



## **Muslims for Progressive Values' Best Practices and Lessons Learned on Protecting and Promoting Human Rights to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism (updated: April 10, 2017)**

### **Introduction**

This is a submission by Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV), highlighting the work that MPV undertakes as a pioneering faith-based human rights organization in preventing violent extremism by promoting universal human rights and inclusive and egalitarian interpretations of Islam.

MPV is guided by ten principles, namely: collective identity, equality, the separation of religious and state authorities, freedom of speech, universal human rights, gender equality, LGBTQI inclusion, critical analysis and interpretation, compassion and diversity. Based on these principles, MPV focuses its work at the grassroots level, both in the U.S. and globally, to stimulate critical thinking of sacred texts, and to educate and promote the implementation of progressive values—such as the human rights norms of gender equality, freedom of expression, and freedom of and from belief—with public forums, arts and music programming, and the production of avant garde educational materials.

At the national level in the U.S., MPV partners with organizations with similar values in advocacy against social injustices particularly against women's reproductive rights, child and forced marriages, [Fair Sentencing of Youth](#), and for non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression. MPV also engages advocacy work on a high policy level at the United Nations (UN) in order to promote inclusive and tolerant understandings of Islam based on universal human rights, peace and justice.

This submission will highlight best practice examples from MPV's line of work, namely: the production of counter narratives, the empowerment of youth, engagement with religious leaders

and the promotion of human rights for all under the banner of leaving no one behind. The examples of best practices are followed by recommendations.

## Best Practices

### **I. Promoting Inclusive Expressions and Interpretations of Islam**

Violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon with multiple root causes.<sup>1</sup> While acts of violent extremism do not occur exclusively within any region, nationality or religion, there has been a surge in violent extremism in the name of Islam. Yet, violent extremism in the name of Islam is an affront to the inclusive and peaceful message of Islam. Using social media and places of worship as hubs and mediums through which to share their violent messaging--often packaged in pseudo-religious language--violent extremist groups, such as Daesh and al-Qaeda, are able to lure and recruit their supporters. Moreover, violent extremists justify their gruesome human rights violations through a bastardized interpretation of the Qur'an and selection of inauthentic Hadith narratives: Daesh has condoned sexual slavery in the name of Islam capturing primarily Yazidi women<sup>2</sup>, while Boko Haram kidnaps schoolgirls and forcibly pushes for their conversion into Islam.<sup>3</sup> It is widely agreed by Muslims worldwide, including prominent scholars of Islam, that such acts are simply un-Islamic.<sup>4</sup>

MPV counters violent extremist messaging with inclusive and human-rights-affirming interpretations of Islamic scripture. While many human rights organizations advocate for universal human rights in secular terms, MPV is truly exceptional in its endeavours as it tackles human rights issues through an Islamic-based approach that is consonant with international human rights law.

### ***Online Communities***

Since 2007, MPV has built online communities across the United States of America, Canada, Chile, France, the Netherlands, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Tunisia, Malaysia and Australia,

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<sup>1</sup> See more: Platform of Action on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism:  
<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=53008#.VuSH9pMrLpA>

<sup>2</sup> See more:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/world/middleeast/to-maintain-supply-of-sex-slaves-isis-pushes-birth-control.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/world/middleeast/to-maintain-supply-of-sex-slaves-isis-pushes-birth-control.html?_r=0)

<sup>3</sup> See more:

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/10/27/those-terrible-weeks-their-camp/boko-haram-violence-against-women-and-girls>

<sup>4</sup> See more: <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>

where Muslims and non-Muslims are able to learn more about Islam and contentious issues, such as women's rights and gender equality, the rights of LGBTQI people, freedom of expression and freedom of and from religion. As of March 2017, MPV counts over 10,000 Facebook page followers, over 25,000 Facebook group members, over 2,600 Twitter followers, and over 2,200 subscribers and 2,563,671 views on YouTube. Thanks to social media, MPV's message has spread throughout the world. For instance, over 2.3 million viewers have watched MPV's video of a young woman leading a co-ed congregation in prayer and MPV's Facebook page gets as many as 48,000 views in one week.

