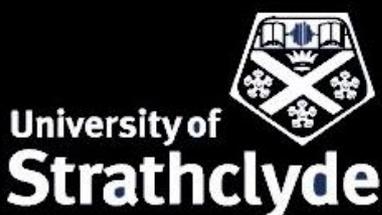


SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Reconceptualising Coercive Control in Religious Contexts



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This report has been written by Elisa Sajed in partial fulfilment of the MSc Applied Gender Studies Degree at the University of Strathclyde. The report has been supervised by partners at Amina Muslim Women's Resource Centre and Professor Karen Boyle at the University of Strathclyde.

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Executive Summary

This report has been compiled to raise awareness and enhance understanding of spiritual abuse in faith-based communities in Scotland. Currently, there is no specific legislation which outlines the act of spiritual abuse, however it is very much linked to and experienced as ‘coercive control’ as outlined in The Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act (2018).

Spiritual Abuse has been defined as the control and coercion of an individual by another person in a spiritual context¹. It is an under researched phenomenon in the field of violence against women and girls which raises significant obstacles for policy and practice. While there has been a substantial body of academic work on defining Spiritual Abuse², it is still a relatively unknown and unrecognisable form of abuse.

Drawing on the discussions and findings of existing literature, this report has found that Spiritual Abuse disproportionately affects women and girls, firmly situating the experience as a gender based violence. The discourse on Spiritual Abuse is a much needed area of exploration for researchers, policy makers and practitioners alike, as the findings of this report suggest a more targeted and conscious approach is needed to understand, respond to and address the operationalisation of spiritual abuse in faith-based communities.

One of the major difficulties in responding to Spiritual Abuse is that the law in Scotland only recognises coercive control as occurring within an intimate relationship. While intimate partners are capable of Spiritual Abuse, there is no recognition of the role of extended families, community members and faith leaders. This particularly affects women and girls from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, as they usually have a strong family influence and distinct living arrangements³. This gap in policy is known to have detrimental effects

for women and girls living at home or within extended family households and is not only a barrier to reporting such instances, but can often intensify the experience of abuse⁴. Although wider community practices of Spiritual Abuse are as equally as damaging, and often reinforce individual experiences, this report highlights the perpetration of Spiritual Abuse from intimate partners and extended family members within the context of Domestic Abuse.

This report advocates for Spiritual Abuse to be recognised within the coercive control model in policy and practice and within the Scottish Government's *Equally Safe* initiative, so that women and girls who experience Spiritual Abuse are adequately supported and perpetrators are held to account for their actions.

Introduction: What is Spiritual Abuse?

In this report, Spiritual Abuse refers to the manipulation of religion or spirituality in order to perpetrate or justify abuse and mistreatment. It is widely understood as the coercion and control of an individual in spiritual and religious contexts⁵. While this is in no way a new form of abuse, it is an under researched phenomenon in the field of gender-based violence which is unfortunately reflected in policy and practical support services.

Spiritual Abuse, like all types of abuse, can be perpetrated in personal settings such as the home or in public spaces. Abusers are not limited to intimate partners. They can be extended family members, as well as community and religious leaders or figures. Because faith forms a large part of religious and spiritual women's identities⁶, the way abuse is experienced can be very convincing that this is permitted in their faith context. This is a defining feature of Spiritual Abuse, as sometimes victims may perceive their abuse as justified in scripture. Additionally, this can often mean that the experience of abuse is intensified by the presence of the wider faith community, creating an environment where abuse is reinforced and subsequently dismissed.

Victims of Spiritual Abuse therefore experience a 'deeply emotional and personal attack' which may include violence the form of exploitation, manipulation, isolation and pressures to obey and conform⁷. Additionally, victims of Spiritual Abuse may experience practice prevention, where abusers limit access to spirituality and religious observance. Although these tactics are recognisable within the 'coercive control'⁸ model, the experience of Spiritual Abuse has been widely disregarded in policy and practice leaving victims and survivors from faith communities unable to access support and appropriate intervention services.

