

Part 2: Dynamic Resistance to Spiritual Abuse: Strategies and Innovations in Muslim Contexts

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Introduction

In the previous chapter, we highlighted that spiritual abuse in Muslim contexts can occur across various settings including domestic environments, religious institutions, and secular spaces. Perpetrators of abuse are identified as both those in positions of religious authority as well as everyday community members, particularly those who may hold influence within community or familial networks. We further noted that spiritual abuse can present in diverse forms: including as sexual, psychological or physical abuse, financial exploitation, bullying, harassment, and the use of shame or fear to control, harm or manipulate individuals. Building on this foundation, this chapter examines three domains of response to spiritual abuse: grassroots initiatives, online activism, and academic enquiry. These illustrate dynamic and versatile efforts by Muslims in both the UK and US to address, resist and heal from spiritual abuse.

By “**acknowledging**” we mean that our purpose is to develop confidence within Muslim communities so that the occurrence of spiritual abuse and the harms it brings with it are acknowledged and, in time, confronted. Achieving this requires education and awareness-raising: only then can the nature of the problem be better understood, and the urgency needed to deal with it be generated. Such initiatives empower individuals to speak out, reducing the secrecy that allows the problem to persist and grow. They also foster resilience and encourage the reporting of abuse.

By “**resisting**” spiritual abuse, we mean to equip communities with the tools and motivation proactively to build systems that prevent harm: by putting in place checks and balances in governance, alongside robust safeguarding, and protection measures, to help minimise opportunities in which abuse can occur. Finally, to heal from abuse we consider the necessity of two levels of action; 1) to provide support (psychological, emotional, financial, legal and spiritual) where requested; and 2) to hold those perpetrating abuse to account, and thus enable a sense of justice and closure, whilst also preventing future offences.

Spiritual abuse is a form of exploitation which can be difficult to substantiate, partly due to the uncertainty surrounding the term itself (Oakley et al, 2018). Efforts to call it out are further hindered in Muslim communities, by the reluctance of some to acknowledge its existence, for fear it could cast Islam in a negative light. This allows perpetrators to escape scrutiny and accountability, creating environments where abuse can continue unchecked (Chowdhury et al, 2019). This hesitancy is not unique to Muslim communities; the desire to protect the image of a religion and to preserve its sanctity, is prevalent across multiple faith groups. For example, in her examination of spiritual abuse in new spiritual communities, Hildegund Keul (2022), identifies similar posturing in the Catholic Church, while Naomi Graetz, discusses it in her book *Silence is Deadly: Judaism confronting wife-beating* (1998). Both scholars describe a narrative in which religious communities ignore, deny or cover up

abuse as a means of protecting their religion and ostensibly its followers from damage.¹

For Muslim communities, acknowledging the existence of spiritual abuse carries additional burdens. It risks bringing Islam, its followers and places of worship, which they already experience as widely and unfairly demonised by the media (Sozeri et al, 2019), under yet further scrutiny and into more disrepute, whilst also exacerbating a potential increase in Islamophobia and anti-Muslim prejudice (Idriss, 2020). Such community apprehensions can contribute to the continuation of abuse (Chowdhury et al, 2019). Keul (2022) describes this inclination where “one wounds the other to protect oneself from being wounded”, as an assault on human dignity, where lack of acknowledgement of abuse results in prolongation of debasement and trauma for the victim, inhibiting them from processing their experiences or moving forward. Chowdhury’s (2023) findings correlate with this, observing that enforced silence for long periods of time compounds trauma, creating further suffering, strained relations with family members, and increased isolation from one’s community.

The three domains of response discussed next, focus primarily on reducing institutional factors that (sometimes unintentionally) facilitate spiritual abuse. Additionally, some strategies have implications for domestic settings, and influence community perceptions of spiritual abuse. These approaches are crucial for building community resilience against such misconduct and for empowering communities to effectively address and challenge spiritual abuse (Chowdhury, 2023). The examples presented here are not exhaustive, but they illustrate key activism methods currently being employed by individuals and organisations in the UK and US to tackle spiritual abuse in Muslim communities.