Given the human-rights-affirming material that MPV produces, MPV members and MPV's social media followers are able to respond to extremist narrative with counter arguments to not just violent extremist narratives online, but also to misogynistic and hateful rhetoric, linking to MPV's educational materials on Islam. As a result, MPV has been able to indirectly influence mainstream mosques to address untouchable issues like domestic violence, true gender equality in Islam, women-led prayers, "Mecca-style" prayers (unsegregated spaces), the question of being gay and Muslim, and Islamic interfaith marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men. The upshot of this sort of advocacy is that dialogue regarding critical analysis of Islamic scripture and jurisprudence is increasingly taking place. MPV affirms that these dialogues are crucial as they pertain to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), the foundation and codification of fiqh (traditional Islamic jurisprudence) in certain Muslim-majority countries (which is supported by some Muslim communities in the West), gender justice and women's empowerment, deconstructing the purportedly Islamic basis for apostasy and blasphemy legislation, and even non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

### ***Global Policy Spaces***

Since acquiring Department of Public Information (DPI) affiliated status at the UN in 2013, MPV has advocated for human rights in the name of Islam at global policy level, collaborating with other NGO partners on Human Rights Council statements<sup>5</sup>, filing Universal Periodic Review reports,<sup>6</sup> and hosting its UN Lecture Series<sup>7</sup> by means of panel discussions, consultations and workshops at the UN in Geneva and New York. By actively engaging in UN's spaces with country Missions, UN agencies, and civil society organizations, MPV counters human rights abuses in the name of Shari'a law with Islamic human rights language, and holds UN Member States accountable when they invoke false religious premises to justify neglecting their obligations under international human rights law.

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<sup>5</sup> See more: <http://www.mpvusa.org/human-rights-council-statements/>

<sup>6</sup> See more: <http://www.mpvusa.org/upr-stakeholder-reports/>

<sup>7</sup> See more: <http://www.mpvusa.org/mpv-un-lecture-series/>

## ***Educational Materials and Media Engagement***

In addition to engaging actively in social media and global policy spaces, MPV also educates its followers and the general public on Islam and human rights through its media appearances, op-eds, and by producing and disseminating educational tools. We have released a teaching tool for highschool students in the form of a DVD titled “Ijtihad: Feminism and Reform”, and in 2013, MPV produced an exclusive lecture series on “LGBTQI Rights in Islam” on its YouTube channel, debunking misconceptions about sexual orientation and gender identity in Islam.<sup>8</sup> These types of educational materials promote an understanding of Islam that is tolerant, peaceful and respectful of pluralism, while countering Islamophobic sentiments which are on the rise in the West. The educational tools that MPV produces are accessible to people of all ages around the world, regardless of their religious affiliation, and are geared to promote religious understandings of Islam—one that is tolerant, peace-loving and inclusive. In 2015 alone, MPV appeared over 77 times in the media through interviews on BBC, RT America, the Huffington Post, Al Jazeera, the Dhaka Tribune,<sup>9</sup> and many other international outlets. Through its media-savvy engagement with mainstream media, MPV is able to raise global awareness for relevant and contentious human rights issues.

## **II. Empowering Youth**

There is growing recognition for the contribution of youth in peace and security efforts. With almost half of the world’s population being under the age of 24 years old, youth can and should play an active role in preventing conflict and violent extremism. It is relevant to support current initiatives led by Muslim youth—such as our Malaysian partner’s “de-radicalization of youth by youth” workshops—to learn how their approaches can be leveraged and supported, particularly in the face of daily terrorist attacks in the name of Islam.

