

SPIRITUAL ABUSE FOCUS GROUPS REPORT



Honest Conversations:

A report on factors impacting women's identity and the potential for spiritual abuse

Trigger Warning: Mention of abuse relating to faith and belief

Foreword

Reading through the report, as an African woman theologian, I was struck by the resonance I experienced in the responses of women to the themes, the conflicted understanding of spiritual abuse and the role of culture, in relation to Christianity in particular. The research significantly created safe spaces for women to open up and share their discomfort with aspects of their faith that compromised their dignity and agency. Also, the challenge of navigating through loyalty and sense of belonging to a religious tradition; while at the same time naming and confronting the narratives and practices that promote inferiority, submission and voicelessness.

The interfaith nature of the research provided a space for the groups of women to explore their experiences within their own faith tradition, which in some cases exposed biases towards other religions as a result of deflecting the pain of admitting the existence of spiritual abuse in one's religion.

Often women are silenced through threats of excommunication or shaming. How to reconcile these realities of belonging and alienation is a challenge for women in their religions. Spiritual abuse therefore needs to be defined in comprehensive and contextual frameworks that encompasses all aspects of faith, belief and practices that violate women. Thus interventions that support women experiencing spiritual abuse and prevent such abuse need to understand the complexity of intersecting factors described by women in this research. The voices of women as authorities of their own experience is critical in these interventions. The research resonates with experiences of women in many parts of the world including Africa and needs to be extended to different contexts so that contextual and cultural particularities are allowed to define the nature of spiritual abuse and the type of interventions needed to address this issue.

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Acknowledgements

The Church of Scotland employed a Gender Justice Officer for the time period 2016-2020 in recognition of the needs of their church community and of the knowledge gap in support provision. Our initial partnership started as a willingness on their part to work with and learn from Amina and our service users. We thank Katherine Gilmour for her work with us and with the Church during that time.

We would also like to thank all the participants who shared with us, with special thanks to Nila Joshi and Manahil Sheikh.

Introduction

Amina Muslim Women's Resource Centre has been running for 25 years to listen, support and advocate for Muslim women and BME women in Scotland. Our work involves tackling multiple barriers to adequate service provision due to the degrees of marginalisation compounded through race, religion, sex and gender.

This project was in collaboration with Katherine Gilmour, then Gender Justice Officer at the Church of Scotland.

Amina was approached to discuss the concept of comprised faith identity and spiritual abuse due to our support work with minoritised women, most particularly from communities of faith. This provided us with the environment and connections with which to undertake this work sensitively and with a level of cultural and religious understanding.

Spiritual Abuse Contextualised

Spiritual abuse is a new, and as yet only partially defined idea [1]. Contention around the definition has primarily been whether it should be seen as a 'new' form of abuse and who the perpetrators are. Is it in the relationship between leaders and congregations; within designated institutions; intimate partner relationships or is it broader than this?

Current resources largely focus on spiritual abuse by faith leaders, community figures and intimate partners as a form of coercive control. [2] However, we (Amina and Katherine) saw the journey towards to understanding spiritual abuse as an exploration of power dynamics in all relationships – relationships that are contextualised through an identity shaped by faith and belief.



[1] Humphries, J and Oakley, L. 2018. "Escaping the maze of spiritual abuse", p6, 18-39

[2] Sajed, E. 2021. "Spiritual Abuse: Reconceptualising Coercive Control in Religious Contexts". <https://mwrc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/AMINA-Report-Elisa-Sajed-2021-003.pdf>

Qasim, Danish. 2017. "Introduction to Spiritual Abuse." In Shaykhs Clothing www.inshaykhsclimbing.com/home/intro

Where spirituality is an aspect of service users' personal, social and/or cultural lives, an exploration of abusive vs healthy relationships defined by religion or belief is crucial. This knowledge is seen here as relevant for the purposes of better identifying gendered support needs and increasing access to support for all women in Scotland. We were clear that our perspective was not focused on identifying perpetrators but of increasing our knowledge of intersectionality in women's lived experiences.

Therefore, the conversations we engaged in, that are mentioned in this paper centred around "What makes a woman of faith". The term spiritual abuse was then offered to participants to explore as a term they wanted to use to describe a misuse of the power dynamics they experience.

What were some of the reactions to discussing spiritual abuse?

As we were exploring an esoteric term, we had to provide space for people to identify with the subject matter organically. It was clear from our conversations that some participants showed aversion, hostility or denial of the concept of spiritual abuse. There was resistance in some individuals to the use of the term 'spiritual abuse' and identifying the ideas associated with it due to an inherent belief that faith could not be tampered with, and that belief systems based on good could not be abusive. Existing biases also sometimes showed as a refusal to acknowledge that it may happen to those in one's own circle or faith community - often alongside an explicit or implicit belief that it could or did happen in other faiths.

