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UK victim-survivor experiences of intimate partner spiritual abuse and religious coercive control and implications for practice

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Abstract

This study extends existing scholarship on coercive control within an intimate relationship by exploring how some perpetrators use spiritual abuse as part of their control repertoire and how others harness belief and doctrine to exercise a totalising 'religious coercive control' over their victims. The analysis in this article draws on two multi-faith datasets: secondary data analysis of 27 semi-structured interviews and primary data collected through an online anonymous survey eliciting 24 qualitative responses, supplemented by 4 follow-up interviews with victim-survivors. Thematic analysis demonstrates the experience and longer-term impact of coercive control on victim-survivors and the barriers to help-seeking, including complicity at familial, community and leadership levels. We articulate their recommendations for change within places of worship and the implications for criminal justice practitioners.

Keywords

Coercive control, domestic abuse, faith, religion, spiritual abuse

Introduction

This study extends existing scholarship on coercive control within an intimate relationship by exploring how some perpetrators use spiritual abuse as part of their control repertoire and how others harness belief and doctrine to exercise a totalising religious coercive control (Sharp, 2014) over their victims. While there is a well-established

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literature in the United States on domestic abuse and faith, particularly within Christian communities, UK-based research is still emerging (Barnes and Aune, 2021; Oakley and Kinmond, 2013). The analysis in this article draws on two multi-faith datasets: secondary data analysis of 27 semi-structured interviews conducted over 2016–2017 and primary data collected through an online anonymous survey in 2021 eliciting 24 qualitative responses, supplemented by 4 follow-up interviews with victim-survivors. Thematic analysis demonstrates the experience and longer-term impact of coercive control on victim-survivors in a faith context and the barriers to help-seeking, including complicity at familial, community and leadership levels. We articulate their recommendations for change within places of worship and the implications for criminal justice practitioners.

Coercive control

In the context of an intimate partner relationship, coercive control describes a pattern of behaviours by the perpetrator, which cumulatively undermines the personhood and restricts the freedom of their victim (Stark, 2007; Tadros, 2004). These behaviours may include physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and/or financial abuse and threats as well as monitoring through stalking, harassment and tracking the victim's movements online. To consolidate their control, perpetrators may seek to isolate their victims from family, friendship and work colleague networks and leverage children, companion animals, cherished objects or activities, to intimidate and punish their victims. Daily life with perpetrators is characterised commonly by fear, unpredictability and intermittent positive episodes, which can in turn lead the victim to self-doubt and confusion about their experience overall. Williamson (2010: 1415) describes how over time victims 'internalize the controls placed on them such that they seek to anticipate and avoid' their perpetrator's abuse. Stark (2007: 205) identifies how coercive control leads to a 'condition of unfreedom', which he terms 'entrapment'.

Stark describes coercive control as a tool perpetrated by men against women. In this way, his work sits in a tradition of feminist scholarship which identifies the subordination of women within patriarchal societies as the primary facilitator for gendered violence and abuse (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Hanmer and Saunders, 1984; Hester, 1992; Kelly, 1988). His work draws directly and indirectly on studies of trauma (Herman, 1997) and on collective and individual coercive persuasion within totalitarian (Arendt, 1973) and cult contexts (Hassan, 2015; Stein, 2016; Thaler Singer, 2003). Further research has explored the operation of coercive control in same-sex relationships (Donovan and Hester, 2014; Frankland and Brown, 2014), its impact on children (Callaghan et al., 2018) and its use by groups, such as street gangs (Harvard et al., 2021).

The work of Stark and others explicitly informed the development of Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 in England and Wales. This legislation makes controlling or coercive behaviour within an intimate or familial relationship a criminal offence. The law requires that the behaviour should occur on at least two occasions between connected individuals and have a serious effect on the victim. In a review of media reports in the 3 years following the introduction of the offence, McGorry and McMahon (2019) found that police and Crown prosecutors were successfully identifying, connecting and pursuing relevant cases, although they queried whether the high guilty plea rate (73% in

the cases they analysed) may be due to the most severe cases making it to court, consistent with the requirement to evidence ‘serious effect on the victim’. Barlow et al.’s (2020: 167) research on implementation of Section 76 in the North East of England suggests that police can struggle to ‘evidence patterned abusive behaviour’, but believe this could be addressed through increased training and resource.

