

CONVERSATIONS WITH *AYAAN HIRSI ALI*

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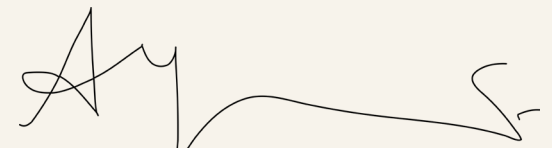


Freedom Women's Rights Restoring the West

Inspired by Ayaan's
Most Influential Essays
and Lectures



If you wonder why I—a woman of color, an African, a former Muslim, a former asylum seeker, and an immigrant—look at the antics of today’s anti-Israel, anti-American protesters with such fear and trembling, allow me to explain.


Ayaan Hirsi Ali

STANDING UP FOR WOMEN’S RIGHTS

“There is no reason to tolerate human rights violations in the U.S. No religion, culture, or tradition can be invoked to justify violence against women and girls.”

— Ayaan Hirsi Ali

She knows the cost of silence. As a survivor of female genital mutilation (FGM), Ayaan Hirsi Ali has spent more than two decades sounding the alarm on abuses too often ignored in the West—from FGM and child marriage to the erosion of safety and freedom of women in Western Europe and the broader denial of women’s rights under Islamism. Long before these issues reached headlines in the U.S. or the UK, she was warning of the dangers, challenging the cultural taboos that kept them hidden, and calling out those who, in the name of multiculturalism, chose not to offend rather than to protect. As she has said, “Tolerance of intolerance is cowardice.” Through AHA Foundation, her vision becomes action—changing laws, shifting public awareness, and defending the rights of women and girls.



Trey: When you established AHA Foundation in 2007, you immediately targeted practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) and honor violence. At the time, the American public largely viewed these as distant, foreign tragedies. What compelled you to sound the alarm that this brutality had already arrived on our shores?

Ayaan: As an African who was subjected to FGM, now living in the West, I could not turn a blind eye when I learned that this abuse threatens the lives of girls in my new homeland. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 513,000 women and girls in the U.S. are at risk of or have undergone FGM.

It is hard for people outside of communities practicing FGM to understand what is taking place. Although it rightly makes many squeamish, we must speak openly about what female genital mutilation is. Otherwise, it will remain underground, and vulnerable girls will continue to be brutalized.

Trey: It’s hard to grasp why this continues to happen. Can you explain what the perpetrators are actually trying to achieve regarding a woman’s sexuality, and the kind of lasting harm this inflicts on the victims?

Ayaan: The main aim of FGM in all its forms is to control female sexuality. The clitoris is removed to take physical pleasure from sex and reduce the libido. In its more severe forms, involving sewing the genitals up, the aim is to ensure the girl is a virgin on her wedding night. Many women must be surgically opened in order to consummate their marriage. The consequences of FGM are ongoing psychological and physical harms, ranging from infections to fistulas and even death.

One example that has stayed with me over the years was a woman in the Netherlands whom I translated for. I accompanied her to visit an obstetrician as she was having great difficulty with urination and menstruation. She showed the doctor the anatomy left after being subjected to the third and most severe type of FGM, where the tissue was completely removed. The stunned doctor asked if she had been burned. He could not believe that what

had been done to her was deliberate; he assumed it must have been a horrific accident. But it was no accident.

It’s for women like her that I started AHA Foundation as a resource to help women and girls who are truly bridging the gap between worlds and cultures. They are living in the U.S. under the protection of our laws and Constitution but suffering human rights abuses imported from overseas.

Trey: Why do some families continue to practice FGM despite the risks?

Ayaan: It may seem hard to understand why parents would inflict this particularly cruel and risky form of abuse on their daughters. The reasons are deeply held religious and cultural beliefs, usually about female sexuality and modesty. By stripping sex of physical pleasure for a woman, it is thought her libido will be reduced, her virginity safeguarded, and her marital fidelity ensured. Families fear that their daughters will be unmarriageable within their community or bring shame to their family if they are not subjected to FGM.

This outdated, barbaric practice takes place behind closed doors, inside families, and within communities that know it is considered abhorrent and illegal in this country, so they hush it up.

Trey: Why are state-level laws so important in preventing FGM in the U.S.?

