

## **Field Notes: Reflections on Addressing Domestic Violence in American Muslim Communities**

Bonita R. McGee and Shaina (Nur) Ayers

### **Introduction**

Islam views the family as the cornerstone of society (Alwani 2007). Unfortunately, American Muslim families face challenges to their strength and foundational role in society as the social malaise that touches the larger society, such as violence and abuse, are present in their communities. Domestic violence (DV), also described as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), gender-based violence (GBV), or family violence (FV), impacts families and communities regardless of race, class, socio-economic status, education, or religious affiliation. Muslim communities in the US have increasingly acknowledged and addressed the issue over the last twenty-plus years. Authors McGee and Ayers engaged community advocates, professionals, and imams to explore their entry into DV awareness work and reflections from the field regarding the progress observed during their respective tenures. The authors will provide a profile of the participant cohort and then describe their responses to a collection of prompts and inquiries, thereby highlighting their views on community support as well as those promising and best practices used by communities to raise awareness and support DV survivors, and share their recommendations and vision for the work's future. Finally, the authors will provide some final thoughts and recommendations.

### **Methodology**

For this article, we focused our outreach to Muslim-based organizations (MBO) primarily serving Muslims, imams, and chaplains as well as other Muslim-identifying advocates. We used the Peaceful Families Project (PFP) website, resources page, and *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice* (JIFP) editorial recommendations to identify and narrow the pool of interviewees. The final determination to use seven interviewees was based on their availability during the data collection period, geographic location diversity, and representation of various stakeholder classes (e.g., advocates, imams, and mental health and social service professionals). The authors conducted most interviews via Zoom, which were recorded for accuracy; others were conducted via phone only. A limitation of this study was the shortened window for data collection, as this resulted in gaps in the greater geographical representation and in securing organizations and advocates with long histories of addressing DV in American Muslim communities.

Participants identified as advocates, executive directors, academics, counselors, and imams. They resided in several states (e.g., Arizona, Ohio, Florida, and Virginia) and had at least fifteen years of experience in DV awareness in Muslim communities. Most participants indicated that their journey

toward doing the work was through volunteering locally with others. Some were inspired by DV advocates in their community; others by witnessing DV's impact. The spark of standing for justice through action and volunteerism started with one participant, currently an MBO executive director, when they were twelve years old. Others related that they consider their work a "calling to" or a "God-given" task to serve the community, help survivors, and address DV in their community.

### **Community Support and Continued Challenges**

Participants across the collective experience acknowledged the increase in community support over the tenure of their work. This is, however, relative to the definition of "support" and how much it has increased. Through much effort, the awareness of, attitudes toward, and availability of resources have experienced greater levels of acceptance and response from the Muslim community. Influenced by creative efforts and more widely accepted by American-born or raised demographics, openness to engaging with programs and conversations around DV have made this issue less taboo. Active commitments from imams, advocates, and leaders to address topics relating to, or adjacent to, DV have aided in the conservative progress of support as deeper understandings of this reality have increased. This increased understanding has, in turn, allowed an increase in available resources. Still, diminishing the taboo around this topic has not decreased the stigma around engaging this issue. Consistently, however, the participants recognize that more support is needed, especially in terms of funding.

Creative methods of communication heavily influence support for DV awareness and intervention. As the psychology of words suggests, the language used in reference to a topic impacts how people perceive and feel about it. Though spoken about more often today compared to a decade ago, there is still a stigma and lack of understanding around DV, survivors, and its impact. Furthermore, cultural misunderstandings of abuse and DV further distort understandings of whether it is nonexistent in Muslim communities or only seen as an idea impacting "Westernized" survivors. For example, although DV's detrimental impact on the family unit inherently counters the essence of that unit in Islam, the term "domestic violence" is viewed as a Western concept. This impacts the community's recognition of what DV is and the harm caused – and that will continue to be caused – if it is not addressed.

Accordingly, in terms of responsiveness, a type of verbal gymnastics has become necessary in order to secure attention and promote action. Avoiding words about "abuse" helps increase support. Preventative measures are preferably worded as "peaceful family building" and "healthy communication." Fundraising efforts asking for charitable donations to struggling mothers and their children enjoy more success than fundraising requests for charitable donations for DV survivors. Overwhelmingly, participants acknowledge DV's ugliness as an area of

discomfort within the community. Hence, more community members support such survivors when other terminologies are used.

