

**Muslim Social Services Safer Families Project: Research and Recommendations Regarding Domestic Violence Prevention among the Syrian Refugee Community**

**Muslim Social Services Kitchener Waterloo**

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## Introduction

The ongoing Syrian refugee crisis has brought on a need for new services in Canada geared towards helping incoming refugees with resettlement and the wide variety of other issues this entails, as well as changes to be made to previously existing organizations in order to accommodate this new and growing population. The Canadian Federal Government has committed to taking in 25 000 of the over 4 million Syrian refugees by February 2016, and the Waterloo Region is expected to receive more than 1000 of them<sup>1</sup>. Muslim Social Services has recognized the need for various service providers in the area to make certain changes to prepare for the accommodation of these refugees, and to help provide better services and assistance for those already living in the region. Muslim Social Service's Safer Families Project, an initiative aimed at preventing domestic violence in the community has especially recognized the importance of improving on certain aspects of the program to account for incoming refugees, and providing services for them that are culturally and religiously sensitive, as well as having a thorough understanding of the refugee situation. While ethno-cultural organizations such as MSS are well-equipped to understand specific cultural needs of the Syrian refugee population, especially in dealing with overly sensitive matters such as domestic violence, some mainstream stakeholders of the Safer Families Project may not currently have access to the resources they need to provide the most effective service for this particular group. The aim of this research project has been to discover what challenges these stakeholders face in providing assistance to Syrian refugees, as well as to other ethnically diverse newcomers, and to provide MSS with suggestions regarding how to help address barriers preventing newcomers from getting the most out of these services.

The general findings of this research project are that most mainstream service stakeholders, while offering a wide variety of services and programs that could be very useful for newcomers, especially women dealing with issues of family violence, lack the proper cross-cultural training for providing the best possible assistance to Syrian families. Additionally, stakeholders cite interpretation and translation as being one of the most prevalent barriers in servicing non-English speaking newcomers, especially when it comes to written materials. Arabic is the native language of 90% of the Syrian population, and only around 46% of Syrians resettled in Canada in 2014 speak one of the country's official languages, leaving over half of the refugee population unable to speak English or French<sup>2</sup>. Mainstream family services and domestic violence prevention services tend to lack staff who speak Arabic, which can potentially cause issues when dealing with these newcomers. Perhaps the most important solution to addressing these barriers that mainstream stakeholders face is a continued dialogue between these services and ethno-cultural organizations like MSS. It is through working together with one another, building bridges and strengthening ties that mainstream services will become more culturally aware, and continue to build on culturally-conscious practices.

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<sup>1</sup> "Syrian Conflict." Waterloo Region Welcomes Refugees. (2015). Region of Waterloo, Immigration Partnership. <http://www.wrwelcomesrefugees.ca/en/Syrian-crisis.asp>.

<sup>2</sup> "Population Profile: Syrian Refugees." (2015). Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 4

## Research Methods

The primary focus of this study has been on interviews with a variety of community stakeholders for the Safer Families Project. Key stakeholders include organizations that deal specifically with refugees in the Waterloo region, such as Bring Back Hope, victim and crisis services in the area that deal specifically with issues of domestic abuse, community religious leaders, and health services. The section of this paper that deals with stakeholders is organized into four categories: ethno-cultural organizations, mainstream organizations, the Canadian legal system, and religious perspectives on domestic violence. Complete interviews with stakeholders can be found in the appendix.

In addition to interviews with stakeholders, this study makes use of previously published literature on domestic violence and immigrant and refugee communities. In particular, two studies done by Mohammed Baobaid for The Muslim Family Safety Project in London, Ontario, the 2002 study “Access to Woman Abusive Service by Arab-Speaking Muslim Women in London, Ontario” and the \_\_\_ study “Outreach Strategies for Family Violence Intervention with Immigrant and Minority Communities,” have proved to be quite useful for this research project. Other important references include Leslie Maureen Tutty’s *Promising Practices to Engage Ethno-Cultural Communities in Ending Domestic Violence*, as well as statistics and information on Syrian culture and refugee situations from government websites.

Incorporating information from interviews, as well as strategies outlined and recommended in the relevant literature, this paper provides a summary of some of the Safer Family Project’s stakeholders, challenges and barriers they face in terms of providing assistance to refugees and recommendations for Muslim Social Services to help strengthen community connections with Syrian refugees, and to help better address any issues of domestic violence they may face.

## Syrian Refugees and Domestic Violence

In Syrian culture, as with most Arab cultures, domestic violence is an issue that is seen as a family matter, and therefore should not be discussed with outside service providers. The collectivist culture Syrian refugees maintain emphasises the importance of the family and the community over the individual, and therefore condemns actions that would threaten this unity, such as bringing family matters into the public realm. Women in such cultures are expected to maintain harmony within the household, to uphold its reputation and status, and are therefore taught not to seek support from outside agencies and counsellors<sup>3</sup>. As Baobaid notes, this puts practitioners and organizations who seek to prevent domestic violence in the community in a difficult position, with the question of whether to intervene (in keeping with Western individualistic values), or to accept the woman’s autonomy and respect her culture<sup>4</sup>. Pressuring women into defying cultural norms in favour of Western views can isolate these women from their families and communities, and increase the risk of continued abuse<sup>5</sup>. Thus it is imperative that mainstream organizations and services implement a culturally sensitive approach to dealing with refugee and immigrant women, and attempt to find a balance between domestic violence

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<sup>3</sup> Baobaid, Mohammed. Outreach Strategies for Family Violence Intervention With Immigrant and Minority Communities: Lessons Learned from the Muslim Family Safety Project (MFSP). London, Ontario. Changing Ways , 5

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> ibid

prevention and intervention and respect for cultural traditions and values. Providing assistance to families from conflict zones, such as Syria, is even more challenging for practitioners, as intersections of gender, race, and religion must be taken into account alongside trauma, psychological effects of violence, and refugee status. Recognizing various intersecting aspects of individual and group identity that affect degrees of oppression and risk for domestic violence is an important aspect of what Muslim Social Services does. In order to help mainstream services geared towards helping women and preventing domestic violence, MSS must continue to have an ongoing dialogue with these services to ensure that they are providing assistance to newcomers, namely, Syrian refugees, in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner.