### ***Youth Engagement in Peace and Security Initiatives***

MPV’s Omair Paul attended the Global Forum on Youth, Peace, and Security hosted by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in August 2015. This Forum was envisaged as a turning point towards a new international agenda on Youth, Peace and Security. Stemming from the thematic debate organized by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan during its presidency of the Security Council in April 2015, the Forum built on continuing efforts by a multiplicity of actors to decisively step-up global attention to young people's contribution to peace and to chart a common agenda. For the first gathering of this kind, young people, youth-led organizations, non-governmental organizations, governments and UN entities came together to agree on a

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<sup>8</sup> Learn more: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLE3saqAXcc3ahCLB4FWqyd7XAJ\\_Lh72IZ](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLE3saqAXcc3ahCLB4FWqyd7XAJ_Lh72IZ)

<sup>9</sup> See more: <http://www.mpvusa.org/in-the-news/>

common vision and a roadmap to partner with young people to prevent conflict, counter violent extremism and build lasting peace. Omair Paul was on the drafting committee of the outcome document of the forum, entitled the Amman Declaration<sup>10</sup> which led the first ever Youth, Peace and Security Resolution at the Security Council—SCR 2250—ensuring that youth in all of their diverse identities as well as socially inclusive faith-based organizations and faith leaders will be considered as part of the global peace and security debate. In addition, at a plenary session of the Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security, Omair Paul raised the point that it is imperative to engage socially inclusive faith-based organizations in changing hearts and minds, and in countering violent extremism.

### ***Amplifying Youth Voices***

MPV has undertaken an initiative to amplify the voices of youth who speak on universal human rights by launching on International Youth Day 2015 its exclusive podcast series, created by youth for youth. The MPV Youth Podcast Series is a series of podcasts empowering the voices of youth in the Global South. Produced by young human rights activist, Monica Islam, hailing from Bangladesh, the MPV Podcast Series provides youth a platform to express themselves freely on all matters that interest them: from music to freedom of expression, from politics to sexual reproductive and health rights and from religion to the arts. As a result of her work on the Podcast Series, Monica has been featured on the Index on Censorship's Freedom of Expression Awards as a Free Speech Hero.<sup>11</sup>

The first podcast's topic on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) features Rand Jarallah, a Young Leader at Women Deliver and the Co-founder, Deputy Director, and Youth Ambassador (Palestine) of the organization named Youth to End Sexual Violence. The second podcast provides a discussion on of expression in Islam. The third podcast was a Global Voice Anthology and is featured on the AWID Young Feminist Wire. This episode provides insight from young feminist advocates from around the world on their experience engaging with the Post-2015 Development Framework. The podcast series is available on MPV's website.<sup>12</sup>

Another initiative that MPV has undertaken is its Youth Open Mic event, which recently celebrated its two-year anniversary. The Youth Open Mic event seeks to create a safe space for youth to express themselves which helps them feel valued, empowered and celebrated, regardless of their gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, race, or other aspect of their identity. Activities include free coaching in poetry and spoken-word craftsmanship.

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<sup>10</sup> See more: <https://www.unteamworks.org/node/505475>

<sup>11</sup> See more: <https://awards.indexoncensorship.org/2016-longlist/>

<sup>12</sup> See more: <http://www.mpvusa.org/mpv-podcast-series/>

## ***Educating Youth on Human Rights***

MPV also undertakes initiatives to educate youth on the work carried out at the UN level to promote universal human rights. In support of the work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, MPV seeks to raise greater awareness among Muslim youth in the West and in the Global South about OHCHR's work to protect human rights around the world. In mid-2015, MPV launched a social media campaign, which features important quotes and positions of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein. The images can be seen on MPV's website.<sup>13</sup>

## **III Engaging with Men and Women Religious Leaders**

MPV also engages with men and women religious leaders as change agents in their communities to defy radical expressions of Islam. It is well known that imams have a broad influence in Muslim communities around the world, and their support is crucial in promoting gender equality and preventing violence against women and girls. It is also known that many imams are already advocating for gender parity and are themselves often ostracized, ridiculed, and sometimes threatened by more radical imams for their alternative and inclusive worldviews. MPV believes that it is crucial to empower women's rights affirming imams, who we call #ImamsForShe champions, by providing them with positive public support, as well as funding to assist them in their workshops, radio programming, and youth-leader conventions including #ClubsForShe programming which produces a multi-level and multi-formatted message against dominant extremist narratives.

