

Ending Domestic Violence in Muslim Families

By Sharifa Alkhateeb

To every gathering of Muslim women, Maria* added a smile. She came to Islam early, marrying a Muslim man and accepting the religion at 13 years old. She embraced it wholeheartedly, learning from the sisters as she went along. By age nineteen, she became the mother of a much-beloved baby boy. She and her son attended Jumu'ah prayers every Friday.

When the women decided to gather in one another's homes two Saturdays a month, Maria made an effort to come to each meeting. By this time, her son was nearly two years old, and Maria was separated from her husband and living with her non-Muslim mother. Often, the talk turned to the difficulties of marriage. Maria listened, sympathized, and smiled. One day, the sisters decided to organize a retreat to discuss family issues.

At the retreat, Maria and the 15 or so other women talked, laughed, and shared a potluck brunch. They began to discuss the topic of marriage. Maria had a question. She wanted to know how a woman knows when her divorce is final. As the women focused on Maria's question, she told them her horror story of suffering, abuse, being divorced, taken back, divorced again, lied to, and finally stalked by her husband. He told her the divorce was final one day, and the next day that it was not final, and that it was her Islamic duty to obey him in everything. She remained Muslim, but did not know enough of her new religion to assert her rights. Her tires had been slashed, her home watched, her peace threatened, and she was afraid.

The sisters were shocked. They should not have been.

According to a survey of the 63 Muslim community workers, leaders, and individuals done in 1993 by the North American Council for Muslim Women, domestic violence (including everything from hitting to incest) against Muslim women and children occurred in ten percent of the population of Muslims. If verbal and psychological abuse were added to this, the figure would rise considerably. By comparison, seven percent of American women in general were physically abused, and 37% were verbally or emotionally abused in 1993, according to the Family Violence Prevention Fund. A comprehensive study in 1993 by the Commonwealth Fund found that in one year alone nearly four million American women suffered abuse at the hands of their husbands or male friends, and that a woman is abused every nine seconds. The Family Violence Prevention Fund also reports that 34% of men and women have directly witnessed an act of domestic violence. This number is higher than the combined numbers of adults who have witnessed robberies or muggings!

Maria continued to attend the sisters' meetings as the sisters began to focus on the problem of domestic violence in their community. She was not the only victim. The sisters protested to their Imam when they discovered that a community leader involved with their children had used violence against his wife. It became obvious to them that some community education was in order. Meanwhile, Maria's ex-husband had begun to frequent another Muslim community in the area, but continued to alternately harass her and then to entice her to continue her relationship with him. He began to use their son as a way to gain access to her, and he continued to disturb her sense of security and to assert his control over her.

Authoritarian Family Structures Lead to Abuse and Violence

An authoritarian family structure predisposes many Muslims in America to be abused in some way and possibly to become the victims of violence. Generally, husband's dominance's in the family structure, the more likely wife and child abuse become. In the most abusive homes, the father believes and socializes his wife and children to believe that whatever he wants the family to do is the same as what Allah wants them to do. He, in effect, makes himself into something of a god.

Of the eight to ten million Muslims in America, more than half are African-American, a small but growing number are European American, and the rest are immigrants (first, second, or third generation) from Middle Eastern, Southwest Asian, and other countries.

African American Muslim families suffer from the influence of the overwhelming incidences of abuse and violence in the general society and from the historical experience of slavery, which encouraged fractured families. While African-Americans who have been Muslim for many years are as self-directed as any community, new Muslim families who are searching for stability and morality often look to the immigrant communities for leadership and mentoring. Unfortunately, the most negative behavioral common denominator between the African-American and the immigrant Muslim communities is a socialization process which presents the parents, particularly the father, as having the last word on everything, and teaches children to be unquestioningly obedient as part of their devotion to faith.

The overwhelming majority of immigrant Muslims come from repressive countries where political power is held by officials who secure or maintain their leadership through unethical, un-Islamic, and sometimes brutal means. These tyrannical governments tend to produce extended families and societies where only the man at the top can pronounce what is right or wrong, what is acceptable or unacceptable, and who is good or bad. Muslim American immigrants fleeing oppressive governments may not yet have realized that their own family dynamics are a microcosm of the tyranny and despotism they so actively oppose, and mistakenly think a tyrannical family structure is an Islamic one. The atmosphere in too many of these families is repressive, non-communicative, top-down, and male-dominated, where the leadership title that is worn is primary and which never allows or plans for asking why or how the family functions.