Though the role of culture in cases of domestic abuse has been debated by scholars and workers in the field, it would be a mistake to leave it out completely when attempting to provide assistance for specific groups of people. Domestic violence is a universal issue, effecting people of all ethnicities, genders, religions, and ages. But inequity and oppression is always multilayered, and culture, as well as socio-economic factors, cannot be factored out of this<sup>6</sup>. For immigrants and refugees, layers of oppression and reasons for abuse become even more complex. Newcomers in the Waterloo Region are the group with the highest percent of people living under the Low Income Cut Off (LICO), with 33.5% living in poverty (compared to the 7.5% of the overall population)<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, the process of immigration, or fleeing one's country can create or add to family violence. Being forced out of one's country can result in loss of self-esteem, loss of trust, and a radical shift in family dynamics<sup>8</sup>. In countries such as Syria, where the family is structured in a way that places the man at the head of the household, being forced to leave may cause him to feel that his status is being diminished. Difficulties finding employment, or having to settle for employment below his education level, and feeling as though he is unable to provide for or protect his family may cause him to experience a sense of weakness or failure<sup>9</sup>. In this case, some men will attempt to hold onto cultural conceptions that associate manhood with strength and control, and resort to hitting his wife as a means of asserting himself<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, if he feels that his wife is transgressing cultural roles, and asserting herself and her independence too much, he may lash out at her as well<sup>11</sup>. In such a case, the blame for the violence is shifted onto the woman for failing to maintain cultural positions and uphold her duty as a wife, completely distorting understandings of domestic violence. Most of the participants from the Muslim community Baobaid interviewed for his study claimed that woman abuse usually arises from frustrations of husbands being unemployed or underemployed, and the "disobedience" of their wives<sup>12</sup>. It is important for domestic violence prevention organizations, as well as organizations that provide assistance to refugees and other newcomers to understand the role that culture can play in creating situations of family violence. It is similarly important for these organizations and services to understand refugee situations, and how to address their specific needs.

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<sup>6</sup> Tutty, Leslie Maureen et al. (2010). *Promising Practices to Engage Ethno-Cultural Communities in Ending Domestic Violence*. Alberta, Prairieaction Foundation, 5

<sup>7</sup> Miedema, Judy Maan. (2008). *Can Money Buy You Health? The Health Impact of Poverty*. Region of Waterloo Public Health

<sup>8</sup> Tutty et al., 9

<sup>9</sup> Baobaid, Mohammed. (2002). *Access to Women Abuse Services by Arab-Speaking Muslim Women in London, Ontario: Background Investigation and Recommendations for Further Outreach and Community Outreach*. London, Ontario. Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, 18

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

## Community Stakeholders

### I. Ethno-Cultural Organizations

#### *i. The African Family Revival Organization (AFRO)*

Though African Family Revival Organization started out as an initiative focused on helping African women and single mothers, it has since expanded to include assistance for the disabled, immigrants and refugees, and a variety of others. AFRO is a small, non-profit organization established by CEO Mona Loffelmann and her business partner, and includes only a handful of volunteers. With the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, AFRO is currently helping many refugee women and their families struggling with the resettlement process. This assistance includes helping refugees find affordable housing, jobs, and simply helping with everyday aspects of life in Canada, such as visiting the dentist, going shopping, and taking care of children. AFRO also offers a Women's Social Program – a place where newcomer women can sit down together once a month and discuss their various needs and struggles, and be provided with helpful information about living in Canada, ranging from everyday things such as what kinds of clothes to buy for their kids, to information about legal matters and their rights in the country. Though limited by lack of funds, AFRO is a dedicated, culturally competent service that many newcomer women can and do benefit from greatly.

#### *ii. Bring Back Hope*

Bring Back Hope is a Kitchener-Waterloo based service that provides assistance for refugees on three basic levels: helping the refugees themselves, helping sponsors through the process of dealing with refugees, and educating the wider community on refugee issues. Bring Back Hope aids refugees with the resettlement process, helping them find housing, find jobs and schools, providing counselling for mental health issues, and organizing social groups, among many other things. There is also a significant focus on teaching the wider community about the culture of the incoming refugee population, currently Syrian, and help mediate issues that may arise between refugee families and sponsors that stem from cultural differences and misunderstandings. Bring Back Hope has around 140 volunteers currently working with them, 100 of which are Arabic speakers, and can therefore provide much-needed interpretation for non-English speaking members of the refugee community.

### Challenges

The main challenge that AFRO faces, and certainly a big challenge many organizations that provide assistance to newcomers face, is the fact that many of these people, upon arrival, do not understand basic day-to-day customs in Canada, and they do not have any one to teach them. They lack the proper instruction regarding things that people who have been living in Canada for a long time simply take for granted, such as how much detergent to put in a washing machine, or that a baby must be buckled into a stroller to prevent accidents. Additionally, when

they first arrive here, many women do not understand what their rights are, nor do they understand laws and regulations, or how the justice system functions.