1) Grassroots Initiatives:

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”– James Baldwin

Lack of recognition and concerted commitment or effort to address spiritual abuse from religious institutions and government bodies, has resulted in the emergence of grassroots organisation. Simultaneously, existing organisations have placed spiritual abuse firmly on their agenda among key issues requiring urgent attention. One such organisation is the Muslim Women’s Network UK (MWNUK), a small national charity that seeks to “improve social justice and equality for Muslim women” (MWNUK, 2024). In 2018, MWNUK submitted a response to the Ministry of Justice, following its public consultation on “Transforming the Response to Domestic Abuse” (MOJ, 2018). MWNUK formulated an online questionnaire, to gather thoughts from its grassroots service users. Based on these findings, two of their key recommendations to the board were: 1) to include spiritual abuse as part of the “domestic abuse/coercive control” definition, and 2) to recognise spiritual abuse as an “aggravating factor” in relevant cases, thereby increasing sentences for abusers. This is in light of the recognition that some perpetrators use spiritual abuse as a

¹ See also a church experience survey, which found that nearly 50% of respondents reported being made to feel shame or blame when dealing with spiritual abuse (Oakley and Kimmond, 2014: 89).

means of control, to prevent victims from leaving or reporting them. Organisations like MWNUK hold potential to serve as effective advocates for minority communities, and to develop links with wider networks to gain further support and amplification.

A second British-based charity Nour (from the Arabic word meaning “light”), is one of few trauma-informed organisations in the UK, which is sensitive to Muslim needs. Founded by women, Nour works with minoritised communities – particularly, but not exclusively Muslim ones. Nour provides a range of services for men and women, including free counselling, legal advice, emotional and practical support, and financial assistance, all aimed at helping survivors heal from the trauma of abuse (Nour, 2024). In addition to these services, Nour actively encourages communities to speak up and report abuse, offering free posters to the public with statements such as: “your silence is their greatest weapon” and other awareness-raising materials. Although Nour focuses primarily on dealing with domestic violence, they recognise both the exploitation of religion to justify abusive behaviours, and the potential of religious teachings to address these issues. Consequently, they have collaborated with Islamic scholars to develop a ready-made *Khutbah* (Islamic sermon) available for free download. This encourages Imams and leaders to speak about the crime of abuse from the pulpit during Friday prayers and in other settings, acting as both awareness-raising and a deterrent through faith-orientated community education.

In the US context, the Association of Muslim Chaplains (AMC), which supports chaplains in providing quality pastoral, religious and spiritual care to service users, has also taken proactive steps to educate, raise awareness, and encourage the reporting of spiritual abuse. As part of their commitment of care to the community, AMC has developed a pledge and code of professional conduct, holding themselves to “the highest ethical standards as derived from the Qur’an and Sunnah”² (AMC, no date), reminding members to make a conscious commitment to “never violate the personhood of another human being, religiously, emotionally or physically” (ibid). This initiative is particularly important as Muslim chaplains may not be integrated into institutions in the same way as other religious employees; thus, this provides a layer of accountability that might otherwise be lacking. Chaplains are further trained on how to offer religious guidance and support to those who have become disillusioned with religion due to spiritual abuse, if they seek it.

There is no equivalent structure in the UK, and governance issues like these are yet to receive adequate attention. However, institutions such as the Markfield Institute of Higher Education provide courses and educational programmes, such as their Certificate in Chaplaincy Training, and undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Islam and Pastoral Care, which widen expertise in this area. Through the critical exploration of theological and practical issues related to pastoral care and counselling within Muslim contexts, the training aims to enhance the effectiveness and proficiency of pastoral care for victims of all forms of abuse, including spiritual abuse.

