

JUSTICE UNDER FIRE

While Europe's politicians, philosophers and journalists, over countless pages and hours of coverage, discussed the merits of Nicolas Sarkozy's brave crusade against the niqab, few were moved to any comparable level of concern about the murder of a young pregnant mother, killed because she was a Muslim woman who covered her head.

Marwa al Sherbini, a pharmacist of Egyptian origin, was brutally stabbed 18 times in a Dresden court room as she gave testimony against a German man who had been accused of a constant stream of hate and xenophobic behaviour towards her and her family that had been going on for some time. Alexander W, Marwa's 28-year-old neighbour, had been harassing her for months, calling her a "terrorist", an "Islamist whore" and forcefully removing her headscarf on several occasions. He had been found guilty and fined a mere 700 Euros. During the appeal, his reaction was to pull a knife and to stab her 18 times while her 3-year-old son Mustafa looked on; Marwa died on the spot. Her husband who rushed to save her was both stabbed by the man and shot by the police, who reportedly believed he was the assailant.

Marwa, the victim of this horrific hate crime, has not been mourned in Europe. In fact the story has gone largely unreported by the media. Perhaps had there not been such outrage in Egypt where her body was flown for burial, the media would have completely forgotten about this brave young woman. Closer to home, European Muslims are left wondering how many more such "isolated incidents" they will have to see before their societies recognise the truth that an ugly disease has, for some time, been spreading.

If this incident were an isolated one, the complete lack of official reaction may be understandable. However, it is sadly only one incident in a consistent pattern of violence against ordinary Muslims, Muslim religious leaders and Muslim places of worship across Europe which have become all too routine. Such disturbing incidents may have been less so, had they succeeded to raise alarm and serve as a call for action against a pattern of discrimination and abuse. However, official circles continue to fail to address the issue of Islamophobia, allowing us to continue on the blind path to further victimisation and persecution, with the German government's vice spokesman Thomas Steg insisting

“circumstances are not sufficiently clear enough to allow a broad political response”.

The warning by the head of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) stresses, that Islamophobia is a growing issue that must be seriously tackled in Europe. Politicians and journalists incessantly talk about integration and cohesion. However most ignore warnings by think-tanks such as the Institute of Race Relations, based on a one-year study of six European countries, that “contrary to public perception, the challenge to multiculturalism in Europe comes not from Muslim communities’ unwillingness to integrate but from Islamophobia”.

Further proof of the advance of racism and xenophobia, if further proof were still needed, can be seen from the spectacular success of far-right parties in recent national, and European, elections. Parties with hate-filled agendas gained as much as 30% of the vote, pushing further and further into mainstream politics.

Rather than seeing such developments as a cause for concern and a call to urgent action, European leaders do not seem interested in tackling right-wing extremists, but often appear to borrow their terminology and rhetoric. In his mobilisation against a minority of Muslim women who wear the niqab, Nicolas Sarkozy proudly declared “in our country we cannot accept that women be prisoners behind a screen” to applause in the parliament’s ceremonial Versailles home. However, this apparent concern for the freedom and rights of Muslim women does not seem to apply to those European Muslim women who face discrimination, harassment and occasionally violence simply for practising their faith and exercising their rights as members of European societies.

FEMYSO calls on European political leaders, governments and institutions to recognise the serious issue of Islamophobia in our societies and to act now to combat its harmful effects on integration and cohesion. We ask leaders not to use or give credibility to anti-Muslim rhetoric or to exploit the widespread fear and misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims, the tragic results of which we have seen in Dresden. We ask that authorities introduce more systematic collection of data on anti-Muslim violence in order to understand the scale of the problem and formulate comprehensive policies to tackle it.

The anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre earlier this month, when more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were murdered in cold blood 14 years ago, should remind us of the tragic consequences of allowing prejudice and hatred to fester unchallenged. While the victims of these crimes join thousands of other forgotten victims, European Muslims continue to wonder when European leaders will loudly and clearly declare that such hatred cannot be accepted and that the perpetrators of such hate crimes will not be welcome anywhere in Europe.