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## In this issue

The true cost of funding specialist services

Faith and spiritual abuse: the search for justice

Exploring the impact of the 'two-child limit'

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# Faith, spiritual abuse and the search for justice

In the December 2018 issue of *Safe*, Marianne Hester and Sarah-Jane Lilley reported on the findings of the Justice, Inequality and Gender-based Violence Project,<sup>1</sup> which explored what 'justice' means to survivors of domestic abuse. Here, Hilary Abrahams, Nadia Aghtaie and Natasha Mulvihill reflect on findings from the project which revealed a hidden aspect of justice: the additional barriers to recognition of abuse and disclosure faced by women of faith, and the impact of spiritual abuse.

**By Dr Hilary Abrahams, Dr Nadia Aghtaie and Dr Natasha Mulvihill, Centre for Gender and Violence Research, University of Bristol**

## The importance of faith

Faith and spiritual beliefs are not often talked about, but for many individuals in the UK, faith and their faith community are a vital part of their lives. The women who spoke to us, who identified themselves as belonging to a faith community, were very clear as to the importance of their beliefs; regular attendance at a place of worship, keeping festivals, and maintaining their faith and cultural traditions – both at home and within the community – were a key part of their identity. For those who were deeply observant, spirituality permeated every aspect of their lives. Women can draw huge amounts of strength and comfort from their spiritual beliefs, especially when they are subject to abusive behaviour. Yet women of faith may well face additional pressures from their abusers, and from faith communities and religious figures. These pressures can result in greater difficulties in recognising and disclosing abuse, and a burden of guilt and shame which may follow them for the rest of their lives. We spoke to women from many faiths, including Sikhism, the Bahá'í Faith, and Hinduism, but in trying to understand this predicament we have looked especially at the three great monotheistic religions; Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

## The problem of patriarchy

In these three faiths, the central religious texts are patriarchal in nature, placing a male as the head of the household and the controlling guardian of all its members. Submission to this control can be seen as a religious duty and, in some interpretations, can be seen as permitting physical chastisement for disobedience. In an abusive relationship, this control sits alongside other types of abuse and, in fact, can exacerbate it, because submission can be framed as a religious duty. When this control extends to aspects of a woman's spiritual life, it is all the more damaging, because it strikes at her core identity as a woman of faith and her sense of autonomy. We see this as spiritual abuse, an immensely powerful form of emotional abuse.

## What is spiritual abuse?

'Spiritual abuse is coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context.'<sup>2</sup> This might include deriding a woman's religious beliefs, denying her the time to pray or fast at appropriate times, or forcing her to transgress deeply held religious tenets. Or there might be an insistence on obsessive observance on every aspect of ritual. Scriptural texts may be used/misused to demand obedience and reinforce the perpetrator's

entitlement to headship. In all three faiths, the family is regarded as sacrosanct – a place apart and private, and not for public discussion. There is pressure for silence and secrecy, which may lead to a growing isolation from those outside the immediate family and even within the faith community.

### The role of faith leaders

Women may well seek the advice and guidance of their imam, rabbi, pastor or priest where domestic abuse is causing problems within their relationship. Guidance which is unhelpful (for example, telling women that the violence is their fault for not obeying their husband, that they should submit to what is happening, suffer the abuse gladly, or forgive him for his actions) can be seen as yet another form of spiritual abuse, one with greater impact as it comes from a figure seen as having spiritual authority. This adds to feelings of shame and guilt at defying what she has been told is her religious duty, making it even more difficult both to disclose the abuse and to seek help. It is only fair to say that senior faith leaders throughout the UK have roundly condemned domestic abuse, but this understanding may not always be shared at grassroots level, and religious texts are open to individual interpretation.

### The faith community

The attitude of the faith community is of vital importance to women experiencing domestic violence and abuse. Some communities can be intensely helpful, but others may feel that disclosing abuse discredits the community and can bring unwelcome publicity, shame and dishonour upon them. If the perpetrator is influential in the community, this can also influence the community attitude. An unsupportive faith community, coupled with poor advice from a local faith leader, can exert what we have described as *structural* spiritual abuse, placing pressure on the woman to stay in the relationship. In this structural context, taking the decision to leave may run the risk of losing their place in the community, their religious identity and might affect the future prospects of their children.

A further factor to be taken into account is the apparent distrust of secular agencies. Jewish and Muslim women (and some Catholic women) we spoke to feared that secular agencies would not understand their faith and its importance, nor the nature and impact of abuse, especially spiritual abuse. They were happier dealing with agencies which shared - or indicated they understood - their beliefs, and respected them.

For women of faith, then, barriers to recognising abuse and taking action are those that affect all abused women, but also include powerful constraints relating to the interpretation of religious tenets. These include the assumption of male headship and the concept of the sacrosanct and private family. Taking all these aspects together, not only is it hard to leave, but there is corresponding pressure to stay.