Surprisingly, in the homes of most Muslims, focusing on the rules and desires of the parents almost always takes precedence over any focus on Allah. Most Muslim parents do not give their children any Qur'anic proof behind their opinions, do not allow themselves to be questioned, and do not invite discussion or reflection on ideas even though Allah continuously instructs Muslims to think and to reflect. Parents rarely see the connection between parents (instead of Allah) as the focus of the family structure, and shirk associating partners with Allah.

What, Exactly, Constitutes Abuse or Violence?

In order to end domestic violence, we must understand what it is that we are dealing with. The Family Violence Prevention Fund described abuse as "a pattern of purposeful behaviors, directed at achieving compliance from or control over, the victim." When these escalate to violence, creating "domestic violence," the definition becomes, "a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partner."

According to the US Department of Justice report in 1991, men against women commit 95% of assaults on spouses or ex-spouses. (Abused females may also abuse their children,

and are sometimes the primary abusers.)

Most of the control mechanisms used by potential batterers that can escalate to violence are so common among Muslim families that they are not seen as threats to the family's existence; minimizing the victim's complaints, denying the abuse, and blaming the victim, isolating the victim from family and friends, intimidation, so-called "joking" about marrying a second wife, and emotional abuse such as name calling and degrading remarks in the presence of her children or guests. While none of this behavior is consistent with the teachings of the Qur'an or the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, few parents ever make the mental connection between this behavior and abuse. In fact, many abuse parents will say they are just "maintaining the discipline of the family."

In most cases, after an episode of violence, the abuser says he is sorry, may ask for forgiveness, and promises not to repeat the behavior. Women may stay because they hope for change, still love the person, or are afraid of losing their children; they often leave only when they perceive imminent danger to their children. Sadly, all research proves that children from abuse homes are equally affected permanently whether or not they are victims themselves. Maria continued to be confused about her relationship as she tried to sort out her Islamic duties, what was best for her son, and her own feelings. The Imam pointed out that Islamically she should stay away from her ex-husband, and said that he did not know what she expected from him, since she had not followed his advice. When an incidence of abuse or violence is reported to someone in the Muslim community, the general response is to avoid "interfering" in family affairs. Some Muslims believe it is the man's Allah-given right to abuse his wife and children in any way he sees fit. Others, like the Imam in Maria's community, recognize the behavior as Islamically unacceptable, but have no training in the areas of domestic violence counseling, and do not know how to intervene effectively and legally. Many Imams, though, blame the situation on the wife.

Most people just hope the problem will go away. When it does not, the entire Muslim community suffers; the existence of abuse convinces a community that they are ineffective and unable to protect women. Maria fell back into silence about her own experiences, but presented the sisters with information about Sisters of Peace, a group of Muslim women in Philadelphia organized to combat domestic violence in their community.

What is the Islamic Stance on Violence Against Women?

Under no circumstances is violence against women encouraged or allowed. The holy Qur'an contains tens of verses extolling good treatment of women. Several specifically enjoin kindness to women (2:229-237; 4:19; 4:25). These verses make it clear that the relationship between men and women is to be one of kindness, mutual respect, and caring. Some verses, where Allah calls men and women "protecting friends of one another," refer to the mandated atmosphere of mutual kindness and mercy in the marital home (30:21; 9:71). Others show disapproval of oppression or ill treatment of women. Surah two, ayah 231 condemns taking women back after a separation in order to hurt them; Surah four, ayah 15 specifies taking an oath against a wife rather than doing violence to her if a husband suspects adultery; Surah four, ayah 19 prohibits forced marriages; Surah four, ayah 29 prohibits deliberately causing a wife suspense or insecurity; Surah five, ayah 92 removes the legal effect from oaths against wives made in anger; and Surah 17, ayat 90-91 require the fulfillment of oaths, verbal agreements, and commitments. Even in the case of divorce, spouses are instructed to bring an arbiter from each side of the family to attempt reconciliation (4:35). If this fails, the instruction is to get back together with dignity and fairness, or to part on good terms (2:229 and 231). Anyone who violates the limits set by Allah is labeled a "transgressor" in the Qur'an.

