Equality and Nondiscrimination Through the Eyes of an International Religious Organization: The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Response to Women's Rights and Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Rights

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**Abstract:**

This article draws on women’s rights and sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) to explore how the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) represents, interprets and seeks to impact the right to equality and protection against discrimination as enshrined under international human rights law. The study is a novel one inasmuch as the OIC is neither a state nor a religious group per se. Rather, the OIC stands out as the only contemporary intergovernmental organization unifying its member states around the commonality of a single religion. In this capacity, the organization maintains no direct obligations or rights under key instruments such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) or the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Nevertheless, as part of its mandate representing 57 predominantly Muslim states, the OIC has increasingly asserted a role for itself on the world stage as “the collective voice of the Muslim world.” This new assertiveness is particularly evident in the context of debates surrounding the content of human rights norms in international fora such as the United Nations, where the OIC has sought to develop common policy positions and encourage its members to vote as a bloc on issues of concern. Against this backdrop, the article concludes supporters of universal human rights norms need to better understand how the OIC’s mission to “protect and defend the true image of Islam” may impact international debates over the substance of equality and nondiscrimination norms, and develop appropriate responses to these efforts as a means for ensuring universality is not undermined.

The paper begins with a brief introduction to the OIC, and proceeds to explore its relationship with the principles of equality and nondiscrimination by examining its founding document and other relevant primary sources. With this understanding in place, subsequent sections examine the OIC’s contemporary understanding of these principles as manifested in rights debates surrounding women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) individuals and related SOGI issues. Throughout this examination, the role of the OIC’s newly established Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) is considered as a means of appraising whether a shift in the OIC’s position may be forthcoming. The paper concludes with several recommendations for concerned policymakers and human rights activists.