

## **Premarital Education: Primary Prevention for Domestic Violence** Aneesah Nadir, M.S.W., Ph.D.

### **Abstract**

While the reality of domestic violence in the Muslim community has been challenging to acknowledge, the reality that it exists has been increasingly accepted. Over the past twenty years recognition has increased, and the numbers of Muslim mental health and human service professionals focused on addressing violence among Muslims has increased. This has led to education, and increased awareness of the need for comprehensive culturally sensitive services to prevent and intervene in this public health issue. Premarital education and marriage preparation are among the ways to prevent domestic violence.

### **A State of Denial**

Over the past two or more decades, there has been an increasing recognition that domestic violence is real and does exist in the Muslim community. When I began this work in the 1990s, our community was in a state of denial. As a prevention-focused marriage and family education social worker, and as someone who had witnessed domestic violence between my parents, I knew this was a real issue that had no religious or cultural boundaries. But most Muslims did not believe it existed among their co-religionists in America. Members of this diverse community, both converts and those raised in the U.S., were not unaware of this reality. Many of our immigrant brothers and sisters thought they had left that practice back home and did not expect to encounter it here. Many of us expected Islam to be a cure-all for the still nascent religious community that had not yet owned this reality. Neither group wanted to admit its existence, for Muslims were dealing with enough stereotypes and Islamophobia and wanted no more labels put on our community. In short, it was better to deny it.

Thankfully, Sharifa Alkhateeb, a pioneer in the field of domestic violence education, pressed on to raise awareness. She conducted surveys that made it impossible for community leaders to continue their ostrich-like “head in the sand” approach to domestic abuse. In 1993, she conducted the first documented survey designed to assess the incidence of domestic violence among Muslim leaders in the U.S. (Alkhateeb 1999). In a groundbreaking survey of 63 Muslim leaders and community members, at least 10 percent of participants reported having experienced physical abuse (Alkhateeb 1999). In another survey of 500 Arab women living in the Dearborn, MI, area, 98 percent of whom were Muslim, 18 to 20 percent of them had experienced spousal abuse (Abugideiri 2010).

These surveys began to open our eyes and suggested that our community suffers from domestic violence at least at the same rate as does the general American population.

After witnessing challenges experienced by couples who were my clients and community members, I wrote a chapter in *Islam in America: Images and Challenges* (Lin 1998) in which I identified domestic violence as a serious problem facing Muslim couples and families. I began to explore ways to prevent it and conduct early interventions. Something needed to be done on a macro community-wide basis.

Shahina Siddiqui, Belquis Altareb, Maryam Funches and I met to discuss our concerns about the lack of focus on mental health and social services needs of Muslim communities. A conference was organized in Herndon, Virginia to discuss our concerns and develop strategies. Approximately 100 committed sisters and brothers attending the conference supported and confirmed the need for an organized effort, which led to the establishment of the Islamic Social Services Association, Inc. (ISSA). ISSA's purpose was to raise awareness about the needs, as well as to educate and advocate for the social service and mental health concerns of Muslims in North America. One concern was domestic violence. Human service professionals knew that imams spent a considerable amount of time addressing marital problems, and that working together might lead them to see professionals as allies and partners. ISSA and the Muslim human service professionals had a vision that included healthy relationships, as well as healthy marriages and families that fostered healthy communities.

In 2000, Sharifa Al Khateeb founded the Peaceful Families Project (PFP), a leader in providing Islamically based programs and resources about domestic violence in our communities. Over the years, ISSA and PFP collaborated to provide domestic violence education for imams and community leaders, as well as DV 101 seminars for community members. One challenge was getting imams on board and vocal about violence against women and intimate partner violence. Imam Mohamed Magid, executive imam of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS) Center in Sterling, VA, was one of the earliest and most vocal supporters.

Then in February 2009, the horrific murder and beheading of Aasiya Zubair, the founder of Bridges TV, the first American Muslim English-language television network, by her husband "sent a shockwave through our collective consciousness. She was the very public face to a very private reality of abuse in the Muslim American community" (Project Sakinah, n.d.). If we did not believe that DV existed within our community before, now we could no longer deny it. The veil had been lifted.

Aasiya's murder led Dar al-Islam to begin Project Sakinah, a campaign led by Zerqa Abid of Ohio, to rally a host of collaborators who would raise awareness about this issue:

In 2011 Peaceful Families Project & Project Sakinah conducted a survey, which indicated that 31% of American Muslims reported experiencing

abuse within an intimate partner relationship, and 53% reported experiencing some form of domestic violence by a family member during their lifetime. The abuse may have included emotional, verbal, financial, physical or sexual abuse. (Celik and Sabri, n.d.)

