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FINAL EDITION

Muslim project provides support for abused women

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Long a taboo subject in Muslim circles, domestic violence is more openly discussed, thanks to a just-ended program, local activists say.

But while the Muslim Family Safety Project has wound down, its three-year federal funding over, community leaders and women's activists say the project has raised awareness and should help encourage abused Muslim women to access mainstream social services.

Already, for example, Women's Community House in London is seeing more Muslim women using the shelter, said Kate Wiggins, executive director of the service.

"It's because of the dialogue," said Wiggins.

"We need to get to know one another. This kind of project sets up the context for that to happen."

Yesterday, at the London Muslim Mosque, about 90 people attended a conference to discuss the effects of the Muslim Family Safety Project, marking the end of the three- year program mainly funded by a federal \$150,000 grant.

A support service inspired by the project will continue at the mosque, said project co-ordinator Mohammed Baobaid.

"A clear message would (now) be sent from religious and spiritual leaders that Islam rejects violence against women and **children**," he said.

"That would really empower women."

Through the project, the Muslim community and the London Co-ordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse looked at barriers keeping women from using mainstream social services.

The project was a response to a study Baobaid conducted in 2001 for the University of Western Ontario's **Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children**.

Women's Community House began making home visits to help meet the needs of Muslim women and has seen more of them at the centre, now that it has some Muslim employees, said Wiggins.

A brochure for abused women will be released this spring in the six languages most commonly spoken by London's approximately 35,000 Muslims, who come from more than 50 countries.

Being mindful of language is one way to reach out to Muslim women, said Alison Cunningham, director of research at the Centre for **Children** and Families in the Justice System in London.

"A lot of women don't see themselves as abused," she said. "To talk about family violence or domestic violence or violence against women or woman abuse is not necessarily always the way that you need to phrase it."

Abuse of women is both a Canadian crime and an Islamic sin, said Melikie Joseph, who chaired the advisory committee for the project.

"As a Muslim and a social worker, I know that the fundamental principles of Islam and social work are in harmony with each other," she said.

"Both strive to promote equity and justice and recognize the inherent right of each person to be free of humiliation and abuse."