

# Domestic Abuse and American Muslims

*By Engy Abdelkader*

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While I did not know Nazish Noorani, the story of her death haunts me: an American Muslim stay-at-home mother of two gunned down in a suburban New Jersey neighborhood. After completing a Ramadan meal with family, Nazish was walking with her husband and pushing her three-year-old son in a stroller when her attacker allegedly shot her near the heart, killing her instantly.

A number of media reports indicated that Nazish was a victim of a volatile marriage marred by emotional and physical abuse. By week's end, her 26-year-old husband who had been hospitalized with superficial injuries was charged in her killing after confessing his involvement.

Such stories are uncomfortable territory for the American Muslim community. Yet there are too many who remain in abusive relationships -- how many other Nazish Nooranis live in our midst and how can we help protect, empower and educate them (and ourselves) to impact a positive change?

I turned to Robina Niaz, Executive Director at Turning Point for Women and Families, the first non-profit to address domestic violence in the Muslim community in New York City.

**Q: What is abuse?**

A: Domestic violence is a pattern of intentional coercive behavior by one partner against the other which is aimed at gaining power and control. Physical or sexual violence is often preceded by controlling behavior, which the victim does not identify as abusive.

**Q: How can a woman tell if she is being abused (as opposed to just going through a rough patch in a relationship or marriage)?**

A: Abuse is a pattern of behavior and is often misunderstood to be only physical. Typically an abuser will try to isolate the woman from her support networks. If she is an immigrant with language barriers she may not have that support. An abuser may also attempt to foster financial dependency. He may exhibit scary behavior intended to frighten, such as: hurting animals; making threats; trying to blackmail her; stalking; or throwing and destroying things that the woman values.

He may also attempt to intimidate or control her through her kids and use emotional tactics, like destroying her self-esteem, criticizing her, calling her names, putting down

her strengths. An abuser may also engage in perfectionist and contradictory demands so she never feels like she is good enough.

She may also suffer at his hands: public humiliation, degradation, lack of affection and/or no communication.

**Q: Why do Muslim women stay in abusive relationships?**

A: Women from all faiths and cultures find it hard to walk out of abusive marriages. On an average it takes at least 10 attempts before she finally leaves an abusive relationship. While Islam allows women to divorce and certainly leave an abusive man, women are often socialized to and held responsible for "making a marriage work."

Frequently, when they try to talk with family and/or friends they are either not believed or her fear is minimized. It takes enormous courage for a woman to say something. When she is met with disbelief she tends to not speak again.

An abusive relationship chips off at a woman's self-esteem and self-worth. She has lived in a marriage where the abuser is obsessed with power and control (which is learned behavior) and tends to isolate the woman from her support network. The abuser may present himself as a charming man who is "very nice" so people find it hard to believe that he could be abusing his wife or children.

It is worth noting that women will stay in abusive relationships because they hope that he will one day change, or that if they try harder the abuse will stop. They may also be financially dependent on him or do not want to deprive the children of their father.

**Q: What is the impact upon children living in households where physical, emotional, verbal and/or psychological abuse is the norm?**

A: According to studies, it is believed that 70 percent of boys who grow up in abusive homes will become abusers and 70 percent of girls who live in abusive homes will find themselves in abusive relationships/marriages. Even if children are not being abused directly, living in homes where abuse is going on will cause children to have behavior and psychological problems.

It is important to remember that abusive behavior is learned behavior and if acknowledged can be changed. However, a majority of abusive men from various cultures will not acknowledge that their behavior is the problem and will blame the victim.

Most men who go for counseling or help are those who have been mandated to do so by courts as a pre-condition to visitation and/or reunification with family.

**Q: When should they get out of the relationship?**

A: If the woman feels her children's safety or her own is threatened at any time she should file a police report and get help immediately. In the end it is her decision, but she needs a lot of support, understanding and reassurance that she is not alone and that her life and her children's lives are important above everything else.

Much too often Muslim women are told by their own family members to beware of what "the community or people will say." This is the last thing anyone should be concerned with. It's important to know that the woman who is living with the abuser knows him best. If she is fearful of leaving, her fear is genuine and must be taken seriously.