Despite the significant number of Arabic speakers, interpretation is the biggest challenge that Bring Back Hope faces. There are two reasons why this is the case. First, when talking to refugees, counsellors and social workers often require interpreters to mediate conversations. This can be especially problematic when discussing sensitive issues such as mental health problems and issues of domestic violence. In this case, both AFRO and Bring Back Hope, as well as virtually all organizations geared towards helping refugees, find that trust is a major issue. Iman Arab, a coordinator at Bring Back Hope notes that often this is because refugees fear that the information they share will not be kept confidential, and will be shared with the wider community, or even with people back in Syria. Because of the political turmoil currently overtaking their country of origin, many Syrians believe that they must be overly careful about what they say, afraid that revealing the wrong things to the wrong person could result in negative consequences, including the harm of family back in Syria. Thus, very few refugees are willing to open up about sensitive issues such as domestic violence and other forms of trauma. Second, though interpreters may speak Arabic, they may not always be familiar with its different forms and its variations coming out of different regions. Because of this, there remains much that is liable to become lost in translation. Subtleties and certain expressions may be misinterpreted by translators, and thus mental health workers, sponsors, and other service providers may get the wrong idea about what a refugee client is trying to say, potentially leading to unnecessary actions being taken, or necessary actions not being taken.

## **Solutions**

AFRO's Women's Social Program has proven to be an extremely useful resource for women adapting to life in Canada. Women in these groups will be provided with information about daily living here, about how to do things that seem only natural to most Canadians, but really are not to people coming from a radically different culture. Additionally, AFRO will occasionally invite members of the Kitchener-Waterloo Police to come and talk to these newcomer women about laws and regulations in Ontario, and answer any questions they may have. Women find this especially useful in cases where they are concerned about their children's well-being, and actions that could potentially lead to detention. It is also a very helpful method for building bridges between the police force and refugee communities, especially considering the aversion most Syrians have towards police.

In terms of interpretation issues that these organizations struggle with, particularly concerning the lack of trust refugees may have for them, there are a few actions that can be taken. In cases where volunteer interpreters from the local immigrant community may actually risk the client's confidentiality, mental health and social workers may want to look into the option of using random language help-lines to ensure anonymity<sup>13</sup>. However if refugees still do not wish to discuss personal matters such as mental health or domestic violence, then counsellors and organizations should not push them into it. Rather, organizations such as Bring Back Hope and AFRO know that building up enough trust to talk about such sensitive issues takes a long time, and cannot be rushed. Instead, they let them know that they are there to talk

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<sup>13</sup> Bhuyan, Rupaleem et al. (2010). "Domestic Violence Advocacy with Immigrants and Refugees." *Domestic Violence: Intersectionality and Culturally Competent Practices*. Ed. Lettie L. Lockhart and Fran S. Danis. New York, Columbia University Press, 177

when they are ready, and can provide help if needed. An extensive study on domestic violence among refugee and immigrant populations in Canada concludes that an array of services for women, such as language classes, driver's education, employment assistance, art classes, and more "create atmospheres in which women eventually felt comfortable enough to report abuse<sup>14</sup>". Continuing to provide similar services and programs is an important aspect in creating a safe space for women to feel that they can open up about such personal issues.

Similarly, news reports from May 2016 reveal that Syrian refugee women in Toronto have begun opening up about domestic abuse, with around one woman every week coming forward to talk about it at the time. Zena Al Hamdam, a manager at the Arab Community Center in Toronto believes these women have begun to come forward because they are no longer in "survival mode," and feel safe enough to get help<sup>15</sup>. This resonates with what Abdelfettah Elkchirid, a professor of social work who has done significant work with refugees, has to say about building trust between clients and counsellors. He believes that emotional and mental issues are the last things refugees are going to want to work on as they are getting resettled in their new country. Before this can happen, they must first try to regain some sense of the security that was lost, and will usually wish to establish themselves financially and socially first. It is by being respectful of these needs, and by demonstrating that the organization is there to help with whatever they need that refugees can start to build up the trust that is necessary to open up a space to talk about something like domestic abuse.

### **Recommendations for MSS**

Muslim Social Services might first benefit from having more women's groups, specifically involving volunteers who will teach newcomers about Canadian customs. Inviting police to these groups is also a great idea, both to begin to bridge the distance between refugee communities and Police Services, and to help answer questions newcomers may have about the legal system here. Additionally, if refugees are concerned about confidentiality in talking to interpreters, MSS may want to explore anonymous over-the-phone translation services. Some options could include Access Alliance Language Services' Remote Interpretation Ontario<sup>16</sup> and Cultural Interpretation Services for Our Communities<sup>17</sup> among others. Similarly, MSS could potentially discuss with volunteer interpreters from the community about the importance of confidentiality.

The parenting classes that MSS provides, such as the ones that Farhat Javed runs for women in the Muslim community, prove to be quite useful for them. When providing these classes for refugee women, it may be helpful to include even more information about daily living and aspects of parenting that most people who have been living here for a while would take for granted, such as that if a young boy wears all pink to school, he will most likely be bullied for it<sup>18</sup>. Additionally, addressing domestic violence and parenting in a holistic manner in parenting classes for both women and men may prove to be beneficial. Integrating domestic violence into parenting classes is a good way to talk about the subject of domestic violence without

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<sup>14</sup> Tutty et al., 60

<sup>15</sup> Lee-Shanok, Philip and John Rieti. (2016, May 20). "Syrian Refugee Women Coming Forward with Domestic Violence Allegations, Group Says." CBC News.

<sup>16</sup> <http://accessalliance.ca/programs-services/language-services/r-i-o-network-remote-interpretation-ontario/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.multiculturalmentalhealth.ca/services/find-an-interpreter/interpreter-services-in-ontario/>

<sup>18</sup> Loffelmann, Mona. CEO of the African Family Revival Organization. (2016, July 5). Personal Interview.

necessarily having to address it head-on. Tutty notes that because “parents want their children to do well, they often respond to respectful information about the effects of violence on children and parenting tools to support children’s success in school and life<sup>19</sup>”.