Inspired by UN's #HeForShe movement, #ImamsForShe is a global initiative of MPV. Launched at the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2015, #ImamsForShe seeks to support imams, religious leaders, and Islamic scholars—#ImamsForShe champions—who debunk misogynistic interpretations of Islamic scripture that have led to human rights violations in the name of Islam against women and girls in Muslim communities. The #ImamsForShe initiative directly supports MPV's mission to embody and to be an effective voice for the traditional Qur'anic ideals of human dignity, egalitarianism, compassion, and social justice. In addition, the implementation of #ImamsForShe contributes to the Beijing Platform for Action, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda and the 2030 Agenda—in particular the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (achieving gender equality and empower all women and girls) and SDG 16 (promoting just, peaceful and inclusive societies).

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<sup>13</sup> See more: <http://www.mpvusa.org/in-support-of-ohchr/>

The objectives of the #ImamsForShe initiative is to build a movement that holds imams accountable, to encourage dialogue, and to develop educational tools. Ultimately, the desired outcomes of this initiative are:

- Increased exchange of knowledge and good practices between women's rights affirming religious leaders through peer-to-peer learning;
- Increased access for audiences to join the global networks supporting #ImamsForShe champions through awareness raising on online platforms;
- Enhanced national and regional dialogue among religious leaders and their congregation on women's rights and gender justice in Islam;
- Increased online messaging that promotes women's rights and gender justice in Islam;
- Increased accessible educational materials for lay audience and women's rights defenders on countering religious justifications for violence against women and girls;
- Increased awareness for the compatibility between women's rights and Shari'a among Muslims, non-Muslims and religious clergy;
- Increased awareness that harmful cultural practices, such as forced and child marriage, FGM/C, are not Islamic.

Currently, there are 32 #ImamsForShe champions, hailing from Australia, Bahrain, Burundi, the UK and USA.<sup>14</sup> These #ImamsForShe champions have vowed to:

- Follow Prophet Muhammad's lead by advocating for women's rights;
- Debunk patriarchal and misogynist interpretations of the Qur'an and the Hadith;
- Lead Muslim communities to embrace gender parity;
- Declare all forms of violence against women and girls to be un-Islamic, including acid attacks; domestic violence and assaults; "honour" killings; female infanticide; female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C); all forms of child and forced marriages; sexual violence, sexual harassment and assaults; and trafficking;
- Encourage women's full participation and leadership in the mosque, at home, in the workforce, in the public sphere and in politics;
- Empower men and women alike to reach their full potential through complete access to education.

Through the #ImamsForShe initiative, MPV is working with religious leaders to foster, ultimately, a change in the behaviour of families and community members to promote gender equitable attitudes towards women and girls. The ultimate goal is community-based demands for just policies and laws as a result of an increased awareness and understanding of women and

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<sup>14</sup> Learn more: <http://www.mpvusa.org/champions/>

girls' rights. By debunking and challenging violent expressions of Islam directed toward women and girls by religious clergy, MPV is changing mindsets of both communities and their leaders, building just and ethical societies, and as such, preventing violent extremism.

#### **IV. Leaving No one Behind**

It behooves intergovernmental institutions and multilateral agencies to consider holistically the interdependent and cross-cutting nature of human rights, as enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and P/CVE measures and initiatives.

Given that human rights violations in much of the Muslim world and in Muslim communities in the West are justified by extremist narratives of Islam, there is a need to reconceptualize and reframe advocacy in a way that resonates and receives traction with target audiences. In these contexts, it is not secular language, but only the language of Islam that is affirming of human rights, social justice, and inclusive worldviews that will have traction.

Furthermore, MPV affirms that without the full respect for, protection and fulfillment of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, with emphasis on freedom of expression, freedom of religion, non-discrimination, and gender equality, P/CVE efforts will fall short of ushering actual and transformational change on the ground. The maxim that peace and sustainable development are not possible without the full provision and fulfillment of human rights is even more crucial to consider under the auspice of Agenda 2030 and all efforts to leave no one behind.

