



Muslims for Progressive Values' Best Practices and Lessons Learned on Protecting and Promoting Human Rights to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism¹

March 2016

Executive Summary

This is a policy brief 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.

I. Introduction

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, LGBTIQI inclusion, critical analysis and interpretation, compassion and diversity. Based on these principles, MPV provides services to the Muslim community including interfaith marriages, same-sex marriages, female-led prayers, while producing avant-garde educational materials.

The main focus of MPV's work at the grassroots level is to stimulate critical thinking of sacred texts and to promote the implementation of progressive values, such as human rights, gender equality, freedom of expression, and freedom of and from belief. MPV also provides 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.

¹ This document was originally submitted by MPV in March 2016 to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in response to OHCHR's call for best practices and lessons learned in protecting and promoting human rights to contribute to preventing and countering violent extremism.

This policy brief 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.

II. Best Practice 1: Promoting Inclusive Expressions and Interpretations of Islam

Violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon with a multitude of root causes.² While acts of violent extremism are not exclusive to any region, nationality or religion, there is 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 worships as hubs and mediums to share their violent messaging, violent extremist groups, such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda, are able to lure and recruit their supporters, often packaged in pseudo-religious language. Moreover, violent extremists justify their gruesome human rights violations in the name of Islam, 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 women³, while Boko Haram kidnaps schoolgirls and forcibly pushes for their conversion into Islam.⁴ It is widely agreed by Muslims worldwide, including prominent scholars of Islam, that such acts are simply un-Islamic.⁵

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 aligned with international human rights law.

Online Communities

Since 2007, MPV has built online communities across the United States of America (USA), Canada, Chile, France, the Netherlands, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Australia, where Muslims and non-Muslims are able to learn more about Islam and contentious issues, such as LGBTIQI rights, women's rights and gender equality, freedom of expression and freedom of and from

² See more: Platform of Action on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism:
<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=53008#.VuSH9pMrLpA>

³ See more:

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

⁴ See more:

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

⁵ See more: <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>

religion. As of March 2016, MPV counts close to 8,000 Facebook page followers, over 17,600 Facebook group members, over 1,900 Twitter followers, and over 1,899 subscribers and 2,563,671 views on YouTube. Thanks to social media, MPV's message has spread throughout the world. For instance, over 18,000 viewers have watched MPV's video of a young woman leading a co-ed congregation in prayer and on occasion, MPV's Facebook page gets 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 with counter arguments to violent extremist narratives online, 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, the question of being gay and Muslim and Islamic marriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim men. The upshot of this sort of advocacy and other contemporary streams of inclusive Islamic advocacy is that dialogue regarding critical analysis of Islamic scripture and jurisprudence is increasingly taking place, especially as these dialogues pertain to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), the foundation and codification of fiqh (traditional Islamic jurisprudence) in certain Muslim-majority countries, gender justice and women's empowerment, deconstructing the purported Islamic basis for apostasy and blasphemy legislation, and even non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI).

Global Policy Spaces

Since acquiring Consultative 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 statements⁶, filing Universal Periodic Review reports⁷ and hosting its UN Lecture Series⁸ by means of panel discussions, consultations and workshops at the UN in Geneva and New York. By actively engaging in UN spaces with country missions, UN agencies and civil society organizations, MPV counters rhetoric at global policy level that perpetuates the idea that Muslim-majority countries are incapable of fully implementing the international human rights framework as a result of Shari'a Laws or their traditional Islamic values. In this way, MPV is able to hold UN Member States accountable for negligent implementation of international human rights conventions on the basis of alleged incompatibility between Shari'a and international human rights.

⁶ See more: <http://www.mpvusa.org/human-rights-council-statements/>

⁷ See more: <http://www.mpvusa.org/upr-stakeholder-reports/>

⁸ 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 and by producing avant-garde educational tools. In 2013, MPV released an exclusive Lecture Series on LGBTQI rights in Islam on its YouTube channel, debunking misconceptions about SOGI issues in Islam.⁹ These types of educational materials promote an understanding of Islam that is tolerant, peaceful and respectful of diversity, 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 terms of media appearances, in 2015 alone, MPV appeared over 77 times in the media, through interviews on, amongst others, RT America, the Huffington Post, Al Jazeera, and the Dhaka Tribune.¹⁰ Through its engagement with mainstream media, MPV is able to raise global awareness for relevant and contentious human rights issues.