Our final example is the Scotland-based community interest company SACRED (Body:Mind:Space) (BMS CIC, 2024), founded in 2022 by Maariya Adam, a community activist and doctoral researcher. Starting out as a primarily female team,

² Sunnah refers to prophetic practice and example.

they have since grown to include male members, too. Their work seeks to benefit all Scottish Muslims, to widen acknowledgement and better understanding of abuse, and to develop safe and nurturing communities that protect and support those affected by abuse. They aim to do this by 1) creating safe spaces for those who have experienced abuse in Muslim communities to come together and help one another through the process of healing, and 2) to undertake community-centred research to explore issues and identify ways of preventing abuse. To date, the safe spaces facilitated by SACRED have catered to various sections of Scottish Muslim communities and have incorporated a range of formats including workshops, retreats, coffee mornings and a men's club. Whilst SACRED is proudly a grassroots initiative, its research element holds affinities with academic enquiry, to be discussed shortly.

This array of grassroots efforts share preventative, educational and supportive features. There is an active recognition of spiritual abuse and its harms, of its entanglements with other forms of abuse, as well as acknowledgement that communities need to drive a bottom-up approach towards addressing this issue. Whilst these efforts contribute collectively and significantly towards developments in addressing spiritual abuse, further work remains to be done. The projects remain constrained in their capacity, with limitations as to their scope and impact. This is not for want of effort, but due particularly to limited access to funding.

2) Online Activism

“Safeguarding the rights of others is the most noble and beautiful end of a human being.” - Khalil Gibran

Online activism against spiritual abuse is a response domain associated most prominently with American Muslims. In the UK, online platforms are primarily used to signpost support groups or provide basic information on related issues. In contrast, US Muslim communities have taken much bolder steps to provide tools and resources to aid in the prevention of abuse. Some have even taken the courageous step of publicly naming, shaming, and calling out individuals for evidence-based abusive behaviours, particularly in cases of spiritual abuse.

Danish Qasim is founding director of the organisation *In Shaykh's Clothing*. A community activist trained in the Islamic sciences, he has worked with victims of spiritual abuse for over a decade. Qasim expresses that when trying to protect vulnerable people from abuse there are limitations in using scripture and religious teachings on their own (In Shaykhs Clothing, 2024).³ He and co-founder Danya Shakfeh, a practising attorney, work instead to educate Muslims on the tactics of those who perpetrate such abuse, teaching them how to identify religious manipulation strategies and such traits as narcissism. They also provide training to institutions and leaders on how to formulate organisational systems with better safeguarding procedures and accountability strategies. Furthermore, they have used their legal expertise and community experience to curate an eleven-page “Code of Conduct in Islamic Leadership” document, which is available for free download

³ Qasim explains that in the past when he has tried to provide theological reasoning for why behaviours are against Islam, people told him that there were multiple opinions and interpretations, and that, consequently, religious justification for abuse might remain legitimate in their eyes.

online (Ibid). This document provides clear definitions to eliminate ambiguity on key issues and includes eight concise sections covering topics such as hiring procedures, dealing with and managing amorous relationships, harassment, bullying and exploitation. Each section outlines best practices, rules and regulations, and guidelines for addressing grievances and implementing remedy processes. They describe the code as setting a minimum standard of ethical conduct for Muslim organisations and as establishing a legal mechanism for enforcement through contract law. They point out that the US legal system has shortcomings but also offers opportunities. Hence, when a standard of ethical behaviour is agreed upon and signed at the outset of employment, this creates a legally binding contract that all signatory parties are committed to, making legal recourse more accessible in the event of abuse. This, they teach, is a concise yet powerful document that could have a significant impact on how Muslim organisations protect themselves and their constituents, as well as a tool to curtail abuse.

