

Background Paper to provide information and strategies towards the prevention and protection of immigrant and refugee women and families against violence.

# Domestic Violence Risks in Families with Collectivist Values

Understanding Cultural Context

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## **Introduction:**

In order to understand any group of people, we need to explore the cultural context in which they live. The basic definition of culture is “a body of learned human behaviours and consciousness within a human society from one generation to another” ([www.wsu.edu](http://www.wsu.edu)). Two of its basic components are values and beliefs. In other words, understanding a person’s attitudes requires consideration of the values and beliefs that govern their behaviours and their view towards life (Nydell, 2002). Values represent the template that guides how people live their lives, including their behaviours, moral judgment and goals ([www.ncset.org](http://www.ncset.org)). Thus, understanding the cultural context of families and its implications, is essential for assessing the risk and threats that face individual family members and for planning and providing intervention services to ensure their safety. For a comprehensive assessment of risk and threat posed by domestic violence in the context of families from collectivist cultures and those who are coming from conflict zones we need to have better understanding the cultural context and migratory experiences of these families.

This paper seeks to discuss the complexities associated with domestic violence in immigrant communities that are grounded in the values of collectivist cultures, while living within a dominant culture with individualistic values. The continuum of both collectivist and individualistic cultures will be explored along with their inherent values and beliefs. The paper delivers knowledge to better understand the dynamic nature of domestic violence and its implications for the safety of women and children. It will present the layers of issues that affect families migrating to Canada from collectivist societies and conflict or disaster zones. These families face complex challenges in their journeys to integrate into Canadian society, as well as barriers to services. After discussing risk assessment this paper will also provide suggestions for an intervention strategy. The Islamic community will be discussed to help shape the understanding of the current Canadian context and to provide a concrete collectivist cultural perspective.

### **1. Collectivist and Individualistic Cultures**

Cultures are generally characterized as collectivist or individualistic. Collectivism is defined as “any philosophic, political, economic or social outlook that emphasizes the interdependence of every human in some collective group and the priority of group goals over individual goals. Collectivists usually focus on community, society, or nation” (Wikipedia). In contrast, Individualism is defined as “the moral stance political philosophy, ideology, or social outlook that stresses the moral worth of an individual. Individualists promote the exercise of one’s goals and desires and so value independence and self-reliance while opposing most external interference upon one’s own interests, whether by society, family or any other group or institution” (Wikipedia). It is important to keep in mind that defining cultures as belonging to

one extreme or another is misleading. We need to be aware that there are elements of both philosophies in any culture and or family, but the emphasis on a particular set of values will tend to differ along this continuum.

When we work with individuals who have experienced trauma in the past and who come from a collectivist culture which has experienced ongoing wars and violence, we need to pay close attention to the family dynamics, how family members define themselves, and how they make sense of their identities. These factors can play an important role in the working relationship between a service provider and the client. We need to understand these individuals well, we need to step back, listen to the story of their journeys and explore their biographies starting with their country of origin and continuing onto their final destination, which in this case is Canada. The cultural context will continue to define the family's responses and structure, particularly when they are newly arrived and under stress.

## **2. The Relationship between Pre-Migration Trauma and Domestic Violence**

Families from conflict or disaster zones have more complex challenges than those that have a more conventional immigration experience. These particularly complex challenges may exist whether individuals are recognized as a refugee or an immigrant arriving under another status. These challenges can influence an individual's interpersonal relationships with immediate and extended family, with their ethnic or "national" community, with their meaningful reference groups and across Canadian society in general.

A study conducted by Boobaid<sup>1</sup> shows that there are no specific intervention programs that address domestic violence in the context of migratory experiences. According to this study, there is a need to recognize the impact of pre and/or post migration traumatic experiences on the way people see themselves and on their inter-familial relationships (Boobaid, 2008:7). Researchers<sup>2</sup> have indicated that immigrants in Canada are changing rapidly and becoming more diverse. The rate of family violence among the families coming from conflict zones is notably higher than immigrants from non-conflict zones. These families are facing multiple and overlapping barriers and discrimination related to ethno-racial and religious profiling and stereotyping. These barriers, particularly when they are overlapping, can have a negative impact on their settlement and integration process (G.V. Sonny and Jackson, 2003).

While research has to some extent documented that urban youth are exposed to increasing rates of community violence, little is known about what increases risk for violence exposure; what protects women and children from being subjected to violence; and what

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<sup>1</sup> Boobaid, Mohamed, 2008, "Community Service Responses towards Men's Violence against Women and children in the context of Pre-Migration Experiences"

<sup>2</sup> G.V. ("Sonny") Montgomery VA Medical Center, Jackson, MS, with additional support from VA South Central (VISN 16) Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC), 2003, University of Mississippi Medical Center press, Jackson, MS, USA

factors reduce the most negative outcomes associated with witnessing violence. The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms of individual family members coming from conflict zones are especially predictive of family distress, loneliness, and severe physical violence.

Most refugees present with a combination of both trauma and grief symptoms. These symptoms can be expressed at an individual, family or community level (Savage and Bowl, 1999). The trauma and grief, if not dealt with, will certainly impact the dynamics of the family. The needs of the family will ordinarily exceed the capacity of the traditional Canadian organizations, mandated or not, to respond to these complex needs. If these needs are not attended to they will hamper the ability of the family to heal effectively and they may bear serious consequence for future generations of Canadians. The concern of course is that unresolved trauma will lead to unaddressed traumagenic components becoming imbedded in the family structure. This creates powerful core issues that may generate violent responses within the family, resulting in conjugal violence, elder abuse and child abuse. There is evidence that unresolved trauma will breed violent intra-familial violence and cross-generational transmission of violent patterns of communication. Individual adults and children may continue to be victimized across generations if comprehensive culturally specific, intensive and collaborative supports are not offered to the family.