Revisiting the concept in 2018, Stark and Hester remind us that coercive control is not just a form of psychological abuse. For example, persistently presenting insults as a ‘joke’ can be a form of psychological abuse (SafeLives, 2019), which may be experienced as distressing by the victim: but it does not necessarily lead to feelings of unfreedom or coercion. Rather, coercive control is an assemblage strategy, harnessing a tailored mix of one or more of physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, financial or other abuse, to confine the victim within the perpetrator’s universe. It is notable that neither this list, taken from Domestic Abuse Act (2021, Section 1.3), nor the 2015 statutory guidance or the 2021 review of Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 (Home Office 2015; 2021), make specific mention of ‘spiritual abuse’ or of coercive control in a religious context.

Spiritual abuse

‘Spiritual abuse’ is a contested term. It evolved as a concept both before (Johnson and VanVonderen, 1991) and after (Langberg, 2020) Stark’s (2007) publication, and it has developed both within and between domestic abuse scholarship and studies of religion. Evidence for controlling and coercive behaviours (even if not specifically articulated as such) can be found in studies of domestic abuse and Christianity (Bent-Goodley and Fowler, 2006; Knickmeyer et al., 2010; Nash and Hesterberg, 2009; Nason-Clark, 2004), Islam (Ghafournia, 2017) and Judaism (Dehan and Levi, 2009; Ringel and Bina, 2007; Starr, 2017). Such studies recognise how patriarchal relations are reinforced within the relevant holy texts and practices of these three Abrahamic faiths. This can compound gendered authority with religious authority (Ammons, 1999; Raday, 2012). Studies into faith leaders’ attitudes towards domestic abuse (Aghtaie et al., 2020; Dyer, 2010; Levitt and Ware, 2006) suggest the issue is not always well understood or sufficiently challenged – what Houston-Kolnik et al. (2019) describe as a ‘holy hush’. Yet faith leaders are commonly an early confidant for women of faith (Neergaard et al., 2007; Pyles, 2007; Rotunda et al., 2004; Shannon-Lewy and Dull, 2005). This has motivated practical initiatives to address faith leader knowledge and ensure women’s disclosures are handled sensitively and safely (Church of England, 2021; Faith Action, 2015; le Roux et al., 2016; Petersen, 2016). Rebecca Barnes and Kristin Aune (2018, 2021) surveyed churchgoers in Cumbria in the North West of England to assess experience, knowledge and church responses to domestic abuse. Only a small number of their respondents reported that their church was very active on the issue (Aune and Barnes, 2018: 58).

The spiritual abuse literature, as distinct from the ‘domestic abuse and religion’ literature, tends to focus on abusive leaders or dysfunctional and harmful dynamics within faith communities (Johnson, 2018; Ward, 2011). This includes where faith leaders, staff or groups within faith-practising communities leverage doctrine and religious authority to manipulate, domineer, isolate and silence, and this can extend to the treatment of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) victims or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender

(LGBT) congregants (Wood and Conley, 2013). It can relate in addition to historic and ongoing cases of physical and sexual abuse within churches and church institutions (Benkert and Doyle, 2009; Bogen et al., 2022). A small literature also exists exploring faith and spirituality as a resource in coping and recovery from domestic abuse (Davis-Weir, 2015; Gillum et al., 2006; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003). To date, both the research on domestic abuse and religion and on spiritual abuse is written mainly by American researchers and relates predominantly to Christian settings.

Spiritual abuse and religious coercive control in the United Kingdom

Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond have led the UK contribution on spiritual abuse over the past two decades. Working from the discipline of psychology, Oakley developed the following working definition:

Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging effect on those who experience it. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship and decision-making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism. (Oakley, 2018: n.p.)

This description of spiritual abuse raises three questions in relation to the 'secular' intimate partner coercive control literature. First, Oakley's definition identifies spiritual abuse both as a form of emotional and psychological abuse *and* as employed systematically, consistent with Stark's definition of coercive control. However, by conflating both the tool (spiritual abuse) and its use (coercive control), it is possible that this definition does not adequately distinguish (a) domestic abuse experiences where spiritual abuse is one among other strategies within the perpetrator's repertoire of control and (b) experiences where a distorted narrative of religion underpins all aspects of the perpetrator's coercive behaviour.

