In particular, external behavior that would evoke the impression by students or parents that the teacher is against human dignity, the equal rights of people according to Article 3 of the Basic Law, basic freedoms, or the liberal democratic order, is not permissible. The fulfillment of the educational mandate [...] of the constitution, and the relevant representation of Christian and Western educational and cultural values or traditions, do not infringe on [this] dictate.


The immense and ongoing attention received by Sürücü’s murder stands in stark contrast to coverage of the xenophobically motivated murder of another Muslim woman, Marwa el-Sherbini, in a German courtroom in 2009. The incident began when el-Sherbini, wearing a hijab, asked Alex Wiens to make space for her three-year-old son on a playground swing. He responded by accusing her of being an Islamist. She brought charges, and Wiens was subsequently fined by the local authorities for xenophobically motivated speech. Upon appeal, el-Sherbini testified again against Wiens, who demonstrated in court that he was an open sympathizer of the right-wing party, the National Democratic Party. Immediately after her testimony, Wiens stabbed el-Sherbini to death in front of her husband and son. Media coverage of and political response to el-Sherbini’s death in the Dresden courtroom were notably muted. Although the murder quickly gained attention in Egypt (el-Sherbini’s home
country) and Iran, followed by stories published in the United States and the UK, German officials and press did not react to the case for nearly a week. By the time they responded, el-Sherbini was being referred to as a “hijab-martyr” in the Islamic world, and her death was acknowledged as the first Islamophobic murder in Germany. Once a governmental and media response finally appeared, it was short-lived, and el-Sherbini’s murder quickly disappeared from the public eye.

It is nearly impossible to discuss the contemporary questions surrounding diversity in Germany without addressing the contentious responses garnered by forms of Islamic headcovering in public space, in particular the debates generated by Fereshta Ludin’s attempt to obtain a public teaching position while wearing a hijab. Yet it is quite easy to enter into a discussion about Islam in Germany without discussing the xenophobically motivated murder of el-Sherbini, who was dubbed by many as the “hijab martyr.” The radically different responses to the violent deaths of Sürczę and el-Sherbini, the former murdered in the name of a gendered “Muslim” code of honor, the latter murdered when she challenged a particular understanding of the “Muslim woman,” are revealing. They suggest a public imagination of Muslim women in which victims of familial violence are easily imagined, whereas Muslim women as participants in public democracy and victims of racialized violence are largely unthinkable in the public sphere. The story I tell here is partly about how the visibility of the headscarf and the invisibility of forms of racialized discrimination are reflective of the larger discussions about Muslim violence in Europe. It is equally important to examine how Ludin and el-Sherbini, as two women who explicitly sought to claim their rights in the public sphere while wearing the headscarf, contradict the pervasive narratives in which Muslim women are unable to both demonstrate their affiliation with Islam in public and productively participate in European democracy.

The epigraph above was taken from one of several provincial laws that had been passed in response to a 2003 German Federal Constitutional Court that ruled on the constitutionality of preventing public schoolteachers from wearing hijab. The decision resolved little; it stated that the regulation of headscarves in public