



Centre for Research
on Violence Against Women and Children



Working With Communities.

Access to Women Abuse Services by Arab-Speaking Muslim Women in London, Ontario. Background Investigation and Recommendations for Further Research and Community Outreach

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Executive Summary

The Islamic Arab communities that live in Canada as well as those living in London face many challenges in their struggle towards positive integration in Canadian society. In this respect, the Islamic Arab community does not differ from many other communities, especially those communities who are not of European origin. One of the fundamental challenges the Islamic Arab community faces in Canada is how to reconcile their Islamic Arab values with the values of Canadian society. This struggle is clearly seen in the cases studied that are related to women and their freedom within and outside the family.

This preliminary study tries to get acquainted with the barriers that prevent Arab women from benefiting from the services provided by agencies that work on women safety in London. This study provides several deductions regarding the barriers that resulted from the analysis of the personal interviews and group discussions. Those interviewed demonstrated a tendency towards limiting their social interactions to people of their cultural and religious backgrounds. These arenas serve as the primary source of their outlook in matters relating to family resettlement and integration in Canadian society.

From the interviews and the focus group discussions conducted with women and men of the community, it is deduced that there are differences between the views of men and women, especially with regards to issues related to the abuse of women in the Islamic Arab community in London. These differences also follow reflect differences in cultural and social backgrounds. The views expressed by the Arab Muslim community on woman abuse range from a refusal of the existence of family violence, a partial acceptance of its presence to recognition of its presence as viewed by mainstream Canadians. But the general view regarding this social problem is characterized by vigilance and confusion. The majority are inclined to recognize a relative presence of violence against women within the Arab Muslim community or a limited presence of this problem in the Arab community in London. The interviews and discussions also highlighted differences in the definition and conceptualisation of woman abuse. The maltreatment of women is rooted in a cultural understanding and praxis where it is the responsibility of the husband to control and guide the family, especially his wife and female relatives. This understanding is in line with conventional moral and religious values recognized in the country of origin.

This is clearly seen in the Islamic Arab community's interpretation of the reasons that compel husbands to be violent against their wives, reasons that normally pardon the husbands. Men consider violence against their wives as an internal affair in which no one has the right to interfere. They also do not exempt the wife from bearing a certain amount of responsibility for the abuse. The woman is often blamed for the violence that she is subjected. Many in the Arab Muslim community frame violence as a consequence of the wife competing with her husband to play a stronger role in the affairs of the family. In addition, Canadian law is seen as restricting the role of the husband and as providing more chances for the wife to revolt against the husband and for encouraging women to be free financially and socially. This is in conflict with an Islamic Arab culture that holds that the wife should be dependent on her husband for everything. Muslim Arabs come from countries that have laws that stress the traditional social role of the family. The main thrust of family law in Muslim Arab countries is to stress the responsibility of the husband in the family and the dependence of the wife and children. Therefore, the Islamic Arab community often finds the Canadian approach to familial and women's affairs surprising.

Most of the interviewed attributed the reason abused women do not seek services from anti-violence agencies to their husband's control over household affairs. The husband's control

extends over his wife who generally has to obey her husband and surrender to the violence that she is subjected to. A Muslim woman seeking help from Canadian institutions may lose her family, respect and her status in the community. Language barriers, ignorance of the laws and the nature of the available services are additional factors that prevent abused women from benefiting from these services.

From the previous paragraphs, we can conclude that men still play a decisive role in familial and women's affairs within Islamic Arab communities. Therefore assisting, defending and protecting abused women from further abuse requires setting a clear strategy that places the education of men as a primary objective. Emphasis should also be placed on programs that elevate the legal awareness of men, community religious leaders and members of other community organisations. It is also necessary to encourage understanding that Islam in its essence is not in contradiction with the contents of the Canadian justice system with regards to women who are abused. This prescription should not be interpreted as failing to work among women. Rather, the prescription is one that supplements the traditional focus on women, with an approach that also incorporates and focuses on men. The outcome of such work with men will have positive results especially with respect to removing the silent barrier that surrounds violence against women that occurs behind closed doors.

Introduction

Violence against women is present in every society and culture. Therefore, women from Arab and Islamic countries are as likely as women from any other country to experience domestic violence both in their home countries and after immigrating to Canada. According to UNICEF, between 20 and 50 percent of women world-wide have experienced physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner or family member.¹

Domestic violence against women is the most prevalent, hidden and ignored form of violence against women. At its core, the dynamics and effects of abuse are similar for women around the world. Similar themes include embarrassment, isolation, fear, or reluctance to involve outsiders. Studies conducted by the author about violence against women, for example in Yemen, showed that women avoid reporting their husband's assault, and prefer to remain silent. Nonetheless, discussions of these issues have been more open in recent years. Recently, there has been greater understanding with regards to the problem of violence against women. Many Arabic and Islamic countries have started to recognize violence against women as a humanistic and social problem. In recent years, there has been a movement among human rights organizations to raise public awareness and break the silence that surrounds violence against women in the family. Many religious scholars and leaders played important roles in this movement. They have claimed that violence is Islamically wrong.

This study is the first step in a larger proposed study of how Arabic-speaking women perceive women abuse services in Canada and how to help assistance seekers *to* overcome the barriers that avoid them from accessing women abuse services That would be by building trust, perspective sharing, and collaboratively developing solutions that are culturally sensitive and effective.

The focus of this study is the estimated over 10,000 Arabic-speaking residents of the London area. These residents are Muslims who came to Canada from countries such as Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Algeria, Morocco, Yemen, Tunisia, and other groups without national states such as the Palestinians and the Kurds.

