

Dangerous game: a reply to Gita Sahgal and her supporters

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In the week following June 26, International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, the co-author with Moazzam Begg of his book *Enemy Combatant: the terrifying true story of a Briton in Guantanamo*, comes to the defence of his work and that of Cageprisoners. A bitter controversy has only fed Islamophobia, demonised an innocent person, and obscured the real human rights issues at stake

Two weeks ago in Leeds, I gave a peace lecture honouring Olof Palme, which ranged over wars old and new, the bombing of Dresden, Daniel Ellsberg, Wikileaks, Bloody Sunday, and the Turkish flotilla to Gaza. Afterwards I was approached by two young Muslim women. They wanted to discuss the issues raised in the lecture, but also to talk about how isolated they felt and how hard it is for them these days to talk about politics without fearing hostility and feeling that they are being seen as "terrorists". In the following two days I talked with another young Muslim woman whose husband is on a Control Order, and who in desperation had broken its conditions and faced possible dire consequences. I also went to see a Muslim woman whose husband is in prison accused of terror-related activities, and one of whose sons is in trouble.

Three days... four Muslim women... The Leeds women came to my lecture because Moazzam Begg told them about it; the two London women I know because Moazzam Begg asked me to visit them some years back, to break their isolation; and he and I have visited the Control Order family together, with Home Office clearance.

Since he was released from Guantanamo, this has been his work - campaigning on behalf of those still held without trial or hope of justice, and doing what he can to help distraught wives and families.

At the centre of the bitter, feminist-led recent controversy over him and Amnesty International, is a completely false perception of his attitudes to women, based on the fact that he once worked in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Long-standing, complex and important debates on gender politics and religion have been shoe-horned into a simple demonisation of him.

None of the Muslim women I mention have ever heard of Gita Sahgal, former head of the gender department in Amnesty International, but their reality is undeniable. The Britain they live in is one of isolation and fear. Ms Sahgal's recent disagreement with her employer, Amnesty International, and her decision to publicise her views on that in an interview with the Sunday Times, has fed into an existing virulent islamophobia. It should have remained an important internal argument inside Amnesty International. Ms Sahgal's ill-considered words about Moazzam Begg and others at Cageprisoners have caused very serious damage to their reputation, and provoked death threats.

Like many people who work with Cageprisoners and Moazzam Begg, I wrongly assumed that the

Amnesty row would have a brief media life in which old enemies of Amnesty on the right would take some pleasure, while the usual metropolitan journalists who resent the celebrity profile of a Muslim man from Birmingham who is both a good writer and public speaker, would follow Ms Sahgal's lead, and recycle old criticisms of Moazzam Begg in the coded islamophobic terms which have become routine in the British media.

However, the "on-line global petition" signed by 2,145 people, Ms Sahgal's statement carried prominently, and unusually, in the influential New York Review of Books, her subsequent call to action in the name of Amnesty's founder Peter Benenson, show that - whether or not she intended it - she has turned into a celebrity herself. Following her time heading the section of Amnesty International devoted to women's issues, and previous work with Women Against Fundamentalism, her attack on Amnesty and on Moazzam Begg may prove a career maker. (The Somali-born, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, has prospered as a celebrity for her critique of conservative Islam, earning a job at the conservative US think tank the American Enterprise Institute.)

In her NYRB statement Ms Sahgal sets out her stall:

"I am now free to offer my help as an external expert with an intimate knowledge of Amnesty International's processes and policies. I can explain in public debates... that adherence to violent jihad... is an integral part of a political philosophy that promotes the destruction of human rights generally and contravenes Amnesty International's specific policies relating to systematic violence, particularly against women..."

At the centre of Ms Sahgal's criticism of Amnesty for working with Moazzam Begg - who can speak on rendition, torture and imprisonment from personal experience - and Cageprisoners, the web-based organisation which campaigns for Muslim prisoners held without trial, are three charges against him:

- * Attitudes to women.
- * Support for the Taliban.
- * Support for "violent jihad"

These have morphed into a generalised and theoretical attack on Amnesty for rejecting a "belief in universalism", and a call for Amnesty to restore the integrity of human rights, as Ms Sahgal puts it. Or, as the petition puts it, "We believe that Gita Sahgal has raised a fundamental point of principle which is about the importance of the human rights movement maintaining an objective distance from groups and ideas that are committed to systematic discrimination". (This is in tune with the astounding new US Supreme Court 6 - 3 ruling that prevents humanitarian groups from speaking to groups considered by the US to be terrorists, even for legal advice or peace-making.) In reality it would be an awkward stretch to imagine how Cageprisoners could be considered committed to systematic discrimination, but in the vagueness of these repeated slurs, too many people have fallen for that extremely damaging idea. Moazzam Begg's calm, modest and dignified response to Ms Sahgal can be read on the Cageprisoners website.