Ayaan: Nine states have yet to outlaw FGM, making the job of law enforcement and prosecutors so much harder. State laws give local prosecutors the tools they need to pursue a case and provide crucial services to survivors. They can mandate education to frontline professionals and the impacted community. Two of the 7-year-old girls allegedly mutilated in 2017 in Michigan were brought by their families from Minnesota, where a prosecution can lead to life imprisonment, to Michigan—a state that at that time had no specific FGM protections.

State laws are necessary and have proven useful for families, feeling pressure from their communities, as to why they will not cut their daughters. Yet laws are insufficient for stamping out FGM.

Trey: Why are the current state laws insufficient—what else is needed to end the practice?

Ayaan: Frontline service workers—the police, teachers, child protection, social services, and health-care workers—are often uncomfortable broaching the subject, worried about appearing culturally insensitive.

This is why AHA Foundation has developed training for professionals on how to recognize and respond to the warning signs of FGM, and how to broach the topic in a culturally respectful manner.

FGM is the symptom of harmful cultural beliefs that girls and women must be sexually pure, modest and that their bodies exist to breed. Whether it’s justified by being a Muslim, Egyptian, Indian, black, a woman or any other category venerated in the identity politics pantheon, these beliefs are not compatible with liberal societies that profess to ensure the human rights of their citizens.

To end the practice of FGM it is important to address the deeply ingrained cultural beliefs that perpetuate the practice of FGM. Education and outreach programs in communities can make a difference. These programs teach women, girls, and, importantly, men, about the health risks and emotional trauma caused by the practice as well as the criminal penalties for inflicting FGM on a minor.

Trey: Ayaan, let’s turn our attention to another important topic: child marriage. Your work suggests that child marriage isn’t just a “tradition” in a vacuum; it seems to be part of a much larger, more violent framework of control. How does that system actually operate against young women?

Ayaan: I think child marriage is a form of slavery. When you are a minor, before the age of 18, you are not mature enough to enter into a legal contract stating that you’re going to spend the rest of your life with this person, in many cases, someone you’ve never met before. That you’re going to have children with someone you’ve never met before. That you’re going to establish a home and a future with a person you’ve never met before.

“I think we talk a lot about slavery and events that took place 200 years ago, but child marriage exists today, and about 98% of these forced marriages happen to girls. That is a form of modern-day slavery. I can’t think of any other language to define that.”

Sometimes the marriage is sold to the child as inevitable. You know, you’ve come of age, you now have your period, and your body is transitioning from that of a child to a woman. So it’s time for you to get married because that’s what your mother did, that’s what your grandmother did, that’s what your sisters did. The child is given no choice in the matter. It is presented as this is tradition, this is just our religion, and you have no choice in this. And sometimes it is actually forced with physical force, where girls are beaten into submission, and they are told, ‘either you die, or you enter into this marriage.’ Even though one might be softer than the other, both represent coercion.

It is an individual who is not yet mature enough, not of age, being forced into a situation that is often a lifelong prison from which they cannot escape. Where unwanted pregnancies occur, any kind of sexual activity that takes place in that marriage is clearly rape. I have spoken to many, many victims of child marriage, and that’s exactly how they describe it. They don’t have the opportunity to say no, and the law is very clear in developed countries that protect women that sex without consent is rape, and that happens when you subject that child that later on becomes an adult who has had a lifelong experience of being captive by someone she would have never chosen had she had the opportunity.

Then, there are honor killings. They are the end of a long chain of coercion: intimidation, confinement, beatings, and forced marriage. A girl is told she belongs to her family and that her body is not her own. If she

resists, she is punished. When she continues to resist, the punishment becomes lethal. The murder is then presented as a moral act, carried out to cleanse shame.

Practices such as honor killings, forced marriage, and female genital mutilation are not cultural accidents. They are rooted in a system of beliefs about female obedience and male authority. Women who reject these roles are seen as threats to the moral order of the family and the community, and violence is used to bring them back into line. The concept of honor functions as a prison for women. Their value lies in their virginity and obedience. A girl who refuses an arranged marriage, who falls in love, or who chooses her own life is seen as dishonorable. Violence is used to enforce compliance. In extreme cases, the punishment is death. These are not isolated crimes of passion, but acts approved and sometimes planned by families and communities.

