

Words are just the beginning

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The horrifying details revealed in the Shafia trial — the tragedy of four female relatives drowned in a car just outside Kingston — has so shocked Canada's Muslim community that imams, scholars and Islamic leaders are decrying so-called honour killings and abuse against women. They are right to speak up strongly and denounce crimes that are often assumed, unfortunately, to be part of the Islamic faith.

Imam Sikander Ziad Hashmi of the Islamic Society of Kingston felt compelled to give a sermon during the first week of the Shafia trial, attacking the idea that Islam endorses such appalling mistreatment of women. The crime, he noted, had been committed in his community's backyard.

"Let me be very clear, killing a girl or a woman, for having an affair, a relationship, a boyfriend, not wearing a hijab, and so on — as dishonourable as they may be considered to be — is *not* a just cause," he said. "Murder is an extremely serious crime; it is *haram* (prohibited) to the severest degree and cannot be justified in any way, especially for girls who are under the care of their parents."

Now Muslim groups across Canada — including almost 60 organizations and two dozen imams and scholars — have issued a joint statement that says in part: "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." Next Friday, imams across the country are to deliver sermons in their mosques condemning the abuse of women.

The story has been unfolding for six weeks in a Kingston courtroom. Two years ago, three immigrant Afghan teenage girls — Zainab, 19, Sahar, 17, Geeti, 13 — and their so-called aunt, Rona Amir Mohammad, were found dead in a car submerged at the Kingston Mills locks. Detectives became suspicious about what had first seemed to be an accident and began to question the father Mohammed, the wife Tooba Mohammad Yahya, and son, Hamed.

Testimony showed they learned the girls were victims of family violence. Although school officials and social workers tried to help, the girls were terrified of their parents and authorities felt their hands were tied. Rona Amir, it turned out, was Mohammed's first wife, replaced by Tooba because she was unable to bear children. Mohammed, Tooba and Hamed face charges of first-degree murder; all three have pleaded not guilty.

What has drawn the attention of imams and others is wiretap evidence in which the girls' father is heard justifying the deaths on the grounds that the girls betrayed their family and their religion by wearing revealing clothes and having boyfriends. "They betrayed us," he is heard saying. "They betrayed Islam. They betrayed everything." Nothing — not even his daughters' lives — is more important than his "honour," he says on the tapes.

It's important that Muslim leaders themselves take the initiative in denouncing such twisted beliefs. It's equally important that their words are followed up by action. In every community, fighting violence against women has been a long struggle — not a one-time declaration. Hashmi says posters will be put up in mosques telling women where to seek help for abuse because many do not know where to go. And Muslim leaders will make resources available for mediation, conflict resolution and domestic violence. That's a start.

Outside Canada, some Muslim women are also the targets of terrible mistreatment: just this week Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai shamefully sanctioned a deal whereby a woman who was raped and imprisoned for having sex out of wedlock was set free only after agreeing to marry the man who raped her.

Physical and psychological abuse of women are hardly unique to the Muslim community. Across Canada, there are more than 450 shelters for abused women and their children, of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds.

The statement by Canada's Islamic leaders is one we all need to heed. Even more important is the need to follow up when women seek help. Words are just the beginning.

32. Zainab



Zainab, 19, was one of four women in the Shafia family who drowned in a car just outside Kingston.

