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Sharia Law and Women in Islam
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INTRODUCTION
One of the most controversial aspects of the Islamic tradition today is the concept of sharia law, especially when coupled with the much debated, and often heated, topic of the role and status of women in Islam. Even to the educated non-Muslim Western audience, the term "sharia law" or "Islamic law" usually brings to mind barbaric, demeaning medieval-type practices, such as stoning to death, cutting off hands, forced marriages, honor killings, or the image of Muslim women wearing abayas with niqabs, chadors, or hijabs. Some of these images are further reinforced in popular discourses including literature and Hollywood (-like) movies that are found in popular literature or media. These accounts are often written in a compelling fashion in the form of biographies evoking in the reader strong emotions of sympathy for the victim (Muslim women) and anger and frustration (directed at the men and institutions that uphold sharia law).

With the significant presence of Muslims now permanently residing in liberal democracies in Western Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, some of these peculiarly Islamic practices, especially the wearing of face veils by Muslim women, are at times further entrenched in the minds of the average non-Muslim Westerner by their very presence in the streets of many Western metropolises. Furthermore, the demands by a minority of Western Muslims to incorporate and officially recognize sharia tribunals, in the sphere of family law, into the Western legal systems (something that other religious communities such as Orthodox Jews and some Christians had the right to enjoy), for those who wish to be governed by them, have raised alarm bells, if not panic, among many non-Muslim Westerners—some Western Muslims too—amid the fears that the barbaric,