Added to these verses is the inescapable fact that the Prophet vehemently disapproved of men hitting their wives, and that he never in his entire life lit any woman or child. In the Prophet's last sermon, he exhorted men to "be kind to women-you have rights over your wives, and they have rights over you." He also said, "Treat your women well, and be kind to them, for they are your partners and committed helpers," and at a different time, he said, "The strong man is not the one who can use the force of physical strength, but the one who controls his anger" (Bukhari).

Very important are those verses that give women the right to self-supervision. Surah five, ayah 44 instructs believers to, "Have no fear of people; fear Me." Surah 33, ayah 35 promises heaven to men and women who individually guard their chastity (or modesty)."

In the abusive mindset, all of these verses and hadith are ignored, and males misquote two specific verses and one hadith to justify complete control of females. The worst interpretations go so far as to assert that a woman is mentally, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually permanently disabled, and is prone to immorality, putting her in constant need of male supervision.

The most abused verse is ayah 34 of Surah four: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah gave them more to the one than the other, and because they support them from their means. So devout women are extremely careful and attentive in guarding what cannot be seen in that which Allah is extremely careful and attentive in guarding. Concerning women whose rebellious (nushooz) you fear, admonish them, then refuse to share their beds, then hit them; but if they become obedient, do not seem means of annoyance against them. For Allah is Most High, Great." This translation charges men with the task of financially and physically protecting and caring for their wives and families, since Allah has made men physically stronger than women, which is the interpretation of most scholars. Women, in return for that care, should be careful in guarding their fidelity and morality at all times when no one can see them in obedience to Allah. Instructions are then given regarding women who rebelliously ignore Allah's commands about sexual fidelity and become sexually disloyal to their husbands.

The husband is instructed first to admonish his wife (talk to her), and then to refuse to share her bed. Should those measures fail, the last instruction is often translated as "hit her," (or "lightly tap her," when the sunnah of the Prophet is considered). Some translators assert that it is incorrect to translate the word "hit" at all, based on the Prophet's lifelong abhorrence of hitting women, seen in his statement, "Never hit the handmaids of Allah" (found in the hadith collections of Abu Daud, Nasa'i, Ibn Hibban, and Bayhaqi), and in his instructions in his last sermon where he restrict striking to a light tap (ghayr muharrib - without causing pain) only if the wife has become guilty of nushooz, obvious immoral conduct. The term nushooz is applicable to men as well (4:128).

The wording of this verse emphasizes the woman's obedience to Allah's desires, and not to those of another human being, but those who misinterpret this verse would assign men the duty of being eternal surveillance police over their wives. This verse has been so misunderstood that it is not uncommon for husbands to prevent their wives from going to the corner store, to attend births, deaths, or marriages, to see doctors, seek education, or even to visit their parents without express permission. This verse has also been used to underpin the mistaken belief that the qawwama of men as protectors and maintainers of their wives not only implies unquestionable obedience to men as individuals but also that only men may lead women in any aspect of life whatsoever on any level. In short, this verse has been used as a tool of control and abuse completely opposed to the Islamic

foundation of marriage and family.

Another misused verse is ayah 53 of Surah 33: "O you who believe, enter not the dwellings of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for the proper time...and when you ask of them (his wives) anything, ask of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts...it is not for you to cause annoyance to the messenger of Allah, nor may you ever marry his wives after him. That in Allah's sight would be an enormity." The verse is obviously directed at Muslim men describing their property conduct only with the wives of the Prophet. It continues, however, to the main reason that some Muslims believe that men and women must be separate in all spaces, and an excuse for some men to claim that all public space belongs to men alone. This is erroneous. The instruction relates only to the wives of the Prophet, and to proper behavior in the Prophet's house. Those who want to apply this verse to all Muslim women never assert that all Muslim women may not marry after the deaths of their husbands (although in practice, that is exactly what is expected of women in some Muslim societies according to their un-Islamic customs). Confining women to the kitchens of their houses during dinner parties, relegating women to back rooms with inadequate or absent audio hookup in most mosques, or worse, banning women from mosques, and bans by political authorities in some countries against women going to school, all come from warped interpretations of the previously mentioned verses.

