

## GIVE ALL WOMEN THE BENEFIT OF OUR ADVOCACY

A WOMAN'S VIEW Ginette Petitpas Taylor

The murder in Mississauga last month of Aqsa Parvez, allegedly at the hands of her father, allegedly for reasons of faith, has been touted as an example of irreconcilable conflict between two cultures: the culture of Islam as interpreted by Aqsa's father, and the culture of "The West". People everywhere reacted to the teenager's death.

Between too-faint condemnation and holier-than-thou righteousness, few have hit the right note.

Some sought to blame Islam for the varied interpretations it allows of its teachings, like most religions. Others seek to blame Canada's religious freedoms. There are those as interested in damage control to their or their faith's reputations as in denouncing the loss of a young life. There are some who blame Mr. Parvez. There are some who paint Aqsa as a deserving target. And those who advocate for women's and equality rights were mostly silent or tentative, made uncomfortable by the Islamophobia around us.

We lose sight of the real conflict in this situation.

If Mr. Parvez did indeed strangle his daughter to death in their home, he may or may not have been acting in accordance with the principles of his faith, but he was definitely not acting in accordance with the laws governing this country. Any more than the 96 other people responsible for family-related murders in Canada – including about 21 child victims - in 2005. We can't blame those on Islam.

The rights of one person or group end where the rights of another begin, or risk being infringed. Like human rights legislation internationally, Canada's *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* concerns itself in detail with the protection of the rights of minorities against the "tyranny of the majority". That is how we reach a balance in situations that would otherwise threaten social cohesion. My right to freedom of expression ends where your right not to be exposed to hate speech begins. Should I transgress that boundary, I am guilty of a criminal act, and will be held accountable.

Mr. Parvez's right to act on his beliefs found its natural end where his daughter's right to life and security began.

Our job is not to apportion blame, but to seek the justice that is allowed by the laws.

Part of this justice-seeking is to question why this young woman did not feel safe enough to seek protection from those institutions designed to help those being victimized – we need reach out to others like her.

Another part of this justice-seeking is to ask ourselves why some are so much more publicly outraged by this case of family homicide than the dozens of others every year.

We have sensationalized it as an honour killing because in some parts of the world, this type of act is officially condoned. This allows us to turn a blind eye to the unofficial attitudes in our own country that produce identical outcomes - deaths of family members.

We must channel our righteous anger into understanding how and why preventable tragedies occur so frequently.

Start with mandatory domestic death reviews in all provinces.

Expand initiatives with students and educators, to build a more full understanding of how to identify and appropriately respond to cases of family abuse.

Increase funding for programs that allow victims of family violence a real chance at leaving dangerous situations. Not only funding for shelters and counseling, but also for initiatives to provide victims with physical necessities, as a new program in Newfoundland and Labrador does, so that they do not have to return to their homes to retrieve belongings or money should they fear to do so.

Reach out to the allies we have in all cultural and religious groups – only the totalitarian in each of those groups are unconcerned by violations of life and human rights. Ensure that those who provide services, whether government or community, deal directly and fairly with all situations even those that have cultural or religious overtones. Shyness, racism or lack of knowledge should not be the cause of uneven protection and benefit.

The case of Aqsa Pervez seems to be only a variation of a problem we know well. Members of immigrant families sometimes must plot a difficult course among cultural practices. But their rights in Canada are unchallengeable.

Those of us who advocate for women's and equality rights must denounce with no less vigour, attacks on women's and equality rights in homes and communities that are different than our own. We must not "tolerate for others what is intolerable to us" as some Muslim women put it recently. We must become comfortable with the issue – after all, this is not the first time that religious justification is used for a violation of rights.

We must extend to all women living in Canada the same benefit of our advocacy.

We are morally outraged by Aqsa's murder. As well we should be. We want to comfort ourselves that her death was something exotic and rare. But without minimizing the tragedy of Aqsa's experiences, we must recognize that her death was not, in fact, unique, and we should focus this outrage toward more productive ends than culture stereotyping.

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