In memoriam:  
‘Sonia’ Nourin Shah-Kazemi  
(11 November 1964–24 February 2021)

Mohamed M. Keshavjee  
The Institute of Ismaili Studies, UK  
mohamed.keshavjee@gmail.com

Nourin Shah-Kazemi, popularly known as Sonia, passed away at home in Kent aged 56 after a short but intense battle with cancer. Sonia was part of a new breed of Muslim women – diasporic in background, born in Britain and yet fully at home with her ability to integrate her cultural and religious heritage with the country of her birth. A product of Haberdashers’ Aske’s School for Girls, in Elstree, Sonia went to the University of Warwick for a degree in philosophy, literature and classics but after one year ended up reading law at Birmingham City University, following which she was called to the Bar at Lincoln’s Inn in London.

At a time when family mediation was beginning to take shape in the UK, Sonia’s work with a small group of people contributed significantly to defining what the profession of mediation should be. This was done largely by defining what it was not. Mediation was not family therapy, neither was it family counselling. Mediation was indeed a new way of resolving a dispute, an alternative to litigation, but drawing eclectically on a number of related disciplines while establishing its own non-negotiable principles. While these principles were non-compromisable, they were
adaptable to the changing cultural demography of Britain and it is in this field that Sonia, through her scholarship and her training experience, established her credentials as an original thinker.

In a pivotal article entitled ‘Cross-cultural mediation: a critical review of the dynamics of culture in family disputes’ (International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family 14(3) (December 2000): 302–25), Sonia made the point very forcefully that while mediation was being extolled as a means of facilitating a smooth management of disputes in family breakdown, the question of how an individual’s particular cultural identity comprises a prism through which disputes and their resolution are viewed, is often neglected. Sonia brought out the point that it was precisely within the parameters of the marital relationship that individuals are motivated to practise their normative ethics and, in her article, sought toanalyse those dynamics and the manner in which they influenced the process of mediation. She did so by closely examining the model expounded by P. H. Gulliver, the well-known social anthropologist and conflict resolution theorist.

Sonia argued that an appraisal of cultural dynamics was a fundamental prerequisite to understanding the process of family mediation. Her objective was to evaluate Gulliver’s model with a view to laying the foundations for a synthetic model of the processual dynamics of negotiation in the light of an analysis of cultural factors. At a time when cultural understanding in family mediation in Britain was still in its embryonic stages, Sonia’s pioneering work in this field was far ahead of its time. In addition to undertaking scholarly work on mediation, Sonia worked as a trainer with National Family Mediation, one of the leading training organisations in family mediation training in the UK at the time.

According to Marian Roberts, a family mediator and former director at the National Mediation Forum, who also taught at the LLM level at the London School of Economics where Sonia was a student:

Sonia affirmed the core aspiration of mediation which manifests itself in the responsibility of the mediator to treat each person with respect, in particular with regard to that person’s own meanings and his or her own capacity to decide and make choices ... The impact of Sonia’s commitment to the values of respect and fairness that underpin the practice of family mediation is as powerful and relevant now as ever.
A second area in which Sonia made a significant contribution in the field of mediation was in her Nuffield Foundation-funded study entitled *Untying the Knot-Muslim Women, Divorce and the Shariah* (Nuffield Foundation, 2001) where she analysed some 287 case files of women who had contacted the Muslim Law Shariah Council (MLSC) UK over a 10-year period (1985–95). Sonia’s findings showed, inter alia, that while the self-perception of their Muslim identity had variable dimensions, all the women studied were profoundly affected by the Sharia and all the women interviewed, and many women in the case files, wanted to know more about their rights within the Shariah. Several women also suggested that some kind of ‘pre-marital Islamic counselling’ should be made available.

All of the women interviewed wanted women to act as a point of first contact and support in the manner of ‘intake workers’ who provide initial information about the organisation and its procedures. Another finding was that women found the coexistence of the Sharia and civil law a preferable option compared to the imposition of encumbrances upon the Sharia’s operation, but not at the cost of lawyers and the judiciary remaining ignorant about the different needs of Muslims in the UK. Once again, Sonia’s work in this field was much ahead of its time and covers basic issues that go to the heart of the debate on informal justice. Sadly, the debate on Muslim informal justice that took place in Ontario in 2004–5 and subsequently in the UK in 2008, did not take heed of the salient findings of Sonia’s pioneering work in this field.

Finally, Sonia’s forensic skills as an advocate found expression in her *Queen’s Law Journal* review of the book *Understanding Sharia-Islamic Law in a Globalised World* (by Raficq S. Abdulla and Mohamed M. Keshavjee, Bloomsbury, 2018). In this nine-page review, Sonia carefully analyses the book and marshals her argument with clear evidence showing how Islamophobic tropes dominate any discourse on the topic of the Sharia today rather than a genuine attempt to understand a subject that affects the lives of 1.6 billion people on this earth. Here, Sonia speaks truth to power, analyses what is wrong and highlights how the book grapples with issues that are normally uncomfortable and not often spoken about. Her methodical arguments, so clearly articulated, reflect a brilliant legal mind and the voice of wisdom in dealing with a subject that is so complex and emotive at the best of times.
Sadly, Sonia’s career was cut short due to ill health, even then, she was able to spend time with her husband Reza Shah-Kazemi (a scholar on Ali Ibn Abi Talib at the Institute of Ismaili Studies) and a group of other scholars from cross-cultural backgrounds to discuss the translations of Rumi’s poetry into Urdu. Deeply suffused with a spiritual inspiration, Sonia expressed a wish to write a book on Hazrat Fatima, the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter, whom she saw as the quintessence of saintly piety and social justice. Sonia’s premature death deprived her of fulfilling this wish to the detriment of scholarship on Islam that could have contributed to a better understanding of Islam’s humanistic and spiritual heritage, and the role that early Muslim women played. With her penchant for enhancing women’s rights and her own sense of justice, Sonia would have been the ideal person to write such a book on one of Islam’s greatest personages. Unfortunately, this was not to be.

Sonia leaves behind her husband and two younger brothers, as well as a host of friends who remember her as a courageous champion for social justice with spiritual focus – always ready for a noble fight, and to talk truth to power. Certainly, a figure who will be missed by many.

About the author

Mohamed M. Keshavjee is a South African-born lawyer called to the Bar at Gray’s Inn in 1969. He completed his LLM at London University and his PhD at SOAS with a focus on Islamic Law and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). He has practised law in Kenya, Canada and the United Kingdom. His first book, Islam, Sharia and Alternative Dispute Resolution, deals with how Muslims engage with sharia, customary practices and the laws of the United Kingdom. In 2016, he was awarded the Gandhi, King, Ikeda Peace Award by the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia, for his work on peace and human rights education.