Between the stigma and a lack of understanding of DV's financial costs, survivors do not receive much financial support from the community. According to the majority of the participants, this fact is one of the most significant areas of opportunity. Mosques provide a limited amount of funds, as they do for any person in need. However, the recovery time a family needs to process the DV events and, at least for some who require professional development, to secure a job will take longer than a month or two. Safe houses offered through many non-Muslim organizations are also limited and not explicitly designed for Muslims. Additionally, one participant noted that one survivor's legal fees could cost more than \$25,000. Unfortunately, depending on their educational level, occupation, or work status, survivors' ability to support themselves and their dependents may be a leading reason for their decision to remain in a harmful situation.

### **Best and Promising Practices**

JIFP asked participants about the promising practices and trends they observed throughout their tenure. The following represents highlights shared from their collective observations from the field.

Participants cited imam training and support as a best practice recommendation. Imams need to be empowered so they can address DV through direct training and increase their capacity by building a support system that will enable them to more effectively address the challenges of supporting families facing violence in the home. Many participants noted that imams are often under-resourced and face incredibly high expectations. Addressing DV compounds those expectations to a degree that may be unreasonable and unachievable. Therefore, imams need mosque-based support systems so they can work with advocates, counselors, and other community-based organizations and institutions to support DV survivors and their families.

Holistic, survivor-centered advocacy is considered a best practice when engaging with survivors. This includes the expectation and assurance of confidentiality. In some communities, survivors are reluctant to engage with Muslim-based organizations and services or even share their stories, fearing that such organizations cannot maintain confidentiality. Many Muslim-based organizations are aware of this concern. American Muslim communities must ensure that survivors and those who serve them are safe to do the work.

Additionally, only trained volunteers and staff should engage with DV survivors. This approach is designed to ensure competency, the quality of the interaction, and the assurance of calm and patient explanation of the available services and options. Survivors, who are often overwhelmed and traumatized, may need the information to be repeated as they navigate their situation. Lastly, it

is a best practice to acknowledge and recognize the intersectional nature of the work and its impact on the survivors and their ability to navigate the many layers and barriers to re-establishing safety in their life and home. These may include, for example, challenges of immigration status, language, and access to services that will compound their already complex and unsafe situation.

Ensuring safe and secure shelter services was also noted as a best practice. Having inter- and intra-culturally sensitive safe spaces can impact the immediate and long-term safety of the survivor and her family. Communities have approached this issue differently. Some prefer and utilize Muslim-based shelter services; others work with their other faith and secular counterparts to provide safe shelter services for Muslim survivors. One respondent, an MBO executive director, stated that while shelters are fine, many women avoid them and that Muslim communities must find ways to serve those women who do not leave their homes.

Additional strategies mentioned as best practices were DV awareness events that explain its impact and promote prevention strategies that support healthy, violence-free homes. Having imams and community leaders regularly speak about this topic help sends a message to the community that DV exists, how it harms the survivor and her family, the necessity of communal support, and how it violates Islamic principles and prophetic examples and teachings.

### **Envisioning the Future: Recommendations and Considerations**

When asked about their thoughts and recommendations for future work in DV awareness, participants envisioned the following:

Muslim communities prioritize and support survivors holistically in the form of safety, stable housing options, legal support, and child support. One participant noted that American Muslim communities need to do a better job of “wrapping our arms around our community.” This sentiment showed through the various participant comments, reinforcing the belief that Muslims as a community must do better for its most vulnerable members and be unafraid to call an issue what it is so it can be fully acknowledged and addressed.

### **Collaboration, Partnering, and Allyship**

Participants wanted to see increased collaboration and partnering among organizations. This includes, but is not limited to, Muslim-based social service organizations, mosques, and other social service providers. Increased networking allows organizations of different sizes and capacities to leverage resources, partner in awareness efforts and mentoring opportunities, and build capacity for sustainable best practice implementation. Participants also noted the importance of increasing Muslim male allyship in DV awareness, because this enables the community to see DV as a communal issue in which all of its members have a

role to play. Increased male allyship and advocacy also enable more opportunities for intervention, education, and awareness by asking the entire community to address this problem. While there was a notable trend and best practice of an increasing number of males in this arena, it remains a critical need if the community is to address DV comprehensively.

