Faith and VAWG Coalition

Strengthening the UK Strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls: Integrating Faith Communities into Prevention, Support and Accountability.

Executive Summary

• The UK Government's Freedom from Violence and Abuse: A Cross-Government Strategy (2025) makes significant commitments across prevention, survivor support and perpetrator accountability; however, it overlooks the role of faith communities. This represents an important gap.
• According to the most recent census', across the UK more than 38.3 million people identify as having a religion.
• Faith leaders and faith spaces are among the first places abuse is disclosed. Faith institutions also shape attitudes, norms and relationships across communities and generations.
• Faith and spirituality can be an important source of resilience and recovery for survivors of domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG.
• Faith and religion can also be misused to justify abuse, through forms of spiritual abuse, coercive control, and community pressure
• Evidence from our member organisations supporting survivors from faith backgrounds highlight how faith, patriarchal family expectations, immigration insecurity, racism and community pressure can shape women's experiences of abuse and their ability to access support (Muslim Women's Network UK, 2016; Amina Muslim Women's Resource Centre, Scotland). These dynamics make culturally grounded and faith-literate responses essential.

Integrating faith communities safely and accountably into the delivery of the strategy would strengthen:

• early identification and disclosure of abuse
• survivor access to culturally competent and faith-literate support
• prevention and long term cultural and social norms change initiatives
• community accountability around violence against women and girls

Evidence from survivor testimony, specialist organisations and safeguarding guidance shows that faith communities can act as both barriers and pathways to safety. Effective implementation therefore requires structured partnership, clear safeguarding frameworks, and trauma informed survivor-centred practice.

This briefing, by the Faith and VAWG Coalition and its partners, outlines how policymakers and funders can close this gap and support effective implementation.

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Key Messages

Ending violence against women and girls requires engagement with all major social institutions, including faith communities.

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• Faith settings can function as frontline spaces for disclosure and support, yet their role is not currently recognised within national implementation guidance.
• Faith communities represent powerful sites of prevention and cultural change, particularly in engaging men and boys and transforming patriarchal community norms.
• Without faith-literate policy and practice, responses can unintentionally increase risk through misunderstanding spiritual abuse, honour-based dynamics, community pressure, or barriers to disclosure.
• Strategic engagement with faith communities must be survivor-centred, safeguarding-led, and delivered in partnership with specialist VAWG organisations.

Introduction

The Faith and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Coalition

The Faith and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Coalition is the UK's leading authority on faith literacy in VAWG. With more than 60 members spanning specialist VAWG agencies, faith-based organisations, and faith and VAWG experts, the Coalition works to build bridges between members of faith communities or faith-centred organisations and specialist services responding to violence against women and girls.

The Faith and VAWG Coalition welcomes the government's Violence Against Women and Girls strategy published in December 2025. We particularly welcome the commitment to protect all victim-survivors of violence against women and girls.

While the strategy emphasises a whole-society response, it does not meaningfully address the role of faith communities in preventing and responding to VAWG.

Research shows that faith and spirituality can be an important source of resilience and recovery for survivors of domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG (Anderson et al., 2012; Gillum et al., 2006). For many women, faith functions as a protective factor and a source of community support. In an increasingly hostile environment for women of faith, evidenced by rising antisemitism, Islamophobia, and racially motivated attacks on women, faith communities can also play a critical role in shaping women's sense of safety, identity and belonging.

Many women from faith backgrounds navigate complex tensions between safety, faith identity, community belonging and family expectations when seeking help

At the same time, faith and religion can be weaponised to control and harm women. Spiritual abuse is a recognised form of abuse experienced by some women of faith, including the misuse of religious texts, doctrines or authority to justify violence or coercive control (Oakley and Kinmond, 2014). Research also highlights that patriarchal interpretations of religion can reinforce gender inequality and inhibit women from seeking support (Nason-Clark, 2009).

Research conducted by one of our members has documented how Muslim women experiencing abuse often face multiple and intersecting barriers when seeking help. Including stigma within communities, fear of Islamophobic responses from services, immigration insecurity, and economic dependence (Muslim Women's Network UK, 2016).

Our Survivor-led research (2021) found that many women from faith backgrounds navigate complex tensions between safety, faith identity, community belonging and family expectations when seeking help. These dynamics highlight the importance of faith-literate responses within both statutory services and community institutions.

A Critical Gap: Faith Communities and Institutions

1. Faith communities as frontline spaces and disclosure sites

For many women, faith leaders and faith settings are among the first places abuse is disclosed. Research and survivor testimony indicate that trusted community figures, including clergy and faith leaders, are often approached before statutory services particularly where family honour, immigration status, or community stigma are factors. (Nason-Clark, 2009; Faith and VAWG Coalition, 2021).

However, there are currently no consistent or standardised safeguarding practices across faith institutions in relation to violence against women and girls. The government strategy does not recognise faith actors as part of the frontline safeguarding landscape, meaning opportunities for early identification and early intervention are often missed.

2. Faith leaders as community responders

Faith leaders frequently encounter situations involving domestic abuse, harmful practices such as forced marriage, or family violence. However, there is limited national guidance or structured training to support safe responses.

Without appropriate frameworks, survivors may face unsafe mediation, pressure to reconcile with abusive partners, or delayed access to specialist support.

