

RENMUN VIII

The Restoration of Serenity



March 4th & 5th 2023

Chair Report

**Reevaluating Womens' Rights in Countries
where Sharia Law is Implemented**

Chair Introduction

On behalf of the RENMUN secretariat and ourselves, we would like to formally thank you for choosing to participate in this conference, and are delighted to have you in the Arab League. To briefly introduce ourselves, we are Darin Lee and Vanessa Kan, a Year 12 student at the Chinese International School and a Form 4 student at Diocesan Girls' School respectively.

The Arab League is an intermediate level committee, aimed at bolstering the skills of advanced delegates and embracing less advanced delegates to experiment with different skills. The committee mainly addresses political issues in Arabic nations, striving for peace and prosperity in the Middle East. We expect delegates to attend the conference well prepared and having conducted sufficient research regarding the two topics. We also hope that delegates will use the chair reports as an integral resource when devising methods to mitigate the situation at hand. In terms of our expectations during the conference, we hope that delegates will be professional and mature when discussing the topics at hand and be respectful of the different cultures, stances, and opinions of countries and delegates. When possible, we urge delegates to revolve solutions around the achievement of peace and avoid propositions that might aggravate the situation at hand. With that being said, we would like delegates to use RENMUN as an opportunity to form strong bonds with fellow delegates and have fun, broadening horizons and perspectives through fruitful discourse.

Should you have any questions or queries, feel free to contact either one of us and we will try our best to aid you. We wish you luck in your preparations and look forward to meeting you all!

Best regards,

Darin Lee (kahdl2024@student.cis.edu.hk)

Vanessa Kan (s191079@student.dgs.edu.hk)

Topic introduction

Sharia law is Islam's legal code as defined by the religion's holy texts: the Quran, Hadith and Sunnah. Currently enacted in various degrees by 53 Muslim countries, it has sparked controversy once more from the wider world due to multiple controversies, including policies the Taliban has implemented after reinstating their rule of Afghanistan, as well as the recent treatment of women in Iran, Saudi Arabia and other countries, even within the League itself. These have all drawn widespread attention and condemnation, and as such is a pressing issue to be discussed and mediated.

Therefore, as part of the Arab League, delegates should approach this problem whilst considering recent events regarding this, its doctrinal background, and how to balance religious law and human rights.

Key Terms

Term	Definition
Sharia Law	Islam's religious law derived from the Quran, Hadith and Sunnah (see below) which lays out the governing principles of Muslims.
Hadith	A collection of the sayings of the prophet Muhammad. Along with the Quran and Sunnah (see below), it provides a source of guidance for Muslims.
Quran	Also known as the Koran, it is the definitive and sacred book of Islam. According to Muslims, it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the angel Gabriel in the early 600s CE.
Sunnah	The book comprises the traditions and practises followed by the prophet Muhammad, which set an example for all Muslims to follow.
Mufti	A Muslim legal authority who gives a formal legal opinion (fatwa) in response to an inquiry regarding Islamic ruling and law.
Morality Police	Also known as 'Guidance Patrol', it is a

	now-defunct police unit of Iran which aims at enforcing the Islamic dress code, notably the proper wearing of hijabs. It gained notoriety when its members detained and later killed in custody Mahsa Amini, sparking widespread outrage and protests.
Islamic Fundamentalism	A conservative movement which comes with the belief in strict adherence to Islamic texts.
Islamic Modernism	A campaign to reconcile traditional Islam with modern notions such as civil rights and democracy.

Background Information

According to Muslims, Sharia law's origins can be found in the precepts passed down by the Prophet Muhammad, as well as in the form of his own behaviour and values (*Sunnah*), which were also interpreted and comprised the *Hadith*.

Most terms of Sharia Law are not controversial: acts such as 5 prayers per day or fasting during the holy month of Ramadan do not come at the expense of certain demographic groups and are observed by most practising Muslims. Instead, this current discussion concerns the hindrance of women as a result of the law. These include the mandatory wearing of the hijab or burqa, strict marriage laws, such as not being able to leave the house without permission from the husband, among others.

Sharia law has always sparked protests and condemnation from the wider world, especially from human rights groups and Western nations, but two events in particular escalated such campaigns, the first being the reinstatement of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. As a radical, ultra-religious regime, the Taliban worked to re-implement several policies which are heavily prejudiced against women, for example, barring them from receiving a university education and most job sectors. This has sparked worry from the wider world that womens' rights would continue to be curtailed, with the regime even administering a public flogging of women convicted of 'moral crimes' in a football stadium with thousands of onlookers, a harsh, humiliating punishment reminiscent of the methods of previous Taliban rule in the 1990s.

