

## **Domestic Violence in the Muslim Community<sup>i</sup>**

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Domestic violence at its worst struck the Muslim community in the recent murder of Aasiya Hassan.<sup>ii</sup> Her husband, Muzzammil Hassan, has been charged with her decapitation after years of abusing her. Aasiya had filed for divorce on February 6, 2009 and was murdered 6 days later at the television station she and her husband had co-founded near Buffalo, New York. The tragedy sent shockwaves around the Muslim community in the United States, spurring Muslim leaders to speak out against domestic violence. A grass roots wave of activity spread across the country as groups sprung up on facebook to start a coast-to-coast initiative to have domestic violence be the topic during Friday sermons in every mosque. The fatality that is the worst nightmare for all domestic violence advocates seemed to finally galvanize the Muslim community into action.

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>iii</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.

That is not to say that there are no abusive practices that are part of the cultures from which Muslims originate. Some families, and some cultural practices within a largely patriarchal system, enable and perpetuate the abuse and oppression of women as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters-in-law. However, coming from a Western paradigm, one must be cautious not to presume that any practice that differs from Western norms is automatically an oppressive one.

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

Although there is very little research addressing domestic violence among Muslims, the author has observed some patterns during her work with hundreds of Muslim families over the 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 under siege, 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 and Muslim women who are unfamiliar with the teachings of Islam, 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 report struggling 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 and misused 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.

### So Does Islam Condone Abuse?

The question of religion is raised repeatedly by Muslims and non-Muslims seeking to make sense out of abuse and senseless tragedies like that of Aasiya Hassan. Islam is certainly easy to blame in the current geo-political context, with media perpetuating images and labels that

often equate Muslims and violence. However, like any other religion, Islam forbids oppression and injustice.

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, 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). The Qur'an describes the relationship between spouses as one founded on mercy, compassion, and tranquility (Qur'an 30:21). Another verse describes spouses as being garments for one another, emphasizing the mutuality in the relationship (Qur'an 2:187). Multiple verses 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. As the live example for all 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.<sup>iv</sup>

#### 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>v</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>vi</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, and in the face of a public tragedy like that of Aasiya Hassan, it is becoming harder for Muslim leaders and community members to ignore the once taboo issue

of domestic violence. Many communities are attempting to build on the momentum that has begun after Aasiya's murder, requesting trainings and resources for their leaders and community members. 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>i</sup> Part of this paper was previously published by the same author, and has been used with permission from the publisher. The original was Abugideiri, S. "A Perspective on Domestic Violence in Muslim Communities," *Working Together*, Fall 2005, FaithTrust Institute.

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.nydailynews.com/news/2009/02/17/2009-02-17\\_muslim\\_tv\\_mogul\\_muzzammil\\_hassans\\_allege.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/2009/02/17/2009-02-17_muslim_tv_mogul_muzzammil_hassans_allege.html)

<sup>iii</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>iv</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the Islamic perspective on domestic violence that includes an analysis of teachings that have been misused to justify or support domestic violence, see Alwani, Z. and Abugideiri, S. (2004). *What Islam Says about Domestic Violence: A Guide for Helping Muslim Families*. Herndon, VA: FAITH.

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