Ms Sahgal first met Moazzam Begg in 2006, when she was introduced as from, not Amnesty, but the feminist group Southall Black Sisters, in a BBC Radio 4 Hecklers programme. She made a presentation alleging the government was pandering to fundamentalism in the war on terror, by engaging with groups such as the Muslim Council of Britain. She was criticised strongly by a panel which included, Lord Ahmed, Professor Tariq Ramadan, Daud Abdullah of the MCB, and Moazzam Begg. At the end of the programme, one of them went up to her and said he hoped she was alright and had not found the discussion an ordeal - it was Moazzam Begg.

In the years since then, Moazzam Begg opened himself to debate and argument with people of every persuasion. He has addressed hundreds of meetings in the UK, many of them organized by Cageprisoners, or by Amnesty UK, or Amnesty local branches, lawyers groups, and indeed any group in Britain and beyond, on the human rights issues around Guantanamo Bay, and Muslims in Britain detained on secret evidence without trial. (He came to London to speak at the Southbank for my play, *Waiting*, which was entirely about women affected by the war on terror.) There have also been dozens of delegations to Downing Street on behalf of prisoners and their families. Much of his focus has been on the attempt to get back to Britain from Guantanamo, his friend Shaker Aamer, a British resident with Saudi nationality and a British wife and four children. Moazzam Begg has concentrated, among other things, on averting the threat to send Shaker to Saudi Arabia if he is released, because it would devastate his wife as she would be unlikely to be able to join him, given the Saudis' authoritarian rules on marrying non-Saudis.

In many of these meetings the wives and families of the detained men have been present, their letters read aloud, their daughters speaking for their fathers. Among the women who have supported some of these events have been Gareth Peirce, Vanessa Redgrave, Helena Kennedy, Caroline Lucas, Sarah Teather, Kate Hudson, Bianca Jagger, Kate Allen of Amnesty UK, Helen Bamber, and myself. Is it likely, if Moazzam Begg and Cageprisoners had the attitudes to women attributed to them by Ms Sahgal and her on-line petitioners, they would want to work with women like us, over and over again? Or would we want to work with them?

The current work is, or should be, the central issue, but it has got obscured by a torrent of words. The recent post on openDemocracy from Rahila Gupta, makes parallels between the Amnesty/Cageprisoners issue, and the unwitting support of Oxfam and other UK-based NGOs for various controversial groups, including a women's group in India whose leader appears to be a member of the BJP. Rahila Gupta writes, "like Begg and Cageprisoners, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) is chameleon-like when it comes to pinning down its true colours", and then throws in about Moazzam Begg, "his self-proclaimed Salafism - a highly sectarian strand of Islam which has much in common with Saudi Arabian Wahhabism."

Ms Gupta is a very experienced journalist and writer, who knows the BJP well enough to judge it. (She is also the editor of a book on Southall Black Sisters.) But her chameleon slur on Moazzam Begg is simply wrong. It could only be said by someone who does not know the person concerned. I worked day in, day out, (weekends excluded) with Mr Begg for eight long months in 2005 to help write his book. And in the following five years I have seen him dozens of times, in circumstances as different as visiting his wife and children, or with families in desperate trouble, or in public meetings. It is not likely that I would have failed to pick up on chameleon behavior and attitudes.

As for his so-called self-proclaimed Salafism, this is also a puzzle, and a red herring, drawing most readers into an intellectual area that they are unfamiliar with, and uneasy, and where Ms Gupta is no expert. It is a journalist's attempt at easy compartmentalisation, and convenient shorthand for "extremist". But Salafis come in all shapes and sizes and a range of beliefs and practices - as do Protestants.

Extremism is the message too, when the NYRB statement talks of "areas where jihad supported by Begg's associates is being waged". Which areas is Ms Sahgal talking about, and who does she mean? Afghanistan, perhaps, where his associate in torture in the US prisons of Bagram and Guantanamo, Abdul Salam Zaeef, the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, is under house arrest from which he has written an historical book, now translated into English, which has had him treated to a respectful 30 minute interview on the BBC? We don't know. And yet another damaging phrase is there to stigmatise, and stick in people's minds: "the specific form of violent jihad that Moazzam Begg and others in Cageprisoners assert is the individual obligation of every Muslim." Violent jihad

is a tautology, like violent war. Noone in Cageprisoners calls for killing of civilians, though they might consider the anti-apartheid movement, or the anti-colonial struggles of the Algerians, Vietnamese and South Africans in the 1960s and 70s to have been a secular kind of defensive jihad.