Though most domestic violence prevention organizations focus primarily on women, it is also important to include working with men as a part of prevention strategies. Alongside ongoing anger management classes MSS provides, they could organize groups for men that help gain insight into their personal lives, as well as help with everyday living in Canada. Because in Syria speaking publically about family violence is taboo, it might be a better idea to use less direct approaches in terms of helping men. This could include one-on-one or group conversations about traumatic experiences in their home country, concerns about parenting, or even group meetings that help with practical aspects of daily life, such as filling taxes<sup>20</sup>.

## II. Mainstream Services

Though the trend in past years for mainstream services in the fields of domestic violence prevention and family services has been to offer services that are culturally-neutral and more open-ended, when it comes to dealing with ethno-cultural communities, especially specific groups like the Syrian refugees, these services are likely to benefit from more culturally-specific strategies<sup>21</sup>. In order to truly be able to help the refugee community, mainstream service providers should work on developing culturally competent outreach strategies, and have a heightened awareness of the values and norms of a particular culture. They should have respect for traditions and beliefs, regardless of the ways in which they differ from western systems, and have the ability to set aside preconceived notions and listen attentively to clients. Additionally, they should be aware of their preconceptions regarding particular cultures, and be able to recognize and challenge stereotypes of these cultures<sup>22</sup>. If possible, services should seek cross-cultural training for staff, though extensive training may not always be possible due to lack of funds. Most importantly, mainstream service providers should continue to strengthen ties with ethno-cultural organizations (such as Muslim Social Services), and collaborate with them to improve cultural competency.

Baobaid stresses the importance of having a two-way education system when it comes to the collaboration between mainstream services and ethno-cultural services so that service providers and the community may learn more about each other. First, mainstream service providers should strive to improve their cultural competency and get to better understand the people and the cultures they are dealing with. Again, this is best achieved through close collaboration with organizations like MSS and AFRO. Second, a public education campaign should be initiated to raise awareness in the target community about the services that are available to them<sup>23</sup>. This could involve representatives from these services being a part of MSS meetings and presentations to discuss what it is they have to offer. Additionally, printing out information about their services (in Arabic as well as English) to give to Syrian community members could be quite useful. The following section outlines challenges specific mainstream stakeholders face in providing services for newcomer populations, as well as possible solutions and recommendations for how MSS can help.

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<sup>19</sup> Tutty, 61

<sup>20</sup> Tutty, 58

<sup>21</sup> Tutty, 8

<sup>22</sup> Baobaid Outreach Strategies, 9

<sup>23</sup> Baobaid Outreach Strategies, 18

*i. Police and Crisis Services*

*a. Waterloo Regional Police Service*

Police services in Syria are known for being one of the worst in the world. Due to police brutality and overwhelmingly negative experiences with them, many Syrians will attempt to avoid dealing with police at all costs. Building refugee trust with police services is, as Elkchirid puts it, “mission impossible<sup>24</sup>”. Though the Waterloo Regional Police hold diversity as one of their core values, making efforts to attend various multicultural events in the city<sup>25</sup>, for many refugees there is nonetheless an extremely negative stigma attached to the department.

*b. Victim Services of the Waterloo Region*

Services associated with the police force, such as Victim Services, can also have much stigma associated with it. Victim Services are often called to scenes of police intervention, such as scenes of serious spousal abuse, to provide immediate assistance and emotional support for victims. Additionally, Victim Services can be accessed by members of the community to help with ongoing cases of domestic violence, providing at-risk women and families with safety planning, quick action response, and references to other services that can provide counselling and help. Their service is 24/7, so can be reached in any time of need, and their Quick Response program offers fast access to counsellors (with the typical wait time being from three to four months), as well as financial assistance for those who would not otherwise be able to afford counselling.

*c. Women’s Crisis Services of the Waterloo Region*

Women’s Crisis Services also offers emotional support to women struggling with issues of domestic abuse, in addition to offering professional counselling and shelter. They provide extensive safety planning for victims of family violence, and are currently working on the expansion of their women’s shelter, Haven House. They work fairly closely with the Reception House, a temporary living space for refugees. Despite prevalent negative attitudes towards violence against women organizations in refugee communities (ref), Women’s Crisis Services does get a notable number of calls from newcomer women.

## **Challenges**

The main challenge crisis services face in terms of providing assistance to newcomers is that there is often a significant distrust prevalent in refugee communities towards these types of agencies. Syrians especially have reason to be wary of police, and are understandably afraid of contacting their services or services related to them. Baobaid finds that in many refugee and

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<sup>24</sup> Elkchirid, Abdelfettah. Professor of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University. (2016, July 11). Personal Interview.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.wrps.on.ca/community-connections/community-diversity>

immigrant communities, victim services, including those geared towards preventing violence against women, are seen as disruptive of family unity and values<sup>26</sup>. He notes that “one of the main barriers to accessing domestic violence services by immigrant families affected by domestic violence is the misunderstanding of these services by immigrant communities<sup>27</sup>”. Similarly, these services also face barriers in their attempts to reach out to these communities because of a lack of knowledge about their culture and core values<sup>28</sup>. Thus in addition to the stigma that is associated with these services, newcomers remain ignorant about what these services actually can provide them with. Language barriers are a potentially a part of this. Though Victim Services and Women’s Crisis Services make use of outside translator services when needed, neither currently has any Arabic-speaking staff, even though they acknowledge that this is one of the most required languages. Intake High Risk Coordinator for Victim Services Ashley Hendricks believes that even if the client speaks broken English, this is usually enough to get the point across. However, such distorted communication is not necessarily sufficient when providing emotional support for victims of domestic violence and other forms of trauma. Jennifer Hutton, an outreach manager at Women’s Crisis Services notes that while they have interpreters who can speak languages such as Arabic, this does not necessarily mean that they can write these languages. This can be an issue for getting certain forms of information across, as well as in the creation of safety planning documentation, which can be very important for women living in violent homes.