Second, contemporary understandings of 'spirituality' and 'religion' are contested, but it could be argued that spirituality connotes an individual's conscious, holistic and self-transcendent (Schneiders, 2003) relationship with 'everything that is' (Van Ness, 1996: 5) or with the divine, and religion may be understood as a tradition or institution, linked to culture (Schneiders, 2003). It may then be helpful theoretically and practically to distinguish the victim's experience of spiritual abuse as an attack on their *spiritual* belief and practice, from the perpetrator's exercise of *religious* coercive control, since such control is commonly exercised in relation to a particular tradition or institution (e.g. Orthodox Judaism or Roman Catholicism). In his US study of women's resistance strategies, Sharp (2014) uses the term 'religious coercive control' to describe the weaponization of 'subjectively important religious beliefs, values, and doctrines' (p. 1409) by perpetrators to coerce their intimate partners, and this is a term we adopt in this article.

Finally, the spiritual abuse literature foregrounds the role and significance of the faith community and leaders. This suggests that the exercise of religious coercive control within intimate relationships cannot be understood without reference to that wider community. This leadership and community are likely to be both witnesses to the coercive control and the first place where a victim seeks help. Significantly, they embody the religious authority which the perpetrator seeks to exploit. The leadership and community can therefore be complicit in victimisation by their action or inaction. By providing a positive and proactive response to victims, faith leaders and communities can be an effective part of the ‘web of accountability’, identified by Spencer (2016) as necessary for a society-wide approach to abused women.

In this article, we seek to explore the lived experiences of coercive control drawing on firsthand victim and witness accounts of abusive intimate partner relationships across Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Buddhist faith contexts in the United Kingdom. Specifically, we examine the experience and impact of (a) spiritual abuse as one of the tools used by perpetrators in their control repertoire and (b) religious coercive control, where a distorted narrative of religion underpins all aspects of the perpetrator’s coercive behaviour. We review also the barriers and facilitators for victims securing support.

Data collection

Our method combined both secondary data analysis and primary data collection. For the secondary data analysis, we re-visited thematic coding summaries compiled as part of the Justice, Inequalities and Gender Based Violence project¹ (2015–2018, hereafter ‘Justice Project’), on which the paper authors were researchers. While the focus of that project was experiences of justice in relation to gender-based violence broadly, we identified 59 out of 251 semi-structured interviews conducted for that research as relating to issues of faith, and 27 interviews within those 59 relating specifically to intimate partner violence, including coercive control. To access further individuals who self-identified as experiencing coercive control in a faith context, we designed and circulated online a questionnaire soliciting both demographic and in-depth qualitative questions.² This is a method that the paper authors have used to good effect in previous research to access harder to reach groups who may want to contribute anonymously (Hester et al., 2019). We also offered the option of a follow-up semi-structured interview, online or by phone. The draft survey was consulted on with a group working on faith and gender-based violence, before release. The research received ethical approval from a University of Bristol Ethics Committee.

The survey link was open for 8 weeks and promoted in social media and sent also by email to almost a hundred individuals and organisations involved in the Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Ba’hai faith, as well as different denominational groups within the Christian church (Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Quaker, Presbyterian, United Reformed, etc.) and groups working nationally with domestic abuse survivors. We asked people to respond if they had experienced or witnessed coercive control within a faith context and gave a broad range of examples. The survey was prefaced with information about the research and consent statements. At the close of the survey were links to organisations providing wellbeing support.

Participant characteristics

As described above, the Justice Project provided data for 27 participants. Participants were accessed through nongovernmental organisation (NGO) gatekeepers and other stakeholders that we targeted directly in order to seek wide representation. Interviews were semi-structured, although opened with a structured section eliciting demographic information and ‘yes/no’ answers on a range of gender-based violence experiences and justice routes. These were conducted either face-to-face, on the phone or using secure online video conferencing during 2016–2017. Participants were asked prior to arranging an interview to confirm that it was safe for them to do so and that their email was secure. Sources of support were signposted in interviews, and participants were reminded that they could stop or withdraw at any time, although none did. Interviews were transcribed by the interviewer or by a contracted third party, anonymised and archived. The profile of these participants was as follows:

- 25 identified as female, 2 as male;
- 23 as heterosexual, 1 as bisexual, 1 as lesbian, 1 as gay;
- 13 described themselves as White British or White European; 10 as Asian British; 2 as Black African and 1 as Arab;
- 13 participants described their experience of abuse in relation to Islam, 10 to Christianity, 2 to Judaism, 1 to Buddhism; 1 to Sikhism.

