Sacred Trust, Silent Wounds
An Exploration of the Experiences and Understanding of Abuse in Scottish Muslim Communities

A Research Report
August 2024

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Forewords

Professor Ingrid Mattson

To understand the significance of this report by Sacred (body:mind:space), we need to begin with the question, what is the purpose of community? In particular, what is the purpose of our mosques and other Muslim spaces? Our Wise Creator orders believers to gather together to work for what is best for us in the afterlife and in the life of this world. This is a theme of the Qur'an generally, and a strong theme in particular of Surah Tawba, the ninth chapter of the Qur'an. Allah (swt) tells us that building and sustaining community is work that must be done through the sincere partnership of believing men and believing women, and this is the work which will earn God's mercy:

The believing men and the believing women are sincere partners with one another
They promote what is right and proscribe what is wrong
They establish prayer and they pay the wealth-tax
They obey Allah and His messenger
They are the ones upon whom Allah will bestow His mercy
Verily Allah is All-Mighty, Wise. (Tawba 9:71)

In contrast the hypocrites, who are condemned by Allah (swt) also work together, but for evil and stop what is right:

The hypocritical men and the hypocritical women are from one another
they promote what is wrong and proscribe what is right
They withhold what they possess and they ignore Allah so He ignores them
Surely the hypocrites are those who cause corruption. (Tawba 9:66)

Even during the lifetime of the blessed Prophet ﷺ there were those who established a mosque to cause harm, promote disbelief and cause division among the believers (Tawba 9:107). If the blessed Prophet ﷺ was tested with those who used sacred means (such as a mosque) to perpetuate evil, why should we not be prepared to face a similar test? The life of the blessed Prophet ﷺ is a source of endless lessons for the believers.

While the verses above are strong warnings for Muslims, we should be careful to impugn hypocrisy upon other believers or communities because we, unlike Allah, cannot know what is in the hearts of others. What we do know is that there are certainly many obstacles to fulfilling our purpose in coming together in community. The *Sacred Trust, Silent Wounds* report identifies racism and Islamophobia as major obstacles to community justice and healing. These systemic sources of oppression cause some of our brothers and sisters to suspect any disclosure of abuse committed within a Muslim setting as likely originating from forces hostile to the Muslim community. Even believers who have experienced harm are often reluctant to disclose what they have suffered because of their love for Islam and their fear that what they share will be misused by Islamophobes or others. Nevertheless, we must heed the words of our Lord who in Surah Ma'ida says:

O you who believe, be upstanding for Allah as witnesses for justice
And do not let the hatred of other people towards you stop you from being just
Be just, that is closer to being mindful of Allah
Be mindful of Allah; surely Allah is aware of what you do (Ma'ida 5:8)

Responding to abuse which occurs within a Muslim setting is therefore challenging, and requires interventions by those who love Islam and the Muslim community, and who at the same time have the knowledge and skills to manage the complex needs and pressures of this situation.

The researchers and practitioners responsible for this report have clearly demonstrated their sincere commitments to the welfare of the Scottish Muslim community in manifest ways; there are two practices I wish to uplift as particularly important. First, their research is based on "community-led knowledge." Not only does centering the knowledge of those closest to the experiences of abuse yield better information, it uplifts their dignity, and engages them to be active participants in healing. Second, the research is accessible and inclusive, focusing not only beyond the "perfect victim" (if there is such a person), but also those whose abuse is often ignored, such as males who have been abused by other males.

The authors of this report point out that Muslim spaces are hoped to be a "sanctuary" for our community members. From the Arabic root for the word *haram*, meaning "sanctuary," comes also the word *hurma*, meaning "sanctity," or "inviolability". It is because our noble Prophet ﷺ compared the sanctity of the holy cities, such as Mecca, with the sanctity of the believers, that we named our work to prevent and respond to abuse within Muslim spaces the "Hurma Project." It is simply not possible to have community sanctuaries without prioritizing the sanctity of the community members who seek out those spaces. The work of the men and women of Sacred to strengthen this link is a manifestation of their deep understanding of Islam, their love for Allah, and their love for the servants of Allah. I pray for the continued success of this work.

Professor Ingrid Mattson, PhD (U. Chicago) is the London & Windsor Chair of Islamic Studies at Huron University College at Western University in London, Canada. Dr. Mattson's writings focus on Qur'an interpretation, Islamic ethics and interfaith relations. Currently Dr. Mattson is directing the Hurma Project, a research and educational initiative she founded in 2018 to prevent and respond to violations of trust and spiritual abuse in Muslim spaces. Previously Dr. Mattson was Professor of Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary (CT) where she founded the first accredited program for Muslim Chaplains in North America. From 2001-2010 Dr. Mattson served as Vice-President, then President, of the Islamic Society of North America (USA). In that position she established the Office of Interfaith and Community Engagement in Washington DC, facilitating new partnerships with other faith-based and civic organisations.

Forewords

Professor Lisa Oakley

This report and the research on which it is based is essential reading. It makes a significant contribution to our understanding and awareness of abuse in Scottish Muslim communities. The focus on Scottish Muslim experiences addresses a paucity of work in this area to date.

The community-based research approach taken is both innovative and significant. This approach ensures that the work is collaborative and that the voices and accounts of those with lived experience are central to the research. The dissemination activities also demonstrate commitment to working together in partnership to effect change.

The findings illustrate the importance of community spaces for Muslims in Scotland. They provide comment on the characteristics of spaces which can support communities. However, the report also evidences abuse and harm. The voices of those who have experienced this are central to the report. The experiences detailed demonstrate areas where safeguarding knowledge and practice needs to be developed and improved. They also illustrate that areas such as accountability and referral need to be addressed. It is clear that all forms of abuse including spiritual abuse have been experienced by some within this community, however there are barriers to being able to discuss, disclose, report and seek support, which need to be addressed. The report thoughtfully explains and addresses the intersection between Islamophobia and racism and how these sustain experiences of abuse.

There is a wealth of knowledge within this report, which allows for a detailed exploration of experiences of abuse within the Scottish Muslim community to be better understood. The report explains a multitude of factors which impact experiences of abuse. It also describes factors relevant to support and recovery.

It is essential reading both for those in faith communities and in the statutory sector seeking to develop their understanding. The recommendations at the end of the report will support those who wish to develop effective safeguarding practices and create healthier safer cultures and communities. It will underpin the identification of abuse and harm but also the learning will work towards better prevention and response.

The strength of this work is in the collaborative approach taken throughout and the commitment to continuing to work in partnership to develop a practice for the future and a more survivor-focused trauma-informed approach.

Lisa is professor of safeguarding and knowledge exchange and deputy programme leader for the MSc in Family and Child Psychology in the School of Psychology at the University of Chester in the UK. Lisa has taught in higher education for over 30 years. She is a chartered psychologist and chair of the British psychological society safeguarding advisory group. Lisa has conducted research into issues of faith, safeguarding and abuse for the past 20 years and has focused on spiritual abuse, she has co-authored a number of articles and book chapters on these topics. Lisa has presented on these topics nationally and internationally. Lisa is currently engaged in a cross-faith research project exploring experiences of disclosing abuse that was experienced in a religious context.

Forewords

Shaykh Amer Jamil

The authors, contributors, and participants of the report have to be commended for their courage and willingness to speak the uncomfortable truth. After reading the Sacred Trust, Silent Wounds report it becomes very clear that a lot of work is required to progress community safety and cohesion. Safe spaces are essential if we have any hope of seeing growth at the community level. Those occupying positions of influence and authority of any community space need to take on board the findings of this report. The Prophet ﷺ said "Each of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock", indicating the enormous responsibility upon the shoulders of those running our community organisations and making them accountable in the next life for any negligence on their part.

The report makes it clear that many processes are simply missing in our organisations and an urgent updating is needed. Our early community elders done a great job in building solid foundations for their future generations. It is now upon this generation to further strengthen those foundations through employing up-to-date checks and balances, processes, and procedures to improve service provision, and importantly to deal effectively with the reality of abuse in all its forms. This is a challenge, as every community suffers from abuse within its ranks in some form or another, one only needs to follow the news to continually come across stories of abuse in all strata of society.

The elimination of harm forms a major basis of rulings in Islamic law and it is a fundamental of this religion to fight oppression in all its forms, whether that is in international affairs, or in our own backyards. The Prophet said ﷺ 'Oh My servants I have prohibited oppression for myself and made it prohibited amongst you, so do not oppress one another', he ﷺ also warned 'Beware of the supplication of the oppressed. There is no veil between it and Allah.' and further advised 'Support your brother whether he as an oppressor or oppressed.' His companions asked how they could help the oppressor, as they understood how to help the oppressed but not the oppressor. The Prophet ﷺ explained that they could help him by preventing him from committing further oppression.

Every person should be able to access community organisations and spaces without risking their dignity. Protection of dignity *(ird)* is included within the higher objectives of Islamic law and taken very seriously, with appropriate deterrents in place. The findings of the report should send alarm bells for anyone involved in community work and be an impetus for them to come together to collectively foster a way forward. My hope is that this will be a first step in spring-boarding our community to take the issues highlighted in this report seriously by taking proactive steps towards safeguarding our community, especially the most vulnerable amongst us.

Amer Jamil holds a (LLB) law degree from Strathclyde university and BA (Hons) in Islamic studies from the University of Wales. He spent 10 years studying the Islamic sciences including 5 years with scholars in the Middle East (Syria and Yemen), gaining him teaching licenses (ijaza) in various Islamic sciences. His main field of interest is Islamic family law; an area in which he has studied in depth having studied all four schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

In 2009 he co-founded the Solas Foundation with Shaykh Ruzwan Muhammad and established the iSyllabus Islamic studies program. He is currently the co-director of the programme.

Sacred (body:mind:space)

Sacred (body:mind:space) is an unaffiliated Community Interest Company (CIC) dedicated to community-based research. Our focus is on researching all forms of abuse in Scottish Muslim communities in collaboration with established partners. We are driven by centring the lived experiences and voices of the Muslim community - the heart of Sacred's work is community empowerment. We work towards creating a safe and authentic space for survivors[1] as well as the Muslim community at large.

The researchers

Maariyah Adam

She is the Founder and Managing Director of Sacred (body:mind:space). She has a background in research and development and has been working and volunteering in community organisations for over twenty years. She holds a BA in Social Sciences, MA in Islamic Studies, MSc in Public Policy, and is currently a Doctoral Researcher at The University of Chester. Her research interest is in understanding the role of Islamic-based texts in the perpetuation of spiritual abuse in Muslim communities in the UK.

Dr Rahmanara Chowdhury

She is a Chartered Psychologist and Senior Lecturer in Forensic Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. She has an undergraduate degree in Ergonomics, masters in Psychology and completed her PhD at Brunel University London, funded by the ESRC. Her research interests include domestic violence and abuse, spiritual abuse, forensic mental health, intersectionality, and holistic well-being. She often engages at the grassroots with organisations and communities alike, in relation to sensitive issues relating to different forms of abuse and the intersection of psychology with faith in informing holistic healing. Alongside her academic publications, Rahmanara has published several books on domestic abuse in Muslim communities.

The researchers

Mahrukh Adnan-Shaukat

She is a senior researcher and brings a wealth of experience to the team from her years of experience at a women's support organisation. She has worked on improving the levels of understanding around equalities in relation to gender, race, and religion, using feedback from minoritised communities to pilot and design programs in schools and training for organisations on holistic inclusive practice. She has experience developing research on a range of topics in collaboration with community members ensuring their protection and support. She holds a BA in International Relations, a certificate in counselling skills and six years of helpline experience.

Imam Farooq Mulla

He has worked as an Imam in the USA, London and Lincolnshire as a Chaplain for over twenty years in various prisons in the UK, including ten years at HMP Whatton, a sessional Muslim Chaplain at Rampton High Secure Hospital, and as an interpreter with the criminal justice system.

1 Throughout this report we refer to survivors as those who have experienced abuse. However, within this we acknowledge that not all survivors have had the opportunity or space in which they have been able to pursue adequate support or recourse to justice.

Summary of Findings

1. The Scottish Muslim Community: Space and Safeguarding

Muslim community spaces have a profound significance for Muslims in Scotland. There is a deep-seated need for connection, belonging, and spiritual fulfilment. Mosques emerge as central hubs, offering a sense of communal identity and worship, with a desire for increased accessibility and engagement. Engaging Muslim spaces in Scotland are characterised by peer interactions, accessible language, and opportunities for personal and spiritual growth. The ideal Muslim community spaces cater to diverse needs, serving as hubs and particularly supporting women, families, and newcomers to the faith. Muslim spaces are sanctuaries for faith affirmation, identity preservation, and socialising. There are however significant gaps in safeguarding practices within Muslim spaces in Scotland, with instances of physical violence, emotional abuse, and sexual misconduct reported. These breaches are exacerbated by a lack of awareness, accountability, and institutional support, leading to a culture of silence and fear of reporting concerns.

2. Abuse: Community Perceptions, Reporting and Spiritual Abuse

The Muslim community acknowledges that like other communities, abuse is a significant issue within the community, with a majority recognising the existence of stigma and a cultural reluctance to openly discuss abuse. There is widespread consensus that learning about and addressing abuse is not contrary to Islamic principles, and there is a clear understanding of the various forms abuse can take, encompassing physical, emotional, verbal, and religious aspects. Barriers to accessing support include fear, shame, language barriers and being unaware of available resources. The types of abuse reported range from racism and domestic abuse to spiritual abuse, with profound impacts on individuals' mental and physical well-being. Equally, there are low rates of reporting for a host of different reasons including fear of repercussions, stigma, disbelief, and mistrust in professional ability of religious authority figures. Many survivors remain silent, fearing community backlash and concerns about protecting perpetrators or family honour. Spiritual abuse is present within the Muslim community, with a substantial portion of participants reporting personal experiences or knowing someone who has experienced such abuse. This abuse encompasses various forms, including justifying inappropriate behaviour through religion, coercion, physical violence, and manipulation of religious teachings to maintain control and silence victims.

Summary of Findings

3. The Role of Islamophobia and Racism in Sustaining Abuse

Islamophobia and racism permeate the experiences of abuse within the Scottish Muslim community, serving not only as barriers to seeking support but also as forms of abuse themselves. Participants frequently cited Islamophobia and racism when defining abuse and identified them as common types of abuse within the community. These systemic barriers create micro and macro-level challenges for survivors seeking assistance, hindering engagement with support services and justice systems, and creating isolation and insecurity. The pervasive fear of Islamophobia in public spaces and lack of trust in authorities, particularly the police, further exacerbate these challenges.

4. Individual Experiences of Abuse

The normalisation of abuse within Muslim communities in Scotland is deeply rooted in cultural and familial norms, perpetuated by a culture of silence and a lack of accountability for all types of abusive behaviours. Additionally, the role of religion and cultural practices complicates the understanding of abuse, with survivors grappling with the distinction between Islamic teachings and cultural norms. Authority figures within Muslim spaces, including religious leaders and family members, often wield power that exacerbates abusive situations, further entrenching the culture of silence. Despite the challenges faced, survivors' experiences have prompted reflections on personal faith and a push for greater understanding and reform within Muslim communities.

Abuse within Muslim communities in Scotland profoundly affects survivors physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually. Physiological stress responses, mental health issues, isolation, and strained relationships with family and faith are common consequences. Coping mechanisms range from cognitive distancing to seeking solace in religious practices. The impact extends beyond the individual, disrupting relationships and faith communities in profound ways. Recovery from abuse is described as a complex and non-linear process, often undertaken without professional support. Survivors rely heavily on their faith for solace and strength, utilising prayer, rituals, and spiritual practices as coping mechanisms. However, there are concerns about over-reliance on spirituality as a means of avoidance or denial. Survivors emphasise the need for safe spaces where they can be heard, believed, and supported without fear of judgment or reprisal.

Methodology

Why community-based research?

1. Research led by Sacred, a grassroots community-engaged organisation in collaboration with academic support. Our community-based research is a whole approach that seeks to create collaboration and co-construction with Scottish Muslim communities. We believe this is essential for autonomy in knowledge creation as it centres the experiences, voices, and lived experiences at the heart of research, knowledge production and dissemination.

2. Grassroots engagement was maintained throughout data collection, with data collection embedded into some of these. This involved holding a series of community engagements across Scottish Muslim communities as follows,

October 2022, Qawwamoon: Protectors and Providers, Muslim Women (Online)
November 2022, Safety & Safeguarding in Scottish Mosques, The Muslim Community (Online)
December 2022, Abuse in Spiritual Contexts, The Muslim Community (Online)
January 2023, An Introduction to Sacred Research, Muslim Women (Edinburgh)

3. Research dissemination was organised into 'Cultivating Mental and Spiritual Wellbeing', 'Cultivating Healthy Spaces', and 'Report Launch Events'. Report launch events are to be held in the summer of 2024. Every event has been a collaborative effort between local and national community organisations. Events were held between September 2023 and June 2024 in several formats as follows:

Cultivating Mental and Spiritual Wellbeing:

September 2023 – present, **'Men's Club'**, Muslim men, Glasgow and Dundee
November 2023, **Healing Through the Qur'an,** The Muslim community, Edinburgh
December 2023, **Qawwamoon: Protectors and Providers**, Muslim women, Glasgow
December 2023, **Tea & Cake Event**, Muslim Women, Dundee
December 2023, **Islamophobia & Muslim Women,** Muslim Women, Online
April 2024, **'Heart Work' Retreat**, The Muslim community, Loch Lomond

Cultivating Healthy Spaces:

November 2023, **Cultivating Spiritual Wellbeing on Campus**, Young Muslim students, Dundee
February 2024, **Cultivating Healthy Muslim Spaces**, The Muslim community, Online
March 2024, **The Role of Islamophobia in Sustaining Abuse**, Non-Muslim Stakeholders, Edinburgh

Our participants[2]:

	Male	Female	Total
One to one interviews	2	4	6
Online survey	6	52	58
Focus groups	8	32	40
Total	18	88	104

In-person interviews took place in neutral environments, some of which were held online as requested by participants. Two researchers were present at each interview, except three interviews where one researcher was present to protect participant wishes. The online survey was disseminated through a number of different community contacts and shared further afield through these contacts. The five focus groups were held in a combination of online and community spaces with the following groups:

3 female-only groups (Glasgow, Dundee, Edinburgh)

Mixed-gender young people (Dundee)

Male-only group (Online)

2 The number of participants as recorded in February 2024

All of these were transcribed verbatim with identifying details removed. Each researcher read each transcript before coming together as a group to analyse each interview. A thematic approach was adopted whereby key themes from the research were derived through careful studying and coding of the transcripts[3]. This process was repeated for the focus groups.

Our participants were recruited *via* convenience and snowballing sampling methods – informing community groups, organisations, and everyday members about the research and allowing them to come forward if they wished to partake. These contacts further went on to share details of the research with others. Our community engagement events also contributed to spreading awareness further and having people come forward to take part in the research.