An estimated 48-54% of immigrant populations in Canada and the US report pre-migration political violence exposure (Rousseau & Drapeau, 2004; Eisenman et al, 2003). Despite the high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) among some immigrant groups (Raj & Silverman, 2002; Dutton et al, 2000) very little research has been conducted to investigate the relationship between pre-migration trauma and IPV perpetration. The findings of recent research which looks at young adult men attending community health centres in Boston suggest an association between IPV and pre-migration exposure to political violence. The study indicates that 29% of the respondents reported pre-migration exposure to political violence; 55% of these men reported IPV perpetration; IPV perpetration was significantly associated with pre-migration exposure to political violence (Gupta & Silverman 2009).

For mainstream Canadian justice and social service organizations charged with providing services to families experiencing domestic violence, the presence of pre-migration trauma requires specific training for them to be effective in providing service.

### **3. Challenges Facing Immigrant and New Canadian Women: Understanding the Dilemma of Immigrant Women from Collectivist Communities**

#### *Institutional Racism*

Institutional racism is described in Canadian society as a significant barrier to service for abused immigrant and refugee women. Agencies created to support women who face violence are generally run by Canadians of European heritage. It is only recently that multiple language

services and multicultural staff have started to become available or visible. Despite increased awareness of the multi-cultural population of women who need service, leadership positions in the social service sector still are not reflective of the wide diversity of Canadian society. This is not particular to the social service sector, however; in the social services it directly impacts the service provided in particular ways, which create additional barriers for immigrant women.

The first study of immigrant women who experienced abuse was written in 1990 for the federal government and was followed by another in 1993. The authors, Linda Macleod and Maria Shin explain in their report that immigrant women face all the same difficulties that non-immigrant women experience, but their problems are “magnified many times by the loneliness, strangeness and newness of their environment” (1990: 7). The report states that these women need the “opportunity to discuss and reassess their beliefs and assumptions concerning wife abuse...with women and men who understand their culture and who can communicate in their language.”

Since that time much attention has been paid to racism within social service organizations with a mandate to respond to abuse. Nevertheless, organizations have demonstrated little change in regards to including minorities in decision-making processes or positions. Despite the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which calls on all citizens to respect differences among people, there is still a clear preference for the values that come from English Protestant traditions and French culture. Western philosophy and the rights of the individual are assumed and not generally made visible or open to question. As well, the government does not provide incentives or funding that would facilitate greater diversity in the social services. Without that diversity, cultural differences are interpreted through a strictly Western worldview lens.

### *The Problem of Blaming Culture for Violence*

Within the Western worldview there is a dominant discourse in regards to violence within collectivist cultures which depicts ‘crimes of honour’ in such a way that the public wonders how a ‘culture can be so violent’. Several scholars have discussed the problem of attributing violence against girls and women to culture. (Grewal, 2009; Jiwani, 2006; Razack, 2002). Feminist scholars, Uma Narayan (1997) and Grewal (2009), have used the phrase, “death by culture”, to describe a pattern whereby, within racialized communities, moral prescriptions are transmitted in the language of culture. The implicit suggestion is that there is something intrinsic to Islamic ‘culture’ that allows and encourages violence against women and girls to occur and so therefore nothing can be done to prevent it from happening. This is a dangerous idea that must be challenged.

The categorization of “honour-related” violence as a cultural phenomenon ignores its position within the wider spectrum of gendered and racialized violence in all societies. This can result in a number of unintended side effects, including fewer advocates for the rights of girls and

women within minority communities. Potential advocates may be self-silencing for fear of reinforcing cultural stereotypes and undermining their community.

As well, blaming culture stigmatizes those communities in a way that further isolates them. The tendency to blame culture is further exacerbated in a climate of fear and mistrust – perpetuated by both the dominant society and Muslims. This has intensified in the post-9/11 era. According to Ayyub (2007), this atmosphere of mutual suspicion and misunderstanding contributes to a denial of violence and reluctance on the part of women and girls to speak out or seek help.

At the same time, the cultural aspects of violence against women cannot be dismissed. Instead, a more nuanced approach is required that carefully balances the benefits and limitations of taking cultural factors into account.

### *Caught Between Two Cultures*

In 1993, the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights established the international Working Groups on Girls (WGGs) to monitor treatment of the human rights of women and girls among signatory nations. The WGG reported that immigrant and refugee girls and young women experience higher rates of violence because of dislocation resulting from migration, the reversal of gender roles within their own families, as well the impact of racism and sexism from their own communities and the host society (Friedman, 1995). Caught between two cultures, where their birth culture is devalued and considered inferior, and where cultural scripts in both worlds encode patriarchal values, these girls and young women face a tremendous struggle as they try to ‘fit’ into Canadian society (Jiwani, 2006). When they fail to conform, they often suffer intense backlash. Lack of self-esteem, barriers to integration, and marginalization are some of the consequences that have been identified as contributing to the increased vulnerability of immigrant and refugee girls to violence (Berman & Jiwani, 2002).

### *Intersections of Violence*

Violence that occurs in Muslim families is similar to that in other communities and reflects overlapping social hierarchies that are based not only on gender, but also on race, culture, class, disability, age, and marital status. According to Statistics Canada (2006), there are currently approximately 750,000 Muslims in Canada, constituting the largest religious minority. The Muslim population is not a homogenous group and is comprised of highly distinct and diverse groups who come to Canada primarily from regions in Africa and Asia. Although mainstream health, social service and justice agencies across the country are increasingly aware of the need to provide culturally appropriate outreach services for the social, cultural and economic development of communities, they lack the training to understand the specific issues affecting these communities.

### *Lived Experience under Repressive Authority*

Despite the need, few women from collectivist communities access existing family violence prevention and intervention resources. In qualitative interviews, Baobaid (2003) shows Muslim women are unlikely to use existing Canadian resources to address issues of intimate partner violence. Participants who were interviewed expressed worries about reporting victimization to authorities. Some women feared reporting their husband to police would place the immigration status of their family in jeopardy. Others came from backgrounds where the police and authorities were repressive, intimidating and discriminating against women. This distrust of authority carries over into their lives in Canada.

#### **4. Safety of women in Individualist and Collectivist Societies**

There are significant differences between individualist and collectivist societies that are not well understood. Mainstream service providers face significant challenges in their attempts to effectively address domestic violence in immigrant and new Canadian communities without an appreciation for the socio-cultural differences in collectivist societies such as Muslim and Arab communities.

