

# Speaking out

STORY AND PHOTO BY DONNA DANIELLI

Iranian born Homa Arjomand has been speaking out for the rights of women since 1970, and recently she brought her message to Georgetown. The guest speaker for the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW), Ms. Arjomand is best known for launching the successful campaign to keep the use of a Shari'a Court system in Ontario through her website [www.nosharia.com](http://www.nosharia.com). Shari'a Court, based on the Koran, was proposed for use through the Ontario Arbitration Act 1991. This Act was originally created to solve family disputes outside of a regular court system with the use of an arbitrator, and was quite often used by those keeping to the tenets of Judaism or Catholicism. "There is no political movement behind the Jewish and Catholic courts though," Ms. Arjomand told the audience. "Shari'a law has a political movement behind it."

Shari'a law came under fire as male centric system that victimizes women and children when proposed for use in Ontario. It sparked protest worldwide. "Four hundred people in Paris were marching against Shari'a law in Canada," said Ms. Arjomand. "We're talking about women living in communities where the right of the community overtakes her individual rights. What kind of choice does this woman have? We are told in the name of cultural relativism to watch it and do nothing because it is their culture."

Ms. Arjomand pointed to the Taliban rule in Afghanistan as the most publicly known example of the dangers of Shari'a law. "In Afghanistan, they did whatever they could to subjugate women," she pointed out. "During the reign of Khomeini, over 100,000 women activists were executed." This is a danger she herself is only too aware of. During the winter of 1989, she fled with her children, a six-year-old son and a one-year-old daughter, through the mountains from Iran, fearing for all of their lives if they should be caught by the Islamic regime.

She was quick to point out though, that there is an important distinction to be made between political Islam and Muslims. "We need to know about the characteristics of political Islam to be able to separate it from Muslimism, they are different" she said. "The movement of political Islam is global

and we have to fight it globally. They are concentrating on our children. They are brainwashing our children, using culture and cultural relativism."

Ms. Arjomand told the packed room of women that the key to fighting political Islam is the strict adherence to a single system of law. "We should have one law for all and if anyone breaks that one law, there should be consequences," she argued. "Under the banner of one law for all, we will manage to protect the children and have equality between men and women."

Another key issue for Ms. Arjomand, since Premier McGuinly ruled on September 11 that there would be no faith based arbitration allowed in Ontario in September, is the separation of the religion from the education system. "The only solution for the protection of women and children is the removal of religion from the education system," she argued. "Culture should not be placed higher than women's rights or children's rights." The danger, according to Ms. Arjomand, lies in what a teacher chooses to teach in the name of religion. "A teacher can teach whatever they want,"

she insisted. "In Iran, under the name of physics, I was teaching social justice. If I can do it, so can the Mullah (Islamic teacher). Under the name of math or science, they can re-direct it. They can brainwash our children."

Ms. Arjomand acknowledged that this separation of religion from education might cause consternation amongst Ontario's Jewish and Catholic schools. "If we go to these schools and talk of the danger of cultural relativism, I'm sure that they will understand and compromise," she told the audience. "Multiculturalism is danger. It was not danger before but it is now. We must move towards integration in every respect." Ms. Arjomand realizes though that while the battle over faith-based arbitration may have been won, the skirmish over religion and education is just beginning. "On September 11, we managed to push back political Islam one step, one tiny step," she told the CFUW. "I am hoping that by next September 11, we can push political Islam back from our education as well. We can do it together. We strongly believe that if people know what is happening, they can stop it."



Renowned women's rights activist Homa Arjomand.

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