Positionality: The Importance of Muslim Researchers

> *"I trust you, so I feel like it is so important that these stories are told because they still happen…we need to eradicate it. I have also realised we can never get rid of this problem without talking about it"*
> *(Female)*

We are deeply rooted in the belief that our research should be about **amplifying Scottish Muslim experiences**. We believe that Muslim researchers, embedded in the community are ideally placed to conduct sensitive research within their communities. We are passionate about empowering community change by leading on research, rather than relying on research done 'upon' our communities. Our core approach is informed by Muslim values of *ihsaan*[4] and the lived experience of the interplay between culture and religion that are a normative experience in Muslim communities in Scotland.

Introduction

This report is the culmination of two years of research and work in the **Scottish Muslim community** – work that has been intentionally designed to bridge the gap between **academia and community empowerment.** This research has sought to explore the often complex and nuanced experiences of abuse within Scottish Muslim communities, emphasising the distinct cultural and religious aspects that shape these experiences. Therefore, this report seeks to engage all sections of the Muslim community and wider non-Muslim communities in opening meaningful conversations and interactions on the experiences of abuse in Scottish Muslim communities.

It Is essential to frame the findings in the report in the context of **Scottish Muslim experiences.** The last census (2011) shows that **Muslims constitute 1.45%** of the population in Scotland and Scotland's Muslims make up 2.8% of all Muslims in the UK. Literature demonstrates race, cultural, religious, and gendered identity formation, as well as prejudice, and discrimination as being prevalent and decidedly central to creating and informing Muslim identity politics[5]. These intersections provide the first layer of complexity when beginning to discuss how abuse is experienced in the Muslim community – the distinctions to meander through are many. **Gender and culture** are among the prominent distinctions; however, **faith/religion** is becoming a prominent distinction in how abuse manifests itself and is experienced by individuals and communities.

The challenges faced by Muslims in accessing mental and physical health services are well-documented[6]. What this report highlights is the need to **understand the centrality of faith and faith identity in the holistic journey of a survivor.** This is exemplified within the web model of domestic violence and abuse[7] where the dual role of faith for Muslim victims is brought to the forefront. **This research demonstrates the significance of understanding the nuanced and faith-based needs of Muslim communities within the context of abuse.**

We know that Muslim communities are often apprehensive about drawing negative press in addressing sensitive topics[8] therefore there is a critical need for us as Muslim researchers to lead this research in a culturally sensitive manner with realistic and informed suggestions for **addressing vulnerabilities and creating grassroots change** - this research project has been uniquely placed to do just that.

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3 Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis was used which allows the data to lead the analysis free from the interpretation of the researchers. Upon reaching the data saturation point, the most prominent themes were identified and focused on.

4 An approximate meaning relates to excellence in integrity, conduct, and purpose, with the intent to research with sincerity to the subject and those who partake.

5 Finlay & Hopkins, 2019; Hopkins, 2021; Bonino, 2015; Bagheri, 2018; Bonino, 2019; Modood, 2003,2005, 2007; Heyes, 2020; Moghamdam, 2019; Birt, 2009; El-Shayyal, 2020

6 See https://www.thelanterninitiative.co.uk/research

7 Chowdhury & Winder (2022)

8 Ibid

Organisation of this report

We have endeavoured to present the findings from this research as clearly and succinctly as possible. It is worth noting that it is necessary to present our research incrementally to provide a holistic and detailed synopsis, therefore this report marks the first of several forthcoming publications.

This report is organised into four distinct sections:

Section 1 - The Scottish Muslim Community: Space and Safeguarding

1. Muslim Community Spaces
2. Accessibility and Inclusivity in Scottish Muslim Community Spaces
3. Safeguarding in Muslim Spaces

Section 2 - Abuse: Community Perceptions, Reporting & Spiritual Abuse

1. The Muslim Community's Perceptions of Abuse
2. Accessing Support Services
3. The Experiences of Abuse and Reporting
4. Spiritual Abuse

Section 3 - The Role of Islamophobia and Racism in Sustaining Abuse

1. Islamophobia and Abuse
2. Examples of How Islamophobia and Racism Sustains Abuse

Section 4 - Individual Experiences of Abuse

1. The Normalisation of Abuse
2. The Role of Religion
3. The Impact of Abuse
4. Disclosures and Reporting
5. Support and Recovery
6. What Helps?

Section 1

The Scottish Muslim Community: Space and Safeguarding
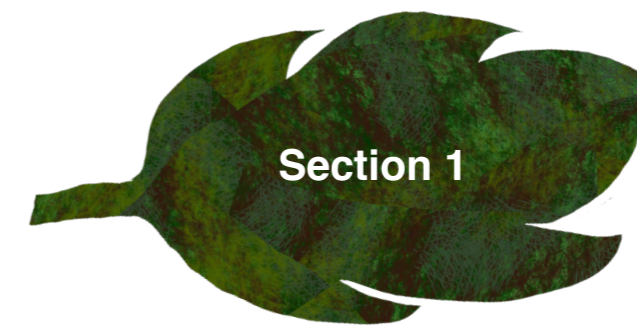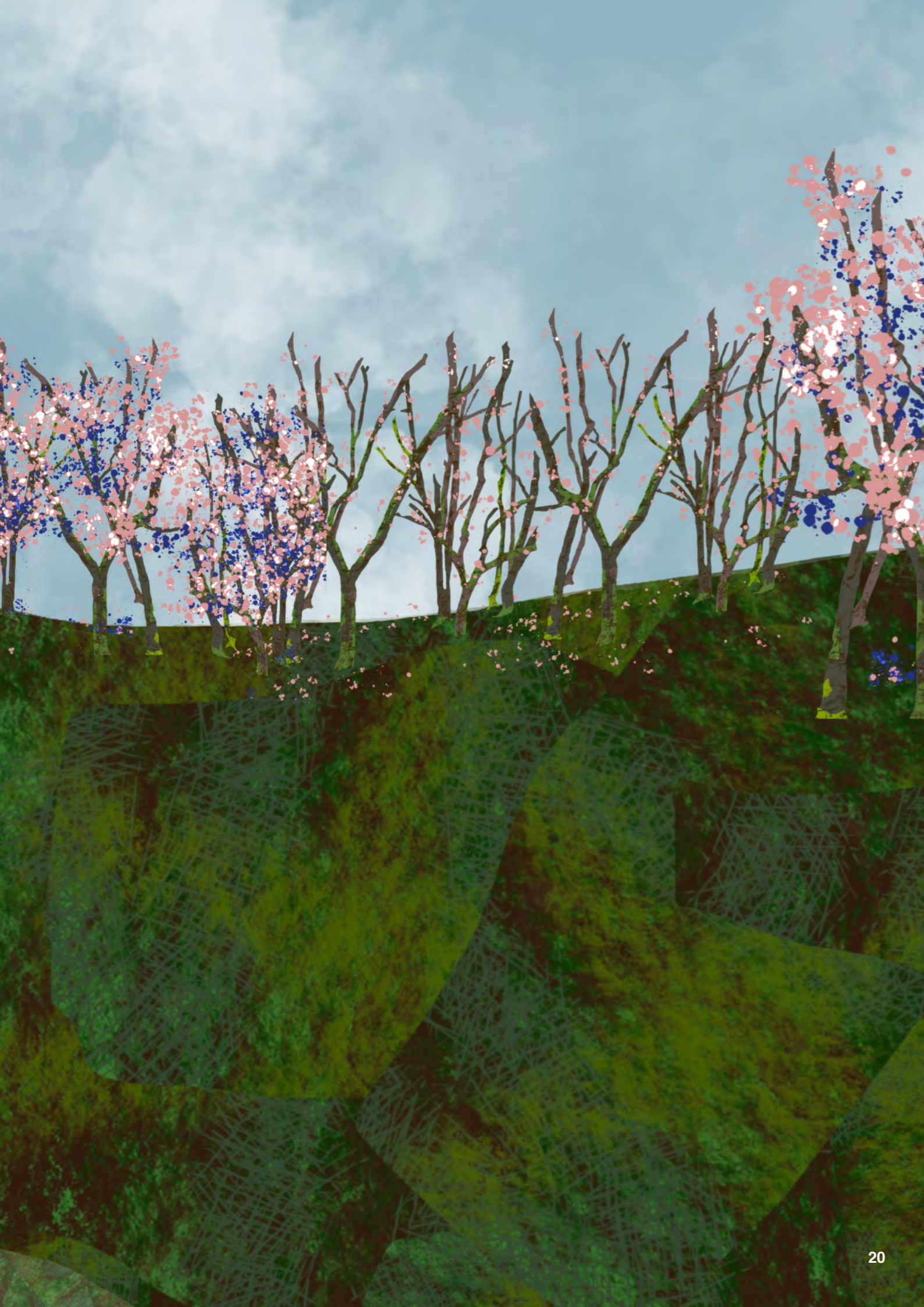
1. The Scottish Muslim Community: Space and Safeguarding

This research has captured an intricate fabric, woven together by authentic and truthful threads of experiences, articulated by the Scottish Muslim community. Men and women who shared their experiences meandered through a wide range of issues and discussions that are all important in deepening the understanding of Muslim communities in general, and the Scottish Muslim community specifically.

These discussions unveiled three main discussion points. These are;

1.1 Muslim Community Spaces
Online/in-person
The gendered experience
The purpose of Scottish Muslim spaces
Islamic vs. Muslim spaces

1.2 Accessibility and Inclusivity in Scottish Muslim Spaces
Muslim women and female leadership
Accessibility
Knowing the right people
Financial accessibility
Barriers within mosques
Segregation

1.3 Safeguarding in Scottish Muslim Spaces
Muslim spaces as safe spaces?
Safeguarding as a government responsibility
Parental interventions
Additional burdens within Islamic education
Examples of breaches in safeguarding
Lack of trust
A lack of accountability
The importance of parents and guardians in preventative spaces
Reporting concerns (what happens when you report?)

1.1 Muslim Community Spaces

What spaces are Muslims using? mosques, madrassahs, women's groups, youth groups, educational institutions, student societies, online spaces, Muslim charities, informal groups teaching and learning about the Islamic faith.

The Muslim communities in Scotland have established a variety of spaces that cater to their social and spiritual needs and have demonstrated an aptitude for **innovation**, **community development**, and **social mobility** across several fields. This research identifies the innate need to have, access as well as exist as a 'Muslim' in faith-based spaces. The mosque was mentioned as the shared space most utilised and the aspiration to use and access the mosque more frequently. Thus, identifying it as the focal point of worship and connectedness to Muslim identity. There was an expression of needing a spiritual space in a physical sense as *"somewhere to connect to God" (Male)*.

"There is an innate feeling that you're missing something…you know I decided to join (names a place) purely because I felt as if I was missing this element of community…there is always this desire to be amongst Muslims"
(Male)

What makes a Muslim space engaging? dynamic, like-minded peers, engaging with current issues, accessible language, social spaces to build connections, facilitate pursuit of knowledge (personal and spiritual development), spiritual atmosphere in the design of spaces (aura – conducive to connecting to God), social contact related to spiritual practice (prayer).

What should Muslim community spaces ideally look like for Muslims in Scotland today? active spaces, community hub, catering to women and families, catering to the needs of 'reverts'.

The gendered experience

"I feel sometimes our mosques are quite unwelcoming. Like I've been to Jummah (Friday prayer)…the priority obviously is given to men…and a very small kind of space is left for women. Sometimes you go in, and men are like "Oh no, no, no you can't come in...

...there's no space for women" and I know there is, so I just say, yes there is, and I just go ahead and make my way but not everybody knows that. And some of the men don't even know and it can be quite intimidating because they end up – the men end up using the women's toilets. The women's, like the whole space, gets kind of taken over so there's not really a safe space for women"

(Female)

Online / In-person

"I think since the pandemic, I've not really managed to kind of find a class that was working with my work commitments, I do online bayans (lectures) with certain scholars and there's online kind of courses"
(Female)

Since the onset of the pandemic, people are increasingly relying on and becoming accustomed to accessing spaces online. Whilst this was a necessity during the lockdown periods, online spaces have now become a convenient and popular option. Many people rely on social media for information about community spaces, what they offer, and how to access them. The importance of needing online spaces to access tailored educational or informative material was expressed as a way to overcome accessibility and financial barriers. Online spaces offer the feeling of being part of a larger community, especially after Covid. The overwhelming feeling remains that, whilst an option for convenience *via* an online method is useful, meeting people is much preferable for fulfilling social and educational needs.

There is a clear and distinct difference in how men and women describe their experiences. Male participants spoke in terms of **growth**, **desire**, and **agency** in using and creating spaces. It felt like men were "guiding" the development of Muslim spaces in more ways than one, and women were more likely to be in supportive roles, rather than leadership roles. This was broadly attributed to the South Asian culture and associated cultural practices that dominate not only mosque spaces specifically but the majority of communities that make up Scottish Muslim communities. However, this goes hand in hand with the fact that Muslim women have established and are running organisations like **AMINA - The Muslim Women's Resource Centre** and **The Muslim Women's Association of Edinburgh in Scotland** which were sources of **inspiration**, **support**, and **motivation** for many female participants. Additionally, some suggested that one of the most effective solutions for Muslim women, in particular, was to participate in **organising and developing new initiatives** that serve a missing need. This indicates clear agency across the community in the creation of Muslim spaces.

The purpose of Scottish Muslim spaces

"I think, as an opportunity to meet others…as an opportunity to kind of build connections…and I would say that, obviously, the Islamic component is there. So, in terms of gaining the pursuit of knowledge, that's quite, that's also a big consideration for me as well. So I guess if these places offer an opportunity to both converse socially, and make, you know, connections with people, plus, you know, also build on my kind of Islamic knowledge and improve my, I guess, improve my, my connection to Islam, then I think those are the kind of the two main points that I kind of, I think, are really important"

(Male)

Men reported that they did not have any concerns concerning their safety or access to a wide range of spaces. The centrality of males frequenting the mosque for prayer is also the reason the mosque is a social space for men, allowing them to utilise the mosque informally. This highlights the level of access, freedom, and safety enjoyed by men and the comparatively different experiences to those of women[9].

Muslim women on the other hand reported barriers such as being primary caregivers, isolation, the gendered nature of spaces, and a lack of opportunity to develop agency. This reality directly impacts the feeling that Muslim spaces are not doing enough to cater to the needs of Muslim women. One potential solution may be the adoption of a 'family approach', one that resembles the experiences of Muslim communities in other countries such as Turkey or Malaysia.

9 See: Hear My Voice: A Report on the Experiences of Muslim Women's Engagement with Mosques in Scotland & My British Mosque Report

The common and binding purpose or need for Muslim spaces was expressed as a place to **affirm the Muslim faith**, **preserve Muslim identity**, and **a place to socialise with people whose faith aligns with one's own**. In this way, 'sacred' spaces have been expanded to include 'creative' spaces. This has been propelled both historically as well as currently by the need to provide opportunities for a vast spectrum of Muslim communities that are safe, accessible, and free from formal religious institutional restrictions.

It is worth noting that some religious institutions themselves have expanded beyond worship, to providing sports facilities and outreach to non-Muslim communities. **Young people spoke about the importance of their student Islamic societies as a place of belonging and a space to build their religious identities.**

The Mosque where prayer and worship are central, is the space where Muslims feel free to express their Muslim identity, free of the fear of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim Hatred, cushioned by people who understand each other. **Belonging**, **acceptance**, **diversity of languages**, **safety**, and **specialised spaces**, such as **female-only spaces** were all concepts that were repeated with every interaction. What has been highlighted are the foundational seeds that have dictated the varied nature and distinctiveness of spaces that have emerged in Scotland over the decades.

What does a welcoming space look like? *"So, for me to feel like a community is actually safe...a smile and being welcoming, meaning inclusive" (Female).* It is important and necessary to cater to subsets of the Muslim community - in particular, female-only spaces and spaces for young people. There is a need to combat feelings of loneliness and needing a community space to meet others *"because I'm just like I said, I'm feeling really lonely" (Female)*

Islamic vs. Muslim spaces

"When I was going down to the Islamic classes…I think it was, it was very focused. And I think that was the right way to go ahead because, you know, when we get together, we can start talking and waste the time away. And because we were following, I would call it a curriculum, because the teachers were really good. And so, we were very focused, and it was just learning and that's it"   *(Female)*

A clear distinction can be articulated between 'Muslim' and 'Islamic' spaces. **A Muslim space is one aligned with the social, creative, and cultural needs of the wider Muslim community. Whereas an 'Islamic' space is one specifically for worship and Islamic education of the community.**

The level of fluidity between the two is dependent on the nature of the activity and the audience. Underpinning both is that Muslim spaces are seen as a means of developing Muslim identity in children. Additionally, specific Islamic norms and behaviours need to be present for a space to be designated 'Muslim', namely those related to the outward practice of the faith and boundaries that are dictated by what is 'halal' (permissible) and 'haram' (forbidden). There was a clear expression that the Muslim community wants and needs both of these spaces to exist simultaneously.

1.2 Accessibility and Inclusivity in Scottish Muslim Community Spaces

Barriers to accessing Musim spaces: poor advertising, lack of females in leadership positions, reliance on public transport, geography, childcare, finances, language, ill-equipped Imams, physical access to mosques for women, group-based access.

Accessibility is essential for any space to be functional and successful for its intended user group. There are wide-ranging barriers related to accessibility in Muslim spaces. Language features heavily. Organisations that are made up of a diverse group of people are sought out as there is a clear understanding that staff, as well as service users speak a variety of languages, consequently opening the prospect for engaging with people that have a shared cultural background.

There are also feelings and experiences of being isolated from community spaces and groups that at times can feel exclusive. Established spaces and 'circles' were said to 'put people off' from using them. They can feel unwelcoming and exclusive rather than inclusive. The clear split across mosques and community spaces along ethnic lines were felt to create unnecessary divisions.

A wide range of nationalities representing the diversity of Muslim communities in Scotland has captured the need for Muslim spaces to be places where diversity is encouraged and welcomed. **Muslim women's organisations and university Islamic societies were found to closely resemble ideal models of inclusion for such diversity.**

Muslim women and female leadership

"So, I have no idea who was running and who was in charge, or because I was mostly in the woman's area, never seen anyone. Or mostly at night…I don't…there was no activity. So, it was just prayer. So, I have no idea. I never needed to find someone who was in authority or something like that. So no, actually, I have no clue about it"   *(Female)*

Muslim women in particular experience higher levels of exclusion from Muslim community spaces as a result of accessibility issues. The **burden of childcare**, and **lack of child-friendly Muslim spaces**, as well as **limited access to information**, are large contributing factors that lead to reduced access. This is exasperated further by the unmet needs of minorities within minorities, for example, single mothers, and those with hidden disabilities.

Women expressed **a sense of comfort**, and **a positive frame of mind** in being able to speak to other Muslim women, particularly in the context of being new to the country.

"I do understand that in Islam, men are protectors of women. But you can't always go to the man to speak...So even mosque x, for instance, if I were to have a problem, is there somebody like a female figure that I can go to and say, these are the issues? Can you speak to the imam? I feel like that is missing"   *(Female)*

Accessibility

"But with buses and all, I don't drive so I was never able to go there"   *(Female)*

The reliance on public transport for some means that finances and geography are a real concern. In a city like Glasgow, it is often difficult to physically get to events or services that are on the opposite side of the city. Furthermore, the additional quandary of not knowing whether a mosque space allows physical access or has open and accessible entrances.