Although none of the participants had ever heard of spiritual abuse before, it was common for participants to connect to the term when invited to examine it as a contextual factor of abuses that they do recognise.

Example:

"Submission can be positive when it's to God and negative when it's to man."



Methodology

Aim: To explore how we might improve service provision within faith communities and the women's movement in Scotland by improving our understanding of:

- a) what it means to have a spiritual identity as a woman of faith for women in Scotland
- b) how spiritual abuse can arise and manifest in different contexts

Method: Exploratory qualitative research based on four group discussions

Number of participants: 32 women

Duration: November 2018 - January 2020

Facilitators: Mahrukh Adnan Shaukat (Helpline Development Officer, Amina MWRC) and Katherine Gilmour (Gender Justice Officer, Church of Scotland 2016 – 20)

Due to time constraints, the conversations we refer to were not recorded and transcribed. There were two facilitators present, of which one was taking notes during conversation. We also asked for direct contribution from participants which were written down. Written notes were all visible and approved by participants during sessions.

Approximately 30 participants were involved in 4 focus groups ranging from 4 to 12 participants. All participants presented as female. The results have been collated from the pool of responses to show the breadth of discussion and nuance involved. This is the primary aim and foundation from which we hope to move forward.



Limitations

Gathering data

In recognition of the fact that these conversations are in their infancy in Scotland and can be controversial or traumatising, we decided to capture very little data about the individuals involved. Although backgrounds are mentioned where relevant, and ages ranged from 20 to late 80s, none of the data was statistically significant enough to warrant the potential barrier to participation by asking for it. We would suggest that in future where dialogue on the subject becomes more open, that data be collected with consent to better understand community structures of different kinds.

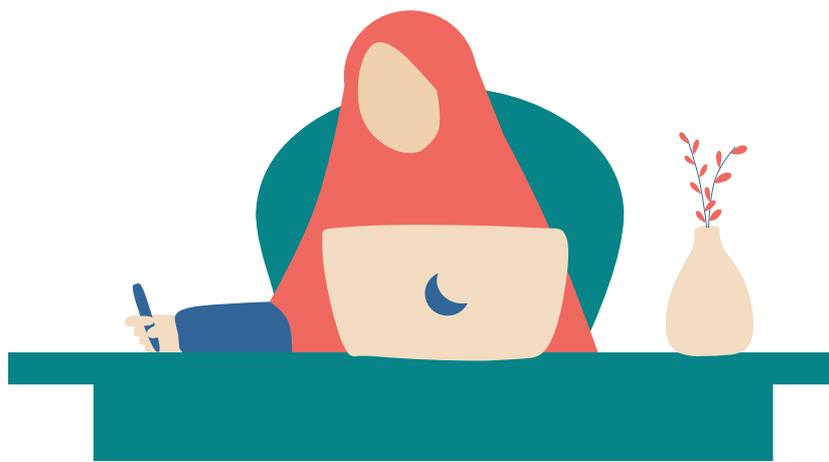
Accessibility

To arrange for these challenging conversations to be made more accessible, the facilitators allowed for advertising of the session by external partners who had access to community members. In future work in this area, we would advocate for a trauma informed approach to marketing the topic by anyone conducting similar work so that the participants who may be unfamiliar with language or topic are fully prepared for the session. This may require sustained relationship building with affected communities or capacity building for external partners before conducting workshops or further research.

Discussing spiritual abuse where there may be some persons who are sole representatives of their faith group was generally avoided to limit this form of pressure but was harder to manage in less structured settings.

Using Interfaith Settings

We found that the interfaith space we entered was not equipped for the depth of conversation that may be required for this type of discussion. Focus on similarities and shared emotions towards faith as opposed to theology, created a barrier to being critical in the same way as specifically Muslim/Christian spaces allowed. Being a single or sometimes outnumbered “representative” of a faith group could have added pressure to carry the conversation where participants did not feel qualified to do so.



Emerging Themes

This section discusses emerging themes from the questions:

“What makes a women of faith?”
“What would happen if you were to leave your community of faith/belief?”

Aside from building trust and breaking the ice within the groups, we wanted to view the concept of power dynamics and spirituality from a range of perspectives. This allowed us to capture the essence of what faith meant to women and what they wanted to retain, as well as any potentially adverse effects from abusive circumstances. From our experience in the field or women’s support, we hear that women of faith often feel a clash with mainstream mental health practitioners and support agencies. Women often share a feeling of being misunderstood, othered or unable to explore their situation without being encouraged to leave their faith, belief or kin behind. The following allows us a limited exploration into the nuances of the lived realities of being a woman of faith. The first two themes offer some contextual information and the last two themes offer more direct insight for support services.