The underlying assumptions of this study are:

- 0 Abuse towards women occurs in every country and in every community. Therefore, women from the identified groups are as likely as women from any country to experience domestic violence.
- 1 At their core, the dynamics and effects of abuse are similar for all women (embarrassment, isolation, fear, hope, reluctance to involve outsiders). Nevertheless, women new to Canada, especially those who cannot speak English, have unique challenges in finding safety.
- 2 Traditional services for abused women are under-utilised by Arabic-speaking women new to Canada.
- 3 Islam and Canadian laws are in harmony in that both prohibit violence.
- 4 Prevention is preferred over intervention.

¹ Domestic violence against women and girls, UNICEF, 2000

Arabs and Arab Countries

There are 22 Arab countries with a population of approximately 300,000,000, which is distributed over Asia and Africa. Most are located in the Middle East. Arabic is the official language in the Arab countries with the exception of Djibouti, Somalia and the Comoro Islands. Islam is the official religion of almost all Arab countries. Arab countries differ from one another drastically. The differences concern their social, cultural and economic conditions. This is depicted in Table 1 with social and economic data of ten Arab countries.

Table 1
Social and Political Situations

Country	Population (000.000)	Political System	First Language	Second Language	Ethnic Language	HDI	Official Religion	Other Religion (s)
Egypt	60	Democratic *	Arabic	English	-	119	Islam	Christianity
Iraq	18.3	Dictatorship	Arabic	English	Kurdish	-	Islam	Christianity
Jordan	4.2	Kingdom	Arabic	English	-	88	Islam	Christianity
Kuwait	1.5	Emirate	Arabic	English		43	Islam	-
Lebanon	3.6	Democratic	Arabic	French & English	Armenian	65	Islam	Christianity
Morocco	28.1	Kingdom	Arabic	French	Barber	124	Islam	Christianity
Qatar	520	Emirate	Arabic	English	-	48	Islam	-
Saudi	17	Kingdom	Arabic	English	-	68	Islam	

* Egypt has a presidential democratic political system officially, but since independence the country has been governed by an authoritarian presidential system.

Arabia								
Sudan	28.3	Dictatorship	Arabic	English	Danka (South Sudan)		Islam	Christianity
Syria	13.4	Authoritaria n	Arabic	English	Kurdish &Armeni an	97	Islam	Christianity
Tunisia	8.3	Republic	Arabic	French	-	89	Islam	-
Yemen	17	Republic	Arabic	English	Mahry	148	Islam	Judaism

Table (2)

Women's Literacy rate and political participation

Country	Year of right to vote	First elected woman	% Women Literacy
Egypt	1956	1957	40.5
Iraq	1980	1980	45
Jordan	1974	1989	81.8
Kuwait	No right	No right	77.5
Lebanon	1952	1991	78.5
Morocco	1963	1993	32.7
Qatar	1998	1998	81.2
Saudi Arabia	No right	No right	62.8
Sudan	1964	-	41.3
Syria	1953	1973	56.6
Tunisia	1959	-	55.8
Yemen (south)	1979	1980	21
Unified Yemen	1990	1990	21

The above tables demonstrate the differences among the Arab countries concerning respective levels of socio-economic development according to the human development report for the year 2001. The Human Development Report of the UNDP uses indicators such as expected age of motherhood, life expectancy at birth, adult literacy levels, and use of the latest technology for the service of manpower development.

The Human Development Report of the UNDP (2001) reveals the diversity that exists among Arab countries. According to the Human Development Indicators (HDIs), such diversity can be classified into three main categories:

- High Human Development

These include four countries, namely: Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirate and Qatar. They are sparsely populated and all oil producing countries.

- Middle Human Development
These include ten Arab countries, namely: Libya, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt.
- Low Human Development
These include three countries, namely: Yemen, the Sudan and Mauritania.

The report also indicates that the efficiency of the Arab world, especially with regard to the use of modern technology in human development, is still weak. These indicators negatively reflect the conditions of women in these countries. Most women still play a traditional role like housekeeping, which includes dependency on men who are the sole breadwinner. Women constitute 16% of the manpower in Arab countries and unemployment among women is three-fold more than men. They work in the traditional sectors of teaching, farming and nursing. Illiteracy is also higher among women in the Arab countries. In some countries for example like Yemen illiteracy among women is more than 80%. Illiteracy is one of the barriers that prevent women from gaining rights, especially political rights. Most Arab countries have passed laws allowing women to vote and be elected. Yet, still a small number of women are represented in the political sector of Arab countries, especially within parliament. This is because in male-dominated societies women are not accepted as partners. At this time, it is worth mentioning that Tunisia is the only Arab country where women constitute 20% of parliament.

In spite of feminist's efforts, alongside other liberal civil organisations to bring about equality with men in society, the status of women is still below that of men. This is because any effort to bring about equality and freedom among women is met with strong opposition from the traditional forces in society. These traditional forces use social and religious means of control that are pervasive.

Islam and Muslims²

The root of the word Islam is *Silm* and *Salam*, which mean peace. Salam can also be interpreted as a greeting with peace. Nonetheless, it's meaning and used is not limited to these definitions. Salam ultimately implies submission to the One God; to live in peace with the Creator, within one's self, with other people and with the environment.

The followers of Islam are called Muslims. Muslims are not to be confused with Arabs. Muslims may be Arabs, Turks, Persians, Indians, Pakistanis, Malaysians, Indonesians, Europeans, Africans, Americans, Chinese, or other nationalities. An Arab could be a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew or an atheist. Any person who adopts the Arabic language is called an Arab. However, the language of the Qur'an (the Holy Book of Islam) is Arabic. Muslims all over the world try to learn Arabic so that they may be able to read the Qur'an and understand its meaning. They pray in the language of the Qur'an, namely Arabic. Supplications to God could be in any language. While there are one billion Muslims in the world there are about 300 million Arabs. Among them, approximately ten percent are not Muslims. Thus Arab Muslims constitute only about thirty percent of the Muslim population of the world.