Knowing the right people

"I think they feel it's their territory even if I went there to host a programme, and, you know, I don't think it would be allowed, you know, even when I was trying to do one in masjid x…and seems when we actually use relatives and friends and family, but this is the barriers they put, you know, so it's quite unfortunate"   *(Male)*

Nepotism and 'knowing the right people' may facilitate access to certain spaces or individuals in the community. Additionally, established groups are seen to be 'exclusive' and inaccessible and therefore tend to attract or facilitate new people, making it harder for some to find a Muslim space.

Financial accessibility

"It's expensive. It's very expensive…if you have more than one child, it all adds up. I've had parents reach out to me and said, you know, "I've lost my job. What do I do?" and I said, well, they do offer scholarships. You need to talk to the management who aren't very welcoming"   *(Female)*

A monetary requirement for participation in an event or a space can also act as a barrier for those in financially difficult situations, particularly those with larger families who use madrassahs and other educational facilities for their children. There were also indications towards mistrust, due to a lack of transparency in what the money was being used for.

Barriers within mosques

"It's really sad to say this, but the kind of main barrier is actually just kind of the main, the Imams of the mosque, who, who kind of have a very they're kind of very set in their ways, and it's very difficult to convince them otherwise. And I guess, you probably need someone up here who's I guess of equivalent stature. To be able to convince them to change their mind, which is a difficulty"   *(Male)*

Mosques specifically are creating extra layers of barriers to accessibility. It has been articulated that mosques do not offer community hubs for everyone and lack of representation on mosque boards, as well as untrained and ill-equipped Imam's act as barriers for the wider Muslim community.

Segregation

"I think the separation between men and women, which doesn't exist anywhere else in society, is, is a real problem. And I'm not, I'm not talking about having completely open and mixed. Whenever you see, we use the word mixed in the Muslim context, people they immediately think that you're, you're doing something which is, which is, you know, heading towards Zina (fornication), or something like that. And I think, what you'll also find then if, if the rest of society is like that, and then suddenly the mosque is a completely different environment, then you're pushing a lot of people and a lot of females away from religion"   *(Female)*

There are mixed feelings about sex-based segregation. Whilst most felt there is an important need for spaces to be exclusive for men and women respectively, the reality is that in some mosques female spaces are not exclusive and can be routinely taken over by men. Specific times such as communal prayers (Friday and Eid) were mentioned as when there was the least access and space. Furthermore, since most mosques do not have well-established advertising practices, relying on word of mouth, many women noted they felt disconnected.

Healing Through Faith

1.3 Safeguarding in Scottish Muslim Spaces

"I wouldn't blame religion – but institutions definitely. You were letting in groups of (children) to learn and they were learning with (people) who were abusing their position and there was no accountability, who was checking?" (Female)

What is safeguarding?

Protecting people's general wellbeing and human rights and allowing each person to live free from abuse and neglect.

What should organisations be doing to ensure safeguarding in their spaces?

Following the relevant national legislation / guidance
Ensuring children are properly supervised
Making sure all adults understand how to share concerns about the safety or welfare of a child or young person
Making the environment as safe as possible for children and young people

What patterns or behaviours can lead to breaches of safeguarding?

Culture that normalises abuse, secrecy and silence
Misuse of authority
Misuse of religious text
Coercive behaviours

What can be put in place to prevent the misuse of power?

Good communication
Education and training
Codes of conduct
Safe recruitment
Vetting for staff

What makes a space feel safe?

No language or cultural barriers
A wide range of activities
A space free from judgement
Representation of all voices
Safe for children
Clubs for all ages
Sharing cultures
Designated person to contact who is easy to contact and well-advertised
Suggestion boxes
Regular public consultations
Accountability
Mosques need to physically BE open for women
Somewhere kids feel welcome and safe and belong
Prevention of harm - hiring imams who have a vision for the future

"In terms of safeguarding, unfortunately, I've never been made aware of any sort of, kind of formal safeguarding measures or procedures that are in place. At any mosque that I've ever been to in my life. Maybe that's because I've never necessarily needed to use them. I've never had any, issues directly. And I've never had to file a complaint in that sense. But I'm not aware. Like if something were to happen, I wouldn't know who to go to really" **(Female)**

There are varying degrees of awareness of what is meant by safeguarding. Whilst some were unsure or felt hesitant to say anything, others described the importance and need for safeguarding procedures to be present in the Muslim organisations and spaces that are being engaged with.

Muslim spaces as safe Spaces?

"We tend to put imams on a pedestal, we think they can do no wrong"
(Female)

"It's just because of our religion. And we think Muslims don't do that, but it mustn't be 100%. Because a human can do that. So, they have to be careful"
(Female)

"Muslim spaces are at times held in tandem with safe spaces – the idea that because Islamic boundaries of 'right and wrong' inform social customs in most environments, both within and external to domestic environments, this naturally leads to a space feeling safe."
(Male)

"It's an Islamic setting of course, you'll be safe. Naturally that can't be guaranteed, and it should just be assumed that that is the case (that it will be safe). So yeah, it's interesting. Kind of makes you think it's a bit worrying as well, actually."
(Male)

Specific things like a lack of alcohol, Islamic gender norms as well as conversations that do not go against the Islamic faith are all part of a bigger picture that constitutes a space safe. However, the risk of only relying on a space that is 'religious' or informed by religious teachings can in itself create an environment where breaches of safeguarding and abuse can either be overlooked, not recognised, or questioned. The experiences that will be shared demonstrate the difficulty of marrying the expectation of what a religious space should be versus the potential of what it can be.

Younger people in particular highlight generation gaps that have led to older people living a fairly isolated civic life. This can lead to limited opportunities for engaging with the majority population in Scotland, leading to differences in understanding and approaching safeguarding. What is highlighted is that younger and better-trained Imams for example might be easier to approach to speak about safeguarding concerns as opposed to older Imams. Contributing factors to the lack of safeguarding in mosques in particular include the lack of paid staff, poor management practices, lack of transparency, and poor access to staff members.

There is a lack of trust in religious authority figures as well as religious institutions. A culture of silence and feelings of frustration in not being able to speak up exist, compounded by the fact that most people are not aware of who is responsible for safeguarding, or the procedural process involved in reporting a concern.

Safeguarding as a government responsibility

The enforcement of safeguarding policies and procedures is seen to be a governmental duty, and legitimate when applied in mainstream spaces. As an example, one participant shared that safeguarding policies in their child's school were competent due to it being government mandated. Thus, what has been captured is that raising safeguarding concerns in Muslim community spaces is perceived as being not as competent or enforceable as they are outside of an official framework.

"So, depending on what it is…I think I'll first go to whatever government structure is in place". Additionally, the responsibility for safety is also seen to rest with official authorities"
(Female)

"For me, safety, I think is always authority, like police and all that if that's what you mean. I mean, that's the ultimate safety. Like, if you're, the government protects you from abuse, and anything"
(Female)
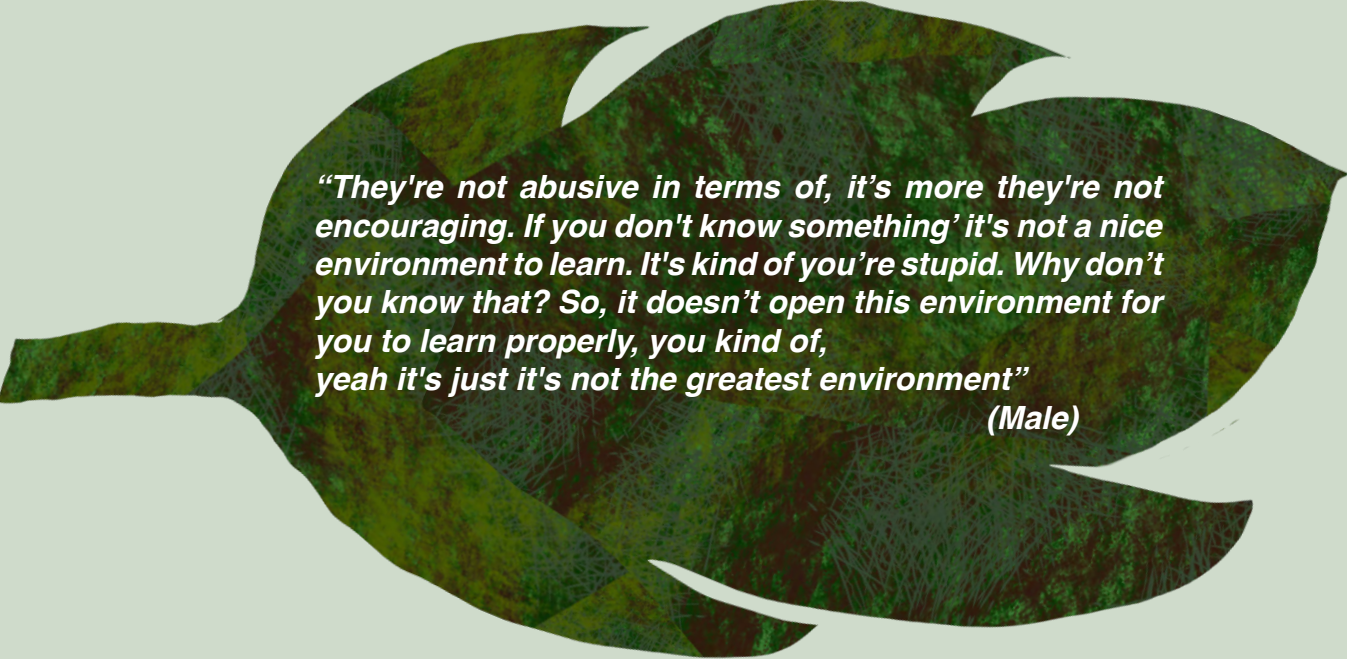
Parental interventions

Parents often undertake safeguarding interventions with their children to ensure basic safeguarding principles are being communicated in spaces that are felt to lack a safeguarding culture. This is often a result of not trusting that the space in question is inherently safe. Some intentionally decide not to place their children in the mosque, perceiving this space as not safe, opting for alternative arrangements for their children to gain an Islamic education.

"I was very clear to my children. I did a lot of work on like, like, if anybody makes me feel unsafe or uncomfortable, let me know. And I also made an active effort to kind of be quite visible in the mosque, so everybody knew I was so and so's mum…So that was that was my way of combating and making sure my children were safe. But I don't know. I feel like, what's the word, impartiality? It'd be really great to make us you know, like our mosque's safe spaces. Yeah, and also, like, if we do raise a concern to validate that like, not just dismiss it. Like, like, I feel like every time I've raised any issue, it can be around safeguarding, it can be around anything, really. I've just been kind of brushed aside. So, you're, you know, you just kind of you just kind of give up, eventually"
(Female)

Additional burdens within Islamic Education

Islamic education, whilst being viewed as integral to Muslim identity and personal growth and development, presented with additional burdens. Many participants spoke at length about their historic experiences of mosques as children. Whilst some **shared positive memories**, others shared the 'matter of fact' **normality** of experiencing **physical discipline**. It was felt a significant factor stemmed from the **embeddedness** of **cultural disciplinary practices**. Current legal impositions as well as the increased proactive role Muslim parents are playing may be contributing factors in the **notable reduction** in the **prevalence of physical abuse** as a disciplinary method in mosques today. It was noted that the expectation on Muslim children to supplement school with Islamic education, **drastically increasing the number of hours they are in daily education can feel like it is not safe or healthy.** When this is coupled with potentially experiencing learning in an environment that may lack a conducive learning environment, it can exasperate how children negatively associate learning and community with their faith.

"They're not abusive in terms of, it's more they're not encouraging. If you don't know something' it's not a nice environment to learn. It's kind of you're stupid. Why don't you know that? So, it doesn't open this environment for you to learn properly, you kind of, yeah it's just it's not the greatest environment"

(Male)

Additionally, strict rules in madrassahs related to children and dress codes are viewed as counterintuitive to a Scottish Muslim identity...*"there were so many strict rules that I thought I should not send my girls" (Female)*

Examples of breaches in safeguarding

The following examples demonstrate that **safeguarding was considered to be lacking** considerably across different Muslim spaces, with some spaces displaying either a **disregard for or a lack of awareness of safeguarding**. This has both **short-term** and **long-term** consequences for individuals. Whilst these accounts speak to **psychological and emotional trauma**, they are also indicative of the **nuances** and **complexities** surrounding **identity** and **spiritual trauma**.

Physical violence and sexual abuse

"I just did not want to be associated with a mosque, I didn't want to go because these people that are 30 years older than you, you know, who was meant to be teaching you the words of God and you know, the right, are doing this to children. And you can't do anything about it. For us, for the guys, even the girls, getting beaten up'. It's one thing you know, it was kind of a, this is what happens. We'll deal with it. But the abuse, sexual abuse, that's something that you can't get over"   *(Male)*

Threat to physical safety

"I was quite excited going in, I think my sister was with my younger sister. And at the start, everything seemed fine, but right, like, right off the bat, I had the teacher, she just kind of she was like, oh, let me look at your nails. I was like oh ok. They were the same as they are now so it's only the tiniest like I can cut them all the way to the bottom she was like see because it's your first day, I'm not going to hit you with them like a ruler or something like that. She's like I'll let you go this time. But next time, I was like woah okay. I kind of stayed throughout the whole day, but I never went back. I just didn't feel safe. I didn't feel comfortable"

(Female)

Child safety

"I think, sometimes, my impression is that sometimes some of the teachers in the mosque, make children feel no(t) safe, or unwelcome. So, they don't want to come to mosque. So, parents are spending a lot of time and energy and money trying to get them into these classes, dropping them off. But then children themselves are saying, I don't feel, I don't feel welcome in this class. And this is from personal experience… the teacher was not welcoming. And he'd make fun of you, laugh at you. And so, he didn't feel it was a safe space for him. And I think that's what worries me"

(Male)

"My daughter stood she was crying. Nobody in the masjid asked my daughter what's wrong with you? In X mosque. Nobody called, she was she stood, you know, if you go into the mosque, the car park she stood there and…I went I cannot imagine my daughter. Immediately. Like I almost lost my mind…she was crying she was screaming no, you know what beats me? She said, people I said, I asked I said people were passing, nobody asked you why you're crying? She said nobody. Oh, no, my body was vibrating. That Ustadha (female teacher) wasn't available then. (When) I call, nobody ever responded. So, for me, that was the end. That was the second incident. And after that, I just withdrew my children. Two months or three months after that. She was then called in she had not seen I said, do you know how long ago we stopped coming? So, I didn't even bother to, I just told her"

(Female)

Lack of trust

"I have massive issues with trust now…there was no way I was sending my kids to a mosque… it's a shame because there will be many Qur'an teachers you can trust but I don't give them the chance"
(Female)

The acute need to provide an Islamic education for children can result in high levels of interaction and trust in Muslim community spaces. Those who directly experienced abuse in a Muslim community space reported a lack of trust in the competency of the space as well as the people who run it. This has resulted in a difference in the level and type of Islamic education that the children of those affected by abuse receive.

"I think, for me, for example, having two young daughters, I do feel afraid, I don't, I don't view many Islamic places, as particularly safe. They do attend, that sort of small local mosques, to read to read Quran. It's been the goodwill of the of the ladies that look after the kids there. And then us getting feedback from them. But there may be opportunities for people to take advantage and that does scare me. I don't think they're safe at all I'm afraid"
(Male)

The importance of institutional responsibility to ensure safeguarding needs to be impressed - one that goes beyond a paper exercise in staff qualifications and a blind trust in Muslim identity as a qualification. In the few instances participants were aware of who their safeguarding officer was, a distrust was expressed in formalising a complaint due to a fear of confidentiality breaches.

A Lack of accountability

"These institutions have no safe space for people to out and talk about it…we are stuck on having a place to pray...religious institutions still have a long way to go to have a space to voice any concerns, Thinking about safe spaces – I just don't know"
(Female)

What has emerged clearly is that Muslim community spaces in Scotland lack sufficient functional procedures and processes both as a means of preventing a breach of safeguarding, as well as the ability, or the desire in some cases to actively manage issues and complaints as they arise. Where participants identified they knew a safeguarding policy was in place, it was felt to be only a paper exercise and that sometimes policies are copied and pasted without the proper training and infrastructure to accompany them. In essence, there was felt to be an acute lack of accountability in Muslim community spaces.

We found that Muslim organisations and community groups fared better in the assessment of our participants when it came to trust that they had procedures in place. The legal requirement for Muslim charities to have policies in place with the oversight of a governing body was seen to help and propel this development.

"There's definitely been a kind of a more clear kind of stepwise progression in terms of who you would go to escalate an issue. Like that's made quite clear events that you go to. And I think it's just that there's a more there's a better support network, available in other and other places"
(Male)

In contrast, feeling a sense of security and safety in mosque spaces was attributed to personally 'knowing' people. Mosques were specifically mentioned as places in Scotland that either lacked safeguarding policies and procedures or that they were poorly communicated or implemented. A lack of pastoral care and administrative support for Imams in mosques, as well as the replication of familiar practices by those who set up these institutions, were cited as reasons we might see a discrepancy.

Participants were vocal and passionate about the need for a community-wide implementation of safeguarding policies and procedures, and the relevant structures to go with it that can ensure accountability on a leadership level.

The importance of parents and guardians in preventative spaces

> *"I think the first thing is a child has to tell the parent, that's quite hard. And I think as parents I know we all do it, but parents need to get closer to their children and have communication. I've talked to mothers who've got young children who said we don't have time. Go talk to them, ask them what they did in school just generally be their friend, then it's more chance to come and tell you. But I think sometimes we're so busy in our lives, I know we have hundreds of things to do but we need to find that time for our children. It's very important"*
>
> *(Female)*

This research has raised the central and core role parents play in the educational and preventative tools that children need to be able to not only navigate community spaces safely but also to be confident in raising concerns with parents and authority figures should they find themselves or others in an abusive situation. For one, **it was the parental interventions they had received at a young age that allowed them to call out an abusive situation they experienced as a child.**

> *"At least my parents weren't like, oh, yeah, you have to go back. They understood. This is not normal. Of course, I've gotten in trouble as well. But that's your parents it's different. A stranger that you don't know. You should feel safe in that space. Just being able to share and just, you know, learn I was there to learn. I was excited to learn"*
>
> *(Female)*

Additionally, there was a need expressed for parents to know exactly what their children are being taught, and to be part of the process of growth and development in educational settings which cater to the educational needs of children and young people. In particular, the need for **Islamic-based sex education** was cited as imperative, not only for **applying preventative measures to recognise abuse** but also to **educate young Muslims on what the Islamic and spiritual perspective is on intimate relationships.** Furthermore, many parents in this research group felt there was a need to provide education and support in parallel to the curriculum being taught in schools, to directly deal with difficult topics such as gender and sexuality that are in opposition to Islamic principles. There was a fear expressed that exposing young Muslims to ideas that run counter to their faith in itself presents a safeguarding challenge as some children will not feel safe to talk about their feelings openly in a classroom environment – therefore, solidifying the need for parallel conversations in Muslim spaces.