## Solutions

Police in the Waterloo region have taken steps to ensure that language barriers are not a significant issue for non-English speaking community members in times of emergency. They have a series of flyers made up with information about contacting their services in a wide variety of languages, including Arabic<sup>29</sup>. Services such as Victim Services could likely benefit from doing the same. Elkchirid suggests that one of the first steps police officers can take to begin to rebuild trust with the Syrian population is to attend local cultural events and show off their “silly” side by being playful and relaxed<sup>30</sup>. This could help depict the police force in a very different light, and help ameliorate negative stereotypes associated with them. The KW police do attend a variety of multicultural events already, and continued participation will undoubtedly be beneficial.

Both Victim Services and Women’s Crisis Services would benefit greatly from additional cross-cultural training, especially concerning Syrian culture. Neither service has received much in the way of cultural sensitivity training, but this is something that could be very helpful for dealing with refugees and immigrants. Women’s Crisis Services does not have a large training budget, so accessing this sort of training may be difficult. However, they could also greatly benefit from hiring a more diverse staff, especially members of the Arabic-speaking community. Baobaid notes that one of the best ways to increase cultural sensitivity among mainstream victim service organizations is to find victim service workers that are a part of the

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<sup>26</sup> Baobaid Outreach Strategies, 12

<sup>27</sup> Baobaid Outreach Strategies, 16

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> [http://www.wrps.on.ca/sites/default/files/911\\_Flyers/911flyer\\_Arabic.pdf](http://www.wrps.on.ca/sites/default/files/911_Flyers/911flyer_Arabic.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> Elkchirid

targeted community and include them as facilitators and committee advisors<sup>31</sup>. Additionally, printing out information about these services in Arabic may help increase newcomer access to such support lines.

If victim and women's crisis services are shown in a positive light, and explained to newcomer communities in a way that shows them to be interested in strengthening family unity, rather than breaking it apart, such communities are more likely to be accepting of these services<sup>32</sup>. Thus if Victim Services and Women's Crisis Services were to advertise themselves to refugee populations in a way that emphasizes the importance of family unity, they may make these women feel more comfortable about utilizing their services.

## **Recommendations for MSS**

When dealing with police, MSS should continue to invite officers to events and gatherings, especially ones focusing on Syrian refugees. In addition, Mona Löffelmann notes how inviting police to come talk to women about their rights, about laws and regulations in Ontario, and to answer any questions they may have about the legal system, has proven to be extremely useful in building bridges between police services and newcomer populations. This could also help show police in a different light, and perhaps make Syrian women more open to contacting them if need be. Also, flyers in Arabic with police contact information could be printed out and distributed among members of the Arabic-speaking community.

What would likely be most helpful for victim and women's crisis services in the region is a collaboration with ethno-cultural organizations such as MSS. Were MSS to work with Victim Services and Women's Crisis Services, they could provide them with some of the cross-cultural training that they could greatly benefit from. Additionally, they could work together on the translation of important documentation and flyers with information about the services.

### *ii. Family and Children Services of the Waterloo Region (FCS)*

Family and Children Services provides a variety of services and means of assistance for families and children in need. The service includes child protection workers and investigators, trained to recognize and intervene in situations where children are being mistreated. Additionally they offer aid to families struggling with a variety of socio-economic factors, and help with the development and implementation of good parenting strategies. FCS has recently changed its vision to take an Anti-Oppressive Practice approach to helping families and children in need, the goal therefore being to be more conscious of how oppression operates in all areas of society, including in social work, and focusing on eliminating that oppression.

## **Challenges**

Though FCS does make a conscious and ongoing effort to be aware of the types of oppression various individuals and groups in the community are subject to, when it comes to immigrant and newcomer families, FCS is still extremely stigmatized. Many newcomer women are afraid of going anywhere near FCS because they believe that the service only

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<sup>31</sup> Baobaid Outreach Strategies, 16

<sup>32</sup> Baobaid Outreach Strategies, 12

operates to take people's children away from them<sup>33</sup>. Unfortunately for refugees and immigrants, this one negative aspect tends to overshadow all of the positive elements that the service has to provide. However FCS is known for jumping to conclusions and lacking good communication with clients, especially ethnically and culturally diverse members of the community<sup>34</sup>. Though FCS is conscious of these negative attitudes towards their service, and are constantly working to improve relations with diverse groups in the community, attitudes towards them remain overwhelmingly negative. Parastoo Derkhshandeh, a supervisor at FCS, believes that lack of diversity among staff is one of the main barriers preventing newcomer access to these services. Helping refugee families is therefore especially difficult, because staff do not understand where they are coming from, what their values and beliefs are, and what sort of attitudes they talk towards parenting. Parenting styles and strategies can differ greatly depending on culture, and ignorance of other methods for raising children can lead to conflicts between mainstream family services and newcomer parents<sup>35</sup>. Similarly, not many staff speak other languages such as Arabic, thus language provides an additional difficulty.