##### *Why Doesn't She Leave?*

The Western perspective of equality is based on the rights of the individual. Under the law, all citizens have equal human rights; however, the lived reality for many Canadians is quite different. Overlapping socio-economic factors such as poverty, education, class, disability, gender and race intersect to disempower and disadvantage people in different ways, even though the ideal of equality is enshrined in the constitution and the law.

In the case of domestic violence, Canadians who do not understand the issue often question why a woman who is abused doesn't just leave her home. *"If it is her right to live free from abuse, then why doesn't she just leave?"* Blaming victims for failing to 'take control' and not changing their abusive situation is a common response to domestic violence in Canada and one that service providers frequently strive to change. The view reflects a generalized public ignorance of the coercive power dynamics involved in many abusive relationships. It is also an attitude that fails to hold the abusive man responsible for his actions.

Anti-violence feminists in Canada have worked hard to educate the public to place the responsibility for violence solely with the violent perpetrator and to respect the rights of women to choose to stay or leave the relationship. Despite the effort, it is still difficult for people in the general population to understand and accept how a woman can 'let' herself be abused or choose to stay in an abusive relationship.

Many women from minority cultures that embrace a collectivist worldview face additional complications with this already existing tendency to blame women for staying in their abusive relationships. The collectivist values that put priority on family and community may also serve to keep a woman in an abusive home. Even if she seeks help from available services, she may have no desire, or support from her friends and family to break the community bond. In these cases, it is not helpful for a mainstream service provider to focus on the unequal gender relations in the family. Instead, it is important for the worker to focus on building trust with the woman because trust is a necessary step toward safety. As well, service providers need to understand that women who choose to stay within the family may fully accept their 'place' within the collectivist system. Differences in values make it too easy for people from the dominant culture to reject such thinking as a sign of subservience and submission. While the woman may be fully aware that the abuse is wrong, at the same time, she may be unwilling to give up the security she derives from her place in the family and community.

Women, who grow up with values that reinforce the value of autonomy, also have difficulty leaving their abusive relationships. Relationships are always complex and multi-dimensional. They can offer forms of safety, security and even love and affection at the same time as abuse. For women from collectivist cultures, the difficulty of leaving the positive and reinforcing parts of the relationship is even more difficult, given that her identity is so closely tied to family and community.

Mainstream service providers who are already embattled, trying to shift the attitudes of the general public from victim-blaming to greater support for abused women are particularly challenged by collectivist values that reinforce maintaining the family. For many service providers, safety is equated with leaving. Working with immigrant women poses a challenge to reinterpret and redefine the concept of safety. This is a knowledge chasm that sits at the juncture of individualist and collectivist worldviews.

Existing service systems, which already struggle to meet day-to-day pressures with limited resources, are facing demands to become more inclusive. It is not reasonable to expect diversification of the sector without adding capacity to meet the unique needs of other cultures.

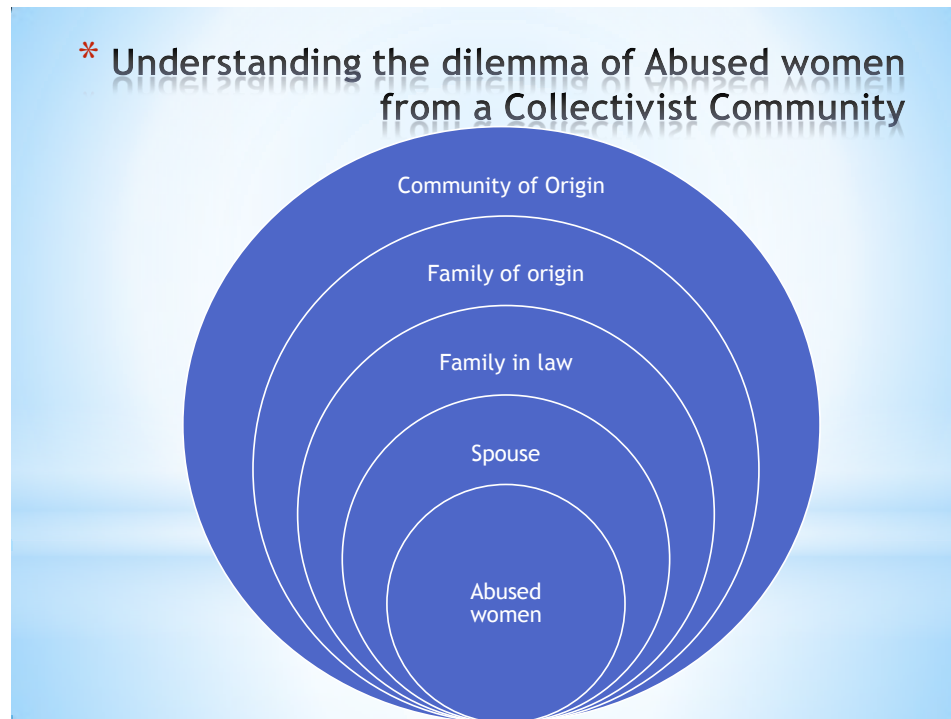
### *The dilemma of abused women from a collectivist community*

The following chart illustrates the critical situation of abused women from collectivist cultures in regards to seeking help. Not taking into account the different factors or layers of relationships surrounding these women will create more problems for them, rather than helping them to solve the presenting concern of violence. As is illustrated in the chart, these women define their identity in relation to a wider community. Their identity is defined by their roles within the collective community rather than by their individual roles and characteristics. Simply leaving becomes much more complex and damaging when one realises the impact that

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has on the woman as well as her community. The risk assessment and the intervention must also take into account these factors, as preserving the identity and existing supports of the women are imperative.



### *Safety as a Relative Term*

With very few exceptions, all societies are patriarchal. Canadian society functions within a predominantly patriarchal value system. There is a tendency in Canada to assume that other cultures are 'more' patriarchal. If all societies are patriarchal, then we can expect that all women and men operate within the limits of their society. The rules of culture and society bind everyone, often in ways that are invisible. As a result, people can and do believe that they are fully autonomous. There is no 'outside' where patriarchy does not exist. Choice is therefore relative to the situation and every citizen experiences an imposed limit of some kind to their choices. This is the reality of living in any social system. The difficulty comes when members from one society pronounce that members from another society are less able to choose under the patriarchal rules of that culture.

