‘I thought in order to get to God I had to win their approval’: a qualitative analysis of the experiences of Muslim victims abused by religious authority figures

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Abstract

The abuse of individuals by religious authority figures has generated considerable political, civic and media attention. To date, much of this focus has been on Catholic and Anglican priests, although instances in the Buddhist community have also emerged~~: there is currently research~~. This paper presents an analysis of the experiences of individuals (n=6) who were victims of abuse by Imams (Muslim leaders) and/or Muslim faith teachers. Participants were interviewed and their accounts analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This paper presents two superordinate themes that emerged from the rich data set: (i) *Toxicity of silence* and (ii) *Barriers to the acknowledgement of abuse*. Findings and implications of the research are discussed in relation to facilitating the reporting of abuse perpetrated by religious authority figures in the Muslim community. The authors argue that the difficulties for victims in reporting abuse has exacerbated the impact of the abuse, affecting their wellbeing and their relationships with their families and their faith.

Keywords: victims, qualitative, sexual abuse, IPA, Muslim, religious, child abuse

Introduction

It appears that every religious community unwittingly provides bespoke opportunities for individuals to perpetrate sexual abuse. As Bottoms et al. (1995) promulgate in their paper examining types of religious child abuse 'religious beliefs can foster, encourage and justify abusive behaviour' (p.86). The modus operandi of perpetration, the demographics of victimisation, and the facilitating impact of situational factors will however vary by faith. The abuse will mould itself to make optimal use of situations or beliefs that act as camouflage for the abuse and make the reporting of such abuse less likely to be communicated or believed. Many of the perpetrators of sexual crime in a religious setting are those who hold legitimate authority over other religious adherents (see, for example, Berry, 1992; Bottoms et al., 1995; Dressing et al., 2021; Hurcombe et al., 2019; Press, 1993; Rashid & Barron, 2019) with victims literally worshipping the person who is offending against them (IICSA, 2020). Where it is a legitimate religious authority perpetrating the abuse, it is possible for individuals to commit abuse against multiple individuals and/or over a longer period of time (Fogler et al, 2008).

Research on abuse by religious authority figures to date has been focused around Christianity and the Protestant church (Denney et al., 2018), abuse by Buddhist teachers (see Engelhardt, 2007), and in particular abuse by religious officials of the Catholic church (Harper & Perkins, 2018; John Jay College, 2006; IICSA, 2020; Rashid & Barron, 2019). There is sparse, but growing, literature to date on abuse by other religious authorities, including within the Jewish (Neustein & Lesher, 2008; RCIRCSA, 2016) and Hindu communities (see CNN, 2015). To the authors' knowledge, there is currently no published research examining abuse by Muslim authority figures, thus a brief analysis of the literature (predominantly around abuse by Christian authority figures) follows.

The media have promulgated stereotypical views around religious authority figures

who conduct abuse, which lead the public to 'believe that these highly predatory and persistent clergy offenders featured in the media, often mislabelled as 'paedophile priests', represent the 'typical sex offender' (Mercado et al., 2008, p.632). Mercado et al. (2008) analysis of records from John Jay College's survey of the Nature and Scope of Child Sexual Abuse by Priests and Deacons from 1950 to 2002 (John Jay College, 2004, 2006) reported that 52% of clerics who had committed sexual abuse had a sole victim (with mean age 12.96 years, implying a spread between paedophilic and hebephilic offending), with a small percentage (3.7%) of perpetrating clerics offending against 10+ victims (mean age of victims = 11.91 years). This 3.7% of persistent abusers however accounted for a quarter (24.8%) of victims. In terms of the prevalence of abuse, the John Jay (2004) College report reported approximately 4% of Catholic Priests had been accused of sexual abuse. Four percent was also proposed in another US report (40th Statewide Investigating Grand Jury, 2018), while an Australian study by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) asserted a higher prevalence (7%) of Catholic priests accused of sexual abuse. A comprehensive study of sexual abuse within the Catholic church in Germany which covered 1946-2014 and a sample of 1670 Catholic priests identified a prevalence rate of 4.4% (Dressing et al., 2019), with 3677 children or adolescents identified as victims.

Not all sexual abuse by religious authorities is against children/adolescents, however. Capps (1993) builds on some of the conclusions arrived at by Lebacqz and Barton in their study of intimacy within Christian parishes (see Lebacqz & Barton, 1991) apropos the power of parish pastors in relation to sexual relations with parishioners. Lebacqz and Barton highlight the importance of pastors having an ethical framework to guide them in decision-making regarding sexual relations with parishioners, asserting that it is not sufficient for pastors to be led by their conscience or to be able to decide whether an intimate relationship is 'right or wrong' and act on the basis of this. Lebacqz and Barton focus on the notion of

'pastoral power' (p. 98) and reflect that while religious authorities (in their case, pastors, who hold a position of authority in Christian religions) may not feel powerful in themselves, they do wield power over their adherents. Lebacqz and Barton explain that religious authorities have 'the power of access and accessibility and (ii) the 'power of freedom' from not being under the surveillance of others. Capps (1993) adds a further type of power, that of (iii) 'power over congregants by being privy to personal knowledge (e.g., marital issues and addictions) (p. 352). These bases of power are crucial in terms of taking away the potential for adults to give fully informed consent to sexual relations with someone who holds a position of religious authority over them. As Rutter declares, any professional to client relationship constitutes a 'forbidden zone' (Lebacqz & Barton, 1991, p.8). Children (who, regardless, cannot legally consent to sexual activity) and indeed all 'ordinary' members of a religion not only cannot tap into religious power themselves (Raine & Kent, 2019) but find themselves at the polar extreme of a power continuum in which religious authorities sit at the other extreme. This power differential not only explains how opportunities for abuse are increased for those with religious authority, but highlight barriers to the reporting of sexual abuse by the victim, whether child or adult.

Kane (2006) highlighted that, in the US, that Catholic priests did not have a professional code of conduct until required to by policy (see USCCB, 2002), and that this policy was a response to pressure from a range of sources, including victim/survivor groups, government agencies, Catholic laypeople, often mediated by the media. In the UK, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA, 2020) has contributed more recently to awareness of the responsibilities on key agencies, including faith groups, in ensuring arrangements are in place with local authorities to safeguard and protect children. This awareness builds on legislation espoused in the UK's Children and Social Work Act 2017, which placed new duties and responsibilities on charities and faith groups to connect with

local authorities. Thus, we see top down and bottom up attempts at protecting against sexual abuse, with faith groups developing codes of conduct for their authority figures, and with governments requiring faith organisations to work with local authorities to ensure safeguarding mechanisms and reporting procedures are in place.

