Faith and Violence Against Women and Girls Coalition's Research

Faith in the System



The Invisibility of Faith in VAWG Policy and Practice

FAITH AND VAWG COALITION

November, 2026

Faith in the System

The Invisibility of Faith in VAWG Policy and Practice

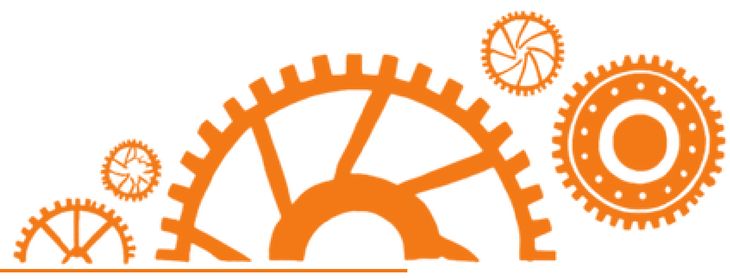
Published by The Faith and VAWG Coalition, November 2026

Author Fran Richards

Design Sarah Butterworth

How to cite this report: *Faith and VAWG Coalition (2026) Faith in the System: The Invisibility of Faith in VAWG Policy and Practice. London: Faith and VAWG Coalition.*





Contents

At a glance 4

Introduction 5

UK VAWG Strategies 6

- England and Wales 6
- Scotland 7
- Northern Ireland 7

Practice Guidance 9

- Risk Assessment 9
- MARAC 9
- Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews 11

Conclusion 13

References 14

About the Faith and VAWG Coalition 16

At a glance

Faith plays a central role in many women's lives, yet the needs and experiences of victims and survivors from faith backgrounds are largely absent from UK VAWG policy and practice guidance.

57%

of the UK population identify with a faith or religion – more than 38.3 million people.

Census

1 of 3

UK national VAWG strategies identifies faith groups as partners (Northern Ireland).

Our review of UK VAWG strategies

0

references to spiritual abuse, faith or religion in the DASH risk assessment checklist and its quick start guidance.

SafeLives DASH RIC

270

MARACs across the UK – but national MARAC data does not record the faith of victim-survivors.

SafeLives

80%

of published Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews show the victim's religion as unclear, unknown or not stated.

Home Office DHR repository (521 of 647)

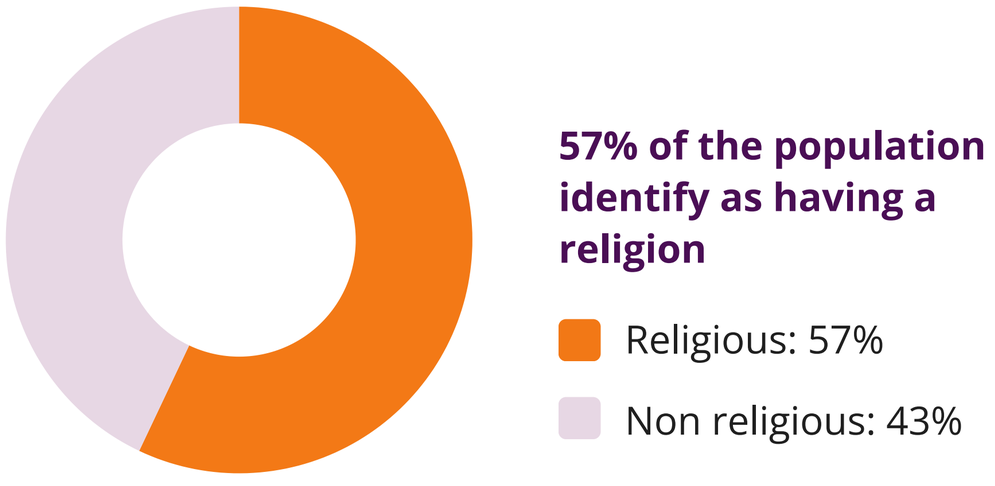
0 of 124

domestic homicide reviews examined in 2019–2020 recognised religion as a factor.

