

The Role of Faith Leaders: Gate Openers or Gate Closers in Ending Violence against Women and Girls?

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Executive summary

Faith institutions for people of faith or from religious backgrounds, particularly women and girls who use their faith as a pillar in their lives, play a vital role when it comes to safeguarding and preventing violence and abuse. Just as, if some of us were to move to a new area, we may seek out a local gym or pub to socialise and connect with others with similar values and interests. This is the equivalent to seeking out your local religious community via a place of worship for people with faith or from faith-based/religious communities. This leaves faith leaders and communities to therefore, act as either gate openers or gate closers when it comes to preventing violence against women and girls. This is heavily dependent on the expertise knowledge and training of faith/community leaders when it comes to dealing with issues around this important topic.

Over the past few months, the Faith and VAWG Coalition has been consulting survivors, faith leaders and women from faith communities to highlight best practices and lessons to be learned from their expert lens' and experiences. We believe the recommendations in this paper will help bridge the gap and strengthen the engagement of faith leaders and communities when it comes to decisions in policies and practice as well as allocating resources to end violence against women and girls.



Introduction

Faith communities are an integral part of our society serving not just their communities but also those outside it and in the case of the House of Lords affect laws and national policy. Faith leaders are often, serving not just their communities but also those outside it and, in the case of the House of Lords, the first point of contact when individuals and families face struggles and challenges such as financial difficulties, mental health distress, family conflict or are called upon to provide safe and confidential healing space for traumatic experiences. Faith, religion, and community can, therefore, be sources of comfort and hold space for survivors of faith. Indeed, with the many cases of violence against women highlighted in the media members of faith communities and faith leaders have been some of the prominent voices condemning the institutional and societal response to male violence towards women.

Faith and religious institutions and leadership have and do not always exercise their power in a just and egalitarian way. Religion and its institutions are not immune to the appropriation of patriarchy and its use for oppressive practice whether that is racist, homophobic, or misogynistic ideology. For example, there are religious interpretations and leaders who reinforce gendered stereotypes and promote inequality. Religious leaders across many countries have been charged with a range of crimes of harm and abuse of women and children. The statement of the Pope in 2008 on the suffering experienced by those who Catholic priests have harmed is a recognition of the global challenge organised religion faces. In theocracies like Iran or Afghanistan, women are at the frontline of religiously 'dignified' abuse and discrimination. The ascendancy of right-wing and literal interpretation of faith and religion across the globe, whether the United States of America, Hungary, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Pakistan, and India reveal the ease with which the weaponisation of faith by patriarchy can have devastating effects on the daily lives of women regardless of nationality or race. It would be unjust and reinforcing the misogynist's narrative to completely exclude faith and religious institutions from doing their part in fighting misogyny and the patriarchal forces harming the lives of women and children. Their pastoral role in looking after the spiritual and emotional needs of their congregation and speaking out against injustice lends them a key position in preventing VAWG within their communities and society at large.

Policymakers, civil society, and local and central government should recognise there is a significant gap in engagement with faith leaders and communities in relation to ending male violence against women. If engaged holistically, faith leaders and institutions could be valuable allies, leveraging their knowledge and expertise, culturally and theologically, to shift cultural and social attitudes that enable violence against women. By working together with other professionals, including VAWG specialists, law enforcement, social workers, and healthcare providers, faith leaders can help identify potential warning signs of abuse and become key partners in effective and coordinated multiagency work.

Failure to engage faith communities, their leadership, and their ecosystems sustainably over the long term, including the provision of training on VAWG, advocacy and raising awareness of pathways to safety provided by the state and



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the women's movement as well as state agencies risks women from faith communities, marginalised and Black and minoritised communities falling through the cracks.

Inclusive engagement and partnership with faith communities and their leadership helps us centre survivors and get better at prioritising their safety and well-being. We also enable a shift in cultural attitudes and beliefs relating to misogyny, gender, and abuse.

There needs to be work around developing referral pathways to specialist support within local by and for organisations. It is important to note that faith leaders should not be seen as a replacement for other professionals or services. Survivors should always be encouraged to seek professional help and support, with faith leaders providing safety, connecting survivors with resources, especially when there are disclosures around "experiencing marital problems" or signs of coercive control including religious coercive control.

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What is VAWG?