Having a professional code of conduct, and transparent procedures and mechanisms to facilitate the reporting of abuse, are important; nevertheless, these do not diminish the barriers to reporting abuse by victims. These barriers include an initial recognition of abusive behaviour as abuse, as Chouliara and Narang (2017) assert 'the importance of dissonance and the importance of 'naming' the abuse as such' (p.536); embarrassment and a belief by the victim that they won't be believed, or that the offence is a private / family matter and not police business (Ministry of Justice, Home Office and The Office for National Statistics, 2013). Other barriers have been identified as being especially pertinent in South Asian communities, namely shame about stigmatising the family, the insensitivity of support services and social frameworks to cultural factors, and language barriers (see Cowburn et al, 2015), together with the lack of awareness about resources available (Gill, 2010). These may all be relevant to abuse within the Muslim community in the UK. Hearing the victims' accounts is a first step in understanding the barriers to reporting abuse, and also, importantly, in prevention work.

The current study focuses on the abuse of children by Muslim figures of authority, that is Imams or religious teachers (both being posited as religious leaders in the Islamic faith; Buang & Ismail, 2007). Despite being the second largest religion in the world (ONS Census, 2011), data on sexual abuse by Imams or Muslim teachers are scarce. There is a paucity of research around sexual abuse in the Muslim community generally; existing research includes research on inter-personal violence within marriage (Faizi, 2000) on the media portrayal of Muslim males in relation to grooming of young white girls (Gill &

Harrison, 2015), some work on child sexual abuse in Asian, rather than Muslim communities (Gilligan & Akhtar, 2005), and research around honour-based violence. While the latter covers a number of different faith communities, much of this research has been conducted within Muslim communities (see Abbas, 2010).

This paper presents the accounts of six Muslim individuals who responded to a request for victims of abuse within a Muslim religious seminary context, by an Imam or Muslim religious teacher. Such seminaries include the Darul Uloom (full-time institution often held in designated learning premises) and Madrasah subset (part-time institution often taking places in established learning premises or mosques). Five individuals recounted sexual abuse and one individual recounted physical and psychological and spiritual abuse. One of the aims of this paper is to highlight the experiences of Muslim victims of abuse within faith seminaries, and to give them a voice. A further aim is to examine the barriers to reporting abuse, both in idiographic terms as well as in the context of the existing evidence base on the reporting of abuse within faith institutes. Research within the Muslim community remains lacking, with matters regarding a sexual nature considered a taboo subject. Reporting sexual abuse is typically known to be surrounded by community shame and stigma in addition to institutional barriers that increase the silent suffering (Harrison & Gill, 2019). As Tishelman and Fontes (2017) asserted 'perpetrators, religious traditions, religious tenets and religious leaders could manipulate youth, using religion perversely as a tool of corruption, exploitation, shaming, secrecy, and isolation' (p. 129). The authors of the current paper maintain that the lack of current research in this area contributes to this secrecy and isolation; thus, their hopes, and intended outcomes for this research were to raise awareness, and to contribute towards prevention work, as well as developing effective reporting and support mechanisms for existing victims within this population group.

The term victim has been adopted in reflection of individuals being children at the

time of the abuse and there remaining no avenues of redress for the abuse. Participants further expressed themselves as victims over being survivors, particularly in relation to the long-term impact. It was therefore deemed inappropriate to be referred to as survivors.

Ethical approval was granted by Nottingham Trent University Research Ethics Committee.

Method

Participants

The participants comprised six adult individuals who were Muslim, five of whom were based in the UK and one based in Pakistan. Four participants were male and two were female. MCB (2015) identified 60% of UK Muslims as being from a South-Asian heritage. All participants within this study identified as South-Asian. Five had been sexually abused by Imams or teachers within religious institutes and one had been physically, psychologically, and spiritually abused. All met the criteria of the abuse having taken place within a Muslim religious seminary context. The participant from Pakistan was deemed appropriate for inclusion due to the international interlinking nature. The UK Darul Uloom and Madrasah syllabus and structure were founded upon the dars-e-nizami structure within South-Asian countries, with many first- and second-generation Imams / religious teachers undertaking their training internationally (Sidat, 2018). The occurrence of abuse internationally therefore sets the precedence for UK seminary-based abuse. Participant information is detailed in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Data Collection

Participants were recruited via convenience and snowballing sampling methods. Some were sent information about the research where they had made their story known on social media platforms and thereafter volunteered to partake. Others heard about the research either via the research team directly or contacted the research team and volunteered to participate.

The sample size (n=6) is appropriate for qualitative research where intensive rather than extensive analysis is prioritised across a range of methodologies (e.g. Smith, 2015). In terms of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and the data analytical approach used in the current study, the sample size is wholly suitable and in accordance with previous precedents (see Blagden et al., 2011; Flowers et al, 2006). The requirement with small *n* research is not to achieve a random sample, but instead the researchers should try to attain a closely matched sample for which the research question will be significant (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Interviews

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews of between 45 and 90 minutes. The interview schedule was developed through consultation within the research team and structured into five broad sections:

[1] Questions about faith, beliefs and values associated with their religion

[2] Questions about the abuse and the circumstances under which it took place and immediate impact

[3] Questions about reporting the abuse, any barriers and reactions to reporting

[4] Longer term impact of the abuse, both spiritually and general health and well-being

[5] Feelings towards the faith and Imams/teachers as a result of the abuse

The research team consisted of two Muslim and two non-Muslim members, all with previous experience of researching sensitive topics. This prior experience and a review of the literature was used to inform the development of the interview schedule. As is typical in IPA, the interview schedule was used flexibly; the research team used open prompts and probes rather than using the interview schedule as a fixed agenda (Loaring et al, 2015). In this way, participants were free to articulate their thoughts and concerns and, crucially, were able to think, speak and be heard. The focus of this paper's analysis is on themes that were driven by the participants and emerged from participants' narratives rather than explicitly addressed by the researchers. Every participant spoke in detail about the experiences they went through and the impact it had on them. Some of the participants struggled to talk about the specific abuse, focussing instead on the impact of the abuse.

