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Muslims strike at spouse abuse

Phila. program will list and shun offenders.

By Kristin E. Holmes
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The veil shrouding spouse abuse in Muslim families is being torn away by local mosque leaders - putting them at the forefront of efforts by American Muslims to stem domestic violence.

The clergy council known as the Majlis Ash'Shura of Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley has adopted a tough policy of public shunning of Muslims who abuse their spouses or abandon their families.

Under the initiative, adopted last month, offenders will go on a list circulated among area Muslims. They will be banned from future marriages in communities that adhere to the policy. Fellow Muslims will be discouraged from patronizing any businesses they own.

"We need to take a public stand," said Imam Isa Abdul-Mateen, secretary of the Majlis Ash'Shura, an association of 30 imams. "We want people to know that this will not be tolerated."

In coming months, the council will address issues such as the criteria for putting names on the list and safeguards to protect spouses who step forward.

Domestic violence appears no more prevalent in Muslim communities than elsewhere, but Islamic advocacy groups and others have tried to push the problem into the open.

With the new policy, Philadelphia leaps over other Muslim communities that are just starting to confront the issue, said Maha Alkhateeb, project manager of the Peaceful Families Project, a Virginia-based nonprofit that addresses domestic violence among Muslims.

A striking aspect of the initiative is that it was started not by women advocates but by the male leadership, said Amina Wadud, author of *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text From a Woman's Perspective*. "This is setting a new precedent, globally."

The Rev. Marie Fortune of the FaithTrust Institute in Seattle, a leading domestic-violence policy center, said she knew of no other religious community in the country that had "so specific and rigorous" a policy.

Within Muslim families, domestic violence remains largely a taboo subject, Alkhateeb said. Some Muslims deny its existence in a faith in which men are supposed to be protectors of women and children. Some immigrant families are too focused on building a better life to deal with the issue. Activists also cite a widespread reluctance to air problems and expose fellow Muslims to public scandal.

As a consequence, there is little data on the extent of the problem. One study, done in 2000, surveyed 500 Arab women in Dearborn, Mich., and found that 18 to 20 percent said they had suffered spouse abuse, a rate similar to the general population's. Approximately 98 percent of the sample were Muslim, said Anahid Kulwicki, a professor at Oakland University in Rochester, Mich., who did the study.

There are signs that Muslims are awakening to the problem. A group of imams signed a pledge to fight domestic violence at a recent Peaceful Families conference in Washington.

A turning point in Philadelphia may have come in 2001 when a city police officer killed his wife and then himself. Both were Muslims, and the incident shook the Muslim community, said Taalibah Kariem-White of Germantown, a domestic-violence expert who lectures nationally on the issue.

Had it not been for hearing the sound of barbecue lighting fluid hitting the floor of her home, Habeebah Ali of East Oak Lane might have met a similar fate.

Ali, 48, endured years of an abusive marriage during which she was battered by her husband, a drug addict. She kept quiet for years.

"I could have gone to the masjid [mosque], but I was ashamed and afraid to tell on him. I didn't want the community to know what was going on, out of fear and embarrassment."

She stayed with him because she believed her four children needed their father in the house. But when he hit her in front of them, Ali left. She took advantage of social services outside the Muslim community - a step Muslim women are reluctant to take because they often face insensitivity about dress, diet and religion, said Rashidah Abdul-Khabeer, deputy director of Circle of Care Family Planning, which helps HIV-positive women and their families.

Ali's now ex-husband was jailed in 1993 when he broke into her new home and tried to set it on fire as she and her children slept inside. He was in prison for 11 months, then received 10 years' parole. She has no idea what has happened to him.

"I am so very grateful that leadership is willing to address these issues and put them on the front burner," said Ali, who believes the new policy would have helped her had it been in effect when she was being battered.

The policy applies to both men and women. Though there are few women batterers, Mateen envisions the sanctions applying to women who make or threaten false claims to police or vindictively deny a man visitation with his children.

As the imam council prepares to develop guidelines, area activists already have suggestions.

Khabeer hopes the imams will help provide safe haven and financial support for a fleeing spouse and her children as needed. She also suggests counseling for families, and procedures so that an offending spouse can reform and be forgiven and accepted back into the community.

The council should also consult lawyers about defamation-of-character complaints that could result from a public list, said attorney George Bochetto, an expert in defamation law.

These issues and others will be discussed in a seminar Aug. 28 run by Sista2Sista Inc., a local Muslim women's group. The program will focus on domestic-violence issues including sensitizing social-service providers to the particular concerns of Muslim women, said Nafisa Cooper, of Sista2Sista.

In the years since her abuse, Ali founded the Philadelphia-based Raise of Hope, a nonprofit association that provides housing for formerly homeless and low-income families.

"We have to become more proactive," Ali said. "It's not like it's the 1980s. We're not ostriches with our heads in the sand."

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