It is unclear from their website how effective this legally informed strategy has been to date – that is, how many Muslim institutions have adopted this voluntary protocol, or indeed how many have the desire, need or compulsion to do so. It appears that the system is only as strong as the bodies that choose to adopt it, and without due pressure and challenge from community members, external bodies or other incentives, its use may remain limited. UK Muslim communities are yet to develop a standardised safeguarding system like this; there may be individual institutions which have formulated their own governance proceedings, but such did not come to light at the time of writing this paper.

In Shaykh's Clothing also features first-hand accounts from individuals who have experienced spiritual abuse, not merely to recount their ordeals, but to extract possible lessons from these experiences. Individual insights are accompanied with religious texts that emphasise the importance that Islam places on respect and preservation of human dignity, alongside the examination of exploitative tactics and patterns employed by those perpetrating abuse, to help others avoid similar situations and to build resilience and solidarity within communities.

A second online medium of activism is the online magazine Muslimmatters.org. Started in 2007 as a collaborative project between Muslim bloggers and Islamic scholars, it aims to address contemporary issues faced by Muslims living in the West. Although the website is not specifically focussed on spiritual abuse, it provides a platform for education, and allows victims of abuse to share their stories, simultaneously exposing predators (providing disclosure passes internal scrutiny panels) and raising awareness. As such they have published a range of articles, addressing issues around spiritual abuse in Muslim communities: from exposing overt spiritual abuse in organisations, to guidance on caution with “celebrity shaykhs”, and understanding coercion and manipulation, as well as promotion of good safeguarding, and highlighting Muslim initiatives tackling abuse. By providing a credible base, with indirect theological endorsement, the platform promotes better understanding, more open discussion, and proactive confrontation of spiritual abuse within Muslim communities. Some articles provide testimonials by those who have direct experience of abuse, which serves as both a public warning, and a means of amplifying the voices of victims, helping to shift the balance of power from leadership to those who have courageously shared their trauma. Speaking out on spiritual abuse is not without risks, particularly given the strong likelihood of power

imbalances between victims and abusive individuals with significant standing and religious authority. Public disclosures in these cases are fraught with challenges and carry the risk of those speaking out being ostracised from their communities (Chowdhury et al, 2021).

Our final example of online activism relates to the US-based organisation FACE: Facing Abuse in Community Environments (Facetogether, no date). FACE is another female-led initiative and was founded by Alia Salem in 2017, out of her frustration that, for too long, some leaders, teachers, and religious scholars in Muslim communities have abused their power and authority without being held accountable. The organisation proposes a framework of investigation to address this gap in accountability, to protect communities, and to ensure that those in power are held responsible for their actions. A significant aspect of FACE involves supporting individuals who make credible accusations of abuse, ethical violations, or who experience an infringement of their rights by those in positions of religious power or trust. FACE asserts that they follow a survivor-centred community safety approach, which allows the public to be informed about individuals holding positions of religious authority who have perpetrated abuse. They draw upon outcomes of official investigations and conduct their own enquiries through legal means. A key element of their work is making their findings publicly available on their website, inclusive of detailed reports with evidence, while at the same time ensuring the protection of victims' identities. They also provide resources such as a "code of conduct for leadership", a community response toolkit (to aid organisations dealing with accusations of abuse), and a defamation toolkit (for defence against defamation, a mechanism frequently adopted to silence victims). Since its inception, FACE has received 162 reports of abuse,⁴ with 53% of these cases categorised as sexual abuse, alongside instances of physical, financial and spiritual abuse.

There are critics of the "outing" methods FACE applies, particularly as sections of their work (while not illegal) operate differently to mainstream US legal frameworks. In 2021, an article titled "The Problem of American Imams and the Failings of FACE", publicly criticised the organisation, accusing it of flaws in its investigative procedures and of prejudice. Although FACE disputes these allegations and maintains that they are continually improving their processes, this situation underscores the risks of embarking on such work. It further highlights the need to explore the impact and viability of such activism in addressing spiritual abuse and how individuals navigate these challenging spaces.