The idea that Muslim women have the ability to define their role and identity in a collectivist hierarchy is perhaps one of the more difficult concepts for mainstream anti-violence feminists. There is a long-standing Western feminist perspective that automatically equates hierarchy in a

patriarchal system with unequal and unjust power relations. If Muslim communities are deemed 'more patriarchal' than the dominant society, then choice is not really 'free' choice for Muslim women, but rather coercion. Yet many women from collectivist societies assert that they are exercising their rights in choosing the role they have assumed within the family and the community.

Rather than imposing a single Western definition on concepts like safety, it may be more helpful to explore safety as a dynamic in collectivist families whereby each member has responsibility to both create safety in the family and also to define it for themselves. A choice to maintain her place in the family and community by staying in an abusive relationship does not mean that safety is not possible or achievable for a woman of a collectivist culture. If a family member uses protection as a rationale to use violence to enforce family safety it is a contradiction. The common ground for mainstream service providers and members of the collectivist community in situations of domestic violence can be found in a shared desire to achieve safety. The caveat is that the abused woman must be included in defining what safety means to her.

### *Cultural Safety*

The concept of *cultural safety* may be useful for service providers. The definition of cultural safety has been evolving in healthcare systems around the world between dominant culture service providers and indigenous peoples. Cultural safety reinforces the idea that each person's knowledge and reality is valid and valuable. Care may be deemed unsafe if the patient is humiliated, alienated, or directly or indirectly dissuaded from accessing necessary care. Cultural safety insists that mainstream service providers recognize themselves as the bearer of their own culture and attitudes that either consciously or unconsciously exercises power over patients.

The concept of cultural safety has political relevance because it attempts to change health professionals' attitudes about power relationships with patients. Many academics maintain that cultural safety in the mainstream health care system cannot be achieved by individual interactions. For example, in our current context, cultural safety depends on the meaningful participation of Aboriginal people in decision-making processes that allow transfer of power to Aboriginal governments (Browne, Fiske, Thomas, 2001)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.naho.ca/english/documents/Culturalsafetyfactsheet.pdf> (retrieved Jan 2011)

### *Safety in Belonging*

If the goal is to find new ways of providing support to immigrants and newcomers then safety must be understood in a way that is consistent with “cultural safety” as described above. We need to define support in a way that is meaningful for the people being served. For abused women and girls from collectivist cultures, the choice to leave the home may provide short-term safety, however; long-term safety may be tied to a sense of belonging to and a place within their community of origin. The challenge for everyone involved is to find ways to stop the violence without breaking ties to the community.

Exploring cultural difference is a necessary experience for training and capacity building within collectivist communities and with mainstream service providers to develop specific techniques that are relevant and appropriate for working with women from collectivist societies. Ultimately, the goal is to discover tools and methods that can promote gender equality and safe families in all societies. Acquiring an appreciation for the real differences between collectivist and individualist societies is the key to success. It is a challenge not easily met without a willingness on both sides to question the underlying assumptions and biases that are embedded in any single perspective or worldview.

### *Conflation of Patriarchy with Collectivism*

In an individualist society, autonomy of the individual is perceived as the highest priority. In a collectivist society, the interest of the group holds priority over the individual. If there is no opportunity created to exchange ideas about what individual autonomy means in a collectivist society, outsiders will develop an interpretation of the other based on their own perspective. This is to be expected in the absence of true dialogue and respect for difference in itself.

It can also help to explain why, from a strictly Western individualist viewpoint, the privileging of the collective over the individual in Muslim communities is often interpreted as happening *because* the society is patriarchal or as a result of patriarchy. In fact, it is not. The conflation of patriarchy with collectivism in this way reveals a bias that does not appreciate that the role of the individual in a collectivist society is fundamentally different from the role of the individual in an individualist society. A woman in a collectivist community is not by definition ‘oppressed’ and people raised in individualist centred societies do not have the right to impose their understanding as the only legitimate possibility. The conflation between patriarchy and collectivism is unavoidable so long as the assumption that individuals are merely subservient in a collectivist society remains unspoken.

### *The Limits of Understanding and Respect for Difference*

A person with an individualist orientation will never grasp what it is to be a member of a collectivist society because it is not their direct lived experience. While the pursuit of deeper understanding should always be fostered, the drive must also be accompanied by the explicit knowledge that the journey toward understanding of a different culture will always involve interpreting and judging the experience through one's own life lens. The limit of human understanding is inescapable. Recognition of this limit can be a powerful support to social change because it ensures ongoing dialogue and interaction in working creatively with differences. Acknowledging that a person from an individualist culture can never become so expert about collectivism that they can speak for its members or exclude them from the conversation, provides an opportunity to achieve shared goals.

In this way, 'understanding cultural difference' means that difference itself is respected in the sense that one 'understands' that there is cultural difference that cannot be fully bridged by understanding. Difference will never become something fully understood, something one can make their own – otherwise it ceases to be difference. Respect is actively demonstrated in the attempt to gain understanding when accompanied by the acknowledgement that there will always be a limit to that understanding.

The importance of learning to live with difference without trying to turn it into something one can grasp - and hold independent of the other - is challenging, and yet there are truly important gains to be made for the effort. If we can accept the idea that difference between peoples can never truly be 'known', then the urgent need to increase diversity, both through legitimizing perspectives of minority groups and in the composition of the service sector becomes even more evident as an imperative.

### *Working with Difference*

The mutual challenge of finding ways to respect difference – especially when the difference is perceived as being culturally 'unacceptable' - should not be underestimated. This is what it means to work *with and for* diversity. It is said in many ways and in many places that today we need the strength of a wide range of ideas and perspectives that diversity gives us to meet the social, economic and environmental challenges the human family is facing around the globe. Learning how to accept and work creatively with the limits of our own understanding and to appreciate the ideas and values that are not, and will never be our own, may be the most important individual and collective learning we can do.