A hadith often used in the control of women reads: "Women, when they travel a far distance, should have a muhrim with them." At the time of the Prophet, traveling even 40 miles could be very dangerous since roads were full of bandits and law consisted of each tribe's different rules and regulations. Rule of law that crossed tribal boundaries, and was consistent with a new concept in 7th century Arabia introduced by Islam. Today a woman can travel halfway across the world by airplane in 19 hours, and remain safely among large groups of people at all times. Yet this hadith continues to be used, even by a few Muslim leaders in large US cities, to prevent Muslim women from going from one city to another, from one part of the city to another, or from leaving the doorways of their apartments, alone.

The real question is, did the Prophet practice, encourage, or even condone surveillance and control behaviors towards women? He never did. Knowing this, it is up to each individual Muslim, as husband and wife, as extended family member, or as community member, to shape morally, ethically, psychologically, and physically safe and healthy society where families can raise happy and contributing members of society.

Ending the Violence: Where Do Muslims Begin?

Let there be zero tolerance for abuse and violence against women! The words of a famous ad campaign state, "There's no excuse for domestic violence." If we hold this in mind, the future for battered women will be a positive one.

Research shows that the more we are exposed to violence against women, the less we are upset by it. Muslim women need to improve their knowledge of their own faith, and then reclaim their right to define themselves in the light of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, instead of by customary practices, traditions, extremist viewpoints, or those who believe Muslim women need to be saved from themselves.

Families need to maintain open lines of communication between all of their members; regular family meetings where everyone is allowed to express themselves without any recriminations are helpful. Marriage must be seen as a partnership, and marriage contracts should specify a commitment to an abuse, free and violence-free family. The parents must

ask of their children only that which is good and which conforms to Qur'anically based concepts. Extended families must stop covering up abuse, violence, and incest in the name of "preserving the family honor." Above all, the family, like the individual must keep Allah as its focus.

The Family Violence Prevention Division in Canada this year published a full report on family violence. Of great significance to Muslims is the need they identified to "reconceptualize power in a way that distinguished between creative and violating power and that more directly expands the focus on power to move beyond power dynamics in individual relationships to power structures." This thinking should be taken from the personal level to the global level. Communities need to see individual cases of family violence in the light of the nature of the global power structure, and that of the community as a whole, to discover whether the community power structure is actually promoting a license to batter.

Imams must be protectors of women's safety by example, avoid blaming wives, and recognize when they do not have the expertise to truly help women who are battered. Community members should be encouraged to obtain profession training and degrees in counseling. The community is responsible to develop protocols for handling problems of domestic violence, network with existing Muslim and non-Muslim agencies that can provide training or referrals, and set up safe houses for battered women and children.

At least twice a year, each mosque or community center should present an Abuse and Domestic Violence Awareness Program for Muslim Families that will teach risk identification, abuse and violence identification, safety planning for possible situations, safety planning for unsupervised visits by a batterer, problem solving techniques, and information on counseling available for battered women and their families. Muslim community activists, lawyers, and counselors should meet in each city to develop protocols addressed to their specific community which will allow for early identification of abuse and a willingness to deal with the situation in order to protect the victims from further abuse or victim blaming. Wherever possible, shelters and Muslim family service agencies should be put into place.

In 1993, the North American Council for Muslim Women was the first national Muslim organization of any kind to discuss Abuse and Violence Against Women and Children during a national convention. In 1995 in Plainfield, Indiana, and the following year in Chicago, the Islamic Society of North America held conferences for social service providers that addressed several subjects including family counseling, divorce and children's issues, and the last one was attended by over 200 providers. (Rafia Syeed coordinates this work, telephone 317-839-8157.)

[\[Women and Islam\]](#) [\[Domestic Violence\]](#) [\[Family\]](#) [\[Mainpage\]](#) [\[What's New?\]](#)