Theme 1: Personal ideas of what it means to be a woman of faith - “Faith as identity” [3]

There were roughly three categories that participant responses fell into:

aspirational
(who they want to be)

contextual
(what they are meant to be)

current
(where they find themselves at this moment in time)

There was a strong understanding that these were gendered responses and participants did question what might come out from exploration with other genders. This could be a useful consideration for further research - “There needs to be some understanding on their (sic) end of what behaviour is abusive since spiritual abuse largely affects women” [4].

Aspirational

These responses captured a broad range of ideas and feelings from humility, strength and resilience to a deeper trust in God and a willingness to be part of greater change:

“To be brave”.

“God is your Lord, your protection, your guide. Others have no power over you. Internalize that. Become fearless.”

This category was universal across participants and added to the environment of togetherness within the session. This cemented aspiration or an holistic view of the self at the beginning of the conversations. Where this was absent in one of the groups, we felt a distinct change in the relationship between participants to the topic and a hesitancy in disclosing personal stories, substituting this with discussion on misunderstood or mistaught teaching.



[3] All titling in quotation marks are direct quotes from participants

[4] We believe that this statement was given in the context of spiritual abuse been considered contextualised abuse that can include any of the recognised forms of abuse that we already know. Therefore, statistics relating to women more generally are likely to apply here although we don't currently have data to present this as fact.

Contextual

These comments related to how participants view themselves in relation to others. It was important to capture the fact that faith communities and cultures that are built around faith are collectivist. The sociological structures of this type of society embed values of togetherness and focus on the individual as a part of a larger whole as opposed to independent to others. To illustrate this we will share direct quotes from participants outlining a range of statements related subheadings within this theme – Divergence and Convergence with their community.

Here are examples or quotes pertaining to:

Convergence

“Deprived of your individuality”

“Representing a whole gender”

“I love having a community”

“Connecting to where you are born”

“Base of the relationship with my mother”

“Doorway to other communities”

“Interfaith is sometimes easier than intersect”

“Closer to faith as children”

“I feel required to emphasise attributes of kindness, loyalty and non-controversy”

“Unique but lonely”

“Defying stereotypes is tiring”

“How could they accept what you believe without having to question themselves?”

“Who decides if you’ve left the church?”

“Why should it be a problem for my community if I left my faith but still wanted to be your sister?”

Divergence



Current

Comments around how participants felt about themselves at the time of the focus group included acceptance of flaws, challenges and expectations, and choice:

“Not perfect”

“Take a flawed human being and do the best you can do”

“integrity”

“acts of worship are more than prayer”

“If everyone around me is Christian and I don’t know about other religions, at which point is it my choice?”

“pressure to please”

“self-worth tied to helping others”

“respect for [all] elders – no”

“my impact and consequences on others”

“a sense of hope is linked to God for me”

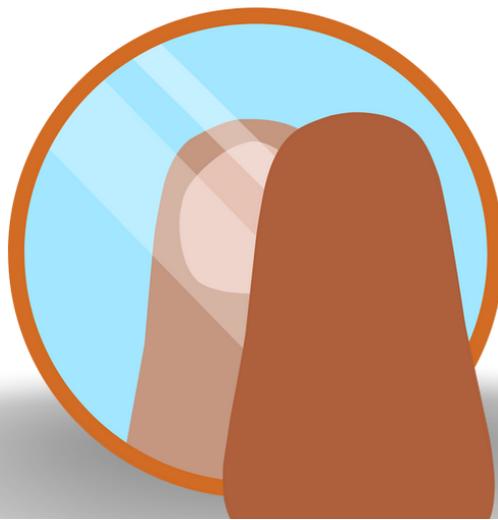
“being able to trust something (not someone) so that you don’t need to worry”

“Women hold people together, but not in the male way we generally understand”

“women have the role of passing on the faith (Islam)”

“having to try harder to have religious authority”

Starting from the women’s perspective on what they felt defines them was a useful entry point into a discussion around power dynamics. In a way, this models an approach of centring survivors experience of abuse and offering a foundation from which they can explore further.



Theme 2: Expectations - “Fitting into a Given Box”

An overarching majority of participants expressed an awareness of the expectations they were brought up with in relation to what it meant to be a woman of faith.

Firstly, such expectations could be unassumingly lived as truth.

“We are all different but act out internalised labels”.

“My first thought was modesty but straight away I had to combat this thought, what would this mean for all of us?”

Secondly, engrained but causing friction and uneasiness.