Home Office (2024)

Introduction

More than 38.3 million people recorded in census' across the United Kingdom (UK) identify with a faith or religion, equating to approximately 57% of the population.



Whilst religion holds a more prominent role for some people, we know that for many, faith plays a central role in their daily lives. Research shows that faith and spirituality can be important sources of resilience and recovery for victim-survivors of domestic abuse and other forms of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) (Anderson et al. 2012[i]; Gillum et al. 2006[ii]). For many women, faith functions as a protective factor and a source of community support.

> **Faith and spirituality can be important sources of resilience and recovery.**

Simultaneously, 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[iii]). Research shows that many women of faith fear that secular agencies will not understand their experiences (Abrahams et al. 2019[iv]), and this can be compounded by wider inequalities and the increased rise of hostility to women of faith, evidenced by rising antisemitism, Islamophobia and racially motivated attacks on women. Therefore, understanding the potential dual role of faith in victim-survivors' lives is vital to the ability to accurately assess their risks and needs and provide appropriate support and safeguarding.

> **Understanding the potential dual role of faith in victim-survivors' lives is vital to the ability to accurately assess their risks and needs and provide appropriate support and safeguarding.**

In this report the Faith and VAWG Coalition explores the extent to which faith is recognised as a factor in VAWG policy and practice guidance to understand whether women's needs are being recognised and met.

CHAPTER 1: UK VAWG Strategies

England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

Responses to VAWG in the UK are shaped by three national strategies covering England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. All three focus on the concept of a 'whole society' approach, where social institutions, statutory organisations and communities are expected to be part of the solution to tackling VAWG. Given that faith communities play a prominent role in many citizens' lives it is reasonable to expect that they are considered key partners in this approach.

England and Wales

The England and Wales 10-year VAWG strategy: Freedom from Violence and Abuse: A Cross-Government Strategy[v] strongly advocates for 'every part of society' to contribute to ending VAWG. The strategy focuses on key themes, including child sexual abuse, prevention and early intervention, pursuit of perpetrators, and support for victim-survivors. In each area faith leaders and communities are uniquely positioned to play a valuable role, from being sites of disclosure to shaping attitudes, norms and relationships. Despite this, the strategy does not address or even reference the role of faith communities in preventing and responding to VAWG.

There is a welcome recognition in the strategy that intersecting characteristics can influence victim-survivors' experiences of abuse and access to support:

> ***'This Strategy includes commitments to help protect all victims and survivors of VAWG crimes and behaviours, including but not limited to those who are LGBT+, Black or from other minoritised ethnic groups, deaf and/or disabled, older, migrants, children and babies, and men and boys. We recognise how factors such as an individual's race, disability, age, sex, and sexual orientation, shape experiences of abuse and access to justice' (p16)***

The absence of faith or religion in this section suggests that survivors from faith backgrounds are overlooked or not included because they are not seen as a distinct group, separate to migrants or Black and minoritised survivors, requiring nuanced understanding and response. This omission also reinforces the stereotype that faith is synonymous with Black and minoritised communities, rendering White survivors invisible.

> **Survivors from faith backgrounds are overlooked or not included because they are not seen as a distinct group, separate to migrants or Black and minoritised survivors.**

For more information on the Faith and VAWG Coalition's response to the government's Freedom from Violence and Abuse: A Cross-Government Strategy please see our briefing: www.faithandvawg.org/publications/strengthening-the-uk-strategy-to-end-violence-against-women-and-girls-integrating-faith-communities-into-prevention-support-and-accountability/

