Death by Culture?

How *Not* to Talk about Islam and Domestic Violence

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Introduction: Revisiting the Bloody Valentines of 2009

The Valentine's Day flurry of promotional ads for jewelry and chocolates and the "human interest" spots on the local news often share the spotlight with news coverage of a brutal, if ironic, Valentine's Day "crime of passion." Research has shown that each year murders spike in the period just before and after Valentines Day (from February 8-17), as does intimate partner violence directed at women.[1] In part, this is why American feminist Eve Ensler launched a global V-Day campaign to "take back" Valentine's Day as an opportunity to raise awareness and prevent violence against women and girls.[2] Stories of Valentine's Day "crimes of passion" grip us in part because the gruesome details that characterize them stand in such sharp contrast to the ubiquitous symbols of romantic love that mark the holiday: pink and red hearts, winged cupids, and long-stemmed roses. Statistics show that American women are far more likely to be murdered by a husband or a boyfriend than a stranger,[3] and each year Valentine's Day media accounts of "love gone wrong" manage to shock us without really surprising us.

In February 2009, the faces of two women of color were juxtaposed against the romantic symbols of the season as victims of domestic violence. The first is the photograph taken by the Los Angeles Police Department as legal evidence of Barbadian pop star Rihanna's bruised and swollen face after allegedly being beaten by her African-American boyfriend R&B artist Chris Brown. On February 8, Brown was arrested on charges of making criminal threats. The police photo, leaked to popular entertainment site TMZ, sparked a media frenzy. Some of the mainstream media's coverage was balanced and productive, furthering the national conversation on intimate partner violence and raising awareness of both its prevalence and the resources available for victims. Some of it, however, was deeply troubling in how it reproduced racial and gender stereotypes, such as whether Rihanna had triggered the attack, whether she should be blamed for not ending the relationship sooner, or whether blacks are more "prone" to domestic violence.

On March 5, 2009, Chris Brown, R&B star, was charged with assault and making criminal threats against Barbadian pop star Rihanna.

The second image that circulated in February 2009 had a shorter life in the mainstream media but an arguably more enduring impact, specifically in Muslim American communities: a smiling Pakistani-American television executive, Aasiya Hassan, pictured in her studio standing next to

Muzzammil "Steve" Hassan, her Pakistani husband and co executive. On February 12, Muzzamil turned himself in to the police in their suburb of Buffalo, New York, and allegedly confessed to murdering his wife. Her body was found decapitated in their television studio. Aasiya had obtained an order of protection against her husband that went into effect on February 6, the same day he was served with divorce papers. The Hassans were the founders of Bridges TV, launched in 2004 to broadcast programming that portrayed Muslims positively to North American audiences.

"The mainstream media and feminist activists often draw on an impoverished understanding of culture to explain violence in Muslim families."

In contrast to the Rihanna/Chris Brown case, the focus of this murder's coverage was not on the epidemic of intimate partner violence, but rather on the Hassans' culture and religion. The set of media representations of Aasiya's murder that circulated in February 2009 reveal the subtle racism governing how some characterize acts of intimate partner violence when both parties are racial minorities and especially, as in the Hassans' case, South Asian Muslims. The mainstream media and feminist activists often draw on an impoverished understanding of culture to explain violence in Muslim families, a misuse of culture-as-explanation that profoundly undermines efforts to combat the violence. Many Americans would agree that our culture is steeped in violence to the point of desensitization; we regularly consume sexualized representations of violence against women as entertainment, and intimate partner violence exists in our society at rates that ought to alarm us.

