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Safe Houses; Crisis Centers Help Muslim Women and Others Suffering from Domestic Abuse

By Makeba Scott Hunter, Herald News, North Jersey Media Group

When the violence at home had gotten so bad that he was hitting her every day and had endangered the life of her unborn child, she knew it was time to get help, but not just any help. She wanted to talk to a woman, and she wanted that woman to be Muslim.

As a relatively new convert to the religion, she wanted to take care to follow the customs of Islam, which has specific teachings on domestic violence — the brutality taking place in her family.

“I didn’t want to do nothing by mistake,” said the woman, who lives in Paterson and asked that her name not be published. “I wanted to follow the rules. I wanted to follow everything by Islam.” And, she says, “I really wanted to feel comfortable with the people.”

So she asked counseling centers and organizations for help finding a female Muslim counselor. She asked at schools, and she asked local Muslim women but kept receiving the same answer again and again: There were none.

Finally, her child’s pediatrician, a Muslim, referred her to Wafa House. After the long search, “I was sooo happy,” she recalls.

Founded in fall 2004, Wafa House (Women Against Family Abuse) is a privately run domestic violence crisis center based in Paterson that caters primarily to the needs of women of South Asian, Arabic and/or Muslim descent. The Arabic word “wafa” translates to “sincerity,” “faithfulness” or “to have hope,” and the organization has come to be known as a place where a Muslim woman can find all three.

The rate of domestic abuse in the Muslim community is about the same as in the general population — about 18 percent, according to a 2000 study performed by Oakland University in Rochester, Mich., a rate comparable to the national average. It tends, however, to be more hidden, says Dorria Fahmy, Wafa’s founder and executive director.

“There is a mindset that you don’t talk about things outside of the home,” says Fahmy, explaining the thinking that inhibits some women from seeking help. “There is concern that taking these issues outside of the community somehow contradicts religious teachings.”

The need for organizations like Wafa House is especially great in New Jersey, which is home to an estimated 10 percent of the U.S. Muslim population, according to the New Jersey branch of the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

“The issues that we face are quite unique,” says Lakshmi Rajagopal, a coordinator at Manavi, New Jersey’s oldest Muslim-focused domestic abuse center. “Among those are the dynamics of violence in the community. The way that violence manifests requires an understanding of the culture, the family structures and the people that abuse comes from.”

Because many of Wafa’s clients are immigrants, abusers sometimes hold the threat of deportation or child-custody loss over their wives. The language barrier can also be a factor.

Natives of Arabic and South Asian nations, who make up a majority of New Jersey’s Muslim population, often speak a number of languages, including Arabic, Hindi, Urdu and Bengali. Most domestic crisis centers lack the resources to communicate with women who aren’t fluent in English. Non-English speakers sometimes were turned away, or referred to organizations like Manavi, which was previously the state’s sole domestic violence center handling the needs of Muslim women. When Manavi was founded 21 years ago, it was unique in the nation, said Rajagopal.

“Given the size of the organization, we can’t handle the number of cases that come in, and Wafa can now help with that,” Rajagopal says.

Close to 80 women, children and families have sought help at Wafa House over the past year-and-a-half. The organization’s primary goal is reuniting families through counseling rather than splitting them apart, says Fahmy.

The Wafa House staff — one paid administrator, several unpaid interns and an unpaid board of directors — also helps women navigate daily obstacles. A Jordanian woman with limited English, for example, gets help about twice a week reading her mail. Wafa House prides itself on teaching women to advocate for themselves against an aggressive husband or one who tries to manipulate Islam’s religious doctrines to justify his actions.

“We teach women about their rights because, Islamically, a woman has rights,” says Wafa House intern Jenin, who asked that only her first name be printed. “Unfortunately with men, some men, they’re going to give you their perspective or their interpretation of women’s rights ... but it doesn’t say in Islam to treat a woman like she’s nothing, or like she’s less than him. Unfortunately some are doing it anyway. Culture definitely tweaks the religion.”

Wafa House has its fair share of critics, Fahmy acknowledges. Some have charged that, by empowering women, the group breaks up families. That perception appears to be changing, however, thanks in part to the addition of male board members — and the outspoken support of the imam of Paterson’s largest mosque, the Islamic Center of Passaic County.

“Islamically, we are obligated to work together to protect this woman or child. From this point, we founded Wafa House,” says Imam Mohamed Qatanani, who has begun a series of Friday

prayers on the rights of men and women according to Islam. “We found it important to have a professional to not only protect her, but to teach and educate the Muslim community (about) how to treat a woman according to the teachings of God.”

At a recent fundraising event at the center, the organization raised \$30,000 in just one hour.

“I was so touched, I just started crying,” said a Wafa House employee, who asked to be identified by her first name, Miriam. “Women were taking rings and gold off their body and throwing it at us.”

The unnamed Paterson woman who sought help is still with her husband, and said that, with counseling from Wafa House and the imam, her mate has begun to change.

“He doesn’t do that anymore,” she said of the prior abuse. “We talked about it and I told him (that) if this is going to continue like this I’m going to leave ... and the imam let him know how the woman has to be treated in Islam.”

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Getting Help

- For More information about Wafa House call (800) 930-Wafa (9232) or go to <http://www.wafahouse.org/>.
- For more information about Manavi call (732) 435-1414 or go to <http://www.manavi.org/>.

Additional Resources

- Passaic County Women’s Center, (973) 881-1450, <http://www.njaonline.org/passaic.htm>
- Legal Services of New Jersey, (888) LSNJ-LAW (888-576-5529), <http://www.lsnj.org/>
- Passaic County Prosecutor’s Office, (973) 881-4800, <http://www.pconj.org/>
- New Jersey Department of Health Services, Office of Children’s Services, (609) 984-0678, <http://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/ocs/index.html>

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