

## **A Perspective on Domestic Violence in the Muslim Community**

*by Salma Elkadi Abugideiri*

The Muslim community in the United States is a multi-ethnic, multi-racial community. There are 6 to 7 million Muslims in the United States, with the largest sub-groups being South Asian, Arab and African American.<sup>1</sup> In addition to ethnic and racial diversity, Muslims come from different educational and socio-economic backgrounds and practice their religious teachings to various degrees.

The diverse nature of this population can lead to challenges for advocates. While some cultural norms and the misinterpretation of certain religious texts may lead to an increased propensity towards domestic violence in certain sectors of the Muslim population, certain cultural and/or religious practices may appear oppressive when taken out of context, but simply represent different values and beliefs that are not necessarily oppressive in and of themselves. One example is the gender segregation that occurs socially in some Arab countries. Another example is the complementary but different gender roles in Muslim families, including the leadership role that men play in the family.

### **Incidence of Domestic Violence in Muslim Families**

There is relatively little data about the incidence of domestic violence among Muslims. Often, Muslims are part of studies of particular ethnic groups (Arab, South Asian) but may not be identified specifically as Muslims. Also, due to the taboo nature of the subject, Muslims are often reluctant to report or speak out about their experiences.

Two surveys that have been cited in multiple places suggest that the Muslim community in the United States suffers at least the same degree of domestic violence as the general population. In a survey of 63 Muslim leaders and community members, at least ten percent of participants reported having experienced physical abuse.<sup>2</sup> In another survey of 500 Arab women (98 percent of whom were Muslim) in the Dearborn, Michigan area, 18 to 20 percent of the women had experienced spouse abuse.<sup>3</sup>

### **Unique Aspects of Domestic Violence in the Muslim Community**

There is no single theory that fully or conclusively explains domestic violence.<sup>4</sup> There are some patterns, however, that have been observed in this author's clinical work with Muslim families over the past ten years.

There are many immigrant Muslim families in which violence did not occur until after coming to the United States. Women in these families report having noticed a change in their husbands

due to the increased stress related to difficulty acculturating, multiple losses (including extended family, social status, career, etc), or the threat of deportation, especially after September 11 and the subsequent implementation of the Patriot Act. Additional stressors exist when the family has experienced severe trauma that may have occurred during a war, while living under an oppressive regime, or while fleeing a country or living in a refugee camp. In other instances, women may not even recognize that they are victims of abuse because it is so common for them due to the acceptance of abusive behavior in their particular society. In the case of American converts, an additional factor is that the abuser will cause her to doubt her understanding of Islam by telling her she is “a bad Muslim,” often leading her to believe she deserves the abuse.

Despite these different scenarios, most of the Muslim women seen by this author struggle with similar challenges and dilemmas. As Muslims, they value the institution of marriage and want to preserve it at all costs. They often believe the abuser, who justifies his behavior by referring to isolated bits of text from the Qur’an. They tend to blame themselves for not being patient enough or understanding enough to help him change his behavior. They also tend to wonder if God is punishing them or is angry with them for some past sins, and they especially struggle with trying to understand how God might view their desire to end the marriage. In addition to struggling with spiritual questions, they also have to deal with some societal issues, such as the shame of being a divorced woman or being a woman who has reported her husband to the police. They may be reluctant to turn to shelters due to misconceptions that their children will be taken away from them, that shelters will report undocumented persons, or that the negative perception of Muslims will be perpetuated.

### Islamic Teachings

Islam must be considered as a whole, as a paradigm that cannot be fragmented and whose teachings cannot be analyzed in isolation. Muslims are required to abide by the text of the Qur’an,<sup>5</sup> which is accepted as the word of God, as well as the life example of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him). From a holistic perspective, the verses in the Qur’an that address the creation of humankind are instrumental in understanding the Islamic position on gender relations and equality. “O mankind! Reverence your guardian-Lord, who created you from a single soul. Created, of like nature, its mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women---fear God, through Whom you demand your mutual rights, and reverence the wombs (that bore you), for God ever watches over you.” (Qur’an 4:1).<sup>6</sup> The Qur’an describes the relationship between spouses as one founded on mercy, compassion, and tranquility.<sup>7</sup> Another verse describes spouses as being garments for one another, emphasizing the mutuality in the relationship.<sup>8</sup> Multiple verses<sup>9</sup> remind men to treat women with kindness and justice, as do many teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

As far as domestic violence is concerned, it is an issue that has been dealt with from a preventive stance since the Qur’an clearly prohibits any kind of injustice or oppression. There are verses that specifically prohibit behaviors that constitute emotional and psychological abuse, such as spying, intimidating, name-calling, insulting, and black-mailing.<sup>10</sup> As a living

example to Muslims, Prophet Muhammad was known to have never hit women, nor to have treated them harshly or with disrespect, and he strongly discouraged others from doing so.

