

Keeping The Faith

What Survivors From Faith
Communities Want Us To Know



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Glossary of terms

BiCC – Back in Control Consultancy

CCR - Coordinated Community Response

Faith and VAWG Coalition – Faith and Violence Against Women and Girls Coalition

LAWRS – Latin American Women's Rights Services

NRPF – No Recourse to Public Funds

Standing Together – Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse

VAWG – Violence Against Women and Girls

Terminology

'By and For' organisations - This report refers to specialist led 'by and for' organisations. A specialist led 'by and for' organisation is one that is led by the same communities that it seeks to serve. e.g. A service for Black and minoritised women affected by domestic violence which is staffed by a board, Director and frontline staff who are themselves representative of Black and minoritised groups.

Faith Leaders – The Coalition uses the term faith leaders in its most inclusive sense. Recognising leaders in faith communities to be formally trained or communally recognised as having credibility and influence. This therefore includes women and young people.

Minoritised – this report uses the term minoritised communities instead of minority communities as we believe these communities have been politically minoritised through the dominant white supremacist framework.

Specialist Services - A specialist service is one whose primary organisational purpose is to address, prevent and tackle domestic violence and abuse, and support the women who have been subjected to abuse as the primary purpose of the service, and is independent from statutory services.

About the Faith and VAWG Coalition



The Faith & VAWG Coalition is a partnership of organisations led by the Faith and Communities Programme at Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse. It seeks to build bridges between members of faith Communities or faith-centric organisations and domestic abuse prevention specialists and organisations within the violence against women and girls' sector.

Co-founding members of the Faith and VAWG Coalition

Forward UK

Jewish Women's Aid

Muslim Youth Helpline

Latin American Women's Rights Service

Respect

Restored

Marwa Belghazi

Nikki Dhillon-Keane

Natalie Collins

Sara Hyde

Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse

SAFE Communities Project

The Faith and VAWG Coalition values

→ We adopt an intersectional feminist perspective that understands violence against women as largely perpetrated by men and rooted in systemic, though not exclusive gender, racial and economic inequality.

→ We are grounded in our expertise and experience as both professionals in the domestic abuse sector and in our lived experience.

→ We believe that faith can contribute to the elimination of VAWG.

→ We believe there is no hierarchy of faith, belief or non-belief. All are equal.

→ We are a safe space created by a diverse range of women with an objective to work against all forms and systems of oppression.

→ We are a non-oppressive coalition that supports and fosters inclusion of all identities and differences.



Executive summary

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ending violence against women and girls sector has been proactively responding to the escalating abuse and the resulting rapidly changing needs of women. Where some strategic gains have been had in highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on women and children being abused by men, the voices and needs of women from faith backgrounds have been conspicuously absent. Many survivors from faith backgrounds have reported that secular specialist services and society, in general, are unable to understand their experiences of abuse, and the barriers to accessing support. Often the unique role religion and spirituality play in their lives and how these manifests in their communities, experiences of abuse and healing is little if understood at all.

Findings

What women of faith want their faith and community leaders to know?

- Faith communities play a unique and vital role in the response to and elimination of domestic abuse and men's violence towards women and girls.
- Faith leaders should be aware that men's abuse is escalating during this pandemic, as factors such as the inability of women to get out of the home and seek support, job loss or furloughing, confinement and home schooling have facilitated an escalation of men's abuse and violence.

What women of faith want the government and Specialist Services to know about how they can be supported and empowered?

- Faith and religion can be sources of comfort for survivors of faith.
- Specialist Services, policy makers, commissioners and funders urgently need to understand the varying manifestation and use of how each or a mix of culture, religious tradition and holy scripture can be used as tools of abuse by perpetrators.
- One of the most important obstacles facing survivors of faith is finding a safe space. Policymakers must support domestic abuse and ending VAWG services that understand the needs of survivors from faith backgrounds.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has made visible the multiple intersections of inequality and discrimination that migrant women face.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a concerning increase in stalking.

Recommendations

- 1.** Local and central government should evidence the value with which they hold 'by and for' organisations and their work by adequately resourcing them and removing barriers to funding.
- 2.** Faith communities including leaders should be seen as allies in the fight against VAWG and domestic abuse.
- 3.** Create and support spaces like the Faith and VAWG Coalition that understand and appreciate the complexity of the relationship between faith and domestic abuse.

Keeping The Faith: What Survivors From Faith Communities Want Us To Know

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of women and girls is increasingly talked about and yet not fully understood. Research has demonstrated that during major health pandemics such as COVID-19, men's violence towards women and girls (VAWG) becomes more severe as men's perpetration escalates and women's insecurities and their vulnerabilities increase (Fraser, 2020).

