

UK: The Left's Silence on Islamic Homophobia

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In Muslim communities, homosexuality is intrinsically linked to anxiety, intimidation, violence and, in some cases, death. For many, it involves living a closeted existence for fear of being ostracised or disowned. Islamic theological teachings, disseminated by religious institutions and espoused by community leaders, range from preaching for our execution to advising us to live lives of celibacy. Yet many on the left, historically a stronghold of LGBT support, do not sufficiently decry the abysmal treatment of gay and bi people of Muslim heritage, nor do they adequately mobilise against this brutal form of homophobia.

This piece will scrutinise homophobia in the Muslim community and explore the left's reluctance to criticise it in a consistent and productive manner. It will not explore the growth of the LGBT Muslim movement, which champions equality and representation of LGBT individuals; rather it will focus on the dominant, wider Muslim community's response to homosexuality.

Homophobia in the Muslim World

It is not a spurious exaggeration to claim that homophobia is more widespread among Muslims than within other religious communities. Statistically relevant polls of social attitudes consistently support these claims. This evidence paints a bleak picture, particularly as regards attitudes in those Muslim-majority countries from which western diaspora communities originate.

A 2017 American [poll](#) found that 51% of Muslim respondents expressed support for marriage equality, more than in previous years—yet 34% still opposed it. Media outlets disingenuously hailed this as a success, citing the figure to justify headlines such as [“Majority of U.S. Muslims Now Support Gay Marriage, While white Evangelical Christians Remain Opposed.”](#) This attempt at obfuscation compares a conservative faction of Christians with a figure drawn from a combination of both liberal and conservative Muslims. A more honest comparison between conservative Christians and Muslims reveals a far more damning picture.

In Britain, Muslims are more conservative than their US counterparts. The [2009 Gallup Coexist Index poll](#) asked 500 British Muslims if they believed that homosexual acts were morally acceptable. 100% of them agreed that they were not, uniformly describing homosexual acts as immoral. In the years since, there have been some positive developments in UK Muslims' attitudes toward homosexuality; however, the picture remains worrying. A [2015 ICM poll](#) found that 52% of British Muslims felt that homosexuality should be illegal. Only 18% stated that it should be legal. Just as damningly, 47% felt it was unacceptable for gay people to be allowed to work as teachers.

The international data is even more alarming. [A 2013 PEW global study on Muslim Attitudes](#) reported an almost unilateral condemnation of homosexuality in Muslim communities around the world. The countries expressing the highest acceptance of homosexuality were Uganda (12%), Mozambique (11%), and Bangladesh (10%). In all the other 37 Muslim-majority countries, less than

10% of respondents thought homosexuality was acceptable.

All eight states or territories that mandate the death penalty for homosexuality are Muslim-majority. Many more imprison people for being LGBT. All these punishments are derived from mainstream interpretations of sharia law and Islamic jurisprudence, which positions homosexuality as a major sin often equated with sodomy and adultery. Where people are executed for the crime of being LGBT, the preferred methods of execution are public hanging or stoning. Unsurprisingly, such laws also encourage extrajudicial mob violence towards LGBT people.

In [Brunei](#), where the existing laws already made homosexuality punishable by imprisonment for up to 10 years, an attempt was made in 2019 to introduce the death penalty (by stoning) for convicted offenders, despite a long-standing moratorium on executions for any crime. Justified by a new penal code that reflected a strict interpretation of sharia law, the policy led to a significant global outcry, and to boycotts and celebrity protests. The government of Brunei conceded to the international pressure, backtracking on its position to clarify that the moratorium on the death penalty would extend to those convicted of “crimes” covered under the new legislation.

Pew Research:

<https://i0.wp.com/images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/5bc52e58809d8e0d73b28927/1609424677300-07V7IVKHN4X82XAPY2PU/Untitled-1.jpg>

The Private Sphere

The detrimental impact of Muslim homophobia on LGBT individuals is not confined to faraway places like Afghanistan and Iran. In the west, honour culture—a community mechanism of social control in which coercive tactics such as shunning, loss of status and shaming are utilized to pressure family members to take corrective action against those who do not conform to Islamic rules—often thrives within Muslim communities.

In 2017, [Jahed Choudhury](#), a UK Muslim of Bangladeshi heritage, married his white partner in what was called “the first Muslim Gay wedding.” He was featured in the press with his husband and interviewed on national television. Some weeks later, he told a BBC interviewer that members of the Muslim community spat at him in the street. He also revealed that he was receiving hate comments on social media and described a specific message from someone in the community who was threatening to throw acid on him. Choudhury then apologised to the Muslim community on national television for the offence of having married his same-sex partner so publicly. In other words, the intimidation and threats of violence were successful.