Still, it makes little sense to us to talk about Valentine's Day as a *cause* of domestic violence in this country or to argue that Christian views of Eve's role in the Fall *cause* abuse. In cases when white males perpetrate violence the focus is on the psychological portrait of this individual: family history, childhood, mental health. Yet when a Muslim woman is killed violently by a Muslim man, we are willing to accept culture as an explanation in a way that would never be satisfactory if the perpetrator were white, just as we tend to look for cultural explanations for teen pregnancy among blacks and Latinos but treat pregnant white teens as individual cases. In the case of Muslims, this racial double standard is a feature of what political scientist Mahmood Mamdani terms "culture talk," the pervasive assumption that while our modern culture is complex, creative, and changing, Muslim cultures are simply ancient rules petrified into lifeless, static customs.[4] The assumption is that in *our* culture, violence is an exception so we must investigate the perpetrator's psyche or individual life experience, while in *their* culture violence is the norm, so what is relevant is their entire culture or religion. In fact, the diverse range of cultures inflected by Islam worldwide and represented by Muslim communities in the United States are just as complex, heterogeneous, and modern

Aasiya Hassan was, with her husband Muzzammil "Steve" Hassan, the founder and owner of Bridges TV.

as the dominant culture in this country. The fight against domestic abuse in *all cultural contexts* will fail if cultural norms and vulnerable populations are not taken into account. Although intimate partner homicides are not *caused* by Islam or any particular Muslim culture, this does not mean that culture is irrelevant.

This critique has two purposes. First, it is intended as an instructive guide for those public servants who intervene in cases of domestic violence involving minority families in general, and Muslim American families specifically. When social workers, police officers, lawyers, advocates for women and children, and other types of public servants make statements to the media about domestic violence cases involving Muslims, how they choose to talk about Islam or, more to the point, how they choose *not* to talk about Islam, profoundly affects the racial climate Muslim Americans navigate. But more significantly, it lowers the likelihood that other Muslim victims of domestic violence will seek out help. Battered women of color often fail to seek help because they do not want to be reduced to a stereotype. They are not simply protecting their community or their abuser from racism; their silence about abuse becomes a way to reject the humiliating role of oppressed brown woman who needs whites to save her from her culture. For example, studies on Arab-American women show they have strikingly low rates of reporting abuse.[5] Aside from language barriers, a lack of information about available support services, and similar issues, the perception that the greater society is hostile to Arabs and/or Islam is a major barrier that prevents victims from trusting institutions and seeking a way out of their abusive situations.[6]

Immediately after the Hassan tragedy, Muslim American leaders, activists, and organizations nationwide publicly condemned the murder, offered condolences to the victim's family,[7] and turned their attention to local grassroots work. For example, a national campaign was organized to encourage imams to devote their Friday sermons to the topic of domestic violence and the accompanying shame and denial that often allow abuse to persist. Although Aasiya's murder is no longer a news story, Muslim institutions across the country have since developed far more aggressive policies to combat intimate partner violence. The second purpose of this report is to alert Muslim American community leaders and activists to how punitive anti-abuse policies might undermine their efforts to combat domestic violence, particularly since studies suggest that Muslim Americans reach out to imams more than any other mental health service.[8]

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Surveying the Coverage: Death by Culture?

American Newspapers covering Aasiya's murder drew out the ironic contradiction between Muzzammil's act of gruesome violence and his television station's explicit purpose of combating stereotypes, such as the headline from *The Toronto Star*: "Man Charged in Beheading: Founder of Buffalo TV Station Aimed at Depicting Muslims in Positive Light Accused of Killing Wife."[9] Since in the minds of most Westerners beheadings are most immediately associated with the tapes of al-Qaeda, the insurgency in Iraq, or the murder of journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan (rather than, for example, the French Revolution, the act of beheading itself becomes coded as an "Islamic," "Muslim," or "Pakistani" way to kill, even though this type of murder is as novel, alien, and gruesome to Muslim publics as it is to American ones. Consider the coverage of the Virginia Tech student who stabbed and decapitated a female friend only three weeks before the Hassan murder broke as news; as a Chinese man, the student did not "fit" the (Muslim) racial profile of a beheading storyline and, therefore, journalists only referenced his Chinese background as a biographical detail; they never referred to Chinese culture as an explanation for the murder.[10] Along the same lines, none of the reports on the Hassan murder invoked the Tara Grant murder, another "Valentine's Day" decapitation; in this case, the family was white. On February 14, 2007, Stephen Grant reported his wife missing; police later discovered he had strangled and dismembered her body in front of their two small children. Journalists lingered on the gruesome details and the Grants' all-American image, not their culture or Christian religion.

