

## **Teen Dating Violence in the Muslim Community: Protecting the Family, Eradicating Hopelessness and Healing the Community**

*by Sakeena Abdulraheem*

Muslim families practice a diverse array of cultural expectations in their households, which contributes to the complexity of their approach to teens and dating. Muslim families sometimes mix their secular practices with their religious practices, thus creating their own social norms. This mix often confuses the teenagers in these families in terms of understanding their identity and cultural expectations.

For generations, Muslim couples have found their partners through arranged marriages and recommendations from family and friends. Pre-marital sexual relations are forbidden in Islam, and fornication extends beyond sexual relations to include activities with the eyes or hands. Anything that could lead to sexual intercourse is considered a smaller form of fornication that Muslims will be held responsible for when the time comes for them to stand before Allah (swt). As a result, more conservative forms of chaperoned dating and courting lead to engagement and marriage. This is the religiously legitimate process that many Muslim couples commit to in order to have a companion and relations in a way that is acceptable in Islam. Some Muslim families enforce conservative secular practices where the parents choose the prospective spouse for their child, some take the more Islamic approach of allowing their children to choose who they would like to marry, while others follow much more liberal secular practices of allowing their children to date and find spouses on their own. Often, because parents themselves may come from a diverse array of traditions, parents tell their children they can only marry someone with a specific type of background, allowing them to choose from that particular cultural or ethnic pool alone, and allowing them to date that particular prospect with or without supervision. This approach in many cases leaves some Muslim teenagers and young adults completely confused and wondering what is the true essence of an Islamic relationship. This confusion often leads some Muslim teens to formulate their own set of traditions, and they often develop two modes of interaction: one mode of interaction with their family and one mode of interaction with their friends. These two modes of interaction (or two personalities) sometimes lead Muslim youth in the direction of making their own decisions about dating and engaging in sexual relations without parental advice or parental guidance. They may be led into situations such as the following scenario about “Muhammad and Sarah.”

Muhammad and Sarah have been dating for two years. Although their parents have no knowledge of their relationship, Muhammad is beginning to act like he owns Sarah. He belittles her at school and in front of their friends, he spies on her, he does not like her to go out with her friends without him, and when they are alone together he pressures her for sex. One day they

are making out and Sarah makes it clear to him that she does not want to go any further with him than kissing. He disregards her requests to slow down and back off, and he forces her to have sexual intercourse. Muhammad later apologizes, saying "I'm sorry but I just could not help it. I just lost control of myself--you have that affect on me, you know."

This scenario depicts rape and is among several scenarios I hear from young Muslim men and women who are living a double life and keeping their relationships a secret from their families. Muslim teens today are living through complex times, where leadership, positivity, and a strong sense of Islamic identity and self knowledge will be their guiding light at the end of the tunnel. Without these and many other important tools many Muslim youths are left at-risk and vulnerable to becoming like Muhammad and Sarah. As discussed earlier, pre-marital sex in Islam is forbidden and anything leading to or encouraging pre-marital sex is forbidden as well. However, there are many teens in Muslim communities who are choosing not to abstain from pre-marital sex, and some are often making these choices without parental knowledge or consent. With these choices come several issues that follow a Muslim teenager's choice to become sexually active. Teens often imitate images of what they believe a relationship should be like, and they often bring their cultural baggage, which confuses them about how the person they are going out with should behave. These images cloud their judgment in recognizing an abusive situation.

Teens also deal with personal pressures at home such as domestic disputes and/or strict cultural expectations that leave them feeling hopeless. This hopelessness sometimes becomes a driving force for many at-risk teens for accepting an abusive relationship in an effort to escape a domestic situation that is considered a life without hope. Muslim teens with mental and/or physical disabilities are at even more risk of succumbing to these scenarios because predators often seek out the weak and most vulnerable individuals who are less educated, less equipped with information that can serve as their defense mechanism. Predators often seek out people who are unable to defend themselves and report the abuse.

Islam, encompassing the Quran and prophetic traditions, is one of the most vital and proactive tools, and the most important defense mechanism, that the Muslim community has when understood, interpreted, and implemented at its full potential. This can be seen during the times of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), who himself was an orphan, was protected by his community and who grew up to become an example for all to follow in conveying the message of protecting the weak, upholding justice even during times when the most corrupt individuals were the most powerful, and were plotting against those that stood for justice. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was also the best example in terms of how he treated his family and those around him with kindness, empathy, patience, compassion, and humility.

**Allah emphasized in the Quran the importance of living with women honorably and setting the foundation for healthy relationships when he said,**

**[وَعَاشِرُوهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ]**

(And live with them honorably), by saying kind words to them, treating them kindly and making your appearance appealing for them, as much as you can, just as you like the same from them. Allah said in another Ayah,

[وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ]

(And they have rights similar over them to what is reasonable) [2:228]. The Messenger of Allah said,

«خَيْرُكُمْ خَيْرُكُمْ لِأَهْلِهِ، وَأَنَا خَيْرُكُمْ لِأَهْلِي»

(The best among you is he who is the best with his family. Verily, I am the best one among you with my family.) It was the practice of the Messenger of Allah to be kind, cheerful, playful with his wives, compassionate, spending on them and laughing with them. The Messenger used to race with `A'ishah, the Mother of the Faithful, as a means of kindness to her. `A'ishah said, "The Messenger of Allah raced with me and I won the race. This occurred before I gained weight, and afterwards I raced with him again, and he won that race. "

The case of sexual violence in the Muslim community reaches across cultures, races and socio-economic levels and it can happen to anyone. Many Muslim youth are usually equipped with misinformation, little information, or no information at all in reference to how they should relate to the opposite gender. For this reason, many Muslim teenagers lack a clear understanding of a relationship acceptable within Islam. Muslim teens often develop their own stereotypes and preconceived notions of what is an acceptable way of interacting with the opposite gender based upon their environments in their homes. Some of these Muslim teens have not learned the difference between a normal relationship with minor upsets and problems, and a relationship that is physically and emotionally abusive. Lack of parental guidance by some parents leaves teens open to the advice of their peers that may be involved in similar activities, which leaves them to continue down the path of poor choices. Nurturing, healthy parental relationships will increase the dialogue about peer pressure and sexual activity, which should be taking place in homes throughout the Muslim community. This dialogue will empower the family structure as well as the community to fight against the injustice of sexual violence and abusive relationships of all forms.

*Sakeena Abdulraheem is a Youth Consultant and Founder of Multicultural Youth Enrichment Services and earned her Master of Arts in Social Studies from the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences. She has extensive experience working and volunteering with the Muslim and Immigrant community on issues related to cultural diversity, civil rights and youth.*