Additionally, some noted the importance of being unashamed as an organization operating from an Islamic framework. Furthermore, some cautioned that as organizations grow and engage in increased collaboration across secular and other faith organizations and institutions, the American Muslim community need not buy into those narratives that view religion, particularly Islam, as something to circumvent, as if it is not a part of the solution and therefore can be negotiated away. Organizations that follow this approach need a more robust response and support from the community if they are to remain sustainable.

Another aspect is ensuring that communities have enough volunteers and advocates who are well trained in addressing DV in Muslim communities. This goes for not only Muslims within their respective communities, but also for partners and allies serving Muslim clients. This increased capacity will help ensure that Muslim survivors, wherever they are, can be served competently and with respect.

#### Infrastructure, Institutions, and Sustainability

Succession planning was not limited to organizational leadership and sustainability, but also included the continued identification, mentoring, and promotion of new advocates within the community. Ideally, male advocates' growing presence will enable the increased presence of diverse voices to raise awareness and strengthen communities. Some of the participants envisioned building capacity through succession planning.

An imam recommended providing safe spaces for Muslim survivors in every major city nationwide; many participants echoed the sentiment. A range of possible strategies were offered, among them Muslim-built and -based shelters as well as leveraging existing partners and ally shelter systems. The range of opinion in terms of how vital Muslim-based shelter services can be based on the following factors: the community level's commitment, given the cost of upkeep and maintenance and residents' safety; the ability to leverage local resources and shelters and expanding partnerships; along with education and cultural competence, through collaboration, partnering, and trusted allies. Leveraging existing systems would require increased technical assistance and cultural competency training directed toward partners and allies. The result would expand the Muslim community's capacity to serve survivors comprehensively while keeping them connected to their community. The reality is that those safe space

solutions are not an either-or proposition, but more a spectrum of strategies based on the community's current and future capacity, needs, and commitment.

Participants raised networking and data sharing as essential components for building capacity. Growing and strengthening existing advocate networks will enable Muslim-based organizations and shelters to share relevant data about population and trends, partner in awareness and training activities, and create a data hub to deepen our community's understanding of the issue. This collaboration and data sharing will support the implementation of evidence-based interventions, awareness campaigns, and outreach.

### Prevention, Awareness, and Intervention

Although pre-marital counseling can serve as a DV prevention strategy, solid marital foundations must be built within the Muslim community. The vision of such a service as a prerequisite was shared by a few participants, including imams and counselors. Even though such counseling offerings may vary in length and duration, most contain a framework for discussing critical topics that couples will face, along with exercises and tools to support constructive communication, and the fundamental relevant Islamic teachings.

For one participant, a social worker and community leader, effective counseling would include vetting partners and ensuring all parties' "informed consent." Establishing such a network would address a specific problem: abusers who move into new communities to continue the same behavior patterns, as that community has a very limited ability to vet and verify them.

American Muslim communities must address the role of accountability, as its members continue to struggle with DV's fallout in the home and community leaders and imams have conflicting or unclear goals. As a result, abusers go unchecked while survivors bear the brunt of any stigma associated with their decision to pursue divorce, separation, or counseling. Communities must effectively address both parties for the cycle of violence to be disrupted and stopped so that safety and healing can take root.

Abuser's intervention strategies often suffer from the barrier of incentive, and a lack of accountability exacerbates the barrier with continuous cycles of violence and stigma. A counselor participant noted that communities must "increase our understanding of and engagement with abusers, as they are not leaving our community, and we need not just punish or litigate." This participant further noted, "Unfortunately, our community does not hold people accountable. So it happens, and even when it is reported it is either minimized or not believed. And then there are no consequences for the abuser. So, because we do not hold them accountable as a community, there are no consequences." Some advocates and organizations are actively working on Abuser's intervention curriculums

based on or adapted to Islamic principles and prophetic examples and teachings. Others are working on Male Ally initiatives.