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Again and again, reporters covering the Hassan murder drew *causal* links between Muzzammil's Muslim identity, his Pakistani origin, and the nature of the murder. For example, sweeping (but often incorrect) generalizations about divorce in Islamic law were invoked, even though all of Aasiya's legal actions were mediated through the American legal system (as was Muzzammil's previous divorce). These causal links were hardened through distorted characterizations of Pakistan as a "traditional" society that sanctions domestic violence. Interestingly, those American newspapers that mentioned Muzzammil's over-twenty-five years' residence in the United States or his lack of religiosity seemed to make these points in order to stress the power his religion and/or culture continued to hold over him, despite his apparent distance from both Pakistan and Islam and his apparent assimilation into mainstream American society. Only one article contextualized

Aasiya's murder in terms of the record of police interventions in domestic disturbances at their home and Muzzammil's long-standing psychiatric illness, rather than contextualizing it in terms of Islam or Pakistani culture.[11]

As one advocate points out, media coverage of intimate partner violence cases rarely focuses on the responsibility of law enforcement or the critical Supreme Court ruling in 2005 of Castle Rock vs. Gonzales, which stated the police are not legally required to enforce restraining orders.[12] In other words, even though the crime was a textbook case of what domestic violence experts refer to as "separation violence," defined as when a batterer lashes out immediately after the victim leaves, journalists suggested that Aasiya was vulnerable not because she had divorced and left her abuser or due to failed police protection, but because her culture put her at risk.

The most dramatic example of the racially motivated insistence that Aasiya's real murderer was her culture and religion came in the form of a statement from Marcia Pappas, the New York president of the National Organization for Women (NOW). In a statement from NOW, she condemned the prosecutors who, in a media statement, referred to the murder as an apparent case of domestic violence. She claimed that it ought to be characterized as "a terroristic version of 'honor killing,' a murder rooted in cultural notions about women's subordination to men." She went on to ask: "Are we now so respectful of the Muslim's religion that we soft-peddle atrocities committed in its name?'" Along the same lines Phyllis Chesler, interviewed by Fox News as an expert on honor killings, also argued against categorizing the crime as an act of domestic violence because the murder had the tell-tale signs of terrorist, rather than domestic, violence. "Leaving the body parts displayed the way he did, like a terrorist would do, that's very peculiar, it's very public," she insisted. On her blog, Chesler argues that "barbaric" violence is qualitatively different from domestic violence against women and that the profile of those who commit "barbaric" violence are "western serial killers, Muslim terrorists, [and] relatively ordinary Muslim families vis-à-vis their daughters and their wives."[13] She later added Hindu and Sikh men to the profile because they are part of the same "honor and shame" culture.

This strange insistence that Muslim and/or South Asian husbands who brutally assault or murder their wives are categorically different from white husbands who commit the same crimes suggests that, in the eyes Pappas and Chesler, domestic violence as a phenomenon is somehow sullied by including these brown Muslim perpetrators. It is as if Pappas and Chesler have a stake in protecting the borders of the category of domestic violence, "our violence," from the violence of those far-off backward peoples as well as those that live here but are not one of "us." This move to separate "our" violence from "their" violence has a long history in feminist debates about violence against women across cultures. Several feminists did object to the racial subtext in the coverage and in statements from individuals such as Chesler and Pappas. For example, Lynn Harris wrote in Salon:

> Pappas and Chesler are right to put Aasiya Hassan's murder -- like so many other domestic killings -- in *a* cultural context. Just not *this* one. Murder "rooted in cultural notions about

