



# FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Political Islam's threat to freedom of expression is bad for everyone, but hurts women the most

## Executive Summary and Recommendations

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## Executive Summary

Supporters of political Islam have launched a multifaceted assault on the principles of freedom in the West. Political Islam includes the establishment of Sharia (the body of Islamic religious law), which contains harsh restrictions on freedom of expression, as well as harsh punishments for apostasy and blasphemy and standards at odds with modern Western norms of gender equality. Political Islamists are actively attempting to extend the reach of Sharia over Western cultures and legal systems.

This report addresses how, through means of actual physical violence, threats and intimidation, legal action, and political pressure, the emancipation of Muslim women is stunted if not ground to a halt.

We look at the plight of women in Islamist communities and how the attack on freedom of speech hinders those who would call attention to their abuse and mistreatment. Freedom of expression and the rights of Muslim women are intertwined: without freedom of expression, it is not possible to discuss critical issues related to women's rights.

The report also examines how supporters of political Islam are active on multiple levels to curb freedom of speech in the United States and other Western countries. In the United States, Muslim reformers have been exposed to violence and threats.

The American Islamic community is disparate: it is unclear, in the United States as everywhere else, who speaks for Muslims. Organizations that claim to be representative of the American Muslim community, such as CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations) and ISNA (Islamic Society of North America), are dominated by Islamists.

Islamists do not support equal rights for men and women and in fact preach to women to be subservient. Currently, the U.S. government is designating as its "partners" such Islamists, sidelining genuinely moderate Muslims, genuinely reformist Muslims, and secular Muslims.

This report identifies four strategies Islamists use to restrict freedom of expression:

- At the global political level they raise large funds from, for instance, wealthy Saudis, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states with a lot of oil money. They collaborate with the organization of the Islamic Conference to put pressure on the United Nations to adopt resolutions that are meant to undermine the freedom of expression in Western countries
- At the national level they bring defamation and libel lawsuits against individuals and institutions that criticize Islam and attempt to defend the rights of women. This strategy has the immediate effect of financially hurting individuals and institutions and is designed to silence all criticism of Islam but also hurts women in ways that have not been discussed enough in public yet.
- On the individual level, women's rights activists meet with threats and

physical attacks when they make public such practices as the introduction of Sharia, forced marriages, honor killings, female genital mutilation and other abuses against women.

- On the social level a climate of self-censorship on the part of respected American institutions is arising. We have seen how such institutions such as Yale University Press, Cambridge University Press, Viacom, Comedy Central, the New York Metropolitan Museum, Random House, and Palgrave Macmillan recoil at the first threat of publications regarding Mohammed. Exposing the plight of Muslim women, in the West, is regarded by some as a threat to their own safety but many also see it as an unjust assault on a vulnerable minority already under a great deal of critical pressure.

Political Islamists apply these four strategies in general to expand a culture of domination outside of Muslim communities and in the West. Much of this has been addressed but very little attention has been paid to how this affects women in particular.

In a culture of domination, freedom is curtailed by the psychological effects of uncertainty, that is to say, uncertainty over whether violence or retribution may ensue as a result of saying certain things publicly or engaging in certain actions. For women in closed Muslim communities, it has an extra effect of living in a perpetual state of terror.

When a woman is beheaded in Buffalo by her husband for seeking divorce and a restraining order against him<sup>1</sup>, the message it sends to other Muslim women is quite obvious. When a young Muslim woman in Arizona is run over by her father for adopting an American lifestyle<sup>2</sup>, other Muslim teenagers who want to do the same know that freedom can come at a high price. When a Pakistani man in Georgia strangles his daughter because she ran away from the husband he forced upon her<sup>3</sup>, other victims of forced marriage arrangements know that an escape will mean not only a confrontation with the offended husband but also their father. And where does a woman under those circumstances find refuge if we, the general public, are intimidated or socially blackmailed into never exposing these horrors in our neighborhoods, our cities, our towns and villages? It is imperative that for the sake of these women and to preserve the rule of law, we should stand up to Islamist pressure on freedom of speech in general and be aware of how silence breeds violence against women in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> Williams 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Netter 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Schoetz 2008.

## Recommendations:

- Western governments, non-governmental organizations and cultural institutions must first acknowledge the vulnerable position of Muslim women and take a principled stand to protect them.
- The push on the part of the Organization of the Islamic Conference to restrict free speech in Western countries through international law and the United Nations must be resisted, not accommodated.
- Self-censorship on the part of respected American institutions not only corrodes freedom of expression but it (willfully) turns away from the suffering of fellow humans. It creates a climate of ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’.
- The deference to Islamist pressure through self-censorship in American institutions, whatever its intentions, must be exposed and eliminated.
- Those brave enough to ignore the Islamist threats, whether they are Muslim reformers, secular Muslims (including apostates and converts) or women’s rights advocates who are threatened or attacked must receive adequate protection, even if this places a financial burden on authorities.
- The current “partners” and intermediaries of the U.S. government to the American Muslim community are not representative of genuinely moderate American Muslims or of secular Muslims. The current leadership is questionable at best; it is very unclear who appointed the current so-called ‘American-Muslim leaders’. Many of them have an agenda to co-opt the loyalty of all Muslims in America for their narrow goal of Islamization and this is not in the best interests of America. The U.S. government must look towards genuine moderates, genuine reformers and secular Muslims, and not to Islamists who pretend to be moderate.
- It is urgent that relevant agencies and institutions become keenly aware that freedom of expression and the rights of Muslim women are inexorably intertwined. Unless critical issues related to the rights of Muslim women can be openly discussed, real progress in improving their situation cannot possibly be made.
- Everything must be done to modify existing laws, and to create new ones if necessary, in order to prevent Sharia or Islamic law from being implemented in the United States. This is important because Sharia, as it applies to the family, (especially as it concerns women’s rights) is informally practiced in Islamic communities in Western countries, including America. The recent controversy over a possible ban of Oklahoma courts considering Sharia law in their verdicts<sup>4</sup>, for example, is one facet of this fight for women’s equality.

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<sup>4</sup> Bravin 2010.