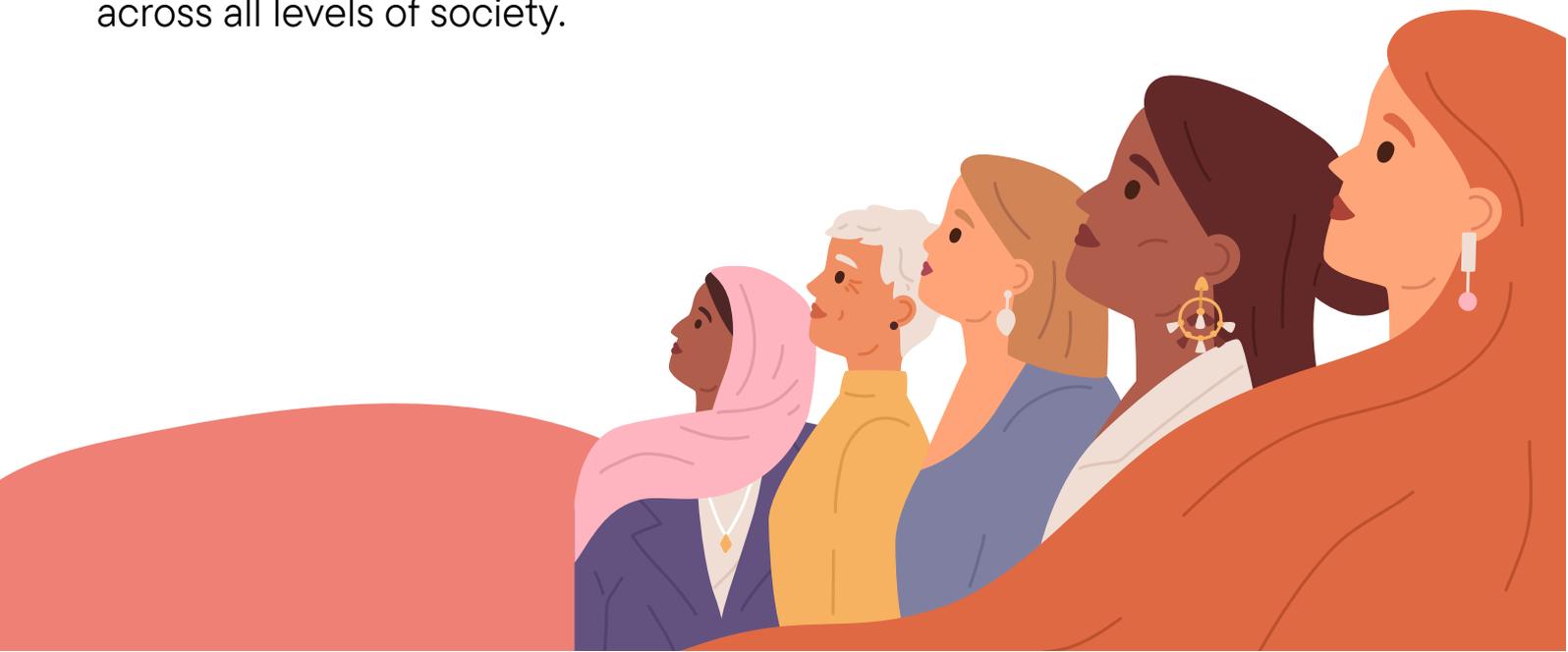
Thirdly, rejected.

“Be full of flaws – if you’ve never put a foot wrong or are always right you can’t empathise with other people.”

“Accepting that your life journey will strongly differ from many of your friends”.

Lastly, worked past over time.

Nevertheless, expectations remain an existential part of life for women of faith across all levels of society.



Gender Roles

Experiences of gender roles were less apparent in some participants lives than others e.g.

“I was always close to my dad and felt that my brother and I were brought up with the same ideas”.

However, the concept of gender as an expectation participants were born into was discussed at length in three of the groups. These gendered expectations were often opposed to what they felt faith or belief provided for them, as seen in the previous section.

Moral Standards

One particular concept captured was that people who do not profess to have religious backgrounds are not expected to have a communal moral standard. It's a choice for each individual decision they make and each objectively good choice is a feat of humanity. Whereas to be a woman of faith includes a hypervisibility and an inherent expectation of moral standards connected to purity and obedience or loyalty. The comment, ***“It's easier for men to marry outside the faith than women”*** illustrates this concept with the idea of a man introducing the faith and a woman being its keeper and reproducing it.

Contradictions

Within the pool of expectations that were discussed, the participants spoke to some contradictory expectations they had experienced or witnessed within their lived reality of adopting a faith. For example, one participant spoke about being pushed to be a receiver of knowledge that was pre-packaged for them. Their scripture encouraged believers to be active in their pursuit of knowledge and so they felt unable to fulfil their role. Others spoke about the polarised opinions of men in particular, seeing women as being either devalued or revered when it suited. These contradictions distorted lived reality and “denied agency” or rendered women as “the object of action – not the actor”. In turn, younger participants mentioned attempting to cultivate a non-gendered idea of themselves as a person of faith in an effort to maintain the connection to the spiritual.

Theme 3: Community - “Who decides when you leave?”

We asked our participants to consider what would happen if they no longer considered themselves part of a faith or belief system. Responses showed a deep acknowledgement of the connectedness you might either leave behind or find anew and the idea faith in something as “relationship glue”.