Ethical considerations included impact of recounting the trauma on participants and the research team. Providing appropriate support for participants was deemed critical. Participants were provided with contact details for culturally appropriate professional support, in addition to a follow-up call from a Muslim member of the research team as required. The research team held a debrief after each interview to assess personal impact and well-being.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Participants were allocated a number used for identifying transcripts. Interviews were saved onto a secure university drive with consent forms stored in separate locked storage. Diligent care was taken to ensure any potentially identifying information was removed. The research utilised the analytic method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA examines how participants make sense of their individual experiences - their personal and social worlds (Osborn & Smith, 2008). Its

primary focus is the subjective experiences of individuals (Eatough & Smith, 2006), and 'participants are recruited because of their expertise in the phenomenon being explored' (Reid et al., 2005, p.20). IPA can be used to bring into awareness understudied, less understood phenomena, or experiences that are only faced by a minority of people. IPA is a double hermeneutic method. That is, there are two layers of analytical interpretation. Initially it is the participants who explain and account for their experience of the phenomenon under study; the second layer is where the researchers reinterpret participants' accounts of their experiences (Loaring et al, 2015). This second layer of interpretation is interwoven with connections to existing literature in order to contextualise the findings but also to provide insight into existing quantitative findings, where this is possible. The rich idiographic data gleaned from a small homogenous (in terms of their having undergone the phenomenon in question) sample of participants facilitates this.

The analysis was guided by previous precedents (see Smith, 2015; Blagden et al, 2016; Winder et al., 2019) and entailed detailed reading, re-reading and analysis of each transcript individually by each member of the research team. Themes were identified through a rigorous process whereby the research team members each created a thematic map, which contained between 10-13 potential themes or 'hubs'. Each hub contained a list of extracts from participants' narratives (with extracts from at least half of the transcripts, as per Dickson et al., 2008) and from a range of places in the transcripts, together with a summary of the essence of the theme. The research team subsequently met to discuss and reflect on their analyses. All of the thematic 'hubs' were pooled, discussed and analysed by the entire research team. The transcripts were cross-checked as part of the analysis. Subsequently, the majority of the thematic hubs were merged. In the few incidences where other research team members had not created an overlapping thematic hub, the transcripts were again checked,

and a decision was made as to whether this constituted a separate theme based on the level of overlap. The final thematic structure comprised the emerging thematic hubs, which were subsequently clustered through joint discussion under superordinate headings.

Results and Discussion ~~Analysis~~

During the analysis phase, four superordinate themes emerged from the dataset. The to superordinate themes that related to victimisation and the reporting of the abuse are the focus of this paper (see Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 here]

Superordinate Theme 1: Toxicity of Silence

Being abused by a religious Elder was not something that participants readily shared with others. For several of the participants, the research interview was the first time they had fully shared their experiences with others. This silence compounded the impact of the abuse in a plethora of ways. These are explored in the following subordinate themes.

Subordinate Theme 1.1: The Slow March of Trauma and Abuse

Participants highlighted how it took them time to recognise and process what had happened to them. Trauma, PTSD and CPTSD are recognised effects of both sexual and physical abuse (Blakemore et al., 2017). For victims, the dual role of the abuser as both perpetrator and religious authority figure, appeared to disguise the recognition that the abuse *was* abuse, and that it was wrong. Meanwhile, it seemed that the more time passed, the greater the psychological impact:

Extract 1

> But at that age I didn't realise, it is only now that I am realising the impact and the gravity of that offence P1

The suffering was compounded by the delayed realisation that it was abuse which had taken place. Making sense of what had happened created cognitive conflict which took considerable time for participants to reconcile internally; as a consequence, victims stayed silent. It is not uncommon for child abuse to be reported when a victim is many years older, with delayed recognition of the abuse *as abuse* being one factor (Lahtinen et al., 2018). However, where there is social resistance to the abuse being reported (from family and the community and even from self), the reporting becomes even more of an ordeal for individuals, and they typically stay silent for many years.

Extract 2

> The challenges I have seen other people face and myself facing of trying to overcome (1.9) such abuse P1

The connection between their strong faith and the perpetrator being a revered figure, coupled with the general enforced silence, appeared to repress the journey of realisation and awakening. This resulted in a debilitating impact when the realisation surfaced. Some had spent years trying to supress their thoughts and feelings and recognition that it was abuse. Consequentially the impact was felt intensely when it did emerge and affected almost every area of their life. This was described elsewhere (see 1.3) as being exacerbated by dismissive reactions when attempting to disclose. Even while they were suppressing their awakening to the abuse, the participants all reported a myriad of trauma symptoms and coping mechanisms

such as self-harm (P3), suicide ideation (P1), transferring anger onto others (P6), drinking alcohol (P2), wetting the bed (P3) and harmful cleansing rituals (P3). The physical manifestations of trauma served to further increase the isolation.

Extract 3

> P3: Erm (.) so you know I was wetting myself, but because I was helping mum with washing and things like that, I would you know to go and take my sheets off and put them in the washing machine
>
> I: So you were hiding it from her?
>
> P3: Yeah I was hiding it, I was hiding it (.) and I was scared that when I was going to school I was smelling of wee or anything (.) I was constantly thinking am I smelling? Am I smelling?

Adaptive behaviours were required in order to mask the trauma symptoms. P3 helped her mother with the laundry in order to hide the bedwetting, such anxiety being consequential of the abuse and the enforced silence. Furthermore, the effects extended into the participant's school life – she was worried that her peers would be able to smell the bedwetting. Living with this additional psychological burden would have the putative impact of increasing self-isolation to avoid social embarrassment. Bottoms et al. (2004) examined the impact of religion-related child abuse using a control group design; the findings highlighted that victims/survivors of religion-related physical child abuse demonstrated greater psychological symptomology than victims/survivors of other physical abuse or a non-abused control group. The authors concluded that religion-related abuse adds 'an additional layer of complexity and harm to the experience' (Bottoms et al, 2004, p.107). The feelings of distress around the abuse were described by participants as growing over time. Eventually, the distress reached

intolerable levels requiring some form of release. For one participant, this led to a daily cleansing routine:

Extract 4

> P3: Yeah I remember taking one of those [*pot scourer*] and scrubbing (.) scrubbing erm my body, my legs and my my arms everything (.) everywhere he had touched and yeah I was just scrubbing myself and I remember I scrubbed one time so hard that I made myself bleed
>
> I: Yeah (.) ok
>
> P3: I remember being stood in the bath and thinking ah that's feels quite nice (.) it feels like the dirt and all that is coming out (.) and that's when I started to cut myself and things like that (.) as I got a little bit older (0.5)

P3 experienced feeling 'dirty' as a result of the abuse, which motivated a strong need to remove the dirt from her physically. By self harming, it allowed for this physically symbolic, yet tangible removal of the perceived dirt and thereby a means by which she could rid herself of the 'dirt' of the abuse and distance herself from it. This form of cleansing contributed to alleviating aspects of the negative affect, as well as feelings of being absolved (Harris, 2000). Baumeister (1991) asserts that self harming can facilitate an escape from self, temporarily alleviating negative affect and punitive self-awareness by rejecting and avoiding meaningful thought. Focussing on the self-harming allows relief without the need to deliberate on the underlying pain and trauma.