Scotland

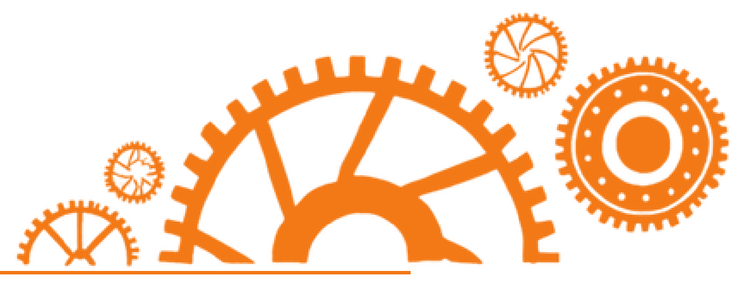
Sitting under devolved governments, Scotland and Northern Ireland have separate VAWG strategies. The Scottish strategy, Equally Safe 2023: Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls[vi] takes a similar approach to VAWG as a whole societal issue with an expectation that *'all spheres of government and all sectors of society have a role to play in tackling this issue'* (p3). The strategy has a section *'shared and differing experiences'* which discusses intersecting characteristics that can increase the risk of abuse and the barriers to accessing support (p13). Although all 9 protected characteristics are listed, the role of religion is not explored here. Indeed, faith is only discussed in the section on 'BME' women, suggesting a conflation of race and faith. This risks erasing or 'invisiblising' White women of faith, reinforcing racial stereotypes of cultural harm associated with Black and brown communities and fails to address specific barriers such as spiritual abuse, not referenced at all in the strategy.

Northern Ireland

In contrast, the Northern Ireland strategy, Northern Ireland Executive's End VAWG Strategic Framework 2024–31[vii] does identify faith groups as partners, although does not reference the weaponisation of faith, such as spiritual abuse. Also taking a 'Whole of Society and Whole of Government' approach, there is a recognition that young people spend time in spaces such as sports, youth and faith organisations, and therefore these parts of the community have a role to play in educating society, supporting women and girls and engaging men and boys.

There is also explicit reference to the need for engagement and actions in areas such as arts, sports and faith. This perhaps highlights the role faith has played in Northern Ireland's political and cultural history, in contrast to countries where public life has a more secular character such as England. Regardless, these absences mean that the specific risks and needs of women of faith, and ways to mitigate these risks are not being addressed in government strategy.





Faith institutions play a key role in many citizens' daily life in the UK, and are important sites of disclosure, support and influence. However, there are currently no consistent standardised safeguarding practices across faith settings. Many faith institutions lack understanding about the dynamics of VAWG, or information about and access to formal referral pathways to specialist support. Therefore, it is essential that they are recognised as part of the safeguarding landscape and integrated safely and responsibly into strategy to strengthen nationwide responses to preventing and addressing VAWG.

There are no consistent standardised safeguarding practices across faith settings.

CHAPTER 2: Practice Guidance

Risk assessment, MARAC and Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews

One way of exploring the understanding of the intersection of faith and VAWG in practice is to review guidance on the key areas of MARAC, risk assessment and Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews (DARDRs).

Risk Assessment

The main risk assessment tool used by the domestic abuse sector continues to be the SafeLives Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Honour based Abuse Risk Assessment Checklist (DASH RIC)[viii]. The assessment itself and the 'quick start guidance' does not reference or ask about spiritual abuse, faith or the impact of religion[ix]. However, the more extensive IDVA guidance asks practitioners to consider whether religion may be being used as a tool of coercive control, the use of religion in the context of 'honour' based abuse and the risk of using religion to gain custody of children[x]. All these questions are indicative of spiritual abuse, although no definition is given or the wider picture discussed. This may make it difficult for practitioners to understand the context of these questions, or how to respond to positive responses from the survivor. Without explicit reference to spiritual abuse in the risk assessment or guidance, practitioners are less likely to ask survivors about this risk which may lead to gaps in safety planning for survivors from faith backgrounds.

> **The main risk assessment tool used by the domestic abuse sector does not reference or ask about spiritual abuse, faith or the impact of religion.**

MARAC

SafeLives also provides guidance for Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs), which take place in local areas across the United Kingdom. There are 270 MARACs across the UK, comprising coordinated partnerships to regularly discuss high risk domestic abuse cases in a structured setting. SafeLives collates MARAC data including demographic information on each case to build a national picture of MARACs and provide local areas with information on expected types of cases. Currently this information includes reporting the number of cases which have disabled, LGBT+, male, Black and minoritised, young or older victim-survivors. However, this

information does not include the faith of victim-survivors, despite religion being a protected characteristic, meaning that we have no record of the faith of victim-survivors who are deemed high risk and, therefore, heard at MARAC.

