

Helping the Hurt

BY M. BASHEER AHMED Family values are very important for Muslims. However, some Muslims do err and treat their spouses inhumanely. This realization led to the Muslim Community Center for Human Services (MCCHS), which was founded in 1995 as a medical and social service organization, to

provide services for victims of domestic violence in the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area.

In 2002, MCCHS started a domestic violence counseling program and established a relationship with area women's shelters. MCCHS, which cannot afford to operate a shelter, receives calls from women in distress and from shelters where women are taking refuge, offers counseling, and assists in their rehabilitation. MCCHS strives to counsel families before relationship problems become serious and irresolvable.

Due to cultural inhibitions, privacy, and denial, few seek help. Even when the wife feels unable to cope with persistent abuse and requests help, the husband refuses to come for counseling. Culturally ingrained attitudes and false beliefs that women have to be totally submissive to and controlled by their husbands are the major factors why many husbands refuse help. Without concerted efforts at educating people about domestic violence, its serious consequences and effects on children, and the Islamic perspective, few will seek help. Boys often learn abusive behavior from their fathers, the girls learn to accept it as "normal," and the cycle of violence continues.

Muslim leaders and imams have a significant role to fulfill in stopping domestic violence. MCCHS asked imams of 24 area mosques to give one khutbah during October (domestic violence awareness month) on issues related to domestic violence, the importance of seeking counseling, and abolishing it from the community. Many women hesitate to dis-

cuss such issues with imams because they are unaware of the issue's seriousness, do not fully understand Islam's clear intent, and advise them to obey the husband.

Such national organizations as ISNA attempted, without much success, to train imams. At the local level, MCCHS organized a regional conference on "Domestic Violence: The Islamic Perspective" in collaboration with the University of Texas at Arlington. National Muslim speakers, an attorney, and judges were invited. However, only 4 out of 24 imams attended. This problem's importance needs to be stressed and recognized, and all imams need to be involved in solving it. Without their full support, it will be difficult to deal with the issue.

Islamic and community centers need to conduct ongoing educational seminars to develop a better understanding of the serious nature of this problem and the fact that it can occur in any family. Emphasizing an intervention's confidential and therapeutic nature might encourage some individuals to seek help. Many individuals hesitate to discuss abuse due to shame, guilt, and fear of rumors. Their fears are justified.

Every Islamic center must have at least 6 to 12 trained volunteers. Most shelters and domestic violence programs offer such training. Volunteers can be helpful in communicating with victims and making appropriate referrals. Many victims have no one to turn to and find it difficult to talk with imams, and do not know with whom they should talk. Due to extreme confidentiality, the imam cannot discuss the issue with the

Muslim communities need an organized approach toward handling family issues

congregation. They must establish a committee, preferably headed by a mental health professional or a social worker, for recruiting volunteers, arranging training programs, and conducting educational seminars based on diagnostic and treatment guidelines developed by the American Medical Association. Family physicians, interns, pediatricians, psychiatrists, and ob-gyn physicians must attend these seminars to familiarize themselves with the relevant screening processes that allow women to explain their experiences. Virtually every woman interacts with the healthcare system at some point in her life, whether for routine care, pregnancy, childbirth, illness, injury, or for her children.

Healthcare professionals who treat these women without inquiring about abuse never recognize or address the underlying cause of these women's health problems. Continued medical education programs will prepare physicians to screen routinely for domestic violence.

Islamic centers must prepare and distribute information about domestic violence and available resources. These pamphlets must provide emergency contact numbers, seminar times, and training programs for volunteers. Trained volunteers should be available for crisis intervention, evaluation assistance, option identification, and to inform the public on matters related to safety and resources (e.g., existing counseling centers, support groups, and shelters). ■

M. Basheer Ahmed, M.D., chairman, Muslim Community Center for Human Services Dallas/Fort Worth, TX, can be reached at (817) 589-9165 (24-hour helpline).