In 2017, [Mahad Olad](#), a gay American ex-Muslim, was invited to travel to Kenya by his family, who are part of the Somali diaspora community. When they arrived, his mother confiscated Olad’s passport, and informed him that she was aware that he was gay and that he had left Islam. In order to “save” him, she had decided to send him to some Somali sheikhs who would bring him back to Islam and make him straight. It was only with the assistance of [Ex-Muslims of North America](#) that Olad was able to escape his kidnappers and return to the US.

In another 2017 incident, [Siddika Reza](#), who was Secretary General of the Islamic faith organization NASIMCO (the Organization of North American Shia Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities), attended the same-sex marriage of her son to his fiancé. After she shared pictures of the wedding on her social media account, more than 1000 members of the Shia Muslim community signed a petition calling for her to resign, on the grounds that her endorsement of her son’s marriage “goes against the legitimate majoritarian interpretations of *Jaffari fiqh*, which NASIMCO must uphold”—essentially, claiming that public endorsement of her son’s wedding was endorsement of sin

and was therefore un-Islamic.

The result? Reza resigned from her post. The Muslim community's social coercion was successful in censoring a member whom they viewed as too accepting; it ensured that a mother's acceptance of her son was suitably punished.

In 2019, [Seran M](#), a Swiss 17-year-old of Iraqi heritage, awoke in bed to find his father standing over him holding a knife and shouting, "Are you gay? Are you gay?" The father then proceeded to slit Seran's throat. Fortunately, the teen was able to scramble over a balcony and obtain aid from his neighbours; he was put into an induced coma at a hospital and managed to survive.

While these overt displays of Islamic homophobia are reported by the media, it is imperative to understand how much remains hidden. Many LGBT people of Muslim heritage are forced to live closeted lifestyles to avoid facing these kinds of consequences. Some even enter into [sham marriages](#) in order to avoid detection. The controlling mechanisms of honour culture often cause relatives to buckle under community pressure and disown their kin, thus tearing families apart and causing traumatic psychological repercussions for the victims.

The Public Sphere

The influence of Islamic homophobia is not limited to the private domestic sphere. Its adherents want to ensure that LGBT rights do not achieve acceptance and that homosexuality is not normalised within wider society. This drives them to take action in the public arena.

In 2019, [Anderton Park School](#) in Birmingham, UK, was the target of a protest by members of the Birmingham Muslim community over a primary school education programme named "No Outsiders," as well as other material which they claimed furthered the "gay agenda." Before a court injunction forced them to relocate, the protesters would gather immediately outside the school gates, creating a frightening and intimidating environment for the students inside. Videos can be found online of adults from the Birmingham Muslim community shouting "Shame! Shame! Shame!" through megaphones at the school gates. Children in their midst were encouraged to chant along with them. This must have had a terrible impact on any adolescents present who were coming to terms with their sexuality. These protests continued for approximately nine months and included the display of banners which read "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."

In an effort to show support for a head teacher who refused to cave to the pressure, LGBT individuals from Birmingham decided to go to the school and hang signs of solidarity, such as pictures of hearts and rainbows, on the school gates. They decided to do this at night so that they would not encounter the protesters and risk direct conflict. Unfortunately, they had not considered that it was Ramadan, and that the Muslim community would be awake late at night, feasting in preparation for resuming their fast the next day. In video footage of the resulting confrontation, male members of the Muslim community can be seen creating a climate of fear and intimidation, shouting at LGBT people for coming into "our community."

Eventually, some Muslim men began throwing eggs at the LGBT people, who departed, shaken by the entire episode. Their symbols of support on the school gates were subsequently vandalised.

Eventually, the protests were permanently banned by the courts, but Anderton Park school suspended the "No Outsiders" programme for a significant period of time—a definite win for the forces that perpetuate Islamic homophobia.

Betrayal by the Left

Given all this, one would expect the left, which generally sees itself as a bastion of support for LGBT rights, to challenge Islamic homophobia. Regrettably, this is not the case. Consider the outcry we see when cake-baking Christians refuse to provide services to LGBT people; in such cases, the widespread vocal condemnation from the left reaches across continents. Similarly, the public outcry about Christian conversion therapy has galvanised an entire movement dedicated to campaigning for its legal prohibition. Such actions are mobilised by LGBT organisations, political commentators, activists, human rights organisations and even celebrities, who lambast and ridicule the Christian faith as archaic and irrelevant—yet no such outcry is forthcoming when Islamic homophobia rears its ugly head. The left remains silent when, for example, Muslim clerics attempt to exorcize [gay demons](#) from members of the Muslim community.