Violence against women and girls, commonly referred to as VAWG is an umbrella term that covers serious harms, crimes, and offences that disproportionality affect women and girls. The term encompasses a wide range of acts but is not limited to forced marriage, stalking, female genital mutilation (FGM), spiritual abuse, domestic abuse, harassment, so-called 'honour' based abuse, sexual assault, rape etc.¹

Definition

As defined in the Istanbul Convention and used by the United Nations: *"Violence against women is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."*²

Prevalence

Statistics around VAWG are difficult to attain as data is usually collected around specific crimes encompassed by VAWG rather than as a whole; however, in 2018, the World Health Organisation found that around one in three women and girls globally are affected by VAWG.³

In England and Wales, domestic abuse is the most prevalent form of violence against women and girls. It accounts for one in five homicides in England and Wales. This equates to approximately two women a week killed by a former or current partner.⁴

**Approximately 2 women
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(Office of National Statistics)

Covid has highlighted the profound social, economic and health inequalities that have a huge impact, especially in the lives of Black and minoritised women. Evidently, multiple factors exacerbated pre-existing structural inequalities due to gender, race, class, sexuality, immigration status and disability.⁵

¹ https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.21_declaration%20elimination%20vaw.pdf

² <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>

³ <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1347689/retrieve>

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/sexualoffendingvictimisationandthepaththroughthecriminaljusticesystem/2018-12-13>

⁵ <https://www.forwarduk.org.uk/forward-publications/covid-19-study/>



Faith

Globally, faith is on the rise with over 80% of the world's population subscribing to a religious belief.⁶ We know that religion and faith are often used as a tool of abuse and weaponised for religiously endorsed patriarchal interpretations, yet globally religion and faith have also inspired and driven many social justice movements. Furthermore, religion and faith can be sources of resilience, empowerment, and strength for women during times of hardship, violence and abuse⁷

In our *'Keeping the Faith'* Report⁸, we argue that a woman's faith can be one of the most precious resources and experiences of belonging in their lives, especially in times of crisis. Just as some people would seek out local social hubs such as libraries and clubs when they move to a new area to find sources of friendship and like-mindedness, similarly, people of faith would seek out religious places of worship.

Notably, survivors from our Experts by Experience panel highlighted the negative perceptions society has of faith. They stress the importance of recognising both faith communities and Black and minoritised communities are not homogenous, that there is a diversity of practice and norms within a single faith and wish to be seen as individuals rather than belonging to a monolithic group or stereotype.

Faith and VAWG – The Link

Faith and religion are often seen as counter-cultural to secular society, but they are also important features of global cultures and structures. With 84% of the world's population identifying with a religion or faith⁹, this suggests that faith is an important dynamic in people's lives which can effectively be used in initiatives preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls. Concepts of justice and human rights found in religious traditions can influence how we value, talk about, and behave towards women from faith communities worldwide. Women of faith are more likely to seek help from faith leaders and institutions before seeking help from the police or specialist services, therefore creating an opportunity for intervention and protection outside of formal avenues of support.

Traditionally, there has been a reconciliation-focused approach from faith/religious institutions and leaders to marital and family conflict which creates a conflict between safety and religious commitment that can be risky with

⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>

⁷ <https://faithandvawg.contentfiles.net/media/documents/KeepingtheFaithFINAL.pdf>

⁸ <https://faithandvawg.contentfiles.net/media/documents/KeepingtheFaithFINAL.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/religion-why-is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next>



(On faith institutions taking reconciliation focused approaches) ***“It creates a conflict of the safety of my body and the safety of my everlasting soul”***

-Nikki Dhillon Keane

devastating impacts for women and girls. Therapist, co-founder of the Coalition and founder of Safe in Faith, Nikki Dhillon Keane stated, *“It creates a conflict of the safety of my body and the safety of my everlasting soul; however, no faith encourages anyone to stay in danger any longer than they already have done.”*

Preventing VAWG

The Faith and VAWG Coalition views the role of faith as vital in preventing VAWG. We recognise that violence against women and girls is not only a social issue but a public health one that impacts women’s physical, psychological, mental, financial and spiritual wellbeing. We believe it is important for faith leaders to be trained and understand the ramifications of how abuse and violence impact every aspect of women’s lives including their psychological and physical health.