There are a number of ways that COVID-19, and the measures to manage it, have escalated perpetration. Each abuser's intention (either consciously or subconsciously) is to control and dominate his partner and any children. He will use whatever tools are available to him. COVID-19 has vastly expanded his "abuse toolbox". His tactics to isolate are aided by lockdowns and fears around contracting the virus. This is particularly concerning for disabled women, who are more vulnerable to the virus and are also 40% more likely to be abused by a partner (Brownridge, 2006). COVID-19 does not cause abuse but creates a highly conducive context that will be taken advantage of by abusers. COVID-19 has increased the opportunity men have to abuse in the home (given how much more people are required to stay at home) and has an emboldening effect, in that abusers are not having to modify their behaviour for the workplace, family gatherings or other places.

With the outbreak of the pandemic, the women's sector has been proactively responding to this escalating abuse and the resulting rapidly changing needs of women. However, where some strategic gains have been had in highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on women and children, the voices and needs of women from faith backgrounds have been conspicuously absent.

The context and challenges facing women from faith communities during the COVID-19 pandemic

While no one is immune to COVID-19, structural inequality reproduces disproportionately across diverse communities and exacerbates existing racialised inequalities (Imkaan, 2020). Studies have shown that Black and minoritised women are most likely to suffer disproportionately from the economic fallout, the emotional labour of working from home, home-schooling, domestic tasks, caring responsibilities for children and older relatives. This also includes homelessness, state and intimate partner violence whether it be being on the receiving end of punitive treatment from police enforcing the quite unclear lockdown regulations or from a lack of safety and refuge from perpetrators in their families and communities (Imkaan, 2020).

Research also reveals how Black and minoritised women are particularly impacted in terms of susceptibility to death from the disease or the impact on general health due to administrative delays in the health system and structural barriers to accessing support. A report by the Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre (ICNARC) found that one-third of critically ill people in the UK were from Black and minoritised communities with 13.8% recorded as Asian, 13.6% as Black and 6.6% as other ethnic groups (Khan, 2020). This is also highlighted by CharitySoWhite (2020) who found Black and minoritised groups are over-represented as communities at risk (due to barriers in access to health) and that Black and minoritised women are disproportionately impacted by these health inequalities (Imkaan, 2020).

Whilst state and wider sector support to women and children from Black and minoritised backgrounds pre-pandemic was inadequate save for the dedicated and heroic effort of specialist by and for organisations, women from faith communities have been invisible to the state and society at large. Before COVID-19, the specialist Black and minoritised refuge sector was subjected to decommissioning at disproportionate levels. Just before the outbreak of COVID-19, Women's Aid, reported that 41% of women supported by the 'No Woman Turned Away' project belonged to Black or minoritised groups highlighting that minoritised women faced additional barriers in accessing safe

accommodation (Women's Aid, 2019). This is in line with one-third of specialist refuges for Black and minoritised women being decommissioned since austerity resulting in a reduction of 50% bed space capacity.

The pandemic has further revealed the extent to which women from faith communities and their needs are totally absent from policy responses whether at a governmental level, or the practical responses of the police, NHS, and women-led services. It is for this reason and in recognition of the barriers that operate in society and faith communities that the Faith and VAWG Coalition is outlining the unique way in which life under COVID-19 has impacted some women of faith.

The Coalition recognises that the experiences and needs of women from faith backgrounds are diverse and intersect significantly with race, ethnicity, class, ability, language, immigration status and even denominational belonging. For instance, a White Anglican woman's experiences will be very different to a Black Christian Pentecostal woman. In addition, women's religious modes of worship and religious needs will be varied depending on a number of factors including their denominational traditions, the racial and ethnic profile of their community, the privileges enjoyed and barriers faced by their faith and or racial communities. The contributions to this briefing draw largely on the experiences of women from Black, migrant and minoritised communities. This means that for some women of faith some of the barriers and issues outlined are not fully representative of their lived realities under COVID-19.

The Faith & VAWG Coalition would also like to highlight the vital role played by faith and religious communities throughout the pandemic in responding to the fall out of the unfolding humanitarian crisis. From providing emergency food parcels, organising food and medicine collections, welfare checks, spiritual and pastoral support to the sick, traumatised and isolated, digital forms of communal worship to the counselling and overseeing of funerals and burials, faith communities have provided a safety net and a holding space for those in most need and for those who feel able to make a difference.

What is the Faith & VAWG Coalition?

