

# **ADDRESSING SPIRITUAL ABUSE IN ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS:**

## **GUIDANCE BY THE FAITH & VAWG COALITION**



**Faith and  
VAWG Coalition**



## Introduction

The Faith & VAWG Coalition brings together organisations and activists working at the intersections of faith, race, gender based violence and feminism. The Coalition seeks to build bridges between members of Faith Communities or Faith-centric organisations, practitioners and specialists within the VAWG-sector.

The Coalition works to address VAWG by providing a more strategic, regular, and structural approach to centring the experiences of survivors of faith. Existing work to end domestic abuse at a grassroots level is rich and diverse. However, many survivors with a faith feel that across society in general, including some specialist ending VAWG services, there is a lack of understanding of their experiences of abuse. There is also a significant knowledge gap around the barriers that many survivors of faith face when seeking support, due to their religious identity, their faith community, structural inequality and experiences of spiritual abuse.

For more information on our work, values, resources and how to become a member please visit our website [www.faithandvawg.org](http://www.faithandvawg.org)

## The Herstory of the Guidance

This guidance was written at a time of global flux and national disruption in the second wave of lockdown in the UK. In the early weeks of 2021, representatives from FORWARD, Jewish Women's Aid, Latin American Women's Right Service, Muslim Youth Helpline, Restored, Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse, Welsh Women's Aid and advocates Natalie Collins and Nikki Dhillon-Keane came together to support efforts in the sector in contributing to the Domestic Abuse Bill consultation in preparations for it to receive royal assent on 29 April 2021. Two months previously the Coalition launched its first report 'Keeping the Faith: What Survivors from Faith Communities Want us to Know', centring the voices of survivors from faith backgrounds whose needs were, well before covid-19, exacerbated by the pandemic and were not being understood or met. The report clarified for the first time how domestic abuse was experienced by women of faith during the pandemic and the missing gaps in statutory and specialists agencies' responses and services provision to women from faith communities. The Coalition was passionate about ensuring that survivors of faith were not erased in the consultation process and the guidance of the now Act. In the consultation submission, it welcomed the inclusion of faith, religion and communities in the guidance as for far too long there has been a 'blind spot' to them being a resource and partners in the fight to end domestic abuse. Since the submission there has been new guidance issued (July 2022) and whilst comprehensive and incorporates some of the issues and recommendations we spell out below, it is disappointing to see that spiritual abuse as a category and its detailed explanation is missing from the updated guidance.

In this document we aim to supplement and enrich the understanding and knowledge of stakeholders, professionals, agencies and all those who deal with ending violence against women and girls on how faith and spirituality can show up in abuse but also how they are critical tools for healing and recovery.

## **What is Spiritual Abuse?**

Spiritual abuse is a tool of power and control that can present as a form of domestic abuse and an exacerbating factor in physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and economic abuse, which uses religion, culture and faith systems to control and subjugate a victim[1]. It is often characterised by a systemic pattern of coercive or controlling behaviour that can take place within a faith and or spiritual context. A perpetrator of spiritual abuse may share the same faith as their victim, or may have a different faith or no faith.

## **Forms of Spiritual Abuse**

- Forcing the victim to partake in spiritual or religious practices against their will
- Preventing the victim from partaking in spiritual or religious practices or ridiculing their religious, cultural or spiritual beliefs and or forcing them to convert to a new religion
- Using a twisted and weaponised form of religious or spiritual teaching or ‘cherry picking’ elements of sacred texts or religious tradition or custom in order to gain and maintain control of the victim or to coerce the victim into staying in a relationship with an abuser.
- Using religious, cultural or spiritual ideas or beliefs as a reason to cause harm to a victim.