To this end, the structure and function of MPV's domestic and international chapters enables the creation of spaces that are non-sectarian, pluralistic, and broadly human rights affirming. Within these spaces, dialogue is fostered on the critical analysis of religious narratives and scripture that MPV considers under the auspice of P/CVE. Furthermore, these sorts of spaces provide all people, but particularly young people, accepting and affirming environments, especially if they feel marginalized or ostracized within their larger communities on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation or gender identity.

Through its grassroots engagement, MPV provides a welcoming space for non-Muslims and Muslims of every ethnic and cultural background, race, sect, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and age to practice Islam in a way that fosters love, peace, human dignity and equity—values deeply rooted in both Islam and promoted in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR). Beneficiaries of MPV's work include Muslims who seek to be part of a community that promotes and protects values that may seem controversial by more fundamental Muslim communities, such as women's autonomy and agency, LGBTQI inclusion and critical



analyses of sacred texts. MPV provides services which are often deemed taboo, such as female-led prayers and customized interfaith marriage services. For LGBTQI Muslims, creating a community that accepts their identity empowers them and helps promote mental wellbeing. As such, MPV has assisted Muslim individuals who are otherwise ostracized within the Muslim community, creating a new Muslim ‘home’ for them, preventing narratives of grievance and perceived injustice—“push factor” conditions conducive to violent extremism.

At the UN level, MPV organized an event during the Intergovernmental Negotiation Sessions of the then “Post-2015 Development Agenda” in February 2015 entitled “Towards Inclusive Post-2015 Development: Defying Discriminatory Laws and Deconstructing Cultural Norms,”<sup>15</sup> that sought to contextualize human rights within the Post-2015 Development Agenda holistically, with particular emphasis on striking correlations between discriminatory laws, policies, and social practices on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) and detriment to economic development that may lead some to violent extremism.

## Recommendations

As per the examples delineated above, MPV puts forth the following recommendations as inspired by relevant policy papers on P/CVE<sup>16</sup>:

1. UN Agencies and Member States should ensure that preventing and countering violent extremism measures engage civil society, including faith-based organizations, at all levels and particularly inclusive grassroots faith communities at the national and local levels.
2. Member States should reaffirm and commit to the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2250, on engaging youth in P/CVE measures and initiatives.
3. Member States should fully implement, with dedicated funding, UNSCR 1325 and all other UNSCR resolutions on Women, Peace and Security.
4. UN Agencies and Member States should support and resource youth in all their diversities to strengthen their leadership skills and meaningful engagement in prevention and response efforts related to violent extremism. UN Agencies and Member States should also support youth-led peacebuilding organizations that work for democratic values and peacebuilding through funding and allocation of other resources. Additionally,

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<sup>15</sup> Learn more: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqCEeI4Ht7I>

<sup>16</sup> Such policy papers include the Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism, the Women, Peace and Security Agenda Resolutions, UNSCR 2250 and others.

the specific and gendered grievances and vulnerabilities that young people experience must be recognized.<sup>17</sup>

5. UN Agencies and Member States should support, promote and invest in grassroots arts-based efforts, such as literature music, theatre, film, storytelling, and other arts productions, which advance the values of pluralism and understanding.
6. Any limitation to the provision and fulfillment of any human right or set of human rights, such as those defined in the UDHR and ICCPR, with particular emphasis on freedom of expression and freedom of and from religion and belief, must be provided by law, must bear a legitimate aim, and must be absolutely necessary. Member States should properly pursue the imperative of protecting national security while complying with their human rights obligations under international law.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “10 Guiding Practices for CVE from a Human Security and Young Peacebuilder’s Perspective”

<http://unoy.org/8-guiding-practices-for-counteracting-violent-extremism-from-a-human-security-and-young-peacebuilders-perspective/>

<sup>18</sup><https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/38276/en/unhrc-side-event:-human-rights-and-%E2%80%9Cpreventing-violent-extremism%E2%80%9D>