Trey: Beyond religion or “honor,” there is often an economic argument in developing countries—that families are too poor to keep their daughters. Is that a valid justification, and why are daughters almost always the ones who pay the price?

Ayaan: Well, the one mouth less to feed—if you allowed this child to actually go to school, she would actually be feeding herself. She would finish higher education, find a job, maybe even start a small business, or join an existing business. She would have the capacity not only to feed herself, but also probably to feed her own children and maybe even contribute to the family income, so I do think it is a fallacy and that denying children, especially girls, their education is what keeps this cycle of poverty going.

I think that it has to do with the history of traditional society, where girls and women are seen as the weaker sex. Young boys and men are trained to be focused on the outside, outside of the house: to fight, to work, to earn money, to travel. By the time a young man has done all of that, he has reached an age of maturity, and often it is taken for granted that a young man will choose who he wants to marry, or, in any case, from what family. Girls are sheltered; they are protected as the weaker sex, and in many of these traditions, girls are seen as property, unfortunately. So when you give a girl away as a bride, the family, in many cases, gets money. The



girl, the woman, is seen as a source of shame, again an extra mouth to feed, and if you put all of these things together, then the family, especially the father or the male guardian, sees it as his responsibility to ensure that a girl is married off for her own sake, for her own protection, for the family honor. I think that’s why girls are affected way more than boys and men.

I have also heard arguments about ‘we have nothing to eat, we are so poor.’ So you know, if this man is going to pay us a lot of money to accept this underage daughter as his wife, then our family gets to eat. And that is literally selling your child. We are seeing, after the withdrawal in Afghanistan, many, many cases of that in Afghanistan, where parents with tears in their eyes and a broken heart are literally selling their children just so that they can have food. Child marriage is a product of poverty and cycles of poverty, and just really a terrible understanding of what it takes to break through these cycles of poverty; it is justified in the name of religion and tradition.

Trey: Ayaan, while some of these horrors happen across cultures and religions, it seems that when they happen within Muslim communities, feminists fail to speak about them. You have argued that by ignoring the subjugation of women in some Islamic communities, Western feminists are betraying the very people they claim to protect. How is this failure playing out?

Ayaan: It’s easy for feminists in the U.S. to avoid the topic of Islam; there aren’t nearly as many unassimilated migrant men from Muslim-majority countries in America as there are in Europe. But European feminists, influenced by the racial absolutism of the American Left, are also failing women—both Muslim and non-Muslim—who suffer horrifically at the hands of Islam.

Self-described feminist and former leader of the UK’s Green Party, Caroline Lucas, has a long history of censoring “Islamophobia,” instructing her constituents to “call out Islamophobia wherever we see it” in 2022. Meanwhile, Lucas embraced the #MeToo movement, working on a 2018 report on sexual harassment within Parliament. The glaring, but typical, inconsistency here is that sexual harassment is indeed on the rise in the UK and Europe, but the culprits are not Members of Parliament. Inconveniently for feminists on the Left, who think race trumps sex in the hierarchy of victimhood, there is a huge problem of unassimilated young men from Muslim countries who regard Western women as mere objects. How dissonant must the mind be to read this and still consider Islam compatible with feminism?

“While those within the Western Left defend the absolute validity of all asylum seekers, over 70% of asylum applicants to Europe are men and most children are boys. Aren’t women considered particularly vulnerable in warzones, from which these migrants ostensibly flee? It’s strange how the overwhelming majority of vulnerable people who come to the West are young, healthy men, isn’t it?”

Trey: In your book *Prey*, you drew a controversial but data-driven link between this influx of young male migrants and a spike in sexual violence. What did your research reveal?

Ayaan: In my book *Prey: Immigration, Islam, and the Erosion of Women’s Rights* (2021), I show the causal connection between increased sexual coercion and rape in countries like Germany (which experienced a 41% increase in 2017 alone) and the influx of young male migrants from North Africa and the Middle East. The 2015-16 New Year’s Eve assaults, when a large group of North African men assaulted approximately 1,200 women in a single night, starkly revealed the ways in which unassimilated migrants treat Western women, whom they view as ripe for the picking.

Between 2008 and 2010, a voracious grooming gang in Rochdale comprising British-Pakistani men was made known to British police. The cops failed to clamp down on its activity, largely out of fear of being condemned as racist (which, no doubt, would have happened). As a result, hundreds of white working-class girls, many of whom were from vulnerable backgrounds and lacked parental support, were made victims of sex trafficking.