## **Impact of Spiritual Abuse**

Spiritual abuse can be the most potent and powerful form of abuse for victims who have a faith. It can have a deeply damaging impact on survivors. The abuse may include, the following but is not limited to:

- Manipulation and exploitation through the influence of religious scripture, teachings, cultural traditions and other forms of spirituality
- Enforced accountability
- Censorship or denying the liberty or capacity to make independent decisions
- Requirements for secrecy and silence
- Rape and sexual assault within the context of intimate and or marital relationships and the use of religious scripture or tradition to justify it
- Coercion to conform, control and enforced observation of ‘religious’ practice or ritual through the use of sacred or religious texts/teaching, e.g. theological justifications in sexual coercion or abuse

- Causing harm, isolation and or neglect to get rid of an 'evil force', 'spirit' or 'jinn'[2] that is believed to have possessed the victim. This can include accusations of witchcraft.
- Requirement of obedience to the perpetrator, owing to religion or faith, or their 'divine' position
- Community isolation as a means of 'punishment'
- Surveillance and monitoring of movements using religious justifications for male privilege
- Spiritual abuse can also involve, using, or preventing a victim from practicing their faith or religious obligations. This may include:
  - Forcing the victim to act or behave in ways which contradict religious beliefs and or spiritual rituals and practice, eg. forcing the victim to transgress religious dietary observations
  - Preventing the victim from performing prayers and/or attending communal worship
  - Forcing sexual acts which contradict religious observance and or religious law (e.g. during and after menstruation or pre-marital sex)
  - Forcing or limiting access to abortion, birth control or sterilisation when this will contravene religious observance

## Religious Marriage and Divorce

Religious marriages from faith communities other than Christianity are not recognised in British law. A couple need to register their religious marriage for them to access their legal rights and obligations under British law. This can be used by perpetrators to:

- Actively discourage or prevent the marriage from being registered, ensuring that a woman is denied her legal rights in the event of the breakdown of the marriage.
- This along with an insecure immigration status of the victim can act as a powerful tool for coercion and control.
- Coerce or trick a woman in being part of a multiple marriage where the husband can have more than one wife at the same time.

A form of spiritual abuse may include the use of religious divorce, that is not recognised in civil courts, as a threat to control and intimidate victims. In some cases, it will lead to other manifestations of abuse within the marriage.

In Judaism this concerns the Get [3], the refusal to issue of a recalcitrant husband to give his wife a Jewish bill of divorce. Unreasonably preventing a religious Jewish marriage being dissolved, often includes the imposition of

conditions. The ability to refuse a Get enables abusive husbands to exert power and control, and will be used often to exert leverage in relation to other aspects of the divorce. The refusal will have a significant impact on a woman's wider living conditions[4], she will be often be severely restricted in her social life, and the ability to re-marry.

In Islam this can involve the refusal of a Muslim husband to grant his wife a religious divorce – talaq [5]- as a way of prolonging the process of divorce or maintaining power and control over the woman. The threat of talaq being uttered (or communicated by text message or email or over the phone) and the arbitrary use of this by perpetrators may also often be cited by some victims.

Whilst Islamic law is varied and contested depending on the school of thought and branch of Islam adhered to, Muslim women can instigate or petition for a religiously recognised separation or annulment of their marriage, they are likely to face delays and a protracted process in obtaining this depending on the religious councils and panels they utilise and on which they are reliant for this process.

## Spiritual Abuse and Other Intersecting Factors

Survivors who follow a religion or are from faith backgrounds may experience additional barriers to receiving help or reporting domestic abuse. Many will fear their faith being misunderstood and are concerned about being believed.

**Race and culture** - Faith intersects with race. Some faith groups are more racialised than others (e.g. Jewish and Muslim communities) and therefore face racism and structural marginalisation. With the prevalence of Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism, the experience of survivors of faith cannot be divorced from how their religious identity is racialised and perceived within secular spaces. As such, discrimination on the basis of one's religious identity should be recognised. In addition, some groups face marginalisation from co-religionists despite being of the same faith or ethnicity (e.g Irish & English or English & French, Catholics & Protestants, Shia & Sunni, Black Jews & European Jews etc)

**Faith erasure** - Faith can also be invisible, mis-assigned or invisibilised (eg. white survivor's faith not recognised in support needs, or a Black or minoritised victim is wrongly assumed to be of a particular faith – especially Middle Eastern Christians and Jews) which can lead to further distress when seeking support from non-by and for services.

**Sexuality** - LGBTQIA+ people may also be people of faith and may be poorly recognised and face additional barriers to support for secular and faith based services.

**Age** - The interconnection between age and abuse is also important when considering issues around child marriage and so-called honour-based abuse and its links to gendered ideas about age, piety, gender roles and healthy relationships. This intersection is another clear example of how separating the VAWG & DA agendas do not serve the survivors they are meant to protect.