Since 2021, due to limited resources and funding, FACE has been forced to initiate an "investigative moratorium" to focus their efforts on existing cases. The last investigation report on their website is dated November 2022.⁵ They continue to centralise records about those who perpetrate abuse, with the aim of providing resources for the public to carry out background checks before appointment to positions of leadership.

All three examples above originated in the US, although *In Shaykh's Clothing* operates globally. Whilst some resources might be helpful and applicable to the UK context, there remains a vast gap in provisions specific to UK-based Muslims' needs.

⁴ This is as of 11 November 2023, when we accessed the FACE website accessed.

⁵ Ibid.

The online domain of activism serves to offer a different form of accountability, one that makes it more difficult for those perpetrating abuse to navigate unhindered from one institution to another. It further serves as an accessible source of resources which communities can draw upon. Whilst such public platforms facilitate public discussions on the topic of spiritual abuse, they do not come without their risks, as we have shown.

3) Academic Enquiry

“At any given moment you have the power to say this is not how the story is going to end.” – Christine Mason Miller

In more recent years, there has emerged a steady stream of academic enquiries into spiritual abuse, including across a range of faith and spiritual groups (Demasure, 2022). This is proving to be a powerful and persuasive mechanism for drawing scholarly attention to the issue, but it is also having impact on individuals and communities more widely. Much of the work amongst Muslims in the UK has involved ethnographic research, listening to the voices and experiences of survivors of abuse, through one-to-one interviews and questionnaires (Adam et al, 2024; Chowdhury et al, 2021; Chowdhury, 2023). Although anecdotal evidence has been used for some time by both individuals and Muslim organisations, as already demonstrated above, having academic research to substantiate this work, provides rigorous empirical evidence and findings which are more difficult to ignore – not only by communities, but by governing institutions and policy makers.

Studies completed to date, draw attention to: 1) what spiritual abuse looks like, including the extent of the problem, and the damage it causes to people’s lives; 2) weaknesses within organisational set-ups and community structures, which may inadvertently enable spiritual abuse; and 3) components such as religious language, religio-cultural community and family practices, distorted scriptural evidence, and patriarchal interpretations of Islam, which are used by those perpetrating abuse to exploit, control and manipulate (Adam et al, 2024; Chowdhury et al, 2021; Chowdhury 2023).

It is through fieldwork that we have come to understand that for many survivors of spiritual abuse the research interview setting is the first occasion where they could tell their whole story (Adam et al, 2024; Chowdhury et al, 2021; Chowdhury and Winder, 2022). Findings highlight the healing which occurs in being heard in a safe space, particularly in light of the inadequacy in current provision of safe spaces and support for victims. This body of work also identifies how religion, scripture and connection with a higher power, can be a source of strength and healing for abuse survivors, instilling hope, a sense of justice, and a way forward through the challenges and trauma (Chowdhury, 2023). The need for service providers to consider tailored and culturally-informed support to Muslim clients, inclusive of faith, has been argued across key areas of wellbeing research (Chowdhury, 2023; Terrill and Chowdhury, 2024; The Lantern Initiative et al, 2021).

In Mohammad Mazher Idriss’s academic analysis of 38 interviews with key agents and survivors of domestic abuse and honour-based violence in the UK, he emphasises various inequalities and discrimination practices faced by Muslim women who have been abused (2020). He refers to Burman and Gills’ terminology of

“triple victimisation”, to depict how Muslim women experience abuse at three levels: 1) in the home (where the abuse first occurs); 2) when reporting abuse to statutory agencies (where they are belittled, misunderstood or undermined); and 3) in the religious domain (where religious institutions when approached for intervention, provide little, if any, support or understanding of their predicament). Instead, mosques are sometimes viewed as colluding in the oppression of women (Idriss, 2020: 2481) by encouraging women to stay in abusive marriages and “not seek outside intervention” (ibid). In contrast to this Chowdhury (2023) demonstrates how victims and survivors of domestic abuse actively utilise faith and scripture to navigate a way out of abuse and abusive situations. Furthermore, they drew upon the support of scholars and religious leaders who possessed a more holistic and nuanced understanding of domestic abuse. What is evident here is the parallel use of faith and scripture to either uphold or challenge abusive practices, in line with the findings of the Web Model of Domestic Violence and Abuse (Chowdhury and Winder, 2022).