We also found that at times parents can be a hindrance to the overall process of safeguarding. Their own childhood experiences, expectations and cultural norms set for them potentially informed their understanding of what a breach of safeguarding was, thereby intervening or recognising an issue only when it seems to have gone too far,

> *"I think it comes down to my parents. Now my parents can only do so much given what they've learned and what they've experienced. So, if they got beaten up in a mosque, that's normality to them. So therefore, it's a rite of passage for me in that respect, because I did tell my dad, oh, look, they beat you with sticks, and my mum, I told my mum and they're like, Okay, that's fine. There was only one time where I've come home with almost like whiplash marks on my hands on my arms that they were like, okay, this is too far now. You know, we're going to have a word, and there's been blood to that extent. So that's when it's gone to a bit of an extreme and it's like, what's going on? Is this a torture cell? Or is this a place of educating? Yeah, there's a boundary of if you know, as long as you're not leaving marks, you're fine, you know"*
>
> *(Male)*

Reporting concerns (what happens when you report?)

> *"They made me feel really small. So, then you just said, well, what's the point? You know?"*
>
> *(Female)*

It is vital to understand that **Muslim communities in Scotland are not bystanders** and are proactively engaging with Muslim spaces to help create interventions and contribute to community development in enhancing Muslim community spaces. What has been observed is that there is **a lack of institutional and community structures**, along with the necessary resources and funding that negate the Muslim community's ability to create and follow through with reports of concerns. What this research has revealed is that there is a **lack of education and certainty about what an individual's rights are in relation to reporting concerns**, either to the entity hosting the community space or to other agencies such as the police.

> *"Like, what are the rights and what are the children's rights? We don't know exactly. And that's why there is a fear of the record. Some people they just thought, like, what will happen? After reporting maybe will be not good for them for future, but just because of the awareness we don't have"*
>
> *(Female)*

When concerns have been shared with mosques specifically, they have been dismissed, ignored, or 'brushed under the carpet'. In some instances, concerns were received as personal criticism, hindering any effort to investigate or resolve the issues raised. Furthermore, such **negative reactions create a barrier for people who want to come forward but feel despondent about doing so.**

Women in particular reported experiencing additional layers of barriers to reporting. The statement 'they won't listen to women any way' made by one participant reflects a deep-rooted nature of how a culture of silence is allowed to breed.

"I feel like, children are in the mosque. I've heard of cases where children have been abused or whatever…You don't know who to go to and they won't listen to women. Yeah. And I think that boys, you know the imams and scholars need to be trained in such a way to sort of notice in children if there's [a problem] you know like domestic abuse or something in the same way in like other schools there are"
(Female)

"Then you just think, well, do I wanna, maybe raise the concern, because they've not taken it on. And they've not been like, they've not, they've not really validated your concern, or it doesn't even need to be a concern. I feel like positive criticism is not taken very well within our communities. It's like, you know, we all want the best for our children. And we want the best for our communities, we want to be the best, you know. And if somebody raises a concern, or like, oh, you know, we could do this better, like, take it like that. Don't take it like personal criticism"
(Female)

"What do I do? And I'm like, oh, you need to reach out to management you need to meet - but actually, the people on the management weren't friendly. They weren't friendly. They weren't approachable"
(Female)

Participants also encountered dismissive attitudes, as well as not being believed. In some cases, the perpetrator was protected and validated citing their 'good character'.

"So, when I tried to raise a complaint regarding a member of staff with the mosque that the young person had shared with me. Sure. And I tried to raise the concern, through written form with management, I just felt, I don't even think they investigated it. They were just like, well, we know this person personally, he would never be like that. Yeah, it was completely shut down. I don't think the complaint or concern was even recognised or taken seriously, or the young person's views taken seriously. So, it just makes you, you don't want to be that again, and you just leave it you just say och, I don't have the energy"
(Female)

We also found in some cases that children were sent back to learn after they had made a disclosure. Jarring as it is, it is reflective of how survivors describe their experiences across communities. The lack of safeguarding, the cultural stigma around reporting and dealing with abuse, and the central fact that victims are not believed, leads to the compounding of trauma and the potential for continued abuse to go unchecked.

"And the fact that they will just that child…he was sent back to that mosque. I don't even know if the parents believed them to an extent. Maybe the parents needed a bit more understanding of what was happening? I think we heard about incidents over the years. And at one point, the police actually got involved…in one of the mosques. And after that eased off…its child abuse children don't tell"
(Female)

Women highlighted when they did report, not only were they not listened to, but that their statements would likely not hold much credibility. One participant shared that she was slapped and told to stay silent when she reported her abuse to female and male members of staff in the mosque.

The fear of community stigma is another reason why someone might not report - *"I have heard of safeguarding issues. there's a bit of a stigma attached that you can't go to or can't report them" (Female).* This is a powerful barrier, a shared experience across faith groups, and functions to add a collective sense of guilt onto victims.

"There's a community stigma, if you're the parent who ratted out on the imam that's teaching these kids, you're not gonna be very much loved, you're going to be frowned upon in the community, so that plays a part"
(Female)

Muslim students in particular felt that the precedence university guidelines take over student societies, complicating matters for those who do wish to come forward and report. It was felt that a lack of privacy and sufficient tools to get on with life defeats the objective of being safe in the first place. Thus, reporting becomes the source of potential vulnerabilities and safety concerns in relation to broader macro-level structures.

Section 2

Abuse - Community Perceptions, Reporting, and Spiritual Abuse
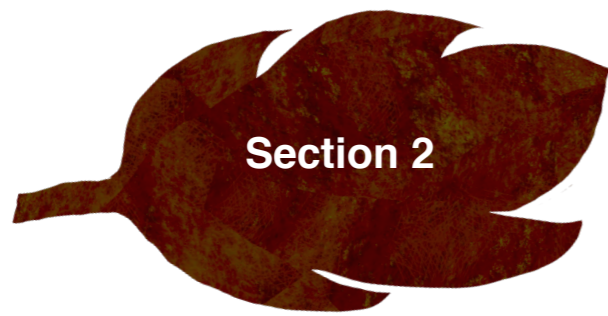
Section 2

2. Abuse - Community Perceptions, Reporting, and Spiritual Abuse

A significant part of this research project has been the development and dissemination of an online survey. This section provides a brief overview of the preliminary findings based on the responses to date from this survey. All statistics presented in this section are based on 58 responses received through the survey[10] and have been presented in quantifiable terms and qualitative responses have been provided as they were received, adding language only where it was necessary.

This section is organised as follows,

2.1 The Muslim Community's Perception of Abuse
What does the term 'abuse' mean to you?

2.2 Accessing Support Services
The use of support services
Barriers to accessing support in Muslim communities

2.3 The Experiences of Abuse and Reporting
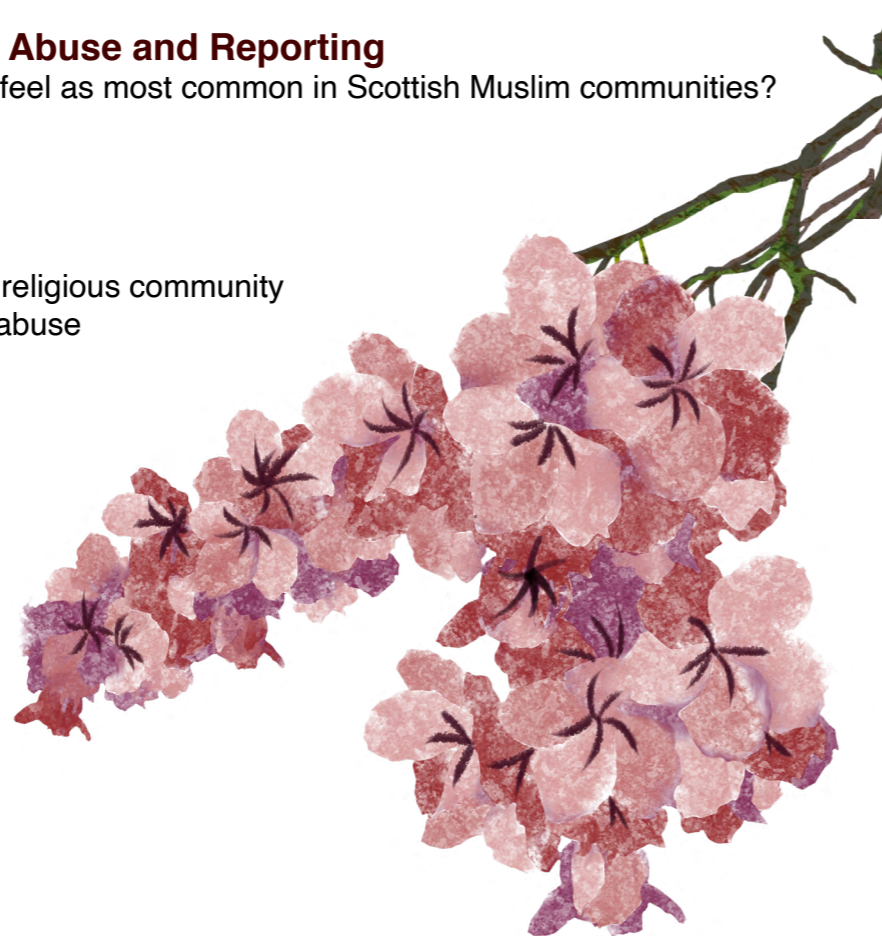What types of abuse do you feel as most common in Scottish Muslim communities?
The impact of abuse
Reporting abuse

2.4 Spiritual Abuse
The Muslim community as a religious community
The experiences of spiritual abuse

2.1 The Muslim Community's Perceptions of Abuse

We can determine that the **Muslim community is aware that abuse is a significant issue** within the Muslim community. Whilst religious spaces are not the right space to raise concerns, it is clear that the Muslim community has the desire to address issues and recognise that culture has a large part to play in maintaining a status quo.
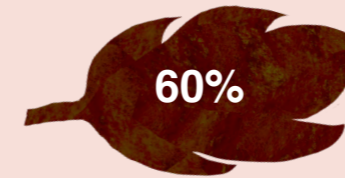
60% said that abuse in the Scottish Muslim community was 'extremely' and 'very' much a problem
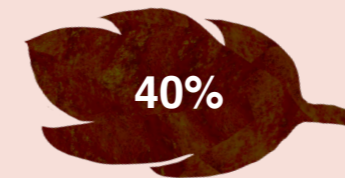
40% said that experiences of abuse within their own religious community was 'extremely' and 'very' much a problem, while 31% felt it was 'somewhat' a problem

39% did not feel that their religious communities are places they could ask questions about abuse, 30% were neutral, 7% strongly agreed
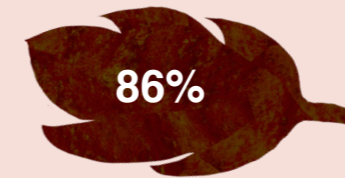
86% said that there is a stigma around conversations about abuse in the Muslim community

91% did not feel that learning about abuse is not Islamic and should be discouraged
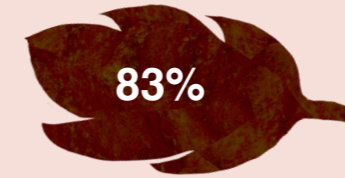
83% did not feel that it is immodest to openly talk about sexual abuse
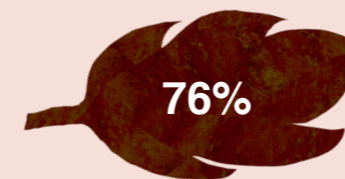
76% said that any stigma related to abuse or having experienced abuse is cultural and not religious, whilst 8.6% disagreed

What does the term 'abuse' mean to you?

- **Physical, sexual, or mental harm**
- **Rights are taken away from an individual**
- **Racial verbal abuse**
- **Keeping someone from being free**
- **Controlling**
- **Verbal threats**
- **Guilt trips**
- **Put downs**
- **Feeling inferior**
- **Islamophobic abuse**
- **A power imbalance resulting in harm**
- **Abuse from spiritual or community leaders**
- **Significantly denying someone's Islamic rights**
- **Being assaulted for my Islamic code of dress**

2.2 Accessing Support Services

"The way spiritual leaders often deal with cases brought to them is a massive discouragement for victims and survivors to seek help from them, some people wouldn't understand from a religious point of view"
                                                                                    (survey participant)

The use of support services

It is important to highlight 'who' the Muslim community feels is an avenue for support and help. Unsurprisingly, the police are mentioned the most as 'help' in a critical situation. It is noteworthy that 'Muslim' support organisations and individuals are mentioned the most often.

47% were not aware of support services that could be accessed for support

53% were aware of support services most often cited 'police', 'Amina – The Muslim Women's Resource Centre', 'Shaykh Amer Jamil', 'Rape Crisis', and 'Scottish Women's Aid'

Barriers to accessing support in Muslim communities

- **Fear of not being believed**
- **Not knowing how to access help and support**
- **Language barriers**
- **Legal status**
- **Shame**
- **'White saviour' syndrome**
- **Fear of confidentiality being breached**
- **Women think that they are to blame for the abuse**
- **Fear of being shamed for involving strangers**
- **Abuse is Islamically accepted**
- **Disability**
- **Not wanting to harm parents**
- **Am I "deserving" of support?**
- **Stigma of being looked down upon for being involved in *haram*[11]**

11 Things which are prohibited

2.3 The Experiences of Abuse and Reporting

What types of abuse do you feel are most common in Scottish Muslim communities?

- **Racism and Islamophobia**
- **Domestic abuse**
- **Childhood sexual abuse**
- **Financial abuse**
- **Controlling behaviour**
- **Physical abuse**
- **Emotional abuse**
- **Stalking**
- **Sexual Abuse**
- **Spiritual and Religious Abuse**
- **Familial Abuse (including In-law abuse)**

65% said that someone has made inappropriate or offensive comments about them

64% said that someone has made inappropriate comments about someone else's body, appearance or sexual activity in front of them

50% said that someone has said crude or inappropriate sexual things to them or tried to get them to talk about sexual matters when they did not want to

41% have been emailed, texted, received social media messages, phoned or messaged with offensive sexual remarks, jokes, stories, pictures or videos that they did want to receive

22% received these in a way that made them afraid for their safety

67% said that someone has made inappropriate or offensive comments about them

52% have experienced a form of abuse, in the past or present within an intimate relationship

87% have experienced emotional or psychological abuse within an intimate relationship

77% experienced controlling or coercive behaviour

50% experienced sexual abuse

43% experienced physical abuse

43% experienced financial abuse

23% experienced stalking behaviour

52% have experienced a form of abuse outside of an intimate relationship
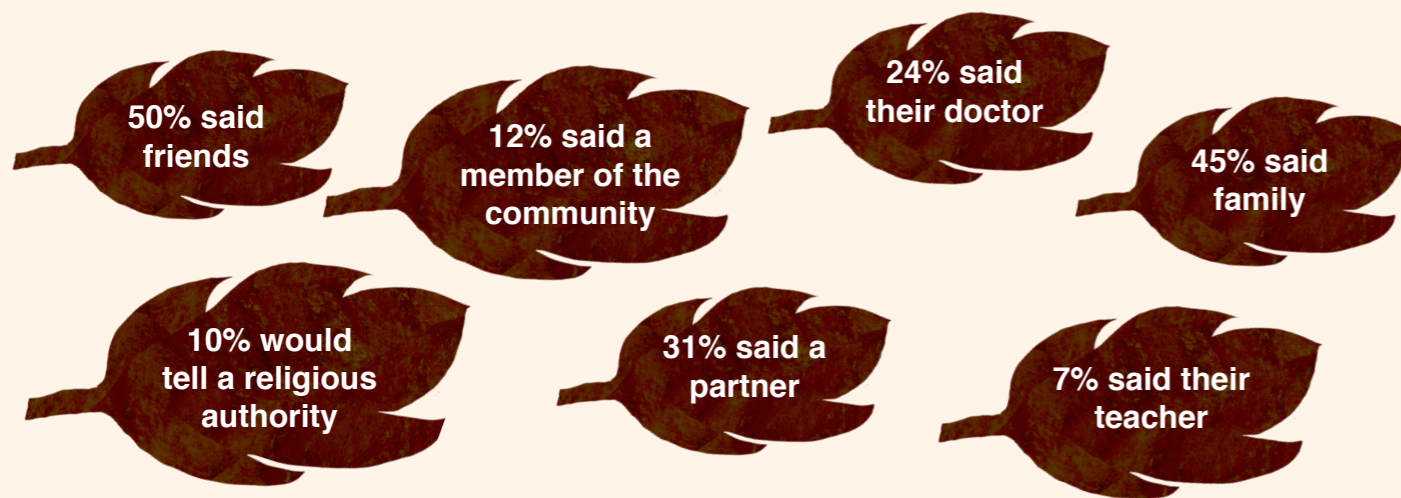
The impact of abuse

- **Negative impact on relationships**
- **Physical illness**
- **Self-harm**
- **Suicidal ideations**
- **Anxiety**
- **Panic attacks**
- **Loss of trust**
- **Reliance on counselling**
- **Anger**
- **Loss of finances**
- **Loss of confidence**
- **Depression**

2.3 Reporting abuse

When asked hypothetically, if they experienced abuse whom they would feel comfortable telling

50% said friends

12% said a member of the community

24% said their doctor

45% said family

10% would tell a religious authority

31% said a partner

7% said their teacher

Only **26%** have reported abuse against themselves and **16%** have reported on behalf of someone else. Of those who reported **32%** reported the abuse to the police whilst others reported it to their GP, a family member, or a social worker. **40%** said they did not know who to reach out to report abuse.

2.4 Spiritual Abuse

"People feel they must just put up with it (abuse) as its the will of Allah swt or mistakenly believe that women must always obey (your) wali (guardian)"   (survey participant)

The Muslim community as a religious community

The majority of Muslims in Scotland are engaged with or affiliated to a religious space. The fact that no one responded with not having a religious community is a powerful demonstration of the centrality and importance of Islam for the Muslim community.

64% regularly attend or are affiliated with an Islamic Institution, mosque, or centre of learning

60% regularly attend or are affiliated with an informal Islamic group

The majority of participants identified friends, family, and a community organisation as their main religious community. **0 participants said that they did not have a religious community.**

The experiences of spiritual abuse

Given the integral nature of faith to the Muslim identity, it was not unsurprising to find the presence of spiritual abuse within several contexts. Spiritual abuse in this context relates to abuse wherein there is a spiritual or faith-based element involved.

32% have experienced spiritual abuse and **59%** know someone who may have experienced spiritual abuse

42% said that religion has been used to justify the removal of their right to oppose or question any action or decision made by themselves

12% reported that religion has been used to force them to engage in behaviours that they did not consent to, such as using religion to demand sexual rights and justify inappropriate behaviour

33% said that religion has been used to isolate them from others

48% said religion has been used to minimise or deny the abuse they or someone they know has experienced

30% said religion has been used to prevent them from speaking out about abuse.

Experiences of Spiritual Abuse manifested across a range of different actions

- Reports of sexual abuse were made, whether within the Mosque setting, by someone with religious authority, or within marital or family relationships.

- There were reports of individuals being made to feel like a bad Muslim for not conforming to externally imposed social expectations, that somehow this became a reflection of their personal faith status and positioning.

- Numerous reports were made in relation to physical violence being used as a disciplinary method.

