

Dr Mohammed Baobaid to the Yemen Times:

“There are many Muslim men and women who believe wrongly that Islam endorses men’s violence against women.”

Yemen Times Staff

A leading Yemeni academic, Dr Mohammed Baobaid was presented on 26 September with an Everyday Hero award by the Canadian Centre for Research and Education for Violence Against Women and Children (CRVAWC) for his role as project coordinator of the Muslim Family Safety Project, an initiative to help victims of violence in the Muslim community in Ontario where he lives.



Dr Mohammed Baobaid advocates for men and religious leaders to be part of the solution to domestic violence.

With a doctorate in Psychology and Criminology, Dr Baobaid advocates for men like him, as well as community leaders, to be part of the solution to domestic violence against women in Yemen and in the Muslim community in Canada.

Head of the Department of Women Studies at the University of Sana’a from 1997 to 1999, Dr Baobaid now lives in Canada where he is a research associate in the CRVAWC, a board member of the Children’s Aid Society, and a men’s councilor for Changing Ways, a Canadian organization that helps men eliminate abusive behavior in their intimate relationships. Dr Baobaid answered Alice Hackman’s questions.

According to UNICEF, between 20 and 50 percent of women worldwide have been subjected to domestic violence during their lives. In many cases, these women remain silent out of shame and fear of society’s judgment. Is this shame any different for a female victim of domestic violence in an Islamic Arab society?

Women who are victimized by their intimate partners are reluctant to ask for outside help because of the consequences on their status within their communities and their families.

I think the situation with victimized women in an Arab and Muslim society would be more difficult if they choose to ask for outside help. The main barriers that prevent Muslim abused women from asking for outside help is the fear of isolation from the community.

We come from a collective society, where relationship to family, network and community come prior to the self interest. So fear of isolation would be one of the major factors that make these women remain silent and not come forward with their stories. This is what I have whether from the research I conducted in Yemen as well as within the Muslim communities in Canada.

Most studies on domestic violence point to husbands as the main perpetrators of abuse against women. In Islamic Arab society, what are the risks taken by a victim of abuse in publicly seeking help and denouncing her husband?

The concept of domestic violence is new in Muslim and Arab countries. Usually people perceive any abuse [of] a woman by her husband or any other male figure in the family as a private and family matter. So, victimized women who brought their stories to the attention of the public would be stigmatized as “bad wives and bad mothers.” With this kind of stigmatization women’s safety could be in real danger.

The obstacles to speaking out are obviously greater for a non-English-speaking woman living in Canada. As coordinator of the Muslim Family Safety Project in London, Ontario, you oversaw the production of brochures in seven languages to inform members of the city's Muslim community about domestic violence and family law in Canada. What has been the reaction to these brochures? Have the effects been positive?

This pamphlet was part of the public education campaign that aims to raise awareness among members of the Muslim community in London, Canada.

The information pamphlet is unique in its approach because it integrates Islamic perspective with Canadian legal framework, and shows that domestic violence is Islamically wrong and legally considered a crime.

The pamphlet was the outcome of open dialogue with religious leaders of the Muslim community in the city and especially the Imams. Two Imams agreed to put their names on the pamphlet and they helped in showing that Islam doesn't support men's violence against women. Because we have been able to include the Imams in our work, the pamphlet and the other activities of our public education campaign have had a positive impact on the Muslim community.

Beside the pamphlet, we have been able to work with the Imams to address domestic violence in their Friday sermons. We have also been able to organize presentations on the issue of domestic violence in our community by inviting representative of mainstream service providers to the Mosques and the Islamic centre.

In your writings, you argue that degrading attitudes towards women in Islamic societies do not derive from Qur'anic text, but rather from pre-Islamic and Ottoman cultural traditions incorporated into Islamic teachings over the centuries. You maintain that Islam rejects the abuse of women and advocates equality in rights and responsibilities between both sexes. To what extent is the role of religious figures such as Imams important in combating domestic violence against women in Muslim society?

Religion plays very significant role in the life of individuals and families of Muslim societies and communities. In particular, religion has a huge influence in understanding and shaping gender and family relationships. Muslims in general look for religious advice and direction regarding their family and intimate relationships.

There are many Muslim men and women who believe wrongly that Islam endorses men's violence against women. This is why the role of religious leaders is very important in preventing and compacting domestic violence in Muslim societies and communities.

From your experience as a councilor for Changing Ways, a Canadian organization whose aim it is to help men eliminate abusive behavior in their intimate relationships, what do you perceive to be the main causes of violence within marriage?

The majority of victims of domestic violence are women and their children. Power imbalance to the advantage of men in intimate relationships is a major factor in domestic violence, especially in a patriarchal society.

However, in recent years many research studies have suggested that there are many other factors beside

gender that intersect with domestic violence. Poverty, culture and race could be some of the major factors that influence domestic violence.