As if the left's silence was not detrimental enough to LGBT rights, its accusations of racism and Islamophobia towards those who seek to criticize Islamic homophobia are a blatant betrayal.

At the Birmingham school protests referenced above, the LGBT community decided to hold a counter protest after the courts had forced the Muslim protesters to move away from the school gates to a more distant location. A small contingent of people, predominantly white, and armed with guitars and rainbow flags, stood across the road from the Muslim protesters, strumming and singing along to love songs. Days later, in a national newspaper, Saima Razzaq, a local Muslim activist, who describes herself as “queer,” [stated that the actions of white LGBT counter protesters “reek\[ed\] of a colonial mindset.”](#) Razzaq had been instrumental in the Birmingham community's response to the homophobic protests, but instead of welcoming the support of white allies, she characterized them as “white saviours” and declared that “the answers have to come from within our community.”

The message was clear: you cannot champion LGBT rights in the UK if you are white and you are opposing non-white homophobes. To do so renders you racist and neo-colonialist. It did not matter that those Muslims who were protesting LGBT education had made it clear that they wanted it stopped on a nationwide level in a white majority country. Only people of the same colour and faith were permitted to lead the challenge against them. Universal human rights could no longer be fought for universally.

At the 2017 [London Pride](#) march, the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB) marched to challenge Islamic homophobia—with a particular focus on Chechnya, where reports of LGBT persecution and gay concentration camps had outraged the community. They carried banners listing the countries that mandated the death penalty for homosexuality, and held witty, provocative placards and signs poking fun at Islam. Near them, a separate contingent of Pride marchers held signs poking fun at Christianity. Pride, after all, had always been a safe place to criticise homophobia—whether religious, political or cultural.

During the march, police descended on CEMB to tell them that their signs were offensive and to request that they be put away. However, they did not accost the holders of signs mocking Christianity. CEMB declined the request and continued to march with their banners and signs.

Days later, the East London Mosque wrote a formal complaint to the Pride organization citing its objection to being named as a mosque that “incited murder and hatred of LGBT.” Imaan, a Muslim LGBT organisation, also issued a press release condemning the protest. Both organisations claimed that the CEMB's placards were Islamophobic and caused harm to Muslim people. Pride issued a statement to a national newspaper in which they said that they would not tolerate Islamophobia; they then suspended CEMB from marching in subsequent Pride marches pending an investigation. The investigation took eight months, but in the end CEMB was cleared of the charges and was able to participate in the following year's march without any restrictions.

Nevertheless, a message was communicated to the wider public that criticism of Islamic homophobia is unacceptable. It did not matter that some of the critics were Muslim and others ex-Muslim. It did not matter that almost all the protesters were part of the Muslim diaspora and many were refugees, individuals who had grown up and lived under Islam and came from Muslim families. It did not matter that many of them had fled countries and communities where imprisonment or death were the penalties for their sexuality. Any criticism of Islamic homophobia was deemed Islamophobic (anti-Muslim) and racist.

In 2020, the iconic reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race* invited actor Jeff Goldblum to appear as a guest judge. The drag queen competitors walked a runway with the American Stars and Stripes as the theme. Iranian-Canadian contestant Jackie Cox wore a red-striped kaftan and a blue hijab outlined with 50 silver stars; she stated, "You can be Middle Eastern, you can be Muslim, and you can still be American."

Goldblum, prompted by the drag artist's outfit, queried, "Is there something in this religion that is anti-homosexuality and anti-woman? Does that complicate the issue? I'm just raising it and thinking out loud and maybe being stupid." RuPaul responded that the presentation was complex, and that drag had "always shaken the tree."

Social and mainstream media erupted with condemnations of Goldblum's comment, accusing him of racism and Islamophobia. His views were labelled as [dangerous](#). The [Muslim Advocates organization issued a statement](#) urging Goldblum to apologise; they claimed, "To not apologise for these comments is a silent endorsement of anti-Muslim bigotry." In other words, yet again, someone who questioned Islamic homophobia (as well as Islamic sexism in this case) was condemned and his questioning was characterised as anti-Muslim.

It is painfully ironic that a gay man of Iranian heritage (Jackie Cox) wore a *hijab* to symbolise Muslim women. Muslim women in Iran have long struggled against mandatory hijab and forced veiling laws. In recent years, as movements such as [White Wednesday](#) have gained momentum, Iranian women have increasingly been resisting and defying the mandatory hijab laws. Theocratic and misogynistic laws allow women to be punished for appearing in public with their hair showing. The [BBC reports](#) that 35 women have been arrested since 2017 in the capital city of Tehran alone. Some of these women reported being tortured and beaten.