## 5. Family Protection in Service to Women' Safety

To move toward prevention, the specific concerns that underlie domestic violence in different cultures must be recognized and acknowledged. Many Muslim families are concerned about losing the religious and cultural values of their families because of the strong influence of Western culture on their children. Women are held as being primarily responsible for family honor and men have a duty to protect that honour.<sup>4</sup>

These are some of the specific concerns:

- Concerns about children's religious and cultural identities
- Children becoming more Westernized
- Disobedience shown to parents
- Disconnected from family and community heritage
- Community pressure on parents (in Canada and in country of origin)
- Parental responsibility to fulfill religious obligations

Concerns related to family honor:

- Concern about girls sexuality
- Overreaction toward girls challenging behaviours, there is generally more tolerance for boys behaviour
- Conflicts between the parents and the broader community

Concerns related to family unity:

- Family relations versus individual interests
- Perceived breakdown of the family

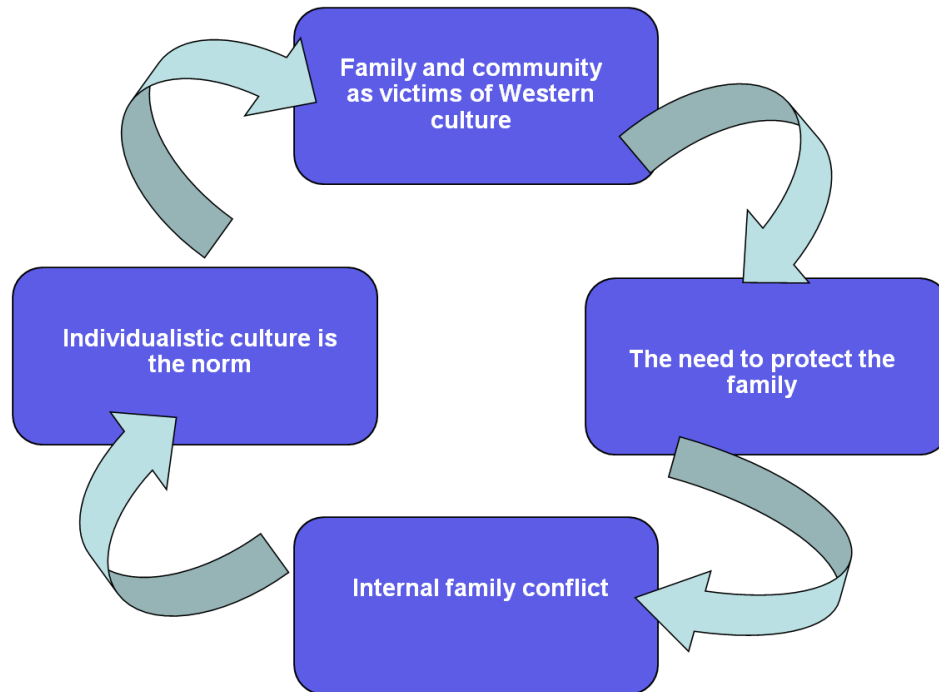
As concerns such as these begin to surface in a family, usually as the children age or as female members become more interested in Western culture, the drive to protect the family can dominate family life. A man with a collectivist cultural background may use controlling and even violent behaviour to 'protect' his family from Western influences. Whereas this behaviour is understood to be abusive, for family members of a collectivist community who are intent on preserving their way of life, the behaviour is understood as merely being responsive to much larger invasive forces that are entering into the family home. In this sense, an angry violent man may see himself as a victim under attack and without power or choice. He is merely trying to keep his family safe. The perception of being victimized and the ongoing struggle to resist being overtaken by Western society can become the dominant driver that circulates through the daily

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<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.unn.ac.uk/societies/islamic>

interactions of the family. In this way, the obligation to protect the family becomes the very thing that begins to break it down.

### The Cycle of Victimization



The cycle of victimization diagram above shows how many Muslim families become ensnared in a vicious circle that contributes to family breakdown. A family migrates to Canada and is immediately immersed in a culture that espouses individualist values. As the children begin to integrate into Canadian society their independent activities can invoke a perceived threat to traditional Muslim values. Concerned parents may fear that the road to integration will lead their children outside the protection of the community and that if they become estranged from the collective, they will not be safe. The parents may feel themselves to be victims of the dominant culture that surrounds them. The protective instinct that is stimulated in response to the perceived threat can divide the family. The mother may be blamed for the behaviour of the children. As limits and controls are imposed and then resisted by family members who want to integrate with Canadian society, the need to protect may intensify the internal family conflict, causing the family to spiral into an increasingly conflicted state.

The internal conflict in the family can also be understood in the larger context as the clash of difference between individualist values and collectivist values. As stated earlier, individualism and collectivism have historically been defined as being opposed. Because the Western values

of individualism make up the fabric of the dominant Canadian culture, a Muslim father may feel overwhelmed and increasingly isolated in his attempt to protect the collectivist values of his family.

### *Family Protection*

Family protection is an important concept, especially in consideration of a prevention strategy. While men have explicit responsibility for protecting the family, the safety and integrity of the family is dependent on a cooperative dynamic that involves all members. It is a mistake to automatically interpret the role of protector as an autonomous and absolute ruler over the family. In fact, the male protector must act with deep regard for each individual and the overall wellbeing of the family. Despite the common perception that the male head of the household has absolute power over his family, he relies on the goodwill and cooperation of all family members to fulfill his responsibilities. Family protection in this sense is a mechanism to preserve and protect the safety and integrity of the family. This means both the relations within the family as well as the family's relation to the wider community.

### *Family Safety*

Family safety can only be realized if everyone in the family is safe. It calls for a balanced set of relations in a family whereby each member contributes to the overall harmony of the household environment. There is a hierarchy, however; the different roles and responsibilities in the family are not static and require negotiation and agreement from family members. For family safety to exist, each member contributes to the agreements of the family as to how it will function. This means that as a family begins to integrate into Canadian society, issues will arise according to how the family views and responds to change.

### *Differing Views of Family Protection*

When all members of the family agree upon the definition of family protection there is balance in the family. However, there can be different views within a family that can cause divisions among family members.

