

# **“Effective Advocacy with Muslim Americans – Exposing Myths and Misunderstandings”**

*An Article of the OVWA Monthly Highlight Series – October 2019*

## **Introduction**

The representation of Muslims around the world is vast; yet the myths, prejudices and stereotypes, fueled by a level of ignorance to the tenants of the religion and associated culture norms, contribute to the continued antagonism experienced by Muslim Americans in the United States. The level of terrorism seen throughout the world has added significantly to the surge in hate crimes against Muslim Americans. Many studies show a direct correlation between terrorist attacks anywhere in the world with increased hate crimes against Muslims in the United States.

The history of the religion of Islam and of Muslim Americans has been buried in our history in the U.S. Applying the following information to improve our advocacy for Muslim American victims of crime is a task to be carefully and sensitively undertaken as the layers of facts are uncovered. Every victim of crime deserves services respectful of their experience and to have services offered in a manner they can understand.

OVWA reached out to renowned Officer Sarah Shendy of the Copley Police Department and a Law Enforcement Training Officer for the Ohio Attorney General’s Office, for help in breaking down essential knowledge for advocates working with Muslim Americans. October’s Highlight Article is laid out in a question and answer format. Officer Shendy’s answers will aid us in our understanding of Muslim Americans while ultimately providing education supporting best practice advocacy to victims in this vulnerable population.

## **#1: Can you explain the history of Islam and Muslims in America?**

There is a lot of evidence suggesting that Muslims from Spain and West Africa arrived to the Americas at least five centuries before Columbus. It is recorded, for example, that in the mid-tenth century, (929-961 CE), Muslims of African origin sailed westward from the Spanish port of DELBA (Palos) into the "Ocean of darkness and fog". They returned after a long absence with much items from a "strange and curious land". The most recent wave of Muslim immigration has come after 1965, the year President Lyndon Johnson sponsored an immigration bill that repealed the longstanding system of quotas by national origin. Under the new system, preferences went to relatives of U.S. residents and those with special occupational skills needed in the United States.

After 1965, immigration from Western Europe began to decline significantly, with a corresponding growth in the numbers of persons arriving from the Middle East and Asia. In this era more than half of the immigrants to America from these regions have been Muslim. Islam and Muslims have basically been here before this country became known as the United States of America. They played a huge role in the structural and financial development of certain areas in our country. To show respect and inclusion for the Muslim religion, there are cities in the U.S that have names such Lebanon, Pennsylvania; Damascus, Maryland; Bagdad, Florida; Alexandria, Virginia; Cairo, Illinois; Palestine, Texas; Bethlehem, New Hampshire; Mecca, California; Jordan, Minnesota; Arab, Alabama; and Village of Mohamet, Illinois.

## **#2: Does Islam seek to eradicate Christianity or other religions?**

Nope, Islam seeks to educate all people regardless of their belief or ideology. - God says in the Holy Quran (10:57) “O humankind, there has to come to you a book from your Lord and healing for what is in the chests and guidance and mercy for the believers.” It is a call for all humankind. There is also a verse in the Quran that says “there is no compulsion in religion, you have yours and I have mine”.

## **#3: Does the Muslim faith inherently oppress and control women?**

In the Islamic religion, women are treated like royalty. I saw it growing up with how my dad treated my mom and saw it with many other adult men in my life. Prophet Muhammed’s (pbuh) first wife, was the one that proposed to him. On top of that she was a wealthy business woman and 15 years older than the prophet at the time. Islam entitles women to vote, be educated, and places women on a pedestal due to their role in the home as the primary care taker as well as the mother. Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) left us with much advice on women in Islam. Some are:

“An honorable man treats women with honor and respect, and only a despicable person treats women poorly.”

“Do not strike the female servants of God,” “Do not hit them and do not revile them.”

“The best of you are those who are best to your women.”

“My parting counsel to you is to treat women with kindness for verily they are your partners and committed helpers”

## **#4: Are the hijab and other clothing choices designed to oppress and control women?**

Absolutely not. This is something that is often misunderstood by the public and a topic that is worth the discussion. Even at a very young age my father would say “if you have something that is beautiful and precious, would you cover and protect it? Or would you expose it to the world?” Muslim girls are taught from when we are toddlers that our bodies are very precious and not everyone near and far should have any kind of access to it; whether that be touching it or seeing it. So the Hijab (the scarf), is something mandated to Muslim women at the time they hit puberty. And I say “mandated by the religion” but it has to be the decision of the female and no one else.