In addition, SafeLives produces specific safeguarding guidance on particular groups of survivors heard at MARAC including Black and minoritised, disabled, LGBT+, older and younger survivors, those experiencing coercive control and those with mental health issues. There is no specific guidance on survivors from faith backgrounds. We see this as a missed opportunity to support MARACs to have a greater understanding of the risks, barriers and potential support mechanisms for survivors from faith backgrounds.

Faith groups are however, referenced in the guidance on Black, Asian and Racially Minoritised victim-survivors which suggests:

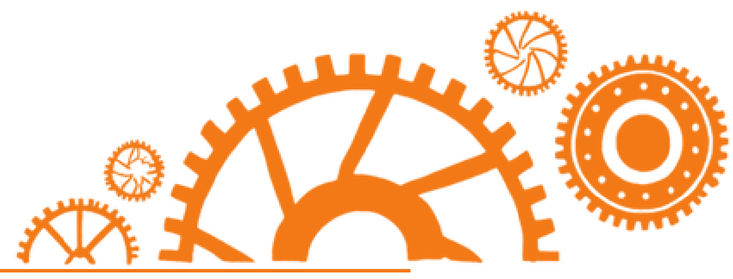
> ***'Find creative ways of engaging victims, for example; making links between statutory agencies and local faith or community groups and networks – or services that are generally used by Black, Asian and racially minoritised individuals' [xi] (p6).***

Whilst we agree that faith groups have a greater role to play in multi-agency working, by including this advice in the guidance only for Black, Asian and Racially Minoritised victim-survivors, faith is once again racialised. This makes assumptions about both Black and minoritised survivors and White survivors which potentially reinforces racist stereotypes and erases the needs of White survivors.

Religious communities are also referenced in the coercive control guidance which states that one mechanism of coercive control is *'Threats to expose sensitive information (e.g. sexual activity) or make false allegations to family members, religious or local community including via photos or the internet'*[xii] (p2).

This acknowledges a very real threat used by perpetrators. However, we see several pitfalls here, including the seemingly contradictory referencing of religious communities as a potential source of engagement in one document and a potential source of harm in another without framing this in a wider analysis of the use of religion by patriarchy to coerce and control and conversely, as a form of resistance and support by victim-survivors. This creates a failure to explore the nuances of risk and support that faith communities can bring. Practitioners may not feel confident in knowing when it is appropriate to engage with faith leaders and communities, so choose not to engage at all. Another potential risk is the use of the term 'community/ies' as a shorthand for racialised groups who are often portrayed as monolithic, distinct and separate from the rest of society, reinforcing yet another harmful trope.





Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews

Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews (DARDRs), formerly Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs) aim to highlight lessons learned following a domestic abuse related death, improve service and multi-agency responses and contribute to our wider understanding of domestic abuse. For this to be effective there needs to be in-depth consideration of how the victim's characteristics and needs impacted their experiences. As the Domestic Abuse Commissioner has noted 'Domestic abuse does not exist in a single form. It is unique to each person's situation and history'[xiii].

> ***"Domestic abuse does not exist in a single form. It is unique to each person's situation and history."***
>
> **Nicole Jacobs, Domestic Abuse Commissioner**

Therefore faith, alongside other needs and protected characteristics, should be explored to assess whether it has played a part in the domestic abuse itself as well as in barriers to support and service responses.

Of the 647 published reviews currently on the Home Office repository, 80% (521) show the victim's religion as unclear, unknown or not stated. Similarly, the perpetrator's religion is unknown in 536 (83%) of reviews[xiv]. This suggests that either agencies working with victim-survivors experiencing domestic abuse are not asking about their faith, the review panel is not exploring this, or both.

80%

of Domestic Abuse Related Death Reviews show the victim's religion as unclear, unknown or not stated.