> women's subordination to men" -- and stemming from the desire to "control" one's wife: how, exactly, is that different from "regular" domestic violence? Yes, there are crimes and "hate crimes," violence and "domestic violence," killings and "honor killings"; we can argue about the usefulness of this kind of taxonomy in the first place. But here, it's hard to argue that Mr. Hassan was not, at first and by some, found guilty of killing while Muslim.[14]

A coalition of eight family and women's groups called on NOW to retract Pappas' statement; but Pappas refused. Claiming that her comments were racially insensitive and harmful to domestic violence victims, the coalition also argued against keeping the category of "honor killings" distinct from femicide.[15] NOW president Kim Gandy then released a statement entitled "No Woman, No Culture Immune to Violence Against Women."

> Despite [Hassan's] patterns that are typical of spouse abuse and murder (only the manner of killing was atypical), most of the conservative commentary has focused not on male violence toward women ... but has focused instead on attacking the Muslim community. Although the crime was quickly decried by Muslim groups, many talk shows and blogs used the horror of Muzzammil's act to indict an entire community ... Is a Muslim man in Buffalo more likely to kill his wife than a Catholic man in Buffalo? A Jewish man in Buffalo? I don't know the answer to that, but I know that there is plenty of violence to go around -- and that the long and sordid history of oppressing women in the name of religion surely includes Islam, but is not limited to Islam. We need to call out the repression of women whenever and wherever we see it, while recognizing that the roots of violence are long and deep, and require a concerted response from every community.[16]

Gandy was right to point out that focusing on culture distracts people from the real issue at hand; however, her statement glossed over a fundamental point of debate among feminist activists today.

Surveying the Debate: How *Not* to Talk about Culture and Domestic Violence

Gandy's ambivalence towards comparing different religious communities' "records" on domestic violence references a long debate among feminist activists about "counting" victims and "ranking" cultures. The feminist movement in the United States successfully challenged the idea that intimate partner violence is simply a string of isolated "crimes of passion" enacted by a few bad men by focusing on systemic violence against women. But the statistics produced by macro-scale analyses have "left in place the story of a few bad cultures."[17]

Feminist scholars sensitive to the politics of race have produced a number of important studies that show that when it comes to violence against women, numbers *can* lie. In a careful and nuanced study exploring the disproportionate attention Americans give to violence against women in India (another "bad" culture), feminist scholar Uma Narayan shows that the rates of dowry-murders in India and intimate partner homicides in the United States are close in range. She demonstrates how unreliable these kinds of statistical comparisons are because of the elastic way in which such crimes are counted. In the United States, statistics are restricted only to homicides in which the husband or boyfriend is *convicted*, whereas in India the sensational quality of dowry-murders has led activists and policymakers to count any and all "suspicious" cases as dowry-murders, including those deaths reported as accidents and suicides.

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Narayan documents these "asymmetries in focus" between feminists in the two countries and shows how their very different cultural contexts have resulted in the *making* of very different feminist agendas. In the United States, feminist activists are not interested in keeping strict count of intimate partner homicides. Instead, American feminist activists focus on issues such as defining domestic violence broadly, stalking, separation violence, and police non-responsiveness. These issues all center on the temporary needs of *survivors*: legal services, shelters, counseling, etc. In India, however, feminist activists concentrate on intimate partner homicide over other issues because domestic violence shelters or campaigns against police rape are not viable goals due to the lack of resources and public interest. Dowry-murders, however, are a novel and shocking phenomenon in part because the victims are often

middle-class women. This public interest in India has allowed Indian feminists to campaign against it effectively. Different national cultural contexts in both countries have produced distinct feminist agendas as well as different kinds of statistics.[18]