## **Solutions**

Derkhshandeh believes that FCS could definitely benefit from additional cross-cultural training to help staff better understand values and beliefs of diverse communities. Likewise, hiring a more diverse staff could be a part of this training, including workers who speak Arabic. The most important solution to the challenges FCS faces when dealing with newcomer populations is to maintain an ongoing dialogue with ethno-cultural organizations such as AFRO and MSS. Many of the improvements that have already been made to FCS in terms of cultural sensitivity is due to working closely with such organizations. Connecting with MSS has helped staff develop a better understanding for family dynamics among Muslim communities, as well as developing a better grasp for newcomer situations. The connections being developed between FCS and ethno-cultural organizations are merely in their beginning stages, and must be continued to be emphasized in order for more improvements to be made.

## **Recommendations for MSS**

It is most important for MSS to keep up the dialogue with services like FCS, and to continue to strengthen connections. Funds permitting, MSS could even participate in providing FCS with additional training on cross-cultural issues, specifically on Syrian culture and its intersection with refugee status. Additionally, Arabic-speaking workers from MSS could be mediators between FCS and newcomer families in cases where there are discrepancies between the two. Ongoing collaboration and consistent communication between FCS and MSS will surely lead to increased cultural sensitivity among FCS staff, as well as a more positive view of the organization on the part of newcomers. Again, FCS could benefit from having information about their services printed out in Arabic, and handed out to refugee families. There are a great many beneficial services and programs that FCS and organizations like them have to offer, such as parenting classes for men and women, counselling for children, and

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<sup>33</sup> Loffleman

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

<sup>35</sup> Derkhshandeh, Parastoo. Supervisor at Family and Children Services of the Waterloo Region. (2016, June 12). Personal Interview.

assistance with mental health problems,, many of which newcomer families are likely unaware of. It is important for MSS to help relieve some of the stigma that surrounds FCS, as well as to help them understand exactly what it is newcomer families need from them. Again, if FCS, with the help of MSS, were to emphasize their role as strengthening family unity, rather than negatively affecting it, refugee families would likely be more open to using their services, for it is often this fear that organizations like FCS tear families apart that keep newcomers at bay.

### *iii. Region of Waterloo Public Health and Emergency Services (ROWPHE)*

ROWPHE provides a wide variety of services for the Waterloo Region, including assistance with mental health. As many Syrians have experienced some form of trauma, whether it is losing family members, witnessing violence, or being the victim of violence, domestic or otherwise, mental health is one of the most prevalent health concerns among the refugee population<sup>36</sup>. ROWPHE recognizes the importance of focusing on immigrant and refugee populations as especially high-risk groups, and attempts to improve refugee and immigrant access to health services are ongoing.

### **Challenges**

An extensive report on increasing access to public health for newcomers in the Waterloo Region identifies three major barriers typically preventing this access, the most significant of which being language barriers. In interviews conducted with community stakeholders, it was the case that nearly every participant identified language as a barrier to access<sup>37</sup>. A lack of staff who speak other languages, as well as consistent professional interpretation is a significant aspect of this issue, as well as a lack of written information in different languages detailing information about ROWPHE's services. The second major barrier identified is newcomer ignorance of the services ROWPHE provides. One of the issues here is that immigrant and refugee-serving organizations do not have the information they need about ROWPHE to make proper referrals, and therefore many newcomers are unaware of what they have to offer<sup>38</sup>. The third major barrier noted is that some newcomers do not have the means of accessing health facilities due to socio-economic issues holding them back. Lack of affordable transport, as well as lack of childcare are examples of this<sup>39</sup>.

### **Solutions**

In order to address language barriers, POWPHE has been focusing on improving the consistency and availability of their translation services. Most of the refugees and immigrants interviewed for the study said that they hear about ROWPHE by word of mouth, and would like more written information on the services they provide<sup>40</sup>. This is something ROWPHE is continuously striving to improve, specifically in providing culturally appropriate multi-lingual

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<sup>36</sup> "Population Profile", 9

<sup>37</sup> Newton, Heidi. (2015). Increasing Access to Public Health for Immigrants and Refugees: Executive Summary Including Results and Recommendations. Region of Waterloo Public Health, 3

<sup>38</sup> Newton, 1

<sup>39</sup> Newton, 3

<sup>40</sup> Newton, 4

resources<sup>41</sup>. To address problems of newcomers lacking adequate information about these health services, ROWPHE is focused on continuing to build relationships with key settlement agencies and ethnic groups<sup>42</sup>. They are working to maintain collaborative partnerships with ethno-cultural organizations and providing targeted outreach – actually going out into newcomer communities to actively engage with these groups and share with them what ROWPHE has to offer<sup>43</sup>. In terms of addressing social determinants of health barriers, ROWPHE is taking actions to address these issues by providing those struggling with financial hardships with bus tickets, childcare, and healthy food and/or food vouchers<sup>44</sup>. They also make sure that their staff is culturally aware and culturally sensitive. All new ROWPHE staff complete a half day of training on diversity and inclusion as a part of onboard orientation, and are taught how to best build trust with culturally diverse clients<sup>45</sup>.

### **Recommendations for MSS**

MSS should continue to provide information about ROWPHE’s services to newcomers. It would be helpful for MSS to give out flyers and pamphlets on these services in Arabic especially, being sure to have actual printed copies of the information ROWPHE provides on their website, as the study found that around half of the newcomers interviewed never used the internet. If staff working with MSS notice any signs of mental health issues among newcomers, they should refer them to ROWPHE, and explain to them the variety of services that they offer.

### **III. The Canadian Legal System**

A reoccurring issue among refugee and immigrant populations is a lack of knowledge concerning the Canadian legal system, and general ignorance concerning their rights. This can be a significant problem in terms of domestic violence problems. In Syria, there is no legislation in place specifically addressing domestic abuse, and women are very limited in terms of legal actions that can be taken in situations of family violence. Many cases of domestic violence in Syria remain unreported, as it is believed that it is a matter that should remain within the family. Additionally, women that do seek police assistance for domestic violence problems will often not receive any help from them, and will sometimes be subject to even more physical and verbal abuse from the police themselves. Laws in Syria do not recognize spousal rape as a crime, nor even as something that is included in the concept of “rape”.

