

Washington Post

Tuesday, May 8, 2007; A01

For Some Muslim Wives, Abuse Knows No Borders; Traditional Pressures Can Persist in U.S.

By Pamela Constable, Washington Post Staff Writer

One was a shy, slender young woman who spoke no English when she was brought from Pakistan to enter an arranged marriage with a stranger in Virginia. The other was a self-confident professional, born in Turkey but raised in the United States, who thought she knew what she was doing when she married an educated Muslim man in Maryland.

Yet both women fell under the sway of the same powerful pressures that sometimes reach around the globe to keep Muslim wives in the Washington region imprisoned in abusive marriages, unable to fight the gossip and shame that come with defying their culture and religion, isolated from help that is just a three-digit phone number away.

“My husband beat. He show knife. I am scared for him, for all family,” said Shamim, 21, the Pakistani bride, who was rescued by police. She is being sheltered and tutored in English at a private home. “They say no money, no call mother at home. I cook for all, I not eat. I not know 911 what is. I think I go crazy.”

Shireen, the woman in Maryland, speaks with articulate chagrin about how the crushing weight of social expectation kept her in a relationship that soon turned violent. Both women’s last names are being withheld at their request.

“I was perfectly happy living alone, but the family kept pushing me to marry. I wanted to show them I was a good Muslim girl,” said Shireen, now 37 and divorced. When her husband became abusive, she said, relatives told her to be a better wife. When she took him to court, she said, “Everyone abandoned me. I was the one who had done something wrong.”

Domestic abuse is hardly unique to Muslim immigrant communities; it is a sad fact of life in families of all backgrounds and origins. Yet, according to social workers, Islamic clerics and women’s advocates, women from Muslim-majority cultures face extra pressure to submit to violent husbands and intense social ostracism if they muster the courage to file charges or flee.

A major obstacle to recognizing and fighting abuse, experts said, can be Islam itself. The religion prizes female modesty and fidelity while allowing men to divorce at will and have several wives at once. Many Muslims also believe that men have the right to beat their wives. An often-quoted

verse in the Koran says a husband may chastise a disobedient wife, but the phrasing in Arabic is open to several interpretations.

“Many batterers manipulate Islamic law or use its perceived authority to control their wives. A man who has the power to divorce can really twist the knife,” said Mazna Hussain, an attorney for abused women at the Tahirih Justice Center in Falls Church. “Muslim women want to be faithful to their religion, and the idea that you cannot disobey the word of God is very compelling, even if you are in an abusive relationship.”

Mosques are a central focus of community life for Muslim immigrants, and the influence of their male clerics is enormous. Only a handful of these imams have spoken out on the problem of abuse, a source of shame and denial among their flocks.

In Sterling, Imam Mohamed Magid at the All Dulles Area Muslim Society offers counseling to engaged couples, ensuring they understand their mutual rights and duties. In Silver Spring, Imam Faizul Khan at the Islamic Society of the Washington Area holds weekly counseling sessions for troubled couples.

“For many years, our community did not face these issues. Women suffered in silence and fear. Even today, many imams think it could never happen in their mosque,” Khan said. “Islam gives equal rights to men and women, but there are myths in Muslim society that men are superior and violence is permitted. This is wrong, and it needs to be said.”

Khan and others are also trying to bring men into the debate by forming a group called Muslim Men Against Domestic Violence. But they said recruiting participants is not easy. Even when taken to court on charges of abuse, several experts said, many Muslim men will argue that they were within their rights or are being victimized by vindictive spouses.

Another powerful barrier to change can be the grip of Muslim culture, with its gossip among extended families and its tradition of arranged marriages, in which brides often are sent to live with their in-laws. Immigrant brides are frequently cut off from their families and isolated in new households, where they occupy the lowest social rung and might be forced to act as servants.

Social workers and government officials said there are numerous programs in the area to help Muslim women who are abused, such as hotlines with links to Arabic and Urdu speakers and shelters that serve meat slaughtered according to Islamic ritual. But if a young woman is brought to the United States, speaking no English and surrounded by in-laws, she might be as far from help as if she were living in a Pakistani or Moroccan village.

“Many women are kept inside, with no one to turn to,” said Catherine Juhel, a counselor at the Foundation for Appropriate and Immediate Temporary Help (FAITH), an assistance program for Muslim women in Herndon. “They don’t know the language or the laws here, only what their husband tells them. Often they come from a society where if you go to the police, they will bring you right back home. How can they be sure it would be any different here?”

A cudgel often wielded by abusive Muslim husbands in the United States is their power over the legal immigration status of their wives. Many brides arrive with temporary “marriage” visas obtained through husbands who are U.S residents or citizens. Lawyers and social workers say an angry or demanding husband might threaten to “call immigration” and have the wife deported, raising the horrifying specter of her returning home in shame.

Many imported Muslim wives do not know that there are U.S. laws allowing them to seek residency alone if they can prove they have been abused by their spouses. Several legal-aid organizations in the region handle these petitions free of charge, and they help women seek protective orders and child custody.

A closely related problem is nervousness about the prospect of leaving home. In many Muslim societies, women are protected and housed by their fathers and then by their husbands; if they date or live alone, they risk being tarred as prostitutes. To seek shelter from strangers in an alien country might seem a worse fate than enduring abuse in familiar surroundings.

“Sometimes women do not want to go to shelters. Even if the man is beating her and the children, she may feel it is their Islamic duty to remain home and respect him,” said Ambreen Ahmad, director of FAITH. “We try to show them that in Islam, their rights are protected and their duty is only to God. When they finally understand, they are so relieved they cry and cry. It is like breaking shackles.”

In the case of Shamim, it took a series of contacts with sympathetic relatives and women’s rights activists for her to summon the nerve to call 911. When she finally did, the police came in a patrol car, helped her pack while her husband and in-laws watched in astonishment, and escorted her to a friend’s home.

“Now I am freedom,” Shamim said, grinning broadly as she took a tea break recently from her English studies. “I stay America. Not go home. In home, everyone blame woman, it is my culture. Everyone blame me.”

Yet even U.S.-educated women can be browbeaten into enduring abuse for fear of shaming their families or facing cruel gossip at the mosque. Organizations that help them escape are viewed by some conservative Muslims here as dangerous saboteurs of Muslim values and family.

In Shireen’s case, even a college degree and a good job could not fend off the demands of family and community bent on fitting her into a traditional Muslim mold. Now that she finally has freed herself from an unhappy match, she said, she has become a pariah to the family that once hovered around her “I know I was stupid to give in, but you get overwhelmed by all the pressure,” she said. “Now I have been totally shunned. I embarrassed my husband in the eyes of the community. It doesn’t matter why I left him or what he did to me. Even in America, you can’t always get away from home.”

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