- Faith was also reported as being used as a means of coercive control. This ranged from being pressured into not making safeguarding reports, to enforcing obedience within family and marital relationships, including being forced into sex. There were also elements of direct exploitation within this such as financial and being blamed for the actions of others. This often involved the misuse of religious text, position, or faith-based principles.

- Positioning through the misuse of scripture was also evident whereby survivors were made to feel inadequate and religiously inferior, thereby creating environments in which abuse could occur and be maintained.

- Mental health concerns were inadequately addressed, with ill-informed and untrained advice given based on misapplied religious teachings.

- The usage of direct religious threats such as threats of hell.

- Exclusion of females from mosques and the spaces associated with mosques.
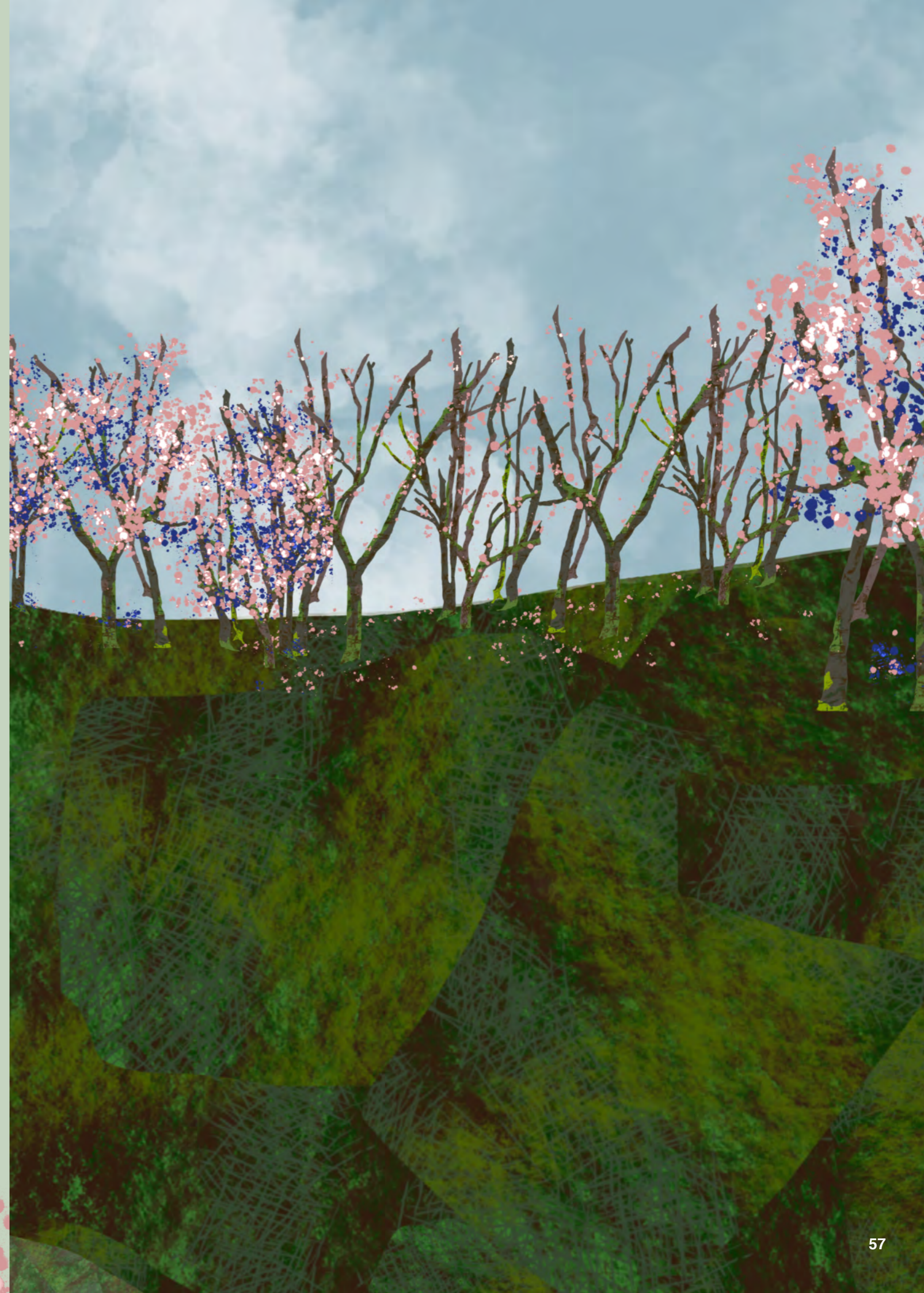
Section 3

## The Role of Islamophobia and Racism in Sustaining Abuse

3. The Role of Islamophobia and Racism in Sustaining Abuse

The findings from this research warranted that this section is presented in such a way as to impress the gravity of how the Muslim community's experiences of Islamophobia and racism, historical and recent, compound their experiences of abuse. **The most powerful tool is one's voice** - which words are used, the order in which they are put together, and how feelings are conveyed. Commentary and analysis can sometimes deflect from the visceral experiences that are threadbare in a research report such as this.

Thus, this section contains a wide range of quotes highlighting that Islamophobia and racism are a malignant presence in the everyday lives of Muslims in Scotland and for survivors and victims of abuse a cancer that spreads deep, often barring them from adequate adequate support and help.

This section is organised as follows,

3.1 Islamophobia and Abuse

3.2 Examples of how Islamophobia and Racism Sustains Abuse
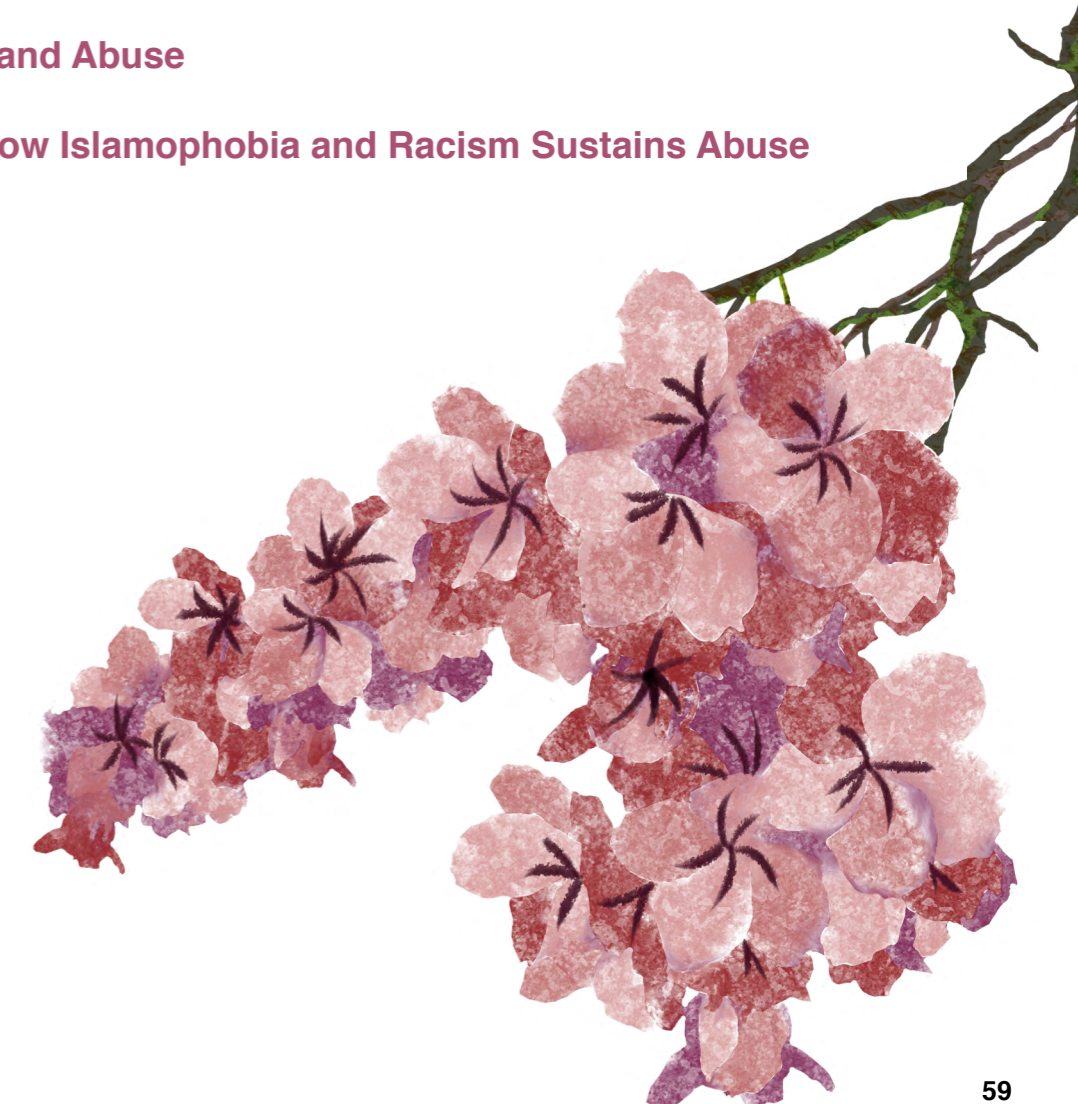
3.1 Islamophobia and Abuse

Islamophobia, as a life experience, as a fear and potential threat, and the reality of the impact this has on the Muslim community has been a constant theme across all strands of this research. When participants in the survey were asked **'What does the term 'abuse' mean to you?'** and **'What types of abuse do you think are most common in the Muslim community?'** Islamophobia and racism were cited often. It is fair to say that Islamophobia emerges not only as a driver to sustaining and creating barriers for Muslim survivors of abuse but also as a form of abuse itself. **The barriers are systemic and are indicative of how Muslim survivors of abuse face micro and macro-level barriers** that make it difficult for them to engage with the necessary services needed for support, recovery as well as justice. **Islamophobia and racism are at the heart of wide-ranging areas of concern that sustain abuse and abusive practices.**

There is a need to feel safe not only in Muslim community spaces but in all spaces. Feeling safe was described as more important in external spaces as the physical and emotional impact of not feeling safe has much wider implications. The common and frequent experiences of Islamophobia and racism relayed to us by participants in this research demonstrate what has been well-documented in the literature. There were general **feelings of being isolated from the majority white communities in Scotland.** Having said that, some felt the openness and multicultural nature of Scottish society was also comforting. Though, the impact of the potential for experiencing racism and Islamophobia on confidence levels in engaging with mainstream organisations due to a visibly non-White identity, was a real barrier and concern. Some felt that mainstream support organisations do not offer the support that is required due to a lack of perceived tools to support them. **Catering to faith-based needs is therefore a requirement for mainstream services, as is the communication of the presence of such services.**

3.2 Examples of how Islamophobia and Racism Sustains Abuse

The lived experience and existence of Islamophobia

"It doesn't help that racism and islamophobia keeps some people from speaking out and seeking resources for fear of imagined or real exaggerated consequences on community members, the community as a whole whether a matter of social perception or legal discrimination"
(Female)

Abuse and its impact on 'expecting' other forms of abuse such as Islamophobia and racism

"Like all of these things over time just become normal. Like, that's what happens. And then I also experienced a lot of physical abuse in school as a result of, like, racist, racists in my primary school. So that layered it for me like, okay, that's just what happens like you are because you're brown that's what happened to you. Because you're a girl or because you didn't wear this or like, certain things that start going through your head. So, it becomes like a self-blame thing. So, you spend your life expecting a form of abuse to come your way because that's just what happens, right? The same thing happened after 9/11. You know, just people shouting abuse at you on the street. Okay, cool. Then you actually become numb to it. It's like you're like expecting it almost, you know, like, Okay, open the door. Just let it all come. "
(Female)
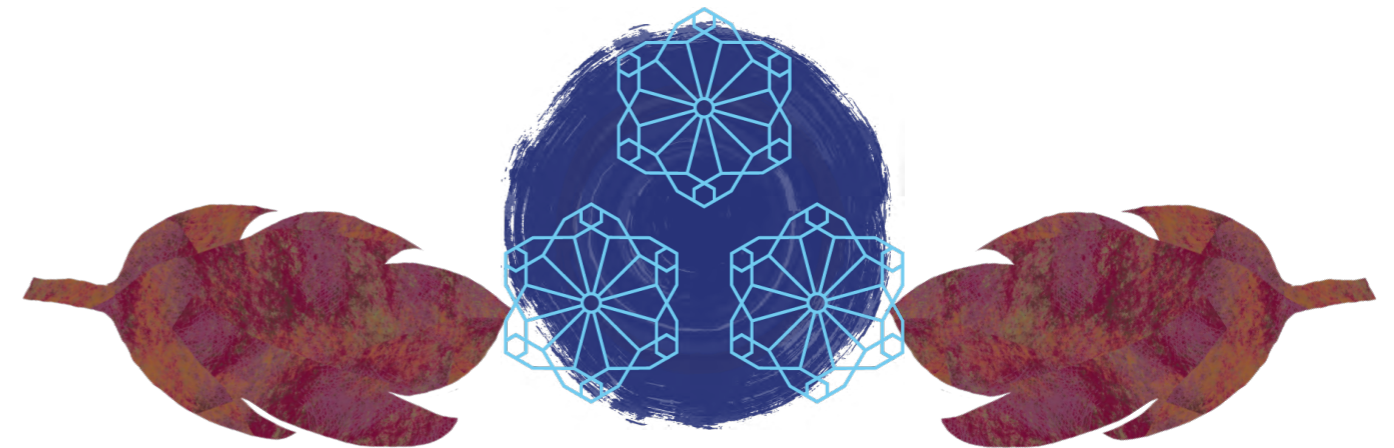
PREVENT and Muslim men

"The culture of PREVENT vilifies Muslim/Brown and Black men as inherently dangerous and violent. In the context of abuse within the community, it can complicate getting external help for some"
(Female)

The police and religious profiling

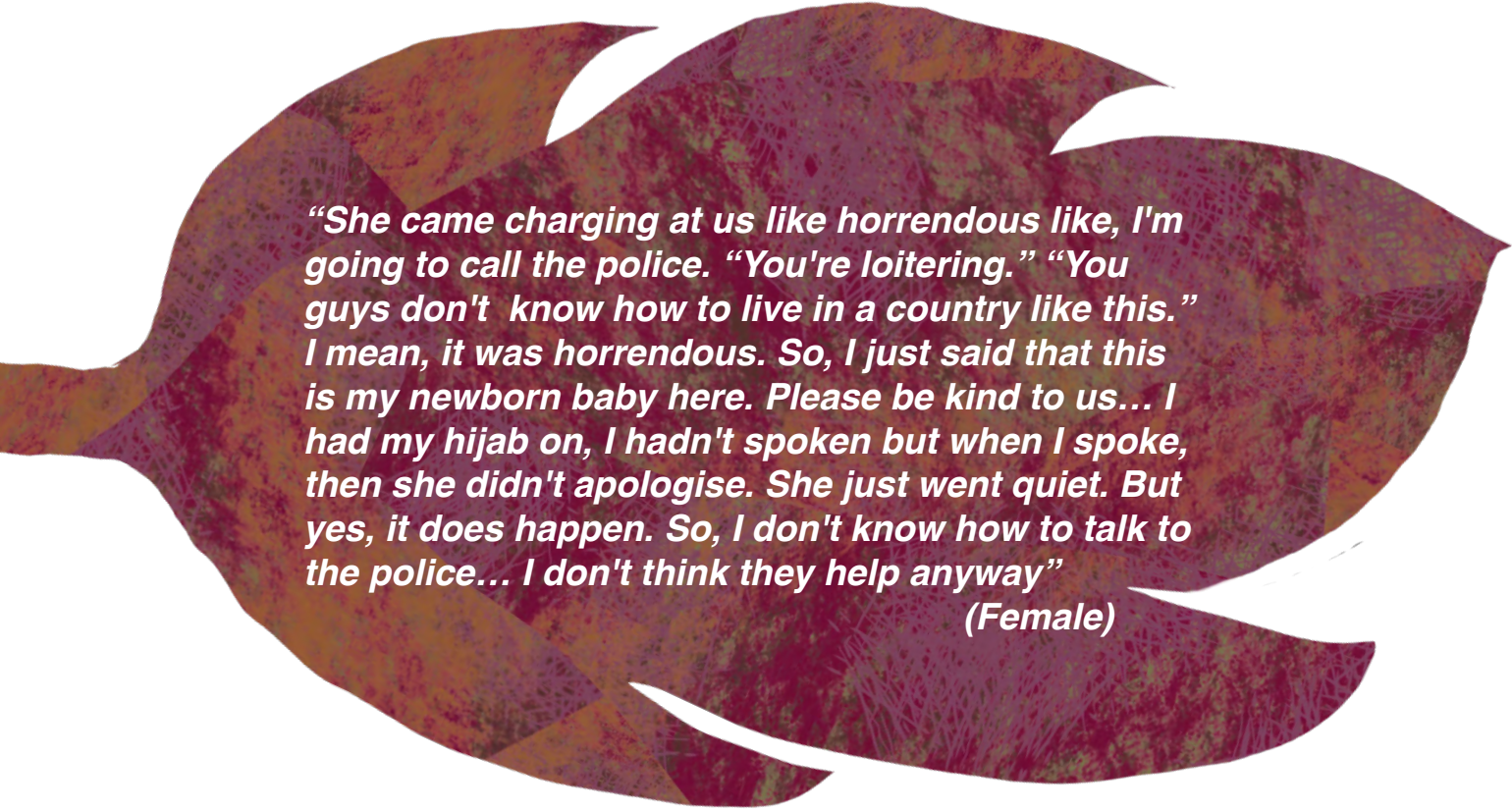*"The system needs to change. And the police people don't understand the thing they that the biggest they had a problem with was they would call it (the abuse being experienced) culture and religion....but I'm saying this is not religion, these men have made up rules for themselves. This is not religion. They (the police) would call it culture and religion...the police made (me) feel out of control"*
(Female)

Islamophobia within support services

"And that's inter…interlaced with my experiences of racism and being Muslim, and the whole experience you know, say, what the heck do you even know about anything? And when I went into (names a support organisation) I was like yup, I knew I was right, because you're actually idiots when it comes to brown people and like religion they don't, like you cannot, how I can talk to somebody that's from a similar background, who will understand nuances, a white person will never get it" (Female)

Abuse in public spaces

"So that bus driver who was abusing us was calling to the next bus, you know, on the phone, the walkie talkie, and then abusing my husband with saying monkeys and all that Paki monkeys, and all that abusive thing he was saying" (Female)

"She came charging at us like horrendous like, I'm going to call the police. "You're loitering." "You guys don't know how to live in a country like this." I mean, it was horrendous. So, I just said that this is my newborn baby here. Please be kind to us… I had my hijab on, I hadn't spoken but when I spoke, then she didn't apologise. She just went quiet. But yes, it does happen. So, I don't know how to talk to the police… I don't think they help anyway" (Female)

"Like the Scottish culture, people I barely see anyone smile at me when I go outside…I mean, it's not that but I have suffered a few instances of, of, you know, racial bias. Because of the hijab or not, I don't know, but I - and it's not just in this country, I faced in my own country, as well. So, I'm used to it, I'm now well aware of it, I know how to deal with it" (Female)