Personal Impact

Participants spoke of both freedom **“to step into one’s space (shadows and all) and claim it”** and **“reframing oneself”**, as well as **“a vacuum and uncontrollable fear”** and **“weakness”** when asked to describe a disassociation from a faith or belief system. Ultimately, connectedness meant different things to different people. This was summarised by one participant who stated that your **faith can be strengthened by stepping away from the organisation you know “because you yearn for the connection in your own way”**.

Community Impact

Others spoke of the function of community in this situation. Some people referenced a fear that they would be separated from their ethnic culture or heritage if they no longer considered themselves part of a faith or belief system. One participant more specifically mentioned that cultural similarities appear in women’s dress across faith groups in Northern Nigeria related to what is available and cheaper and comfortable for women. We can start to see an intertwining of culture and religion in what we would consider markers of gender norms here and in comments relating to a wish for separation of faith and (abusive) patriarchy. [5]

Significantly, the findings reveal that participants did not see spiritual abuse as being solely within the hands of faith leaders which has been a dominant lens for research:

“It isn’t always faith leaders who are in positions to be abusive, there are dominant characters in a whole range of situations”.

[5] I reference “(abusive) patriarchy” here due to a lack of clarity around whether members of the faith groups present considered patriarchy in its scriptural form inherently abusive.

The section on **Abuses of Faith** can give more of an insight into where else people feel abuses of power can manifest and how. This includes the fact that with globalised religions come internet personas and leaders from afar feeding into our celebrity culture and creating dominant narratives - **“Who dominates the internet?”**.

What does this mean for support services?

From professional practice, both facilitators of the focus groups can add that the repercussions of individuals not being believed when reporting abuse from within their own communities can have a devastating impact and adds an extra layer to silencing. However, as we can see from other comments relating to community and belonging, people who are abused and feel an affinity with the community will require support to figure out their truth. This can include a better awareness of the depth of connection they hold to the context their abuser may come from. One participant claimed that:

“People can make you feel like it’s all or nothing.... either you’re with the community or against it”.

Another said that:

“I’ve noticed quite a resistance...quite a violence...in response to when I speak about spirituality within the VAWG sector”.

It is crucial for both faith/belief institutions and mainstream secular organisations to provide equally supportive environments for people to disclose and have their journeys and identities respected.



Theme 4: Religious and Cultural Differences - “Giving Each Other the Space to Share”

Religious Similarities and Differences

“There was a general feeling that the title of a woman of faith tied you to more communities than one’s immediate faith group. A sense of universality.”

There is a general assumption through the design of mainstream support services that they will be adequate in providing support across a spectrum of cultural and religious beliefs and practices. This section outlines shares anecdotal evidence and observations to support that this is not the case. We will start with similarities in experiences to show the limitations of this approach.

Experiences which brought participants across the spectrum of faith experience together tended to be aspirational goals for belonging to something bigger, searching for meaning and better intentions for themselves and the world around them. Participants were also able to relate to each other’s personal stories and explanations of how they grappled with living a faith-driven life. The universality achieved through these ideas of personal spirituality were noted to be **“...so positive. It’s difficult to fit abuse into these attributes”**.

Similarities were also present when discussing male oriented language or gendered undercurrents in worship across religious groups:

“church as wife”
“my job is service”
“Sons of God”
“head of household”

translations of the word God into the masculine and the idea of women being mentioned rarely or as a warning
“angels will curse you if you keep yourself from your husband”

Staying within the parameters of similar experiences however would not allow us to hold space for the many differences that were also referenced and would have a large impact on ongoing support where abuses have occurred.

Boundaries of Relatability Between Religious Groups

Despite some groups comprising of members from the same interfaith group, or having previously taken part in interfaith work, relatability did have its boundaries.

“Christians feel the need to apologise...Muslims are tokenised and go on the defensive due to their position as a minority”.

“For some losing your faith might not externally obvious”.

We can assume that there was not necessarily a lack of willingness of the participants to connect with each other given they had all consented to being in the space but rather that there are social, political and cultural factors at play.

Some other differences included: **what it looks like to be excommunicated, the nature of visibility, the power of racial hierarchy in what is deemed as acceptable religion, the concept of intermediaries with God vs. direct connection, the structure of a faith/belief community, and understanding of where spiritual abuse of a person of faith can occur.**

Cultural Variations

“Today we have been vulnerable together...we recognise faith is not perfect.”

Cultural differences included what women of faith considered perceptions of themselves by society which has implications for how and when they may seek support as well as the multitude of variations in how religion and culture come together across the world. While we cannot speak to each individual community of faith, we can advocate to build spaces where knowledge is shared. We can also raise some of the issues brought to us about UK/Scottish culture that prevents access to support outside of faith/belief communities.