Muslims are divided into two major doctrines; namely, *Sunni* and *Shia*. The Sunnis constitute the largest number followed by the Shiite. Shiites are the majority in Iraq but are minorities in other Arab countries like Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Syria. It is also worth mentioning that both of these doctrines further divide into subgroups.

² <http://www.unn.ac.uk/societies/islamic/>

The legal sources of Islam are the Qur'an and the Hadith. The Qur'an is the exact word of God (Allah); its authenticity, originality and totality are intact. The Hadith is the report of the sayings, deeds and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad was chosen by God to deliver His Message of Peace, namely Islam. He was born in 570 C.E. (Common Era) in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. He was entrusted with the Message of Islam at the age of forty. The Prophet's sayings and deeds are called Sunnah. The Seerah are the writings of followers of Muhammad about the life of the Prophet. Hence, it is the life history of the Prophet Muhammad, which provides examples of proper daily living for Muslims.

God instructed the Muslims to practice what they believe. In Islam there are five pillars, namely:

1. Creed (Shahada): The verbal commitment and pledge that there is only One God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God, is considered to be the Creed of Islam.
2. Prayers (Salat): The performance of the five daily prayers is required of Muslims.
3. Fasting (Saum): Fasting is total abstinence from food, liquids and intimate intercourse (between married couples) from dawn to sunset during the entire month of Ramadan.
4. Purifying Tax (Zakat): This is an annual payment of a certain percentage of a Muslim's property, which is distributed among the poor or other rightful beneficiaries.
5. Pilgrimage (Hajj): The performance of pilgrimage to Makkah is required once in a lifetime if means are available. Hajj is in part in memory of the trials and tribulations of the Prophet Abraham, his wife Hagar and his eldest son Prophet Ishmael.

Islamic practices are based on the lunar calendar. However, Muslims also use the Gregorian calendar to regulate their daily religious lives. Hence, the Islamic calendar includes both the Common Era and the migration (Hijra) year of the Prophet of Islam from Makkah to Madinah in the year of 623 C.E.

Muslims have two celebrations (Eid); namely, Eid of Sacrifice and Eid of Fast-Breaking. The Eid of Sacrifice is in remembrance of the sacrifice made by (Prophet Abraham of his son. The Eid of Fast-Breaking ends the month of fasting. The month of fasting is Ramadan. Islam allows Muslims to eat everything that is healthy. It restricts certain items such as pork and its by-products, alcohol, or any narcotic or addictive drug.

The Muslim place of worship is called a Mosque or Masjid. For Muslims, there are three holy places of worship in the world. These are the Mosque of Kaaba in Makkah, the Mosque of the Prophet Muhammad in Madinah, and the Masjid Aqsa, adjacent to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. A Muslim may pray any where in the world whether in a Mosque, a house, an office, or outside. The whole world is a place of worship. While it is preferable that Muslims pray in a congregation, he or she may also pray individually anywhere.

The holy day for Muslims is Friday. Friday is considered sacred, and the Day of Judgment is expected to take place on a Friday. Muslims come together shortly after noon each Friday, for a congregational prayer in a Mosque. A leader (*Imam*) gives a sermon (*Khutba*) and leads the congregational prayer.

Muslims are required to respect all those who are faithful and God conscious people, namely those who received messages. Christians and Jews are called People of the Book. Muslims are asked to call upon the People of the Book for common terms, namely, to worship One God, and to work together to find the solutions to society's problems.

Christians and Jews lived peacefully with Muslims throughout centuries in the Middle East and other Asian and African countries. The second Caliph Umar did not pray in the church in Jerusalem so as not to give the Muslims an excuse to take it over. Christians entrusted the Muslims, and as such the key to the Church in Jerusalem is still in the hands of the Muslims. Throughout the Muslim world, churches, synagogues and missionary schools were built within the Muslim neighbourhoods. These places remained protected by Muslims even during the contemporary crises in the Middle East.

Part I: Woman abuse from an Islamic Perspective

1.1 Women's Rights in Islam

The main ideology of Islam with regard to the status of women is that women should be equal to men in rights and responsibilities. This is reflected in the marriage contract that necessitates the consent of both the bride and bridegroom. The two contracting partners have equal rights to continue the relationship or nullify the contract or divorce. In so far as the man is concerned, this is termed *Talaq* (divorce). In so far as the woman is concerned, this is termed *Khula*.³ Islam outlines detailed rules concerning the building of marriage contracts and subsequently terminating them.

Islam has endowed upon women several rights. Some of these rights are: to retain her maiden name after marriage and to maintain and carry out her financial or business income independently "*Dhima Malia*". Islam also allows women to keep their nationality, keep custody of children after divorce and it obligates the husband to pay alimony (family support). There are several versions in the Qur'an and *Hadith*⁴ that stress on the rights of women. The following section clarifies the causes of the overlapping cultures of the Muslim countries with the teachings of Islam with regard to women 's Rights.

1.2 Religious Teachings versus Cultural Endowments

The status of women and their relationship with men and the family remains a controversial issue in the lives of Muslims. In current practice, the teachings of Islam have been mixed with what has been inherited from the accumulated cultures through the centuries. For example women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to drive cars. This prohibition is justified by deploying a particular interpretation of Islamic texts. The Islamic scholars in many other Islamic countries disagree with such interpretations. The mixing the teachings of Islam with distinct cultural traditions that exist in Islamic countries is the result of many reasons; some of which are summarized below:

A.

Before the advent of Islam, 1400 years ago in the Arabian Peninsula that used to be occupied mainly by tribes and nomads, the major occupation of the inhabitants of these regions was raising cattle, business and invasion of other tribes. Men used to carry most of these works. The role of women was basically limited to offering sexual pleasure for men and raising children. Some tribes in these regions became famous for degrading women in the marriage relationship. This is reflected in the practices of absolute polygamy, the forced marriage of women captured during war to her conqueror, the right of the eldest son to inherit

³ Right of women to divorce her husbands, in Islamic right(Shariaa).