Both the short-term and long-term tangible impact of the abuse was evident within participants' narratives. The data aligns with childhood trauma being known to impact

physiological, psychological and neurological development long after the abuse (Dye, 2018). Participants sought out a variety of coping mechanisms to manage the abuse, but many of these were unhealthy and caused additional damage. Some realised the abuse was abuse earlier than others, but for each, when full processing occurred their post traumatic symptoms only exacerbated. This trauma was further drawn out and amplified through the rejection experienced when trying to disclose, which will be discussed further in superordinate theme 2.

Subordinate Theme 1.2: Distancing from Faith

The abuse created distance between each individual and their faith. Whilst some created distance as a means of preventing further abuse (thereby removing themselves from a situation in which their religion teacher could abuse them), others struggled with the internal conflict it created in disentangling their faith and faith-based identity from the abuse. This is to be expected given the proximity of both the context and perpetrator to their sense of self, community and faith identity (Herman, 1992). Participants had previously associated faith with the upholding of high morals and character, yet this was contradicted by the abuse being carried out by someone with religious authority.

Extract 5

> P6: And then what actually happened is that (.) erm (.) I looked at him and thought what is, what kind of deen [*faith/way of life*] is this yeah, I don't like deen, it just seems like a (.) it just (fades away)
>
> I: Ok
>
> P6: Do you know what I mean, I only saw that kind of and no disrespect to Darul ulooms (*boarding madrasa setting*), you know I seen they're doing good things but I saw it as (.) nah

In the above extract, the behaviour of the teacher is seen as a manifestation of the faith and thus also becomes a deterrent to belonging to this faith group. In the next extract, the abuse undermines the validity of the faith entirely, with the religion perceived as invalid for allowing abuse to happen to people.

Extract 6

> I just thought that this was all linked and I just thought how could I believe that you know, being a good Muslim, and reading Qur'an and namaz [*prayers*] and all this … when you are doing all of these bad things to me, so I just didn't believe in anything, I just thought it's all (1.1) you know, how can I believe in my faith when all of these bad things are happening to me. P3

The abuse by the religious teacher becomes the embodiment of the faith, leading to participants rejecting their faith. Further, the impact of the abuse permeated all aspects of their life with religious festivals becoming significant reminders of their abuse, and enhanced feelings of distance from both family and faith.

Extract 7

> I can remember it was a day of Eid, normally we spend it with our family and everybody, but I was so distressed that day I said I needed to do something P1

Where the entire community would be engaged in celebrations and family gatherings, P1 felt unable to partake. This resulted in being physically and emotionally isolated from both family and the community within celebrated religious gatherings.

The individuals committing the abuse held dual roles in which they were both perpetrators and distinguished representatives; this created cognitive conflict and psychological incongruence in various ways.

Extract 8

P3: Cus I hated, hated the thought, even the thought of opening it (.)

I: Mmm

P3: The Qur'an, I was like it's all dirty it's dirty, you'll have to excuse me, I don't want anything to do with it, I just pretended that I was reading namaz *(prayers)*, going upstairs

I: Yeah

P3: And I hated it (.) for many many years, only recently

I: Uhh huh

P3: That I've accepted the fact that you know it wasn't (.) that, it was just this one person that has made me feel that way, the mosque wasn't to blame (.)

I: Ok

P3: My faith wasn't to blame (.)

The repetition of the word 'hate' demonstrated the extent of the negativity felt. The Qu'ran had become tainted by the abuse, it was seen as dirty and thoughts of practising significant elements of the faith caused feelings of repulsion. These feelings had relational consequences in that they could not authentically engage in religious practice. Furthermore, recitation of the Qur'an being integral to the daily prayers and Ramadan, resulted in this negative association preventing individuals accessing foundational spiritual practices over a substantial number of

years. This association amplified the silencing experienced by participants, compounding the trauma at the time and thereafter. Hence the toxicity of the silence extended from the short-term into the long-term. Ward (2011) described spiritual based abuse as being multi-faceted. He called for consideration to be given to bio/psycho/social and spiritual domains.

Participants' narratives typically showed movement from contamination narratives about faith (McAdams et al, 2001) to a more redemptive sequence.

Extract 9

> Now it [*faith*] is helping me, there was a time when I almost lost my faith, I thought that if this is faith then to hell with it P6

Extract 9 demonstrates this redemptive sequence where faith had been lost but is now construed as a positive in their life. Participants had (or were beginning) to reconcile the dissonance of religious leader perpetrating the abuse and having religious beliefs, there was a recognition that the act of the abuse and faith were separate. Bryant-Davis and Wong (2013) draw attention to spiritual and faith support needing to be employed with care. They acknowledge the potential for harm where faith had been used in a punitive way within the abuse, but equally identify the powerful healing elements within faith-based support for those seeking spiritual wellbeing.

Subordinate Theme 1.3: See No Evil, Speak No Evil

The idea of learned helplessness became apparent as participants expressed their inability to take action. This included both at the time of the abuse and currently. The feeling of helplessness was exacerbated by rejection from close family members when they learnt about

the abuse. Peterson and Seligman (1983) argue learned helplessness derives from a loss of self-esteem as a result of experiences which undermine feelings of agency. Negative family reactions had a significant impact upon participants.

Extract 10

FM: Translates: Again I informed my mother

P4: [Speaks Urdu] you have a problem [continues in Urdu]

FM Translates: She kind of said that I was the one with the problem, that wherever I was going I was having these issues

P4: [Speaks Urdu] I was wrong, other people are right [continues in Urdu]

FM Translates: So I got this feeling that I was er the guilty person, that I was having these type of sensations that I should not have had these type of thoughts and feelings

There was an unambiguous understanding that religious figures could not carry out abuse. Victim-blaming became the standard response to disclosures, with the corresponding transference of guilt onto the victim. This facilitated the need by third parties to self-soothe through denial (Goleman, 1989). Victims were left to self-doubt both the abuse itself and the wisdom of reporting the abuse to others. Dorahy and Clearwater (2012) identified this wider denial (from family) as increasing the victims' sense of shame apropos the abuse and also to any mental health issues that had arisen (potentially) from the abuse. Ciftci et al. (2013) expound upon shame as one factor compounding denial of mental health issues within Muslim families. The intersection of such internal dynamics to external factors was identified as resulting in double stigma in relation to Muslim mental health. This double-barrelled

shame, together with the rejection of victims' accounts of abuse, created a toxic silence. The latter was compounded by abuse being considered inappropriate to discuss.