It is worth noting that the Justice Project initially included a ‘nested project’ looking at the experience of Muslim victim-survivors of domestic abuse seeking justice through Sharia Councils. This accounts for the relatively high proportion of Muslim participants in the sample, relative to the other faiths and to the religious profile of the general UK population. In the UK 2011 Census, 59% of the population reported as ‘Christian’, 5% as ‘Muslim’ and 25% said they had ‘no religion’. Active worship levels, however, are likely to be significantly below religious identity or perceived religious alignment.

The survey, carried out in 2021, had 56 completed responses after excluding duplicates and excluding responses where consent was provided to access the questions but no answers were provided. Seven provided demographic information only and gave details for interview but did not respond to follow-up contact. One response gave a general opinion on the topic, rather than writing as a victim or witness. Eight responses provided demographics and some information on their experience, but insufficient for the qualitative analysis in this article.

Therefore, 40 responses provided detailed answers within the survey and/or in a follow-up interview. Interviews were offered where participants indicated in the survey that they would like to discuss further in person and provided a contact email. The researchers contacted 13 individuals by email for a follow-up interview and sent one further reminder: 7 responded. The seven interviews carried out were semi-structured, conducted using secure online video meeting and recording software and lasted around 40 minutes to an hour. Participants were asked prior to arranging an interview to confirm that it was safe for them to do so and that their email was secure. Sources of support were signposted in interviews and participants reminded that they could stop or withdraw at

any time, although none did. They were each recorded, transcribed by the interviewer and anonymised ready for analysis. Of this group of 40 participants, 5 have experienced coercive control in what they described as a coercive community or cult context, 6 by faith leaders (who were not also intimate partners), 2 by parents, 3 in the workplace and 24 with an intimate partner. This article focuses on the survey responses of those 24 intimate partner cases, which included four of the seven follow-up interviews. Of the 24 cases in the final set,

- 18 identified as female, 6 as male;
- 24 as heterosexual;
- 16 described themselves as White British or White European, 8 as Asian British;
- 17 were practising Christians across 10 denominations (Anglican, Baptist, Evangelical, Methodist, Non-denominational, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Protestant, Quaker, Reformed); 6 respondents practised Islam (all Sunni); 1 identified as agnostic.

Ten of the group of 24 declared an issue relating to physical or mental health, and 6 among these felt that their perpetrator exploited that health issue through their abuse. Six out of 24 had migrated to the United Kingdom. Thirteen of the participants had converted to their current faith (12 through free choice outside of marriage) and 11 were 'born into' their faith.

In terms of the faith community (or communities) which related to their experience of coercive control, for the most part, this was the same as their current faith state above. Exceptions included two cases where the experience related to Roman Catholicism and five cases related to Evangelical or Charismatic Christianity, which the participants had since moved away from practising. None of the participants had experienced coercion in relation to the Quaker faith. Two of the 24 respondents were witnesses only: 15 were direct victims of coercive control in an intimate partner relationship and 7 described being both direct victims and witnesses. The four semi-structured interviews were with three Christian women and one Muslim woman: all were direct victims.

We recognise from the literature above that the exercise of coercive control is strongly patterned by gender in heterosexual relationships: by men against women. However, in the analysis that follows, we include the experiences of eight male victim-survivors across both datasets, seven of whom experienced coercive control from a female intimate partner; one from a male partner. Their accounts confirmed the broader experiences of spiritual abuse and religious coercive control and the barriers to help-seeking for all victims, irrespective of sex, and also underlined that male victims of female perpetrators tend to cite spiritual, psychological and financial coercion, rather than physical or sexual abuse.

Finally, we reflect briefly on the relatively small number of responses to the online survey ($n=56$), albeit a significant proportion of responses provided extensive detail. The precise reason for this is not clear, although it may be due, for example, to any or a combination of potential respondents not recognising the term 'coercive control' as relevant to their experience; apprehension in breaking confidentiality or of being critical of their faith community; and/or mistrust or lack of confidence in the faith literacy of academics working in secular organisations. For example, Sikh Women's Aid conducted their first survey of Sikh women and domestic abuse in the United Kingdom around a

similar period in 2021 and collated around 700 responses. So, in addition to trust, therefore, a more targeted sample in which people could see themselves (e.g. 'Bahá'í practising women') may also have yielded a higher response rate. These are important considerations for future work in this area.