In Islam, no one can make a Muslim female wear the hijab. The hijab (meaning cover and concealment), covers the hair, neck, and chest area. It also dictates what the woman can and can’t wear. For example, one cannot wear the hijab and shorts or a tank top. Arms and legs have to be covered and women who don’t wear the hijab are expected to dress in a modest fashion. Growing up I was not in tune with the hijab but as an adult in a world that operates on how good we look on the outside and not on the inside, I have grown to love and respect Islam wanting us to shield ourselves against being put on display and sexualized to sell items such as deer and cars.

Muslim women love wearing the scarf because it separates them from others and it tells other, especially men, that they have no right to see or touch their body because it is guarded and protected. It gives us a sense of self-worth and value. Now in some countries, the government may force women to dress a certain way. That has nothing to do with the religion besides that a lot of times those individuals twist and exploit the religion to work in their favor when needed. The following pictures show different veils and cloaks, and in some cases, the regions in which they are most prevalent.

**Niqab**

A veil covering the head and face, but not the eyes, usually worn with a loose black garment (abaya) that covers from head to feet.



**Hijab**

A general term meaning 'to cover' or 'veil', most commonly refers to a headscarf that covers the hair and neck, but not the face.



**Burka**

A veil that covers the entire body and face, with a mesh window or grille across the eyes for a woman to see out of.



**Chador**

A full-length cloak worn by many Iranian women, typically held closed at the front by the wearer's hands or under their arms.



**Dupatta**

A long scarf loosely draped across the head and shoulders, common in south Asia and often paired with matching garments.



The Nation



## **#5: How has terrorism impacted the Muslim American community?**

This question makes me sad and I will tell you why. Due to social media and technology, absolutely nothing happens in a vacuum. What happens in another state or in another country can and does impact us right here in Ohio. I often ask people “who is impacted the most by acts of domestic or international terrorism?” I get a lot of different answers but the one I am looking for is - the Muslim communities and the image of Islam. Why? Consider what happens when one officer in Texas or California has a bad use of force incident? Is it that one officer? Or is it “police in America?” It is the same exact thing that happens when one individual alleges religious cause behind their acts of terrorism.

The public and the world does not see them as that one person, and neither does the media. They see it as all “Muslims”. Although the religion condemns all acts of terrorism and violence on the innocent, when one person does something wrong or evil, we are all blamed and become highly suspicious because we dress the same, speak the same language, and are the same religion. Muslim families in America have become victims to hate crime, most of which is never reported, they are discriminated against in schools and place of employment, and they are targeted in public places with hostile actions and offensive language. Many of the Muslims that have experienced this were born and raised here.

What is most hurtful is that individual feeling, as if they don’t belong and will never be a part of the community. Which, in return, impacts how much they interact with the public and the outside world. I see how people stare at mom and sisters in public like they are from another planet. And then they see me standing beside them in uniform or wearing something with the U.S flag on it. Their face is usually full of confusion because in their mind, one cannot be Muslim **and** patriotic. Ironically, many have told me that I am more patriotic than the average American they know. My reply to that is, we love this country for the opportunity and rights it has given us. Living in other countries, we know that the grass is not always greener on the other side.

### **#6: Do Muslim Americans follow the U.S. system of law, particularly in regards to marriage?**

Yes! A lot of people don’t know this but, a part of Sharia law (Sharia law is Islam's legal system, derived from both the Koran/Quran, Islam's central text, and fatwas - the rulings of Islamic scholars) is love and commitment to your country in which you reside. There is cultural practice and Islamic law, but here, we must adhere to the court’s law, their ruling **and** the Islamic law. For example, a Muslim couple would have to get married in the court of law and then marry Islamically. The majority of Imams (Imam, in a general sense, one who leads Muslim worshippers in prayer. In a global sense, Imam is used to refer to the head of the Muslim community) will not marry a couple Islamically without a marriage certificate from a court of law.