Extract 11

P3: Erm and it was a different generation I just (0.7)

I: Yeah

P3: We just didn't speak like that (.)

I: [were you]

P3: [so that was very strange not knowing how to] to tell her something like that (.)

The expectation that the abuse could not be addressed becomes critical when others corroborate this through actions, words or unspoken rules. Topics of a sexual nature were culturally considered taboo within Arab communities (Alzoubi et al., 2018) and British South-Asian communities (Gill & Harrison, 2019). Moreover, accepting that abuse was being perpetrated, and by someone with religious authority, was unfathomable and could not be discussed.

Oakley and Humphreys (2019) draw on parallels in the Church whereby congregation members exhibit a reluctance to engage with such sensitive topics. The overwhelming fear being the negative attention it will draw to the faith as a whole. All participants in this study expressed fear of the negative repercussions of disclosing upon themselves from their community, and towards the community itself by wider society at large. Constraints in fully disclosing the abuse at a family level permeated the dataset. The toxicity in the silence thereby extended from the abuse itself, the institutional and religious leadership context, into

the family and community context. Consequently, victim faith identities became drawn into this.

Extract 12

> P6: But saying that, all the other, the rest of the family have always been in [city name] so they haven't had that kind of grandma to, you know that relationship with the grandma, the older generation, when it comes to the adab [*manners/etiquettes*] and respect and standing and putting people first, I was kind of brought up in that kind of sense that I felt wait maybe I shouldn't take that leap yet
>
> I: Responsibility?
>
> P6: I shouldn't take that leap in saying oh this is what happened

P6 raises how cultural notions surrounding respect to elders made him question whether he should disclose the abuse, particularly as this would have reflected negatively on the elders within his family. A helplessness was exhibited in the sense that speaking of such matters would be deemed disrespectful and therefore hindered disclosure. A sense of being culturally obligated to maintain the silence was alluded to.

The impact of external rejection was referred to by Rudolfsson (2019) as secondary victimisation. This prevented participants from full disclosure and obtaining support at various points in their journey. Patterson (2011) identified that secondary victimisation exacerbated psychological suffering; this was evident across the dataset. Herman (1992; 2015) presents the role of wider family and social support in the aftermath of trauma as being critical to preventing further trauma. For all participants, there was a clear theme of wanting their voices to be heard by family in the first instance, followed by the wider community and

religious institutions in question. Their needs within this were numerous: (i) as an acknowledgment of the abuse they had suffered; (ii) so that the abuse would be addressed; and (iii) to provide them with personal support for coping with the psychological, emotional and spiritual internal incongruence they were experiencing. The latter resonates with the findings of Ward (2011), who identified emotional and existential internal struggles experienced by those who had endured violations of boundaries by religious leaders. However, with silence being enforced upon them through various means, it enabled a toxicity to build up which directly impacted victims.

Superordinate Theme 2: Barriers to the Acknowledgement of Abuse

Reporting the abuse presented several dilemmas: victims did not always fully comprehend that what occurred was abuse, or they believed it was justified behaviour in the context of their faith and its teachings. Further, even when victims realised it was abuse, they needed to find suitable avenues to report the abuse in the hope that it would be stopped.

Subordinate Theme 2.1: Perceived Scriptural Barriers

Individuals perpetrating the abuse in this study were all Imams or religious teachers. They used their knowledge of the Qu'ran and religious text to construct a narrative by which sexual abuse was deemed acceptable. This was reinforced through the assumption that they were entitled to privileges and exemptions by virtue of their religious position.

Extract 8

> Terminology that I have picked up from a number of clerics and it is known as 'illatul masha'ik', illatul masha'ik means that if a shaykh or a teacher or a pious person engages in sexual activity then it's okay P1

In extract 13, we see evidence of religious distortion, whereby honour and prestige attributed to the position of Imams and religious teachers facilitated the justification of abuse. This permitted an attitude whereby religious teachers and scholars were granted a form of immunity, regardless of their actions - in this case the permissibility to engage in sexual abuse without being held to account. By default, this environment of immunity prevented victims from speaking out as they did not conceive this as an option for them. Such distortions are not exclusive to Muslim communities. Raine and Kent (2019) identified numerous features specific to abuse within religious settings. Within a Christian context these included the misuse of scripture, religious figureheads being held in veneration, and the requirement for obedience by followers. Consideration of distinctive factors unique to the religious context were denoted.

Extract 14

> He *(Head of Institute)* said that, (.) as a victim I should give compensation, sadaqah, charity and forget about it P1

The use of faith and scripture by religious leaders as part of the process of preventing reporting proved critical. The teachers were experts and the students were there to learn from them. Charitable compensation, as a means of making amends, is normally encouraged for those who commit a wrong action which does not entail criminal harm against another. However, being told by the Head of the Institute (when the victim attempted to report their sexual abuse), that they (the victim) needed to be charitable as an act of compensation, directed the blame onto the victim instead. This modulated the severity of the offence and further facilitated the perpetrator concealing his actions and maintaining control over the

victim. Simultaneously, it reaffirmed his exemption from accountability due to his religious status.

Oakley and Kinmond (2013) draw parallels within the Christian Church context, whereby the perpetrator retains unaccountability due to their power positioning and public reverence, whilst the victim is held accountable by the perpetrator through these very factors. Creating this culture resulted in a type of learning through osmosis, whereby victims absorbed what was permissible and not permissible within the religious context. Such rules were sometimes unspoken and sometimes distinctly openly reinforced. This echoes findings in instances of abuse in other faith (see, for example, Anders, 2019, with regard to abuse in Rigpa Buddhist organisation). P6 demonstrates how these widely held beliefs regarding those of religious standing impacted reporting.

Extract 15

> …I think subconsciously (0.2) he's studying the deen [*way of life*] so I should have a bit more respect P6

Subconsciously absorbed associations of respect and position for those pursuing religious knowledge shaped initial responses to the abuse. Subsequently, a belief that accusing such individuals of any wrongdoing would be a form of disrespect, existed. In turn, this implied it would be disrespecting the faith itself, given that the individual was pursuing the path of sacred knowledge. Hence, instead of seeing abuse for what it was, victims associated reporting abuse as being wrong and disrespectful on their part.