Gender, Faith and Spiritual Abuse: Who Does What to Whom?

There is a significant body of academic literature which emphasises the gendered nature of violence both within intimate relationships and out-with. Research and activism in the field of Domestic Abuse has recognised the disproportionate effect on women and girls which subsequently has resulted in the Scottish Government adopting a gendered definition of violence⁹. While the data on faith groups is extremely limited, male and female gender roles within faith groups are often largely stereotypical¹⁰, meaning that women of faith may experience violence which is justified by traditional gender roles, and reinforced by patriarchal peer support within the community¹¹.

The recent criminalisation of 'coercive control' in Scotland recognises the existence of violence on a continuum¹² by considering the damaging effects of psychological and emotional abuses on people who suffer from Domestic Abuse. Widely hailed as the 'gold standard' of Domestic Abuse legislation¹³, The Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act (2018) prohibits this type of violent behaviour within intimate relationships. Despite its ground-breaking content, the Act fails to consider the influence of wider families in abusive contexts, something which is known to be very problematic in minority and faith-based communities¹⁴.

Indeed, the experience of Spiritual Abuse can be conceptualised within common understandings of coercive control albeit with perpetrators who may not be intimate partners. Victims have described the experience as distressing and confusing, given their commitment to their faith¹⁵.

Spiritual Abuse is not a named feature within The Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act (2018), however it can be perhaps located within the parameters of the legislation, based on intentionality¹⁶. Domestic

Abuse is recognised as a pattern of behaviours intended to maintain power and control within an intimate relationship, aligning it closely to the perpetration of Spiritual Abuse. Spiritual Abuse is therefore closely conjoined with Domestic Abuse in its own right, as the motivations for perpetration also rooted in power and control.

While there has been limited research to determine what are the exact features of Spiritual Abuse, the experience varies across faith-based groups, and according to recent research, does not overwhelmingly feature in a particular religious denominations¹⁷. Interestingly, alongside well understood aspect of coercive control as it operates within policy and practice, Spiritual Abuse also features behaviours such as censorship¹⁸ and conformity¹⁹. While these are two opposing ideals (censoring religious practice and forcible/justified practice), they are both united by the premise of which they operate within abusive relationships. Because of the context in which the abuse occurs, this can create difficulties in seeking support when living in an abusive situation. Women in faith-based communities sometimes feel coerced into silence when experiencing abuse to avoid negative community portrayals²⁰, so often seek guidance from those within the same community.

The wider faith community is thought to be an integral part of women's experiences of violence and abuse²¹. Although they may not be actively involved in the perpetration, they are often looked to for support and guidance even before medical, criminal and third sector services, especially in communities of colour²². There is then a multi-dimensional aspect to faith in abusive situations. Firstly, faith can be exploited by perpetrators both explicitly and implicitly. Additionally, faith provides networks of support and recovery when living and dealing with abuse. The role of faith in abusive contexts is therefore extremely nuanced as it can essentially act as a barrier or a resource in violent relationships.

Policy, Practice and Preaching: Responses, Developments and Future Research Directions

Spiritual Abuse is a relatively unknown and under-researched area of violence against women and girls. Although considerable attention has been drawn in academic research to intersectional experiences of domestic abuse, this still remains to be translated into policy and practice, to ensure diverse experiences of abuse, such as Spiritual Abuse, are recognised and appropriately addressed.

Current Service Provision Developments

Despite the dearth of research and lack of adequate policy, there has been substantial effort, input and awareness raising by various intersectional organisations and key partners on the issue of Spiritual Abuse:

Amina Muslim Women's Resource Centre



Amina MWRC has been a pioneering force in spotlighting Spiritual Abuse from an intersectional standpoint. While the organisation specifically caters to the support needs of Muslim and BAME women, their workshops, webinars and focus groups on the topic of Spiritual Abuse have been inclusive and accessible to all faith-based communities. Initiatives co-ordinated by Amina MWRC have been successful in creating dialogue between women who have experienced Spiritual Abuse and the wider community, as well as bridging the gap between victims and vital support services.