A tendency to view women of faith as “**politically conservative**”, “**oppressed**” or carrying an “**inherently irrational**” belief in a “**fairy-tale**” describes a perspective which participants felt they would have to first fight against in order to be seen and heard:

“When explaining hijab (for example), they have to defend Islam and the idea of free choice rather than being able to explore the concept.”

The concept of modesty and policing women was also seen as cultural. Limitations that women presented in accessing knowledge or status were not seen as exclusively founded from their faith traditions, rather the interpretation of such traditions in many of today’s cultural contexts. One participant stated that:

“Theology and culture is so blurred, it’s not fruitful to parse these”.

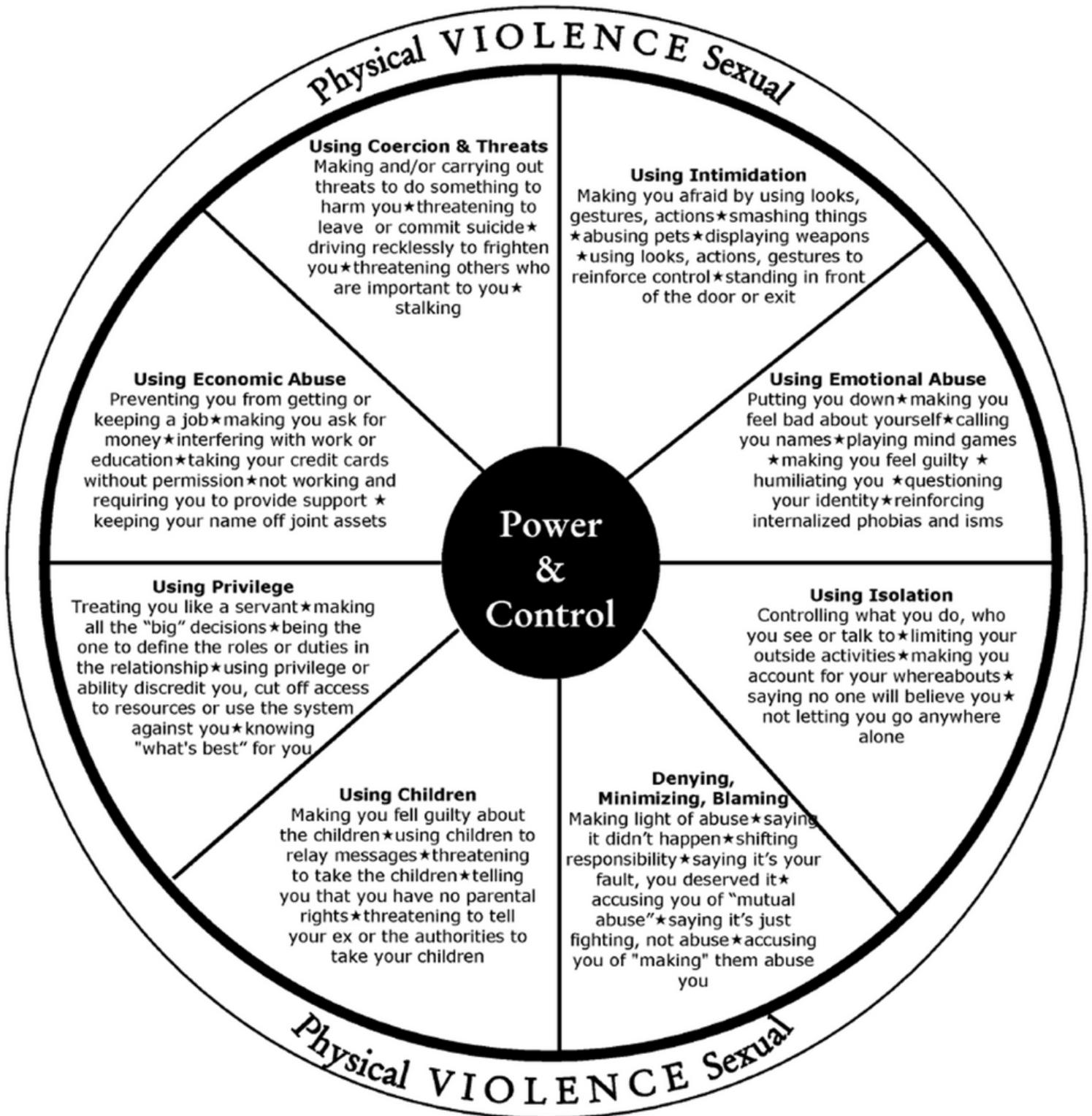
This may be a useful note for understanding the nuanced ways in which abuses can occur and to consider an individual’s experience over any one understanding of a faith or belief system. From one group we also gained the insight that many people recognise abuses of power as being inherent to other cultures, institutions or even localities and not in theirs.

What does this mean for support services?

