

Media Advisory

**November 7, 2008
For Immediate Release**

Aqsa Parvez' tragic death is not just a "Muslim" or "immigrant" issue

PRESS CONFERENCE:

**YWCA
80 Woodlawn Avenue East, Main Lounge
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The December 2008 edition of Toronto Life has featured Aqsa Parvez in ways that perpetuate misconceptions surrounding her murder. While this feature reveals a recognition that a young woman's life was tragically cut short, it reflects common stereotypes about Muslim and immigrant communities, diverting needed attention from the issue of violence against women in Canada.

The article paints Muslim communities as monolithic, static and inherently violent. It reduces the issue as being a problem merely of cultural differences rather than pointing to the institutional and legal challenges which must be addressed in order to protect all women from violence.

Fifty-one percent of women in Canada have experienced at least one incidence of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16, and there have been approximately 25 female victims of domestic homicide each year in Ontario from 1975 to 2004.

Aqsa did not travel between "two worlds" as the article suggests; she lived in the world millions of other Torontonians live in. Violence against women and girls is an issue that affects everyone, including immigrants, Canadian-born people, and religious and non-religious people.

"Why is it that when a young woman of colour is killed, we don't honour her life in the same way as when young white women are killed?" Michelle Cho, Project Co-ordinator at Urban Alliance on Race Relations asks. "It demonstrates that systemic racism is embedded in mainstream media. We need to stop the gender-based cycle of violence and challenge Islamophobic and racist stereotypes. Violence cuts across all communities in Canada - no community is to blame more than others and no community is exempt."

Panelists include representatives of:

Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children
Urban Alliance on Race Relations

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Issues with the article

- 1) Aqsa's murder must be looked at through the larger context of violence against women in Canada. The problem is not limited to any one community or religious faith. Violence against women, racism, and Islamophobia are issues that affect all of us in diverse and important ways. Fifty-one percent of women in Canada have experienced at least one incidence of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16.
- 2) The article calls Aqsa's murder "Toronto's first honour killing". Approximately 25 women a year are murdered in incidents of domestic violence. The use of the term "honour killing" is an attempt to sensationalize the situation by invoking common stereotypes about the prevalence of "honour killings" among South Asian Muslim families, thereby suggesting that domestic violence is not occurring at alarming rates across Canada. Instead, we should be working to end violence against all women.
- 3) The article associates Muslim religiousity with a tendency towards violence. In other words, the more religious a Muslim is, the more likely s/he is to engage in this type of violence. This is false and based on Islamophobic stereotyping.
- 4) The question, "Has multiculturalism gone too far?" suggests that Muslims and immigrants are threats to Canadian society, rather than contributing members to Canadian society. The idea that "our" tolerance or respect for cultural diversity has let "them" continue their oppressive and dangerous behaviours is not only based on racist and Islamophobic stereotyping of diverse Muslim and immigrant communities, but also ignores the ongoing racism that exists in Canada despite our public commitment to multiculturalism.
- 5) The focus should be on violence against women, not hijab. The article sets up a false dichotomy between Muslim women who wear the hijab as oppressed and Muslim women who do not wear the hijab as liberated. Furthermore, it reinforces the idea that all young girls want the same things, completely ignoring the diversity and richness of Muslim women's voices and lived experiences.

Call to Action against Toronto Life's Misrepresentation of Aqsa Parvez's Murder:

The decision of Toronto Life to put Aqsa Parvez on the cover of the December issue is an important recognition of a young woman whose life was tragically cut short.

However, 51 per cent of women in Canada have experienced at least one incidence of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16, and there have been approximately 25 female victims of domestic homicide each year in Ontario from 1975 to 2004. The suggestion that this violence is an immigrant issue masks the fact that Aqsa Parvez was a Canadian citizen, entitled to same rights as all other Canadians. It allows the public institutions that failed Aqsa to absolve themselves of their responsibility to her, and to perpetuate and preserve the negative perceptions and false stereotypes that keep marginalized communities away from the services that they need and are entitled to.