⁴ The term applied to the reports of the prophet Muhammad's words and actions

his father's wife, as she is viewed as one of his father's assets. There were other traditions attached to marriage that could permit the husband to offer his wife for a short period for the guest or lending her to one of his friends during the period of his absence. Although Islam came with progressive ideas that give more freedom and better status to women, yet some of the tribal traditions of the people of the Arabian Peninsula were integrated as part of Islamic heritage.

B.

With the spread of Islam in other cultures, the Qur'an was interpreted according to the cultures where Islam prevailed. For example, during the Ottoman Empire, Turkish cultures and traditions were enforced as part of the Islamic culture with regard to the relationship between couples. Segregation of women from men was enforced during the Ottoman Empire as a part of the Islamic culture.

C.

Islam did not always develop smoothly but also passed through 'dark ages' characterized by periods of stagnation. During this period the scientific and logical interpretation of Qur'an was suppressed. Thus many backward ideas about women spread and were considered as part of Islamic teachings.

D.

Men were the sole interpreters of the Qur'an. Therefore, the versions related to the status of women in the Qur'an were interpreted in harmony with their interests. We should not forget here what the Prophet has said pointing at his wife *Aisha*, "Take half of the teachings of your religion from her." This clearly shows that women have a right to interpret the Qur'an. However, many Muslims ignore or are prevented from practicing this right.

The above-mentioned ideas show how Islam acquired different traditions that were incorporated into Islamic religious teachings. This was consolidated through two main ways: the first one is a socialization process whereby the discrimination of females is stressed since childhood by giving greater roles to the boys and ignoring the role of girls. The second one involves the enforcement of these ideas by passing legislation that limits the freedom of women and their roles in the family and society. This is seen in some of the articles on personal status laws in most of the Arab countries that ignore the rights of women. Some examples include depriving her from having the right to divorce her husband, and forcing her to obey her husband. Muslim clerics still differ on these issues; especially that wives must obey their husbands. Some are of the opinion that it is the right of the husband to charge his wife and the wife is obligated to obey. A wife disobeying her husband results in punishment that leads to her forced obedience or depriving her from family support. Others are of the opinion that marriage is a partnership that is based on the good treatment of each other. Those of this opinion reject the idea of absolute obedience.

Mohamed Fathi Nageeb⁵ summarizes that the inherited cultures have influenced the formulation of laws in the Arab countries due to the equal status given to non-negotiable Qur'anic tenants and the negotiable rules and Islamic law (Sharia⁶) defined by clerical interpretation. Therefore much of the legislation

⁵ Nagib, Mohammed Fathi, (2001). *The effects of the marriage contract on the Arab legislation regarding to the personal status.*

<http://www.amanjordan.org/womenand law>.

related to the family and women in most Arab countries based on the Sharia, are considered nonnegotiable rules even though these are not derived from Qura'nic verses, but emerge out of interpretations. We can therefore summarize by saying that the legislation that restricts the rights of women result from the way the Qur'an was and continues to be interpreted and manipulated by various cultural traditions.

In conclusion, it is clear that Islam rejects the abuse of women and views the relationship between husband and wife as one based upon equality in rights and responsibilities. The abuse of women is distorted and downplayed in Arab countries by manipulative interpretations. This stems from the continued influence of traditional Arab culture that relies on deliberately patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an, coupled with some political legislation that unjustly restricts the rights of women.

1.3 Response of the Arab Societies towards Women Abuse

Arab societies in general view and deal with issues related to the abuse of women within the framework of the family. This framework is defined according to old traditional cultures on the pretext that these views are in conformity with the Islamic teachings. In the past ten years, some non-traditional views emerged. These views put the issues surrounding the abuse of women into public forum. The development that took place in the media has played an important role in bringing these issues to light, especially the live programmes that are presented as talk shows on the television. These programmes allowed women to call and interact during the program with issues that were previously considered taboo. The following clarifies the response of Arab countries with regards to these issues.

1.4 The laws of Arab countries and the abuse of women in the family

Most of the Arabic laws incorporate articles that discriminate against women especially with regards to issues related to divorce. These laws deprive women of their right to get divorced. Tunisia serves as an example, as it is the only Arab country that gives women the same rights as men when it comes to divorce. This year Egypt included an article in its Personal Status Law that gives women the same rights as men to seek a divorce. Most of the laws in Arab countries incorporate articles related to obedience, this means wives are obligated to obey husbands. In cases of disobedience, the wife is forced by law to return to her husband against her will. Laws in Arab countries may also incorporate articles that legally absolve persons who commit murder against female members of the family suspected of adultery. Also, legal codes in Arab countries do not include procedures that protect women from domestic violence.

1.5 The Role of Society to Combat of the Abuse of Women

In the past five years, human rights organisations in Arab countries started to focus their programmes on issues related to the abuse of women. These activities centre mainly on raising social, legal and religious awareness to encourage society to fight against the abuse of women. In addition to this, these

⁶ The rules by which Muslim societies have been governed throughout centuries (Islamic right)

organizations also focus on capacity building and personnel training. These organizations use several means to counter violence against women such as the media, the Internet, the mosques, etc.

Jordan is one of the Arab countries considered a pioneer in combating woman abuse. Jordan has developed policies aimed at swaying public opinion against the abuse of women and has encouraged different initiatives in this regard. One of the most significant activities that appeared in Jordan is the one related to combating honour killings that got full support from the Royal Family. Jordan for example has hosted the Regional Workshop on Honour Killings in June 1999. The outcome of this workshop meeting was the formation of a regional network to combat honour killings.

Further governmental and non-governmental agencies in Jordan also formed several institutions concerned with the protection of women and children from domestic violence. As examples, the Department of Family and Child Protection was established in affiliation with the Ministry of Interior and the Jordanian Women's Union recently established shelters for the first time.