Extract 16

P2: So, he took me to the room and I was hysterical and he wiped my tears and he said the words "just remember every part of your body that gets struck by a teacher that part of the body will never go to heav.. er hell, the hellfire".

I: Oh

P2: And he said so many things to me in that short space of time and he was telling me "you know why, it's trying to better our err by getting beaten up it's a way of becoming better humans for it"

In extract 16, the direct mis-use of text by bystanders to justify abusive behaviour and render it unaccountable becomes apparent. Victims were led to believe that the abuse held two protective elements for them. First, that the perpetrator as a religious teacher was responsible for the spiritual development of the victim, even if that required inflicting various forms of abuse. Their job was to make them a 'better human' and therefore the violence was acceptable. Second, that it would protect them from hell. Aligning the abuse to core tenets of the faith exploited both emotional and spiritual vulnerabilities and facilitated the transference of blame onto the victim. Perceived shortcomings within the victim became the focal point, rather than accountability of the perpetrator. Furthermore, it provided a valid justification in the mind of the victim for excusing the abuse.

Spiritual threats were also used to silence reporting. Creating fear of God being at 'war' with or cursing the victim was reported. This led to psychological and spiritual anguish wherein victims believed they would be spiritually damned if they attempted to report those who held high spiritual ranks. The use of both spiritual threats and misuse of sacred text is not uncommon to sexual abuse within faith institutions. Raine and Kent (2019) explore

historical precedents in numerous branches of Christianity whereby both threats and misuse were adopted. This related to both perpetration of abuse and covering it up.

Extract 17

> Don't tell your parents what happened because if you do and if something happens to the madrasa, the madrasa will get closed down and you will have spoilt the knowledge, the pursuit, the pursuit of knowledge for all these students and God will curse you eternally P2

Extract 18

> We had some clerics who made my mental health even worse by using threatening phrases that if you are going to be an enemy to God then God will engage you with war P1

By creating an 'us and them' culture, and actively aligning the victims against a perceived external threat, individuals were coerced into maintaining loyalty towards protecting the institution, as described by P2 above. This reinforced the implicit understanding that accepting the abuse and not fighting against it would be a means of attaining spiritual protection. Oakley and Humphreys (2019) present the very subtle ways in which coercive control can take place within religious institutions. For an individual whose faith encompasses the core of their identity and holistic way of life (Otters, 2012), the magnitude of a threat of becoming an enemy of God creates great personal and spiritual significance. P1 went on to reveal that he left the faith practices and presented with suicidal thoughts for a number of years as a direct result of the abuse and this specific threat. The coercive control

led him to conclude that if he had now become the enemy to God, there was nothing left to live for, and no hope left for him.

Rudolfsson (2019, p172) puts forward the idea of conflict between God concept and God image. Where God concept related to the conceptual understanding behind a Deity, God image related to how God was perceived and seen. Within a Christian context, the God image was seen as God abandoning victims to the abuse; within the Madrasa context however, God concept and God image were deliberately aligned to portray a punitive God. This was particularly so for anyone who refused to conform to interpretations as presented by religious teachers. Additionally, the transference of blame indicated that such a punishment would be self-inflicted as the victim had waged 'war' with God by challenging religious leaders. It is unsurprising that the conflation of being a religious leader and the personality characteristic of narcissism has been demonstrated as amplifying instances of sexual abuse (Denney et al., 2018), and faith communities should ensure that safeguarding processes take potential perpetrator characteristics into account when designing effective mechanisms for investigation of reported abuse.

Subordinate Theme 2.2: Relational Impediments

Everyday relationship dynamics were inevitably influenced by the abuse. The gravity of others disregarding the abuse and its impact became more severe when they originated from close family members.

Extract 19

> (sigh) The fact that I wanted to commit suicide (1.5) and I rang a number of helplines….I physically went to the graveyard on a number of occasions wanting to

end my own life (2.0) and even phoning my father from the graveyard (1.8) he said I've got no time for you, I've got to watch cricket P1

The levels of isolation felt as a consequence of the abuse was expressed throughout participants' narratives. The need to call out for help and the desire to be helped was evident. The impact of rejection when reaching out to others continued to be felt even now. This rejection served as secondary victimisation (Rudolfsson, 2019) and typically left victims in a state of shock, disbelief and continued trauma. P2 spoke of a similar experience but from the perspective of knowing that his mother would never be able to fully comprehend the level of abuse.

Extract 209

For some reason, my mum, I just never told my mum the gravity of, the extent of, the beatings P2

The abuse created a sense of permanent distance, leaving the victim with the knowledge that the people closest to them did not, could not and/or would not understand. This resulted in never being able to fully share their trauma. Without full disclosure, P2 felt he was forced to navigate his way through the relationship, talking about some experiences but actively staying silent regarding others.

Grooming (also termed 'entrapment', 'engagement' or 'subjection') (see Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014, p.957) not only 'prepares' the child for the abuse that is to follow but also helps to protect the perpetrator after the abuse. Grooming is completed through relationships, with the majority of child sexual abuse conducted by someone known to the victim

(McAlinden, 2006). P3 disclosed grooming techniques in the form of bribes and rewards which then forced unnatural adaptive behaviours. Money was used in this case, resulting in P3 having to buy sweets to 'get rid' of the money whilst she desperately tried to manage the situation.

Extract 10

P3: It was terrible, it was a horrible horrible time, but I used to quickly go to the mosque and get rid of the sweets with all my friends

I: Yeah

P3: And (.) I'd dish them out and they'd be like oh [name]'s got sweets and ooh she's got this she's got that

I: Yeah

P3: And things like that (.) so I was quite popular in that way because they wanted the sweets off me

I: Mmm

P3: But yeah it was constant of having this money (.) how do I get rid of it (.) I've got the sweets I've got to get rid of that (.)

I: Mmm

P3: Just (.) so that I wouldn't get caught and get in trouble (.)

A sense of panic, anxiety and intense psychological distress were described. The victim was forced into hiding the bribe from her parents and fellow classmates, in order to manage the secrecy of where the money had come from. It was described as being drawn into a 'vicious circle' wherein she was forced to collude in covering up the abuse. This created an inhibition with both her parents and fellow classmates. On the one hand, it facilitated her popularity,

whilst simultaneously creating a greater detachment from her peers. Actively involving the victim in hiding the abuse, created a sense of guilt and shame of somehow having contributed to the abuse. Quas et al. (2003) identified the proximity of the relationship to the perpetrator, severe levels of sexual abuse, victim perceptions of disgust towards the abuse and the abuse being carried out over a substantial period of time as being predictors of increased self attribution of blame. Self-blame and guilt about the abuse were reported by all the victims.