Data analysis

The qualitative survey responses and interview transcripts were analysed first using framework analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). Our frame focused on seven areas and was distilled from the online survey question topics. They included nature of coercive control experienced, how far participants felt that coercive control in a faith context was different, how far participants felt it was the same as in secular domestic abuse contexts, attempts at help-seeking, impact (particularly longer term), recommendations for change and other comments. These data and the Justice Project data were then analysed inductively using a grounded approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), to identify emerging sub-themes within those framework categories.

Findings and discussion

Here, we present the results of our thematic analysis under three headings: the experience of intimate partner coercive control in a faith context, help-seeking, and longer-term abuse impact and victim-survivors' recommendations for change.

Coercive control in a faith context

In this first section, we draw on participant accounts to describe experiences of religious coercive control and spiritual abuse. We also acknowledge two areas, evidenced in the data, which characterise coercive control in a faith context: (a) use of scripture and doctrine and (b) complicity at the level of the family, community and faith leadership. This issue of complicity is developed further under the second section below on 'help-seeking'. However, we start here by recognising the *commonality of experience* between victim-survivors of coercive control in a faith context and outside of a faith context. Shared characteristics include social isolation (from family and friends); physical, sexual and psychological abuse; leveraging of migrant status or children to threaten and exploit; and engineering a bewildering and frightening 'unreality' for victims:

It seemed as if I was viewing life from inside a tumble dryer – I couldn't make any sense of anything, and completely lost any sense of myself as a person. (Female victim-survivor, Christian faith, Oak#2)

For some participants, their faith was used against them to belittle and threaten. Across our two datasets, this was commonly in the context of the perpetrator either not practising any faith, not practising the same faith or nominally practising the same faith. For example,

I was mocked and ridiculed for being a good Muslim. (Male victim-survivor, Muslim faith, Oak#49)

My partner was not a believer and used my faith to undermine and attack me. (Female victim-survivor, Christian faith, Oak#19)

He said, 'I hate the Catholic Church. I hate everything to do with it, but I'm going to use it and I'm going to stop you ever doing what you want' [to annul their marriage]. (Female victim-survivor, Christian faith, Justice#256)

He would not allow me to participate in the traditional burial practices [for a deceased family member]. (Female victim-survivor, Jewish faith, Justice#310)

In these cases, we identify this spiritual abuse as forming part of an assemblage of perpetrator tactics – for example, preventing someone from attending church is part of isolating them from their cherished activity, from a social network, and undermining their sense of self – but, in these examples, religion did not appear to sit at the heart of the abuser's controlling behaviour.

We identified other participant accounts, however, where religion was the central and subsuming dynamic, which we would define as 'religious coercive control'. For example, for one female participant, her husband became increasingly obsessed with a particular version of Christianity: he moved his family across the country to join a new church; became a minister; dominated the family with psychological abuse, manipulation and expectations around clothing and modesty; forced sexual relations and forbade contraception, leading the participant to have several children.

As identified in the literature review, the invocation of scripture is a common tactic in both spiritual abuse and religious coercive control, and this was evident in our data. It has a powerful impact on victims because of their desire to be faithful. Holy texts were commonly used to perpetuate binary gender roles and patriarchy, which in turn manifested in physical, psychological and sexual abuse as well as through expectations on behaviour and dress. One participant recalls her abusive pastor husband designating ripped jeans as 'sinful'; another tells how she and her children, in particular her daughters, felt out of place in public with their long dresses and unbraided hair, mandated by her husband. She describes, in common with other victim-survivors, that her abuser would say that other people were not a good influence. In this way, the perpetrator persuades the victim that they are 'set apart' from (ungodly) others. This in turn deters the victim from help-seeking because they fear that this would be a betrayal of their spouse, but also of God's will. This participant shares how holy texts and prescribed gender roles can be twisted by perpetrators to justify sexual violation:

He would tell me [. . .] that the Bible said that my body belonged to him. So, he could do with me as he pleased. Things like the marital bed or the marriage 'sanctifies' and 'anything is allowed in the marriage bed'. And he would do things, and you know, lots of awful things. But the main thing is I would wake up to him performing sex acts on me, and I hated that. You know, I just *hated* it. (Female victim-survivor, Christian faith, Oak#33)

The 'sanctity of marriage' across faith groups can be used to exhort victims of religious coercive control and spiritual abuse to forgive and reconcile with their abusers. Participants talked of being told by elders and faith leaders that divorce was sinful and that it was the victim's duty to stay and make the relationship work.