The Faith & VAWG Coalition is a partnership of organisations led by the Faith and Communities Programme at Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse. It seeks to build bridges between members of faith Communities or faith-centric organisations and domestic abuse prevention specialists and organisations within the violence against women and girls' sector.

The Faith and VAWG Coalition was created following a conference organised by Standing Together in November 2018, which discussed the role of faith communities in responding to domestic abuse and violence against women and girls. There was a need for a professional and strategic space where VAWG specialists and professionals working with faith and cultural contexts can come together. Although the work to end violence against women and girls at a grassroots level is already rich and diverse, this Coalition will allow a more strategic, regular, and structural approach to tackling the issue at hand.

Many women with a faith have found that secular specialist services and society, in general, are unable to understand their experiences of abuse, and the barriers faced in accessing support due to their religious identity, their faith community and the perpetrator's spiritual abuse of them.

Methodology

To uncover the unique challenges and experiences related to COVID-19 for women from faith communities who have been subjected to abuse, this briefing used a mix-methods approach and combined a desk review with a series of interviews and questionnaires of specialists working within by and for organisations.

The following women have been instrumental in contributing to the briefing: Ashiedu Joel, Marwa Belghazi, Natalie Collins, Nikki Dhilion-Keane, Hanan Bibikir, Veronica Simpson (Back in Control Consultancy), Esther Sweetman (Restored), Bekah Legg (Restored) and Gisela Valle (Latin American Women's Rights Service).

Findings

What women of faith want their faith and community leaders to know?

1. The important and unique role played by faith and community leaders

As stated earlier, faith communities have played a vital role in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, they have and some already play a significant role in the elimination of domestic abuse and men's violence towards women and girls. These communities carry the responsibility to protect and nurture the spiritual wellbeing of individuals and the community as a whole. During times of crisis women who are subjected to abuse often turn to faith leaders (whether formally trained or communally recognised) for spiritual guidance and support. This is done, often before or instead of seeking support from secular specialist services. The unique understanding of the role of faith in an individual's life and its power to provide support and resilience explain some of the reasons why women subjected to abuse choose to disclose to leaders and members of their faith community. Similarly, perpetrators may also turn to faith leaders, perhaps either as a means of legitimising their abuse or to seek guidance and support in understanding and changing their behaviour. Faith leaders may be asked, then, to provide spiritual guidance and counselling to both the survivor and the perpetrator. To be done comprehensively and safely this requires faith leaders and community members to not only acknowledge and understand abuse but also to educate themselves and have an awareness of statutory and specialist services that survivors and perpetrators can be referred to. It is therefore important that responses to domestic abuse and violence against women and girls cannot exist without careful attention to the safety of the survivor as well as some form of accountability for the abusive partner which statutory and specialist services have a role in ensuring (VAWnet, 2020).

COVID-19 related restrictions resulted in the shutting of the doors to churches, synagogues, mosques, and places of worship worldwide. Many religious communities swiftly adapted and took faith online (some had already been building online faith communities for many years). For those whose traditional modes of worship

rely on segregation of the sexes, this created new, or growing, space for women to participate in religious congregations. In some Black and minoritised religious communities, women would be excluded from religious congregations either because there was no space for women or there was no childcare provision. However, with the new digital religious spaces created by the pandemic, women from these communities felt more included as there was more ease for women to join online. It also allowed for more flexibility as women could turn off their cameras; do other things while listening in; mute themselves when children made noise. Notably, one important issue raised by our respondents was the added responsibility this placed on the online religious meeting moderators. Given the sensitive nature of issues such as violence against women and girls and domestic abuse, there is a large responsibility placed on faith leaders in charge of the online meetings in ensuring the anonymity of women when they seek advice on sensitive issues.

It is important to note that whilst for many the term religious leader connotes a man in religious garb, the Faith and VAWG Coalition recognises that women have and continue to occupy formal and informal spiritual and religious leadership positions within their communities. This can manifest differently across faith, racial and ethnic communities. Even though these women exist in a patriarchal system, nonetheless one should be careful not to reinforce the patriarchal binary that religious legitimacy and influence can only be held by men.

2. Faith and community leaders must become more literate with regards to domestic abuse and its varied manifestations.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, one of our contributors, Back in Control Consultancy (BiCC), a specialists in Safeguarding and Domestic Violence training has received more domestic abuse-related enquiries, and referrals for specialised support from places of worship than in previous years. Restored, a Faith & VAWG Coalition co-founder, saw a doubling of visitors to their website and their Survivor's Network grew from 150 in March to nearly 250. Notably it took 4 years to grow the network to 150 members and within 6 months of the pandemic demand for membership increased to 250.

