

The role of faith in domestic violence in Muslim communities: Barrier, bridge, or both?

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) is a complex issue that can be shaped by various cultural, religious, and societal factors. Despite growing recognition of the role that faith can play – both positive and negative – in DVA, there has been limited research focusing specifically on how Islamic teachings and practices intersect with experiences of abuse. A recent study[†] conducted by Dr Rahmanara Chowdhury at NTU explored this intersection in depth, exploring the multifaceted influences of faith on DVA among UK Muslim communities. The findings point to a need for more nuanced approaches in policy and practice, suggesting that faith can be integral to both addressing and preventing DVA in this context.

Background

DVA is a widespread issue affecting people across a broad range of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds; however, it has been found that experiences of DVA within Muslim communities may be influenced by unique cultural and religious factors. This can complicate both the understanding of the issue and the provision of appropriate support.

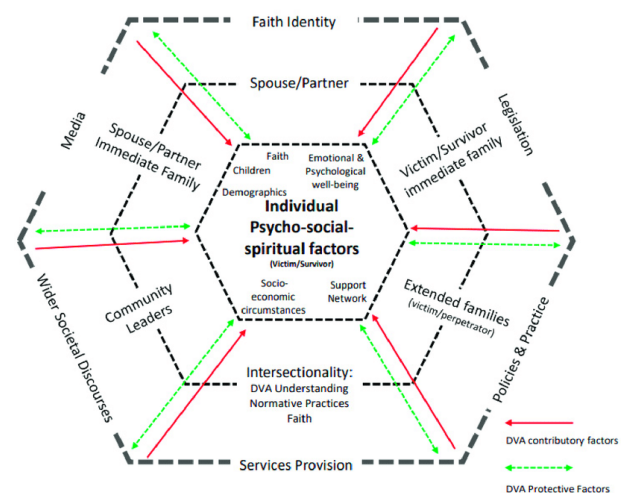
“The added element of a faith or religious tradition ... adds complexity to our understanding of ... DVA”

In recent years, there has been growing interest in how religious beliefs and practices can either contribute to DVA or provide protection from it, as well as in their potential to offer pathways to healing and recovery. Seeking to explore this theme, Chowdhury's study examined the nuances of the role of religion and faith practice in DVA within UK Muslim communities, drawing on the experiences of ten survivors and nine practitioners involved in supporting them, their families, and the perpetrators of abuse. To build a detailed picture from these experiences, the participants were each interviewed individually, either in person or remotely.

The interviews

The interviews with survivors focused on their overall experiences of DVA, as well as the reactions of their families and communities. The practitioners were asked about how DVA manifests in Muslim communities and the role of faith and cultural norms in shaping experiences of abuse. Both groups were asked about any changes they believed might be needed at the community level.

From this research, the “Web Model of DVA” was developed (as shown below), and the emerging themes were explored across several levels using this framework, with a specific focus on the Faith dimension in relation to Islam.



Web Model of Domestic Violence and Abuse

Different approaches to faith

The role of faith was explored at four levels: the individual psycho-social-spiritual level, the stakeholder level, the level of intersectionality, and the macro level. Across all of these levels, it emerged that the participants had experienced two distinct and contrasting approaches to faith: holistic and reductionist/androcentric.

Here, reductionism refers to the distillation of the faith to literal interpretations of scripture and binary rules, and androcentrism refers to preference being given to males, generally based on ethnic cultural norms rather than through direct reference to Islam. Conversely, holistic approaches consider the faith in a broader and more nuanced way, avoiding simplistic interpretations and dualism.

“Reductionist approaches to faith [allowed] for the occurrence and maintenance of DVA.”

Critically, the research established that reductionist/androcentric approaches to Islam tended to normalise and perpetuate DVA, while holistic approaches, informed by a more nuanced understanding of Islam, had the potential to address DVA and help people to find a way out of abusive situations.

Findings at the four levels

At the individual level, it was found that taking a holistic approach to faith provided victims with hope and strength, empowering them to reclaim their right to live free from abuse.

Stakeholders – including family, community members, and practitioners – had the potential to play a key role in either supporting or hindering victims’ access to help, with their understanding and approach to faith influencing the effectiveness of the support they provided.

The examination of intersectionality highlighted how the interplay of faith, gender, ethnicity, and culture shaped victims’ experiences of DVA. Certain cultural norms could exacerbate abuse; in particular, religious authority, when combined with ignorance of DVA’s impact, can cause

additional suffering for victims. Nonetheless, when survivors had access to support from those with a holistic understanding of Islam and a good knowledge of DVA, this had the potential to be transformative.

“Survivors and [practitioners] reported the desire for services to encompass their cultural and religious background.”

At the macro level, it was noted that societal prejudice and negative portrayals of Muslims created fear and hindered both service provision for DVA survivors and their ability to access that provision. A lack of demographic data on faith and culture in service provision was also found to limit the provision of support tailored to the needs of Muslim communities.

Implications

The study’s conclusions call for policies and practices that recognize the complex role of faith in DVA within Muslim communities. This includes integrating both holistic and religiously sensitive approaches to support victims and address the root causes of abuse.

The paper also recommends that training should be provided for practitioners to better understand how faith intersects with cultural norms and power structures, promoting more effective interventions. This could help bridge gaps in support and significantly improve community engagement in tackling DVA.

Summary

- Faith can have both positive and negative influences on DVA among UK Muslims.
- Reductionist/androcentric approaches can harm, and holistic approaches can help.
- Recognizing the blend of ethnic culture and faith is key to supporting DVA survivors.
- Policies should promote a holistic understanding of faith in DVA support.

[†]Chowdhury, R. (2023). The role of religion in domestic violence and abuse in UK Muslim communities. *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, 12(2), 178–198.

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