

The New York Times

January 6, 2008

Abused Muslim Women in U.S. Gain Advocates

By Neil MacFarquhar

CHICAGO — After enduring seven years of beatings from her husband, a young Yemeni-American woman recently fled to a local shelter, only to find that the heavy black head scarf she wore as an observant Muslim provoked disapproval.

The shelter brought in a hairdresser, whose services she accepted without any misgivings. But once her hair was styled, administrators urged her to throw off her veil, saying it symbolized the male oppression native to Islam that she wanted to escape.

Instead the woman, who asked for anonymity because she feared further violence from her relatives, decamped to the Hamdard Center for Health and Human Services in suburban Chicago, a shelter that caters mainly to Muslim women by not serving pork and keeping prayer rugs handy. Such shelters are extremely rare nationwide, activists say, because Muslim Americans only recently began confronting the issue of spousal abuse.

Domestic violence among Muslims has long straddled a blurry line between culture and religion, but now scattered organizations founded by Muslim American women are creating a movement to define it as an unacceptable cultural practice. The problem occurs among American Muslims at the same rate as other groups, activists say, but is even more sensitive because raising the issue is considered an attack on the faith.

“The Muslim community is under a lot of scrutiny, so they are reluctant to look within to face their problems because it will substantiate the arguments demonizing them,” said Rafia Zakaria, a political science graduate student at Indiana University who is starting a legal defense fund for Muslim women. “It puts Muslim women in a difficult position because if they acknowledge their rights, they are seen as being in some kind of collusion with all those who are attacking Muslim men. So the question is how to speak out without adding to the stereotype that Muslim men are barbaric, oppressive, terrible people.”

The answer, she and other activists have concluded, is to show that Muslim Americans are tackling the problem.

“Domestic violence is an issue we can deal with as a community, and not by saying we don’t have this problem, which is obviously a lie,” Ms. Zakaria said.

Some activists describe being expelled from mosques and holiday fairs when they first tried to broach the topic five years ago, but they have achieved a wider audience by allying themselves with sympathetic clerics.

The Yemeni-American woman sought advice from several imams after her Yemeni husband of just a few months started to slap, punch and degrade her.

The clerics offered marriage counseling, but only if the husband came too, a condition she knew doomed the idea. Her sister suggested she lose weight and be more obedient. Her father encouraged obedience, too, while her husband hit her through three pregnancies. After she filed for divorce, she said, her father hauled her home and hit her too, for shaming him.

“Both my dad and my husband told me that women don’t talk back,” said the 29-year-old woman. “They told me the Koran said I had to be obedient, and I answered that it does not say beat up your wife.”

At Hamdard, calls for help come from Muslim women as far afield as Wisconsin, Kentucky and Louisiana, shelter workers said, far more than they can accommodate with just 11 beds. They turned away 647 women and children in 2007, said Maryam Gilani, the director of Hamdard’s domestic violence program, noting that about 55 percent of the women the center helped were Muslim. Some large, wealthy Muslim communities, like the one in the San Francisco area, have been unable to raise money for a shelter, which activists attribute to the wish to label the problem as foreign to Islam.

“There was resistance, and there still is,” said Ms. Gilani, adding that opponents dismissed shelters as some kind of brothel. “There are some who say what we do is not right, you have to stay with your husband and make it work. They try to turn it either into a religious thing, or they say that it is just a normal thing that happens in the family.”

The challenge for most organizations is getting accurate legal information to women who are often closeted at home and may not speak English. Hamdard developed several novel solutions. Briefing area grocery store owners and hairdressers that cater to Muslims produced numerous referrals. More often, it organizes mosque seminars about breast cancer, then slips in a few minutes about domestic violence.

Activists describe mosques as the most effective way to reach Muslims because immigrant societies remain heavily patriarchal and because American mosques serve as community centers. The latter also means that immigrant imams ill-equipped to deal with social problems are prone to give battered women advice like “Read the Koran more,” or will try couples counseling, which can bring disastrous consequences at home.

One outspoken cleric is Imam Muhammad Magid, who runs a collective of seven mosques in suburban Virginia and is vice president of the Islamic Society of North America, the country’s main Muslim umbrella organization. Anyone getting married at one of his mosques must undergo marriage counseling during which domestic abuse is discussed.

But activists expect real change will only come with the next generation of Muslim women here, raised in an American context that condemns such violence.

In most Muslim countries, the law is rooted in a combination of the Koran and tradition, so immigrants are more reticent.

“It is much more difficult there to say I want a divorce, I want custody or my husband is forcing me to have sex without my permission,” said Samira Ansari, a family lawyer in San Jose, Calif. “Because they don’t get that legal support back home, it takes them a while to understand what exists here.”

Mr. Magid said older immigrants in particular refused to hold men accountable and expected imams to advise the wife to return to her husband.

“So many people emphasize trying to keep the family together regardless of the pain or consequences,” he said. “We tell them that the foundation of the family is peace and tranquillity and if that doesn’t exist, then the family doesn’t exist as a unit.”

To counter opposition rooted in religious texts, Mr. Magid and others use the example of Prophet Muhammad. There is no record of him striking one of his wives; rather, he would withdraw when angered. The raging debate comes with Chapter 4, Verse 34 in the Koran, long interpreted as giving husbands the right to strike their wives as the final step in an escalating series of punishments for being rebellious.

Maha B. Alkhateeb, who helped edit a book on domestic violence called “Change From Within,” is among the leading activists pushing a new interpretation of the verse that understands it as calling for women to be obedient to God.

But given that the Koran is considered the unassailable word of God, it is particularly difficult for young, often secular women to promote a new interpretation.

Although few men cite the Koran as justification for hitting their spouses, Ms. Alkhateeb said that in every seminar she organized about ending domestic violence, at least one man invariably asked on what authority the verse could be reinterpreted.

Toward that end, Imam Johari Abdul-Malik, the outreach director for Dar Al-Hijrah Islamic Center in Falls Church, Va., is trying to set up a nationwide movement of Muslim men who will lobby for the new interpretation.

“That is the linchpin, the fulcrum that justifies domestic violence in the Muslim context,” the imam said.

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