



**MUSLIMS FOR  
PROGRESSIVE VALUES**

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# Symposium on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Cultural Rights and Women:

Promoting a Gendered Perspective on  
Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion

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**Palais des Nations  
Geneva**

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## Executive Summary

On 23 May 2018, Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV) convened the Symposium on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Cultural Rights and Women at United Nations Headquarters in Geneva. Over the course of the day, 54 attendees joined panelists from Poland, Tunisia, Bolivia, the United States, and other countries in dialogue regarding the Promotion of a Gendered Perspective on Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion.

The Symposium sought to create a space in which religious and cultural narratives could be discussed in relation to the structures and attitudes that sustain patriarchal and misogynistic gender roles and stereotypes. Human rights experts and advocates, grassroots women’s rights activists, faith-based organizations, and feminist and religious scholars were brought together as panelists to interrogate these themes, and to take stock of the reprisals and consequences women and girls experience when they speak out against rights violations in the name of religion or culture. The panelists also sought to identify positive and reinforcing linkages between religious and cultural narratives, freedom of religion or belief, and international human rights standards pertaining gender equality and women’s empowerment.

The overall objectives of the Symposium were to promote women’s and girls’ right to freely partake in cultural life, and to promote their unrestricted enjoyment of freedom opinion and expression, as well as freedom of thought, conscience and belief. This was accomplished by discussion of religious, cultural, and national movements underway that have had a positive impact on the ability of women and girls to exercise their rights; gender equitable perspectives and interpretations of state obligations regarding freedom of religion and belief; critical analysis of the interplay between narratives of culture, religion, and nationalism, and patriarchal and misogynistic stereotypes and attitudes regarding the role and status of women and girls; and discussion of sound theological frameworks for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

## Opening Remarks

The Symposium opened with remarks from Ms. Ani Zonneveld, founder and president of MPV, who provided background and framing of the topics under discussion. MPV was pleased to invite H.E. Monique T.G. van Daalen, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the UN, Ambassador Carl Hallergard, Deputy Head of the EU Delegation to the UN, and the Symposium keynote speaker H.E. Walid Doudech, Permanent Representative of Tunisia to also offer opening remarks.



**Ani Zonneveld, Founder and President, Muslims for Progressive Values**

“As a musician turned activist, the issues we will address today are of incredible personal importance to me. I refused to bend to narratives of Islam that would have rendered me and my music silent, and because I have actively reclaimed my power and space as a female Muslim leader in the Muslim community, I have experienced, first-hand, hatred, reprisals, even death threats. Since founding MPV, I have been slandered and defamed for daring to speak out against and challenge skewed and misogynistic narratives of Islam instrumentalized to oppress Muslim women across the globe. My experiences are not unique, and the use of religion or culture to oppress women is not unique to Islam. We must understand that we are witnessing a global upsurge of religious, cultural, and nationalist extremisms and fundamentalisms that are affecting the rights of women and girls everywhere.”



**H.E. Monique T.G. van Daalen**, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the UN

“The Netherlands is very pleased and proud to co-sponsor this important Symposium. The Dutch human rights policy attaches great importance to freedom of religion and belief, equal rights for women, as well as the equally intertwined freedom of expression. Some might argue that religion is a barrier for gender equality, and indeed there are sometimes practical tensions between religion and women’s rights. While some of these tensions may exist, we believe that all rights are universal and indivisible. It’s especially important that we engage in dialogue about how any religion or belief and women’s rights interact and can help strengthen each other.”



**Mr. Carl Hallergard**, Deputy Head of the EU Delegation to the UN

“The misuse of religion driven by politically motivated purposes gives rise to human rights violations that can be condoned through cultural and religious arguments. This is an unfortunate reality, and women often pay the highest price. From our point of view, we need to work together to recognize that certain practices associated with the manifestation of religion or belief, or practices perceived as such, may constitute violations of international human rights standards. The right to freedom of religion or belief is sometimes invoked to justify such rights violations, and the European Union firmly opposes such justifications whilst remaining fully committed to the robust protection and promotion of the freedom of religion or belief in all parts of the world.”



**H.E. Walid Doudech**, Permanent Representative of Tunisia

“This is a good opportunity for me, as Permanent Representative of Tunisia here in Geneva, to speak about issues related to freedom of religion or belief, cultural rights, and the rights of women. We are here today to see how best we can forge linkages between religion and women’s rights. This is an important conversation now because of widely held perceptions that religion constitutes a barrier to the achievement of human rights. Rights norms are universal, and should be respected by all states who have agreed to uphold them. But we must understand that while issues pertaining to the right of freedom of religion and belief and to women’s rights occur across the world, how we address these issues must be specific to the context and situation of each society. So it’s very important that we continue to have dialogue regarding how best to approach and link context-specific rights situations with universal rights norms.”