Faith leaders need to understand that men's abuse is escalating during COVID-19, with factors such as the inability of women to get out of the home and seek support, job loss or furloughing, confinement and home schooling have facilitated an escalation of men's abuse and violence (Imkaan, 2020).

"Men's perpetration of violence and abuse towards women and children is rooted in their beliefs of ownership and entitlement, this stems from patriarchal ideas of hegemonic masculinity"

Natalie Collins

is threatened (e.g. through job loss, loss of access to male-only social, sports or cultural spaces, being confined within the home that he perceives as a "woman's place" etc), this can lead to his escalation of abusive and dominant behaviour. While alcohol or drug use does not cause abuse, they can lower an abuser's inhibitions leading to more sustained violence and abuse towards his family. Therefore, the only way to address perpetration is to deal with the root issues of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinities.

It is important to engage faith leaders and ask what their understanding of domestic abuse and violence against women are. Leaders need to have conversations about what is often a taboo subject within faith communities that examine the cultural and religious traditions and assumptions that excuse or enable abuse. Religious leaders should be willing to acknowledge that abuse will be perpetrated by men within their community (even by men they know and like) and they need to know the resources available in their community and seek training to use a trauma-informed approach (Ramsey, 2020). Everyone can become more knowledgeable about domestic abuse and trauma-informed care. Religious and community leaders who want to support women and children should take the time to learn about domestic abuse and to ensure their institutions are welcoming and safe places for survivors to report abuse. They can become advocates for ending domestic abuse by creating systems where there are none and partnering with existing specialist organisations that work to end VAWG and domestic abuse (Ramsey, 2020). They must also use their position to challenge notions of male ownership and entitlement over women and children, and advocate for religious understanding which condemns abuse, holds perpetrators to account and believes women and children.

"To leaders in the Christian faith (of which I belong), I say "Be the Christ they see"

Ashiedu Joel

One of the key tactics of an abuser is to isolate their partner. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced this isolation. As a result, families with an abuser have become more insular and hidden away in plain sight of communities, friends, and family. It can be very difficult for anyone to know what an abuser is doing to his family, and COVID-19 measures mean he can

control all communications outside the home, making accountability easier to escape. Most of the time faith and community leaders will not know if someone in their community is being abused, and so significant vigilance is needed, particularly if a woman has disengaged from the community.

If a faith leader is aware that a woman within their community has been subjected to abuse previously, it is crucial that they persevere in maintaining regular contact and seek advice from specialist services. Faith leaders should encourage and support women through the use of religious and cultural texts, traditions, practice, and ritual to ease their trauma and signpost them to specialist support needed for recovery. Men's fatal violence towards women has doubled during COVID-19, and faith communities can be a key resource to helping women and children reach safety before the abuser seriously injures or kills them (The Guardian, 2020).

For women (and their children) who have escaped an abuser, COVID-19 measures may exacerbate previous trauma. This may also be the case for those with other forms of historical trauma, including sexual assault, living in a war zone or being a refugee. For those who have previously been strangled, choked, or otherwise had their airway restricted, mask wearing can be extremely traumatic. For those who have experienced the horror of war or authoritarian regimes, necessary government enforced COVID-19 restrictions can trigger trauma responses. If an abuser has previously made their partner or children paranoid by accusing them of being dirty or filled with germs, the virus may trigger terrible trauma responses. For those who have previously been forced to stay in their home due to an abuser, or as a result of racist or religiously motivated attacks, lockdown restrictions can feel suffocating and triggering. For those who have been emotionally abused, told they were ugly and disgusting, seeing themselves on a screen during Zoom meetings can be deeply painful and difficult.

Faith leaders must take account of these and many other factors for those who are no longer living in situations of threat or trauma. The physiological nature of trauma is not rational and so becoming literate in the science of trauma is crucial, not least because this pandemic

is a collective trauma that the world is currently living with, including religious leaders. Their ability to take care of themselves and others will be hugely enhanced by greater understanding of trauma and recovery. Rebuilding the trust of those who have been abused is crucial and faith leaders should not encourage attempts or facilitate opportunities for the abuser to further victimise or re-traumatise women and children. Faith leaders can talk about domestic abuse and violence against women and girls in their sermons, making clear their desire to help and support; letting everyone know about their efforts to create safe spaces and open non-judgemental access to support.

What seems to be the most important message to faith

"The sanctity of life overrides the sanctity of marriage."