While this betrayal by the left is abysmal, the attempt to police the audience's response to Jackie's art is Orwellian. Through his art, a drag performer was able to express his "misgivings" about the way LGBT people are treated in Muslim communities and provoke questions about the subject from his audience. Yet, the response from the left was to throw accusations of racism at that audience and eschew any useful dialogue about the real issue at hand. Once again, the message was clear: even when presented with art by and about queer people of Muslim heritage, one may not scrutinise or question Islamic homophobia. All dialogue on the subject must place Islam in a positive light; to do otherwise is anti-Muslim, Islamophobic and racist.

Fortunately, Goldblum did not issue an apology—but neither has the Iranian government apologized for its Islamic- and Sharia-inspired execution of LGBT people. Iran still issues the death penalty for the "crime" of two people of the same sex loving each other. The Muslim Advocacy group is quick to outrage over a scene from *RuPaul's Drag Race*, but does not appear to have written to the Iranian government to request an apology for state-sanctioned murder, nor has it declared the murder of gay and bi Muslim people in Iran to be anti-Muslim.

Islam is not a Race

The word *Islamophobia* is a deliberate conflation of criticism of an ideology (Islam) with bigotry towards a people (Muslims). Critics of Islam can be silenced through the accusation of Islamophobia, which carries an inferred accusation of hatred of Muslims—something that would be far better described as Muslimophobia or anti-Muslim bigotry. The fear of being accused of Islamophobia makes many people hesitant to highlight the abhorrent nature of Islamic homophobia, its theological roots and the corresponding Islamic jurisprudence that results in the ongoing persecution of LGBT people.

Islam is a set of ideas in exactly the same way as Christianity, capitalism, communism and Hinduism are. Ideas must be open to scrutiny, assessment and criticism. They must be open to satire and ridicule. Criticism of ideas leads to societal advancement, as can be seen in the widespread replacement of superstition with reason and the scientific method. Stifling criticism of Islam ultimately hurts Muslims and individuals of Muslim heritage; such censorship enables regressive and harmful practices (such as gay Islamic [exorcisms](#) in the UK) to continue, rather than to be scrutinised and stopped.

A majority of the adherents to an ideology may be part of a particular racial demographic, whether in reality or in the popular imagination, but that does not mean that criticism of that ideology is an attack on that racial demographic. If it were, one could argue that criticism of capitalism is anti-white, criticism of communism is anti-Chinese, and criticism of Hinduism is anti-Indian. In any case, Muslims are a racially and ethnically diverse group.

Muslims are people and as such must be protected from bigotry. While all bigotry is unacceptable, we must acknowledge that using facts to highlight problematic beliefs and attitudes within the Muslim community is not bigotry—particularly when the facts suggest rampant discrimination towards a sexual minority that is often in need of protection. Highlighting homophobic aggression and persecution, including Islamic homophobia is a civic duty.

It is hypocritical of the left to highlight and condemn Christian homophobia and therefore to implicitly suggest that Christians (and, by extension, white people) are robust, rational thinkers able to withstand that criticism, while characterising Muslims as fragile brown people in need of protection from cognitive dissonance and critical thinking. This insistence on [Islamic fragility](#) is racist, paternalistic and patronizing.

Any focus on Islamic homophobia is inevitably challenged by the left with the question, “What about Christians?” But it is perfectly acceptable to focus on one specific form of homophobia. In fact, it is essential. Attempting to address Islamic homophobia using an approach tailored to Christian homophobia, or a model designed for tackling homophobia in China, will cause us to miss many of the nuances particular to the Islamic faith. Such a protest will also be meaningless to a Muslim audience who, by and large, consider Christianity and atheism to be at best erroneous, at worst heresy.

A specific focus on Islamic homophobia requires the compilation and assessment of data on Muslim theology, history and attitudes. This can lead to specific suggestions for solutions, resource allocation, accountability and timelines for improvement. In order to plan specific remedial measures, we must look at the specific issue.

We must not be silenced by accusations of Islamophobia or racism in our efforts to eradicate the most pernicious form of homophobia that currently affects LGBT people across the globe. We must stand resolute and increase our scrutiny of Islamic homophobia, holding it and the Muslim community to the same standards to which we hold the rest of society. To do anything less is the bigotry of low expectations, and a racist double standard.

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