Anthropologist Lila Abu Lughod's ongoing research on statistics related to honor killings in Arab countries also shows that statistics do not always tell us as much as we think they do. Like dowry-murders, the category of honor killing does not have an agreed upon definition and the ways of "counting" these crimes are extremely elastic. For example, if honor killings are homicides in which a man kills a woman or girl over real or perceived sexual indiscretions, then should we consider the British woman who was killed by her estranged husband for changing her facebook status to "single" an honor killing?[19] Some define the perpetrator of honor killing as a blood relative of the victim. In the United States, most murder-suicides with three or more victims involve a "family annihilator" -- a subcategory of intimate partner murder-suicide. Family annihilators are murderers who kill not only their wives/girlfriends and children, but often other family members before they kill themselves, usually because they feel their families have humiliated them.[20] Are these cases honor killings? Others insist that honor killings are specific to Middle Eastern cultures. Abu Lughod found that Arab activists could not agree on a common definition. In one case, a Palestinian man murdered his daughter out of fear that she would reveal he was an informant; although the murder had nothing to do with her sexual misconduct, it was counted as an honor-killing statistic.[21]

> **"As a phenomenon, domestic violence crosses race, class, and religious lines."**

Fortunately, feminists like Narayan and Abu Lughod are no longer alone in recognizing the limits of making cross-group comparisons of the research on domestic violence. Given the inconsistencies in how violence and abuse are defined and the extraordinary range of methods and selection criteria in sociological studies on domestic violence, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) considers the prevalence figures on intimate partner violence as simply unreliable and useless in cross-cultural comparison. One consistent finding, however, is that poverty is a confounding factor. The CDC's 2008 report states: "[T]he current research base is highly skewed towards investigating individual factors rather than community or societal factors that may affect the likelihood of abuse. Studies from a wide range of settings show that, while physical violence against partners cuts across all socioeconomic groups, women living in poverty are disproportionately affected."[22]

The problems with counting domestic violence do not emerge only at the global level. In her 1994 path-breaking article, law professor Kimberle Crenshaw traced the evolution of American constructions of domestic violence as the *exclusive* problem of poor neighborhoods and racial and ethnic ghettos to the now popular, though dubious, claim that domestic violence affects all classes

and races *equally*. She found that domestic violence activists in Los Angeles actively prevented the release of statistics that mapped a higher incidence of domestic violence onto poor black neighborhoods out of fear that these statistics would confirm racial stereotypes of white police officers and policymakers that black culture is pathologically violent. Of course, as Crenshaw argues, the activists' gag order only served to undermine the *particular* needs of battered women of color.[23]

As a phenomenon, domestic violence crosses race, class, and religious lines. And yet the higher prevalence of domestic violence among minorities in the United States and under conditions of poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, and other stress factors is undeniable. Higher rates of domestic violence are not proof that the cultures of blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, or other minorities are more flawed than others; however, they do tell us something about how race, class, and gender intersect in this country. Crenshaw found that battered women of color who seek protection are usually unemployed or underemployed, burdened by poverty, lack job skills, and suffer job and housing discrimination -- all factors that make it harder for them to leave their abusers. Their friends and relatives are often too poor to provide temporary shelter. In the case of battered immigrants, lack of English skills, unemployment, alienation from social networks, and, for those without immigration status, fears of being deported also prevent women from leaving an abuser.[24]

Sociologist Sherene Razack found in her research on domestic violence in South Asian communities in Canada that they had the same problems as those highlighted by the CDC and Crenshaw. Razack felt caught between trying to undermine racist explanations of domestic violence as simply emerging from South Asian culture and trying to provide rich accounts of the battered women's lives that reflected their *particular* needs and vulnerabilities. She admits that in her efforts to avoid reproducing racist rhetoric about oppressed brown women who need whites to save them from brown men, she did not know what to do with "culture." Like many feminists of color, Razack adopted a de-culturalized approach by stressing institutional practices that subordinate women and exacerbate domestic violence in immigrant communities in the West, such as the racial climate, police discrimination, and harsh immigration regulations. Razack realized that her misguided attempts to gloss over and minimalize the cultural details in South Asian cases of abuse ultimately reproduced a Western, highly individualized concept of a woman defined solely by her gender rather than the obligational, relationship-centric concept of South Asian womanhood. She realized that "we cannot have a conversation *within* our communities about stick figures. To do this is to avoid naming what we know happens ... [Since] men commit violent