Recently, a website called *the Arab Centre for Information and Resources for Violence Against Women* was constructed by a non-governmental organization. In spite of the humble resources available to human rights organisations in Arab countries, steady steps have been made especially in the area of raising awareness of women abuse and rallying public opinion against it. Men and women work together in these organizations to struggle against the abuse of women.

These activities are not only limited to liberal Arab countries such as Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, but have also extended to include other conservative countries such as Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. In Yemen, for example, many non-governmental organizations have come into existence to fight the abuse of women in spite of the resistance met by traditional forces. Some official newspapers in Saudi Arabia have also started talking openly of the incidence of abused women in the Kingdom. Some centres have been established to help abused women in the Kingdom.

In conclusion, it is encouraging to see that in spite of strong opposition by traditional conservative forces to the initiatives of human rights organisations in Arab countries, the societies of these countries have started responding positively. The Arab public has begun to discuss the issues surrounding the abuse of women within the family publicly.

Part II: Methodology

2.1 Data Collection:

For the purpose of this study, interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in the Arab Muslim community. Key informants such as the Imams of the two mosques in London were interviewed. The topics for the interviews and the discussion groups dealt with understandings of women abuse in the family, reasons for women abuse, dynamics of abused women towards violence, the extent to which facilities provided by the women abuse agencies are used, and with views towards the Canadian justice system on the issue of women abuse.

The interviews and the focus group discussions began with questions seeking to understand the nature of problems facing Arab immigrants to London. This was followed by an exploration of the issues of domestic violence in Arabic speaking Muslim families. The participants were candid and cooperative. The focus group discussions took place at Wheable, the Centre for Adult Education and at the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children as well. Each session lasted approximately 2 hours.

In addition, representative of various local agencies in London were interviewed to gain further insight and knowledge. Key informants included staff from the following agencies: the Women's Community House, Women Battered Advocacy, the London Police, Sexual assault centre, Victim Witness Assistance, the London Inter Community Health Centre, ESL Centre, Across Languages, Changing Ways, the Cross Cultural Learner Centre, Success Resources London, the centre for children and family in the justice system, and the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children.

The purpose of these interviews was to determine the current levels of service utilisation by Arab Muslim women, to explore the experience of London agencies with providing services to this particular cultural group and to develop suggestions for program and outreach strategies. An extensive literature review about Islam's position toward woman abuse was also conducted. The aim of this study is to provide a better understanding of the situation and context of violence against women in Arab communities, including religious and cultural issues associated with transition to Canadian society.

2.2 The Arab Muslim Community in London

There are about 35,000 Muslims in London, Ontario. The Arab Muslim population is about 10,000. Arab Muslim's in London come from such diverse countries such as: Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, Egypt, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Morocco. In addition, there are ethnic groups like the Kurdish who come mainly from such countries as Iraq and Syria and speak Arabic alongside their first language (Kurdish). Somalia is a member of the Arab League, and there is a big Somali population here in London. The study excluded Somalis, because Arabic is not their first language. Arab immigrants came to Canada for many different reasons. Some families came independently for work or business. Others arrived as refugees because of civil war or due to an unfavourable change in government in their countries. The challenges Arab families face integrating in Canadian society differ depending on the reasons that led them to immigrate. Some families lost everything before arriving in Canada, including many of their relatives. The trauma of such losses is difficult to forget and add to the stress of adjusting to a new social environment. The structure and content of family life for immigrant's from the Arab world in Canada is strongly influenced both by the problems they have left behind and by the many challenges related to the

adjustment process in Canada. Often the lack of proficient English language skills, differing levels in the quality of education and unrecognised qualifications add barriers that make the process of adjustment and integration rather difficult.

Part III: Women Abuse from the Point of View of the Arab Muslim Community in London

As mentioned above several interviews were conducted with several Arab males and females residing in London, Ontario. Also, focus group discussions with Arab females were carried out. The results of these interviews and discussions are summarized below:

3.1 Women Abuse Concept within the Family

The opinions and understandings of woman abuse by the male and female participants can be classified into three categories:

A. The first category views the concept of women abuse as a Western concept. The issue of violence against women is thought to result from the weak nature of family bonds in Western society and from an absence of religious teachings. As Muslim families are taught to live by Islamic teachings that stress the strong moral bond of the family that enjoys mercies it is felt that there is no place for violence within the family. The group of interviewed Muslim males and females in this category believe that beatings that take place within the family from time to time are merely a component of familial disciplinary actions that do not necessitate the interference of the law. In the opinion of these participants, domestic beatings are not a crime that is (or should be) punishable by law. It should be noted that this view is held by only a very small percentage of the people interviewed.

B. The second category is of the opinion that domestic violence occurs in all societies including Arabic and Islamic societies. However, they differentiate between violence that constitutes a criminal offence, such as acts of assault and battery, and cases of ‘petit beatings’ that women may be subjected to by husbands and that do not have any serious consequence to the health of the women. In addition to that this group doesn’t consider other form of woman abuse such as economic and emotional as an abusive behaviour. This group constitutes a **large** percentage of the Arab Muslim community. The views of this group are shared by a large percentage of members of the Arab Muslim community.

C. The third category does not make any distinction between types of domestic violence. This group is of the opinion that familial bonds do not serve as an excuse to commit violence against women. Their understanding is that Canadian laws exist in order to protect abused women from assault by any man including member of the family. They outwardly reject any justifications, whether cultural or religious, that allows husbands to assault their spouses. The number of individuals constituting this group makes up a small percentage of the Arab community in London.

3.2 Reasons of Woman Abuse within the Family

The difficulty of the new social and economic environment for immigrant Arab families may lead to a situation in which the husband no longer feels he is able to provide for his family as he once used to. These feelings may be exacerbated as women join the labour force in Canada to help supplement or even fully earn the family's income. Some men may feel that a lack of social and economic success in Canadian society weakens his image within the family and his community, and presents him as a man not capable of providing for his family according to the customs of his home country.