In Part 1, we noted that Islamic scholars evidence how the dangers of spiritual abuse have been considered in early Islamic tradition. Indeed, historical documentation⁶ utilises language such as *darar deeni* (religious harm) (see Nsour, 2022: 133). Spiritual abuse can thus be defined through the lens of Islamic terminology such as, the taking of someone’s right (*haqq*), through 1) *al-Ghaish* (deliberate religious deception) (see Mahon 2015: 44; Nsour, 2022: 133;) 2) *al aklu bil deen* or *khiyanatul Amanah* (misusing one’s power/religious position) (Nsour, 2022: 135) or 3) *talbis* (manipulating Islamic scripture) (Nsour, 2022: 136). Given this, scholars posit that there are tools which exist within the Islamic tradition which can be used to help 1) raise awareness of the dangers of spiritual abuse; 2) emphasise the Muslim community’s responsibility to address the issues and design systems to minimise it; 3) provide guidelines for punishment of spiritual abuse and hold people to account; and 4) help people to heal from the damage it causes (Malik, 2019).

It is recognised that those who perpetrate abuse distort religious teachings to justify their actions and maintain power; it is less often stated that misunderstood religious texts increase vulnerability for those enduring abuse. Victims may believe their suffering is a trial that they will be rewarded for, or that “this life doesn’t matter” (Hassounah-Phillips, 2003: 688), leading to “passivity and compliance”, and weakening their resistance to abuse (2003: 692). Thus, understanding how Islamic texts can be used instead as a means to empower individuals to resist abuse, to report it, and as aids in healing from it is important (Hassounah-Phillips, 2003). This has resulted in the reclaiming of those interpretations of scripture which might be misunderstood by communities, or mis-used to facilitate exploitation, restoring them to be used as tools of “empowerment and liberation” (Desai and Haffaji, 2011: 128–29).

By using academic enquiry to educate communities on their rights in Islam and the collective responsibility to stand up to oppression, such enquiry provides a mechanism to strengthen communities in tackling abuse committed in the name of

⁶Sk Rami Nsour of the Taybah Foundation, in analysing the work of Mauritanian scholar Shaykh Muḥammad Mawlūd’s (d.1905) *Mat-hartul Qulub (The Purifier of the Hearts)*, explains how the concept of *darar deeni* (religious harm), was postulated by the Prophet Muhammad himself (Nsour, 2022: 133).

religion. Islamic epistemologies are thus being actively utilised both to warn against the vices of spiritual abuse, and to identify historical practices in Islam that can be safely and legally replicated for the purposes of accountability. Indeed, there is evidence of both in existing service provision. Hence, Nour, the domestic abuse charity cited among grassroots initiatives, quotes from a number of prominent scholars of Islam on their website,⁷ and uses scriptural references to challenge derogatory notions of gender and patriarchy, which might otherwise be mis-used to legitimise abuse, particularly violence against women.

Within the US context, the Hurma Project was set up by American activist-scholar of Islam Professor Ingrid Mattson in 2018. The Arabic word *Hurma* translates as “inviolability”; the term is derived from Prophetic teachings and aspires to capture the high regard Islam holds for the sanctity of human life and preservation of essential standards of human dignity and respect.⁸ The Project’s body of staff is currently all female, although it is not clear if this is deliberate. The Hurma Project is funded by various Muslim philanthropic organisations and community grant distributing bodies and aims to educate the community on what they define as “their God-given dignity and rights”. Their primary focus is on the responsibility of those in positions of power and authority and on equipping them with principles and processes both to respond to and prevent abuse in Muslim spaces. This is achieved through the production of research papers relating to spiritual abuse, its psychological impact, and how those in positions of leadership and religious authority can support in removing obstacles for survivors of abuse. One of their key methods for conducting and disseminating this work is through their podcasts, where Mattson interviews experts who have worked on spiritual abuse or related issues, or abuse survivors, exploring themes from trauma and healing, to investigating allegations of misconduct, to safeguarding children in educational institutions. By providing a platform to openly discuss, educate, explore and find solutions to age-old problems around exploitation, abuse and keeping the vulnerable safe, Hurma raises the bar on expectations for Muslim leaders and organisations, pushing them to do better. In combining an academic and research approach with an online element, the reach and impact potential of their message is considerable.