**Religious leadership** - Abuse perpetrated by a religious leader creates additional barriers to support. There are additional power dynamics to consider, potentially tied housing concerns, and risks around the religious establishment prioritising the abuser over the victim. Where the survivor is a religious leader, this creates additional challenges, including fears of losing their vocation or being unable to speak out because of the need for religious leaders not to separate or divorce in some communities.

**Gender** - Given that many religions are dominated by male religious leaders, and the gendered nature of many religious texts, it is important to recognise the disproportionate potential for spiritual abuse to be perpetrated by men towards women and girls.

**Mental health and physical disability** - It is also important to recognise the complexity/multiplicity of religious perspectives on issues such as disability, mental health, complex needs and how this impacts survivor experiences which are not currently understood or appreciated by secular specialist services.



Many women with a faith have found that secular specialist services and supportive organisations, are unable to understand their experiences of abuse, and the barriers faced in accessing support due to their religious identity, their faith community and the perpetrator's spiritual abuse of them.

1. A woman's faith can be one of the most precious resources and experiences of belonging in her life. Specialist services communicating their understanding of this could transform women's perceptions of the service, feeling of emotional safety and support.
2. Secular Specialist Services urgently need to understand the varying manifestation and use of how culture, religious tradition and holy scripture can be used as tools of abuse by perpetrators. This means greater literacy on what spiritual abuse is and how it operates. This includes the weaponisation of divorce as a tactic, to prolong the separation process or conversely use it as a threat to control and intimidate women and its impact on the woman, her children and family as a whole.
3. Women and survivors needs should be centre when holding perpetrators to account. Religion or cultural practice should not be used to avoid accountability for violence and abuse.
4. Marital rape is another example of how religious literacy would dramatically improve support services offered to survivors. The use of religious scripture to argue against the notion that women can be raped by their husbands as 'sex' is part of the marriage contract and what is 'expected' of a wife.
5. Religious literacy would prevent secular agencies reinforcing patriarchal interpretations of religion and re-victimising survivors through their acceptance of religious/communal practices and traditions as 'fact'. Lack of literacy of these intersections leads to further silencing and barriers because the experience of survivors is that agencies such as the police, courts, social care, and housing create further harm.
6. Building trust and relationships with faith and minoritised communities, seeing them as allies in the fight against domestic abuse and ending violence against women would go a long way in providing a survivor-centred and wholistic service by secular and specialist services. Innovative approaches like embedding some services in religious and community spaces as well as creating direct referral pathway would require genuine, respectful, and long-term engagement.



Specialist services, statutory organisations and civil society must overcome the gaps in knowledge and literacy of some of the intersections listed above. Failure to do so leads to silencing survivors and reinforcing barriers to support from agencies. Victims should not need to choose between their faith and their safety.

As a Coalition we would like to reiterate that faith and communities and religious leadership, whether formal or informal, must be seen, included and recognised as an important part in the mission to end violence against women and girls. In doing so, we create more opportunities for transforming patriarchal structures into supportive and equitable ones.

## References

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[1] Oakley, 2018

[2] Jinn – in Islamic theology, a supernatural spirit

[3] Get – a Jewish document of divorce – which ‘chains’ them to the marriage of they have been divorced in the civil courts. Jewish couples have their marriages registered civilly at the time of their religious marriage. However, divorce is a twin track process, involving a civil divorce and a religious one (a ‘Get’). In Orthodox Judaism, a Get must be given and received with consent. If the husband does not consent, the wife is unable to remarry under Orthodox Jewish auspices and any children she has in a future relationship will be severely restricted in whom they are able to marry.

[4] Aguna’ (chained woman). Without a Get a woman is known as an ‘Aguna’ (chained woman). She cannot remarry under Orthodox Jewish auspices and any children of a future relationship are affected with a status in Jewish law known as ‘Mamzer’, meaning that they are severely restricted in whom they can marry. This situation can continue indefinitely through the generations.

[5] Talaq translated as "repudiation" or simply "divorce". Under Islamic law it refers to the husband's right to dissolve the marriage by simply announcing to his wife that he repudiates her.