Feelings of failure may lead to an internal conflict for the husband, at which point he faces two possible options. One option is for the husband to change his notions of what constitutes proper marital roles and accept his position as a partner within the marriage rather than leader. Such a move involves a redefinition of the concept of manhood once nourished and practiced. The author of this study feels that most men will find it difficult to embrace a marital relationship based upon notions of partnership. Instead, many men feel more comfortable holding onto traditions that associate manhood with strength and control. Domestic violence tends to occur most often in families where the husband finds it difficult to let go of old patterns of marital interaction and gender expectations.

As mentioned above, men are brought up not only to be the breadwinner but also to ensure that cultural and religious traditions continue to guide family life. As the husband perceives and feels his status within the family diminish, he may become more concerned about maintaining and enforcing traditional cultural roles within the family. As frustrations within the husband begin to build, the husband may find it easy to lash out against his wife and to punish her for supposed transgressions from the cultural role she is meant to play. This sort of popular reasoning pushes the blame of domestic violence onto women themselves. Within this male biased framework, the behaviour of women becomes responsible for accounting for the violent behaviour of men. In this respect, the reasoning of Arab men for their own violent behaviour does not differ from the justifications of abusive men in society generally.

From the interviews conducted, it is clear that many participants feel that abused women themselves bear the responsibility of violence because of their supposed disobedient behaviour. The participants of the interviews indicated that they felt that while husbands feel strongly about maintaining traditional family roles and obligations women on the other hand feel empowered to act differently or 'selfishly' because the Canadian legal system is in her favour. Thus, popular reasoning within the Arab community holds that women begin to betray their obligations to the family because of their awareness of the protection they receive from the legal system. Such understandings distort the realities of domestic abuse. In this situation, the husband gains the sympathy of the community and not the abused woman because people feel that it is the wife who has failed to live up to traditional obligations. Therefore, when abused women refer to community leaders for help and guidance oftentimes she will not find a sympathetic support system.

In conclusion, most of those interviewed for this study from the Arab Muslim community feel that woman abuse arises out of the frustrations and disappointments of husbands finding themselves unemployed or underemployed, and from the so-called 'disobedience' of wives and their reliance on Canadian legal protections and rights. It must be recognized that such reasoning by participants is distorted in order to serve the purpose of providing the husband with legitimate grounds for domestic violence.

3.3 The Dynamic of Abused Women towards Violence

The great majority of the women interviewed are of the opinion that most abused women in the Arab community do not refer to legal or other agencies, but prefer to remain silent and bear the violence to which they are subjected. If the violence persists and is repeated women may react by discontinuing communication with their husbands, by seeking help with relatives either in Canada or their home country, or occasionally by approaching family friends in the

community or neighbours. When these efforts bear no result only then do women consider seeking advice from the Imam. Approaching the Imam for guidance and solace can be a dangerous move since their actions might be easily exposed to their husbands if the religious community structure view acts of violence against women as acceptable private behaviour. According to the women interviewed very few of the women suffering abuse refer to anti-violence agencies such as the police and women's community agencies. Many Arab Muslim women believe that seeking out the help and protection of existing agencies serving society constitutes a measure of last resort after all familial and community routes have been exhausted.

The large majority of abused women in the Arab Muslim community refrain from approaching anti-violence agencies because they are taught to hold the view that making use of such agencies and publicizing private disputes constitutes a breach of the marriage contract. In seeking out mainstream social agencies, women may subject themselves to a loss of status and respect within their community and within their family in particular. Thus, some of the barriers that prevent women in the Muslim Arab community who face domestic violence from seeking out help from service providers include: their ignorance of the type of services available, false or incomplete information about social agencies and the help that they provide and such social factors as isolation and insufficient English language skills.

3.4 The Use of Social Agencies

Most of the individuals (male and female) interviewed revealed that their knowledge of services for abused women is limited and vague. Many believe that these agencies only provide shelter. Their knowledge of agencies and their services is not based on firsthand knowledge but, rather are based often are based upon what they have heard from people in their community. Such information is frequently based upon certain stereotypes. Only a limited number of those interviewed have positive attitudes about agencies that provide services for abused women. However, a small number of interviewed women mentioned that the existence of such agencies has helped save the lives of many women in the Muslim Arab community. Furthermore, the courage of some women to seek help with social service agencies has lead many men to change their attitudes fearing that they will face the law and lose their children and wives.

The negative view that much of the Arab Muslim community has acquired about shelters is a major obstacle that leads abused women not to seek out the help and protection of these shelters. Negative notions and understandings of the shelter and social service system are spread by men and traditional elements of the Arab Muslim community who believe that such services and protections serve to weaken or destroy Islamic family values. It should also be mentioned that very often men have the consent of their wives to represent them and to act on their behalf in many formal administrative matters and that men generally take charge of bureaucratic and legal affairs. Allowing husbands this sort of representative authority means that women remain ignorant about much of the content of Canadian laws and are frequently unaware of their legal rights. Since many Arab Muslim women have limited interaction with formal social and legal institutions in Canadian society many are uninformed of the social supports available and are forced to rely upon information provided by husbands. Many of the interviewed people strongly argued for the need of service providers to understand the cultures and attitudes of Arab Muslim communities and to be more culturally sensitive.

3.5 The Views of Participants towards the Canadian Justice System and Actions on Woman Abuse

An analysis of the discussions with those interviewed revealed that most are uninformed about the Canadian justice system and legal actions on woman abuse. The main source of knowledge of the law and woman abuse stems from what they learn from members within their community. Many of these beliefs are reinforced when people of the Arab Muslim community learn that individuals from different cultural communities share their views and opinions. Generally, many in the Arab Muslim community hold the opinion that the justice system and legal actions on domestic violence interfere in family matters that are internal affairs.