Extract 22

> So I've, so it was a bit like (0.2) okay, don't believe me, cool, keep, brush it under the carpet, normal thing to do P6

Silence surrounding disclosures featured heavily in participants' narratives, with a reluctance by others to engage in or address the issue. P6 describes it being 'brushed under the carpet', as though it was something dirty which required being out of public view in order to maintain an immaculate external image. This rejection and denial caused P6 to withdraw into himself, attitudes of indifference upheld as a protective layer. Middleton et al., (2017) identify the historical prevalence of victim silencing through a variety of mediums, including disbelieving the victim. They argue such dynamics continue to exist despite progress in reporting and acceptance of disclosures. Sawrikar and Katz (2017) identified shame and fear of being socially excluded as being barriers to wider family acknowledgement and reporting of child sexual abuse, particularly within close-knit communities. A sense of remoteness and imposed loneliness was evident in all narratives. The isolation the abuse created within the context of family was profound. The outright rejection or more subtle forms of denial reinforced disbelief and amplified this isolation.

Subordinate Theme 2.3: Doors Closed by Extended Muslim Community

At various time points, victims attempted to get their voices heard on broader platforms. Having lived with the impact of the abuse, each felt a need to confront their trauma and to attain justice. They were however met with numerous barriers including rejection by the wider community which enforced further silence. P2 spoke of being met with disapproval for tainting the image of the faith.

Extract 23

> For us, a slap on the head was just normal, getting beatings was normal so why on earth would you want to speak out against the madrasa? You know and I think that's why, erm why on earth are you trying to give Islam a bad name? P2

Physical violence under the guise of 'discipline' was viewed as the norm; therefore, to complain on public platforms about this issue was seen as vilifying the sacred space of the Madrasa. Instead of being acknowledged as a victim, P2 was labelled as giving the faith a bad name. By denying physical abuse as being an issue of concern it permitted the focus to remain on the victim as being the one at fault, rather than calling the institution to account. This pattern replicated the handling of abuse within the Catholic Church, whereby silence was encouraged over giving the faith a negative reputation (Berry, 1992).

Similarly, P3 spoke of further barriers through institutions not wanting external interventions in dealing with abuse by religious authority figures within the community.

Extract 24

> P3: And they tend to keep it between themselves and get rid of that one person (.)
>
> I: Umm

P3: And send them somewhere else which is not helping

Instead of confronting the issue directly, institutions were seen as passing the problem on, thereby compounding it and driving it further underground. Oakley and Kinmond (2013) refer to this as unaccounted institutional power (p15). Hierarchical structures, power availed to those in positions of authority and concealment by people in positions of power were found present across institutional concealment including within the Catholic Church (Dale & Alpert, 2007); Catholic Diocese of Cloyne (Murphy et al., 2010); and US and UK sporting contexts (Hartill 2013; Darling at al., 2020). Such actions exhibited denial of both the abuse and that it was a serious issue which required addressing. Through passing it on, gave the impression that it was not their responsibility to resolve.

Extract 25

FM Translates: For example, in a number of cases where the Principal's son was the perpetrator, they would actually remove the victim and keep the perpetrator still in that institute.

P4: [Speaks Urdu]

FM Translates: When I mentioned these type of events to a number of scholars they said 'look this is part of the growing up, this is part of the culture, this is how one becomes a moulvi' [scholar].

P4 similarly spoke of the dismissive way in which such issues were addressed. Victim blaming took place in the form of removal of the victim rather than the perpetrator. Protection over image and family appeared to take precedence over the victim and the abuse. Concerns were not only brushed aside but were further justified as being inherent to the process of

becoming a person of religious authority, as has been reported in instances of abuse in Buddhism, where it was explained as 'karma purification' (Anders, 2019b). With this type of endorsement, at the highest level, it resulted in perpetrators remaining at large and free to perpetrate further abuse. This draws parallels to spiritual abuse within the Church context whereby secrecy became enforced (Oakley & Humphreys, 2019).

This rejection by the wider Muslim community made it apparent to victims that they had very little support in gaining redress and accountability. All participants were keen to prevent harm to potential future victims, yet this concern was not apparently shared by the religious leaders they consulted. Focus remained on protecting the institution and any potential wider backlash regardless of the cost to victims.

Extract 26

> Even more (3.) (sigh) shocking at the time was the amount of people that I went and told this story of mine to, leading Muslim individuals in this country and some of them has OBEs, MBEs, there was even a Knight (3.1) and (1.1) erm some of them listened to the narrative (.) but nothing practical was done (0.9) nothing. P1

P1 discussed the need to seek justice and accountability, driving him to approach prominent members of the Muslim community. Desperation to be acknowledged, to share the burden and to be believed was manifest. While many recipients of the victims' reports were sympathetic, nevertheless they simultaneously rejected acting on this information. This dismissal by prominent individuals created internal congruence for P1. Denial of the problem within the Muslim community, particularly relating to cultural differences, was noted as

being a barrier for services in engaging with different population groups by Rao and Rao (2010).

General Discussion

Sexual abuse within a religious context has severe long-term impact on the wellbeing of victims. Such impacts include: posttraumatic stress disorder, damage to sexual adjustment, low self-esteem, reduced capacity to trust others, and a deleterious effect on mental health (Oakley & Kinmond, 2013; Wolfe et al., 2006). Individuals who have been abused within a religious context additionally typically experience conflicts with their faith, their relationship with Deity/Deities (Hurcombe et al., 2019; Rodger et al., 2020). These all impact upon victim/survivors' feelings of hope and recovery (Rudolfsson & Tidefors, 2014). Suicidal ideation and detest towards Holy scriptures were profound impacts within this study. The consequences are compounded when abuse is committed by religious leaders (Mart, 2004). These conflicts can undermine the protective and positive aspects of religion, the latter including an increased ability to cope with stressful life events (Gall at al., 2011). Religious leaders are often looked up to as exemplars and symbolic of the faith itself. Hence damage from abuse becomes intensified through psychological and theological means (Cashwell & Swindle, 2018).