Rochdale was by no means the only grooming gang; grooming gangs have since been exposed in Rotherham, Huddersfield, Bradford, Oxford, and other areas with notable South Asian Muslim populations and enclaves. In 2017, it was found that 84% of those convicted for grooming gang offenses in the UK were South Asian, despite representing only 7% of the population.

Trey: You often criticize the Left, but the rot seems to go deeper. From the police to the BBC to academia, why have the British establishment institutions have been so eager to cover up or rationalize this specific form of violence?

Ayaan: As the Rochdale debacle shows, leftist ideologues are not alone in ignoring the problem: police and establishment media are complicit. “Centrist” media outlets routinely ignore the inconvenient trends I describe in *Prey*, instead framing migrants as victims of Islamophobic bigotry when the topic arises. In 2016,

the BBC produced a gushing documentary about Omar Badreddin, a Syrian refugee who was charged with sexual assault but found not guilty.

Similarly, rather than grappling with unpleasant case studies or statistics that risk seeming critical of Islam, Western feminism paradoxically condemns “Islamophobia” and sexism in the same breath. On May 1, 2023, the Department of Gender Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) compared the French radical feminist group Femen with the “far-right.” Why? For criticizing patriarchy within Islam and the sexually aggressive behavior of migrants from Muslim countries.

Trey: What explains the reluctance among progressives to confront the cultural factors behind migrant-perpetrated sexual violence?

Ayaan: Christopher Hitchens’ comments on leftist hypocrisy regarding unassimilated Muslims remain relevant. There’s little wonder why these young men don’t consider it their moral duty to assimilate to the normative condemnation of sexual assault in the West: as Hitchens pointed out in a 2007 article, “Londonistan Calling,” Traditional Islamic law says that Muslims who live in non-Muslim societies must obey the law of the majority. But this does not restrain those who now believe that they can proselytize Islam by force, and need not obey kuffar law in the meantime.”

For Western feminists, Islam is the elephant in the room. While many feminists refuse to address the ways in which Muslim women suffer all over the world, they even more anxiously avoid the topic of sexual abuse by migrant men from Muslim countries on their own turf. To point out the data on sexual assault by migrant men in Europe, as I did in *Prey*, won me the baffling label “absolutist” in *The New York Times*. Another review in *The Standard* condemned my book for implying that “sexism” is in the “DNA” of migrant men who mistreat women. Nowhere do I make such an essentialist claim. Cultural norms, uncorrected by assimilation, drive the phenomenon of migrant-perpetrated sexual assault. The Left has a serious problem grasping the implications of per capita calculations: for my critics, noticing demographic trends means painting every single member of that group with the same brush.

A constructive feminism would not be angered by the contents of my book *Prey*; it would confront the problem, lobbying for pragmatic solutions and tough borders in response to the unmanageable numbers of asylum applicants who enter Europe for economic purposes. Above all, it would demand that all men in Europe, no matter their creed or color, assimilate into the cultural norms that allow women to walk the streets in safety.

Trey: What is at stake for women—both in Muslim-majority societies and in the West—depending on which interpretation of Islam gains influence?

Ayaan: All cultures have strong views on marriage, family, divorce, promiscuity, and parenting. Not all cultures are similar or interchangeable, however. Let me explain how different groups of Muslims perceive women’s rights and where their beliefs have been shaped. The first group of Muslims is the most problematic—the fundamentalists who envision a regime based on Sharia, Islamic religious law. They argue for an Islam largely or completely unchanged from its original seventh-century version and take it as a requirement of their faith that they impose it on everyone else.

I call them Medina Muslims, in that they see the forcible imposition of Sharia as their religious duty, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad when he was based in Medina. They exploit their fellow Muslims’ respect for Sharia law as a divine code that takes precedence over civil laws. It is only after they have laid this foundation that they are able to persuade their recruits to engage in jihad. There is no equality between men and women in their eyes, either legally or in daily practice.

The second group—and the clear majority throughout the Muslim world—consists of Muslims who are loyal to the core creed and worship devoutly but are not inclined to practice violence or even intolerance towards non-Muslims. I call this group “Mecca Muslims,” after the first phase of Islam and the peaceful Qur’anic verses that were revealed in Mecca. In this group, the position of women is contested.