The views of participants towards the Canadian legal system and actions on woman abuse can be classified into three categories:

1. Those that believe that the Canadian justice system contradicts Arab traditions and Islamic values
2. Those that believe that the Canadian justice system should provide protection to women from domestic violence
3. Those who feel that the content and objective of Canadian laws are not in contradiction with the teachings of the Koran when it comes to women's rights and the protection of women from violence, whatever the source of threat may be. However, they also point out that the manner in which the law is often implemented does not give due consideration for cultural sensitivity.

It is important to underline the point that the negative attitudes of those interviewed towards Canadian laws and the legal system should not be understood in isolation from their experiences with and conceptual understandings of the legal system in their home countries. Many participants believe that Canadian laws aim to weaken the role of the husband in enforcing discipline and order in the family. The belief that Canadian laws interfere in a manner that works against the family contradicts the content of laws in Arab countries, which give more authority to the husband to control the affairs of the family. This cultural respect for the role of the husband explains why many in the Arab Muslim community remain suspect of the workings of the Canadian legal system. Traditionally in Arab countries husbands are respected for their role as family providers and protectors. For instance, in cases of honour killings, the murder of a female member of the family by a male member, in Arab countries the punishment imposed on the murderer contains sentences of lesser degree, as seen for example in Article 341 of the Jordanian Criminal Code of Law.

Another reason for the negative attitudes of the Arab Muslim males towards the content of Canadian laws stems from the fact that many simply do not have much contact and experience with the legal system in this country. Most immigrant families continue to live their lives in Canada with a strong emphasis on tradition and custom. Most of the people are of the opinion that the law is unfairly enforced upon the weak members of society and on those who have less influence. In some societies, for example, seeking out justice through the law reflect the weak status of their tribe or social background.

Thus, one can deduce from the different attitudes of those interviewed that their views on the issue of the woman abuse are influenced greatly by their understandings of justice gained from their home countries. Since the content of laws in Arab countries is biased towards males, many of the interviewed carry negative attitudes towards the values of gender equality entrenched in Canadian laws. Therefore, raising the level of legal awareness in Arab communities in Canada is of great importance in the fight for the prevention of women abuse.

Conclusion:

This preliminary study is a product of the cooperation between the London Muslim community, the anti-violence agencies in London and me. For the first time a discussion about this very sensitive issue within the Arab Muslim community has been initiated. This first impression reveals that Muslim community leaders are aware of the necessity to work on the issue of woman abuse in collaboration with anti-violence agencies in London, Ontario. A plan for future collaboration between the Arab Muslim community and London service agencies will be tackled as an important next step.

The literature review with respect to the position of women within Islam and the issue of woman abuse showed that Islam respects women's rights and does not permit husbands to abuse their wives. In Islam, the marital relationship is viewed as a partnership between two people with equal rights and responsibilities. Therefore, it is important to stress here that Islam does not tolerate violence against women and that unequal gender relations in some Arab and Muslim are a reflection of cultural practices that predate Islam. Many of these societies are still tribal and patriarchal, and emphasize the dominant role of men within the family and the society. In fact, there are no essential differences between the teachings of Islam and the Canadian justice system with regard to woman abuse issues, in that both prohibit violence against women.

The results of the interviews and the focus group discussions show that understandings of woman abuse used by participants of the group discussions play a key role for comprehending the barriers that prevent abused women in the Arab Muslim community from accessing social services. For many the issue of woman abuse refers only to violent action that results in serious physical harm. Other forms of woman abuse such as emotional, financial and 'light' physical abuse are frequently excluded from definitions of woman abuse held by participants from the Arab Muslim community. This indicates that the husband's dominant role within the family continues to be viewed as acceptable and normal in a large section of the Arab Muslim community.

Based upon the situation described above it is clear that it is very difficult for women in the Arab Muslim community who experience an abusive relationship to ask for outside help from places such as woman abuse agencies. Many women may find it easier to remain in the abusive relationship rather than seeking help from institutions present in society. It seems likely that many women fear that if they ask for help from social support and anti-violence agencies they risk being isolated from their families and communities and risk losing their status and reputation. Women also face the greater fear of possibly losing their children by seeking out help from social law enforcement and support agencies. Thus, abused women in Arab Muslim communities will often not seek out any supportive intervention by social agencies in order to avoid negative familial and community responses.

It is clear that the popular definition of woman abuse by members of the Arab Muslim community, especially by males, serves to justify the status quo of unequal gender relationships and to minimize the personal accountability of men for taking responsibility for their violent actions. The blame for abusive actions is placed upon the social and economic circumstances that immigrant Arab Muslim families find themselves in. The disappointment and frustration over the reality of finding themselves unemployed or underemployed is provided as grounds for understanding violent behaviour in the home. Many men may also feel

provoked by the fact that their wives may be playing more active economic and social roles than they used to. Such a situation in the minds of many husbands serves to highlight their own failure to provide and care for their family and also serves as an underlying cause for abusive and violent behaviour towards their spouses. In other words, the dominant logic of abuse in the Arab Muslim community suggests that it is not the husbands themselves have a problem with violent behaviour rather that violence emerges a result of the difficult economic and social context experienced in Canada. Therefore, attitudes within the Arab Muslim community need to be changed so that violent behaviour itself is addressed and condemned.

Recommendations for future action:

The interviews and group sessions with both male and female members of the Arab Muslim community and social service and law enforcement agencies working on the issue of woman abuse in London reveal that gaps in communication exist. It is important to reiterate a point made earlier in this paper that violence against women exists in all societies and all communities, regardless of cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. So it is important that the Arab Muslim community not be singled out as a community that exhibits a unique display of violence against women. Rather, the purpose of this study is meant to highlight how the issue of domestic violence is conceived of in the Arab Muslim community, by both male and female members, and to gain a better understanding of how mainstream social agencies and services in London are viewed and used by women suffering abuse in the Arab Muslim community. What emerges from this study is a picture of a community isolated from and suspicious of legal and social service agencies and a strong sense that women suffering domestic violence do so in silence and without help.