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acts in culturally specific ways, there is something about the violence that we will not be able to fully describe if we refuse to talk culture *outside* our communities. Stories involving gruesome culturally specific details will simply be suppressed ... the very secrecy that gives abusers power."[25]

While it is wrong to treat culture as a simple cause of domestic violence, it is also wrong to ignore or suppress the cultural particularities that may characterize acts of violence or to talk about violence only in the abstract. Culture alone does not cause violence; however, the effects of violence are always cultural, as are the conditions that allow abuse to persist. Journalist Asra Nomani details how the shame and stigma tied to abuse and the Hassans' prestige in Buffalo's Muslim community protected Muzzammil from scrutiny.[26] Violent abusers in all communities employ whatever culturally specific tools are at hand: these cultural tools-turned-weapons can range from misogynistic interpretations of verses in their scripture to posting demeaning photos of their victims on the Internet. The resources for combating domestic violence can also be culturally specific. On February 20, 2009, imams across the United States gave sermons condemning this murder specifically and domestic violence generally, and many of them provided alternative interpretations of patriarchal verses.

By focusing on the cultural effects of violence instead of the cultural causes, culture becomes the starting point -- not the neat conclusion -- of our investigation. We should not assume that we have the answers before we ask the questions. For example, Muslim feminists have directed a great deal of energy to debating the interpretation of controversial Quranic verses. This is important intellectual work, as perpetrators, their victims, and friends and neighbors who witness violence but fail to act must all be disabused of the idea that the Quran permits abuse. But scriptural analysis cannot be the only or primary tool for combating domestic violence in Muslim communities. Individuals who counsel abusers in American mosque communities report that many Muslim abusers *do not* believe the Quran sanctions their violent behavior and that they are ashamed to find themselves reenacting the abuse they grew up with and detested. And, of course, many abusers are not observant Muslims and have little interest in *any* Quranic verses. Unfortunately, Muslim Americans sometimes fall back on culture talk themselves by assuming that Muslims' social problems *must* be rooted in the foundational texts of Islam and the deep history of seventh century Arabia rather than in a dysfunctional family history.

Conclusion: So, *Does* Culture Matter? Yes and No

So, yes, culture does matter, but not in the way culture talk suggests. The point is simple: culture matters in the fight against domestic violence, but not only when the battered woman is of color. Nor does cultural context always matter in the same way across different cases of abuse. In a telling example, counselors found that while some South Asian women who lived with their in-laws often suffered abuse from them, in other cases these extended family members prevented violence and sometimes rehabilitated their abusive sons. We should consider the complexity of social life before dividing cultures, family structures, or religions into those that are risk factors for women and those that are not.

Aasiya's murder galvanized efforts, many long in development, to adopt far more aggressive policies in the fight against intimate partner violence at the national and local levels in American mosque communities. In conclusion, the following recommendations are offered to those dedicated and well-intentioned Muslim American community leaders and activists battling intimate partner violence in their local mosques.

"We should consider the complexity of social life before dividing cultures, family structures, or religions into those that are risk factors for women and those that are not."

Recommendations

Do Not Avoid the Question of Culture or Religion when Talking to the Media about Domestic Violence

Individuals who intervene in publicized cases of domestic violence like the Hassan murder have the opportunity to challenge how the media typically represents discussions of culture and domestic violence. Alerting Americans to their misconceptions about a sensitive issue such as domestic violence and Islam requires a great deal of delicacy. The very process of changing the topic from the horrible details of a specific case of violence to the double standards or sloppy categories we use when we talk about violence in a "bad" culture has the effect of putting people on the defensive, making them feel "accused" of ignorance. In addition, one risks sounding self-righteous and defensive, and thus possibly losing credibility and being dismissed as a Muslim in denial about the problems of women in Islam.