### **Promoting Healthy Marriages**

ISSA continued its community-based domestic violence prevention education and awareness campaigns while promoting healthy marriages through its Sakinah Healthy Marriage Initiative (SHMI). SHMI's vision includes a community of healthy, caring, vibrant, and peaceful marriages and families founded on sound Islamic values and principles. The National Muslim Marriage Week, an outgrowth of SHMI, was launched via a nationwide event that is held during the first week of Ramadan each year. This effort brings attention to the marital life of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and reminds community members to utilize this month to reestablish their relationship with Allah through the Quran and renew their relationship with their spouse and family. Community members are encouraged to use its 29-30 days to practice and strengthen the new relationship habits they commit to during this special week-long period in Ramadan's first week. This campaign has been effective in raising awareness in Phoenix and Detroit, which have served as pilots for the campaign in the hope that it will expand nationally.

In 2008-10, in collaboration with the Muslim Alliance in North America (MANA), ISSA's Sakinah Healthy Marriage Initiative promoted the signing of the Healthy Marriage Community Covenant (HMCC) by imams in Michigan. Among other items, it called for establishing a zero-tolerance policy for domestic violence in mosque communities and taking steps to ensure adherence, such as requiring couples to attend three to six premarital sessions, acquire a premarital education, and be referred to such local community or mosque-based programs.

Approximately fifteen imams and community leaders supported the Healthy Marriage Community Covenant. However, there were challenges, including the lack of professionals and imams qualified to provide premarital education, as well as funding to support the hiring of professionally trained instructors. Because prevention and early intervention services, as well as social and mental health services, were not considered of value, the focus was on convincing the Muslim community that they should be recognized and valued.

### **Domestic Violence Prevention**

To understand domestic violence prevention, we need to understand prevention. The literature describes three categories of prevention: primary, secondary, and tertiary (Wolfe and Jaffe 1999) and considers primary prevention, early intervention, and treatment. Primary prevention focuses on addressing a problem

before it happens. For example, lock your car, lock your house, and set the alarm system before someone attempts to steal it or break in. Engage in good nutrition, water intake, sleep, and exercise before you get sick. Domestic violence prevention seeks to thwart the outbreak of any type of domestic violence or intimate partner violence. Secondary prevention's goal is to decrease a problem's frequency by minimizing or reducing its severity and the continuation of its early signs. At this level, prevention is about recognizing the first signs early on, the risk of additional abuse, and taking immediate action to avert any further abuse. Secondary prevention is also considered early intervention after the first sign or in the problem's early phase. Tertiary prevention efforts address chronic domestic violence. By this stage, the perpetrators may be incarcerated. We are much more familiar with the level at which the survivors and perpetrators begin therapeutic treatment. As a society and a community, we tend to focus on fixing rather than stopping problems before they occur (Nadir 2021).

While a multipronged approach is needed to address domestic violence, I advocate for primary prevention and early intervention. I am committed to preparing teenagers and young adults before they start considering marriage and who are engaged or in a relationship.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), early intervention is the key to survivors and perpetrators avoiding future involvement in violent relationships (Centers for Disease Control 2021). The CDC's website highlights strategies and approaches for blocking intimate partner violence. Wolfe and Jaffe (1999) share a Public Health Model for Domestic Violence Prevention from primary to secondary to tertiary prevention.

### **Premarital Education and Domestic Violence Prevention**

As I continued to collaborate with my colleagues in the field to promote awareness and advocate for survivors, I held firm to my belief that we needed to lean into prevention and early intervention efforts. I argued that community members spent more time planning their wedding than preparing for a lifelong healthy marriage. I contended that if they knew more about marriage, marriage according to the Quran and the Prophet's traditions, how to cultivate a healthy relationship, and how to select a compatible spouse via a vetting process, they would have a better chance of not marrying an abusive person, or at least of recognizing red flags early in the relationship. Marriage preparation and premarital education courses are an important forum for conveying such information.

The Premarital Relationship Enhancement and Prevention (PREP), the Prepare and Enrich, the FOCCUS Pre-marriage Inventory, as well as other faith-based and mainstream programs, provide important marriage preparation and relationship skill-building learning opportunities. Throughout the 1990s in North

America, it was difficult to find Islamically based marriage preparation courses. Many of these offerings came out of the Christian community, which referred couples to their churches' primary providers: the clergy and pastoral counselors. But only a small percentage of couples sought formal marriage preparation (Silliman and Schumm 2000). Muslims who saw the need for such education began adapting some of these programs for their community. Some were supplemented with religiously based study sessions on marriage, among them the Marriage Preparation Course (Siddiqui 1996) and Are You Sure You're Ready for Marriage? (Nadir and Ahmed 1996), which led to the Marriage the Islamic Way: A Comprehensive Marriage Preparation and Education Program (Nadir 1997). These courses are considered among the predecessors to Dr. Aneesah Nadir's Before the Nikah Marriage Preparation course, which is currently provided via Zoom. Students from the U.S., Canada, the U.K. and Bangladesh have attended via the Zoom platform.