It is enormously difficult for any woman who suffers domestic abuse to seek out help and support. Many women do not speak out because they are ashamed and embarrassed. The barriers to be overcome for immigrant women are that much greater. Immigrant women must work through realities of social isolation marked by a lack of proficiency in English, unemployment and the lack of a social support system. Although the work of social and legal service agencies was not analysed in this paper, it is clear that if the purpose is to improve the situation for women suffering domestic violence then these agencies must work to understand and reach out to the Arab Muslim community.

It is clear then that one of the first steps must be to bridge the distance that exists between the Arab Muslim community and social agencies through better communication strategies that are based upon mutual understanding and respect. These strategies should develop out of collaborative engagements that involve members of the Arab Muslim community in the development of public education and resource materials. Also, education and outreach efforts should focus on prevention over intervention when it comes to woman abuse. It is as important to change people's attitudes towards violent behaviour, as it is to ensure that individuals are aware of the legal and social instruments that exist in society to help them. As mentioned before, these efforts at education and discussion should involve both female and male members of the Muslim Arab community, in conjunction with social and legal service agencies.

Thus, strategies of collaboration and education that work to inform members of the Arab Muslim community on the issue of woman abuse and to build a climate of mutual understanding, support, trust and openness should begin by:

1. holding joint meetings and workshops with the Arab Muslim community and local anti-violence agencies with the aim of creating trust and a supportive working relationship to work on the issue of woman abuse
2. developing strategies of communication that work to inform and educate the Arab Muslim community on woman abuse, the role of social service agencies and the law, as well as educating social and legal agencies on Islam, religious and cultural values, and on the experiences of immigration and resettlement for the Arab Muslim community in London
3. work collaboratively with Arab Muslim women on the publication of booklets and posters in both Arabic and English that contains information on Islamic teachings that prohibit violence against women, as well as information about the rights of women under the law in Canada and what actions to take and where to go for help and support
4. form a community committee that meets regularly to discuss the issue of woman abuse and to actively plan and implement strategies aimed at prevention and intervention
5. encourage the London Mosque and the Islamic Centre to hold public education sessions and lectures that discuss how Islam explicitly condemns violence against women and children, and to discuss appropriate actions in moments of conflict or anger
6. also, work to develop public education programming related to domestic violence and on the existence of woman abuse for consumption by the Arabic speaking community on both radio and television stations such as CFMT, and in Arab language newspapers

These are just some recommendations that would help straddle information and communication gaps that exist between the Arab Muslim community and local law and social service agencies. Through such collaborative action it is hoped that constructive and respectful strategies of communication and education will successfully develop and result in greater understanding of domestic violence. It is hoped that such efforts will lead to effective prevention on woman abuse

Final Thoughts:

For these recommendations to come into existence and have any real impact it is important that further steps in terms of research, information sharing, community outreach and participation follow. In order to successfully bring into the open the issue of woman abuse and to involve the Arab Muslim community in the prevention of domestic violence, the next two steps taken should include:

1. A larger research survey of woman abuse in the Arab Muslim community.

This entails further interviews with Arab Muslim women already known to social service providers in the city, and with women who have approached the Mosque or Islamic Centre.

Also, focus groups and/or confidential interviews with Arabic-speaking Muslim women in the community who have not come forward about their experiences should be organized by contacting women confidentially through advertising in the Arab language media.

It is also important to include males in this process. Therefore, interviews and focus groups should be conducted with Arab Muslim males to learn more about their perspectives on woman abuse.

Such intimate research and outreach is necessary in order to gain an understanding of how the community understands and responds to the issue of woman abuse.

2. Action should be taken to develop a community action plan that involves the Arab Muslim community on woman abuse.

This would involve the implementation of better outreach strategies by social service agencies that reach more Arab Muslim women and inform them about support and services available.

Also, strategies for addressing issues of family violence should be developed with the work and help of the two London area mosques.

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A list of interviewed Key Informants of the Arabic Speaking Muslim community:

Faisal Joseph, Lawyer and a chair of the Islamic centre of London Ontario.

Gamal Taleb, Imam of London Muslim Mosque (Oxford Street)

Huda, Abdul Razaq, Community outreach & and vice president of Middle Eastern woman association in London Ontario.

Melika Joseph, Family court clinic and member of board of directors of Canadian Women Muslim Association.

Mohammed Aladeimi. Cultural Interpreter and Immigrants consultant.

Mohammad Yassin, Chairman of the Association of London Muslims (All Muslim groups are represented in this association),

Dr. Munir El-Kassem, Acting Imam of the Islamic Centre of Southwest Ontario

Razia Ali Hassan, member of the board of directors of Canadian Women Muslim Association.

Zina Abukhter, Family home visitor at London-middlesex and expert on multicultural aspects on women abuse.

A list of Interviewed Key Informants from the Anti-violence Agencies:

Alison Cunningham, Acting director of the centre for research on violence against women and children

Bina Osthoff, London Battered Women's Advocacy Centre, Program Manager.

Chantal Philips, Global educator, London Cross Cultural Learner Centre

Levonty Kazanian, London Inter Health Community centre. Co-ordinator for program on "women of the world".

Mary, Singeris, co-ordinator, Adult ESL :Wheable for adult education

Phi Arnold Changing Ways.

Ron Paul, Success Resources London, Co-ordinator.

Saira Cekic, Success Resources London, Integration councillor

Bhabani Chakraborty, Success Resources London, Integration councillor.

Susan Dill, Manager Residential Services Women's communities house London Ontario.

Tom Drouillard Police London, domestic violence inspector.

Veronica Vanderborguht , Coordinator, Victims Witness Assistance Program.