The other event concerns that of the theocratic, authoritarian Iranian regime. It has one of the most restrictive forms of Sharia law, yet what sparked international attention and outrage was the death of Mahsa Amini after her arrest by the nation's now-defunct Morality Police, who enforced Iran's strict dress code. It is widely believed that she suffered a cerebral haemorrhage after being severely beaten. Protests erupted over this, and have since spilled over into decrying the regime and a demand for the ousting of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei.

It is worth noting that the Arab League's relationship with Iran is, for the large part, far from cordial, yet there exists within the League several states which are not hostile, but friendly towards Iran. They are Lebanon, where Iranian-backed Hezbollah wields much influence, and Syria, Iran's ally which is currently suspended from the League. Moreover, considering the varied reactions of Arab states towards the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, despite the Arab League not having any formal discussion regarding the issue, it is safe to say that, within it, there is a varying degree of commitment towards condemning gender discrimination which stems from Sharia Law.

In traditional Sharia law, women have experienced discrimination or unfair treatment in various main areas. The first concerns marriage and family. In conservative countries such as Saudi Arabia, women are required to have a male guardian, usually a relative or their husband. In this way, their decisions and movements are severely restrained, exemplified by rules such as how they are required to gain permission from said guardian before travelling. Most significant, however, is the law which requires women to gain permission from their male guardian before marriage, thus severely limiting their freedom to choose a partner. The second area concerns criminal justice. According to the Quran, two women's words equate to that of one man when it comes to providing testimony in finance-related cases, and in some Arab countries, discrimination and biases are also evident in their laws. For example, Morocco criminalises those who house a woman who has left her husband in their home, indicating a system which works to restrict the autonomy of women. In Bahrain, a rapist could avoid punishment if they married their victim, further serving to silence women when they are sexually harassed.

According to the vast majority of Muslims, Sharia Law is 'the revealed word of God'. Therefore, in reality, the prevailing public opinion on the administration of Sharia Law is positive rather than negative. From Southeast Asia to the Middle East and North Africa, most citizens in Muslim-majority believe Sharia Law should be the official legal code. This includes that of most Arab League nations. Support is highest in countries like Iraq (91%) or Morocco (83%), whilst Lebanon records one of the least support for this (29% in favour). Support for Sharia Law is still, for the most part, overwhelming and delegates must keep this in mind when arriving at a decision regarding stances and potential solutions.

Potential Clashes

Conservatism v.s. Modernity

Despite how states comprising the Arab League tend to be more conservative and traditional, there are still internal divisions over how the League should react to and stand on issues regarding women's rights. For example, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar were among countries to condemn the Taliban regime's ban on female university education, other countries did not, indicating that the way Sharia law is manifested and enforced is divisive even within the League, and this may be a source of contention for delegates.

The Feasibility of Implementing Reforms

Considering the various interpretations of the Sharia Law in different countries, the lack of jurisdiction the League has over its member states and the countries' varying degrees of willingness to adapt reforms which may arise from this particular debate, delegates should also take into consideration this factor when arriving at solutions and discuss whether adopting a hard or soft approach is appropriate.

Autonomy of Sharia-law countries when implementing laws

Should the League's stance incline towards reform, the problem of whether said reforms would infringe upon the sovereignty of certain nations arise; therefore, delegates should seek to not only achieve an equilibrium between the two, but to devise feasible solutions that respect the autonomy of individual states.

Ethics vs Public Opinion

As mentioned above, the public is usually supportive of Sharia Law in most Arab League nations. However, this does not mean that the legislation they support is morally justified. Therefore, delegates should address and solve the dilemma of whether to acknowledge public opinion or tackle the problem of women's rights in a more comprehensive manner.

