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BATTLING MISCONCEPTIONS

Conference speakers to address abuse among Muslims

By Jeffrey Weiss and Lori Price
Staff Writers of the
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Desperate phone calls from hopeless, abused and battered women trickle into the Muslim Community Center for Human Services in Arlington.

Many of the women fear that their fate is ordained by the will of God — and the dictates of their faith.

Dr. Basheer Ahmed, the Arlington psychiatrist who founded the community center in 1995, has been taking these calls for years. He and his staff try to provide aid and explain that the laws of Islam actually condemn abuse of women and children.

Last year his center, a medical and social service organization helping indigent Muslims who live in the Arlington-D/FW area, took about 20 calls from abused women.

Half never came to the center for help. And few of those who did returned more than a few times.

Although there is a passage in the Koran — Islam's holiest book — that some Muslims interpret to justify domestic violence, to do so is to falsely read the text, Dr. Ahmed said.

The real problem is rooted in the culture of the homeslands of his callers, he said.

"They come from a culture that teaches them not to

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The Dallas Morning News file

Dr. Basheer Ahmed, founder of the Muslim Community Center for Human Services, is an organizer of Saturday's conference.

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Members of Muslim faith, UTA plan domestic violence conference

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complain about their husbands," Dr. Ahmed said.

Many of these women are from Southeast Asia and the Middle East. For them, the call for help was the bad deed, not the beating or abuse they suffered, he said.

In December, his frustration finally drove Dr. Ahmed to start organizing a conference with experts in the field of domestic violence and the more specialized arena of domestic violence among Muslims.

Saturday's conference, co-hosted by the University of Texas at Arlington School of Social Work, is designed to bring together local and national experts with local physicians, social workers, health care providers and Islamic community leaders and activists.

Barriers of language, custom and faith make it difficult for many Muslims to seek help from most social service agencies, conference organizers say. The Islamic Association of North Texas says there are about 100,000 Muslims in North Texas.

While there are no good statistics about the problem, national Muslim organizations have devoted attention to domestic violence recently. Last year, one of the largest American Muslim organizations, the Islamic Society of North America, held a session on the topic at its annual meeting. And a popular Muslim Web site

(soundvision.com) has a special section devoted to discussion of the issue.

The public is welcome to attend Saturday's conference in Arlington, but Dr. Ahmed doesn't expect many nonprofessionals to attend. The people who could benefit the most, he said, are the most afraid to seek this kind of information.

That's a familiar tale for Sharifa Alkhateeb, president of the Washington-based National Council of Muslim Women and one of the speakers scheduled for Saturday's conference.

Battling cultural attitudes about family relationships is her biggest challenge, Ms. Alkhateeb said. Some Muslim women and children routinely accept abuse that most Americans would condemn.

"If you told them that repeatedly calling their children 'dogs' or 'donkeys' is committing verbal violence, they'd look at you as if you're crazy," she said. "Hitting a child is considered meritorious for many Muslim families."

A U.N. study showed that in many countries with large Islamic populations, such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Pakistan and Zimbabwe, many people see wife beating as justified, Dr. Ahmed said. In Egypt, the report showed, more than 80 percent of women in rural areas say that wife beating is necessary under certain circumstances.

Much of the connection between domes-

tic abuse and Islam can be traced to one place in the Koran: chapter 4, verse 35. English translations of the original Arabic vary hugely. But part of the verse, an instruction to men, is often rendered:

"Those [women] on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great."

But the correct interpretation of the verse is not so straightforward, said Imam Yusuf Kavakci of the Islamic Association of North Texas in Richardson and one of the scheduled speakers at the conference.

Islam teaches that this verse instructs people to seek a higher authority — the law — to take care of anyone who endangers the family structure, he said.

"No harm must come out of any Muslim," Imam Kavakci said.

Soundvision's section on domestic violence also discusses the same verse in the Koran. Not only does it apply only if the man is completely blameless and the woman completely guilty, but also, it says, the "beating" is to be symbolic.

For those who disagree, Imam Kavakci holds up the example of Mohammed, Islam's holiest prophet who founded the religion in the seventh century. Tradition teaches that Mohammed was married for 38 years and never hit his wife or children,

he said.

Islam is not unique in having sacred passages that seem to condone violence. Scripture studied by Christians and Jews does as well.

The biblical book of Proverbs chapter 13, verse 24 reads, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him."

And in the Bible, Exodus chapter 21, verse 17 reads, "Whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death."

But no mainstream Jewish or Christian theologian would argue today that these verses condone child abuse.

Dr. Ahmed knows too many stories about families that don't follow Mohammed's example.

One woman who called with a story of abuse had moved to the United States from the Middle East. She spoke little English and had no driver's license. The woman's husband told her she could not work outside the home. The couple had three children. When the woman planned to file a legal complaint against her husband, he told her she would be deported if she followed through.

"She believed him because she didn't know any different," Dr. Ahmed said.

Staffers at the Muslim Community Center were able to explain her rights and protections under American immigration law.

Specific legal information such as that will be discussed at Saturday's conference, scheduled to run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the E.H. Hereford University Center, 301 W. Second St. on the UTA campus. A \$30 registration fee covers the conference and materials to be distributed.

Other local speakers on the program include a representative of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a Dallas County juvenile court judge, a Tarrant County assistant district attorney, the director of a battered women's shelter and the imam of the Fort Worth Central Mosque.

Conference organizers hope this will be the first of several events and an initial step in setting up a system to help abused Muslim women.

The need isn't going away, Dr. Ahmed said.

He had a call Tuesday morning from a woman who said she had been beaten and called the police.

"[Her husband] told her if she goes through with this, she will go to jail and she is scared because she has three kids and doesn't know what to do. She called me half an hour before her court time and there wasn't much I could do," Dr. Ahmed said regretfully.

"We are hoping a year from now we will have enough resources to get help for people like her," he said.