Scotland based SACRED (body:mind:space), meanwhile, is a grassroots organisation that partners with academics and religious leaders to explore how abuse is understood, experienced, and addressed in Scottish Muslim communities. Drawing on collaborations with other grassroots organisations, their open research methods have resulted in a series of community engagement events. These have brought together various sections of Scottish Muslim communities (from academic and practitioner sectors, as well as the general public) which has yielded impetus for subsequent research explorations. Engagement activities include workshops, coffee mornings, male wellbeing events and coffee clubs, an immersive retreat, wellbeing on campus, islamophobia awareness events, and more. The research element has run in parallel with community engagement. This brings the rigour of research

⁷ See <https://www.nour-dv.org.uk/features/tafseer-surah-434-does-islam-really-allow-wife-beating/> (accessed 4 September 2024).

⁸ This “foundational teaching” is derived from a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, which draws attention to celebrating the age-old Arab custom of “Upholding the sacred inviolability of all who enter Muslim spaces from exploitation & abuse by those holding religious power & authority” (see, <https://hurmaproject.com>, accessed 4 September 2024).

methodology to an unwavering commitment to and focus on the communities at the heart of the research. The research team advocates for research that is both critical and sensitive, which is particularly necessary when working in groups who are stigmatised and minoritised in a post-colonial context (Adam et al, 2024).

Academic enquiry into spiritual abuse can provide an added layer of authority and validation to the experiences of victims and survivors, who often otherwise have their voices suppressed (Chowdhury et al, 2021). It allows for addressing spiritual abuse from an insider approach, as well as for sensitively informing the provision of services and policies, within affected communities themselves, and beyond. Through combining with other response domains, such as those covered in sections one and two, such methods also hold potential for developing effective bottom-up and survivor-informed approaches for maximising effectiveness. This innovative two-way approach can be seen in the examples of both the Hurma Project and SACRED.

In Conclusion

"It is not only what we do, but also what we do not do, for which we are accountable." – Moliere

The three areas of engagement explored in this chapter demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of activism addressing spiritual abuse within Muslim communities. There is a palpable sense of ownership, with community activists and others working in the field embarking on diverse initiatives through which spiritual abuse can be addressed. This has led to a range of activism across different media, with each making a valuable contribution.

Figure 1 sets out key risk factors which permit spiritual abuse to prevail unchecked, as per the work of activists and academics outlined here. Understanding this, allows us to determine how and why practical measures have been adopted by organisations to intervene and attempt to break the chain of abuse at multiple points.

Figure 1 Preventing and Addressing Spiritual Abuse: Risk Factors and Protective Measures