Community members must also consider DV's impact on the entire family, especially children, and create and support services that support children from violent homes. These children may also carry the shame and stigma of dysfunction within the home. One participant, an MBO executive director, noted that they had observed second-class citizenry in some mosques when dealing with this latter issue. The topic was further elaborated on by stating that "some masjids do not like to have children that are marginalized, so they shun them."

### Training and Technical Assistance

Creating a new training curriculum for targeted groups or improving existing resources was a collective vision for most participants. Curriculum targeting imams was cited as being important. Although imam training programs already exist, it is not known how many curricula have been developed to train them. By creating a master training for chaplains and imams regarding DV, advocates can support consistent messaging and quality assurance as well as establish a baseline of accurate information. Male abusers are also a targeted population for intervention and training. Two participants are currently working on curricula, designed specifically for Muslim male abusers, that will be critical to many communities' ability to address DV comprehensively in the coming years.

Participants noted positive trends in the Muslim community, such as the increased amount of need-specific resources available to them over the last twenty years. Continued efforts to revise, improve, and develop resources that address DV in Muslim homes remains ongoing.

### Frameworks and Concepts

There should be an effort to reconsider the narrative frameworks currently present in most DV awareness efforts. When observing how popular media and social media often frame such incidents, one often notes their focus on the survivor's circumstances and behavior. That may be effective for awareness building, but advocates who want to effect behavioral change must also address the abuser's behavior. Shifting the framework to address behavioral and social change will not happen by just talking to women. As one participant stated, "The victim may need more practical help, but he [the abuser] needs a lot of help to change."

Complementing this idea is the notion of promoting awareness and education regarding gender and healthy relationships as early as possible. As a prevention strategy, some participants recommended developing and engaging Muslims on gender and healthy relationships across the lifespan. Discussion of healthy relationships in curriculums serving Muslim youth help to reduce such incidents.

### **Final Thoughts**

While this article helps shed light on the progress, barriers, and emerging trends in addressing DV in American Muslim communities, it only reflects a small segment of the advocates and community members. It is not comprehensive; rather, it illustrates the need to expand the effort to learn more from the field about these issues. One recommendation is for more research and exploration. Moreover, the authors have additional recommendations regarding what community members can do to implement the recommendations and sustain the progress of the efforts illustrated in this article.

More engagement and research are needed to support communities and advocates to address DV effectively. Areas for continued research and reporting include, but are not limited to, understanding the prevalence and attitudes toward violence in the home. This includes deepening our understanding of the types of abuse within this community, reporting them in aggregate form, and then breaking down by demographic and other relevant factors when they are shown to be statistically significant.

For researchers engaged in field qualitative research: Ensure adequate outreach and buy-in from local organizations to provide an adequate context and history of DV in the community. Additionally, be proactive in establishing a feedback loop for those advocates and subjects engaged in the research to inform them of the research's progress and how their work is impacting the larger field of study. Grassroots workers and advocates may hold researchers at arm's length and, in some cases, display skepticism due to their perception that such people are only interested in publishing and not the cause. Communities should consider partnering with local universities and researchers to engage in more community-based participatory research. This approach could be more beneficial for both parties, as it seeks to build capacity in the larger community, support the development of a shared narrative, and more readily translate data into actionable strategies.

For Muslim-based organizations, masjids, and community centers, network to support a consortium for data collection and reporting: The benefits of establishing even a minimal data set would support local, regional, and national efforts in technical assistance and supporting survivors. America is home to one of the world's most diverse Muslim populations, a reality that often presents many challenges when providing services. The ethical and secure use of data ensure that organizations serving Muslims can rely and build upon evidence-based and -informed interventions.

Imams, scholars, and community leaders do not need to reinvent the wheel to address violence in the home: Seek the guidance, buy-in, and partnership of those who do the work daily. Utilize platforms to heighten awareness, promote accurate and consistent messaging, and encourage community members to take



concrete steps. These efforts will enable the activation of volunteers, cause the desired shift in mindsets and behavior, and go a long way to ensuring the survivors' safety.

**References**

Alwani, Zainab. 2007. "The Qur'anic Model for Harmony in Family Relations." In *Change From Within: Diverse Perspectives on Domestic Violence in Muslim Community*, edited by Maha B. Alkhateeb and Salma Elkadi Abugideiri, 33-65. Virginia: Peaceful Families Project.