The unfortunate reality is that even when public servants and community and family representatives interviewed in the mainstream media tread very carefully on the terrain of culture, *and the Hassan murder was such a case*, they may be drowned out by a few voices blaming Islam because these voices echo and confirm the simplistic formulations of culture talk. Community leaders and scholars who work on domestic violence and Muslims cannot simply avoid discussing culture altogether for fear of reproducing racist stereotypes. Such an approach is not practical when the inferiority of Islam or Muslim cultures is what is on everyone's minds. It is also not enough to blame Arab, South Asian, African American, or "*x* culture, not Islam," for this is just another form of culture talk. Point out that it is wrong to indict an entire culture or religion as a *cause* of violence, but also stress that the *effects* of violence are always cultural because violent abuses in all groups draw on whatever cultural tools are at hand. Across religions, abusers often invoke a God-given right to control, abuse and punish their wives and/or children. Challenge the assumption that the most illuminating context for understanding cases of intimate partner violence is the culture or religion of the perpetrator rather than the perpetrator's psyche or personal history.

Prevent "Zero-Tolerance" of Abuse from Becoming "Zero-Reporting" of Abuse

In the wake of the Hassan murder case, some American mosque leaders, as a reactionary form of damage control, made hasty announcements of enforcing zero-tolerance polices in their mosques without putting such declarations into the proper context for community members. For

example, several U.S. mosques announced that they were adopting such a policy on domestic violence by implementing piecemeal the comprehensive directives issued by a national Muslim organization. In one such community, the reporting of domestic violence incidents to the imam and other community elders simply halted. It would be a grave mistake to assume that the imam's announcement has eradicated domestic violence; rather, it suggests that battered victims may have interpreted "zero-tolerance" as community leaders washing their hands of the issue. A "zero-tolerance" of abuse policy must be more than simply an announcement in a sermon; a clear stance against abuse must be coupled with comprehensive programs that demonstrate the leaderships' commitment to helping victims and rehabilitating perpetrators.

Promote Rehabilitation

The concept of zero-tolerance of abuse has been interpreted in a range of ways in American mosque communities, some more punitive than others. For example, some mosques have announced that individuals with a record of abuse will not be permitted on the mosque's premises and various imams have refused to officiate weddings for them. Such punitive bans help no one; rather, they simply push troubled individuals, couples, and families to the social margins, and it is precisely in those shadowy margins of communities in which abusers can further isolate and victimize their families. Shutting out abusive individuals indirectly encourages them to find another mosque community that might not scrutinize them as carefully. Moreover, it further isolates victims.

Given the large number of Muslims in American prisons who need support as they reenter society, it is critical that mosques foster environments that promote rehabilitation and self-betterment, rather than exclusivity and judgment. Encourage accountability and rehabilitation by offering space and supervision for arbitration or safe child-visitation. Other constructive and effective "open-door" policies adopted in some US mosques and recommended by the Muslim Alliance in North America's (MANA) Healthy Marriage Initiative include requiring (1) premarital counseling for all couples married in the community, (2) ongoing counseling for individuals with a record of abuse, and (3) "big brother/big sister" couples to guide troubled couples or newlyweds to prevent isolation and abuse.

Train Religious and Community Leaders to Screen for Abuse and Counsel Individuals and Families

Domestic violence prevention certification programs are available to train imams and other community leaders how to identify the signs of abuse as well as how to work with authorities and social services to get individuals the help they need. Muslims seeking to become chaplains in hospitals, prisons, the armed forces, and on college campuses should be required to take domestic violence prevention training courses as part of their curriculum.