### The search for justice

As the Justice Project found, justice, for survivors of domestic abuse, can be seen as a multi-layered and complex concept. It involves being treated with fairness and respect. It requires the voices of survivors to be heard and their experience recognised, believed and validated. It means that they and their children are able to live in peace in their community, free from fear and harassment. A secular justice would include recognition of the damage caused by the abuse by both the perpetrator and the community, and would be fair and effective. Women of faith want all this, but also they want, at a deeper level of faith and spirituality, to continue to be accepted by, and play a full part in, the faith community. They want to be able to live in accordance with the culture and traditions of their religion and practice their faith in association with others. For the majority of the women who spoke to us, a further and crucial element of justice at this level would include terminating their marriage in their religious tradition and in the eyes of their community. This would validate their decision to leave and maintain their status and respect within the community, freeing them to move on with their lives with the blessing of their faith and remarry in that tradition, if they so wished.

### Religious justice

While there is no clear pathway to religious justice in the Protestant tradition of Christianity, for Catholic, Jewish and Muslim women, there are specific tribunals addressing this need. In this article it is only possible to provide a brief outline of their operation, but it is a complex issue with many aspects which are widely debated amongst feminist activists.

For Catholic women, divorce is not a possibility; marriages can only be annulled and declared invalid on specific grounds by matrimonial tribunals in each diocese. This might be termed 'doctrinal' justice, but perhaps more important

to women is the role of the local priest in ensuring 'pastoral' justice, which can enable women to participate fully in the life of the faith community. As discussed earlier, the approach of the local faith leader may vary, but Pope Francis has called on clergy to look for ways to be inclusive.

For Jewish women, divorce can only be by mutual consent, ratified by a Beth Din – a body dealing with all aspects of Jewish law, of which there are nine within the UK, each with their own jurisdiction and views. Pressure on the husband to agree to a divorce can be exerted by the community or, in the Reform tradition, refusal can be overruled and a divorce agreed. If consent is refused, a woman becomes agunah, which means she is 'chained' to her marriage, unable to move on with her life or remarry within her faith. This refusal can be seen as yet another means of spiritually abusing a partner.

For Muslim women, divorces are granted by sharia councils, of which there are about 30 major ones in the United Kingdom. It is possible for a divorce to be granted even if the husband does not consent. Each application is judged by a panel of Islamic scholars who use their own interpretation of religious texts, meaning that there may be a lack of consistency and a possibility of bias. Refusal to grant a divorce means that, as with Jewish women, she is trapped in the situation and unable to move on, although she can apply to another sharia council. It should be noted that women who have been married in the UK only under sharia law have no other recourse to secular law. Women married in countries where sharia law is recognised, but who are living in the UK, do. There is fierce debate amongst Muslim women activists as to the validity, transparency and accountability among these councils.

These tribunals<sup>3</sup> can be hard to negotiate and it is sometimes impossible to achieve an acceptable, equitable outcome. The barriers that women face in trying to obtain religious justice may well be regarded as structural spiritual abuse perpetuated by a religious hierarchy. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these systems, although flawed, do sometimes offer the possibility of religious justice, enabling women to feel that their decision to leave an abusive relationship has been validated by religious authorities.

## Doubts and conflicts

Yet for women of faith, and particularly for those unable to achieve religious justice, doubts and conflicts can still remain after leaving. On the one

hand there is the guilt and shame of defying what has been perceived as religious duty and breaching the protected nature of the family. On the other hand, there are teachings from the same texts on the importance of forgiveness, compassion, redemption and mercy. Trying to reconcile these two concepts after the experience of domestic abuse can be painful and difficult for women of faith and it can be exacerbated by comments from religious leaders and the attitude from the faith community. In addition, for many of the women that we spoke to, there was an understanding that earthly justice can only ever be partial and that it is fundamentally a spiritual concept. In this view, justice can never be seen as political and achievable under mortal jurisdiction; rather it would be seen as spiritually based, coming from a divine source and perhaps only achievable in an afterlife.

## Conclusions

Faith and spirituality can provide strength and comfort to women, but some interpretations of religious teachings can also lead to spiritual abuse and be used to justify other forms of domestic abuse, since submission to male control can be portrayed as a religious duty. This, together with the pressure to protect the privacy of the family can result in problems in acknowledging and disclosing abuse and be a barrier to leaving. There has also been reluctance on the part of many women of faith to approach secular agencies, fearing that they may not fully comprehend the importance of faith to them, or the impact of spiritual abuse. A greater understanding and appreciation of the impact of abuse on women of faith and their specific needs is now beginning to emerge within society as a whole, and the attitude of faith leaders and the faith community can play a key role in promoting this understanding.

## Notes

1 A detailed account of the justice project and its findings can be found at: [https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/en/projects/justice-inequality-and-gender-based-violence\(49bc49cc-1db3-4675-b2ed-94a46555a0e9\).html](https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/en/projects/justice-inequality-and-gender-based-violence(49bc49cc-1db3-4675-b2ed-94a46555a0e9).html)

2 Oakley, L. and Kinmond, K. 2013. *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse*, Basingstoke; Palgrave MacMillan.

3 This is further discussed in Abrahams, H. Aghtaie, N. and Mulvihill, N. 'Defining and Enabling 'Justice' for Victims/Survivors of Domestic Violence and Abuse: The Views of Practitioners Working within Muslim, Jewish and Catholic Faiths,' (2019 to be published - submitted to the *Journal of Religion and Gender* and under peer review.)