Amina MWRC has facilitated a number of very successful events (see Figure 1 below) which have not only created spaces for women, community members and advocates to discuss the manifestation of Spiritual Abuse, but have also indirectly provided an arena where experiences are understood and upheld.



Fig.1: Timeline of Spiritual Abuse events at AMINA MWRC

Side by Side



Side by Side are an interfaith movement committed to gender justice. Operations run on a global scale, with members striving for gender equality and justice through a theological lens. Offering resources and toolkits, Side by Side promote the use of faith and spirituality as a resource for responding to gender based violence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, women of faith have been vulnerable to ‘domestic and spiritual abuse’ during local periods of lockdown²³. Side by Side have responded by creating a bank of resources which consider the effect of COVID-19 on gender based violence²⁴.

FACE



Facing Abuse in Community Environments (FACE) consider the abuse of religious leaders and community leaders. Their mission is to hold spiritual leadership accountable for the perpetration of spiritual and sexual abuse and general abuses of power²⁵. By commissioning independent reports and investigations, FACE offer an anonymous reporting service where abusive faith leaders and religious personalities are investigated. Many reports compiled by FACE are published with recommendations for the purpose of awareness, community safety and justice.

The Faith and VAWG Coalition



Comprising of a partnership between faith and women's organisations, The Faith and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Coalition exists to create a platform of dialogue between faith communities and specialist Domestic Abuse services. Established in 2018 by the Safety Across Faith and Ethnic (SAFE) Communities project at Standing Together, the coalition raises awareness of distinct types of abuse as suffered by women of faith. Most importantly, the coalition seeks to defend women's spirituality and autonomy to practice faith in abusive situations. The Faith and VAWG Coalition have invited the UK government to improve on policy making through understanding the important role faith plays in responding to VAWG²⁶.

Recommendations

This report has illustrated how the experience of Spiritual Abuse can be conceptualised and understood using the coercive control model. In perpetrating Spiritual Abuse, the abuser seeks to oppress and control the victim, manipulating religion and spirituality as a tool to justify and legitimise abuse. Although we can widely interpret Spiritual Abuse within the framework of coercive control, due to community pressure and perceived justification of mistreatment in religious scripture, the experience of Spiritual Abuse requires a sensitive and nuanced response from policy makers and service provisions alike to support women at the intersect of gender, race and religion.

Spiritual Abuse can therefore be considered as a gender based violence, given the parameters of which it occurs and is experienced. The gendered nature of Spiritual Abuse is reinforced by what is currently known about the types of perpetration and the nature of victimisation. It can be concluded that women from faith-based backgrounds cannot be adequately supported in their experiences of Spiritual Abuse. This conclusion is based on the clear gap in knowledge of Spiritual Abuse, from the types of perpetration, to the effect it has on victims. This paucity in research thus reflects current policy and practice and lack of service provision for victims and survivors of Spiritual Abuse. It is therefore crucial that faith-based communities are targeted as a research priority in order to provide a deeper understanding to the experience of Spiritual Abuse.

Collaborative practice between the third sector and faith leaders is required to ensure women of faith who suffer from Spiritual Abuse are adequately supported and reassured that this type of abuse is not justified nor acceptable in any faith or moral context. This requires a strategic partnerships of service provisions and faith and community leaders to not only provide faith-based counsel for abused women but to educate the wider faith community on preventing and responding to gender based violence. Given the value and the importance of the

wider community in abusive situations, a collaborative approach between faith leaders, support service and criminal justice partnerships is essential to support women suffering from Spiritual Abuse.