Perceived Islamophobia and lack of trust in the police

"I was really scared. I mean, I didn't trust the authority for some reason I didn't feel safe enough to give go and give a statement…Because I just feel like I'm accustomed to it because I feel like with hijab, I'm very accustomed to it (fear of Islamophobia)" (Female)
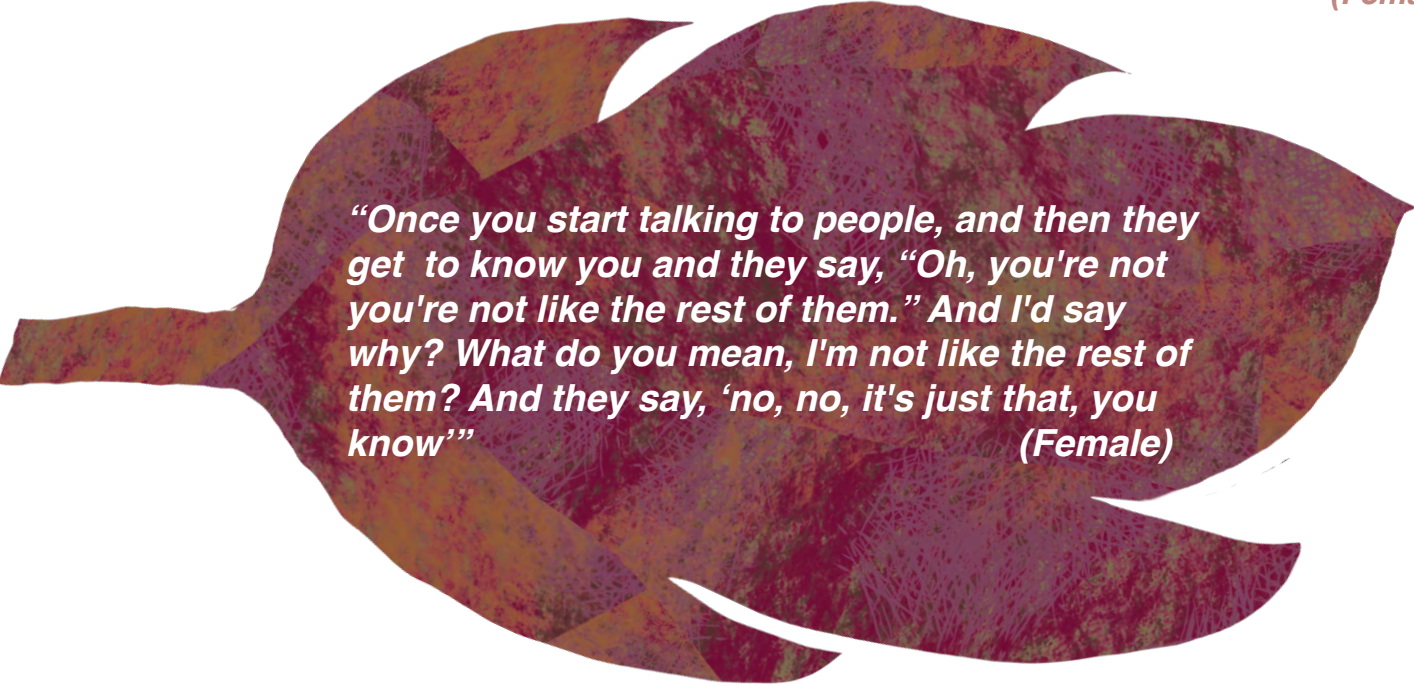
Fear of raising concerns about Islamophobia in schools

"Sometimes I feel with those, sometimes because I complain or raise concerns you seen as like, ah, like our nagging parent. Yeah. And then my husband who avoids confrontation, like, he at all costs' he'll just say, don't complain because if you complain, they're just gonna ignore your child. I think that's what worries him. You're always complaining or raising concerns, then ' they're going to ignore our son, and then they're not going to support him. And I'm like, you know, I think I'm just so tired" (Female)

Negative perceptions of Muslims hindering wider interaction

"The moment you hear my accent you definitely know; I'm not born here. I'm not from here… an accent plays a lot. Like even if I'm wearing hijab, but if I'm speaking in a Scottish accent, they will accept me more freely I guess because they think I'm here. And when they think of me from another Asian country, they usually think I'm on benefits and I'm taking their money. Somebody said that to me blankly once, so I'm not making this up – where I used to work. So, like, I'm here for benefits and everything like that. So like, that's what I'm saying, that they don't know me, but the moment they see me and hear me they just think… they have this judgement. Whereas it's quite the opposite. It's very opposite to it and I'm not gonna explain them to me of my earnings and everything like that to a stranger but the judgement is clearly seen in their eyes all the time. Some say it, some has said it, some doesn't. But the looks always say it in some ways, you know" (Female)

"Once you start talking to people, and then they get to know you and they say, "Oh, you're not you're not like the rest of them." And I'd say why? What do you mean, I'm not like the rest of them? And they say, 'no, no, it's just that, you know'" (Female)

Fear of sharing experiences of Islamophobia and racism with non-Muslim researchers and practitioners

"It's been a difficult thing. I don't kind of feel safe sharing this with a non-Asian, like these things, because I'm sure they will think, Oh, I'm cry, and all that playing the racist card. So, I don't feel safe to do that. I feel as when I, to be honest, I saw the page in the consent form I saw all familiar names like from my country, and also, I joined it. But if it was not, I might not have joined it, you know, and it's something I'm, I'm maybe I'm blocked in my own mind not all people are the same. But I still don't feel so you know, trust enough to go and share these experiences" (Female)
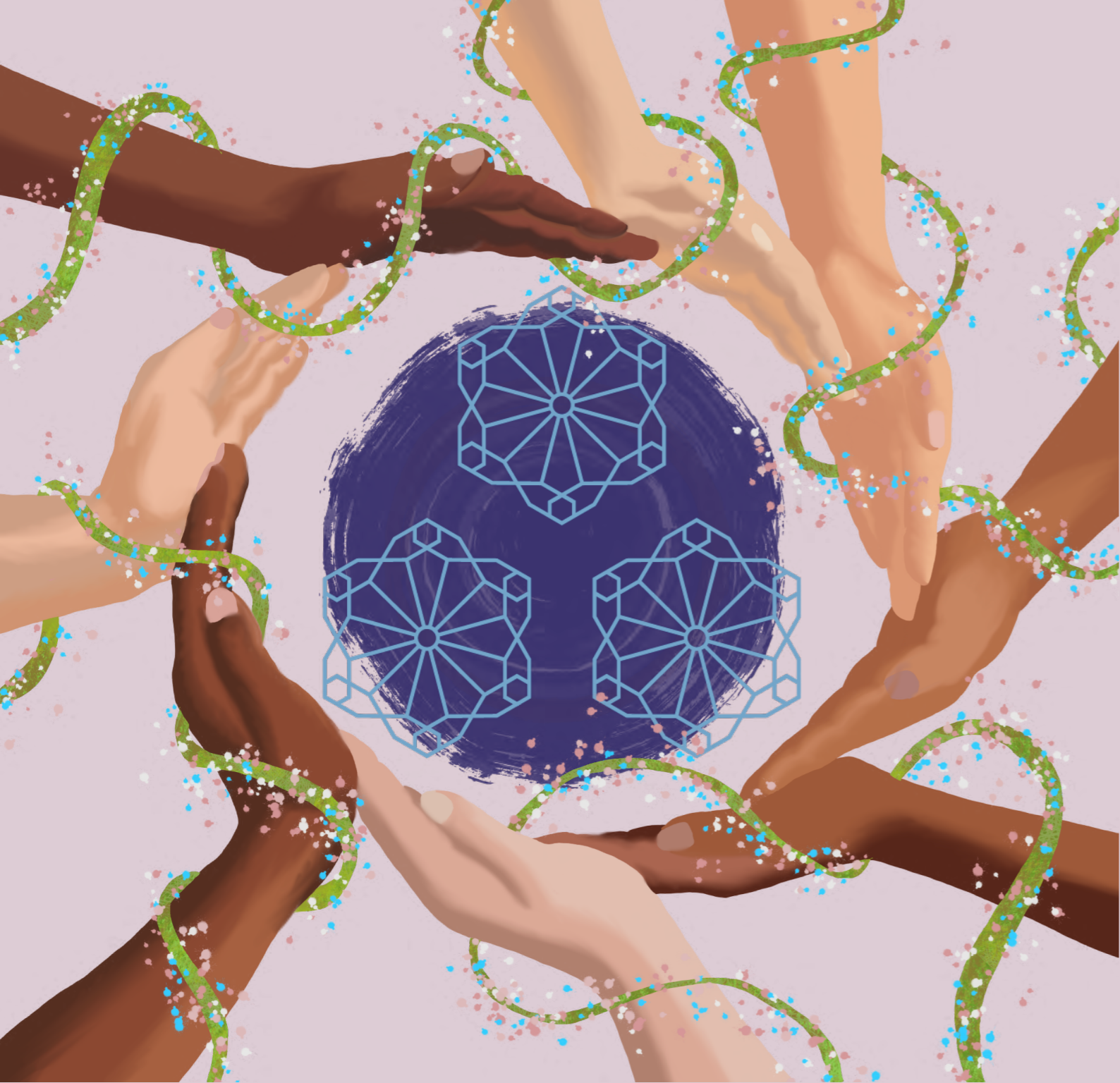
Fear of being a practicing Muslim in a majority non-Muslim environment

"In your in your class, you don't feel safe there because I mean, in my class, I'm the only Muslim in like 480 kids, and there's another well the other person left. So now it's 50 and I'm the only one there that practices"   (Male)

Muslims do not feel safe in all spaces

"And as a Muslim, you're like, okay, I can only be safe if I'm in a madrasa, if I'm in with other Muslims, if I'm in kind of with my people, if that makes sense. And then you're not able to interact outside with other people of other beliefs, and still feel as safe. I think and like I said, I mean, I keep talking about this, but it goes back to the larger issue of how we create a space where everyone feels safe"   (Male)
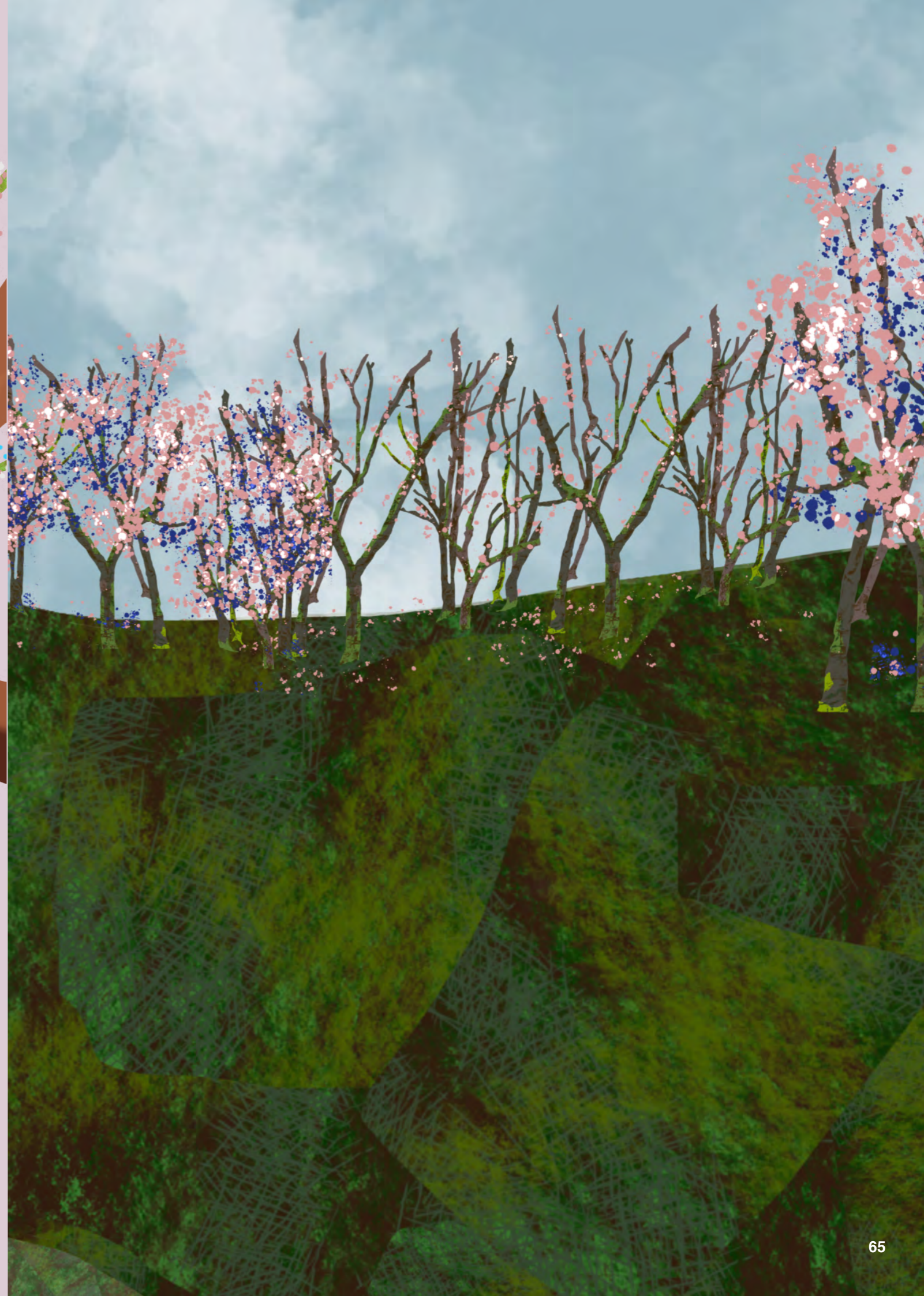
Section 4

Individual Experiences of Abuse

Section 4
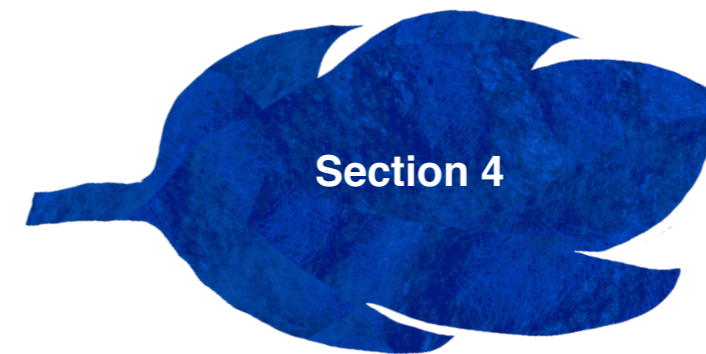
Individual Experiences of Abuse

Survivors spoke passionately about needing to verbalise their experiences, mostly because saying it in a space that felt safe allowed them to feel like a burden was taken off them mentally, emotionally, and physically. In the instances where disclosures were made to family and friends, it led to a domino effect whereby others around them felt able to disclose their own. The idea that people need to normalise speaking about and giving words to what they experience was something that was shared by all of our participants. **There were raw and deep conversations about the idea that Muslim communities in Scotland may be suffering from a 'culture of silence'**, something our participants were familiar with. Indeed, for some, this was the first time they shared their stories in depth and at length. Integral to this process was the trust in us as researchers, and our cultural and Muslim identities.

We identified six key areas of discussion that came out of interviews with **6** (**4** female, **2** male) individuals. All participants have been assigned a pseudonym. Their experiences are integral to the understanding of how Muslim individuals have experienced abuse, the impact it has had on their lives, what reporting and disclosures look like, and what the recovery process has been. Please note that this section contains sensitive quotes from survivors who have experienced abuse, not everyone will find these easy to read.

This section is organised as follows,

4.1 The Normalisation of Abuse

4.2 The Role of Religion
- Religion and culture
- Muslim spaces and authority figures
- Shariah councils
- Personal faith

4.3 The Impact of Abuse
- Impact of relationships
- Impact on faith and spiritual wellbeing
- Coping mechanisms

4.4 Disclosures and Reporting
- Disclosures
- Reporting to the police

4.5 Support and Recovery
- Faith as a support mechanism

4.6 What helps?

4.1 The Normalisation of Abuse

What kinds of abuse were experienced?

Domestic violence, emotional abuse, physical abuse, coercive control, sexual violence, spiritual abuse, stalking, financial abuse, childhood sexual abuse, racism, Islamophobia.
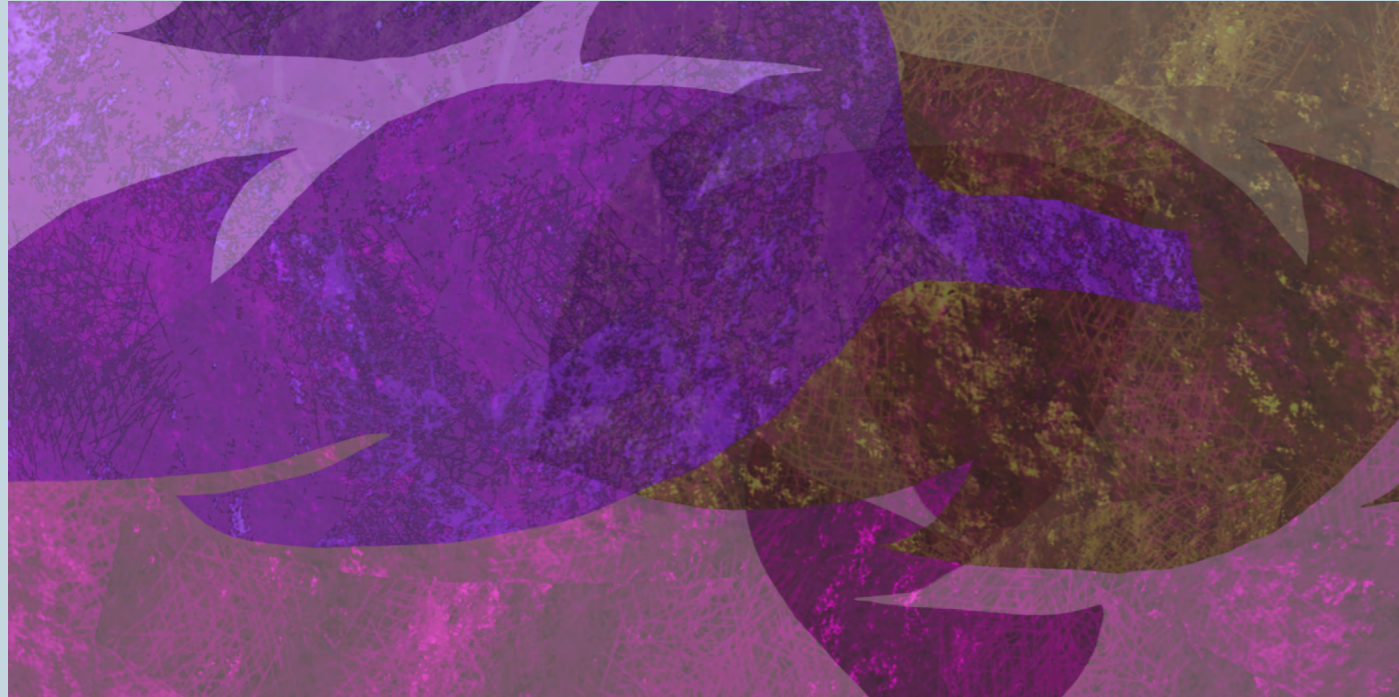
When we think about the normalisation of something, the first thing that occurs to us is that a community of people implicitly or explicitly agree and accept it or stay quiet about it. It becomes part of their lived experiences, whether individual or communal, frequent or infrequent, and whether it directly impacts them or not. This feeling is what was communicated to us by the survivors that we spoke to. That the lived communal norms experienced in Scotland by Muslim communities were one where abusive behaviours, traits, or patterns were commonplace and largely ignored in some Muslim community spaces as well as in familial and private settings. In their journey to process and come to terms with their experiences of abuse, our survivors expressed that they felt some of their experiences were 'normal' and part of life - in particular, physical abuse in a mosque or madrassah,

"So, you know, things like most things come out as getting beat by a stick, you know, that's quite common. And the mischievous kids would always get that"   *(Imad)*

Religious authority figures were seen to hold a position of trust, one that went hand in hand with obedience, and ultimately, they were **'untouchable' and unaccountable.** Physical beatings in a mosque or madrassah setting were referred to as 'common' and 'standard', at times supported by parents, and when parents did intervene, they failed. Additionally, the use of sexual innuendos, inappropriate conversations, and inappropriate touch are examples of our findings of how some religious authority figures have used their position to display abusive behaviours. Similarly, within familial settings, we found there to be a lack of boundaries and safeguarding in the unwavering trust in wider family members that led to some of the abusive situations our survivors found themselves in. 'Touchy' 'feely' members of the family were not called out or perceived as abusive.