## Session 1

The Symposium was divided into two sessions. The first session addressed how religious and cultural narratives can be transformed to be just and equitable for women and girls through critical expression and religious freedom; linkages and impacts between women's rights and the right to freedom of religion and belief; and consequences and reprisals women human rights defenders face in challenging religiously or culturally justified discrimination. Mr. Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, facilitated the conversation and opened the session by offering some insights on normative interpretations of freedom of religion or belief in relation to women's rights, and how it is crucial to break down silos and engage a variety of stakeholders to promote the realization of gender equity.



**Mr. Ahmed Shaheed**, Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief since 1 November 2016, and is also Deputy Director of the Essex Human Rights Centre.

“One challenge we face when we discuss interlinkages between different rights norms is advancing literacy; literacy on the human rights framework generally but, from my perspective, what I call ‘freedom of religion or belief’ literacy. The human rights framework gives primacy to the protection of the rights of human beings, not of religions per se. Therefore, it is never justifiable to use religion to violate the rights of women, as they bear the right to equality and nondiscrimination, as well as full agency in regards to religion or belief. But no religion is immune from patriarchy. It’s unsurprising why religion and women’s rights would be seen as mutually exclusive. Additionally, there is the view that women can just exit the culture or religion to claim their rights. But now we are increasingly being exposed to narratives and practices that argue and demonstrate that women can claim their full rights from within their culture or religion. In this sense, it must be understood that religion can be a positive force for women’s rights. Ultimately, it is vital that we listen to the authentic voices of all key rights holders to get past stereotypes, stigmas, and stock attitudes. To take this forward, it is also fundamental that we engage with those who do not agree with us.”



**Mr. Liviu Olteanu**, Secretary General of the International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty, followed Mr. Shaheed’s framing remarks with his presentation on the role of education to change problematic mindsets regarding women and girls in the field of religion or belief. Mr. Liviu also stressed the need to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment as imperatives for the achievement of the Sustainable Development goals and sustainable peace.

“I recall that all of the universally adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals rely on the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women, as enshrined in Goal 5. Gender equality is also an antidote to violent extremism, and spaces need to be opened up to the voices and inputs of women and girls which must be transmitted to the larger peacebuilding framework. But policymakers, religious leaders, and other actors need the information necessary to change existing policies and practices, and to create tools to foster gender equality by affecting mindsets regarding women and girls in relation to religion or belief. The ‘Dialogue 5 Framework’ conceived to engage diplomats, politicians/statesmen, religious leaders, scholars, civil society/NGOs, and media who work together at the national, regional, and international level is intended to facilitate the “training of trainers” by building the capacity of government, parliaments, diplomats, religious representatives, and others to contribute to the development of human rights education and sensitivities in different societies.”



## Session 1



**Ms. Fawzia al Ashmawi**, President of the European Forum for Muslim Woman, presented on conceptual and practical linkages between the Islamic Shari'a and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in relation to the rights of women and girls. She also spoke on the importance of hermeneutics and critical analysis of history and scripture.

“For fourteen centuries Muslim women were important factors in the development, stability, and prosperity of Muslim societies across the globe. Unfortunately, the status of Muslim women living in Islamic societies today has regressed, and certain traditional cultural or ethnic practices are presented as religious prescriptions, including female genital mutilation and cutting, and early and child forced marriages. Because of this, one of the most misunderstood aspects of Islam is the status of Muslim women and their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. In a study I undertook for UNESCO, I compared the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with the Quranic prescriptions and rules determining the status of Muslim women. I discovered that the majority of the articles of the Declaration are compatible with the Shari'a. In fact, some Quranic verses explicitly consider men and women as equal in their nature and in their relationship to God: “O mankind, be careful of your duty to your Lord, Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate... (Quran 4:1). This verse defines clearly the equality of man and woman and rejects any claims that men are superior or better than women.”



**Ms. Liliana Religa**, Communications and Promotions Coordinator at the Federation for Women and Family Planning, spoke at length about how religious institutions in Poland influence national politics to diminish the sexual and reproductive health and rights of woman and girls. She also speaks about nature of the reprisals that women's human rights defenders face when they speak out in protest of religiously or nationally sponsored discrimination against women.

“Conservative politicians and bishops are notorious for hate speech against non-Catholic groups, for rejection of the LGBT+ rights and for equating Polishness with being Catholic. Women's rights advocates and pro-choice activists are commonly condemned by the priests, and compared to terrorists and murderers. There is hardly any space for constructive critique of the Church's politics. Catholic women, men, and even some priests who oppose this are silenced, forced to self-censorship, perceived as traitors of the Catholic community or accused/ prosecuted for ‘insulting religious feelings.’ And the current government is unprecedentedly responsive to the Bishops' requests in return for their support, especially before elections. This nationwide campaign targeted at undermining the Istanbul Convention has hindered gender-equality education and laws on combating gender-based violence. Furthermore, activists and academics promoting gender-sensitive approaches were declared as ‘genderists’ who pose a threat to Polish religious and cultural values, and to Polish national identity. ‘Feminists are the enemy of the nation,’ as one of the bishops put it.”