The Scottish Government's *Equally Safe* initiative intends to deliver a framework which prevents and takes action on all forms of violence against women and girls. While the strategy acknowledges that other protected characteristics alongside that of gender may present distinct experiences of gender based violence, religion and spirituality only appear in passing in consideration of honour-based violence and forced marriage. Indeed, an argument can be made for both of these abuses to be considered under the hypernym of Spiritual Abuse given the motivation behind the abuse, as well as the coercion involved. It is then imperative that Spiritual Abuse is widely investigated to determine whether it is an all-encompassing experience which can be ultimately implemented into the *Equally Safe* model.

Lastly, statutory agencies, service provisions and public bodies must respect the will of women's religious practices and freedoms. Despite this call for policy and practice revision, the freedom to practice religion in circumstances of Spiritual Abuse must be upheld at all costs. For many women in faith-based communities, religion and spirituality play a very important role in daily life. The problem is not the practice of religion in itself, it is the manipulation of divinity for the purpose of exploitation, power and control. Perpetrators exploit religion for their own personal benefit, which affects the way abuse and faith is perceived by victims. By respecting religious practices and differences in the response to Spiritual Abuse, it allows victims and survivors to reclaim their spirituality on their own terms, thus encouraging victim empowerment.

Annotated Resource List

Christian Organisational and Activist Resources on Spiritual Abuse

Church of England (2006) *Promoting a Safe Church: Policy for Safeguarding Adults in the Church of England*. London: Church House Publishing. [online] Available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/promotingasafechurch.pdf> (Accessed 29th March, 2021).

This was the first church report in the UK to acknowledge and name Spiritual Abuse. This report was the first of many safeguarding reports commissioned by the *Church of England* in order to promote the safety and wellbeing of churchgoers.

Church of England (2011) *Responding Well to Those Who Have Been Sexually Abused*. London: Church House Publishing. [online] Available at: https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/Responding%20Well%20to%20those%20who%20have%20been%20sexually%20abused_0.pdf (Accessed 29th March, 2021).

Another safeguarding report commissioned by the *Church of England*. Although the focus remains on the issue of Sexual Abuse, the document importantly recognises the damaging and long lasting nature of Spiritual Abuse.

Church of England (2017) *Responding Well to Domestic Abuse: Policy and Practice Guidance*. London: Church House Publishing. [online] Available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-12/RespondingWellWeb.pdf> (Accessed 29th March, 2021).

In this report, the *Church of England* formally recognise Spiritual Abuse as a potential component of Domestic Abuse, despite the lack of governmental recognition. They provide a definition of Spiritual Abuse both as a justification of abuse and the weaponisation of faith to control intimate partners.

Church of Scotland (2019) *Integrity Information Sheet 3: Spiritual Abuse*. [online] Available at: https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/54688/Information_on_Spiritual_Abuse.pdf (Accessed 29th March, 2021).

A *Church of Scotland* help-sheet for the church's congregation detailing what spiritual abuse is, and types of abuse suffered. Provides a Christian perspective of what Spiritual Abuse may look like in a Christian context.

Evangelical Alliance (2018) *Reviewing the Discourse of 'Spiritual Abuse': Logical Problems and Unintended Consequences*. [online] Available at: <https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Reviewing-the-discourse-of-Spiritual-Abuse.pdf> (Accessed 29th March, 2021).

This report work towards a precise definition of Spiritual Abuse which encompasses the lived experience as suffered by victims and survivors. The report claims that 'Spiritual Abuse' is a problematic term due to potential discriminatory practices in policy and safeguarding. It also details the disproportionate effect of Spiritual Abuse against women and girls.

MACSAS

(Minister and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors)

<https://www.macsas.org.uk>

Christian organisation who support victims and survivors of clergy abuse. MACSAS operate through understanding how the problem of abuse in the church may be rooted in Spiritual Abuse. MACSAS also offer advisory services to churches on how to implement effective policies and procedures to prevent abuse.