Domestic violence is the collective responsibility of the state, institutions, and the general community of Canadians and residents. Where, for example, was her school in all of this? If, as suggested by friends and others, Aqsa bore the visual markers of ongoing physical violence, such as bruises, was she advised of available counseling and services for abused girls? Why did her school call the local imam and not, for example, the numerous social services agencies serving women who experience violence?

We are reminded of the case of a young Muslim woman sexually assaulted at C.W. Jeffreys, a public high school. In that case, the school administration bought into the discriminatory attitude that Muslims fall under a different category of "Canadian". They adhered to a false paternalist assumption and swept the incident under the rug, denying the young survivor access to resources she may have needed, or significantly, to the justice that was her due.

There is a false dichotomy established in the article on Aqsa's murder. Aqsa didn't travel between "two worlds", she lived in the same world as other Torontonians live in. It is not always idyllic, but it is certainly not exotic. It seems like this "two worlds" narrative attempts to sever the link between Muslims and the rest of Canada. But it was in Canada that Aqsa did and thousands of other Muslim teenagers currently do attend school, work part-time jobs and make friends. When Aqsa went home, she was still in this same Canada, despite the horrific abuse she suffered at home. It was in this Canada that the murder occurred. It is an issue that affects all Canadians, Muslim, atheist or otherwise. And statistics clearly show that this violence against women cuts across all communities in Canada – no community is to blame more than others and no community is exempt.

Why is it that when a young woman of colour loses her life to violence, we do not honour her life the way we do when young white women are killed? This displays the inherent systemic racism that is imbedded in mainstream media – the importance, value, and normality of young women of colour is ultimately discounted. We need to stop the cycle of gender-based violence, as well as Islamophobia, racism, and stereotypical thinking of the media and other public institutions that only creates a smoke screen and makes the problem worse.



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Violence Against Women, Young Women, and Girls: Statistics

- One-half of all Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16 and one in four women are victims of assault by a partner (Statistics Canada, 1993, "Violence Against Women Survey", *The Daily*, 18 November).
- Four in ten Canadian women experience sexual assault (Johnson, 1996, *Dangerous Domains: Violence Against Women in Canada*, p. 50, 52).
- Eight out of ten sexual assaults against children and youth are perpetuated against girls and young women (Statistics Canada, 2005, *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile*, p. 89).
- Perpetrators of sexual assault against children and youth are most commonly male and known to the victim, either as a family member or as acquaintance (RESOLVE Alberta, 2002, *School Based Violence Prevention Programs: A Resource Manual*, <http://www.ucalgary.ca/resolve/violenceprevention/English/reviewprog/childsxintro.htm>).
- Twelve percent of Canadian women aged 18 to 24 reported at least one incident of violence by an intimate partner in a one-year period, compared with the national average of 3% of all married or cohabiting women (Johnson, 1996, *Dangerous Domains: Violence Against Women in Canada*, p.148).
- Women under twenty-five are at greatest risk of being killed by their male partners (Morris, 2002, *CRIAW Factsheet: Violence Against Women and Girls*, http://www.criaw-icref.ca/factSheets/Violence_fact_sheet_e.htm).
- Young women and girls from marginalized communities are more vulnerable to violence. For example, 80% of Aboriginal girls under the age of 8 in the Northwest Territories have been sexually assaulted (Gurr et al., 1999, *Breaking the Links Between Poverty and Violence Against Women: A Resource Guide*, <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/familyviolence/html/1breaking.htm>). Also, the rate of sexual abuse for girls living with disabilities is four times that of the national average (Razack, 1994, "From Consent to Responsibility, From Pity to Respect: Subtexts in Cases of Sexual Violence Involving Girls and Women with Developmental Disabilities", *Social Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 4, p.891-922).

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