More recently, and partly in response to the rise of Islamic terrorism, a third group is emerging within Islam—Muslim reformers or, as I call them, “modifying

Muslims”—who promote the separation of religion from politics and other reforms. Although some are apostates, the majority of dissidents are believers, among them clerics who have come to realize that their religion must change if its followers are not to be condemned to an interminable cycle of political violence. Reformers generally favor equality between men and women.

The future of Islam and the world’s relationship with Muslims will be decided by which of the two minority groups—the Medina Muslims or the reformers—can win the support of the rather passive Meccan majority.

In the West, most people of goodwill are committed to providing women with equal rights and the opportunity to build a good future for themselves, to develop into autonomous human beings. The people I would call “Medina Muslims”—men such as Sayyid Qutb, Yusuf Qaradawi, or Osama Bin Laden—offer an alternative vision. They claim that their vision, based on Sharia law, is in all ways superior to the norms prevailing in the West. Medina Muslims churn out the statistics—which are of course widely available in the West—of divorce, single parenting, prostitution, the hook-up culture on American campuses. They offer crude and simple remedies: segregate the sexes; cover women from head to toe (the modesty doctrine) to prevent men from losing sexual control; marry girls off as early as possible on Sharia terms; and a list of other measures.

Medina Muslims claim that, when all of these Sharia measures towards women have been adopted, the vexing problems of promiscuity, children born out of wedlock, and the social chaos (*fitna*) they view in Western countries will cease. Yet Medina Muslims are uncomfortable when pressed to explain why Sharia measures implemented in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and to some extent in Pakistan



have not resolved every conceivable social ill. On the contrary, what we see in those countries is often appalling mistreatment of women and especially of young girls.

Feminist academics in the West might be expected to call out Medina Muslims, or at least to enable students to think through the consequences of implementing Sharia measures such as we see in Iran and Saudi Arabia.

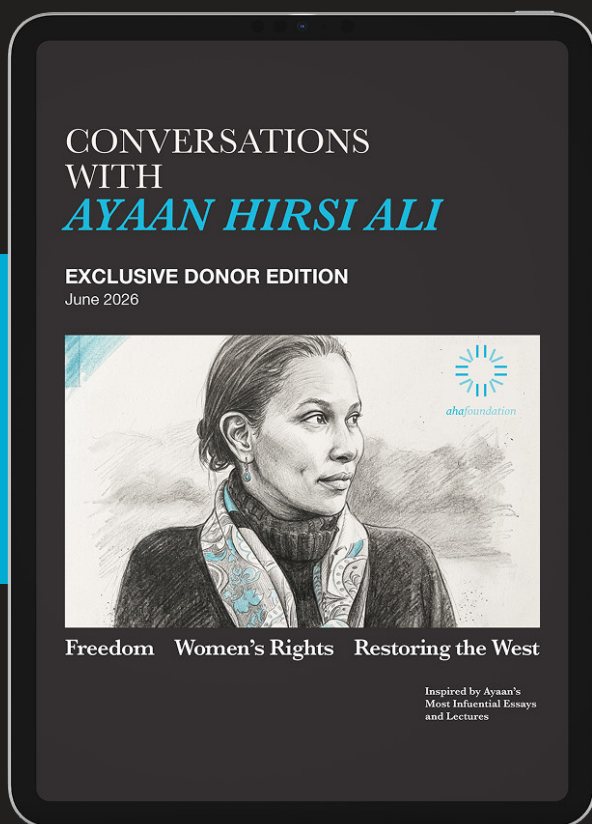
Yet what we see is rather different. It is striking how many American university professors and students reject any analysis of a real conflict between enlightened Western values and unreformed Sharia, even as Western civilization is mocked and its many contributions to human freedom and gender equality are cynically dismissed.

- Read more about TOPICS IN THIS CHAPTER:
- The Transformative Power of Women–Speech at Pepperdine University (Oct 2019)
 - Western Women and Islam, Restoration (April 2024)
 - What We Were Really Talking About Beneath the Weasel Words: Genital Cutting, Fox News (April 2017)
 - Finally, FGM is on Trial in America, Daily Beast (April 2017)



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