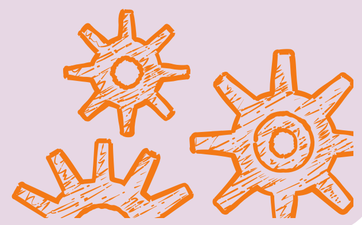
Home Office repository: 521 of 647 published reviews

A Home Office review into DHRs in the year 2019–2020 concluded that religion was not a factor in any of the 124 domestic homicide reviews examined.[xv] This is to be expected given that a victim's religion is known in so few cases but is presented as fact. If we agree that faith can play a role in the experiences of victims from faith backgrounds, ignoring this discrepancy is a missed opportunity to increase our understanding of their experiences, and a potential erasure of a vital aspect of the dynamics and circumstances that led to their tragic death. If services are not asking victim-survivors about their faith and how it intersects with their experiences, opportunities are likely to be missed to risk assess, safety plan, identify barriers and illuminate issues such as spiritual abuse.

0 of 124

A Home Office review of homicides between 2019–2020 failed to recognise religion as a factor in any of the 124 domestic homicide reviews that year.

Home Office (2024)

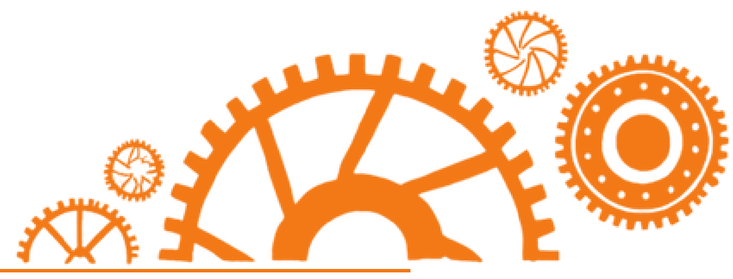


In 2026 the Home Office published Domestic Abuse Related Death Review: Statutory Guidance[xvi]. Unlike previous guidance this acknowledges faith-based abuse as a potential aggravating factor in a homicide and has a small section on religion and belief (alongside all other protected characteristics). Importantly it acknowledges that victims from faith backgrounds may experience barriers to accessing support. This reflects the Faith and VAWG Coalition's submission to the Home Office emphasising the importance of addressing faith in the guidance. Whilst this change is welcomed, as long as the religion of such a high proportion of victims is unknown, this will have limited use in guiding DARDRs.

One of the key aspects of a DARDR is to engage with those who knew and had contact with the victim or perpetrator prior to the victim's death, not just professional services. The previous (2016) statutory guidance states that 'the quality and accuracy of the review is likely to be significantly enhanced by family, friends and wider community involvement'[xvii] (p17). Many of the survivors we have spoken to at the Faith and VAWG Coalition have told us that their faith leader or faith community supported them when they were experiencing abuse, suggesting that these networks can be a valuable source of information to illuminate the experiences of victims from faith backgrounds.

The newly updated guidance explicitly mentions faith and community groups as possible support networks to engage with, alongside family and friends. This is an improvement on the previous 2016 guidance which omits these groups. However, whilst the rationale is given that engaging with faith groups, as well as family, friends and community members more broadly, can give a 'comprehensive picture of the victim and their life' (p26) it is not explicit that faith institutions are common sites of disclosure for victims from faith backgrounds and therefore can often be crucial to understanding their experiences. Panels may therefore fail to understand the importance of engaging faith communities, who in some instances may be the only source of information on the abuse experienced by the victim.