Nikki Dhilion-Keane

leaders is to have a believing attitude to disclosures of abuse. The best way to support women and children is to first and foremost make them feel heard and to be knowledgeable of existing resources in your community. If necessary, support her to leave or tell the husband to leave the house. It may also be possible for faith communities to provide a safe place for women and children to go, indeed properties and premises at the disposal of faith communities have often been used to provide safety and sanctuary. Domestic abuse services and women's centres are trained in a trauma-informed counselling approach, which is the most effective way to support survivors of violence and abuse. Austerity and the impact of COVID-19 has limited the capacity of specialist services to offer support, however faith communities could support these services by asking them how they can enable the crucial work they are doing.

“Faith leaders need to understand that domestic abuse is a safeguarding issue and needs to be dealt with competently.”

Esther Sweetman

justifications in sexual coercion or abuse, or preventing a woman practicing her faith or religious obligations. Faith leaders must always operate from a safety-first approach, while specialist services need to be aware of, and vigilant about the impact of spiritual abuse on women. Importantly, religious leaders should be leading on these types of issues within faith communities since scriptures are often misused to justify the abuse. As abusers often employ faith to manipulate their partners, faith leaders may struggle in gaining trust of those reporting abuse and needing help. Religious and community leaders can counter these harmful practices within their communities by using scripture, faith, and spiritual beliefs to speak out against violence and by supporting survivors when they report abuse. It is also important that wherever possible, women can speak with another woman about pastoral matters. As mentioned earlier, in some faith communities’ women leaders are more visible than others, despite this, faith leaders should make it clear to their congregations and co-religionists that woman-centred support is available.

Domestic abuse is not something to ignore and hope it goes away, whilst there have been initiatives to support safety, faith communities and institutions need robust and comprehensive safeguarding policies, for protecting both children and adults. Learning about spiritual abuse is also important, this may include using religious texts to legitimise abusive behaviour, using a woman’s faith to further abuse her, using theological



What women of faith want the government and Specialist Services to know about how they can be supported and empowered?

1. Faith and religion are a source of comfort for survivors of faith

A woman’s faith can be one of the most precious resources and experiences of belonging in their lives. This becomes even more so in times of crises. Specialist services communicating their understanding of this could transform women’s perceptions of the service, and of feeling emotionally safe and supported. A study conducted in Egypt exploring the psychological effects of the pressures that have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic found that many women reported experiencing depression, sleep disturbances, headaches, high blood pressure or general fatigue.

Crucially women cited the sources of support to be found in their faith and faith communities. Muslim women reported turning to prayer, reading the Quran and supplication, their Christian counterparts mentioned reading the Bible or listening to religious programs to cope with the impact of the pandemic (Centre for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance, 2020). One need only consider how strongly an abuser wants to stop a woman from authentically practicing her faith to realise what a powerful resource faith is for women.

2. Faith and religion can also be used as tools of abuse – the importance of spiritual abuse literacy

Specialist Services, policy makers, commissioners and funders urgently need to understand the varying manifestation and use of how each or a mix of culture, religious tradition and holy scripture can be used as tools of abuse by perpetrators. This means greater literacy on what spiritual abuse is and how it operates is needed. Training and significant research as exemplified by the nested study in Justice, Inequality & Gender Based Violence by Professor Marianne Hester et al are needed to understand the dynamics and impact of spiritual abuse.

In addition, greater investment in building trusting relationships between Specialist Services and faith communities would lead to a more holistic and coordinated response to supporting survivors and holding perpetrators to account. Understanding that for some survivors, separation or leaving a perpetrator(s) is complicated by communities and gatekeepers within them that can at times judge, isolate, and ostracise women who leave an abuser. This can potentially lead to

a change in practice and support that is better tailored to navigate such obstacles. It must also be considered that asking women to separate from the abuser has consequences for separation from the only community or resource of support they have. Their children will also be impacted by the social stigma of coming from a ‘broken’ home where they may be ostracised and isolated from the community immediately and in the future.

For many survivors, particularly for those whose faith institutions are an integral part of their lives, their relationship with the Divine and God is mediated through religious leaders and community elected representatives. Some women have grown up in a culture where the faith leader has ultimate authority. Breaking links with religious leadership or community, for many will feel like they are breaking up with God. For some, it may feel like as a sin and a loss, akin to a grieving process. Specialist Services would provide better support if they are able to understand that nuance.

