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## Hero opens doors for Muslim women; DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES

**BYLINE:** BY JENNIFER O'BRIEN

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Domestic violence services in London are now seeing more Muslim women.

For the first time, it's not unusual for abused mothers, daughters and sisters from the 30,000-strong Muslim community to seek help. And for the first time, mainstream services are equipped to help them.

That's largely because of the passionate work of one man --Mohammed Baobaid, whose brainchild, the Muslim Family Safety Project, has changed lives by educating the community about family services and social service providers about Muslim culture.

The Yemeni immigrant is often praised by London's imams for mobilizing the community to address domestic violence. Today, at Fanshawe College, he's to receive an Everyday Hero award from the Centre for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women and Children.

"The kind of work he has done is really unique in Canada," said the centre's Barb MacQuarrie. "We are in contact with women we never would have seen otherwise."

"Islam does not condone woman abuse, but there are individuals within the Muslim community who have patriarchal values and violence is the way to maintain control."

Only a few years ago, it was "unusual" to see a Muslim woman seek help out of an abusive situation, said Kate Wiggins, of Women's Community House in London.

Baobaid, recognized internationally for his research on domestic violence in his home country, noticed the gap after immigrating to Canada.

Speaking to women from his community, he soon learned there was a lack of trust in mainstream agencies.

"Muslim women, like every other, are reluctant to come forward with their stories," said Baobaid. "But for Muslim women, because often they are coming from a collective society where relationships with community come before self interest, there is also a fear of being isolated if they ask for outside help," he said.

As a result, Baobaid conceptualized the Muslim Family Safety Project, to raise awareness and address myths inside

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and outside the community.

"There is a myth among some Muslims about what Islam says regarding woman abuse," said Baobaid.

"Some men and women think that according to Islam, the man has the right to exercise power and control over his wife and children," he said, adding such principles root back to cultural tradition -- not religious -- in some Arab Muslim countries.

"To change that (way of thinking), we needed to engage the Muslim community in a campaign against violence against women," he said.

That was a tough task in a post-9/11 world, with leaders wary of calling attention to seeming gender inequalities, given the intense scrutiny Muslims were already facing.

"Ninety per cent of my conversations with the leaders were not about the Canadian framework on women abuse but about Islam's position on woman abuse," he said.

"I said, 'Either we deal with the issues as a community and don't worry about how people perceive that, or let the problem remain.' "

Because of his work with mainstream social service agencies, places such as Women's Community House now have Muslim women on staff, the Children's Aid Society now has two Muslim foster families and the community now has the Muslim Family Support Services, through which a counselor out of Family Service Thames Valley connects with families and bridges them with the most fitting type of counselling.

But most changing is the impact the project has had on women who need help, said Zina Abukhater, president of London's Middle Eastern Women's Association.

"This has been a dream of mine for 15 years," said Abukhater, who helped found the project. "You wouldn't believe how many (women) are getting help now. He started to open eyes for both sides," she said.

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**GRAPHIC:** photo by Ken Wightman Mohammed Baobaid, a men's counsellor at Changing Ways, is being honoured with The Everyday Hero award from the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children.

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