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Islamophobia's injustice: a deadly double-standard



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Five years on, the Western media still frequently makes reference to what happened to the Dutch film director Theo van Gogh who was killed by Mohammed Bouyeri, a Dutch Muslim of Moroccan origin, three months after the release of van Gogh's Submission 10-minute movie.

Focusing on the topic of violence against women in some Islamic societies and using Quranic verses unfavorable to women projected onto their bodies in Arabic flew a Muslim fury at the movie, which is seen by Muslims as "an offensive and provocative one."

Boyeri was accordingly sentenced to life without parole. Of course I do not defend this 31-year-old youth whose crime is neither tolerable nor acceptable; but I have a point to make about Europe's Islamophobia.

The charges by the prosecutor against him included the following statement:

"The defendant rejects our democracy. He even wants to bring down our democracy. With violence. He is insistent. To this day. He sticks to his views with perseverance. This calls for a strong response. By literally placing him outside our democracy."

And yes, according to the European Court of Human Rights "the idea of freedom of expression has an essential role to play in a democratic society, helping to foster the development of an open, tolerant society in which human rights are respected."

Let's now recall another recent scenario that took place in a European courtroom where a three-month pregnant veiled mother, Marwa al-Sherbini, was stabbed 18 times to death by a German 28-year-old attacker, identified only as Axel W, who was "driven by a deep hatred of foreigners and Muslims," according to a German official.

Axel W and Sherbini, an Egyptian living in Germany, were in court for the former's appeal against a

€750 fine for an insult to her headscarf, hijab, in 2008. Attempting to rescue his wife, Elwi Okaz -- who was present with their child -- was shot when a policeman opened fire in the courtroom. Okaz is now in a critical condition in hospital with an unpredictable future, whether dead or survived.

In Europe, the continent of freedoms and democracy, the hijab is still unacceptable by many Europeans, though, as a dress code for Muslim women, the hijab neither insults nor provokes others.

Sherbini's mere crime was wearing the hijab and reporting a discriminatory act she faced, thus becoming a "terrorist" and deserving death -- at least in Alex W's eyes.

A few Western media outlets reported the case and referred to the murderer's "hostile toward foreigners."

With no purpose for raising any doubts about the German legal system and the way Dresden court, where Axel W is currently in custody, is dealing with the situation, German veiled Muslim women should now investigate into the death threat posed by any Islam- or veil-hater and call for safety procedures to follow.

It is not all about Muslims' sympathetic attention given to Sherbini's story; it is about the culture of accepting Islam and Muslims in Europe and the escalating Islamophobic trends towards Muslims and the veil.

According to a study conducted by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), 59 percent of European Muslims nowadays believe that Islamophobic and discriminatory actions against them have become part of their "normal everyday existence" thus "nothing would happen or change" if they report such incidents to authorities.

Scanning through the two European death tragedies (Van Gogh's and Sherbini's), one can easily realize the difference in the way and magnitude of coverage adopted by the western media towards the two incidents.

Van Gogh's killer was identified days after his crime, and was described by the Western media as a "radical Muslim," "terrorist" and "extremist." The whole genealogic tree of Boyeri made the media headlines for months.

In incidents like that, Western media gives the green light to any related fact that would spark a venomous attack against Muslim communities in Europe and thus guarantee a special outcome.

I am not accusing the Western media of stirring debate against Islam and Muslims, as it's not their fault only. It is a culture and will remain a culture unless positive official and unofficial steps are taken.

Dialogue to bridge this gap is an effective solution. Objective media coverage is another one. But justice is the pre-condition for all of this and it must prevail. Muslims in Europe should continue to report discrimination and Islamophobic incidents, seek their rights and fulfill their obligations, and make their voices heard.

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