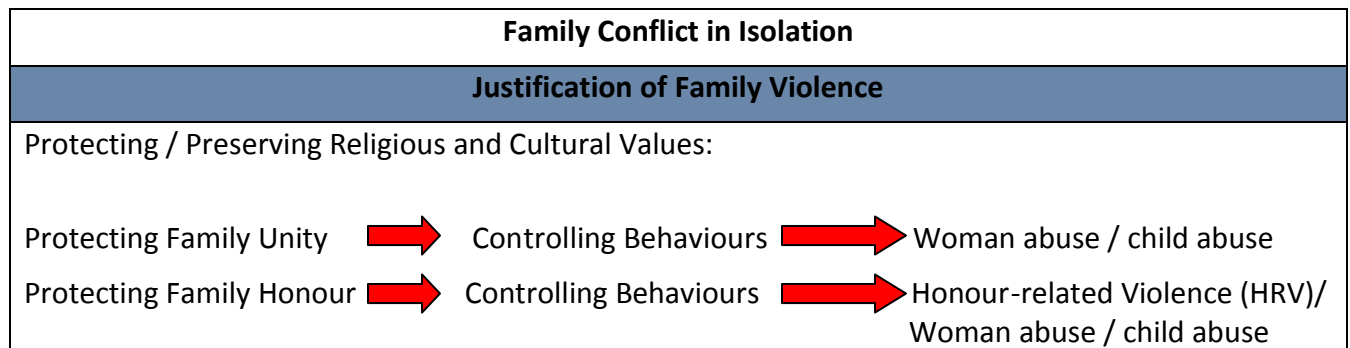
- Wives and mothers are held responsible to maintain the family honour. Daughters must behave properly at all times and obey their parents. In this way, family protection can become a burden for female family members.
- Children have fewer rights and must be obedient and respectful of elders. Children may be unable to understand the reasons why a younger brother has more rights and freedoms than an older sister.

- Husbands and sons are less responsible for bringing shame on the family. If a man’s behaviour contradicts tradition, it is likely to be less shameful, and will often be overlooked by others.
- A mother-in-law may pressure her daughter in law to behave in certain ways and then pressure her son to ‘be a man’ in meting out punishment she disobeys. As a result, the son may do things he wouldn’t do on his own in an attempt to show respect for elders and community tradition.

Whenever family differences are not fully considered, family protection is sacrificed. By definition, family protection holds and protects the common interests of the family. When a man is focused on his own image and how he is perceived in the broader community he transgresses and lapses in his responsibility. Family protection is a privilege that should not create tension or be used as justification to maintain power and control. Together, the family maintains its own safety and integrity.

*When Protection Turns Violent*

Family protection that is not defined by all members of the family is conflicted. If the conflict is denied in a household where some family members believe they are under attack by the dominant culture that threatens their way of life, then the drive to protect the family can turn violent. When this happens, it is most often women and children who are the victims.



*Increasing Isolation*

If protecting the family is interpreted to mean strictly resisting integration into Canadian society - at all costs, a man of a collectivist culture can become increasingly isolated within his family and in his community. His family may be divided as some members start to embrace Canadian society. This can create conflict that deepens with his every effort to control or change the



situation. As identified earlier, he may see himself as a victim of the overwhelmingly individualistic culture that surrounds and influences his family, alone and accountable to his community for keeping his family within traditional values. If he is unwilling to consider alternative perspectives about what family protection means, he is left to his own fearful imaginings that can grow to support increasingly extreme responses. He may begin to fantasize worst possible scenarios that lead him to do 'whatever it takes' to protect his family from losing traditional relations and values. In the worst of cases, protection that becomes violent has resulted in domestic homicide.

In addition to the breakdown and suffering within the family, if a man resorts to violence to control the family situation, he will be in conflict with Canadian laws. If his children are seen to be at risk, the child welfare authority will become involved. These are new realities that reconstruct the traditional role from *protector to perpetrator* of family violence in Canadian society. This can be a shattering reality for a man who believes he is fighting to keep his family safe and to fulfill his obligations as a man. What can be done to support him to make other choices that actually create safety for everyone involved?

## **6. Intervention Strategy: Aligning Protection with Safety**

To align family protection with family safety is a logical movement. It is logical to assume that family protection is driven by a desire for family safety. However; when attempts to protect the family result in domestic violence, there are a number of issues that must be considered prior to any intervention plan.

*Different types of domestic violence require different interventions*

- Working with Michael Johnson's typology, there are three types of domestic violence.
  - Situational couple violence
  - Coercive control
  - Violent Resistance

*Coercive control is the most lethal form of domestic violence*

Coercive control does not arise from a desire to protect the family although family protection may be the reason given for abusive behaviour. Rather, coercive control occurs when one partner in an intimate relationship uses violent tactics to dominate and control the other partner. The purpose of the violence, usually and specifically, stems from a powerful sense of entitlement to hold power over a female partner and/or female children. An appeal to family safety will have little meaning in this case. The motives behind the violence are self-related and as such, are not restricted to any particular culture or community affiliation. Coercive control

happens in both individualist and collectivist societies. It is a dynamic that is supported by patriarchal values that place women as inferior to men. Even in Canada where women have equal rights under the law, patriarchal values continue to structure dominant society.<sup>5</sup>

**To ensure safety, any plan to intervene should routinely begin with the assumption that the violence is part of a coercive control dynamic.** Safety concerns must be constantly attended to by both bystanders and the professionals who are trained to assess risk and who are authorized to respond to criminal actions and to do safety planning. Extreme caution should always be exercised so as not to put victims at greater risk or escalate the violence. The need for safety cannot be overstated – *all types of domestic violence can be very dangerous, and it can be difficult to determine which type of violence is involved.* Friends and family members can learn to recognize the warning signs of coercive control.

### *Using Logic to Intervene in Situational Couple Violence*

For protection to be aligned with family safety, this intervention strategy must be understood as being limited to the first type of domestic violence described in the typology above; *situational couple violence*. The ‘situation’ that has been described throughout this chapter is one where members of a collectivist family begin to integrate into Canadian society in a way that raises concern about the potential loss of their traditional culture and values. Real fear is generated that the family member(s) will become estranged from the safety of the community. The motivation for this type of violence is a misdirected attempt to keep the family safe. This is very different from coercive control violence that is motivated by the need a man has to retain power and control over his family to ensure his personal sense of entitlement and right to be obeyed. As described earlier, the motivation for coercive control is not related to concerns about family safety.