Key Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Involvement with the Issue
Iran	Recently, Iran's controversial 'Morality Police', established in order to enforce the Islamic dress code on citizens, detained 22-year old Mahsa Amini, who later died in custody. This has sparked mass protests in Iran and calls for

	<p>reform. While the morality police have been dissolved, strict policies that they used to enforce remain. Their acts have caused worldwide protests and condemnation, and the country is now under immense pressure to make a u-turn on such policies and hold themselves accountable for their actions. Even though Iran is not a part of the Arab League, the stance that organisation arrives at is pivotal for Iran's role within the Middle East.</p>
Saudi Arabia	<p>Saudi Arabia has one of the strictest versions of Sharia Law of any country, to the point where women were not allowed to drive until June 2018 and are only allowed to watch football games unaccompanied in 3 cities. They are still not allowed to marry or seek an abortion without a male's permission, and enforced dress codes means that most women wear a burqa. The recent loosening of regulations for women, to some, indicate a gradual liberalisation and modernisation of Saudi society, though critics of the measure and regime have labelled it as nothing more than propaganda.</p>
Countries with harsh Sharia Law policies	<p>Governments of these countries tend to align towards conservatism and wish for the preservation of the status quo, and would therefore be against any changes that would undermine Sharia Law. Their people and societal structure would also be impacted drastically, for their better or worse.</p>
Women residing in countries which implement a stringent version of Sharia Law	<p>As these women experience the direct consequence of a stricter enforcement of Sharia law, the decision the League chooses to arrive at would impact their lives drastically.</p>

Possible Solutions

Increased dialogue between religious leaders

Currently, there is no official consensus within Islam on what modern Sharia law should comprise, as there are distinctions depending on the Islamic branch (Sunni, Shia, etc.) or countries, some of whom, like Afghanistan, administer their own interpreted form of Sharia law. Therefore, calling for a convention or meeting of religious leaders, which could possibly extend beyond the Arab League, may be conducive towards establishing a comprehensive understanding of Sharia law which can be accepted by all nations.

Centralising the administering of punishment for violating Sharia law

A major problem, as illustrated above, is the fact that individual households carry out punishment in the name of Sharia law which usually targets women. Therefore, delegates may devise measures to create a comprehensive framework for the administration of Sharia law and the carrying out of a fair trial and punishment, thus ensuring that women's rights are safeguarded and are not risked and undermined in the name of religious law.

Increasing the public's legal understanding of both Sharia and secular law (education)

No matter the general public's stance on their countries administering Sharia law, it is important to provide them with the information necessary to formulate their own educated opinion. Therefore, delegates are suggested to include education as an integral part of their solution no matter their stance, and allow for an increased knowledge of Sharia and secular law amongst the populace so as to facilitate dialogue, understanding and the arrival of a comprehensive, reasonable solution which is widely-accepted by citizens.

Increased advocacy

For years, activists within conservative Muslim countries and abroad have campaigned and exerted pressure on governments to pay heed to women's rights. These have come with minimal success. Therefore, delegates can work to provide a safer environment for activists within these countries, allowing them to express their views and providing an opportunity for countries to relax legislation.

Imposing consequences of nations which violate womens' rights in the name of Sharia Law

Should the League wish to direct discussion towards liberalisation and the prioritisation of womens' rights, it would help to establish an adequate framework for imposing punishment on countries who fail to protect the rights of women or whose legislation actively works against them using the League's leverage.

Past Actions

1979	The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. It came into force in 1981. It acknowledges the systematic discrimination against women and lays out a concrete agenda to achieve equality for women, spanning civil rights, legal statuses, reproductive, education and employment rights, and others. As of today, 189 state parties have ratified the treaty and is touted as the most important human rights treaty for women. Involved state parties must submit a report every four years, which outlines the measures undertaken to promote womens' rights in their country. The committee discusses and makes recommendations annually on how to accelerate the elimination of discrimination against women. It must be noted, though, that despite all of the Arab League members ratifying the treaty, they view it with scepticism and reservation.
2017	The first Arab Conference on Good Practices and Regional Opportunities to Strengthen Womens' Nationality Rights was held in which members stressed the importance of promoting womens' rights under the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Plan.
2018	The Arabic Declaration of Belonging and Legal Identity is codified after a groundbreaking conference hosted by Tunisia. The declaration welcomed Arab nations' attempts to promote gender equality, as well as strongly encouraged members to grant equal rights to men and women and lift reservations regarding CEDAW (see above).

Guiding Questions

1. Should Sharia Law undergo a new, universally accepted interpretation? Is it feasible, and can it be adopted by all countries who wish to incorporate Sharia law into their laws?
2. Should there be a universal framework for the treatment of women under Sharia Law?
3. Can Sharia law be administered even if it sometimes runs counter to the tenets of womens' rights and individual freedoms?
4. Should countries which undermine womens' rights in favour of Sharia Law be warned/ punished? How so?
5. Does the general public of these countries actually support the reversal of what is perceived to be harsh Sharia law? If not, should they even be reversed, and why?

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