The concept of masculinity in many patriarchal societies is unfortunately associated with controlling attitudes and behaviors, which means that men within the patriarchal framework believe that they have the right to control their spouses. In this kind of environment, it is most likely that men would use violence against their wives if their authorities are challenged. In a collective society such as Yemen, violence within marriage could be easily justified in the name of family honor protection.

Within Muslim and Arab communities in Western societies such as Canada, the picture is a bit different. Based on my observations through my clinical work as a men's counselor and through my research, I can tell you that most Muslim men who use violence in the intimate relationship have a traditional perception of their gender role and relationship within their family. These men feel that they are disrespected by their wives because of the support they receive from the Canadian justice system. So violence here is seen as a reaction towards triggers that challenge their masculinity and, on some level, as a reflection of failure to integrate in a new society.

Honor [also] plays a significant role when you look at the causes of violence against girls in the Muslim and Arab community. This is mostly because parents think that their daughters will be assimilated into mainstream Canadian culture, while they live in isolation and struggle with integration challenges. This kind of situation creates tension, anxiety and fear of losing the kids and may lead some parents - especially fathers- to use violence to control the situation.

It is important to look at context to get better insight into the key factors of violence within marriage and the family.

In a recent study on domestic violence within the Arabic-speaking community in London, Ontario, you highlight a change in the structure of marriage for many Arab couples who move to Canada from the Middle East. What is this change and what are its effects? Can a similar phenomenon be observed in modern-day Yemen?

The major changes that have occurred to many Muslim and Arab families who have migrated to Canada are mainly related to gender roles and relationships.

When you are in your country of origin, you deal with any kind of marital or family conflicts in a familiar environment. In general, people resolve their conflicts by using traditional strategies where gender roles and family structures are simple and clear.

It is very challenging for many men who come from the Middle East to see their wives gain more power than they expected, perhaps be more successful in their integration process including making significant progress in terms of jobs, mobility and independence. These changes create a different dynamic within the family and the marital relationship.

In Yemen, marriage is still very traditional and gender role within marriage is very much consistent with the traditional rules of a tribal society. Of course, the situation in some cities is different where marriage is based on partnership between two equal people.

But if we talk about Yemeni society in general, we need to remember that we are talking about a society where more than 70 percent of women are illiterate and most of them live in poverty. The most important issue here is eliminating poverty and providing proper health care and education for women.

How many men voluntarily ask Changing Ways for counseling? How effective is counseling in preventing domestic violence?

Only 30 percent of Changing Ways clients are volunteers. The rest of them are mandated by court if they are convicted with domestic assault.

The program uses cognitive behavioral model to help men change their thought patterns. It also provides them with tools that help them to cope with conflict situations within the intimate relationship in a non-violent manner. Part of the program is also focused on encouraging men to take responsibility for their choices of using abusive tactics in their intimate relationship.

Counseling programs work very well as early intervention and are very effective in preventing further victimizations of women and children. The program at Changing Ways is very successful in helping men change their abusive attitudes and behaviours as well as keeping women safe in their intimate relationships.

Does an organization similar to Changing Ways exist in Yemen? If not, do you think such a project would be successful within the context of Yemeni society?

To my knowledge there is no such program in Yemen or any other Arab countries.

I believe this kind of program is much needed in Yemen and Arab countries. However to ensure the success of this kind of project, we need to take some aspects into consideration.

First, we need to develop a counseling program that is culturally competent and consistence with the Yemeni context.

Second, we need to start with a research project to identify the needs and explore challenges and opportunities and select the most effective model that fits within the Yemeni context.

Third, we should integrate this kind of initiative within a national domestic violence prevention and intervention strategy.

In your study on violence against women in Yemen published in 2002, you noted that only 3.4 percent of Yemeni women interviewed would choose the police as a way to cope with violence against them. Do you think this statistic would change if more women were employed in the Yemeni police force?

I think the presence of female workers in the police force and the criminal justice system in general will encourage victimized women to ask for the help of the authorities.

[In addition,] the establishment of a national body that focuses on women's and children's safety would strengthen the role and the presence of female police officers. Women should have a leading role in this body and activists as well as professionals should be included.

Finally, from your experience fighting abusive behavior towards women in Canada, what additional advice cans you offers Yemeni community workers and relevant authorities in the Yemeni government?

I think the most important thing in this stage of the campaign against violence against women in Yemen is to develop a comprehensive national prevention and intervention strategy.

We should start with a national survey about the prevalence of domestic violence. We should also take some steps back and evaluate the work have been done so far, whether by the governmental or non-governmental institutions. The evaluation should also focus on the real impact of our work on women's situations by including their voices in any coming evaluation.

We need to see more collaboration between all the organizations and individuals involved in this field. In this regard, we need to be more creative in engaging men as well as key community leaders to be part of the solution. It is always very challenging to balance engaging people with authorities and, at the same time, avoiding being controlled by them.