### *The Role of Protector in Service of Family Safety*

A key intervention strategy is to teach everyone the warning signs of domestic violence so that neighbours, friends and extended family members who are concerned with the safety and integrity of the family can play a role in protection. The movement toward protection can interrupt the isolation that surrounds the family by linking with available services and by using the strength of existing relationships to offer support. Working together, both collectivist immigrant communities and mainstream allies have different roles to play in ending violent responses that stem from a misdirected protective instinct.

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<sup>5</sup> Despite the Charter of Rights that set out equal rights for all Canadians, embedded patriarchal values are still evident in institutional and social-structural reference points such as ongoing wage disparity, lack political representation of women, lack of corporate representation of woman in leadership positions, poverty statistics as well as the rates of violence perpetrated against women.

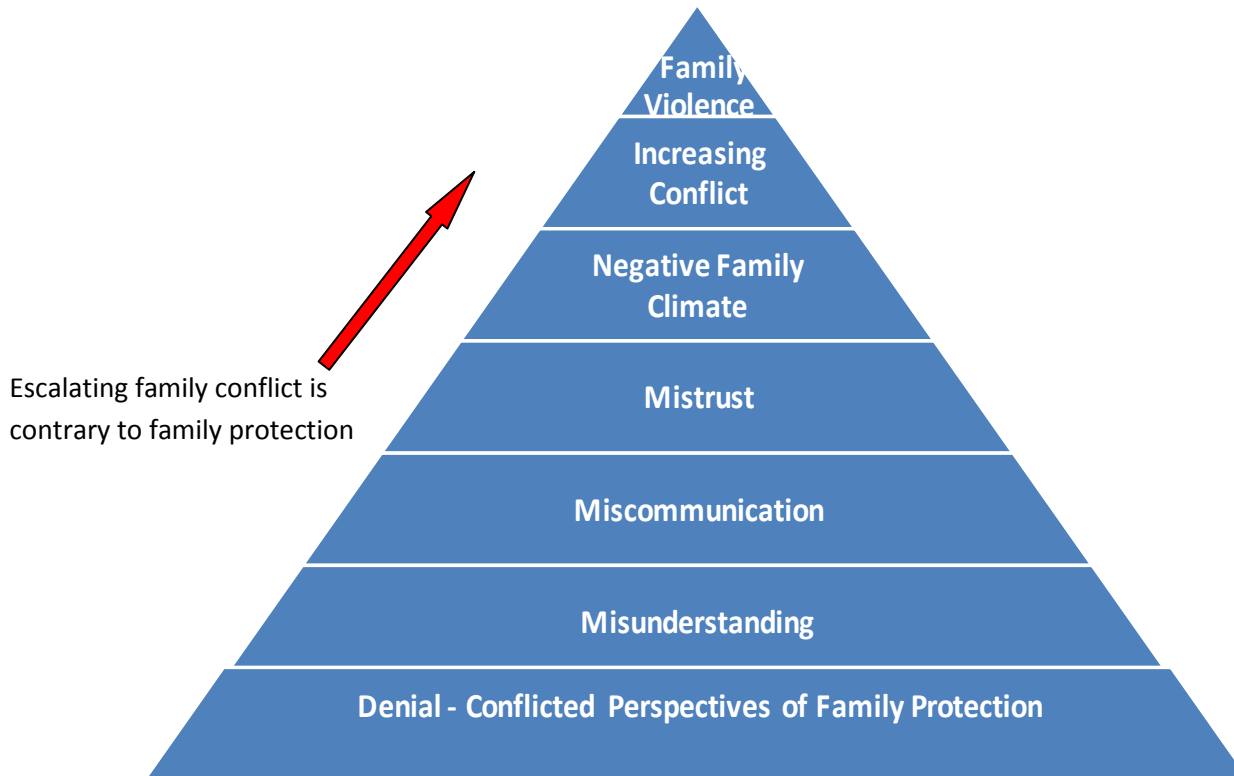
In working with Muslim men for example, and as long as fulfilling the protector role is truly the motive behind the violence, then strengthening the internal rationale that links protection to safety is a powerful connection to make. Male friends and other family members who have significant relationships with the man can support him in recognizing that violence does not produce the result which he is truly seeking; protecting the family. For the abusive man, a significant shift is necessary to bridge the gap between family protection and family safety. He must be willing to recognize that he is creating a destructive family dynamic by his actions and that he has the ability to change his behaviour. If he insists on being the only one to decide on the meaning and scope of family protection, he commits himself to a role of policing and punishing his family for any actions he deems inappropriate or threatening.

In order to engage in a process that will de-escalate the violence and ensure safety, he must accept that there are differing perspectives of family protection and integration in his family that require discussion. He must come to believe that thoughtful and open discussion with his family and with his community is the means to cultivate respect and also to reflect on the value of maintaining tradition. In this way, he will be better prepared to serve his family / community and to negotiate the considerable challenges of migration and integration. Support from friends and relatives can make a critical difference in reducing the isolation and in strengthening the rationale that will lead to greater family safety.