For our aim of improving services, it is important to note that while these observations are not conclusive, it is enough to suggest that in cases where the person being supported has a faith or belief system, it will be important for them to guide the support worker on the intersection of their experience and identity. It is also worth noting that interventions around spiritual abuse are unlikely to be universally effective across faith/belief systems so capacity building within communities is essential. That being said, knowledge sharing can be a powerful tool and the presence of interfaith spaces may be useful where the universality of goodwill can be used as a nourishment for any movement.



Power and Control Wheel



*Adapted from the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project
 Duluth, Minnesota*

Abuse of Faith: Patterns and Principles

Here are some ideas directly from participants on how they have recognised spiritual abuse in their lives or the lives of others. We have grouped them into themes relating to, or precursors of, abuse people may already be familiar with which correspond to the diagram below. The addition of the misuse of faith or belief is the key aspect in determining spiritual abuse. Relating the acts mentioned below to the power and control wheel is a learning method to help recognise where or how actions move into abuse patterns as opposed to designating any one religious doctrine as inherently abusive.

We recognise that some of the answers below do fit into more than one “category” of abusive behaviour and encourage wider thought about how we can frame our understanding of spiritual abuse.

Using Coercion and Threats

Threat of divine punishment to enforce submission

Forcing plural marriage

Forced "modesty"

Forced marriage

Temporary marriage (out-with the Shia community) or more broadly creating loopholes to exploit people

Withdrawal of approval/love if you “stray”

Being asked to do what you may be uncomfortable to do especially financially as a basis for further favour

'If you don't believe in xyz you can't be one of us' – reality of a threat e.g., LGBTQI+ inclusion

Honour killing

Marital rape

Shaming (husbands who can't provide, woman who is unmarried, divorce)

Being judged continuously for a past mistake, being punished excessively for a crime you are truly repentant for

Divorce being spoken about using language such as "closest thing to sin" and "hated" by God

Using Emotional Abuse

Using Isolation

Ostracism or banishment

Denying/dismissing faith education

Denying medical treatment or attributing symptoms of mental illness exclusively to black magic or possession

Victim blaming – You have brought this "punishment" on yourself i.e., miscarriage, disability, divorce

***Sabr* (patience) as a control mechanism - abuse is your test, you should bear it**

Denying rape within marriage

Not being considered as having the capacity to understand

Guilt/No grey areas – Unable to figure out how much sacrifice is enough due to external pressure and justification of your fault and your role in a situation

"Trust in God" as reason to stay – "reward from God", "keep giving", "submit better", "pray harder", "pray for forgiveness"

Removing/silencing women's voices or giving women's voices less weight or authority

Higher moral standards for women/hypervisibility of women

Not considering the specifics of a case as a person approached for spiritual counsel

Denying, Minimising, Blaming

**Using
Children**

**Particular force in using religious reasoning e.g.
father to child**

Denial of the right to autonomy

**Using
Economic
Abuse**

**Family gatekeepers to religious
and/or secular education and
support**

**Hierarchy of power:
husband/father over
wife/daughter as an example**

**Justifying FGM with weak
sources**

**Manipulating religious texts for
one's own gains**

**Justifying the use of violence
societally**

**Dictating roles, appearance and
behaviour**

**Your decision-making ability
being undermined until a leader
approves**

**Use of personal belongings by
spiritual leader without consent
being freely given or even asked
for**

**Lack of parity/ disrespect/
intolerance of people in sacred
spaces**

**Women seen as inherently weak
and not respected equally**

**Justifying the undervaluing of
dowry (Islamic context)**

**Being considered property of
the institution**

**Choosing options for a person
without listening to their whole
situation**

**Denial of access to places of
worship for women**

Abuse by a faith leader

Abuse of power dynamics

Gendered nature

**Child marriage
Misinterpretation of sacred
text – elevation of certain 'sins'**

**Taboo on certain subjects
(menstruation)**

**Women's only role is to bear
children**

Internalised misogyny

**Inequality/ Women
disproportionately affected**

**Obliviousness due to lack of
women's voices**

**Using
Privilege**

General Summation of Spiritual Abuse

Abuse linked to faith

Any abuse in a spiritual context

Can take on any form of recognised abuses e.g. *physical, emotional, psychological, financial, sexual*

So much power in religious language – potential for misuse of power

Almost seems natural that abuse comes out of the way we manipulate faith

We can see from the groupings that conceptualising spiritual abuse for these participants, although expressed in many ways, primarily stems from abuse of privilege. The forms of privilege mentioned are largely founded in a lack of equal access to education and representation in key areas of community life. The voices we heard from seem to be talking from a place of understanding that alternative realities, rights and opportunities do exist. What is missing then are voices of others who may not know that the reality they exist in is not the whole picture? Dr. Rahmanara Chowdhury et al. (2022) outline some of the ways in which silencing can and does happen through the cultural barriers to acknowledging abuse. [6] Current research conducted by Sacred body:mind:space seeks to identify what this may look like in the Scottish Muslim context over the coming year [7]. Perhaps, herein lie models and opportunities for organisations and faith communities themselves to rectify inequality in access and representation.