However, it is undeniable that there is genuine and well-founded mistrust of male faith leaders who, at best, may be well-meaning, but do not understand the levels of harm abusive and traumatic experiences have. Male faith leaders may also inadvertently adopt unsafe practices or provide unsafe advice such as reconciliation, informal mediation, forgiveness, or similar practices that do not understand or appreciate the dynamics of power and control. In addition, the overwhelmingly normalised patriarchal and gendered interpretations of faith and religious institutions make survivors hesitant to disclose or seek support, fearing shame, blame and judgment.

In addition, there is genuine concern highlighted by many VAWG organisations that, due to cuts in legal aid coupled with growing anxiety about the Government’s plans to scrap The Human Rights Act, increased racism, a punitive approach to immigration and heightened community surveillance, will collectively result in vulnerable women turning to faith-based and cultural organisations and networks who may recommend religious-based arbitration and mediation being the only avenue to seek resolution and justice to deal with private and family matters.¹⁰ Therefore, it is imperative that faith institutions and faith leaders in formal and informal settings are aware that inappropriate responses can cause more harm than good.

¹⁰ <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/news/sharia-law-legal-pluralism-and-access-to-justice/>



Survivors' Experiences

Although there are good examples of survivors who were well supported by their local faith institution, there remain far too many stories of survivors across all faiths and communities who are driven to return to their abusers and/or let down due to inadequate support. These frequent “missed opportunities” can have a huge impact on the safety of survivors and their children, and in some cases, lead to serious harm, murder, and failure to hold perpetrators to account. The case studies below are good examples of how the right intervention by faith institutions and leadership is critical.

Case Study 1

Rosie, (not her real name) is a White Christian woman in her 40s; she is a survivor who experienced domestic abuse, including spiritual abuse from her partner. Her partner's role was leading worship in their Church. When she finally disclosed her abuse to the church, the church leaders involved the 'safeguarding officer.' Because of her husband's status within the institution, the leaders decided to 'handle it themselves'. Rosie was left vulnerable by disclosing very confidential information to the committee to prove herself; the safeguarding officer did not have much power or strategy to provide support. She stated, *“Church was my bubble, my world within a world. Important at that time, structure and understanding of the world was centred around faith.”* Rosie was harmed by an insensitive and inadequate response by her Church leaders.

“Church was my bubble, my world within a world. Important at that time, structure and understanding of the world was centred around faith.”

Rosie - Survivor

“Often, women are put under pressure to preserve their marriage and home over their personal safety. Sometimes, women are discouraged from seeking advice or support by initial responses from their faith community in which they are disbelieved or dismissed. In other cases, churches have chosen to support the perpetrator of domestic abuse or to push the survivor into forgiving him. This means that spiritual abuse, and the advice given by faith leaders, can be a major factor in survivors leaving the Church for good.”¹¹

¹¹ https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/54688/Information_on_Spiritual_Abuse.pdf



Case Study 2

Rukhsana (not her real name) was a university-educated, disabled, South Asian Muslim woman. Her husband, Nasir, was abusive, and controlling and led the Police and Social Services to believe that it was Rukhsana and her family who were the perpetrators of abuse not only towards him but also abusive towards the children. Both were regular attendees of their local mosque. Her husband eventually killed Rukhsana. The Domestic Homicide Review states that the religious leaders at the mosque were aware of ‘marital problems’ between Rukhsana and her husband. The mosque leaders said that they did not intervene because the couple did not formally approach them. It was their impression that *“people would not want to expose themselves by revealing their abusive situation”*. They also said that marital advice from the mosque recommends reconciliation, then arbitration and then family intervention.¹²

The Mosque did not intervene because they were not formally approached by the couple.

Similarly, the report by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse highlights the urgent need for safe support infrastructure and the critical role faith institutions can play in preventing harm. The Inquiry found that child sexual abuse was found in most major UK religions, with some found to have no child protection policies in place at all.¹³ Places of faith have a critical role to play in supporting survivors. Religious leaders can use their influence and platforms to educate their communities about the prevalence and impact of VAWG and encourage their members to speak out against it. It is crucial for faith leaders to be aware engage, and actively participate in training around VAWG and understand the dynamics of abuse, including religious coercive control and how it can isolate victims. They should be able to identify signs of abuse and know how to respond appropriately, including making referrals to specialist services. Hence, the outreach and engagement from the ending VAWG sector is critical.

