



Shafia trial a wake-up call for Canadian Muslims

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The Shafia trial, now mercifully over, has been an “Ecole Polytechnique” moment for many Canadian Muslims. A shocking wake-up call to the ugly reality of family violence rooted in the need to control women – ostensibly for the sake of family “honour”. Horrific details of dysfunction within the Shafia family, culminating with the murder of four women – have shaken many out of complacency.

Mind you, those working in the field of social services, have known all too well about the breadth and depth of family dysfunction. Their voices, their pleadings have been largely ignored, as community leaders have been more interested in building grandiose mosques, than dealing with social illnesses within the community. During media coverage of the Aqsa Parvez murder, traditional institutions, for the most part, stuck their collective heads in the sand, pointed to domestic violence elsewhere, and blamed the media for biased coverage. Those who wanted to do something, anything, to address the issue, realized they had to bypass those who refused to open their eyes.

And so, before the Shafia trial even began, a grass-roots campaign, facilitated by social media, emerged to address the issue of family violence head-on. No more denials. No more defensiveness.

Imam Sikander Hashmi, the newly-appointed imam in Kingston, took the lead the day the Shafia

trial began. In no uncertain terms, he told the congregation that honour crimes were heinous, and forbidden by Islam. He reminded the audience that while such crimes were committed by different ethnic/religions groups, Muslims should step up to the plate and be part of the solution. That includes unequivocal condemnation of murder, and the establishment of resources to address family tensions.

This was soon followed by a National Call to Eradicate Domestic Violence, signed by over 100 mosques and community leaders across the country, which stated: “Domestic violence and, in the extreme, practices such as killing to “restore family honour” violate clear and non-negotiable Islamic principles, and so we categorically condemn all forms of domestic violence.” As part of this call, imams across Canada gave sermons unequivocally condemning family violence. Signatories pledged to go further by raising awareness, and providing workshops in mediation, anger management and family counselling.

Furthermore, a group of Muslim men launched the first-ever Muslim community White Ribbon Campaign at the Islamic Institute of Toronto. Men and boys pledged never to commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women and girls. It was also promoted at Toronto’s annual Reviving the Islamic Spirit convention, with an audience of 15,000. The White Ribbon campaign is scheduled to go nationwide on March 8, coinciding with International Women’s Day.

Last week, the London Muslim Resource Centre for Social Services and Integration announced the launch of the “Honouring Families” project, in partnership with Ceasefire, a renowned anti-gang program based in Chicago. The premise is that one can “save face” through mediation and non-violent options.

MRCSSI, led by Dr. Mohammad Baobaid, has a wealth of experience (and success) dealing with inter-generational conflict in Muslim families, finding key risk indicators for honour-based violence, such as: cross-generational gender conflict (e.g. father-daughter) which is exacerbated by the involvement of extended family; an older male sibling taking on a parental role; when extended family or a parent overseas has a significant say in the parenting; pre-migration trauma or post-migration stresses; and family isolation. In many of these cases, the parents are disengaged from the solution, and blame the child entirely. They hold uncompromising views of their tradition, and/or maintain rigid interpretations of Islamic teachings regarding gender roles and expectations. The risk is highest when the conflict involves adolescent girls. Also, reports with the police or child protection services can worsen the situation, as the child subsequently denies any problem for fear of getting their parents in trouble, especially if the intervention is not culturally sensitive.

The MRC has been successful in resolving many high-risk cases by engaging the family at risk, and the many support services around the family.

These are just a few of the initiatives launched by a new generation of activists and leaders. It reflects a sea-change in attitude, best expressed by Imam Hashmi: “We have a responsibility to speak up for the wrongs that take place.” The wider Canadian public can assist by providing expertise, resources, and partnerships.

The Shafia trial raises wider questions about our immigration policy.

Tooba Yayha denied ever hearing the term “honour killing”. Yet, her older sister, Sorayah, approved killing for the sake of honour, telling La Presse’s Michèle Ouimet in Kabul that “if someone committed a shameful act, they deserved to be eliminated”. Her son agreed, adding “Afghans are right to kill in the name of honour.” Her husband added that if his daughters dared to ruin his honour, he would “put them in a sack, and eliminate them so that no one could find a trace of them.” Clearly, there are some who are unapologetic, standing firmly behind such a heinous practice. Of these, a few migrate with such pathological thinking, unwilling to change.

Yet, the majority of immigrants arrive with the desire to build a better future. Yet, are they fully aware of the differences between their traditional culture and the freedoms afforded by a liberal democratic society? Are they willing to accept the reality that their children will be influenced by the host culture? What are we doing to educate potential immigrants about these fundamental differences?

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