

The Death of Aasiya Zubair Hassan, Domestic Violence, and Child Abuse

By Anas Coburn

The recent murder of Aasiya Zubair Hassan shocked, and saddened, and angered American Muslims. The incident has served to highlight the issue of domestic violence among American Muslims. There was a call for Imams across the nation to speak out (<http://blog.beliefnet.com/cityofbrass/2009/02/american-muslims-call-for-swif.html>) in their Friday sermons on February 20, 2009. Many did so. See, for example, Hamza Yusuf's khutba: "Removing the Silence on Domestic Violence."

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDEKJDgXO-U>) The Vice-President of ISNA, Imam Mohamed Haggaj Ali, who has been actively engaged in addressing the issue of domestic abuse in the Muslim community, issued a statement (<http://www.isna.net/articles/News/RESPONDING-TO-THE-KILLING-OF-AASIYA-HASSAN-AN-OPEN-LETTER-TO-THE-LEADERS-OF-AMERICAN-MUSLI.aspx>)

Categorically there have been those who considered the impact of the incident on Muslim organizations, (<http://zerqaabid.blogspot.com/2009/02/did-we-ever-bother-to-know-muzzammil.html>) calling for greater efforts in due diligence before support is given to an organization. There have been those who noted the inadequacies of the response of the American feminist group NOW to the crime. (<http://laurafo.dreamhosters.com/blog/2009/02/19/national-organization-of-some-women-gets-it-wrong-more-on-muzzammil-hassan-and-domestic-violence/>) There have been those who used the incident to inveigh against the dangers of political Islam. (<http://www.mzuhdijasser.com/4106/the-plight-of-women-under-islamism>)

An aspect of the discussion largely missing has been the question of "Why?" There has been some commentary about whether the motivation for the crime was financial difficulty, or whether it was because the decedent had filed a protection order and papers for divorce not long before the murder. Whatever precipitated the act, the question remains, "How is it that someone can permit themselves violence against another who is not actively trying to do them physical harm?"

While this kind of general inquiry admits of many approaches to finding an answer, a profoundly important, and broadly ignored, way to consider this issue is from the standpoint of childrearing practices. It is highly probable that those who commit such horrors were gravely mistreated as children. The child is shaped by the early mistreatment in a way that dulls their sensitivity to the suffering of others and learns that violence toward others is an acceptable mode of personal behavior. This mistreatment is often culturally sanctioned, and many even interpret religion as sanctioning violence against children. In this sense, the issue is parallel to the one we have been hearing more about in this case: the teachings of Islam as they relate to the treatment of women, and the way in which these teachings have been distorted culturally such that mistreatment of women becomes acceptable.

The mistreatment of children includes humiliation, derision, and neglect, as well as slaps and spankings and beatings and sexual exploitation. All are mistreatment because all

injure the integrity and dignity of a child, even if their effects are not visible in the immediate aftermath of the treatment.

"Our brains are sculpted by our early experiences. Maltreatment (<http://www.leadershipcouncil.org/1/res/brain.html>) is a chisel that shapes a brain to contend with strife, but at the cost of deep, enduring wounds."

--Teicher, 2000, p. 67

The growing body of knowledge

(http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Early_Violence/) regarding early brain development suggests that "the ways parents, families, and other caregivers relate and respond to their young children, and the ways that they mediate their children's contact with the environment, directly affect the formation of neural pathways" (Shore, 1997, p. 4).

Even if children are not abused physically themselves, they can suffer psychological trauma, including lack of bonding, from witnessing battering. As Lerner (1992) points out, attachment or bonding has far-reaching implications not only for the emotional well-being of a child, but also for a child's cognitive development and the child's ability to cope effectively with stress and to develop healthy relationships.

To stop the violence we must attend to the root causes, and those causes lie in child-rearing practices few are willing to consider. According to Alice Miller, (http://www.alice-miller.com/index_en.php)

Almost all small children are smacked during the first three years of life when they begin to walk and to touch objects which may not be touched. This happens at exactly the time when the human brain builds up its structure and should thus learn kindness, truthfulness, and love but never, never cruelty and lies.

Obviously, not every child who has had their hand smacked before the age of three ends by committing a horrible crime. But Miller argues that virtually every perpetrator of horrible crimes has a history of being abused as a child. In Miller's view, the protective factor that mitigates the probability of victim becoming perpetrator is the presence of "helping witnesses" in the child's life.

The point of this article is perhaps more difficult to communicate than most, because almost everyone has repressed and been trained to deny mistreatment they suffered at the hands of their parents. The effects of this denial, and the way this denial has been culturally reinforced make the entire subject both difficult of access and profoundly important.

As Muslims in America wake up from denial of the domestic violence (this article has a list of links to responses to the incident) (http://www.theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/reflections_on_aasiya_hassans_murder_and_domestic_violence/) that takes place in some of our homes, we must come to

terms with the fact that many of the perpetrators of this violence are viewed by others in their community as “good Muslims.” As we wake up, it will no longer be acceptable to minimize reports and evidence of mistreatment of women, nor will it be acceptable to rest without taking action, even in the face of cultural pressure to do so. By all means let us move forward in defining the practice of Islam as one that categorically rejects mistreatment of women, whether financial, psychological, or physical. At the same time, let us struggle with ourselves to recognize the role that mistreatment of children plays in shaping adults who find it acceptable to mistreat others. This is an issue that is seldom raised. It is one that deserves to be examined in some detail and at some length.