[6] Chowdhury, R; Winder, B; Blagden, N & Mulla, F. 2022. "I thought in order to get to God I had to win their approval": a qualitative analysis of the experiences of Muslim victims abused by religious authority figures, *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 28:2 pgv196-217, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13552600.2021.1943023>

[7] <https://www.sacredbms.org.uk/>

What do we want to do about it?

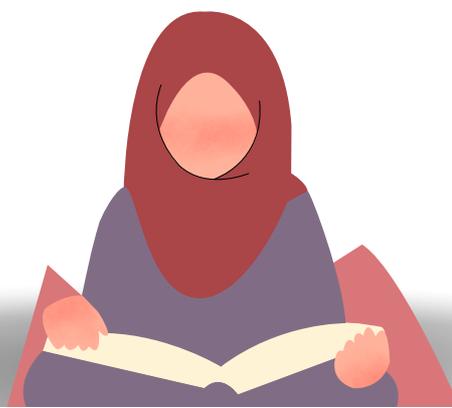
Aside from the analysis we can provide as facilitators we asked for solutions from our participants, Participants were given the opportunity to discuss areas of focus, further discussion or change they wanted to see based on what they had expressed. The following are examples of what was provided to us to take forward as practitioners:

Prevention

- Need for women in the community to have influence: boards of mosques, church leadership teams.
- Awareness raising of other's experiences.
- Elevating children's voices – misunderstanding about children's mental health and that they are better with a stable, happy parent rather than abusive parents.
- Improving education on spiritual abuse amongst non-professionals in the community so that women find support in other community members who are aware of the issues.
- Remove the focus from crisis centred support.
- Resourcing faith communities to employ primary prevention.

Interventions

- Women to be given direct and clear information on rights and support options.
- Training for faith leaders on abuse.
- At an appropriate stage we will need to involve men {and other genders} into the discussion, although we need to think about how we make people feel comfortable in what can be perceived as an antagonistic setting.
- Women's support organisations to be provided with opportunities for training.
- Spiritual Abuse to be included in toolkits and legislation relating to gender-based violence.
- Explaining and resourcing HR content for honour-based violence.
- Creating a cross faith movement to equip a central resource/support directory.



Conclusion

This report outlines exploratory research into the concept of spiritual abuse as a gendered experience in faith communities. We have largely been limited in the research to Muslim and Christian communities due to the facilitators scope of influence and the trust needed to generate participation for this seminary research in Scotland.

Through these conversations we have begun to understand the way in which faith communities have shared foundations for potential abuse. This is largely due to barriers in access to education and representation of a female lived experience under male leadership. We understand that there are many women willing to share and encourage readers, supporters and practitioners of all genders to create opportunity for further conversation. We need to enrich the pool of information available to us and cultivate create solutions to enable women to access their rights, inform their identities and be supported in rectifying abusive patterns where they emerge.



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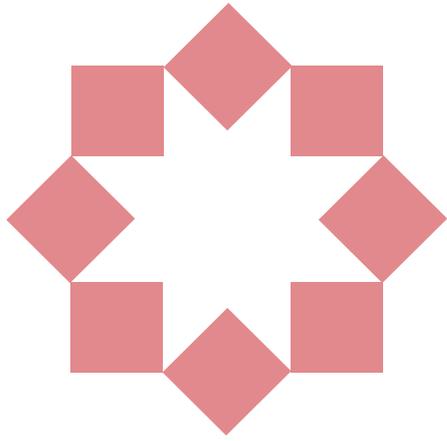
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Appendix

The following are some organisations dealing with spiritual abuse.

- Sacred body:mind:space – community based research organisation established in 2022 to work in collaboration for and with the Muslim community in Scotland to identify and establish an evidence base for support and prevention mechanisms - <https://www.sacredbms.org.uk/> (Scotland)
- The Hurma Project Research – www.hurmaproject.com (US)
- In Shaykh's Clothing - <https://inshaykhsclathing.com/> (Global)
- Willoughby Britton PhD Buddhist ideology and meditation as methods of social control and abuse – <https://www.cheetahhouse.org/> (US)
- Facing Abuse in Community Environments (FACE) - <https://www.facetogether.org/> (US)
- Thirtyone:eight - <https://thirtyoneeight.org/> (UK)
- Victim Support: Safe Spaces (England and Wales)

A list of academics can also be gathered from the Spiritual Abuse Conference organised by the University of Chester in 2021 - <https://www1.chester.ac.uk/trs/conference/spiritual-abuse/programme>. For those interested in following up about the conference please contact Dr. Lisa Oakley at University of Chester.



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