## **#7: Are there societal and cultural norms for Muslim Americans that may impact our ability to advocate for Muslim American victims of crime?**

Yes, there are both body language, nonverbal considerations, and differences that are important to consider:

- Not shaking hands with the opposite sex in a sign of respect. Islamically, a male is not to touch a female that is not his rightful his wife, daughter, or other family member and the same applies to the female. Most persons I have associated with do shake hands but some don't. It is out of respect and high regard.
- Lowering the gaze or avoiding eye contact with the opposite sex is also a sign of respect. One is supposed to avoid staring and making the other person feel uncomfortable. It is not a sign of deception but a sign of respect.
- Some Muslims speak Arabic but not all Arabs or Middle Eastern families are Muslims. Only 20% of the Muslim population is Middle Eastern.
- Some Muslim families may not wear their shoes in the home if they pray right on the carpet or floor.
- Fridays between 12-2:00pm, a lot of Muslim families go to the mosque for "Friday prayer"

## **#8: How can we, as advocates, ensure we are providing the best possible advocacy for Muslim Americans?**

Similar to working with other minorities in our communities, a lot of cultures do not like outside influence getting involved with family issues. Many of these families do not want to involve the police, children services, or victim advocates when it comes to resolving family issues. In my experience, a lot of the mentioned agencies get involved because of third party intervention; i.e a neighbor calling the police or a mandated reported reaching out to children service bureau.

The absolute best thing that one can do is communicate effectively why they are involved and provide them with the best-case scenario outcome. For example, as an officer I may be called to check the welfare of a child in a Muslim or Middle Eastern home. I would say, "Hello, I am Officer Sarah. The reason I am here today is because someone called and was concerned for the safety and welfare of the child because ..... My presence here does not mean that someone is in trouble. We care about your safety and welfare and want to offer help if you need it."

If I were a victim advocate I would say "Hi, my name is Sarah and I am a victim advocate. My job is to try and make the process easier for you by ..... If at any time you have any questions, please ask. We are aware of how confusing and scary the courthouse or this process can be for victims. We are on your side and here to help you through this."

When working with people, regardless of background, I try to come off as human and as disarming as possible. I let them know exactly why I am there and what we hope to accomplish. I also tell them that I may not have the answers but that we will figure it out together. Victims really just need the support and someone to help them understand and work through the trauma that they have experienced.

### **#9: As an advocate, what does a Muslim American need from me? What should I do to help them feel safe and comfortable?**

I cannot stress the importance of communication in this situation involving people when different cultures and religions are involved. When it comes to safety, the unknown, their culture, their religion, their customs – **just ask questions**. Ask a lot of questions and don't be afraid if you don't know something or are confused about something you have seen or heard.

It is nearly impossible for us to know everything about everyone's culture or religion. I feel that all victims want to be heard and understood. Since we are speaking particularly about working with victims of other backgrounds, I feel that there is also a need for the advocate to understand some barriers that are unique to that individual. There is nothing wrong with asking, "Is there anything I should know about your family, culture, or religion that can impact our communication or this process?" In reference to safety, effective communication is always paramount for everyone involved. Victim advocates are usually perceived as friends and helpers to the family and others involved. Although the family may not be used to working with an advocate, I feel that we all need someone in times of need and emotional distress.

### **Conclusion**

It is imperative we recognize a vital point made by Officer Shendy, "It is nearly impossible for us to know everything about everyone's culture or religion", which encapsulates the important distinction between cultural competency and cultural humility. Cultural competency is impossible to attain, because to describe one as competent suggests that one has become an expert and there is nothing more to learn. We hope to strive towards cultural humility, knowing that education is essential in understanding differences in culture, while acknowledging there will always be more to learn in an effort to serve victims of crime in a respectful and sensitive manner. Many thanks to Officer Sarah Shendy for providing us with a roadmap to better serve Muslim American victims of crime. Sarah spent countless hours working with OVWA to prepare this comprehensive summary of what advocates may need to know. Additionally, Officer Shendy recommends reviewing **30 Facts about Islam**, and we have included the link to this article under Relevant Articles. You can read Officer Shendy's full bio at the end of this article.