Related to the use of scripture and doctrine by intimate partner abusers to control their victims, we also noted *complicity* as an important theme in the data. Within the different spheres of family, community and faith leadership, bystanders denied, ignored or minimised the abuse and thereby encircled the victim ever tighter with their abuser at the centre. One participant spoke, for example, of being groomed as a teenager by an older male in the church. Her family forced her to marry him and she endured an abusive and controlling marriage for more than a decade. Three others spoke of similar family coercion into marriage. They felt that the use of religious control within their upbringing had 'primed' them for religiously abusive relationships as adults. One woman recalled her mother urging her to stay in her violent marriage:

My mother said, 'You will burn in hell if you do not do as your father tells you, because heaven lies at the feet of your husband'. (Female victim-survivor, Muslim faith, Oak#34)

One man spoke of his parents blaming his sexuality for being a victim of intimate partner abuse and thereby refusing to help:

My mum and dad would say ridiculous things like, 'This wouldn't happen if you were still a Jehovah's Witness', or, 'This wouldn't happen if you weren't gay – now do you see why we're so concerned about your sexual orientation?' (Male victim-survivor, Christian faith, Justice#257)

At the level of the community, participants talked of other faith members ostracising them for speaking about their abuse or urging them to 'keep quiet'. A male participant explained that domestic abuse would be considered 'taboo' in his local mosque, so there was no realistic way of raising it. And finally, participants spoke of faith leaders failing to speak out and condemn abuse in marriage or of using the pulpit or prayer meetings to perpetuate male headship. Indeed, in 5 of the 24 responses in our survey sample, the faith leaders were themselves the intimate partner abusers.

Help-seeking

Many of our participants did seek help, though in common with domestic abuse survivors in a non-faith context, this could take many years. Help-seeking is hindered by the 'tumble dryer' effect of coercive control which imprisons the victim in a daily struggle for survival. In addition, as explained in the previous section, victims in a faith context are negotiating fear and guilt about doing God's will, the sanctity of marriage and the requirement to forgive, all of which may be reinforced by their family, their faith community and their faith leadership. It is important to recognise that for many women and men who practise a faith, their religious leader or community of worship are likely to be one of the first places they turn for support (Bent-Goodley et al., 2012; Gillum et al., 2006; Nason-Clark, 2004). This places a responsibility on that faith setting. In a similar

way, victims in a non-faith context may turn to their general practitioner (Taket et al., 2003) or possibly an NGO, well before they consider if and when to speak to the police.

Moreover, even if victims-survivors do engage in the criminal justice system (a very small proportion of our survey or interview sample had), many still want recognition of their hurt, confirmation that they are not at fault and spiritual support from their faith community (see Aghtaie et al., 2020). When asked about seeking support from secular domestic abuse charities, interviewees welcomed all help but felt they needed services with workers who understood the dynamics of religious control and the personal spiritual struggle of coping with abuse.

We identified three barriers to help-seeking which appeared recurrently in our participants' accounts: first, some perpetrators are well networked within the place of worship and hold positions of authority; second, there is often a lack of understanding among faith communities (and the wider public) about coercive control and how a perpetrator's public and domestic faces may be very different; and finally, and related to the discussion of complicity and gendered roles above, victims frequently found themselves held responsible for their perpetrator's behaviour or were disbelieved.

Looking across the data, some participants described their abuser as having authority or being networked within the faith community or hierarchy: for example, as a faith leader, activity leader, faith school governor or faith society leader at university. One respondent explained how she moved church only to receive a phone call from her new vicar berating *her* behaviour in her abusive marriage: her ex-husband had apparently used his clergy networks to 'tip off' the new vicar. Another described how her own vicar was too afraid to challenge the participant's abuser – 'she treats him with kid gloves' – because on a previous occasion, her abuser had reported the vicar to the diocese.