## Session 2

The second session addressed women's and girls' perspectives on religion, belief, and culture by highlighting gender equitable religious and cultural movements, and providing examples of instances in which religious and cultural practices or the actions of religious entities have had a positive impact on women's rights. The session was moderated by Ms. Karima Bennoune, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, who opened it by elaborating on the principles of universality and normalizing a gendered perspective on cultural rights.



**Ms. Karima Bennoune**, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights since 2015, a professor of international law at the University of California–Davis School of Law, and the author of *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here*

“It is critically important that, during the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration, we have a crystal clear understanding of the principle of universality. The UDHR starts with a very basic idea, which is that same principles are meant to guarantee the rights of all human beings regardless of their differences or particularities. States have clearly committed to this principle of universality, and it is the duty of states—regardless of their political, economic, and cultural systems—to promote and protect all human rights. It is equally as important to understand that cultural rights are a core part of the universal human rights system, but they are also governed by that system; they are not an escape clause. So a gendered perspective was embedded in the resolution that created this mandate. Both the former mandate holder and myself have devoted significant attention to women's equal right to participate in all aspects of cultural life, including in deciding which cultural practices to continue and which to discard. This is also a facet of cultural rights, and we have to remember that the CEDAW stresses that cultural practices that lead to violations of women's human rights must be evolved overtime to ensure women's equality. It is also important to avoid the tendency of viewing culture solely as an impediment to women's human rights. This, too, is an over simplistic and problematic view. It essentializes culture, makes it static, and diverts attention from the specific actors, institutions, rules, and regulations that subordinate women within patriarchal systems and structures. We also have to remember the positive roles that rights respecting approaches to religion and culture can play in women's lives and in the advance of gender equality. That is what we are really here to talk about today.”



**Ms. Amel Grami**, Professor at the Department of Arabic Studies, University of Manouba, followed with her presentation on certain gender equitable Islamic movements that are taking place in the Maghreb. She provided a specific example of how the process of *ijtihad* and feminist readings of the Qur'an facilitated the achievement of women's rights gains in Morocco.

“Moroccan law forbade women from officiating marriage and divorce contracts. This marriage registrar position was traditionally held by male religious figures certified by the government to draw up marriage papers as well as inheritance papers, et cetera. I should note that this is very symbolic, because all of this work is related in some way to the religious sphere. But from October this year, women in Morocco will be able to register marriages and divorces and draft other legal contracts. According to media, the decision was rooted in the King's 2017 royal decree allowing women throughout the country to exercise several duties as notary officials. There were political parties that resisted this change, but the feminist demand was strong, and women's rights group and Muslim feminist scholars were integral in achieving this victory. These Muslim feminists provided policy makers with religious perspectives to argue for this right. This is *ijtihad*; it is the process by which Muslim feminist scholars read a new interpretation of Islamic texts and scripture to claim their rights. When we undertake this process, we see how the Qur'an recognizes women as the subject of rights and we can argue that it contains language responsive to their demands. These feminist readings of the Qur'an also encourage the economic and social inclusion of women on equal grounds with men, and can pave the way for future Islamic justice reforms.”

## Session 2



**Ms. Fernanda San Martin**, Member of Parliament of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, spoke about the status and situation of women in Bolivia and how fundamentalist religious narratives promote and sustain misogynistic mindsets. She also spoke about how she is uniquely poised as Member of Bolivian Parliament to facilitate dialogue regarding international human rights norms at the national level.

“Women’s central roles have always been of wives, mothers, and transmitters of cultural and religious beliefs, which necessitated that their behaviors be regulated. The basis for gender violence and discrimination against women is found in the preservation of patriarchal interpretation of scriptures that relies on the domination and exploitation of women for political, social, or other reasons. In Bolivia, we are a majority Catholic nation. Four months ago, the reform of a criminal law intended to address the legality of abortion was met with resistance from leaders of the Catholic Church who polarized the discussion and sought to reject any measure that would protect women’s reproductive health and rights. But I believe faith can be a mode of emancipation and inspiration, and a way to challenge gender violence and fight exclusion and discrimination against women. The challenge here that some religious authorities and figures do not acknowledge the temporal remoteness of religious texts. This is why it necessary for women to interpret religious texts for themselves from their own experience and through a feminist perspective. As a parliamentarian, I fight to introduce international rights norms to the national context in this sense, but it is difficult, and the status of women in Bolivia has not changed because societal mindsets have not changed.”