### **Challenges**

Upon arrival in Canada, the dynamic among many refugee families is for the husbands to take care of all legal affairs. This can be an issue for a variety of reasons, as it means the husband can use this legal information as leverage against his wife. Though it is a form of abuse not typically recognized by immigrants, use of legal status can be used by men as a means of

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<sup>41</sup> ibid

<sup>42</sup> Newton, 1

<sup>43</sup> Newton, 3

<sup>44</sup> ibid

<sup>45</sup> Newton, 1

manipulating their wives<sup>46</sup>. Fear of deportation, or fear of losing sponsorship may prevent refugee women from reporting cases of domestic abuse<sup>47</sup>.

Additionally, Baobaid points out that in general, Muslim communities hold the idea that the justice system interferes with matters that should be kept within the family<sup>48</sup>. It is a misconception of the justice system that portrays it as attempting to weaken the role of the husband in enforcing discipline and order in the family<sup>49</sup>. This can be problematic for Syrian refugees, as in Arab communities the husband is traditionally respected for his role as the provider and protector of the family, and thus if it is believed that the Canadian justice system attempts to diminish his role in the family dynamic, negative attitudes will be developed concerning a system that is in reality designed to keep families safe<sup>50</sup>.

### **Solutions and Suggestions for MSS**

In order to address negative attitudes towards the Canadian legal system, organizations like MSS could have law enforcers or people who work with the Canadian government come in to talk to refugees about how the legal system works, emphasizing its role in protecting families, and not as a system that attempts to diminish the roles of men in their families. Additionally, having law enforcers and people who work in the criminal justice system come in to talk to refugee women in particular about their specific rights in Canada could help them to better understand their situations, and what actions they can take if need be. Classes and workshops on a holistic approach to Canadian law is perhaps the best approach, as it could include the discussion of women's rights regarding abuse in a less direct, more socially acceptable manner. As Baobaid notes, raising the level legal awareness in Arab communities in Canada is extremely important in the fight for the prevention of woman abuse<sup>51</sup>.

Another aspect preventing newcomer women from understanding their rights is, once again, the prevalence of language barriers. Most translators and interpreters are not familiar with the proper terms used by Canadian courts and other legal institutions, and therefore cannot provide adequate translation regarding such issues<sup>52</sup>. Thus many newcomers are left confused about their rights concerning domestic violence. To address this, MSS might want to facilitate collaborations between legal workers and translators, so that this kind of information can be communicated effectively.

## **IV. Religion**

Religion is often an extremely important aspect in the lives of refugees and newcomers, and when implemented correctly, can be very useful in helping prevent violence against women. 87% of the Syrian population are practitioners of Islam<sup>53</sup>, and the role of faith cannot be

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<sup>46</sup> Elkchirid

<sup>47</sup> Tutty et al., 9

<sup>48</sup> Baobaid (2002), 20

<sup>49</sup> ibid

<sup>50</sup> ibid

<sup>51</sup> ibid

<sup>52</sup> Tutty et al., 56

<sup>53</sup> "Population Profile," 5

underestimated when providing assistance to refugees and immigrants. Islam promotes gender equality, emphasising the complimentary nature of male and female genders, and teaches the importance of having equal respect for men and women. The Qur'an repeatedly stresses the importance of women, and describes that while they are biologically different, they are spiritually equal. The Prophet Muhammed also made it very clear that men must always treat their wives with respect and kindness, and that any act of violence towards them is not acceptable<sup>54</sup>. The Qur'an provides guidance for male-female relationships, as well as advice for married couples. The text describes men and women as "friends and protectors" of each other, as "He has put love and mercy between (your) hearts"<sup>55</sup>. The roles of husband and wife are both independent and complimentary, and a wife should only follow her husband's lead if it is in line with Qur'anic teachings<sup>56</sup>.

## Challenges

Despite the Islamic perspective that gendered violence is not acceptable, at times abusers will distort or manipulate teachings to rationalize or justify abusive behaviour. The Qur'anic passage 4:34 has been the subject of much controversy, as in some interpretations of the text, it seems to justify a man hitting his wife if she becomes disobedient. However, this is a distortion of what is truly meant, for Islam, and especially the teachings of the Prophet, do not allow for this kind of violent behaviour<sup>57</sup>. Interpretations of the Qur'an can never be taken alone, and must always be considered in tandem with the Prophetic teachings. Thus the passage must be read as allowing for a mere symbolic striking, not a physical striking, and only as a last resort<sup>58</sup>. The passage is intended to help preserve a marriage by guiding the wife back onto the right path, and certainly should not be taken as giving the husband permission to be violent or abusive<sup>59</sup>.

An additional issue preventing Muslim women from seeking religious-based assistance when struggling with issues of family violence is the potential fear that talking to Imams about this may be dangerous since their actions could be exposed to their husbands, or exposed to the wider community<sup>60</sup>. Especially if women believe that the religious community structure views violence against wives as acceptable, they will be very hesitant to put their trust in Imams regarding such sensitive issues.

## Solutions and Recommendations for MSS

MSS should continue to run workshops and discussion groups about Islamic perspectives on gender and gender violence, stressing the importance of taking a holistic approach to interpreting the Qur'an, wherein Prophetic teachings are brought to the forefront. Additionally, because different translations and versions of the Qur'an tend to word things differently, some in a more woman-friendly way than others, MSS could provide Muslim newcomers with specific versions of the text that are especially geared towards the respectful treatment of women. Baobaid

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<sup>54</sup> Zaidi, Ali. Coordinator of Muslim Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. (2016, July 4). Personal Interview.

