VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT of Social Services

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES NEWSLETTER

October 2007

The Islamic Community and Domestic Violence

A woman's first option and priority may not always be leaving the abusive relationship

This is the third in a series of newsletters focusing on the issue of culture and domestic violence. The Office of Family Violence understands that experiences of domestic violence vary from person to person. These newsletters hope to offer a glimpse into how someone from a particular community or culture may see and experience domestic violence differently from another. The third newsletter focuses on the Muslim community. Mazna Hussain of the Tahirih Justice Center talked to Urmila Oberoi about what some of the issues Muslim women face when dealing with domestic violence.

Urmila Oberoi (UO): *Can you talk a little bit about the unique cultural issues survivors in your community are dealing with when it comes to domestic violence? What cultural norms/ practices have you seen that are different or unique from what someone else might be dealing with?*

Mazna Hussain (MH): I work with immigrant women and, of course, this has its own complexities. I work specifically with Muslim immigrant women. Muslim women come from very diverse cultures and practices and so they will have very different experiences of domestic violence. There are a lot of commonalities and similarities about abuse across cultures, religions, etc., but there are some distinct factors that happen in the Muslim communities.

Some Muslim women face a unique situation because religion affects all aspects of their life. Islam is a way of life and regulates all parts of daily life – including marriage and family life. Because of this, often batterers manipulate Islamic law. Batterers use religious arguments to justify abuse. A batterer may assert that he, as a man, has authority to control his wife's behavior. The abusers also draw upon verses and tools they can find in order to further the abuse and say that they have the right to do this.

UO: *Do you feel that there are still stigmas attached to reporting domestic violence in your communities? What kinds of stigmas and where do they stem from?*

MH: A lot of reasons are attached to why women are not reporting domestic violence. Muslim communities in particular are very tight-knit. They tend not to go to the outside for help and intervention. If help is needed, they go to sources within the community. Post 9/11, there is a feeling that the community is under a certain pressure and is portrayed a certain way in media, and so there is a hesitance to go outside the community so that they don't perpetuate the stereotype that Muslim men are violent. The Muslim community feels under attack and unfair portrayals create a disincentive for a woman to talk about abuse that is happening.

UO: *Can you talk a bit about the immigration piece and how it fits into your community? What kinds of things are being done or said to get women to not report domestic violence?*

MH: In terms of Immigration status – again, it goes back to talking about a community that feels targeted with immigration issues and is perceived as violent. These are barriers that are present for immigrant women and this immigration layer further complicates woman leaving. When immigration status is dependent on abusive husbands, it keeps her [the wife] from wanting to come forward. This fear is in addition to what all women have to experience when leaving their husband. It is scary for women who are thinking about their children being sent away, and because many of these women have been here for years, they have friends and family they do not want to leave either.

If a woman was to be sent back to a Muslim country, something else to think of is custody laws in that country. In some places, women have custody of the kids at a young age, but the custody goes to the father once the children hit puberty. Also, the legal system in the woman's home country may not work to her advantage if she were to return.

UO: *What kinds of things can domestic violence programs do to be more conscious of those who come into their shelters seeking services? What kinds of things should they be asking at the intake level to be more sensitive to the cultural needs of a woman?*

MH: There's a perception that domestic violence service providers' purpose is to help a woman leave. Frankly and openly speaking, this is not always the first option or the priority. It could be that a woman's priority is: how can I safety plan? What are my options? It's important when doing intake to think

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Office of Family Violence (OFV)

The Office of Family Violence (OFV) funds local public and private non-profit domestic violence programs whose mission and purpose are to address the issue of domestic violence within their community and respond to the needs of all people in that community who have experienced and/or been impacted by domestic violence.

OFV values the provision of consistent reliable services for victims and children in every locality of the Commonwealth. With the recent adoption of the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Agency Accreditation manual, the funding priorities of the OFV will shift toward fully accredited programs.

Accredited domestic violence programs provide hotline, information and referral, crisis intervention, safety planning, emergency companion services, emergency transportation, individual support services, legal advocacy, support groups, children's services, community coordination and systems advocacy, community education, emergency housing services and outreach and access for underserved populations. For more information on Accreditation please see:
http://www.vsdvalliance.org.

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that family is a priority and that they may not want to leave, but that they want to know their options. Also, thinking and keeping in mind that if they leave the relationship, they may not be entitled to work in the U.S.

Also, be open to asking not just about the types of abuse we usually think about, but also spiritual abuse. Muslims may not have experienced name calling or other sorts of emotional abuse by their husbands, but they may be prevented from praying or going to the Mosque. Maybe having intake ask the question, "Have you ever been prevented from participating in your religious practice?"

The rules and regulations at shelters – like meal times, mandatory English classes, etc. might need to be discussed, especially if they are very structured. Again, the idea is to be sensitive to needs. A Muslim woman who has to pray five times a day needs to be able to do this. Also, if the woman is fasting and needs to eat only within a certain window of time, she should be able to do this as well. The main thing is to be understanding of where the woman is coming from, and especially being open to the differences she may come into shelter with.

UO: *Has it gotten better? Have you seen an improvement in the number of women who are reporting abuse and leaving? Have you seen an improvement in the services that shelters provide to those from underserved communities?*

MH: It is difficult to gauge because I've been working less than a year in this field. But, I can tell you that Muslim communities are becoming more sensitized to the issue of domestic violence and becoming more vocal. The reverse side to this is that post 9/11, in order to rebuff and throw off the stereotypes, the community is thinking twice about vocalizing the issue of domestic violence.

One thing I have noticed is the role of the Imam [Muslim religious leader] is very important in vocalizing that domestic violence is not acceptable and some talk about it in sermons. As a result of this discussion, people more comfortable talking about the issue. Imams play an important role in connecting women to shelters and resources. This could also go the other way in that the religious leader can push the woman back into an abusive relationship.

One area of improvement that we need to work on is to recognize the important roles that leaders of faith communities play in the work we do. Sometimes it's hard, but we need to train them and make them aware of domestic violence so that they can be a positive influence.

Resources to go to for More Information on the Islamic Community and Domestic Violence:

Tahirih Justice Center

Phone: 703-575-0070

Website: http://www.tahirih.org

Foundation for Appropriate and Immediate Temporary Help (FAITH)

Phone: 571-323-2198 & 571-323-2199

Website: http://www.faithus.org

Peaceful Families Project*

Phone: 703-474-6870

Website: http://www.peacefulfamilies.org

*does not provide direct services