Many faith leaders lack information about and access to formal referral pathways to specialist services.

Research and safeguarding guidance by several organisations, including one of our members, Restored, consistently warn that without appropriate frameworks, survivors may face unsafe mediation, pressure to reconcile with abusive partners, or delayed access to specialist support.

Service data from our member Amina Muslim Women's Resource Centre also highlights that women may initially seek advice from community or religious authorities who lack safeguarding training, which can sometimes lead to advice that prioritises family preservation over survivor safety.

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3. Prevention and attitudinal change

Faith institutions play a significant role in shaping social norms and values across communities and generations. Faith communities therefore represent an important yet under-utilised opportunity for prevention. Evidence from our co-founding partner Jewish Women's Aid, and community-based prevention initiatives suggest that faith settings can play a constructive role in challenging misogyny, promoting gender equality, and supporting healthy relationships education when engagement is structured and survivor-centred.

This is particularly important for young men and boys, many of whom are exposed to harmful and misogynist influences on and offline. Whilst the prime minister has acknowledged there is not a 'silver bullet response' to these issues, with the right training faith leaders are in key positions of trust to tackle them within faith spaces.

Along with our members we want to emphasise the importance of engaging faith leaders and community educators in conversations about gender equality and domestic abuse in order to challenge harmful and patriarchal interpretations of religious teachings that may be used to justify abuse.

Engaging faith communities in prevention work could strengthen efforts to:

- Challenge misogyny and harmful gender norms
- Support healthy relationships education
- Engage men and boys in conversations about violence and accountability
- Create safer spaces for women and girls

4. Accountability within communities

Faith communities can also act as sites of accountability and cultural change, helping to address harmful practices (including female genital mutilation, forced marriage, so called 'honour-based' abuse, virginity testing etc) and support survivor-centred responses. As the Crime and Policing Bill introduces a statutory definition of 'honour' based abuse, faith leaders have a key role to play in addressing this form of abuse alongside other harmful practices such as spiritual abuse. Research highlights that when faith institutions work in partnership with specialist organisations, they can support both community education and improved safeguarding responses (Jewish Women's Aid; Restored UK). However, without structured engagement and accountability frameworks, these opportunities remain under-developed.

Faith literacy within service provision

Without faith-literate practice, statutory services struggle to understand the role of faith in survivors' lives or recognise forms of abuse including harmful practices such as spiritual abuse, honour-based dynamics, or community pressure.

Research from our members highlights that women from faith backgrounds may avoid seeking help if they believe services will misunderstand or stigmatise their faith, culture or immigration circumstances. Many women also fear experiencing antisemitism, islamophobia or racism in settings that are not informed by cultural and faith sensitivity. This underscores the importance of culturally competent and faith-aware responses within statutory services.

Our Policy Asks

1. Recognise faith settings as part of the safeguarding landscape

National guidance should be developed to recognise faith institutions as potential disclosure and referral points. This would align with evidence showing that survivors often approach trusted community figures before engaging with formal services. This should also be reflected in regional strategies, building on close working between regional government and faith communities.

2. Develop a national faith-literate response framework

Government should commission a national faith-literate framework providing guidance for both statutory services and faith institutions.

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Often faith-led services or faith institutions are disqualified from accessing funding that supports survivors

This framework can include:

- responding safely to disclosures in a trauma informed and survivor centred manner
- recognition of spiritual abuse and coercion as forms of gender-based violence
- understanding honour-based abuse
- safe referral pathways to specialist services
- clear safeguarding responsibilities and boundaries
- guidance discouraging mediation or reconciliation in abuse cases.

3. Invest in specialist faith informed services

Funding should be made available to faith led services and faith institutions to support survivors

Evidence from our member and other specialist organisations consistently demonstrates that culturally competent, community-based services improve access to support for survivors facing multiple barriers. Whilst we share the call for funding to prioritise specialist organisations providing culturally and faith-sensitive support to survivors, often faith-led services or faith institutions are disqualified from accessing funding that supports survivors due to the systemic prohibitions on funding religious institutions or institutions that have a public faith identity.

This is a good example of how the gap in faith literacy can lead to omissions and barriers to a whole society approach.

4. Establish cross-sector training programmes

Government should fund reciprocal training programmes bringing together:

- faith leaders and community organisations
- police, healthcare providers and local authorities
- specialist VAWG organisations.

Such training should be bespoke, culturally specific training which should focus on safeguarding, coercive control, harmful practices such as spiritual abuse, safe referral pathways and survivor-centred responses. This should be carried out by specialist faith based VAWG agencies who hold expertise on both faith and violence against women and girls

5. Support faith-based prevention initiatives

Faith institutions are important sites of influence and social learning. Funding should support prevention initiatives that:

- engage men and boys in conversations about violence and accountability
- promote healthy relationships and gender equality
- equip faith leaders with resources to challenge misogyny and harmful norms.

Conclusion

The UK Government's strategy provides an important opportunity to transform the national response to violence against women and girls.

However, achieving the strategy's ambitious goals will require engaging all parts of society where influence, trust and disclosure already exist.

Faith communities represent one of the UK's most significant yet under-recognised social infrastructures. Integrating them safely and responsibly into the strategy's delivery can strengthen prevention, survivor support and community accountability, helping ensure that the strategy delivers meaningful change for women and girls across the country.