Risk Factors	Safety Measures
1. Misuse of: • Religion/spirituality • Religious position/authority /power • Scripture/religious texts	1. Greater clarity and education of religious teachings on: • issues in religion which might be subject to misunderstanding, manipulation or abuse • ethics and responsibility of religious authority & processes of accountability • Distorted/misused scripture
2. Inadequate Safeguarding Practices: • lack of comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures	2. Strengthened Safeguarding Mechanisms: • Robust governance and safeguarding policies • Regular safeguarding training • Clear and accessible reporting mechanisms
3. Weak Community Support Systems: • Lack of strong, supportive community networks	3. Building Resilient and Supportive Communities: • Increased awareness of spiritual abuse and encouragement of reporting • Foster open communication and mutual support within communities • Encouragement of collaboration with external support networks
4. Insufficient Support for Survivors of Abuse: • Lack of accessible, empathetic, religiously sensitive and effective support for victims.	4. Enhanced Support for Abuse Survivors: • Provide tailored support services, including counselling and legal assistance • Establish survivor-led support groups • Clear and accessible reporting systems • Opportunities to access religious/spiritual support when requested
5. Deficient Investigative and Accountability Mechanism: • Lack of rigorous systems for investigating abuse and holding perpetrators accountable • No fear of repercussions; leading to a greater sense of power, infallibility and confidence in repeating offences	5. Development of Investigative and Accountability Systems • Develop transparent and independent systems for investigation and accountability, e.g. Muslim Arbitration Tribunals (MAT) • Encourage external oversight and regular audits

Our analysis highlights how activism within Muslim communities is creating vital opportunities for developing mechanisms to address spiritual abuse. While the strategies identified are not exhaustive, they mark the beginning of a significant effort to confront this issue. Figure 1 not only illustrates these mechanisms, but also offers a potential model of good practice for other faith groups, which can be adapted to their specific contexts.

Across this broad expanse of work, which is still in its infancy, a number of clear contours are apparent. There is a drive to understand spiritual abuse (what it is, how it presents) and to raise awareness about it within communities. This is reflective of a widespread lack of understanding and awareness at a community level. Underpinning this drive is an effort to identify religious concepts and theological frameworks that highlight the harmful nature of spiritual abuse and the religious obligation to challenge and speak out against it. Integral to this is the development of robust safeguarding and prevention mechanisms, inclusive of clear accountability structures, within religious institutions. Also at the heart is strong emphasis on encouraging the reporting of spiritual abuse and support for victims/survivors towards recovery and healing.

Some of the activism also seeks to build resilience within communities, whether through the use of scripture to affirm human rights and dignity, or through better identification of risky behaviours and environments. Efforts are being made to encourage Muslim institutions to adopt systems, processes and procedures which promote good practice and clear accountability. Within the US context, the issue of spiritual abuse appears to have more visibility than in the UK, although here too things are still at an early stage. There are publicly disseminated mechanisms of support for those who have faced abuse, as well as pathways towards healing and gaining some form of legal recourse. There also exists a much stronger mechanism for exposure and accountability, even when this can come with personal repercussions for the people working in this area. Given how Muslim communities are particularly stigmatised at a macro level (Chowdhury and Winder, 2022; Younis 2024), this is a precarious position to be in. Due to such risks, the work of publicly calling out abusers has to be meticulously traversed, otherwise those attempting to seek justice risk being labelled as perpetrators themselves.

The public drive towards addressing all forms of abuse appears to be gaining traction in Muslim communities (Awan, 2020), and the return to scripture to aid in this endeavour is also apparent. Muslim activists utilise sources from within their own tradition to demonstrate that abusive practices have been, can and should be called out, as well as prevented. Thereby, narratives relating to stigma and shame, or to further marginalisation when disclosing (Chowdhury et al, 2021; Hammer, 2019) can be contested using culturally appropriate resources, methods and epistemologies (Adam et al, 2024; Terrill and Chowdhury, 2024).

While these efforts are commendable, they underscore the need for broader recognition of spiritual abuse, including in terms of policy and funding. Effective deterrence of abuse requires support from macro level systems, including statutory recognition and intervention. (Adam et al, 2024; Chowdhury et al, 2021; Chowdhury and Winder, 2022). Current work to address spiritual abuse is largely driven by communities themselves, usually with minimal statutory and financial support, and represents an important start in building protection and resilience against abuse.

We hope that these pioneering endeavours will receive more support, so that they may evolve and continue to foster a healthier culture of respect, dignity and enhanced protection for vulnerable individuals and communities.

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