The leveraging of authority or networks was, for many participants, a natural extension to the coercive behaviours that the perpetrators exercised in the home. They spoke of their abusers, or of the abusers that they witnessed, being popular and well-liked and being adept at 'duping' worshippers and leaders. For example,

My close friends, they couldn't believe what I was telling them. To others, [he was like] a god. He used his Christian businessman persona to groom many people with gifts and favours. (Female victim-survivor of abuse, Christian faith, Oak#56)

I had people coming up to me and saying they were praying for me as he had said I was going through depression and having terrible trouble at work – things that were not the case. (Female victim-survivor of abuse, Christian faith, Oak#29)

He's a very intelligent man, very dominant man. Right? So he became [senior in the faith] and he's said things in the community that I'm crazy, that I'm mentally ill you know . . . (Female victim-survivor of abuse, Buddhist faith, Justice#152)

He was charismatic and charming – an evangelist after all. (Female victim-survivor of abuse, Christian faith, Oak#3)

One witness to abuse recounted how elders in her church actively sought advice from a domestic abuse charity, as they realised they did not understand the

dynamics of coercive control. This had a very positive impact for the victim and also a legacy of learning for the faith community as a whole. Another spoke of a minister ignoring his colleagues' advice to stay out of her abuse case and instead accompanying her to court, sitting in the waiting room for many hours as a supportive presence. However, across both the primary and secondary datasets, we found instances where faith leaders wrote letters in support of the perpetrator, and against the victim, in child custody proceedings. Again, this suggests a level of strategic engagement (in support of the perpetrator) or strategic non-engagement (where the victim requires help or justice) by some faith leaders in relation to intimate partner violence cases in their place of worship.

In a similar vein, participants described being encouraged to take responsibility for their perpetrator's behaviour. They felt that faith leaders and community members 'came alongside' the perpetrator, providing sympathy and support, while urging the victim to be forgiving:

He is redeemable in their eyes. If he cries and says he's sorry, then they call it 'grace'. They cite the gospel; that how can I not reconcile and forgive and yet claim to be Christian? And they threaten me that I will go to hell if I do not forgive him. When I was emotionally fragile, those things were enough to send me back to a man that I thought might kill me one day. But that was the power of those male leaders, using scriptures very authoritatively over my life. (Female victim-survivor, Christian faith, Oak#33)

They just said, 'It's not in our religion to divorce. He'll change. Don't worry; he will change'. (Female victim-survivor, Sikh faith, Justice#131)

Most of all, however, and in common with victims of domestic abuse and coercive control in a non-faith context, participants spoke of just wanting someone else to step in. Those who experienced religious coercive control in particular spoke of long periods before they realised what was going on.

People [in the church] who could have helped – they tiptoed around him, trying not to upset him. (Female victim-survivor of abuse, Christian faith, Oak#1)

I wish somebody had raised my husband's behaviour with me. Apparently, lots of people could see exactly what he was like – but nobody approached me with a listening ear. (Female victim-survivor of abuse, Christian faith, Oak#2)

As well as fellow worshippers, participants recalled wanting those outside the faith – family, old friends who knew them before the marriage – to reach out to them.

Longer-term impact of abuse and recommendations for change

Our participants identified the longer-term impact of coercive control in terms of (a) self and family and (b) relationship with God and with organised religion. Not surprisingly, the effects of spiritual abuse and religious coercive control in particular were profound for both the victim-survivor and their children. Participants described their

adult children being in counselling or on medication for anxiety and depression. They identified disrupted familial relationships after years of isolation by their perpetrator and rejection, ongoing exclusion from leading activities or silencing within their faith community. Commonly, victim-survivors felt guilt for what had happened, but anger and sadness too at their treatment. The impact on spiritual identity was particularly marked in participant accounts and this extended long after they had left the abuse:

I feel angry at my religion. I have anxiety now. And nightmares. (Female victim-survivor, Muslim faith, Oak#15)

I used to have strong faith and now I'm trying to make sense of why God would make me meet someone like that and stay in a relationship where I was unhappy and scared all the time. (Female victim-survivor of abuse, Christian faith, Oak#19)

One participant felt she was still looking for her spiritual home but that the stigma of divorce was strong in the churches she had tried to join. A number spoke of how the scriptural abuse that they had experienced 'cut deep': one woman, for example, said she hid her Bible in the loft when she finally got out of the relationship because she felt it was 'dangerous' and had been used to keep her 'in bondage and control'. Yet while one participant described themselves as currently agnostic, it is notable that all the other participants in our survey, and all but three in the Justice Project data interviews, held on to their same faith – albeit a small number changed denomination. Some did this by mentally separating the institution of organised religion from their relationship with God. They felt suspicious of male leadership in particular and vigilant to, and triggered by, signs of authoritarian or coercive practice.

