

World Union for Progressive Judaism

Case Postale 205 – 1196 Gland – Suisse

UN Human Rights Council – 17th Session (30 May -17 June 2011)
President: H. E. Ambassador Sihasak Phuangketkeow (Thailand)

Representative David G. LITTMAN–Friday (p.m.), 10 June 2011

*Follow-up to and implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action:
Integrating the human rights of women throughout the United Nations system (item 8)*

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY (8 June 2011)

Violence against women and related taboo subjects at the Human Rights Council

[Only the words in bold were pronounced in the 2 minutes speaking time for NGOs.]

Sir, we understand that when raising the issue of religion and human rights we need to do so with sensitivity. But this should not, surely, lead us into a paralysis of self-censorship when certain religious beliefs threaten the universality of human rights. (1)

On this sensitive subject, we shall again quote two recognized human rights experts. In 2003, Radhika Coomaraswamy, stressing the integrity of the UDHR [Universal Declaration of Human Rights] & the International Covenants, condemned cultural relativism in her Final 'Violence against Women' Commission Report: "*The greatest challenge to women's rights & the elimination of discriminatory laws and harmful practices comes from the doctrine of cultural relativism.*" (2)

In 2008, in her 60th anniversary UDHR lecture, Noble Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi declared: "*The idea of cultural relativism is nothing but an excuse to violate human rights.*" [She condemned the fact that in Iran a girl is considered an adult & liable to punishment, even execution, at 9 and a boy at 15.]

Only last week, a popular Egyptian preacher, Abu Ishaq al-Huwaini, confirmed on Egyptian TV [Hikma] what he had said 18 years ago that: Jihad still justifies plundering, enslaving and raping the infidels – for which he provided quotations from sacred texts in justification. He even boasted that Islam allows Muslims to buy and sell conquered infidel women, adding: "When I want a sex-slave, I go to the market and pick whichever female I desire and buy her." (3). And last weekend, a political activist and former parliamentary candidate for Kuwait's government, Salwa al-Mutairi, expressed her religious opinion to "revive the institution of sex-slavery." (4)

It is 3 years since a 1½ hour landmark event [also known as the 'Sharia-gate Shipwreck'] occurred at the Council in reaction to our joint statement on 'violence against women' [item 8]. (5)

We had begun by once again condemning FGM [– the barbaric female genital mutilation of @ 3 million young girls every year in 32 countries, 29 of which are members of the OIC; the stoning of women; honour killing and the marriage-sale of 9 year-old-girls – all carried out in the name either of 'traditional practices' or 'cultural relativism', but with irrefutable religious connections.]

And we remain convinced that such crimes, carried out 'traditionally', but also with official religious sanction (6), should not be treated as taboo subjects at the Council. The growing phenomenon of 'cultural relativism' should not be supported by self-censorship at the UN, [especially not under the guise of 'complementary standards' or 'sensitivity and understanding'.] It is surely time for more States, especially OIC countries, and NGOs to condemn here all such barbaric practices against women – for whatever reason. We appeal to both the Council and the High Commissioner to reconsider this matter seriously and put an end to the silence.

Silence that dreadful bell [Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act ii, scene 3]

Thank you, Mr President.