In this study, the first superordinate theme considered the various ways in which silence became toxic and the long-term resulting impact. Rodger et al. (2020) reported the increased prevalence of silence within ethnic minorities in particular, resulting in increased barriers for victims to overcome. Sawrikar and Katz (2017) draw attention to the interconnected nature of close-knit communities, and role of families within this as being significant impediments to reporting. One consequence in this study was the grave impact regarding the lack of recognition that victims had suffered abuse. The gradual process of

realisation by the victim appeared to compound the trauma. Participants disclosed experiencing various physical ailments over time, some of which they associated with the psychological impact of the abuse. Other ailments (physical ones in particular) were not initially linked to the trauma they had suffered; however, as they reached adulthood, participants reported that they began to understand the enormity of the abuse and the related trauma. This was an additional level of trauma. Enforced silence further deepened this trauma, with learned helplessness preventing disclosures or further help seeking. This toxic combination created a precipitous distancing with the faith, further intensified by the perpetrator being in a position of religious authority. Muslims consider the Qur'an as Divine revelation and a guide to life principles. Eaton (2012) explains that the Qur'an is the pinnacle of Islamic faith and provides a means for an individual to connect directly to God, without an intermediary. However, a religious authority; seen as a representation of the Holy scripture whilst perpetrating abuse, fragmented that connection. Despite some participants reporting actively re-connecting with their faith in adulthood, the initial damage caused to their belief and practice was substantial. With faith recognised as providing meaning to life itself (Bottoms et al, 2004) and being integral to the Muslim identity, the damage was not only profound but also deeply rooted, causing individuals to leave the faith altogether for some time. This created an acute shift in their identity as Muslims, which further cast them outside their communities. Not only did victims have to cope with the damaging impact of the abuse, they further had to manage the fallout within their families and communities. This resulted in deeply troubled isolation that became overpowering.

The second superordinate theme considered barriers to acknowledging and/or reporting and/or gaining a conviction against the abuse. Extant literature echoes these challenges, which have included difficulties with accepting child's word against an adult (Ramaswamy & Seshadri, 2017), the charisma of the perpetrators (Poling, 2005), the lack of

credibility that a religious authority would perpetrate such actions or do so in a holy setting (Minto et al., 2016), together with idealism around religious authorities (Oakley & Humphreys, 2019). Furthermore, there was misuse of holy scripture to justify the abuse. The amalgamation of such complexities resulted in significant relational impediments, both with the faith itself and with family, peers and community members. The added layers of isolation therefore compounded.

Where a religion has a very close-knit community, there are additional barriers to reporting abuse by members of the faith. Katzenstein and Fontes (2017) highlight an underreporting of CSA within Jewish communities, commencing with the institutional inadequate response to an internal investigation into a prominent Rabbi, who was later convicted on numerous CSA charges. The authors postulated five factors that underpinned the underreporting of the abuse; religious prohibitions in secular reporting and of speaking negatively of another Jew, fear of internal community backlash, collective and individual stigma and shame – also echoed strongly across the findings herein, expectations of utilising religious judicial systems and processes, and patriarchal gender roles. For individuals within such close-knit communities, these factors lead to the restricting of their everyday lives and their very identities.

There is evidence to suggest that denial and covering up the abuse at the family level serves the purpose of protecting the family from shame, social stigma and exclusion (Sawrikar & Katz, 2017). This was accentuated within close-knit communities, resulting in limited avenues of support. Covering up abuse at a religious institutional level performs the same function, with concerns about the resulting impact on the image of the faith itself. This is particularly the case given the presence of labelling, stigmatisation and alienation of Muslim communities (Taylor, 2020). Oakley et al. (2017) draw attention to the need for

increased awareness and training of child abuse linked to faith or belief (CALFB) for front line services. They emphasise the need for a multi-disciplinary approach. The findings within this study demonstrate the severe impact of abuse within Muslim faith institutions. For minority communities who already face added layers of barriers, it stripped away their once perceived safety net. In light of this, adopting a multi-disciplinary approach which considers wider barriers and cultural factors is further advocated (Chouliara & Narang, 2017; Oakley et al., 2019; Sawrikar & Katz, 2017).

Limitations of research

This research focused on a sensitive topic within a very cohesive community. Only a small number of individuals came forward to tell their stories (sometimes for the first time). This would inevitably have meant that the sample was skewed in terms of representativeness of people who had been abused by Imams/religious teachers. However, as the first piece of research known to authors in this area, it constitutes an important starting point for understanding this challenge within the Islamic faith community. The sample consisted of only South-Asian participants. Whilst this is reflective of the largest ethnic sub-group within the UK Muslim population, further research within other Muslim communities is recommended.

Given the sensitivities, participants naturally exhibited trauma. By opening Pandora's box, victims demonstrated a clear need for further support. This is a significant consideration for future research. Particularly given that many may not have previously disclosed to anyone or may have done so very minimally and even then, were likely to have been met with rejection.

One participant had not experienced sexual abuse but had experienced severe levels of physical, psychological and spiritual abuse, coercion and control. Due to the similarities surrounding his experiences and falling within the research criteria of being within a faith institution, it was deemed appropriate to include him within the study. One participant was internationally based and provided insight into the historical context of training for some UK based Imams/teachers. The overlap of his experiences with other participants strengthened the findings, particularly given his own position of religious authority. All participants reported knowing other victims within various contexts; hence the scope of the research requires broadening out. Equally, in order to encourage reporting and participation, supportive and adequate reporting mechanisms need to be put in place.

Implications for Practice

All participants were keen to know that there would be a tangible outcome to the research, particularly for potential future victims. They all wished to be contributing towards positive change.

Our recommendations are:

- Increased in-depth training required for Imams/teachers both on the theological prohibitions against child abuse and impact on victims.
- Imams/teachers to work in coordination with multi-disciplinary teams in order to effectively respond to reports of abuse.
- Increased opportunities for parents to gain deeper understanding of how to respond if their/a child reports abuse.

- Specific recovery support programme to be developed for Muslim survivors, adopting a multidisciplinary approach through utilising both mainstream services and theological support.

Conclusion

Abuse at a young age within the context of a sacred space/by individuals with religious authority created a profound impact on victims which lasted into significant periods of their adult lives. To date, literature on this impact within the Muslim population has remained scarce. Having faith intertwined with abuse, faith being a core aspect of the Muslim identity, resulted in at least temporary rejection of the faith itself and profound psychological and spiritual harm. This was compounded by delays in acknowledging the abuse as abuse, with significant impediments along the way where reporting was attempted. Supporting victims and facilitating safe platforms at various levels for addressing abuse within sacred spaces is recommended, with due consideration for cultural differences.

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Data Availability

Due to the detailed qualitative nature of the data, the data cannot be made available in the public domain due to the risk of participant identification and loss of anonymity.

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