In terms of recommendations for change, participants identified three areas in particular. First, they wanted faith leaders urgently to get educated in the dynamics of abusive and coercive control and 'wake up' to the manipulation of perpetrators. They wanted faith leaders to understand and stand by them as victims, rather than minimise their experience or suggest they 'pray a little more'. One respondent suggested a dedicated pastoral supporter be provided for victims who turn to their place of worship for help. Second, they urged faith leaders pro-actively to speak up and condemn abuse and control, to facilitate an environment where victims could disclose safely. Finally, they wanted effective referral and support procedures, untainted by fear, shame, nepotism or leadership interference. Many felt that accountability structures within local faith communities needed external scrutiny, particularly where allegations related to individuals who held positions of authority or leadership. In our Justice Project data, a number of Muslim women who used Sharia Councils in relation to abusive marriages felt the processes should be more transparent. This suggestion in relation to Sharia Councils is a good example of a denomination- or faith-specific observation. In general, however, our analysis did not identify strongly divergent views between respondents of different faiths on how to address spiritual abuse and religious coercive control. We acknowledge that the way in which this shared view of what needs to be done appears to transcend intersectional identities may be, for example, a feature of our sample or of our survey questions.

Conclusion

In this article, we made the case for distinguishing spiritual abuse (Oakley, 2018) as one element of an abuser's repertoire of control tactics from 'religious coercive control' (Sharp, 2014), which is where the perpetrator harnesses religious belief to underpin and justify all aspects of their coercion. Both are devastating for victims and both have long-term impact on selfhood, family life and the victim-survivor's spiritual identity. However, they may require different responses in terms of victim support. Specifically, while all survivors of spiritual abuse would likely welcome faith-literate support that recognises this aspect of their experience, individuals who experience religious coercive control may require specialist work to address profound spiritual trauma (see, for example, Cashwell and Swindle, 2018). In terms of *who* delivers that support, from analysing our participants' accounts, it is not clear that preferences for secular or for faith-led interventions map clearly onto type of experience – although the need for secular support organisations to demonstrate faith literacy does appear to be important for survivors. More empirical work is needed in this area. For the purpose of this article, we suggest two implications of our study: for faith leaders and communities, and for criminal justice practitioners in relation to Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015.

Consistent with the existing literature, places of worship continue to be a key site where faith-practising victim-survivors turn for help, reassurance and recognition. This places a responsibility on faith communities to get their house in order and ensure processes and training are in place to safeguard and support. In this way, they form part of the social web of accountability (Spencer, 2016) for abuse victims. Aune and Barnes (2018) observe that the churchgoers in their North of England study 'were much more aware of domestic abuse outside the church than within it' (p. 58). Our data similarly confirm that intimate partner coercive control is occurring within faith communities, and indeed that some of the perpetrators are networked, well-regarded individuals, including faith leaders themselves. Faith communities must therefore turn the spotlight inwards, as well as out. In particular, they must challenge religious coercive control in intimate relationships since this abuse is being exercised by their own worshippers in their name. Ensuring safety and standing by victims must take precedence: forgiveness (but not acquiescence) may follow, if and when the victim is ready. We recognise the organisations in the United Kingdom doing important work to raise such awareness, including Restored, Press Red, Thirtyone:Eight, Black Church Domestic Abuse Forum, Jewish Women's Aid, Sikh Women's Aid, Muslim Women Network and Broken Rites, among others.

Second, spiritual abuse and religious coercive control go unmentioned in the 2015 statutory guidance for Section 76 or the 2021 Home Office implementation review. Abuse in relation to faith has some commonalities with coercive control in the context of 'honour' abuse, which is mentioned in the guidance – these include loyalty to a defined community, abuse stigma and responsabilising the victim. However, it also mobilises and weaponises belief and identity in a way which exerts significant power over victims. Understanding the nature of both spiritual abuse and religious coercive control will enable police and prosecutors to ask the right questions, to understand where evidence may be, to better interpret victim and perpetrator behaviours, and to understand the high barriers to reporting facing victims.

Victims of spiritual abuse and particularly religious coercive control are hard to reach. Our sample size was relatively small, had under-representation of faiths outside of Christianity and Islam, and privileged those who had Internet access and a safe place to respond. We acknowledge too that our data reflected predominantly experiences of failure within institutions and that many victims-survivors also find their faith a great resource and comfort. Notwithstanding these limitations, this article offers important cross-faith insight into experiences of coercive control in faith contexts in the United Kingdom. We would urge policy and criminal justice actors to pay closer attention to this area.

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