**Ms. Ani Zonneveld**, founder and president of Muslims for Progressive Values, offered the last intervention of the session and focused on practical and specific examples of programmatic work and transnational civil society initiatives underway that address and debunk misogynistic religious and cultural attitudes in Muslim societies across the world.

“Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV) was founded in 2007 in Los Angeles, California. We came together to establish safe and free spaces for Muslim women, LGBTQ Muslims, and other Muslims who felt unwelcome at mainstream mosques. We began to actively advocate against intolerant, discriminatory, and misogynistic narratives of Islam while promoting the virtues of inclusion we deem inherent to the faith. We did this by advocacy through the arts, by providing marriage officiant services for interfaith couples and other kinds of marriages, by creating inclusive and woman-led prayer spaces, and by engaging policy-level advocacy both domestically and internationally.

But when we started MPV, we only catered to American Muslim needs, not realizing that many in Muslim communities across the world also desired such inclusive spaces, spaces where they could think and express themselves freely. We began to expand internationally, and in 2015 conceived our #ImamsForShe initiative. Since then, we have partnered with local actors to advocate the initiative in Malaysia and Tunisia. In Burundi, we work with local Imams who created the #ClubsForShe camp in which the Imams provide lessons to young women regarding their rights in Islam, as well as their economic, social, and cultural rights. The demand for partnerships was so high, we decided to launch the Alliance of Inclusive Muslims organization in Tunisia, which now has members in 12 different countries and is registered in Geneva as a human rights association. These are but a few examples of the strategic and constructive engagement of faith narratives and leaders, and of progressive Muslim movement building, that can usher sustainable gender equity and the empowerment of women in Muslim communities across the globe.”

## Conclusion

Rising tides of religious, cultural, and nationalist fundamentalisms have enabled and emboldened both state and non-state actors to neglect and openly disregard international standards for the rights of women across the globe. These actors often instrumentalize religion to prohibit, penalize, and persecute dissenting, critical, or innovative opinions or thought regarding the reformation of mainstream and oftentimes misogynistic religious or cultural narratives, norms, and practices. This necessitates a coordinated and transnational feminist response that accounts for the voices of feminist scholars of faith and gender equality activists to effectively challenge religiously and culturally perpetuated patriarchy and misogyny.

Additionally, strategic and meaningful partnerships must be forged between state actors at both the national and international level, civil society organizations, feminist scholars, and inclusive and rights-affirming faith leaders in the effort to consolidate efforts to achieve sustainable gender equality and the empowerment of women. Such partnerships have the potential to yield collective and effective responses to the misogynistic and patriarchal instrumentalization of religion or culture, and can help facilitate the respect for and implementation of international rights norms for women and girls.

MPV would like to thank the Permanent Missions of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Canada, Sweden, and the European Union Delegation to the United Nations for their generous sponsorship and kind support. We would also like to thank the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Ms. Karima Bennoune, and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Mr. Ahmed Shaheed for their guidance and for facilitating the day's conversations. Finally, we would like to thank our civil society partner the International Panel of Parliamentarians on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Alliance for Inclusive Muslims for their contribution and support.



# MPV

Muslims for Progressive Values is an NPO founded in 2007 in the U.S. We are a grassroots, human rights organization that embodies and advocates for social justice, for women's rights, LGBTQI inclusion, freedom of expression and freedom of and from belief.

Since our inception, we have consultative status at the U.N. as an NGO and a founding member of Alliance of Inclusive Muslims, or AIM, an umbrella organization spanning 13 countries and 17 cities.

[www.mpvusa.org](http://www.mpvusa.org)



@mpvusa

# AIM

Alliance of Inclusive Muslims, or AIM, is a collective of progressive Muslims across all nationality, race and sectarian affiliation. The purpose of AIM is to consolidate the efforts of progressive Muslims and progressive Muslim organizations from around the world in order to counter radical, intolerant and supremacist attitudes and behaviours in Muslim communities.

AIM seeks to challenge theological justifications for hate and supremacism with the progressive values that we feel to be inherent in Islam, namely:

- Human Rights and Dignity for All – advocating for the recognition of each individual's equal worth in society and equal protection under the law.
- Freedom of Expression – advocating for freedom of expression and freedom of dissent. No one should be legally prosecuted, imprisoned or detained for declaring or promoting unpopular opinions whether political, artistic, social or religious, even when said expression may be offensive or afore-mentioned dissent may be considered blasphemous.
- Freedom of/from Religion – to uphold the Qur'anic mandate "*let there be no compulsion in religion*" (Q:2:256), that freedom of conscience is not only essential to all human societies, but integral to the Qur'anic view of humanity.

[www.aim.ngo](http://www.aim.ngo)