Oakley, L. and Humphries, J. (2018) *Understanding Spiritual Abuse in Christian Communities*. [online] Available at: <https://thirtyoneeight.org/media/2185/spiritualabusesummarydocument.pdf> (Accessed 29th March, 2021)

Led by Dr Lisa Oakley and commissioned by CCPAS (*Churches Child Protection and Child Advisory Service*), this research details the experience of Spiritual Abuse in Christian communities in the UK, as well as common understandings of the term. The report indicates that more research is required in order to define, respond to and understand the manifestation of Spiritual Abuse.

Jewish Organisational and Activist Resources on Spiritual Abuse

Jewish Women's Aid

<https://www.jwa.org.uk/spiritual-abuse>

JWA recognise how Spiritual Abuse may occur in intimate partner relationships. Their website has helpful links to Jewish specific contexts in which Spiritual Abuse may occur.

Jewish Women International

<https://www.jwi.org>

JWI have training and informative resources for congregations and clergy on how to deal with, and respond to abuse within the Jewish community. They offer webinars and training for faith leaders and community members in support of ending violence against women and girls.

Muslim Organisational and Activist Resources on Spiritual Abuse

Al-Khateeb, M.B. and Abuigideiri, S. (2007) *Change from Within: Diverse Perspectives on Domestic Violence in Muslim Communities*. Great Falls, VA: Peaceful Families Project.

This book details the diverse experiences of Domestic Abuse as suffered by Muslim Women in the USA. This volume brings together the distinct experience of Domestic Abuse and considers Spiritual Abuse within the realm of Domestic Abuse. It offers a unique position by consulting religious and faith leaders on their perspectives of abuse and why it should not be tolerated.

FACE

(Facing Abuse in Community Environments)

<https://www.facetogether.org>

A North American Muslim organisation which is committed to holding faith leaders and community members accountable in abusive situations.

In Shaykh's Clothing

<https://www.inshaykhsclathing.com>

In Shaykh's Clothing are a group of Islamic scholars dedicated to supporting victims and survivors of Spiritual Abuse, whilst committing to overcome Islamophobic interpretations of Spiritual Abuse.

Muslim Women's Network UK (2018) *Transforming the Response to Domestic Abuse*. [online] Available at:

https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/779026-MOJ%20Domestic%20Abuse%20Consultation%202018.pdf (Accessed 29th March, 2021).

The Muslim Women's Network Ministry of Justice consultation urges the government to consider Spiritual Abuse within coercive control legislation. This report considers the experiences of service users and questionnaire respondents- likely to be the first published research of Spiritual Abuse in Muslim communities in the UK.

@sabisnotsilence

<https://linktr.ee/sabisnotsilence>

A social media based movement to raise awareness of Domestic Abuse in Muslim families. 'Sabr' is the religious concept of patience which is often used by the community when dealing with hardships. This group offer a monthly 'sister's circle' to help victims and survivors heal with community support as well as YouTube videos and training events for advocates and practitioners.

Interfaith Organisational and Activist Resources on Spiritual Abuse

Faith and Violence Against Women and Girls Coalition

<https://www.standingtogether.org.uk/faith-vawg>

A partnership of faith and cultural organisations committed to raising awareness to violence against women and girls at the intersect of gender, race and religion.

Ritual Abuse Network Scotland (RANS)

<https://www.rans.org.uk>

A registered Scottish based charity dedicated to supporting victims and survivors of ritual abuse from all faiths and cultures. The charity notes that not all ritual abuse happens in religious and faith communities, but does acknowledge how religion and spirituality can be used to organise and justify abuse. The organisation also actively undertakes research in the field of ritual abuse and publishes findings on their website.

Side by Side

<http://sidebysidegender.org>

Side by Side is an international interfaith movement who are committed to global gender justice and equality. They have resources and publications available on their website which support definitions and occurrences of Spiritual Abuse throughout various religious and spiritual denominations.

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