



**Economic and Social  
Council**

Distr.  
GENERAL

E/CN.4/Sub.2/2005/NGO/28  
15 July 2005

ENGLISH ONLY

---

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS  
Sub-Commission on the Promotion  
and Protection of Human Rights  
Fifty-seventh session  
Items 2 and 6(a) of the provisional agenda

**QUESTION OF THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL  
FREEDOMS, INCLUDING POLICIES OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND  
SEGREGATION, IN ALL COUNTRIES, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO  
COLONIAL AND OTHER DEPENDENT COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES:  
REPORT OF THE SUB-COMMISSION UNDER COMMISSION ON HUMAN  
RIGHTS RESOLUTION 8 (XXIII)**

**SPECIFIC HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES:  
WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

**Joint written statement\* submitted by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, a  
non-governmental organization in special consultative status, and the Association for  
World Education and Association of World Citizens, non-governmental organizations on  
the Roster.**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in  
accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[4 July 2005]

---

\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting  
non-governmental organization(s).

## **The Plight of Muslim Women in Bangladesh, and other Islamic States**

### **Introduction:**

On 18 April 2005 during the 61<sup>st</sup> session of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), a Parallel NGO Conference (Victims of Jihad: Muslims, Dhimmis, Apostates, and Women) was held, sponsored by three NGOs: the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), the Association for World Education (AWE), and the Association of World Citizens (AWC).

The matters debated during that day by historians, writers, and human rights defenders are of crucial interest for human rights worldwide. The dire effects of the situation of women in certain Islamic States is most pertinent to item 2 of the agenda, as CHR resolution 8 (XXIII) of 16 March 1967, § 2, requests "information on violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms from all available sources for the use of the Commission." Item 6 (a) deals specifically with women and human rights, and four speakers covered this grave matter. This statement is adapted from the conference text of Taslima Nasrin.\*

\* \* \* \* \*

1. Bangladesh is a nation of more than 130 million people where 70 per cent of the people live below the poverty line, where more than half the population cannot read and write, a country where there is insufficient health care, and where infant mortality is high.
2. Nearly 40 million women have no access to education nor do they have the possibility of becoming independent. They suffer from malnutrition and from anaemia as well as from physical and psychological problems that are not treated. Women normally remain untreated because they are not taken to hospitals until they reach terminal stages. According to Taslima Nasrin, women are "not supposed to become sick", because they must remain busy with household chores, bear and rear children, take care of the family, and make sure that the male members of the family are happy. Women, therefore, are condemned to a lifetime of servitude.
3. In her statement to the conference, Nasrin explained that because women are considered weak, their rights, their freedoms, their desires, their wishes: all must be controlled by men. Women are considered inferior beings, servants, mere sexual objects. For a married couple, the most unwanted thing is a female baby. If a female baby is born, it is not uncommon that either the wife is divorced for her crime of having given birth to a female or she must spend her life in disgrace. Women are considered intellectually, morally, physically, and psychologically inferior by religion, tradition, culture, and custom.
4. As a result, far too many women suffer from trafficking, from slavery, from all kinds of discrimination. Men throw acid on women's bodies, burn their faces, smash their noses, melt their eyes, and walk away as happy men. Women are beaten, are flogged, and are stoned to death. Women are raped, are accused of having allowed the rape, and the rapists are set free. Violence against women is not considered a crime in Bangladesh.
5. Taslima Nasrin then gave an example of Yasmin, a 15-year-old girl, who was employed as a maid and was raped by her master and fled from the master's home.

“She was observed by the police as she walked towards her parents' house. The police told her it was not safe for a girl to be walking on the road at night and they offered her a ride home in their van. And what happened? Six policemen raped her, killed her and then threw her body into the bushes. When news of her murder broke out, villagers demonstrated against the police. Not unsurprisingly, the police shot at the protesters, killing seven of them. The government then issued a statement the following day that Yasmin was a girl of bad character, a prostitute, and the police had every right to treat her as they did. Hers is not a rare case in Bangladesh. "I know" said Nasrin, "it happens in other countries".

6. She explained that for centuries, women have been taught that they are slaves of men, that they should not protest against the patriarchal system, that they must remain silent against their abusers. As a result – she pointed out – it has been difficult for women to accept the idea that they are, in fact, human beings and have the right to live as independent and equal human beings. Nasrin then described what she set out to do:

“Through my writing, I have tried to encourage women to fight for their rights and freedom. My voice gave the chance to women to think differently. That did not make the religious fundamentalists happy. Quite the contrary! They were upset at my saying that religious law, which discriminates against women, needs to be replaced by secular law and a uniform civil code. Hundreds of thousands of extremists appeared on the streets and demanded my execution by hanging. A fatwa was issued against me, setting a price on my head. The government, instead of taking action against the fundamentalists, took action against me. I was charged with having hurt the religious feelings of the people and an arrest warrant was issued.”