It was on reflection as adults that there was a realisation that they had, in fact, experienced abuse, and carried trauma stemming from that, into their adult lives. Survivors spoke about experiencing varying levels of vicarious trauma and shock in discovering that abuse was commonplace and that many within their own family and civic circles had abuse in common.

"I thought it (referring to disclosures) was good. Because I thought well like people, people like are getting this out...I don't know how they were or why they gravitated towards (me) and just confiding and saying oh yeah this happened. There was a lot and I didn't realise, months later and I was like, it was maybe too much, it was almost too much"   *(Jafar)*

We were told multiple times that there was a denial, even excusing abuse at a community level, this reality precipitating the culture of silence we mentioned earlier and resulting in an acute lack of support and safe spaces for Muslim survivors of abuse in Scotland.

"Obviously back then, you know, use the beatings if you didn't do well, you know that was the unfortunately the norm, and you just not used to it wasn't all the time but if you hadn't learned what you needed to and you weren't up to scratch you got… when you think about it at the time, you just think that's normal everybody's getting beats here and there so you're getting it's just normal is it"   *(Jafar)*

They were saying these poor men from (named a country) here without wives, they have urges and needs – are you making excuses for them? This was a woman saying this! Almost trying to find an excuse for this behaviour. I remember hearing that in a gathering and I was disgusted"   *(Yara)*

4.2 The Role of Religion

Religion and culture

"I think culture for sure, I don't think any of this had to do anything with to do with our you know, beautiful Islam, I think it was the culture, you know"
(Heba)

"So, growing up, I would see, we had a very. It was a very cultural household. And I think at the time, that was synonymous with being Muslim" (Judy)

"I think, for me, the religion didn't play a part or culture didn't play a part in the whole thing, the whole experience" (Imad)

We (researchers) are often part of conversations within our families, friends, and wider circles about the difference between the Islamic faith or religion, and our culture as people who share a faith across continents. Whilst there is a clear distinction between what the Islamic faith says and ethnic or social-cultural practices, cultural normatives have led to grey spaces within which these become indistinguishable.

"because I feel like what I thought was religion was actually culture. (Okay.) And the more and more that you learn about religion, the more distance that you're able to make over the years, right? However, having said that, I think that our you know, like, we're not Christian, so we don't have that system. But whatever our system is, it still maintains and propagates certain things that I, I feel are inappropriate. So, for example, by not informing (inaudible) men that have abused kids in mosque, because you don't want to bring disrepute. That's not religious, but it's happening within a religious framework. So, it actually becomes murky, right. How do you distinguish the two? (Judy)

Survivors spoke about these complexities. Many of them discovered and understood their faith as adults and 'reclaiming' it from ethnic or social-cultural practices, and negative human behaviours that framed some of the reasons why they experienced abuse. A clear example of this is the negative role played in the perpetuation and acceptance of abuse by in-laws in some Muslim cultures, something our survivors mentioned. This mental toil led some to convey that it was not until they were adults that they were able to understand that religion itself, its doctrines, and spiritual importance as a Muslim, was not to blame, but that practices, spaces, and authority emanating from culture definitely played a role.

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Muslim spaces and authority figures

"You've got no choice but to put your trust in people that are meant to be trustworthy"
(Yara)

Whilst some of our survivors enjoyed a largely positive relationship with Muslim spaces others reported a lack of connection, negative childhood experiences, and a deep-seated mistrust of Muslim spaces. The experiences of physical, verbal, and for one survivor, sexual abuse, were direct reasons for these feelings. We found there to be a diverse understanding of how Muslim authority figures are defined. We were given examples of *imams, madrassah* teachers, scholars, male family relatives, and the 'community' as figures of authority from where knowledge about faith and culture, behaviours, boundaries, what is and is not acceptable, and what is allowed to be verbalised and what is not spoken about, emanates from.

"We are boxed into the like, so we're all women. We have no interaction with anyone except for our mahrams[12] who you don't talk to about these things with because it's not appropriate, so your messaging is all coming from non-mahram men who are scholars or imams or things or people that are teaching you this stuff. So, you then take that as okay, they, they must know what they're talking about… And there's a real danger in men who don't, either do understand the responsibility and the power that they have when they're doing this. And the worst is when they don't. And there's abuse of that power. And I think that's where that kind of spiritual abuse certainly exists because men can say things that can dramatically affect young men and women in how they approach life" (Judy)

12 *Male relatives by genetics or marriage*

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This variety and spectrum of who the Muslim community assigns power and authority to increases the layers of how abuse is experienced, and how faith and Muslim identity is associated with the abuse.

Survivors spoke about the social and cultural framings learned through familial religious teachings in particular, which informed their learning of faith through mediums like storytelling and anecdotes. A sort of directive way to live, based on the familial knowledge of their faith. There was a gendered element to this, with one survivor speaking about being aware of modesty and gendered spaces from a very young age. The abuse of religious authority and the power held by religious leaders is demonstrated through the example of an Imam trying to marry the victim whilst she was seeking help with divorce proceedings. We also discovered that the use of Islamic texts and sayings was an extra layer of power and authority used against survivors as coercive and controlling behaviour. One survivor shared that her abuser, in this case, a husband, would often quote *"if there was a second sajdah (prostration), it would be to the husband"* as a way of controlling her behaviour. Or that, being a *'sayyid'* (a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad) was a reason for allowing poor and abusive behaviour to continue. One of our survivors also outlined details of extensive forms of black magic (*sihr*) carried out against her to maintain coercion, control and abusive practices. The resulting impact penetrated into every aspect of her life for a significant period of time. Whilst she was the only one to raise black magic as a concern, this does demonstrate how deep and dark abusive practices can be.

Shariah councils

"Awful. So that sums it up there was awful. I um, I made contact. I wasn't sure what Shariah courts to approach I knew nothing about the, I mean the Shariah councils – I knew nothing about the Sharia councils at the time"
(Heba)

The use of *Shariah* Councils by Muslim women was raised, primarily to seek to dissolve or terminate their marriage in conformity with their religious beliefs. This is particularly the case where religious-only ceremonies had been conducted. These councils have been questioned for their authority and authenticity[13] the disadvantage Muslim women face in the process of seeking a divorce[14] and the often difficult, long, and trying process that adds another layer of trauma and distress for women who are already in a precarious situation. Our research found this to be the case in the experiences of Scottish women.

One survivor told us that her experience with the *Shariah* Council had been fraught with difficulties. Some of the difficulties included the geographical accessibility most of the existing *Shariah* Councils being located in England[15]. This also added to the emotional and financial burdens already felt. There was also felt to be some confusion around the function of *Shariah* Councils parallel to a lack of knowledge and awareness regarding processes around religious divorces A lack of professionalism, obscure processes, and bureaucracy were raised. **Removal of autonomy and further revictimization in some cases were also evident including through deciding that the case required prolonging in case the woman changed her mind.**

Personal faith

The most significant impact upon religion for our survivors has been to either strengthen their faith and connection to God – *"that was the one beautiful thing of all of it. And I am 100% saying, yes, our faith and our eman (faith) and everything, and it counts really does especially in, you know, torture cases, abuse cases, whatever you want to in difficult situations, you know, it's the faith that keeps you going" (Meera)* or a distance from or questioning of faith itself - *"I don't have the connection to God I'm meant to have"*
(Judy)

Whilst none of the participants reported a loss of faith, we found that there were some personal struggles in accepting and understanding some key Islamic teachings as a direct impact of experiencing abuse, *"Like there are things that I do, like hijab, to this day, I'm like, what the heck's the point? Genuinely like I do it because Allah has asked me to, I don't see what different it makes"*
(Judy)

13 Ali, 2013
14 Wilson, 2010
15 The Islamic Shariah Council Scotland has recently been established. Still in its early formation, as a service is not widely known or accessed https://islamicshariascotland.co.uk/about-us/
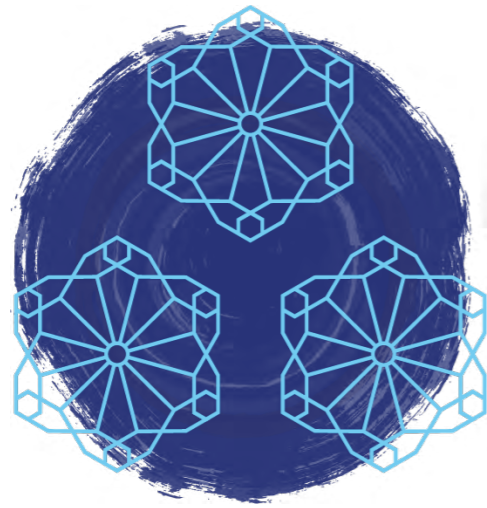
There were numerous faith-based dilemmas raised. The notion of pre-destination (*qadr*) was raised whereby there was questioning of whether Allah (God) had predetermined everything and what that implied for the abuse experienced by survivors. In extension to this, females questioned how when religious messages portraying women as holding the responsibility for modesty failed, what purpose did upholding modesty actually serve? **Furthermore, where sex-based boundaries were stipulated as protective mechanisms, there was a blurring of lines between what these boundaries meant from an Islamic versus a cultural perspe§tive and how these boundaries were moderated.** Particularly given that abuse was able to take place despite such boundaries. When sexual abuse did occur, particular where victims were adults at the time, there were expressions of religious guilt held by female victims in particular. Rather than being able to discern the abuse as abuse, victims grappled with whether or not they had committed a sin. Added to this was whether they would be exposed after marriage should their husband discover no hymen. Cultural misconceptions and lack of biological knowledge surrounding this were visible.

Confusion also presented in notions surrounding the concept of *Qawwamah* (male guardianship). Some felt that this created a power imbalance leading to higher rates of female victims. This was tied in with whether or not the concept was actually understood by communities and the consequential behaviours which may exhibit as a result of lack of understanding. This included just how far that guardianship (translated as authority by some participants) extended. **An accurate understanding of *Qawwamah* was felt to be a prerequisite for healthy Muslim communities.**

4.3 The Impact of Abuse

Impact on Individuals

Physiological stress responses, isolation from family, friends and religious community, self-blame, shame, silencing and censorship, disassociation, long term health issues stemming from physical abuse, impact on relationships, impact on religion and faith, trauma responses to religious symbolism, loss of faith-based community groups and support.

Survivors shared with us feelings of confusion, shock, and an inability to figure out 'what to do' in the immediate aftermath of experiencing abuse.

> *"I was like, I just kinda froze and I was like why is this happening?"*
> *(Jafar)*

They shared the devastating, long-lasting, and 'paralysing' affect their experiences had on their lives, as well as the lives of the ones they love. It is vital to centre this conversation to understand how far-reaching the impact was. One survivor described it as having *"tentacles everywhere" (Meera)* – that the impact of abuse and the resulting trauma not only affected their mental, spiritual, and physical well-being but that living with the impact was far worse than the abuse itself. Underlying this trauma was the predisposition to victimisation as a result of childhood experiences of racism and Islamophobia as an adult (see section 3).

"I don't know how else to explain that horrible feeling. So, I walked about with a lot of guilt, like I'd actually committed zina (fornication), but I knew logically that I hadn't. But there's this emotional, strange entanglement that I had with well, maybe I let it happen because I let it happen before and before that, and before that, and you're meant to be able to fight off more, but I couldn't fight off grown men because they're so bloody strong" (Judy)

Survivors described that they lived in a state of **hypervigilance** and **often modified their behaviour in situations** that they perceived could lead to the possibility of abuse occurring. This includes **behaviour modification in a home environment.** Sleepovers at a friend's or family's house was something that survivors said they categorically disallowed, being mistrustful of allowing family and friends into their homes and with whom they left their children. Even within their own homes, they were hyper-vigilant about boys and girls being together, alone in the same room. They also expressed a level of guilt in having such feelings and controlling certain spaces but acknowledged that this is born from the trauma of having experienced abuse from a 'trusted' family member.

Survivors reported a range of detrimental consequences on their wellbeing on a profound level.

In physiological terms, this included trauma responses such as

- **Panic attacks**
- **Elevated anxiety**
- **Claustrophobia**

Psychological harms included

- **Nervous breakdowns**
- **Memory loss**
- **Suicide ideation**
- **Paranoia**
- **Fractured train of thought**
- **Dissociation**
- **Depression**

"Breathing was funny, and I was like, what the is going on I don't get, (names himself) doesn't get panic attacks, I don't get anxiety. That's not for me. I couldn't I could not accept it, I was like I'm all right. That's not for me. That's for people that have got depression this and that and I was like I shouldn't be getting that" (Jafar)

There were further social consequences including **isolation from family and friends and the religious community, self-blame alongside silencing and censorship at family and community levels.** The double-edged nature of this only compounded the isolation. For those who had experienced physical abuse, there was also the consideration of resulting health issues.

"I spent years of my life feeling like I didn't exist, like this world didn't exist. Like I couldn't. Things were happening around me and I was like, whoa, that like I don't feel like that's real. I couldn't connect with people I couldn't connect to things, I couldn't, even other people thought I was successful"

(Judy)

Collectively this disempowered survivors, leaving them unable to function as their normal selves. Whilst each person experienced their own stages in processing and coming to terms with the abuse, external actions of seeming to continue with daily functioning often masked layers of grief, trauma, and suffering. It was an impact that remained into adulthood with imposed silence often intensifying this impact further. **The silence was stated as almost being worse than the abuse itself.**

Impact on relationships

"The resentment never left, I didn't trust my parents or the people around me and especially my dad" (Yara)

I think that's one thing that really came out for me is my relationship with my dad is (expletive). I feel really distant from him…" (Judy)

There were painful and deep-seated feelings of anguish, disconnect, and hurt expressed when our survivors spoke about the impact their experiences of abuse had on their relationships with their loved ones, in particular with their parents. **We found that the individual experience of abuse impacted a wide range of relationships including siblings, intimate relationships, children, with wider family members, as well as wider communities.**

Survivors described the difficulty and trauma associated with physically connecting with their children, needing physical closeness but feeling unable to do so. For some female survivors, closeness with close male relatives was difficult, due only to the fact they were male. **For example, hugging a male sibling was something one survivor found difficult to do.** In one case, shared trauma amongst siblings emanating from shared experiences of abuse resulted in complex and difficult relationships, often causing the survivor to feel isolated.

Abusive experiences have also led to increased isolation, with survivors feeling unable to be in social groups or settings due to the related anxiety and mistrust. There were also indications of feeling safer when in isolation. Some did state that those parents who had clear religious boundaries concerning safeguarding were viewed as being more trustworthy and therefore socialising with children felt safer in such contexts. Survivors were left to navigate social spaces and relationships, constantly trying to determine what was safe and where there might be risk.

Impact on faith and spiritual wellbeing

"When I see men with big, long beards I just feel, I am sure they might be nice people, but I feel disgusted"   *(Yara)*

As well as the questions posed to us and some of the critical thinking about what personal faith meant to survivors, they also shared with us the profound impact their experiences of abuse had on their faith and spiritual wellbeing.

"Yes, so I think for me, religion was like an outward thing that I was just doing. But internally, my relationship was really difficult and strained. So, I stopped praying…Like, I just, I didn't want to. That's the honest truth, I didn't want to. And then every time I did, I was overwhelmed with guilt and shame. And these feelings of impurity these feelings of, because I allowed it to happen. It's somehow my fault. And I just had this disconnect with God, because I don't even, I can't even explain why. I just felt like, part of the reason that I'm here is because we don't have healthy conversations. We have these boundaries that God has put in here" (Judy)

We found there were trauma responses to religious symbolism such as beards, hearing the *adhan* (call to prayer) or the Qur'an being recited, prayer itself, as well as conversations about the role of males in Islam. One male survivor described the feeling of letting down his family as the leader or head of the family amidst struggling with his mental health, especially given the religious duty on him to provide and protect his family.

Coping mechanisms

Survivors developed several different mechanisms to cope with the trauma. Some made a conscious decision to cognitively distance themselves from everything around them, whether that was in terms of their emotional, psychological, or physical state. Social situations became overwhelming for some, therefore maintaining a distance provided much-needed safety.

"I just couldn't cope socially"   *(Meera)*

For others, the only way to cope was to completely disassociate from their childhood and block it out or adopt a stance of denial of the abuse as a means of self-preservation. All of these mechanisms once again offered safety or illusions of safety. Denial was also exhibited through acts of spiritual bypassing, whereby survivors used the faith to justify why they did not need to seek professional help with their mental health and wellbeing. Concepts such as being 'grateful' and the inability to recognise that anxiety can affect Muslims too were present within this stance.

"I just blocked it out, that was part of my life"   *(Imad)*

Others had an opposite reaction where they were able to turn towards their faith and use it as a mechanism to help them cope. This involved various formal and informal practices including "talking to Allah", engaging in *tasbih* (acts of remembering God), *salawaat* (sending prayers upon the Prophet Muhammed)[16], making *du'a* (supplications), and seeking *istikhara* (guidance on making decisions). There were also active attempts to engage in seeking Islamic knowledge and keeping Muslim company as part of maintaining and developing faith-based connections.

