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Muslims in Philly Shun Men Who Abuse Wives

By Kristin E. Holmes, Knight Ridder Newspapers

PHILADELPHIA – The veil shrouding spouse abuse in Muslim families is being torn away by some mosque leaders – putting them at the forefront of efforts by American Muslims to stem domestic violence.

The Philadelphia clergy council – known as the Majlis Ash’Shura of Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley – has adopted a tough policy of public shunning of Muslims who abuse their spouses or abandon their families.

Under the initiative, adopted in May, offenders will go on a list circulated among area Muslims. They will be banned from future marriages in communities that adhere to the policy. Fellow Muslims will be discouraged from patronizing any businesses they own.

“We need to take a public stand,” said Imam Isa Abdul-Mateen, secretary of the Majlis Ash’Shura, an association of 30 imams. “We want people to know that this will not be tolerated.”

In coming months, the council will address issues such as the criteria for putting names on the list and safeguards to protect spouses who step forward.

Domestic violence appears no more prevalent in Muslim communities than elsewhere, but Islamic advocacy groups and others have tried to push the problem into the open.

With the new policy, Philadelphia leaps over other Muslim communities that are just starting to confront the issue, said Maha Alkhateeb, project manager of the Peaceful Families Project, a Virginia-based nonprofit that addresses domestic violence among Muslims.

A striking aspect of the initiative is that it was started not by female advocates but by the male leadership, said Amina Wadud, author of “Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text From a Woman’s Perspective.” “This is setting a new precedent, globally.”

The Rev. Marie Fortune of the FaithTrust Institute in Seattle, a leading domestic-violence policy center, said she knew of no other religious community in the country that had “so specific and rigorous” a policy.

Within Muslim families, domestic violence remains largely a taboo subject, Alkhateeb said. Some Muslims deny its existence in a faith in which men are supposed to be protectors of

women and children. Some immigrant families are too focused on building a better life to deal with the issue. Activists also cite a widespread reluctance to air problems and expose fellow Muslims to public scandal.

As a consequence, there is little data on the extent of the problem. One study, done in 2000, surveyed 500 Arab women in Dearborn, Mich., and found that 18 percent to 20 percent said they had suffered spouse abuse, a rate similar to that in the general population. Approximately 98 percent of the sample was Muslim, said Anahid Kulwicki, a professor at Oakland University in Rochester, Mich., who did the study.

There are signs that Muslims are awakening to the problem. A group of imams signed a pledge to fight domestic violence at a recent Peaceful Families conference in Washington.

A turning point in Philadelphia may have come in 2001 when a city police officer killed his wife and then himself. Both were Muslims, and the incident shook the Muslim community, said Taalibah Kariem-White, of Germantown, a domestic-violence expert who lectures nationally on the issue.

The policy applies to both men and women. Though there are few female batterers, Mateen envisions the sanctions applying to women who make or threaten false claims to police or vindictively deny a man visitation with his children.

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