We are reminded of Aasiya Zubair who after years of suffering finally left her husband, had an order of protection against him. He was ordered out of the house yet tricked her into coming to the Bridges TV in New York where he murdered and beheaded her.

**Q: Where can abused Muslim women go for help?**

A: There are dozens of community based non-profit organizations that provide free and confidential help to women trapped in abusive relationships or marriages. When women connect with one of these groups they are helped by professionally trained staff who understand the issues, dynamics and causes of domestic violence, as well as the cultural norms that often influence or govern the decisions women make regarding their safety and lives. Through culturally, religiously sensitive services, support and counseling, professionals can help women understand why they are trapped in abusive relationships, what their legal rights are, and they can connect them with resources.

Turning Point for Women and Families is one such organization, first and still the only one in New York City to address domestic violence in the Muslim community. By helping women empower themselves, professionals can assist them protecting themselves and their children.

Women are often in most danger when they are trying to leave an abusive relationship, so it is very important that both social workers and family members know that it is the women themselves who know their situation best. They will speak up if there is a culture that supports them and they are not blamed or judged for the spouse's abusive behavior.

**Q: What can family and friends do when they suspect abuse?**

A: A family member or a friend who knows that a woman is being abused must encourage her to get professional help so that she can be assisted in coming up with a safety plan. One thing that I encourage family and friends to do is never to under-estimate the danger the woman might be in, to take her seriously, support her emotionally and make sure that she does not feel isolated.

Often when young women marry against their family's wishes they feel they cannot go back with a problem. That should never be the case -- one of the things abusive men do is

isolate her and make her completely dependent on him so it is easy for him to maintain control over the woman.

**Q: What should a woman do if she doesn't find the support she needs among her family and friends?**

A: She should definitely connect with a professional organization and seek counseling so she understands what is going on and learns that it is not her fault, she is not alone and help is available.

We need to create a culture where women feel they can speak up and let others know she is suffering. Domestic violence must be de-stigmatized so women can come forward and acknowledge the reality but also understand that even if their physical safety is not threatened, staying in an abusive relationship has far reaching impact not only on the victim's life but on her children's as well. Our entire community needs to take responsibility and hold abusive men accountable.

**Q: What initiatives can the American Muslim community (inside and outside of our mosques) undertake to help educate Muslim men and women about these issues?**

A: I think we need to remember that only 20-25 percent of American Muslims regularly attend mosques which means there are at least 75 percent of Muslims who may not have access to resources. Also our mosques do not have qualified, trained staff who can deal with domestic violence.

It's extremely important that all community leaders recognize that domestic violence is far more prevalent than they would like to acknowledge, and a concerted effort in educating women about abusive behavior and their rights as victims must be made.

Men are abusive because they know they can get away with it and there is no accountability or social consequence for them. It is the entire community's responsibility to hold abusers responsible and work to change the mindset that it is the woman's job alone to hold a marriage together. Abused women are left often feeling ashamed, and they are less eager to seek help because often they don't want the marriage to end but want the abuse to stop. Because of this, they will delay seeking help, be in denial and may be unaware of the serious danger they may be in.

If we help the victims – and the Muslim community at large – understand that Islam allows divorce and abhors oppression, that often staying in an abusive marriage leads to more harm than good for themselves and the children, perhaps women will be more willing to seek help. But the message needs to come from community and American Muslim religious leaders.

**Q: Last question: is there a comprehensive list of community organizations (ethnic, religious or otherwise) where victims outside of the New York City area can go?**

A: There is a state by state list on Turning Point's website and there is a national domestic violence hotline. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence also has related facts, figures and helpful information as well.

To be certain, abuse and violence in relationships transcend religion, culture, race, education and socio-economic factors. No community is immune from its ills, including the American Muslim community.

Nazish Noorani was 27 years old when she died and is survived by two sons, age 3 and 5, who in reality lost both parents. Her tragic death is yet another reminder that we each must do more to protect, educate and empower victims before their heart-breaking story makes the front page of our local newspaper.

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