The one verse in the Qur'an that mentions hitting one's wife<sup>11</sup> has been the subject of much attack from non-Muslims and controversy among Muslims; it is also taken out of context and used by some abusers to justify beating their wives. This verse begins by describing the protective responsibility that men have over women, and defines their leadership role in financially supporting the family. It then identifies the steps a husband should take in the event a wife is guilty of disloyalty (*nushuz*),<sup>12</sup> with the final step in the process being to hit her.<sup>13</sup> The majority of Muslim scholars emphasize that this verse is not teaching wife-beating; that if the verse is interpreted literally, the hitting should be done in a manner that would leave no mark or injury; and that it provides a step-by-step procedure to deal with a very specific and very severe threat to the marriage. The verse underscores the importance of the marital unit, the gravity of sexual misconduct, and the ultimate accountability of both spouses to God.

### The Muslim Response to Domestic Violence

The responses to incidents of domestic violence are as varied as the community is diverse. At one end of the spectrum, a victim may find her community to be completely invalidating of her experience, and even blame her for angering her husband. An imam might insist that she be patient, return to her husband and try harder to please him. At the other end of the spectrum, a victim may find multiple resources in her community. The imam might encourage her to call the police if she is threatened in any way, and local families might offer to provide her with shelter.

In the past ten years, the Muslim community has made a lot of progress in acknowledging the existence of domestic violence among Muslims and in creating initiatives to fight this problem. From isolated Muslim voices speaking out against this issue, today there are examples all across the country of communities mobilizing their resources to understand the problem and to work towards prevention and solutions. At the forefront, a Muslim community in Philadelphia publicly identifies known abusers and bans them from future marriages.<sup>14</sup> While this is not representative of the entire Muslim community in the U.S., it illustrates the trend of communities taking a stronger stand against domestic violence as they become increasingly aware of the extent this issue is affecting Muslim families.

In the Washington, DC metropolitan area, a group of imams signed a proclamation to publicly state their unified position against domestic violence.<sup>15</sup> In other parts of the country, Domestic Violence Task Forces are being established, Muslim shelters and social service agencies are being created, and national organizations (such as the Islamic Society of North America, and the Islamic Social Services Association) are training Muslim leaders.

As these trends continue, it is becoming harder for Muslim leaders and community members to ignore the once taboo issue of domestic violence. Some imams are using the opportunity of the weekly Friday sermons to educate the community about Islam's prohibition of family violence.

Although there is still a lot of work that needs to be done, most importantly increased education about the dynamics of domestic violence and its impact on the family, the outlook for the future appears hopeful and promising for the Muslim community.

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<sup>1</sup> American Muslims: Population Statistics. Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). July 6, 2005. [www.cair-net.org/asp/populationstats.asp](http://www.cair-net.org/asp/populationstats.asp)

<sup>2</sup> Alkhateeb, Sharifa. (1998, January). Ending domestic violence in Muslim Families. *Sisters!*, 1 (4).

<sup>3</sup> Kulwicki, Anahid Devartanian, and Miller, June. (1999). Domestic Violence in the Arab American Population: Transforming Environmental Conditions through Community Education. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 20 (3), 199-215.

<sup>4</sup> Jasinski, Jana L. (2001). Theoretical Explanations for Violence Against Women. In Renzetti, C. M., Edleson, J. L., & Bergen, R. K. (Eds.), *Sourcebook on Violence Against Women*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

<sup>5</sup> The Qur'an was revealed in Arabic to Prophet Muhammad. The original Arabic text is considered the word of God. Multiple translations and commentaries of the Qur'an exist. These are not considered divine and may vary greatly according to the interpretation of the author. This article relies on the following translation: Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. (1999). *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*. 10<sup>th</sup> Edition. Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications.

<sup>6</sup> Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. (1999). *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*. 10<sup>th</sup> Edition. Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications.

<sup>7</sup> Qur'an 30:21.

<sup>8</sup> Qur'an 2:187.

<sup>9</sup> Qur'an 2:231-233; 4:19-21; 16:90; 65:6.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed presentation of Qur'anic verses that address specific types of abuse, see Alwani, Z. and Abugideiri, S. (2004). *What Islam Says about Domestic Violence: A Guide for Helping Muslim Families*. Herndon, VA: FAITH.

<sup>11</sup> Qur'an 4:34.

<sup>12</sup> An Arabic word that has been interpreted in a variety of ways, including sexual misconduct, disobedience, and ill-will.

<sup>13</sup> This final step has also been translated from Arabic as "leave her." Refer to Alwani, Z. and Abugideiri, S. (2004). *What Islam Says about Domestic Violence: A Guide for Helping Muslim Families*. Herndon, VA: FAITH, pp. 28-32.

<sup>14</sup> Holmes, Kristin E. (2005, June 17). Muslims Strike at Spouse Abuse. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. [www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/living/religion/11914551.htm?template](http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/living/religion/11914551.htm?template)

<sup>15</sup> Peaceful Families Project Workshop. *Islamic Principles for Peaceful Families*, Training for Muslim Leaders, May 28, 2005, Great Falls, VA.