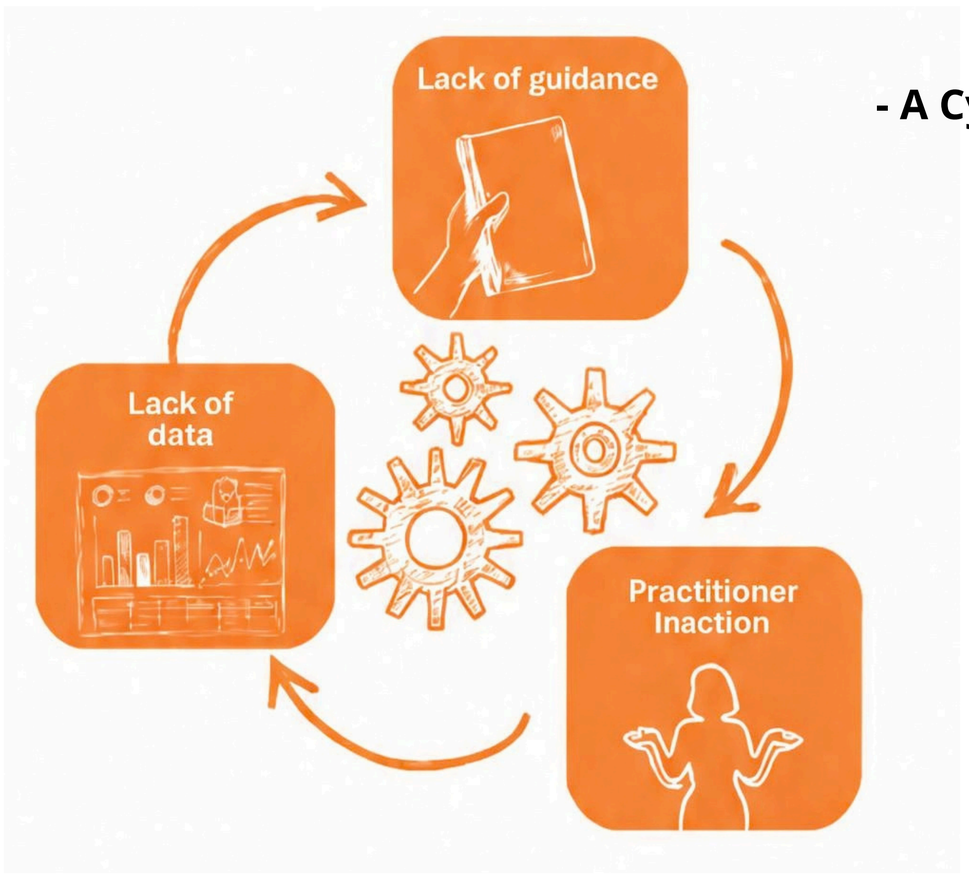




Conclusion

This overview of UK VAWG strategies and practice guidance suggests that the needs and experiences of victims and survivors from faith backgrounds are largely absent from policy and practice guidance. Although all the VAWG strategies reference intersectionality or the impact of intersecting needs of women's experience of VAWG, faith was unexplored as a factor. Faith leaders and communities, who often support victim-survivors, have opportunities to create attitudinal change and input on prevention work, but are rarely referenced or engaged with in policy or practice. This is in contradiction to the concept of a 'whole of society' approach favoured by current governments. The exception is the Northern Ireland VAWG strategy which acknowledges the role faith communities can play in educating young people, supporting women and girls and engaging men and boys.

There is also limited advice for practitioners on the role faith can play in victim-survivors' experiences of abuse. Although the use of religion is referenced in some guidance as a potential form of coercive control, explanations are limited. Race and faith are frequently treated synonymously or conflated, which risks repeating harmful stereotypes and rendering White survivors from faith backgrounds invisible.



- A Cycle of Invisibility

The absence of data in these processes impacts our ability to understand the experiences of victims and survivors from faith backgrounds, to name the abuse and to validate survivor experiences. It appears that whilst guidance fails to highlight the importance of understanding the intersection of VAWG and faith experiences, practitioners continue to pay little to no attention to these issues, leading to an absence of information and data to inform policy. In order to ensure that victim-survivors from faith backgrounds are safeguarded, their needs met and are accessing justice, it is essential that these gaps and contradictions are addressed.

References

[i] Anderson, K., Renner, L. and Danis, F. (2012) Recovery: Resilience and Growth in the Aftermath of Domestic Violence. *Violence Against Women* 18 (11) 1279–1299.

[ii] Gillum, T., Sullivan, C. and Bybee, D. (2006) The Importance of Spirituality in the Lives of Domestic Violence Survivors. *Violence Against Women* 12 (3) 240–250.

[iii] Oakley, L. and Kinmond, K. (2014) Developing Safeguarding Policy and Practice for Spiritual Abuse. *The Journal of Adult Protection*. 16 (2): 87–95.

