

There is no honour in domestic violence

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The three now-convicted murderers stepped out of Frontenac County Courthouse and took what are likely to be their last steps at the historic, century-and-a-half-old courthouse. As Mohammad Shafia, Tooba Yahya and Hamed Shafia were swiftly led to the waiting police van and the double-doors were slammed shut, a horrible chapter in this tragic saga came to a close.

The murder of sisters Zainab, 19, Sahar, 17, and Geeti, 13, as well as Shafia's first wife Rona Amir Mohammed, 50, was a "heinous" crime, as Justice Robert Maranger correctly pointed out.

The details that emerged in the courtroom were shocking and at times, simply disgusting. Like most Canadians, members of the Muslim community experienced anger, disbelief and sadness. There was also frustration over having this terrible crime linked to the Islamic faith.

If there is a silver lining in this terrible tragedy, it is that imams and Muslim community leaders have come together to take concrete steps to combat domestic and honour violence. After all, the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), who is regarded as a role model by Muslims, emphasized kind treatment of women repeatedly. He never hit, let alone killed, a woman and is reported to have said: "The best of you is the one who is best to his women."

Furthermore, one of the common practices outlawed by Islam after its advent in 7th century Arabia was female infanticide. The killing of girls in the name of honour is similar. Islam brought that barbaric practice to an end then and Muslims today have a responsibility to put a stop to this practice. Although it is not limited to Muslims, it is unfortunately practised by some in predominantly Muslim societies as part of their ethnic or tribal culture.

On Dec. 9, during their Friday sermons, imams and community leaders spoke out strongly against domestic violence and deconstructed, from an Islamic perspective, the practice of killing in the name of honour. Soon after, a white ribbon campaign was launched in Toronto's Muslim community. Dozens of men and boys took a pledge against domestic violence. Recently, the London Muslim Resource Centre for Social Services and Integration launched an innovative program to diffuse conflicts that have the potential to result in honour.

Yet, initiatives against domestic and honour violence alone likely won't be enough to prevent future tragedies. A shift in thinking is required.

Most parents can attest to the fact that raising children is no easy task. It can be even more challenging for those parents who want their children to respect their traditional and religious values.

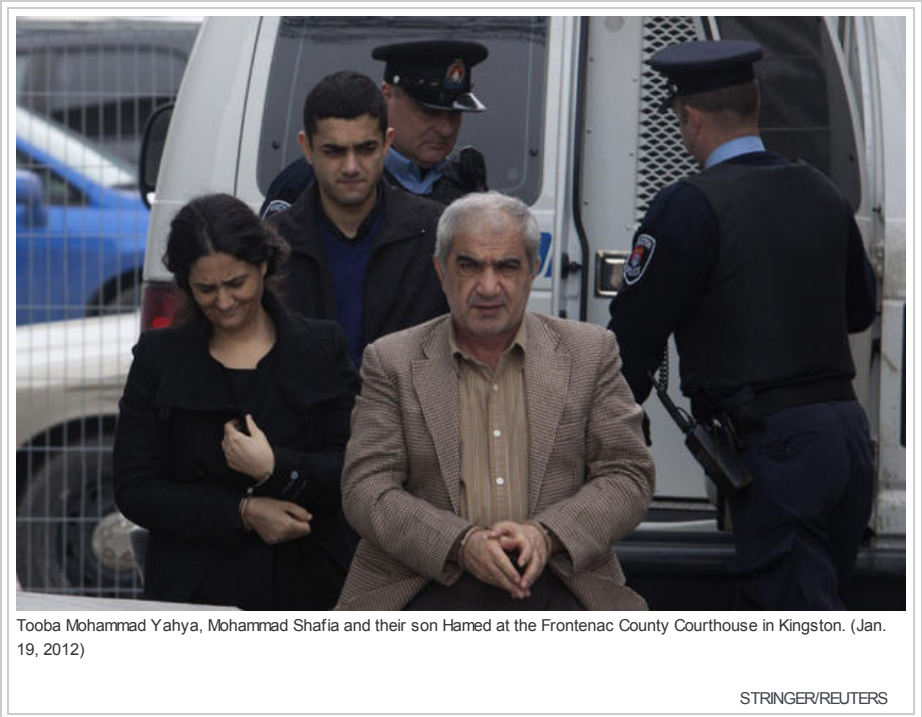
Many times, the shock caused by the difference between these values and those prevalent in society is too much to handle for the child. The result: a rebellious child and disappointed, if not angry, parents.

At this point, parents may react in different ways, depending on a number of factors such as what they experienced as children, what values they inherited from their parents and their perspective on parenting. What must be clear is that resorting to violence is never an option.

For starters, values must be instilled in children from a young age, with love, compassion and positive reinforcement. Suddenly forcing a rebellious teenager to conform to traditional norms is a recipe for disaster.

Parents living in free and democratic societies, such as Canada, must be aware that their children may end up making choices different than theirs, and there is very little they can do about it — apart from discussing, counselling, praying and trying to win the hearts and minds of their children.

One of the most disturbing elements in the murders of the sisters is that they sought assistance and authorities were aware of trouble within the Shafia home. Yet, even though there were so close to the help they needed, the helping hand that could have plucked them out of danger never appeared.



Tooba Mohammad Yahya, Mohammad Shafia and their son Hamed at the Frontenac County Courthouse in Kingston. (Jan. 19, 2012)

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A lack of cultural sensitivity and understanding has the potential to complicate and negatively affect the impact of responses to cries of help. The answer is to bolster resources within cultural and religious communities that have the understanding and expertise to efficiently respond to the needs of members of their community, in conjunction with partners in law enforcement and health and social services.

Homes and families are meant to be a source of love, peace and tranquility. No human being — woman, man or child — deserves to be subjected to domestic violence or live under the threat of violence or death.

The presence of domestic violence often signals dysfunctional behaviour within families. Whether it's due to anger, rebellious behaviour by teenage children or any other reason, help must be sought and must be offered. No one should feel compelled to suffer quietly, in fear, because seeking assistance is seen as a taboo. It is violence that must be shunned, not the seeking of help.

On that note, the perpetrators of these terrible crimes are the ones who should be shunned. The victims who tried seeking help — Zainab, Sahar and Geeti, along with Rona — must never be forgotten. May their souls rest in peace.

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