III. Best Practice 2: Empowering Youth

There is growing international 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 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 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

⁹ Learn more: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLE3saqAXcc3ahCLB4FWqyd7XAJ_Lh72IZ

¹⁰ See more: <http://www.mpvusa.org/in-the-news/>

document of the forum, entitled the Amman Declaration¹¹ which led to to 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 Youth 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 and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), 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.¹²

The first podcast's topic on 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 freedom 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 (now Agenda 2030). The podcast series is available on iTunes and on MPV's website.¹³

Another initiative that MPV undertakes is its Youth Open Mic event, which recently celebrated its two-year anniversary. The Youth Open Mic event, which occurs every month in Los Angeles, USA, has the mission 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, and/or other aspect of their identity. Activities include free coaching in poetry and spoken-word craftsmanship.

¹¹ See more: <https://www.unteamworks.org/node/505475>

¹² See more: <https://awards.indexoncensorship.org/2016-longlist/>

¹³ 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 UN level to promote universal human rights. In support of the work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 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.¹⁴

IV: Best Practice 3: 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 justice and are themselves often ostracized and ridiculed by more radical Imams for their alternate views. MPV believes that it is crucial to empower these women's rights affirming Imams, who we call #ImamsForShe champions, by providing them with positive public support, as well as educational and training materials and a safe space where they and their audiences can have meaningful discussions about women's rights in Islam.

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).

¹⁴ See more: <http://www.mpvusa.org/in-support-of-ohchr/>

The objectives of the #ImamsForShe initiatives are to build a movement that holds Imams accountable, to encourage dialogue and to develop educational tools. Ultimately, desired outcomes 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 network 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 female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C), are not Islamic.

Currently, there are 32 #ImamsForShe champions, hailing from Bahrain, Burundi, the UK and USA.¹⁵ 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; 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 ultimately foster a change in the behaviour of family and community members to empower women, with the ultimate goal of them demanding just policies and laws as a result of an increased awareness and understanding of women's rights. By debunking and challenging violent expressions of Islam

¹⁵ Learn more: <http://www.mpvusa.org/champions/>

directed toward women alongside religious clergy, MPV is changing mindsets of both communities and their leaders, building just and ethical societies, and as such, preventing violent extremism.

V. Best Practice 4: Leaving Noone Behind

It behooves intergovernmental institutions and multilateral agencies to holistically consider 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. Reducing violent extremism solely to the instrumentalization of religious narratives by extremist groups, CVE measures to militaristic action, and PVE initiatives solely to countering fundamentalist narratives would essentialize the perceivable issue and subsequent responses.

However, given that human rights violations in much of the Muslim world are justified in the name of fundamentalist and extremist narratives of Islam, there is a need to conceptualize and frame advocacy in a way that resonates and receives traction with target audiences. In this context that language must be affirmed with human rights and social justice and conceptualized within an inclusive Islamic worldview.

Furthermore, MPV affirms that without full provision and promotion of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, with emphasis on freedom of expression, freedom of religion, respecting, protecting, and fulfilling 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 worldwide Chapters enables the creation of spaces that are non-sectarian, inclusive of sexual and gender diversity, 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 SOGI.

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”¹⁶, that sought to holistically contextualize human rights within the Post-2015 Development Agenda, with particular emphasis on striking correlations between discriminatory laws, policies, and social practices on the basis of SOGI and detriment to economic development that may lead some to violent extremism.

Through its grassroots engagement, MPV provides a welcoming space for non-Muslims and Muslims of every ethnic and cultural background, race, sect, gender, sexual orientation and age to practice their 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 other Muslim communities, such as gender equality, LGBTQI inclusion and critical analyses and thinking of sacred texts. MPV provides services, which are often deemed taboo, such as female-led prayers and customized marriage services (including same-sex marriages and inter-faith marriages). For LGBTQI Muslims and other vulnerable communities, creating an inclusive faith-based community that accepts their identity empowers them and helps keep mental health issues at bay. 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.

VI. Recommendations

As per the examples delineated above, MPV puts forth the following recommendations as inspired by relevant policy papers on P/CVE¹⁷:

1. UN Agencies and Member States should ensure that P/CVE 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

¹⁶ Learn more: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqCEeI4Ht7I>

¹⁷ Such policy papers include the Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism, the Women, Peace and Security Agenda Resolutions, UNSCR 2250 and others.

should also support youth-led peacebuilding organizations that work for democratic values and peacebuilding through funding and allocation of other resources. Additionally, the specific and gendered grievances and vulnerabilities that young people experience must be recognized.¹⁸

5. UN Agencies and Member States should support, promote and invest in grassroots arts-based efforts, such as literature, music, theatre, film, story-telling, and other arts productions, which support freedom of expression and the production of counter narratives to violent extremist expressions, and advance the values of tolerance, 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 and other obligations under international law.¹⁹

¹⁸ “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/>

¹⁹<https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/38276/en/unhrc-side-event:-human-rights-and-%E2%80%9Cpreventing-violent-extremism%E2%80%9D>