¹² Page 19 : https://www.ealing.gov.uk/downloads/download/5144/domestic_homicide_review_safer_ealing_partnership_-_case_of_rukhsana

¹³ Child protection in religious organisations and settings - Investigation Report - September 2021

<https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/child-protection-religious-organisations-and-settings-investigation-report-september-2021.html>



What faith leaders have told us

We recognise in this section we do not have responses from a representative of all faiths; however, The Faith and VAWG Coalition collated responses from a diverse range of faith leaders including faith leaders from Jain, Christian and Muslim faiths.

- All faith leaders we spoke to agree and believe violence against women and girls is condemned by their respective faiths and offered their solidarity with survivors of abuse.
- All faith leaders acknowledged that there is still the perception that women should be subservient to men.
- They understand their roles to be alleviators of suffering for all beings and work towards their welfare.
- The faith leaders we spoke to recognised it was vital to engage with the causes of domestic abuse and violence. They also expressed the desire to learn more about more appropriate resolutions and possible solutions.
- They acknowledged ostracism of women who leave their abusive husbands by members of the community and, at times, their own families.
- All faith leaders agreed more needs to be done to end violence against women and girls.

“In my role as a faith leader, I think I have an important role to play in terms of preparing couples for marriage and emphasising how unacceptable violence in any form is within marriage. Within the sacrament of confession there is also an opportunity to give advice to women who are experiencing domestic violence within a forum which they know is confidential and safe”.

- Father Dan Mason, National Catholic
Chaplain for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers

“Addressing questions of abuse arose in our everyday interactions and discussions with the lay Jain Community. Training would certainly help us to support women better. We find that our training in the philosophy of non-violence is particularly useful and can bring transformative results in eradicating such inhuman practices.”

- Jain Nun



Whilst many leaders expressed a desire and recognition for more to be done, this is not enough, especially when, in many faith communities and institutions, speaking out is still a taboo. This leaves many victim/survivors feeling isolated and unable to speak out or seek support. Abusers, on the other hand, are likely to use their victims' faith as a tool for control and manipulation, cutting their ties further from their community and support networks.

"In some faith communities, domestic abuse is rarely discussed and can be considered taboo. Such silence means a victim's faith can be used by an abuser."¹⁴

¹⁴ : <https://www.leicester.gov.uk/your-council/policies-plans-and-strategies/public-safety/safer-leicester-partnership/domestic-homicide-reviews-dhrs/>



Examples of good practice:**Restored**

Restored is an organisation that speaks up against violence against women and equips churches across the UK and beyond to respond to domestic abuse. It is building a network of churches called “Restored Beacons”. A church identified as a ‘Restored Beacon’ is a place of safety that welcomes survivors. The aim is to not only create safer churches but also to challenge and change a culture where violence against women is normalised.¹⁵ Their tremendous work is an example of how faith institutions can be integrated into the work to end VAWG. We recommend this model as an example of how faith institutions can raise awareness of the issue of VAWG among its parishioners and communicate to survivors that they are a safe space for disclosure and support. It is also a public demonstration to agencies and perpetrators alike that they actively work to end VAWG and hold perpetrators to account. This model can also be applied with adaptations where necessary to other faith institutions. Financial and institutional support from a diversity of sources are the next steps to build on this initiative to ensure the financial sustainability of such lifesaving work.

Inclusive Mosque Initiative

Inclusive Mosque Initiative actively works to create an affirming space for individuals who have experienced discrimination or marginalisation within their Muslim faith communities. This includes offering support groups and counselling services for those experiencing trauma or isolation. This intersectional feminist mosque is launching a Feminist Imam programme in the coming months, as well as developing a marriage contract for couples, which will include provisions for dealing with abuse or major deceit. The aim is to provide guidelines for imams across the UK to - understand domestic abuse better and to prevent further harm when individuals seek help to leave an abusive marriage.

Jewish Women’s Aid

Jewish Women’s Aid actively engages with faith leaders, offering training, and has developed a community toolkit and resources to raise awareness. Faith leaders and synagogues who have engaged with the organisation have demonstrated an eagerness to learn from and listen to what JWA offers. These faith leaders are, therefore, not only doing their duty towards vulnerable members of their communities but also reducing the risk of repeat victimisation and discrimination survivors may experience from secular and culturally uninformed services.

¹⁵ <https://www.restored-uk.org/what-we-do/restored-beacons/>



Our Recommendations

The need for Collaboration

We require a significant and strategic approach to building trusting and collaborative relationships between faith leaders, institutions, communities and the VAWG Sector.

