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## Gruesome killing poses another test for US Muslims

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-- The crime was so brutal, shocking and rife with the worst possible stereotypes about their faith that some U.S. Muslims thought the initial reports were a hoax.

The harsh reality of what happened in an affluent suburb of Buffalo, N.Y. \_ the beheading of 37-year-old Aasiya Hassan and arrest of her estranged husband in the killing \_ is another crucible for American Muslims.

Here was a couple that appeared to be the picture of assimilation and tolerance, co-founders of a television network that aspired to improve the image of Muslims in a post 9-11 world.

Now, as Muzzammil "Mo" Hassan faces second-degree murder charges, those American Muslims who have spoken out are once again explaining that their faith abhors such horrible acts, and they are using the tragedy as a rallying cry against domestic violence.

The killing and its aftermath raise hard questions for Muslims \_ about gender issues, about distinctions between cultural and religious practices, and about differing interpretations of Islamic texts regarding the treatment of women.

"Muslims don't want to talk about this for good reason," said Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur, a Muslim author and activist. "There is so much negativity about Muslims, and it sort of perpetuates it. The right wing is going to run with it and misuse it. But we've got to shine a light on this issue so we can transform it."

There is evidence of movement in that direction in the 10 days since the Hassan slaying. In an open letter to American Muslim leaders, Imam Mohamed Hagmagid Ali of Sterling, Va., vice president of the Islamic Society of North America, said "violence against women is real and cannot be ignored."

He urged that imams and community leaders never second-guess a woman in danger, and said women seeking divorces because of physical abuse should

not be viewed as bringing shame to their families.

Muslim women's advocates consider the statement significant after years of indifference in a community which has seen only recent progress \_ for example, the opening of shelters for battered Muslim women in a few major cities.

"This is a horrible tragedy, but it gives us a window," said Abdul-Ghafur, editor of the anthology "Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak." "The next time a woman comes to her imam and says, 'He hit me,' the reply might not be, 'Be patient, sister, is there something you did, sister? Is there something you can do?' The chances are greater the imam will say, 'This is unacceptable.'"

At least nine mosques, imams and Islamic organizations also agreed to denounce domestic violence this week at the behest of a coalition of Muslims that organized on Facebook after Aasiya Hassan's death.

"What you have is a cultural problem our communities have been silent about too long," said Wajahat Ali, a journalist and playwright who helped drive the effort. "What people with an agenda are trying to do is say this is an example of a barbaric religion. This is an example of barbaric misogyny and domestic violence."

At the South Bay Islamic Association in San Jose, Calif., Imam Tahir Anwar said he preached at Friday prayer services about keeping peace in the family and denounced physical and emotional domestic violence.

"I wouldn't say (the problem) is particular to the Muslim community, but to the immigrant community whether you're Muslim or otherwise," Anwar, whose parents are from India, said in an interview. "Women don't speak up about it. It's a taboo that all immigrant communities sort of face."

Of Islam's potential role in the Hassan slaying, Anwar said: "All religions have texts that can be misinterpreted. Good people regardless of faith would never do something like this."

While sermons like Anwar's are encouraging, other Muslim clerics in the U.S. likely preached that Aasiya Hassan could have avoided her fate by being more obedient, said Muqtedar Khan, an associate professor of political science and international relations at the University of Delaware.

"The imam has to be enlightened enough to recognize this violence happens, to not hide in denial or somehow blame it on American culture," said Khan, author of "American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom."

"In order to essentially condemn violence against women, they will have to treat women with greater respect. Unfortunately, the level of enlightenment among imams in North America varies significantly."

Asra Nomani, a Muslim journalist, author and activist from Morgantown, W.Va., challenged Muslims who say the murder has no link to Islamic teachings. While Islam does not sanction domestic violence or murder, a literal reading of a controversial verse in the Quran taught in some mosques can lead to honor killings and murder, she said.

"It's sort of like the typical reaction to terrorism in the community, where people want to say, 'This had nothing to do with Islam,'" Nomani said. "Well, it doesn't have anything to do with your interpretation of Islam that teaches you can't kill innocent people. But terrorism, violence, honor killing \_ they are all part of ideological problems we have in the community we need to eradicate."

The passage \_ Chapter 4, Verse 34 \_ has been widely translated to sanction physical discipline against disobedient wives. There is disagreement about to what degree and whether it's punitive or symbolic.

The verse is cited "all the time" to justify domestic violence, just as people of other faiths cite scriptures to support oppression of women, said Salma Abugideri of the Peaceful Families Project, which offers training and workshops to combat domestic violence in Muslim communities.

"People will use whatever they can to justify their behavior," she said. "It just seems that people outside the Muslim faith just tend to buy that rationalization as true."

There also has been speculation \_ by the head of the New York chapter of the National Organization for Woman, among others \_ that the Hassan case involved honor killing, in which a person is slain by a relative who believes the victim has brought shame to the family.

Aasiya Hassan was killed six days after her husband was served with divorce papers and a protective order. Mo Hassan is a native of Pakistan; acquaintances said he was not overtly religious, and his lawyer has said neither religion nor culture played a role in what happened.

Marsha Freeman, director of the International Women's Rights Action Watch at the University of Minnesota, said honor killing is a cultural and not religious phenomenon. She said it's practiced in some Muslim countries but not others and is present in nations with people of other religions.

"I wouldn't go running around talking about honor killings without knowing

more," Freeman said.

On Web sites and e-mail lists, many Muslims are rejecting the term.

"Calling it an honor killing, it sort of takes it out of the mainstream conversation and makes it a conversation about those people from over there from those backwards countries," said Abugideri, of the Peaceful Families Project. "In fact, in this country and in mainstream society there are many cases where domestic violence escalates to the point where a woman is killed."

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