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Muslim leaders speak out against violence towards women

By CANDICE SO AND JOE FRIESEN

Honour killings have nothing to do with Islamic teaching, statement says

A broad coalition of Muslim leaders, some of them shaken by allegations emanating from the Shafia family murder trial, have seized on the Dec. 6 anniversary of the killings at Montreal's École Polytechnique to speak out about violence against women.

Nearly 60 Muslim associations have issued a statement condemning domestic violence, particularly honour killings, saying the practice has nothing to do with Islamic teachings and "[violates]clear and non-negotiable Islamic principles."

As a first step, it encourages imams to address the issue during Friday prayers.

Sikander Ziad Hashmi, an imam at the Islamic Society of Kingston, helped organize the initiative. He said he was affected by the trial of Mohammad Shafia, his second wife, Tooba Mohammad Yahya and his son Hamed, who are accused of killing Mr. Shafia's first wife and three daughters. The Crown contends they were killed in a plot to preserve the family's honour.

"I think everyone has been shocked and appalled by the kinds of things coming out of the trial," Mr. Hashmi said. "It's very serious and has very grave implications for our faith, which makes it so much more important to us to come out very clearly against these types of acts."

Mr. Hashmi said the idea that so-called honour killings are condoned by Islam is reprehensible. That's why he felt it was important to encourage Muslim leaders to speak out this week. The anniversary of the Polytechnique killings, in which 14 women were targeted and murdered based on their gender, is a reminder that violence against women can affect people of all religions and cultures, he added.

Samira Kanji, president and CEO of the Noor Cultural Centre in Toronto, said the issue strikes a personal chord with her.

"I feel very, very sad for the victims of this type of violence," Ms. Kanji said. "I think there's a reluctance on the part of many to acknowledge that there's a problem ... and a lot of people feel that it's washing your dirty linen in public."

She said that's why she and so many other leaders in the Muslim community have responded to the issue. She is speaking at a vigil at the University of Toronto on Tuesday night.

Imam Syed Soharwardy is another leader who has been working to end domestic violence.

Mr. Soharwardy, who is the head of the Jamia Riyadhul Jannah mosque in Mississauga, said he has been talking about the issue for the past decade.

He walked across Canada in 2008, leading the Multifaith Walk Against Violence to bring attention to what he sees as a "multi-dimensional problem."

"They use Islam to justify their violence," he said. "As an imam, this is my responsibility and other imams' responsibility that we speak out against these misunderstandings of Islam, intentional or unintentional."

Mr. Soharwardy stressed that the problem is not limited to the Muslim community.

Other faith groups are also addressing violence against women this week. The Women's Inter-Church Council of Canada has for the 22nd year designed a service that can be used in churches and at ceremonies of remembrance across Canada. This year, 14 women, each carrying a stone, will come forward and say a small prayer. The stones refer to a biblical passage that says, "If we keep quiet, even the stones will cry out."

"For any group talking about violence against women, the overwhelming message is we have to talk about it," said Patricia Burton-Williams, communications director at WICC. "We can't be silent."

Imam Syed Soharwardy, founder of the Islamic Supreme Council and a long-time anti-violence advocate, took your questions on the issues raised in this article. The edited questions and answers are Related content [http://external://ece-v4-article/2262247]available here.

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