Developed specifically to provide marriage preparation, this course integrates lessons from the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad with practical relationship-building skills and is designed for Muslims as young as 16 years old (with parental permission). Unlike other such courses, Before the Nikah is geared for single, never-married young adult Muslims; however, newlyweds, divorced, and remarried Muslims are also encouraged to enroll. The focus remains primary prevention – obtaining knowledge and information before considering marriage and meeting a prospective spouse.

### **Do Marriage Preparation Courses Prevent Domestic Violence?**

Strategies to address domestic violence vary with the causes and severity of the abuse. Unfortunately, there is no unanimous agreement on what causes it. Wolfe and Jaffe (1999) outline five theories: biological, individual psychopathology, couple and family interactions, social learning and development theory, and societal structure theories. Domestic violence can be explained by genetics, biochemistry, and changes in the brain's development due to trauma, and is also based on individual psychopathology or dysfunctional personality structures. Men who witnessed domestic violence or were victims of abuse during their youth could not develop healthy relationships. In this perspective, men who battered were shown to have mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, mania, psychosis, and criminality indicators. Faulty couple and family interaction that lead to poor family dynamics, as well as the underlying power imbalance in society and systemic gender discrimination, are also causes of domestic violence (Wolfe and Jaffe 1999).

Ongoing microaggressions and the trauma of systemic racism and anti-black violence outside the home also contribute to domestic violence at home. According to the Institute of Domestic Violence in the African American

Community, black women are three times more likely to die because of intimate partner violence than white women (Thomas 2015, 2). In addition to institutional racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia compound the many challenges new immigrant and refugee families face. Unjust immigration policies, a complex and difficult to navigate immigration system that does not easily accommodate language and cultural differences, as well as the lack of legal access exacerbate the difficult position new immigrants find themselves in. Domestic violence survivors also face threats that they will be deported or separated from their children, or that their immigration status will intentionally be disrupted by their abusive partner (YWCA Spokane, n.d.).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) suggested strategies to prevent intimate partner violence include creating protective environments, strengthening economic supports, and reducing financial concerns. It also recommends teaching safe and healthy relationship skills and engaging with influential adults and peers for support.

Generally, marriage preparation courses include self-awareness and introspection, problem solving and conflict resolution skills, and building communication and relationship skills. Most are geared toward engaged or committed couples. The Silliman and Schumm (2000, 139) literature review conveys that "integrated research and program improvement hold the promise of significantly reducing distress, divorce, and marital violence and for enhancing couple functioning and those systems that they affect."

The research and literature review of longstanding marriage preparation programs, as well as feedback received from Before the Nikah students, show hopeful signs with regard to those single, never married, and previously married Muslims who participate. In this structured two-hour-a-week course held over a three-month period, students attend lectures, discussions, and activities on topics that focus on self-awareness, marriage from an Islamic perspective, and how to recognize green flags of a healthy relationship and red flags that may be a warning of impending domestic abuse early in the courtship phase. In addition, students recognize the Marriage Support Team© and Before the Nikah Vetting Process© as tools that can facilitate prevention of getting into an abusive marriage. They will be better able to identify a potentially abusive person before marriage and to discern the qualities of a healthy, empathetic potential spouse. Students become part of a community of course graduates, which gives them the needed support to implement the Before the Nikah principles. They are also encouraged to retake the course as many times as they like, to come back with a potential spouse, and to participate in premarital counseling and coaching prior to marriage.

### Summary

After more than twenty years as a mental health practitioner working within the Muslim community, I have experienced the historic denial of domestic abuse and dysfunctional relationships. I have also seen more imams and community leaders become aware of this as a real community problem and indicate their readiness to address it and work to prevent it. While our community is not unlike the larger society when it comes to funding for prevention services, the increasing number of Muslim mental health professionals and community leaders has increased its awareness and willingness to find ways to promote healthy couples, families, and communities. Marriage preparation and premarital education for single, never-married, teen, and young adult Muslims is receiving more consideration as a strategy for preventing domestic violence and promoting healthy marriages and families. In the future, research efforts will be geared to determine the effectiveness of marriage preparation, premarital education, and counseling to prevent domestic violence among American Muslims .

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