### *Working with Family Conflict*

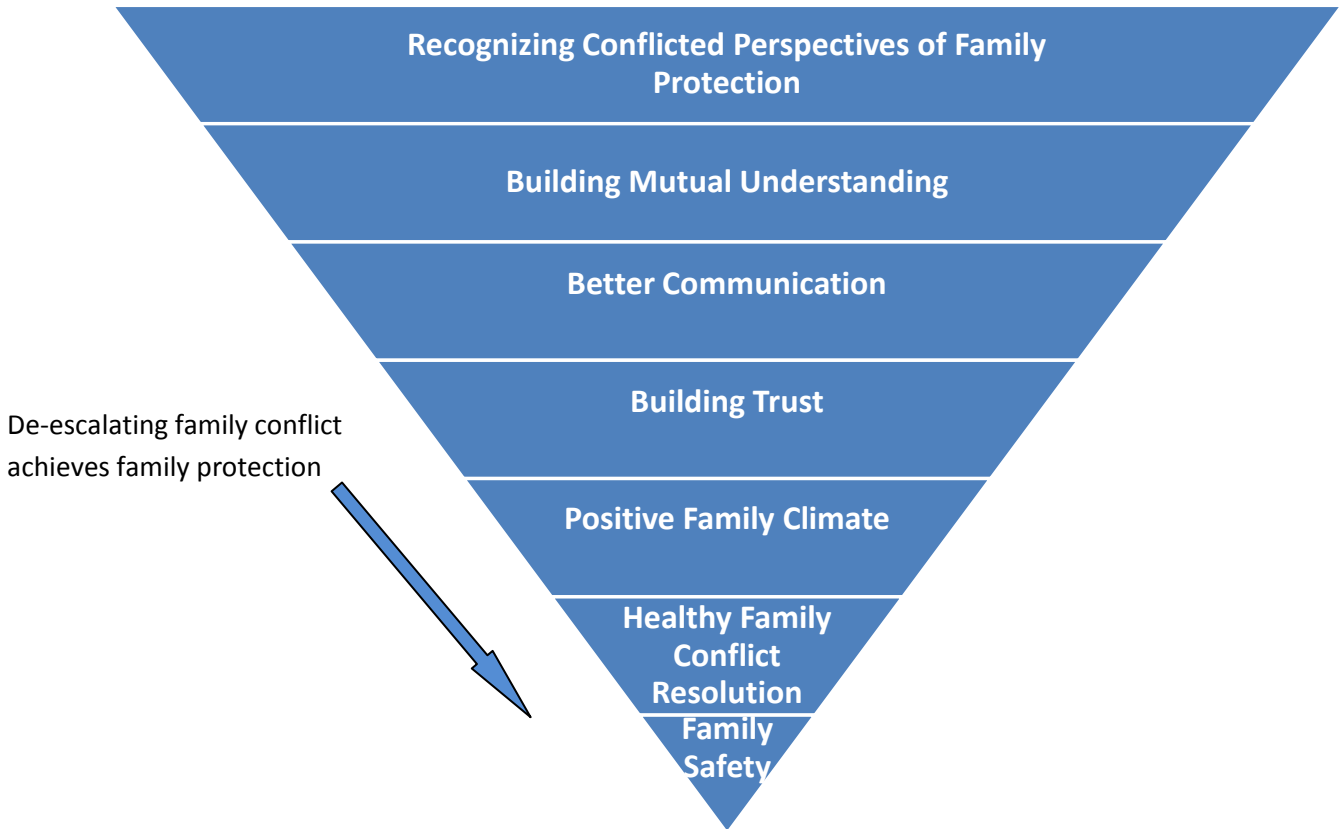
The figure below shows how domestic violence is justified by some men of a collectivist culture. When internal conflicts in the family are denied, the different perspectives of family members are not given consideration. As a result, miscommunication, misunderstanding and mistrust operate to create a negative family climate that embroils the family in conflict that may escalate to violence. In this situation, the protective instinct divides the family.

## When Conflict in the Family is Denied



In the second figure, below, if the internal conflict is recognized and acknowledged, the protective instinct can actually propel the family towards better relations. Acknowledgement allows for mutual understanding through open communication that builds the trust that is essential for a positive family climate. The conflict is resolved in a manner that achieves family safety. In this way, family protection and family safety are aligned.

## When Conflict in the Family is Recognized



### *Other Pressures*

The concerns raised by integrating family members must also be understood as existing in the particular situation of the family, but at the same time, in a larger socio-cultural context, which has been described throughout the manual as collectivist. In traditional collectivist values the good of the community is privileged above individual rights; not because individuals do not matter but rather, because family safety is achieved through the community. The community is necessary to protect individuals and therefore must have priority.

Concerns that arise as a result of an individual's integration may be voiced by family members or by the larger community. Intense pressure may be brought to bear in different ways and from different sources to restore traditional roles and behaviour. A family that is embracing the Canadian individualist-based society may find itself at odds with more traditional members of their collectivist community in a way that jeopardizes their place in that community. The pressure to conform may therefore also be brought to bear by the extended family and/or the

larger community. This can intensify the anxiety felt by the man to control the behaviour of his family.

### *The Logic of Common Ground*

Individualist and collectivist doctrines have a long history of being opposed to one another. This is a fundamental divide between societies. There is as yet little understanding or imagination directed at understanding how individual and collective societies can co-exist and even be mutually supportive. It is reasonable to assume that the strength of communities is related to, and dependent on, the strength of the people who comprise it, and also that the strength of individuals is directly related to their belonging and inclusion in a healthy community. It is a self-reinforcing circle of relations. Domestic violence undermines the strength of the collective because it rends the family unit. Family members become more and more isolated by the violence that usually escalates without intervention. Domestic homicide devastates families and communities. The impact of domestic violence cuts across all social differences in a way that could unite people in working together across longstanding historical divisions of individualist and collectivist societal values.

<b>Finding Common Ground for Family Violence Interventions</b>				
	Motivation for Acting	Intervention	Means	Outcomes
Collectivist family in conflict	Protecting / Preserving Religious and Cultural Values	Family Protection to preserve family unity and honour	Recognition of conflict. Entire family is engaged in achieving Family Safety	Family unity Family honour
Service providers	Safety for abused women and children of a collectivist community	Appreciation of the importance of family unity and honour in collectivist families	Teach non-violent and culturally acceptable ways to negotiate a resolution to the conflict	Increased safety and support for women of collectivist community

The objective set out in this paper was to promote understanding that will enable interventions that balance the safety of women and children from collectivist immigrant communities with an comprehension and appreciation of their complex cultural and migratory contexts and experiences. The goal is to increase the safety of women and their children from these communities by recognizing and respecting the difference that will always exist between individualist and collectivist values and experience. The challenge is to understand both the ways that people and societies are different and also to find places of common ground. Learning to respect difference and to work more inclusively are critical aspects to achieving safety.