7. “But, despite all the pressure, I continued writing. In my poetry, prose, essays and novels, I have defended people who are oppressed. I have cried loudly for equality and justice, justice for all people whatever their religion and gender. I have spoken loudly for the separation of religion and state, for secular law, for secular education. During my struggle for a secular and ethical humanism, I tried to defend the poor and also the ethnic and religious minority communities that were being oppressed. It was impossible for me to accept the idea that people living miserable lives did so because they had a different faith, or spoke a different language, or had a different culture. I believe that the diversity of our world's many religions, languages, cultures and ethnicities is not a pretext for conflict, but is a treasure that enriches us all. Diversity is a treasure to be appreciated. There is no superior, no inferior culture in this world, only various cultural patterns that make up our beautiful multicoloured mosaic. But human beings should not allow oppression in the name of religion. Humans should not allow torture such as female genital mutilation in the name of custom or tradition. Humans should not allow barbarism, humiliation, inequality, or injustice in the name of culture. Culture should not be and must not be used against humanity.”

8. She then stressed that both the Judeo-Christian Bible and the Qur'an clearly accept and condone slavery, pointing out that Jesus explicitly tells slaves to accept their roles and obey their masters. But, no one in this world today would defend slavery in any public forum or allow it under any legal code. Neither fundamentalist Christians nor Orthodox Jews talk about animal sacrifice or slavery today. In those countries in which *Shari'a* or Islamic law exists, where stoning for adultery and amputation for stealing are legalized, no legitimization of slavery is ever mentioned. Polygamy and concubinage are clearly accepted in the Old Testament, but nowhere in the Judeo-Christian world are either of these practices legalized.

Having made this distinction, she pointed out that: “insistence on the continuation of practices that denigrate, oppress, and suppress women under the guise of scriptural reference is a sham. Such practices could and should be de-legitimized just as chattel slavery has been de-legitimized.”

9. Her message to the United Nations was that humankind is facing an uncertain future. The probability of new kinds of rivalry and conflict looms large. In particular, the conflict is between two different ideas, secularism and fundamentalism. She did not agree with those who think the conflict is between two religions, namely Christianity and Islam, or Judaism and Islam. After all, there are fundamentalists in every religious community. Neither did she agree with those people who think that the Crusades in the Middle Ages will be repeated soon, nor that this is a conflict between the East and the West. For her, the conflict is basically between modern, rational, logical thinking and irrational, blind faith – a conflict between modernity and anti-modernism. While some are striving to go forward, others strive to go backward, and therefore it is a conflict between the future and the past, between innovation and tradition, between those who value freedom and those who do not.

10. “A Bangladesh court sentenced me to one year in prison for what I have written. In recent years, the Government has banned all four books of my memoirs. In my memoirs, what I have written is not just my life story. It is the same story that thousands of women know about, how women live in a patriarchal society that (...) allows them to suffer. It is important to give other women some inspiration to revolt against the oppressive system that I grew up under, and which still continues for them. We, the victims, need to be heard. We must protest loudly and demand our freedom and rights. We must refuse to be shackled, chained, beaten, and threatened. If women do not fight to stop being oppressed by shameful patriarchal and oppressive religious systems, then shame on women! Shame on us for not protesting, for not fighting, for allowing a system to continue that will affect our children as well as our children's children! I regret nothing that I have done or that I have ever written. Come what may, I will continue my fight against all the extremist, fundamentalist, intolerant forces without any compromise until my death.”

\* Statement by Taslima Nasrin: Bangladeshi exiled writer and humanist activist; recipient of the 2004 UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and non-Violence. Adapted from her speech – read in her absence by Roy Brown, President IHEU – at a Parallel NGO Conference ( 61<sup>st</sup> session UNCHR), on 18/4/05, co-sponsored by International Humanist and Ethical Union, Association for World Education, Association of World Citizens: VICTIMS OF JIHAD: Muslims, Dhimmis, Apostates, Women.

The full texts of the presentations made at the conference can be found at [www.iheu.org/UNCHR2005](http://www.iheu.org/UNCHR2005); and the text used by Taslima Nasrin is at: [www.iheu.org/modules/bfsection/article.php?articleid=408](http://www.iheu.org/modules/bfsection/article.php?articleid=408)

- - - - -