<sup>55</sup> Abugideiri, Salma Elkadi et al. "A Commentary on Religion and Domestic Violence." *Domestic Violence: Intersectionality and Culturally Competent Practices*. Ed. Lettie L. Lockhart and Fran S. Danis. New York, Columbia University Press, 332 (Q 30:21)

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*

<sup>57</sup> Zaidi

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*

<sup>59</sup> Abugideiri et al., 333

<sup>60</sup> Baobaid (2002), 19

emphasizes the importance of including religious elements in discussions regarding domestic violence, as highlighting Islam's rejection of woman abuse is an invaluable way of adding to its prevention. He notes that "the inclusion of Islamic perspectives and teachings provides a familiar context to public education on woman abuse for members of the Muslim community<sup>61</sup>". Thus because Islamic teachings are something Muslim refugees value as an important part of their lives, including it in discussions regarding domestic violence will help allow the message to resonate with them. Dr. Zaidi, coordinator of the Muslim Studies program at Wilfrid Laurier University also believes that Islam can be used as a means of preventing domestic violence by showing abusive spouses that they are not living up to their own standards. He believes that while using western ideals of what it means to be a good husband or a good man can be useful to some degree, it has more of an impact to allow people to discover their own contradictions, their shortcomings in terms of their own values and beliefs<sup>62</sup>.

Additionally, Zaidi notes that certain Islamic teachings can help Muslim women struggling with issues of domestic abuse find their inner strength, and help empower them as women. There are many strong and powerful women in the Islamic tradition, such as the Queen of Sheba, and encouraging Muslim women to read about them, perhaps learn from them, can help with feelings of powerlessness and weakness that they may feel are associated with the female gender.

In order to encourage Syrian Muslim women to be more inclined to open up about issues with Imams, MSS and other religious-based organizations could collaborate with Imams and other key figures of the religious community to organize seminars and presentations about Islam's rejection of domestic violence. Religious leaders talking to the community about domestic violence would certainly serve to make it clear that abusive actions are not acceptable behaviours, and may help to prevent future issues of domestic violence among Muslim families.

## Next Steps

The research concerning the Safer Families Project is never fully complete. Improvements and changes can and should be ongoing to accommodate for constantly changing populations and their complex social dynamics. This research project is far from being totally encompassing, and much remains to be done in order to really understand newcomer situations in the Kitchener-Waterloo area. Recommendations for furthering research include interviewing more community stakeholders, with an emphasis on speaking with Imams and other religious leaders in the area to better understand how issues of domestic violence are already being approached from a faith-based perspective. Additionally, contacting larger organizations that provide assistance to refugees, such as the YMCA's Immigration Center, to get an idea for what barriers they face and how they are attempting to overcome them could provide a more comprehensive understanding of refugee situations in the Waterloo region. Interviews with police officers are also an important next step, as learning more about exactly what sort of cultural and diversity training they receive could be quite valuable for the project.

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<sup>61</sup> ibid

<sup>62</sup> Zaidi

## Conclusion

Muslim Social Services' Safer Families Project is an invaluable resource for women in the community struggling with situations of family violence. With the influx of Syrian refugees in the area, MSS has realized the importance of making certain alterations to the program in order to account for this growing population. This research project has been focused on determining what these changes could consist of in order to help provide the best services possible for Syrians, specifically in the case of family violence. A synthesis of the information taken from interviews with key community stakeholders, as well as from previous research conducted on the subjects of refugees and domestic violence, reveals a few fundamental barriers stakeholders face in providing service to this particular group. For ethno-cultural organizations and mainstream service providers alike, interpretation and translation is often one of the major initial challenges they come up against. Similarly, for mainstream stakeholders, lack of knowledge regarding Syrian culture can be an additional issue, stemming from lack of cross-cultural training for staff, as well as from lack of diversity and range of spoken and written languages among them. The most important solution to these issues is ongoing collaboration with ethno-cultural organizations such as MSS and AFRO, as such services provide the wider community with increased cultural and religious knowledge and sensitivity. Though mainstream service providers often believe an all-encompassing approach is the best means of providing assistance to the community at large, this is not necessarily the case for ethnically diverse groups who may require specific kinds of assistance. When dealing with Syrian refugees, and especially when providing services geared towards preventing domestic violence, it is important for service providers to understand the culture's collectivist values, Islamic perspectives on gender, and the refugee situation in general, particularly how this can create tension within the family dynamic and potentially lead to situations of abuse. It is only in being culturally sensitive, respectful of their values and beliefs, and open to understanding non-western ways of being that refugees may begin to build trust with these stakeholders, and continued dialogue with MSS is a critical component of developing this cultural competency.

Legal matters are another area of interest that MSS should focus on when providing assistance to refugees. Many Syrian women do not know what their rights are upon arriving in Canada, a barrier that can exist for many reasons, including husbands who prevent their wives from having access to legal knowledge, language barriers, and misunderstandings that can arise from interpretation issues. A good solution to this might be to have a group or workshop for women addressing their rights, as well as other elements of the legal system they may not be aware of. Finally, the role of religion in the lives of Syrians cannot be overlooked, and can be a useful tool in domestic violence prevention strategies. Talking to Imams and other religious leaders about leading discussions about Islam's rejection of domestic violence may prove to be very useful in deterring husbands from abusing their wives, and may also help women realize that such behaviour is not acceptable in any way. Giving out more woman-friendly versions of the Qur'an and other religious material may be helpful for this as well.

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