Again, look at the work, and listen to what is said at Cageprisoners' meetings. They are often chaired by a non-muslim, by a female, addressed by non-muslims, and in a whole series last year, featured former Guantanamo guards, who know better than the petition signatories what took place and why. The meetings' message is always the same - work for justice for people being denied it.

Ms Gupta writes that Ms Sahgal's attempts to "expose" the dangers of providing a platform for religious and communalist forces, have been hijacked by right wing, illiberal voices using the opportunity to attack Amnesty. In fact Ms Sahgal must have been aware, with her choice of paper for one thing, that she was giving ammunition to just the very rightwing illiberal forces Ms Gupta mentions. There was no high-jacking of her campaign. Nor did she "expose" anything - the use of Moazzam Begg at Amnesty functions was entirely public, and gave them useful credibility in an area - the war on terror - in which the organization was considered weak by many of those closely concerned.

The demonising has had a nasty personal tone. Ms Sahgal has stated that she feels unsafe in the company of Moazzam Begg and Cageprisoners' senior researcher, Asim Qureshi. (This is curious, as she made the statement while sitting next to Mr Qureshi in a BBC studio. And, on her second meeting with Moazzam Begg, at a Cageprisoners press conference in The Frontline Club in the aftermath of leaving Amnesty, she asked him to sit down with her afterwards and they had a long conversation. Face to face, incidentally, she was quite unable to clarify what her real difference with him is.)

In print she has gone so far as to pen, in the NYRB, the very offensive sentence, "But the spectre that arises through the continued promotion of Moazzam Begg as the perfect victim is that Amnesty International is operating its own policies of sanitizing the truth."

Neither Moazzam Begg nor any of the British citizens or residents who returned from Bagram and Guantanamo are victims, so much as survivors of the war on terror which has destroyed the lives of so many others unjustly held and tortured in those and other US prisons. After years of being held beyond the reach of the law, being tortured, being betrayed by Britain, all without a single charge brought against them, they have against extraordinary odds rebuilt their lives with families, education, jobs, in a climate in Britain that was not easy when they returned, and has got worse, partly thanks to Ms Sahgal's initiative. Respect would be the appropriate response to these men, particularly from someone with a background in the human rights industry and no excuse for not knowing the details of what was done to them.

The death threats to Cageprisoners that followed Ms Sahgal's irresponsible words cannot just be shrugged off. For Moazzam Begg in particular - as young British soldiers die in Afghanistan - it cannot be easy to feel safe walking in public after being branded the greatest supporter of the Taliban. He can't ask everyone he sees to read his book and see what his real position has been. The fact that he actually went, in a joint decision with his wife, with his young family to Afghanistan, to build schools for girls, and dig wells, at least should be a matter of public record by now. The objective was to engage, however difficult it was, in the experiment of an Islamic state, which he by no means accepted blindly - as his book makes clear. That same willingness to engage, has been behind his accepting the responsibility of playing a leading part in the debates on the war on terror and its fallout. He could hardly have foretold this 'gender politics' chapter of the consequences.

But even more serious is how Ms Sahgal has contributed to the current climate of intolerance and

islamophobia in Britain, where the families of Muslim women like those I mentioned at the start, are having their hopes and dreams of a normal life in Britain dashed. Intolerance and confrontation with Muslims is on the rise all over Europe. Parliaments in France, Belgium and Spain are currently trying to pass laws against wearing the full veil in public, and a French MP justifies it by talking of combating "the French Taliban in our midst." Violent incidents are recorded in Britain's local papers every week. Human rights lawyer Helena Kennedy QC said on a platform recently, that we should be concerned that hostile and vicious expressions towards Islam have become shockingly respectable in our society - as racism and anti-Semitism once were.

Ms Sahgal has been playing a dangerous game, and has got a following - besides the obvious one she would get on the right - that she does not deserve. This row will not destroy Amnesty, nor Cageprisoners, but it has given a push towards further heated polarization, when what we need are cool heads in complex debates on the politics of gender, patriarchy, and of religion, now when religious fundamentalism is on the rise all over the world - including the US.

The only good outcome from this whole unnecessary saga would be a new focus on what those petition signers, so keen to support human rights, can do about the on-going excesses of the war on terror. For a start, they could work to shame the British and American governments into ending the nine year ordeal of a woman like Shaker Aamer's wife, who has now been deprived of her husband for longer than she was with him. Up to now, her main support, besides her lawyers, has been Cageprisoners.

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P.S.

* From Open Democracy:

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/victoria-brittain/dangerous-game-reply-to-gita-sahgal-and-her-supporters>

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