## **Relevant Articles**

- Zayn, Ayden. (n.d.) **30 Facts about Islam**. Retrieved from <https://www.30factsaboutislam.com/>
- Alwani, Dr. Zainab. **Domestic Violence: Islamic Perspective**. Retrieved from <http://karamah.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Domestic-violence-Islamic-Perspective-FINAL.pdf>
- Alkhateeb, Maha. (2012). **Islamic Marriage Contracts A Resource Guide for Legal Professionals, Advocates, Imams & Communities**. Retrieved from <https://s3.amazonaws.com/gbv-wp-uploads/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/17215509/Islamic-Marriage-Contracts-Resource-Guide-2012.pdf>
- Abugideiri, Salma Elkadi. (2010). **A Perspective on Domestic Violence in the Muslim Community**. Retrieved from <https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/articles/DV-in-Muslim-Community.pdf>
- **Fact Sheet: Domestic Violence in Muslim Communities**. (June 2011) Retrieved from <https://s3.amazonaws.com/gbv-wp-uploads/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/12231610/DVFactSheet-Muslim-2011-formatted-2019.pdf>
- **Removing Roadblocks: Examining Barriers to Justice and Healing to Build more Victim-Centric Services for Muslim Survivors of Sexual Assault**. (2017). Retrieved from <http://heartwomenandgirls.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Removing-Roadblocks-May-2017.pdf>
- Bucar, Liz. (November 5, 2018). **Three things we can learn from contemporary Muslim women's fashion**. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/three-things-we-can-learn-from-contemporary-muslim-womens-fashion-104889>
- **American Muslims in the United States**. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/what-is-the-truth-about-american-muslims/american-muslims-in-the-united>

## **Resources**

### **KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights**

<http://karamah.org/>

National Organization

KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights is a nonprofit organization committed to promoting human rights globally, especially gender equity, religious freedom and civil rights in the United States. It pursues its mission through education, legal outreach and advocacy.

### **Muslim Family Services of Ohio**

<http://www.ohiomfs.org>

P.O. Box 14023 Columbus, OH 43214, 614-470-2848

Hours: 24-hours/7 days a week. Caller leaves a message that is returned.

- Services focused to widows, displaced, disenfranchised, and the abused
- Emotional Support
- Referrals and Resources within the Muslim Community
- Short-term financial Assistance

### **CAIR-Columbus**

<http://www.cair-columbus.com>

4242 Tuller Rd, Suite B2, Dublin, OH 43017, 614-451-3232 info@cair-columbus.com

Hours: Monday - Friday 8:00am - 5:00 pm

CAIR-Columbus (Council on American-Islamic Relations) is a leading advocate for justice and mutual understanding, whose mission is to enhance understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.

Services include:

- Civil Rights
- Immigrant Rights
- Education
- Outreach and Volunteerism
- Media Relations
- Activism
- Government Affairs



## **Officer Sarah Shendy**

Officer Sarah Shendy is a Law Enforcement Training Officer through the Ohio Attorney General’s Office, and a part time officer with the Copley Police Department. Prior to her employment with the Ohio Attorney General’s Office, Sarah was employed full time with the Copley Police Department since December 2008. Before her career with Copley Township, she worked in corrections for Cuyahoga County. While at Copley Police, Sarah taught the DARE program for 6 years for the Copley-Fairlawn Schools. She also participated in other community oriented events such as “Shop With A Cop” and drug education for parents and teachers via the “Hidden in Plain Site” program.

In 2012, Sarah designed a training that was geared to educate law enforcement and other public service employees on interacting with the Middle Eastern population. The class included a large segment on the Muslim religion. In 2014, Sarah was one of sixteen members elected by Attorney General Mike DeWine to serve on a panel evaluating the training, certification, and advancement of law enforcement officers in the State of Ohio. Sarah also served as the department’s Terrorism Liaison Officer. Sarah earned a Bachelor’s Degree and Master’s Degree in Criminal Justice with a background in global issues and juvenile justice.

Contact Officer Shendy at [Sarah.Shendy@OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov](mailto:Sarah.Shendy@OhioAttorneyGeneral.gov)