3. Support domestic abuse services that understand the needs of survivors of faith

One of the most important obstacles facing survivors of faith is finding a safe space. With the outbreak of COVID-19, Imkaan stated in its report “The Impact of the Two Pandemics” that their members noticed weekly increases in need for refuge space among Black and minoritised women as the COVID-19 crisis continues (Imkaan, 2020). This is because many service providers have stopped working with newly referred women because of lack of capacity, they are therefore only able to work with pre-COVID survivors. The ways COVID-19 threatens hegemonic masculinity may lead some men to escalating control in the home, with their partner only just recognising or experiencing his behaviour as abuse. This means there is a lack of support for these women as new victims who have emerged since the pandemic. Government, local commissioners, and funders must support existing organisations that have assisted survivors from faith and minoritised communities.

“For years domestic violence specialists have failed to provide tailored support for survivors from faith groups.”

Veronica Simpson

In response to our briefing, a contributor noted that in the scoping, design and delivery of most (if not all) funded domestic abuse and non by and for violence against women and girls services, there is a significant knowledge gap, expertise and skill in relation to the impact of culture/cultural background, lived experience and faith on the response of the Black (African, Caribbean) Asian and minoritised communities. Furthermore, it was also said that for independent practitioners within the Black African community, there is no designated agency or resource available to survivors of domestic abuse with the competency, experience and understanding of the intricacies and sometimes complex relationships that must be navigated so as to get the support needed to enable the woman to leave safely. Where a knowledge gap is identified, non by and for or white secular led specialist organisations are unwilling to engage professionally with independent practitioners for various reasons such as cost, reputation, trust, etc.

Related to the lack of faith and culturally sensitive service provision and support is a commissioning and tendering process that heavily relies on targets and focuses on “successful” cases. The impact of this on women is multiple but for any woman and child from minoritised communities who may not immediately respond to support that does not take account of language, cultural, caring, and economic needs. Their engagement is classed as ‘failed’ or are blamed for “not willing to engage”. These women, children (and men) are already severely disadvantaged and marginalised by structural barriers in wider society and have been failed by a system that continues to reinforce discrimination, finding that specialist services replicate this kind of violence really leaves many isolated and vulnerable. Similarly, support that centres the religious and spiritual needs of White Christian women subjected to abuse is rare, meaning that for such a woman a holistic environment is still lacking.

4. The pandemic has made visible the multiple intersections of inequality and discrimination that migrant women face

In response to our briefing, a contributor noted that for those working with migrant women, COVID-19 has not revealed anything they did not already know. In their recent paper, Imkaan members reported that women eligible for government support were turned away from refuges without an assessment of their situation including a specific case in the North of England where a woman was turned down by four refuges as she had no recourse to public funds. In another recent case, a woman with no recourse to public funds was turned away by housing even though the abuser was designated high risk on the DASH risk assessment. Whilst another Imkaan member reported that in 70% of cases women had been mistakenly refused access to services as having No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) (Imkaan, 2020).

Organisations such as the Latin American Women’s Rights Service (LAWRS) have been raising awareness of the precarious working conditions and barriers to services faced by migrant women for decades. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the response from the government with regards to the issues affecting migrant women has been non-existent. Instead, local, and national authorities have adopted a fragmented approach to COVID, with issues around health, employment, housing, benefits, and No Recourse to Public Funds being treated separately and in silos. For many migrant communities, these issues are all interlinked. For example, statistics such as Black and minoritised communities having higher infection rates and worse clinical outcomes are not surprising if one considers the overcrowded accommodations in which many within these communities’ dwell. In such settings, one person becoming ill can lead to all in the crowded household becoming infected illustrating the inextricable link between health and housing. What COVID-19 has done is make visible the intersectional hardships migrant women endure which includes domestic abuse, poor access to healthcare, housing issues, precarious working and living conditions.

“It is not about finding anything new because we already knew that the hostile environment means that the focus of any statutory service will go through immigration agencies first. What COVID 19 has simply done is bring all this to the forefront”

Gisela Valle

Many people have and continue to suffer the impact of the pandemic. Migrant communities being one of the most marginalised have been left by government and statutory services to fend for themselves. Little to no, policy and resources has focused on addressing the needs of migrants during this pandemic. This has meant that the burden of support has been placed on already stretched charities such as LAWRS. For example, local authorities in London stopped providing any translation services as the pandemic took hold. LAWRS staff had to work additional hours translating materials related to health, employment, and domestic abuse services. At the same time LAWRS was engaging with the government highlighting the gaps in its reach and messaging to communities.

