

White Ribbon Day: Islam & Domestic Violence

*A short paper presented by Dr Zachariah Matthews, Australian Islamic Mission
at the Canterbury Domestic Violence Committee Forum to launch White Ribbon Day
held at Campsie Police Station, Tuesday 25th November 2008*

Superintendent Peter Lennon, Canterbury Police; Councillor Kebbe, representing the Mayor; Uncle George Fisher, Aboriginal Elder; Jihad Dib, Punchbowl Boys High; Nadia Saleh, Canterbury DV Committee; Sh Haitham Farache, Lakemba Mosque.

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak today. It is my privilege and duty to support the campaign against domestic violence and the abuse of women.

It is a shameful statistic that the number of women and children murdered in domestic violence is at a 10-year high, with at least 74 women and dozens of children dying in Australia each year at the hands of violent men, making up the majority of all murders committed. [Sydney Morning Herald 23/11/08]

As most of my civic work is within the Muslim community, I would like to touch on a few related issues.

In Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper on Friday 21st November 2008, an article titled "Local Muslim clerics accused," some Muslim religious leaders in Victoria were blamed for condoning rape within marriage, domestic violence, polygamy, and exploitation of women.

These allegations are serious and need to be appropriately investigated.

Unfortunately some sections of the media, especially talk-back radio in Sydney have used this article as another Muslim bashing opportunity.

According to the Federal Government "...Domestic violence occurs in all geographic areas of Australia and in all socioeconomic and cultural groups ..."

[Dr Kerry Carrington, September 2006, http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/sp/Dom_violence.htm]

To what extent religious or cultural practices play a role in domestic violence is therefore unclear.

A thorough Root Cause Analysis (RCA) is important if we are going to effectively address the primary causes to the question: "Why certain men use violence and emotional abuse to control their families?"

A follow up article by the same author the next day focussed on "Islamic women's anger at entrenched discrimination and segregation in Mosques."

The issue is not merely one of segregation but proper facilities conducive to achieving spiritual worship objectives. Some mosques certainly do have inadequate facilities for women but not all. Improved facilities like the Singapore model of incorporating family-friendly designs in Mosques are needed.

With regard to the issue of hijab (head scarf), the West looks at the hijab as a sign that Muslim women are oppressed. But when you ask Muslim women they see it as a sign of dignity that is sanctioned by their religion.

The irony is that Muslim women who wear the hijab have been particularly vulnerable to physical and verbal abuse since they are readily identifiable. Many Muslim women have been forced to remove their scarves out of fear and many others have become prisoners in their own homes, terrified to leave – especially at times of heightened anti-Muslim sentiment like S11 and the Cronulla riots.

So what does Islam teach about gender relations?

Islam promotes gender equity and states clearly that women are not inferior to men. Yes they are assigned different but complementary rather than competitive roles. The only criteria of distinction is taqwa (piety, righteousness) – something that only God knows and judges.

Islam emphasises treating women well. Allah Almighty says in the Quran, "*Live together with them (wives) honourably.*" (Q4:19)

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) severely reprimanded those men who physically abuse their wives and then have the audacity to sleep with them at night. [Bukhari, Muslim]

In his farewell pilgrimage address, he included among several important reminders, the requirement for men to treat their wives well "for they are your partners," he said. [At-Tirmidhi]

The Prophet (pbuh) also said: "The best of you are those who are best to their wives, and I am the best of you towards mine." [At-Tahaawi]

In an amusing incident that happened more than 1400 years ago, Aisha reported that she was once on a trip with the Prophet (pbuh) while she was still a young wife. "I had not acquired excess body flesh, nor had my body become large. The Prophet said: 'Come, and I will race you.' I beat him in a foot race. Later on, I again was on a trip with him and he said to me: 'Come, and I will race you.' I had completely forgotten the previous incident. Moreover, I had become heavier. I said to him: 'How can I race you when I am in this condition?' He said, 'You will race me!' So I raced him, and he won the race. He then began laughing and said, "This is for that (previous) victory." (Al-Humaidi, an-Nasaa'ee, Abu-Dawood)

This incident demonstrates the Prophet's good humoured, compassionate and playful demeanour towards his wife -- an important lesson for all husbands.

In summary, Domestic Violence cuts across all cultural, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. It is therefore a problem that we all share and must work together to address. There is no benefit in pointing the finger at one section of the community as this will not solve the problem.

In addition to tertiary level victim support programs, the argument is that we must focus more of our energies on primary preventative strategies in the three main areas of:

- working with victims and perpetrators to break the cycle of violence;
- working with young people to break the intergenerational cycle of violence;
- working with communities to educate against violence [[Current Perspectives on Domestic Violence](#)]

It is in these last two areas, the youth and the community (including Imams and leaders), that organisations like ours can draw on Islamic principles to educate against the abuse of women.

Islam teaches that the honour of a woman is sacred and that the best of men are those who are best to their wives.

Thanking you for your attention.