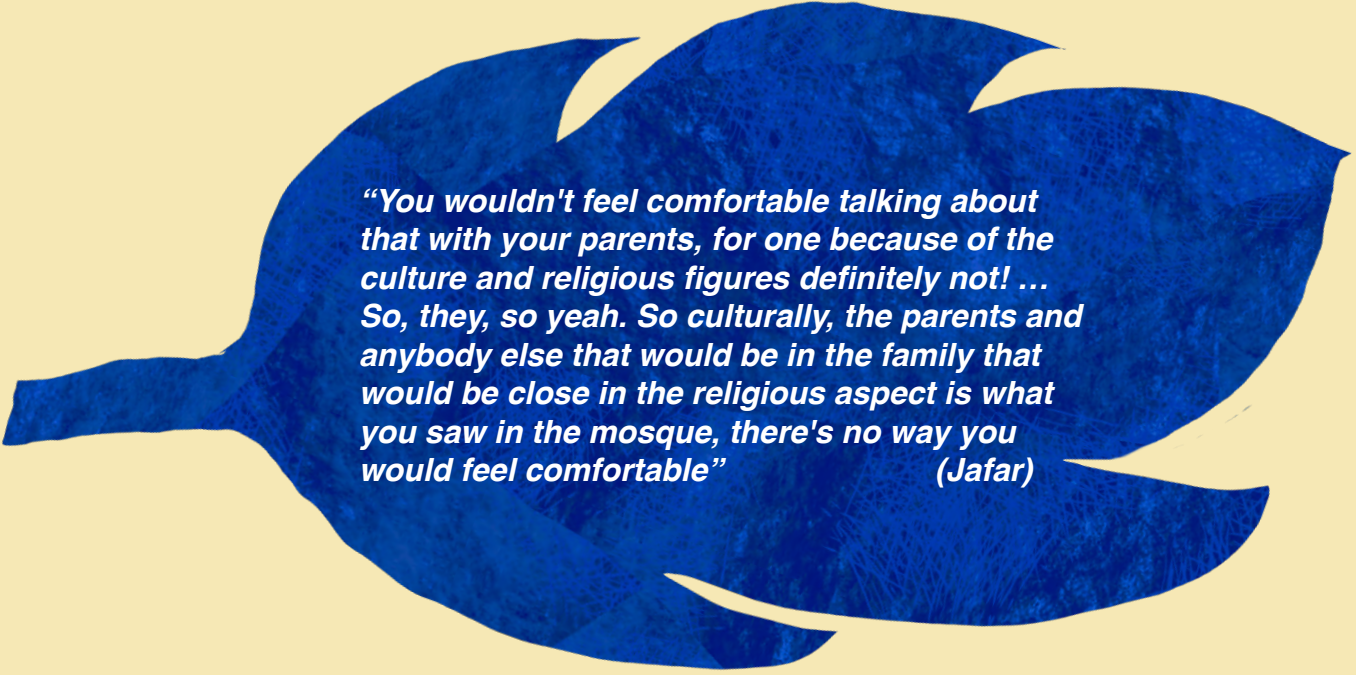## 4.4 Disclosures and Reporting

Disclosures

We found that many of our survivors had made disclosures at some stage of their lives to different people ranging from parents, spouses, siblings, friends, doctors, and religious teachers. We also found that for some people, disclosing to certain people and not others was dependent on the perceived impact it would have on their own relationships or the relationships of others. However, **the dominant pattern was that most have and continue to stay silent about what happened to them for a multitude of important and complex reasons.**

Reporting to parents in particular presented with a whole host of complexities and was perhaps the most traumatic. There were some reports of positive responses from parents in making disclosures, however these were few. For some, they felt that by not disclosing they would be protecting their parents from the shared grief and trauma of potentially feeling like they had failed as parents. Rather than be protected, they became the ones to protect. **For those who did disclose to family and were met with a negative response, this led to resentment which psychologically broke them and permeated all aspects of their life.**

A sense of protection was also exhibited towards the family of the individual who perpetrated the abuse. Survivors felt the need to protect them from harmful repercussions that would present alongside disclosures. For others, they were acutely aware that should they disclose, then this had potentially serious consequences such as the risk of honour killing. This was particularly the case where there was a lack of understanding relating to abuse or where victims had been older at the time of the abuse. Added to this were fears around community gossip, shaming, and stigma leading to a loss of *'izzat'* (honour), key determinants of honour killings. **It, therefore, was not surprising to find that in most of the cases, perpetrators of abuse were left to act with impunity in the name of protecting honour, family, and livelihood.**

Disclosures to other community members such as a religious authority figure, were reported as places where survivors felt they could not approach.

"You wouldn't feel comfortable talking about that with your parents, for one because of the culture and religious figures definitely not! … So, they, so yeah. So culturally, the parents and anybody else that would be in the family that would be close in the religious aspect is what you saw in the mosque, there's no way you would feel comfortable" (Jafar)

It was felt that it would be counterintuitive for them, coupled with the reality that the vast majority of Imams are not trained in dealing with disclosures. In cases where disclosures were made to religious authority figures, we found that silencing, censorship, coercion, as well as physical harm were experienced by survivors. This was significant in compounding the mistrust and trauma at a community level.

Not being believed was the predominant general worry held by all victims. This was magnified for males in particular, especially if the perpetrator of the abuse was female. This was felt to add a double layer of silencing whereby they would be mocked for firstly being a victim of abuse and secondly for being abused by a female.

"Yeah, and then in my head if I was to tell my mates or whatever, I'd probably get, you know the mick taken out of me and (pause) comments like, was it good? did you enjoy it? It was a girl, you know all these things, typical lad kind of, chat. I don't know, but in my head that's why I never said anything" (Jafar)

Male survivors also reported a lack of support provision. When they engaged with services, it was apparent that the provision for them as males was not adequate. As an example, one survivor engaged with a Rape Crisis Centre but was turned away as they did not support men. Support sought *via* their workplace was scarce, mostly online, and insufficient.

Survivors highlighted that whilst Muslim and ethnic minority specialist organisations were doing a good job overall, they did not feel they could always use their services for support due to a fear of a breach of confidentiality as a result of 'everyone knows everyone'. Being a relatively concentrated community, anonymity became complex. **One survivor reported that they felt their confidentiality had been breached and as a result, trust had been lost.**

Beyond barriers to disclosures internal to their communities, survivors also expressed concerns about external barriers. In line with wider discriminatory experiences of Muslims within societal structures, they were worried that should they reach out to mainstream organisations then they may be met with Islamophobia and racism. **There were also concerns about whether mainstream organisations were sufficiently trained to be able to meet their nuanced needs and competently navigate the cultural sensitivities involved.** Only one mainstream organisation was reported to have been helpful. In disclosing to a doctor, this was described as a 'clinical' and an 'off-putting' experience, and one that did not lead to long-term support for the participant but rather made survivors feel cold and even more disconnected.

The barriers to disclosures presented on all sides and whilst the mechanisms adopted by survivors protected them in one regard, they added further layers of trauma and distress for each survivor. **One survivor felt like they had overcome a barrier on discovering that 'nothing happened' and that they didn't 'crumble' after making a disclosure.** This gave them the positive impetus that was needed to break their silence with other people in their lives. An unintended consequence however of making a disclosure was that others navigated towards them to make their own disclosures. This was indicative of the level of silencing and suffering present, whilst also presenting a disproportionate level of vicarious trauma for those who initiated disclosure. **An unpreparedness and emotional burden was being carried by survivors which added another complex layer to their trauma and subsequent mental health.**

Reporting to the police

3 survivors reported to the police

3 not reported

Outcome of Reporting

1 conviction that was overturned

1 person placed on list if he re-entered the country

From the survivors who reported

2 were in immediate physical danger

1 was reported as a historic abuse

"What am I going to get out of this? Is that going to help if report this? I was like, nothing much. Because again, the she said he said thing. So, on the whole no evidence... I didn't feel I was going to get anything from it cos I had made my peace with it. That's why I didn't, I didn't think there was going to be any benefit to me because that's what was important. Whether it was gonna benefit me or not"   *(Jafar)*

What's the point? We had this question repeated to us on several occasions when we asked survivors whether they had reported what happened to them to the police. Some felt that the historical nature of the abuse they experienced would 'waste police time'. We had reports of some positive engagements, as well as difficult and well-documented experiences of alienation, fear, and mistrust of the police.

Survivors reported that they were apprehensive about calling the police due to the perception that the police are not equipped with enough understanding of cultural considerations, as well as the fear of being treated differently as a result of their ethnicity and/or religion,

"biggest thing...they would call is culture and religion...The police made me feel out of control"   *(Meera)*

The majority of survivors who reported to the police said they did so either because they were in immediate danger, that it was reported by a third-party practitioner, or that they reported their abuse at the same time that a different case of abuse was being reported. **Those who did not report said they were fearful of community backlash, and in one case the fear of death threats as they had seen this happen in other cases where someone was reported.**

Whilst reporting to the police is an inherently positive thing, we have to be mindful of outlining what survivors experienced in the aftermath of reporting - homelessness and financial difficulties; heightened Islamophobia and racism as a result of being re-housed, and a loss of trust in the judicial system. This is indicative of how much is at stake for survivors from the Scottish Muslim community in making disclosures. **In reaching out for support they also risked losing any semblance of normality, stability and belongingness in their lives.**

4.5 Support and Recovery

"You're like a zigzag"
(Judy)

"The goodness that Allah (swt) gave me itself was my recovery"
(Imad)

Survivors described a non-linear and lifelong process of recovery. All survivors said that they had not had any sort of or any significant level of professional support. The reasons for this were a lack of opportunity, a lack of desire to share their stories, and the feeling that a self-determined route to recovery felt safer, controlled, and easier to manage in a cultural and communal context where silence and censorship were a lived reality. Additionally, where a survivor had a strong familial support network, it felt even less important to seek external support. We have already mentioned that survivors have found some services to be inadequate, and completely lacking in the case of male survivors. **New relationships, distance from their abusers, the passing of time, and having successful lives of their own have been some of the catalysts for seeking a path to recovery.**

Faith as a support mechanism

"When I was able to just speak to Allah and say look make things easier for me. You know, I'm struggling I'm really finding it hard. I've never experienced this fear before please help me out. So that helped and obviously it's speaking to this guy as well. So yeah, so that's the support"
(Jafar)

One of the prominent themes emerging from our research has been that Muslim survivors overwhelmingly spoke about their faith as being essential to their recovery. This manifested in two ways:

1

The use of prayer, rituals, social spaces, and informal Muslim friendship groups as sources of solace and strength to inform support and healing.

"But more so in those difficult times. I remember once that I was holding the prayer beads, you know, and the tasbih. And I was trying to do my dhikr and my meditation and prayers or whatever…But you know, and I was just lying there, crying on my entire pillow, I was crying so quietly, that I didn't want my husband to hear me. And the pillow was completely soaked with tears. But for some reason, I don't know, I just felt like God, God loved that moment. And, you know, and I just felt like, my whole body being filled with light. And I felt so much peace"
(Meera)

"We know that we (referring to informal faith-based support) were victims, there was no, there's nothing in our mind for somebody to convince us or even play in our mind that we weren't a victim, you know, you, this, you are part of this whatever abuse it was" (Imad)

2

The use of faith as a way to bypass trauma, what is referred to as 'spiritual bypass', or to prioritise spiritual or faith-based practices.

In some cases, this was done as a means of bypassing facing the impact of the abuse and appeared to be avoidant in nature. A recent study[17] carried out with Muslims in the US found that over-reliance on spirituality for dealing with traumatic experiences may not correlate with better mental health. Thus, potentially signifying a need for a combination of approaches within interventions in the recovery process.

In other cases, there may have been elements of spiritual bypassing. Alongside this there were also indications towards using gratitude style mindsets to contextualise and come to terms with the abuse.

"It's not like I need some kind of therapy. I don't need any therapy. Because alhamdulillah what Allah swt blessed me with was too good to overcompensate for, you know the harm. So, I think I'm comfortable with it"
(Imad)

17 Ahmad et al., 2023

Healing Through Faith

4.6 What helps?

"I think a big thing for me was not to be blamed, for the situation I was in. Yeah. And it wasn't said to me many times, but it sticks, stays with you. This is the things that keeps ringing in your head that it was it was probably me, even though I didn't say it was me. I kept saying it was, probably. But that was hard enough, it was hard enough to live with that"
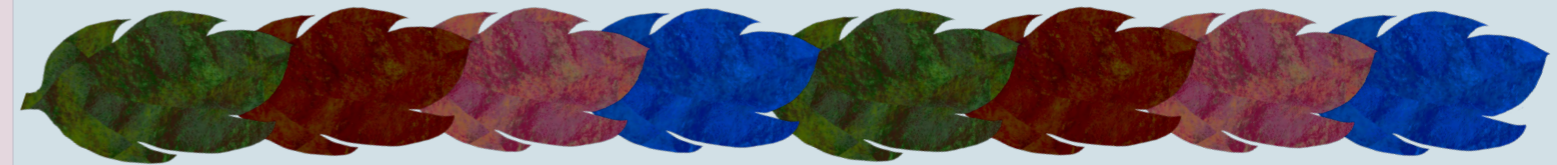*(Heba)*

"I'm somebody that needed support and an outlet and for someone to believe me, and for someone to tell me that it's not your fault - those years, that makes you into the person that you become"
(Judy)

"No-one acknowledged what happened to me. I wish I could be less emotional about it…I wish there was something like this (referring to Sacred) then, to be able to speak up"
(Yara)

"I probably go back to the fact that if I assessed my life and how it's planned out, you know, Allah swt has, well He's blessed me. I just feel blessed. Every day, like health tick, parents' health, tick, children's health, wife, job, financial stability, like everything's Alhamdulillah, ticked. So, I think that just gives me too much of erm thankfulness to Allah swt that, you know, I've got a lot of good. And, you know, the bad that came in my life at that point, is, you know, outweighed (By the good) Yeah. And because I managed to block it out. But maybe if that continued… that's one thing, you know, and I know some people that they've continued from their childhood and even till now, that, that experience haunted them. So, even that, alhamdulillah I have to thank Allah swt, he didn't keep you know, he let me block out"
(Imad)

Other faith-based tools which were utilised to aid recovery included *tasbih* (contemplation), *du'a* (supplications), sending prayers upon the Prophet[18], recitation of the Qur'an, and keeping positive Muslim company.

In their recovery journey, survivors expressed their experiences had moulded who they were but that the result of this was a feeling of becoming a person with increased resilience, wisdom, and strength. **They spoke passionately about the importance of using their experiences in a positive way to create a change for other people, and that participating in this research was a way to raise awareness and bring about change.** The central theme that emerged was that their faith was strengthened as they became adults and had opportunities to learn in-depth about their faith. They thereby 'reclaimed' their faith as a force for positive change, in opposition to some of the negative associations they previously carried.

18 Peace be upon him.

Survivors expressed the need to be heard, for the abuse to be acknowledged, and to be believed. This requires the provision of safe spaces that offer confidentiality and freedom from the constant worry and fear of breaches, which might reach their families or communities in which they are well known. **A space within which it is acceptable to speak out.**

Female survivors felt there is a real need for the availability of Muslim female practitioners who were accessible across the spectrum of services that might be accessed during or after experiencing abuse – *"So having that female figure, which we're really desperate to find, there's not many scholars, female scholars that we, you know, we can just go and approach"*   *(Heba)*

Within support provision, it was felt that there needed to be therapists and counsellors who understand the Islamic tradition and thereby provide tailored, culturally informed services which account for their faith identity. **The need to extend the understanding of how to deal with disclosures within community contexts was also raised.** This included increased accessibility and availability of religious leaders (imams and scholars) both male and female, professionally trained in dealing with disclosures, understanding mental health issues, and being able to signpost to relevant local agencies.

Within the preventative space, survivors expressed the need for Muslim communities to learn about marriage and healthy sexual relationships, within an Islamic framework. Herein it was recognised that growing up in conservative environments could at times lead to a lack of preparation for being in an intimate relationship. Compounding this is the reality of easily accessible porn and unhealthy sexual outlets which were felt to be negatively impacting on intimacy within marital relationships.

Final Reflections

To reflect on this research in a manner that would do justice to the layers and complexities that exist for the 'Muslim community' as a heterogeneous and mostly religious community, as we have discovered, is a task that deserves more than a few words. This report is a first step, a concentrated effort to frame how the religious identities, lives, and experiences of Muslim communities in Scotland are central to how abuse is experienced. It has become apparent that service access, provision, and support have gaps that are prevalent as a result of a 'blind spot' to faith identity. **The centrality of faith has emerged as intimately key for survivors in support and recovery; indeed, faith is how the participants in this research defined themselves and organised themselves socially, institutionally as well as individually.**

It is clear from this research that Muslim survivors of abuse face additional layers of challenges and barriers. A culture of silence and shaming prevents making disclosures whether in an informal or formal capacity. These are imposed internally within communities. However, the impact of wider Islamophobia and anti-Muslim Hatred narratives further feed into the external barriers superimposed onto survivors.

Speaking out therefore becomes a careful balancing act, one wherein survivors are required to juggle an impossible number of considerations. Not only do they have their own safety and wellbeing to contend with in the aftermath of the abuse, but they are further required to consider the wellbeing of others within their communities, for fear of wider negative repercussions. Within this, experiences of spiritual abuse only compound the situation further.

What is important to survivors is being heard and having safe accessible spaces within which they can speak freely. Encompassing their faith identity within any support provision deemed essential. Working towards creating preventative spaces and cultures is essential to addressing this issue. **This includes the development of resources internal to communities as a first step, whilst also considering how external mainstream services can also be more accessible and relevant.**

Recommendations

Community members

- Exercise power within community settings in relation to insisting on transparent and clear safeguarding procedures

- Create cultures whereby talking about sexual abuse is no longer considered taboo

- Attendance of parental training courses on dealing with sensitive issues

Mosques

- Increased efficacy of communication between institutions and the communities they serve e.g. better use of social media and designated administrative contact points

- Safeguarding training and practical implementation to be more transparent and part of everyday safeguarding culture

- Ensure safeguarding training is carried out by those who are suitably qualified whilst also holding cultural competency

- Accountability and transparency to be embedded within everyday cultures. Impartial and transparent complaints procedures and mechanisms for providing feedback

- Provision of parental training courses in relation to dealing with sensitive issues by trained professionals who also possess adequate cultural competency

- Greater provision of marital preparation courses

- Increased training for imams and those with religious authority in sensitive issues, by trained professionals

Service Providers

- Increase in training in cultural competency to provide better services

- Inclusion of faith and cultural-based identities within service provision

- Adequate representation within services of the local demographics they serve

- Strict upholding of anonymity of all clients who access services

Policy Makers/Government

- Fund, support and recognise the value of having independent researchers not tied down by any organisational affiliations

- Recognise heterogeneity of the Scottish Muslim community and the need for services and funding to acknowledge this within their provision

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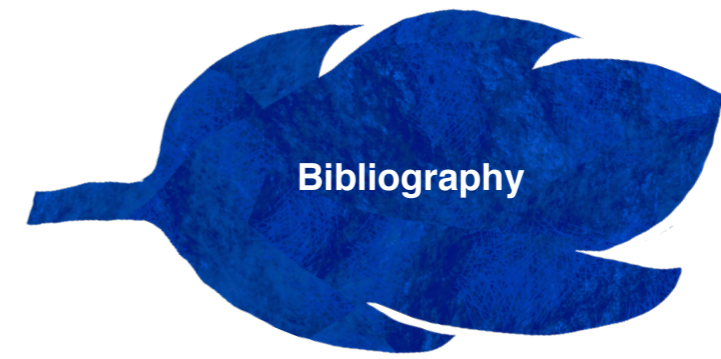
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