Employment rights violations rose dramatically during the pandemic and have uniquely affected migrants and in particular migrant women. As the government was in crisis itself, some employers took matters into their own hands. Whilst the government funded furlough scheme was seen to provide much needed short-term security, policymakers did not consider the impact of the furlough scheme on migrant communities with precarious working conditions. In effect the furlough scheme allowed the government to abdicate responsibility for women with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). LAWRS found that given the nature of the work they do, many migrant women in cleaning and hospitality industries are subject to exploitation and the furlough scheme did not prevent this. Lack of government literacy on the impact for those with NRPF status was evidenced when Prime Minister Boris Johnson was questioned about this by a parliamentary committee in May 2020. When asked by an MP how his local constituents with no recourse to public funding could survive without work or tax credit support, Johnson seemed completely unaware that having no recourse to public funds means no access to welfare systems (The Independent, 2020).

As industries heavily reliant on outsourcing, many migrant women are employed by at least two agencies at once, however many migrant women were only furloughed on a single contract which for many would mean as little as two hours a week on the minimum wage. As

such, not working during this pandemic was not an option for many migrant women. Crucially, 6 months into the pandemic, LAWRS began receiving serious cases of labour exploitation for domestic workers such as being underpaid, being refused pay or unlawful termination of contracts. These women were often living with their employers with nowhere else to go and did not receive their final payment. Awareness of the plight of migrant women in employment and domestic labour has been poor. More needs to be done to shine a light on the suffering and injustice they face.

In addition, as many migrant women who are subjected to domestic abuse or other forms of gender-based violence do not have recourse to public funds, this forces them to decide between their safety on one hand or destitution and homelessness on the other. In many cases due to their precarious living and working conditions, migrant women who have been subjected to abuse have no other option but to return to their perpetrators. And in some cases, after years of having escaped to safety as they cannot support themselves and their children in any other way.

5. The pandemic has led to a concerning increase in stalking

“A lot of women have raised concerns over cyber stalking which needs to be taken more seriously”

Hanan Bibikir

The pandemic has created a paradox when considering safety in the home, but it is important to recognise the dangers this presents to many victims of stalking. Whilst lockdown measures might appear to have made victims less accessible to stalking, early evidence from one study suggests that their vulnerability has increased. Technology has helped to facilitate stalking behaviours

by providing new approaches to control, humiliate, threaten, and isolate their victims. Some lockdown restrictions have provided increased opportunities for stalkers to monitor their victims and the professional uncertainty and recognition around stalking has continued, coupled with delays in the criminal justice system, resulting in increased vulnerability and heightened risk for women targeted by stalkers. The COVID-19 crisis has reversed gains made by stalking victims and has kept some in their homes making their whereabouts easier to monitor. Additionally, the pandemic has impacted the form and frequency of stalking behaviours. Factors such as the loss of employment, working from home or being furloughed increases perpetrators' time and capacity to modify and/or escalate their stalking behaviour. Effective practice, policy and legal responses are required for both the victims and perpetrators of stalking during the pandemic and afterwards (Bracewell et al, 2020)



Conclusions – Coronavirus: Chaos and Contradictions

Since the start of lockdown restrictions in England and Wales in March 2020 there have been numerous major religious events in the calendar of the major religious communities in the UK including Easter, Ramadan, Eid Al-Adha, Purim, Passover and Diwali. In all these occasions women play a central role in ensuring the spiritual preparations for the festivities but also the practical necessities needed for the rituals to be performed. Paradoxically this positions women as powerful and significant agents in the heart of the faith community but also increases their vulnerability to being pressured and coerced by men. Many abusers will deliberately seek to ruin special occasions, to show their partner and children that they are in control and can destroy whatever is precious to the woman. After significant effort and preparation, and while treading on eggshells to try and keep the abuser happy, he will then destroy those special times to further hurt and abuse her. Pre-COVID-19, women would be able to join in with others and in community for significant religious events, thereby ensuring they had some respite, and precious safe space. During COVID-19 stay at home restrictions however, abusers can destroy these dearly held practices and rituals, further hurting their partner and children, and isolating them from their communal support networks.

The experiences of survivors of faith have seldom been present in the wider response to COVID-19 and this is concerning as the impact of this pandemic has been gendered and intersectional. To fully understand the impact of COVID-19 on survivors from faith backgrounds, there is a need for disaggregated data to inform policy. The lack of such data fails to identify the scope and scale of the problem, hiding the racial, gendered, and intersectional impact of the pandemic. Where this invisibilisation continues, Black and minoritised women will fail to be recognised in responses by the government to address the crisis deepening the sense of systemic discrimination and exclusion that occurs (Imkaan, 2020).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had multiple and varied consequences on survivors from faith communities especially those from migrant, Black and minoritised groups. In most cases the pandemic has exacerbated already existing inequalities as the inability to leave the home and seek support has emboldened men and increased opportunities to abuse. Where they can, men have escalated their abuse and violence towards women and children.