Develop Diverse Forms of Education and Outreach in Your Community

Periodic Friday sermons against abuse are not enough. Invite local mental health professionals to give regular public talks on domestic violence in mosques and community centers on nights and weekends. Display literature on local social services and national hotlines that represent your community's linguistic diversity. Collect *zakat* or other charitable funds for a local shelter or to help a victim leave an abuser. Serve on the boards of local shelters and support social services groups. Take advantage of the wide range of financial and social services offered by the state and in your local area for the temporary support of victims as well as for prevention.[27]

Endnotes

1 Gerald Falk, *Murder: An Analysis of its Forms, Conditions, and Causes (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1990), 205.*

2 See http://newsite.vday.org. In 2001, women accounted for 85 percent of the victims of intimate partner violence (588,490 total) and men accounted for approximately 15 percent of the victims (103,220 total), according to the *Bureau of Justice Statistics Crime Data Brief, Intimate Partner Violence, 1993-2001* (February 2003).

3 Although women are less likely than men to be victims of violent crimes overall, women are five to eight times more likely than men to be victimized by an intimate partner according to the U.S. Department of Justice's report *Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends* (March 1998).

4 Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror (New York: Pantheon, 2004), 18.*

5 Barbara Aswad and N. C. Gray, "Challenges to the Arab American Family and ACCESS," in *Family and Gender among American Muslims: Issues Facing Middle Eastern Immigrants and Their Descendents, ed. B. C. Aswad and B. Bilge, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).*

6 Wahiba M. Abu-Ras, "Barriers to Services for Arab Immigrant Battered Women in a Detroit Suburb," *Journal of Social Work Research and Evaluation, vol. 4, no. 1 (2003).*

7 Most national Muslim organizations immediately released statements to the press, and several nationally recognized religious leaders circulated open letters electronically or videos of sermons on www/youtube.com. See http://muslimahmediawatch.org/2009/2/17/a-collection-of-statements-concerning-the-murder-of-aasiya-hassan.

8 See Osman Ali, Glen Milstein, and Peter Marzuk, "The Imam's Role in Meeting the Counseling Needs of Muslim Communities in the United States," *Psychiatric Services, vol. 56, no. 2 (2005) and Wahiba Abu-Ras, Ali Gheith, and Francine Cournos, "The Imam's Role in Mental Health Promotion: A Study at 22 Mosques in New York City's Muslim Community," Journal of Muslim Mental Health, vol. 3 (2008): 155-76.*

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10 See http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,482025,00.html

11 See http://startelegram.typepad.com/crime_time/2009/03/report-woman-decapitated-while-kids-waited-in-the-car.html

12 See http://www.familylawcourts.com/domestic.html.

13 See http://pajamasmedia.com/phyllischesler/2009/02/14/be-headed-in-buffalo-the-honor-killing-of-asiya-z-hassan.

14 See http://www.salon.com/mwt/broadsheet/feature/2009/02/18/murder_while_Muslim/index.html.

15 See http://www.buffalonews.com/cityregion/story/602683.html.

16 See http://www.now.org/news/note/022009.html.

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27 Adapted from the Peaceful Families recommendations for imams online at http://www.peacefulfamilies.org/AboutDV.pdf.

About the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) is an independent nonprofit think tank committed to education, research, and analysis of U.S. domestic and foreign policies issues, with an emphasis on topics related to the American Muslim community.

Since its inception in 2002, ISPU has built a solid reputation as an organization committed to objective, empirical research and continues to be a valuable source of information for policy makers, scholars, journalists and the general public. Our research aims to increase understanding of Muslims in the United States while also tackling the many policy issues facing all Americans. We provide cutting-edge analysis and policy recommendations through publications, conferences, government briefings and media commentary. ISPU firmly believes that optimal analysis and treatment of social issues mandates a comprehensive study from several different and diverse backgrounds. As social challenges become more complex and interwoven, ISPU is unique in its ability to bring this new approach to the human and social problems facing our country. Our multidisciplinary approach, in partnership with universities, think tanks and other research organizations, serves to build understanding and effect lasting social change.

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