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Dangerous silence: debating "honour killings"

The recent decision by the "Festival of Dangerous Ideas" to cancel Uthman Badar's talk on "honour killings" begs the question of what is more dangerous: having a dangerous idea, or not wanting to talk about it?

[Selen Ercan](#)

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The issue of "honour killings" has received relatively unprecedented media attention in Australia over the past week. The trigger for this was, thankfully, not the murder of a woman for allegedly "cultural" reasons, but the decision made by the organizers of the upcoming "Festival of Dangerous Ideas" to pull a planned talk on the topic. The organizers had initially invited the Sydney writer Uthman Badar to talk about the moral justifications behind these killings. This made a good fit with the overall aim of the festival, which, according to the joint founder and co-curator of the festival, Simon Longstaff, is "to push boundaries to the point where you become extremely uncomfortable". Yet the organizers cancelled the talk due to "the level of public anger" over the title: "Honour Killings are Morally Justified". They feared that this title

could give the “wrong impression” and could potentially generate a “wall of hostility” if the event were to take place.

Uthman Badar said he did not choose the topic himself, nor is Badar any kind of advocate for “honour killing”, but he was most probably selected by the organisers given his invaluable “insider perspective” on the issue at hand. Disappointed by the sudden change of plan, Badar said he wanted to argue in his talk that honour

killings are used by Westerners as a symbol of everything they dislike about another culture.

Enough has been written in the Australian media over the past couple of days regarding the decision to pull Badar’s talk out of the Festival, its political message, and its potential marketing value for the Festival itself. Rather than retread this tired ground, I want to explore the potential merit in talking about a topic that the mainstream in society deems unreasonable and feels uncomfortable with. A democratic society should not be afraid to air and discuss issues related to “honour killings”. Drawing on my own work, which compares the “honour killing” debates within contemporary multicultural societies, there are several critical insights that emerge.

Firstly, Badar is surely right to see that “honour killing” has become a symbol for everything that has gone wrong in multicultural societies, caught up in a classic case of intellectual laziness. Especially in Europe, “honour killings” have a straightforward definition. They have been seen as indicative of broader problems, such as the presumed failures of integration, the oppression of women in traditional cultures and the difficulty of reconciling cultural expectations of behaviour with life in a modern western society. Yet different societies have been dealing with these issues in quite different ways. Some countries, such as Britain, have been more willing to put these issues on the policy table and discuss them in detail, while others, such as Germany, have viewed it as an opportunity to justify the need for an anti-immigration agenda.

The second insight that emerges is that the more a society is willing to debate “honour killings” publicly, the better it understands the driving forces behind such

killings. One clear message that extends from this argument is that we should stop treating these murders as “cultural practices” and linking them with traditional minority cultures only. Honour killings are clearly gendered, and should be dealt with within the boundaries of violence against women. The gendered dimension of “honour killings” only become visible in societies where there is a sufficient and open debate around these issues and where there is a willingness to listen and engage with the members of cultural minorities.

My research indicates that a plural and inclusive public debate and deliberation on “honour killings” actually helps to reveal the similarities between cultures, rather than the differences between them. This involves the presentation of a range of viewpoints, including the “most dangerous” ones. To be clear, mainstream society is by no means free of the patriarchal imperatives that underlie honour killings more broadly. An open debate on these issues, where the moral justifications behind such murders are discussed, can reveal the parallels between the experiences of ethnic minority women and those of white women, rather than building “a wall of hostility” between cultures, as the organisers of the “Festival of Dangerous Ideas” so fear.

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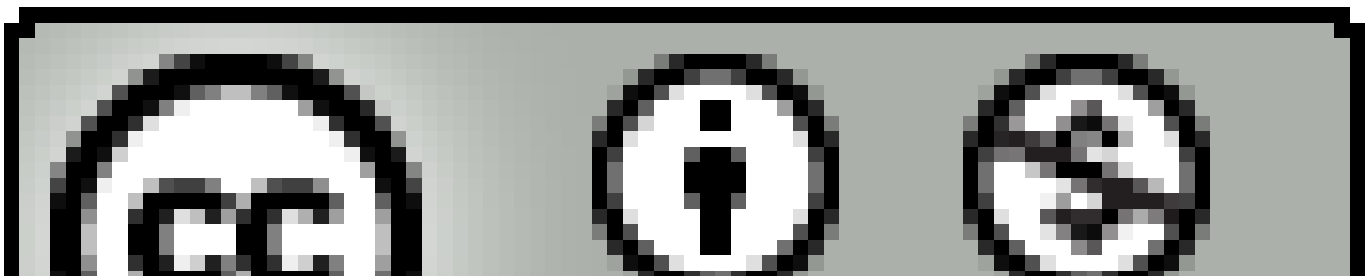
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