The Coronavirus COVID-19 2020 Act calls for increased policing to address the challenges imposed by the coronavirus such as reinforcing restrictive measures. This has had a disproportionate impact on Black, migrant and minoritised communities. This is due to emergency policing measures continuing to target specific communities and deploy pre-existing racialised dynamics which are normalised by new emergency legislation. The hostile environment and barriers in accessing services meant some women in need of housing support fell off the radar and were exposed to unintended consequences such as sexual violence, coerced into prostitution, exploitation, and being trafficked (Imkaan, 2020)

Nonetheless, COVID-19 was a space of contradictions as it also created opportunities for marginalised women. The pandemic revised the taken for granted status quo as some of the previous patriarchal rules that excluded women were turned upside down. This was illustrated best by the opportunities presented by the online presence of religious congregations because of the lockdown. In many religious congregations where segregation between the sexes is practiced, women were not only able to attend communal worship for the first time, and for some they were in the same virtual 'rooms' and spaces to the men. They were also at times visible to their male counterparts. This enabled some women of faith to 'transgress' taboo subjects and become more visible in spaces where they were previously excluded. In doing so, the pandemic allowed for the disruption

of social norms and created the possibility for change as previously accepted norms such as the exclusion of women from religious spaces can be overcome. This will undoubtedly have important ramifications for future dynamics of power and privilege in religious spaces.

The pandemic also created an important space which has centred religious leadership. As the President of the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly H.E. Tijjani Muhammad Bande noted, faith-based organisations and religious leaders play a crucial role in times of crisis. They are frequently in positions to advocate for social and legal change. They use their moral authority to advocate for the empowerment of women, access to education and health facilities. Therefore, it is crucial that religious leaders (particularly men) understand the important role that they play in both upholding of the exclusionary and patriarchal order and the progressing of many positive changes during the pandemic that has led to increased women's participation, space for action and their influential role in their communities. This will undoubtedly have consequences for the ways in which religious leaders deal with and combat men's violence towards women and girls in their communities.

Recommendations

The Faith and VAWG Coalition with the contribution of expert practitioners working at the intersections of feminism, VAWG, race and religion, have identified a number of trends, gaps and areas of support that will enable greater safety and 'space for action' for survivors. These are:

1.

The government must support and fund 'by and for' organisations.

The engagement of national and local government with specialist services and women's groups to formulate an appropriate response to the COVID-19 pandemic has provided another opportunity to highlight and raise awareness of the vital role organisations led, created by and for minoritised and faith communities make to the lives of women, children and communities. It is important for local and central government to evidence the value with which they hold 'by and for' organisations and their work by adequately resourcing them and removing barriers to funding. Only then will vulnerable people within faith communities stop feeling overlooked and start feeling supported.

2.

Faith leaders can be seen as allies in the fight against VAWG and domestic abuse

Faith communities provide an incredible network to reach vulnerable women and children. Engaging and resourcing faith leaders in the fight against men's violence towards women and girls should not be limited to one-off campaigns or projects. Instead it can be part of a wider long term holistic preventative strategy to support survivors and end men's violence. This requires the formation of trusting and lasting relationships with communities including but not limited to faith leaders who can be trained to respond appropriately and hold perpetrators to account. They can duly reciprocate learning on spiritual abuse, its manifestations, and strategies to effectively intervene and support women subjected to abuse and harm. When faith leaders and communities are better equipped to practice perpetrator accountability, in addition to those of survivor safety and empowerment, they are better able to create a response that meets the needs of women and their communities as well as contribute to attitudinal change that does not see abuse and misogyny as inevitable or something practised by few outside the fold of the community.

3.

Create and support spaces like the Faith and VAWG Coalition that understand and appreciate the complexity of the relationship between faith and violence against women and girls.

Spaces such as the Faith and VAWG Coalition will allow for the strengthening of the work already being done, sharing best practice, strengths, and weaknesses, and spreading more awareness within the sector, society and communities about the specialist services available. This also enables independent practitioners working at specialist intersections of faith, feminism, ending male violence towards women, race, and ethnicity to have a network and conduit to share findings and emerging trends. This will also enable them to contribute to the calls for change in both governmental and sector approach to domestic abuse. The Coalition would offer a two-way contributory learning and partnership opportunity allowing faith communities to become more literate in the fight against violence against women and girls and the government and specialist services to become faith literate, more proficient at understanding the needs of survivors from faith communities and adapting their interventions to support the process of healing and empowerment.

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