[iv] Abrahams, H. A., Aghtaie, N. and Mulvihill, N. (2019) Faith, Spiritual Abuse and the Search for Justice. *Safe: The Domestic Abuse Quarterly*, (68), 11–13.

[v] Home Office (2025) Freedom from Violence and Abuse: A Cross-Government Strategy to Build a Safer Society for Women and Girls. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/697c7e1404 3a4ade0f7b503f/31.260_VAWG_01_Strategy_Slip_FINAL_v5_290126_WEB.pdf

[vi] Scottish Government (2023) Equally Safe: Scotland's Strategy for Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2023/12/equally-safe-scotlands-strategy-preventing-eradicating-violence-against-women-girls/documents/equally-safe-scotlands-strategy-preventing-eradicating-violence-against-women-girlsscotlands-strategy-preventing-eradicating-violence-against-women-girls/equally-safe-scotlands-strategy-preventing-eradicating-violence-against-women-girlsscotlands-strategy-preventing-eradicating-violence-against-women-girls/govscot%3Adocument/SCT06237178601.pdf

[vii] Northern Ireland Executive (2024) Available at: https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/strategic-framework-evawg.pdf

[viii] SafeLives (2015) DASH RIC. Available at: https://safelives.org.uk/resources-library/dash-risk-checklist/

[ix] SafeLives (2019) DASH RIC Quick Start Guidance. Available at: https://safelives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Dash-risk-checklist-quick-start-guidance.pdf

[x] SafeLives (2015) SafeLives DASH Risk Checklist for the Identification of High Risk Cases of Domestic Abuse, Stalking and 'Honour'-based violence. Available at: https://safelives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Dash-risk-checklist-for-Idvas.pdf

[xi] SafeLives (no date) Guidance for Multi-Agency Forums: Cases Involving Victims who are Black, Asian and Racially Minoritised. Available at: https://safelives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/National-Scrutiny-Panel-Guidance-Black-Asian-Racially-Minoritised-clients.pdf

[xii] SafeLives (no date) Guidance for Multi-Agency Forums: Coercive Control. Available at: https://safelives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Guidance-for-multi-agency-forums-Coercive-control.pdf

[xiii] Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2024) Consultation on Updating the Domestic Homicide Review Statutory Guidance: Written Submission from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales. Available at: https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/DAC-response-to-updated-DHR-stat-guidance-consultation-Web.pdf

[xiv] Home Office (no date) List of Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs). Available at: https://homicide-review.homeoffice.gov.uk/



[xv] Home Office (2024) Key Findings from Analysis of Domestic Homicide Reviews: October 2019 to September 2020. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/key-findings-from-analysis-of-domestic-homicide-reviews/key-findings-from-analysis-of-domestic-homicide-reviews#characteristics-of-victims

[xvi] Home Office (2026) Domestic Abuse Related Death Review: Statutory Guidance. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6aaa9fdd086ce7c57b81859e/Domestic_abuse_related_death_review_statutory_guidance1609.pdf

[xvii] Home Office (2016) Multi-Agency Statutory Guidance for the Conduct of Domestic Homicide Reviews. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80be88e5274a2e87dbb923/DHR-Statutory-Guidance-161206.pdf

FAITH AND VAWG COALITION

About the Faith and VAWG Coalition

We are the UK's independent authority on faith literacy in VAWG. We up-skill the VAWG sector and equip faith organisations so survivors of faith are understood and protected, without having to choose between safety and belief.

For VAWG services

Practical training, including on spiritual abuse, and tools that build faith literacy into risk assessment and safety planning.

For faith organisations

Safeguarding training that aligns faith traditions with safeguarding responsibilities, clear referral pathways and confidential case guidance.

For funders and policymakers

A trusted, single interface between faith bodies and the VAWG sector. Fund change that reaches the survivors others can't.

Connect with us

Join our network, book training, partner with us or support our work with a donation.

Website www.faithandvawg.org

Email hello@faithandvawg.org

Charity no. 1206961

Join our mailing List . Follow us on socials @FaithandVAWG . Become a Member.