- Faith leaders and faith institutions need to be engaged in dialogue and training on issues of VAWG to actively challenge harmful attitudes and practices within their communities like the examples provided throughout this paper.
- VAWG organisations and the sector, generally, would be doing excellent work centring the needs of some of their beneficiaries if concerted efforts were made to build long-term and respectful relationships with faith actors and faith institutions where many male and female allies can be found. If recognised as key stakeholders and influential change makers, it follows that thoughtful and strategic effort will lead to powerful and long-term work positively impacting survivors and their communities.
- Collaborations between the VAWG sector, academic researchers and faith actors/institutions would shed light on the unique and hidden experiences of survivors from faith communities and their needs. This will enable a coordinated approach to changing attitudes not only within communities but also within voluntary and statutory agencies.

The Need for Fluency and Training

- We see the urgent need for fluency and specialist training around VAWG for faith institutions and their personnel to ensure the safety and wellbeing of women and their children. With specialist training and understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse and harmful practices, faith leaders can be involved in and enrich a range of processes such as domestic homicide reviews, MARACs (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference), multi-agency processes and government consultations.
- A journey of learning, training and organisational change needs to take place in both faith centred spaces and the ending VAWG sector that makes vulnerable women seen, heard, understood and safe.

Comprehensive Perpetrators Strategy

- The Government has committed to a national strategy, we endorse the voluntary sectors recommendations in a call to action.¹⁶ We encourage faith institutions to be involved.

¹⁶ <http://driveproject.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Call-to-Action-Final.pdf>



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- The sector needs to adopt a holistic VAWG strategy and framework which acknowledges the work of Faith institutions can do to challenge harmful attitudes and beliefs that contribute to VAWG and a need to promote healthy and respectful relationships.
- We should have clear policies on dealing with perpetrators within faith institutions. Many of them are able to continue doing harm and avoiding accountability by moving from one place to another. Faith leadership and organisations must win back the trust of those harmed by and in the name of faith and religion.

Call for Gender Inclusive Faith Institutions and Leadership

- We call for greater inclusion of women and women in leadership in faith spaces to reflect the diversity of the community and better serve their needs. In order to align faith institutions and organised religions with the fundamental principles of equality and egalitarian theology, it is imperative to steadfastly commit to prioritising the equal humanity of women. There are many inspiring examples within faiths and cultures of egalitarian practices and beliefs where women's roles and leadership are nurtured, elevated and centred. We call for these narratives and practices to be re-discovered and shared.



Conclusion:

Research tells us that Communities are often the first to know about abuse. *“They can act as gate openers or gate closers in terms of help seeking.”*¹⁷ Women and faith institutions do not live and operate in a vacuum. They reflect and are impacted by the wider dynamics happening in society. Faith institutions and communities are on the front lines of supporting the most isolated and vulnerable long before the police, statutory agencies, or charities and therefore, have a critical role in supporting survivors. The aforementioned, are excellent examples where faith leaders and communities continue to provide practical support to survivors, such as arranging temporary accommodation, food banks, helping with financial assistance, advocacy, and social support, as well as using their influence and platforms to educate the masses. Recognising and leveraging these commonalities is an important step in working in coalition and support of survivors and other marginalised groups. Furthermore, as this paper argues, faith leaders play a vital role towards bridging the gap not only to ensure survivors are getting the best and most efficient support but also in preventing violence against women and girls altogether. We cannot be ignorant to the ruptures and contradictions caused by patriarchy, racism or market forces in co-opting and seizing to disrupt partnerships, but if we care about ending male violence against women and children, we cannot be held hostage by this either.

We would like to conclude by quoting faith leader Dr Zina Egemony from Black Churches Domestic Abuse Forum (a Faith and VAWG Coalition member), when she emphasised *“the pulpit has been used to intimidate, harass, enable, and justify the perpetrators and victims are blamed and condemned... Don't want to make faith leaders feel bad? Respect your faith and what you do know, but with regard to nuance and support, you can't do it all with regard to domestic violence. Faith leaders need to study, too”*.¹⁸

¹⁷ Finding the Cost of Freedom report, 2014

https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Costs_of_Freedom_Report_-_SWA.pdf

¹⁸ Taken from 'Role of Faith leaders' workshop at Faith and VAWG Coalition's Connecting Communities Conference

