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# Sexual Violence in Muslim Communities: Towards Awareness and Accountab

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*Sexual Violence  
in Muslim  
Communities*

Towards Awareness  
and Accountability

Edited by Samah Choudhury and Juliane Hammer

Foreword by Kecia Ali

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### **Academics, Community Activists, Muslim Leadership, Limits, and Collaboration: A Case Study**

*Nancy A. Khalil*

#### **Abstract**

How can community organizations and academics work together to acknowledge, analyze, and intervene to mitigate matters of injustice and violence in relation to sexual abuse? What role should academics play beyond documenting and analyzing instances and trends if they are interested in decolonizing scholarship and the academy? Facing Abuse in Community Environments (FACE) and Nancy A. Khalil, Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, co-produced a case study that is both public scholarship and community engagement, as well as an example of partnership between academics and activists. Based on an instance of sexual abuse disclosure, the case study is designed as a resource and pedagogical tool for best practices in community response to instances of sexual assault disclosures in US mosque communities. The case study also contributes to Dr. Khalil's scholarship on the profession of imams, becoming an example of articulated public engagement that can benefit both scholarship and community interests, demonstrating that those two are never mutually exclusive. This chapter summarizes the construction of the case study as an instance to think through how academics and community workers together can respond to concerns around sexual abuse, and also demonstrates how such work is critical in pursuit of decolonial interests.

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#### **Introduction**

How can imams become entangled in cases of abuse even if they are themselves not abusive or are actively seeking to resist and eradicate abuse? What does research with imams teach us about scholarly ethics, service, and accountability? What would it mean to conduct research on the lack of accountability facing US imams without holding oneself accountable as a scholar? This chapter tells the story of how a case study on a sexual assault disclosure in a Muslim community emerged as a public engagement project from a scholarly interest in better understanding spiritual abuse. The process and relational layers needed to complete the case study are detailed in this chapter as a means of providing answers to the aforementioned important questions a scholar on US imams interested in decolonial work, like myself, must confront.

## Community Imams and a Search for Service

The term imam in the US is overly ambiguous. I write in my forthcoming book, *Recognizing Community Imams*, about the idea of a *community imam*. I coined this term to characterize imams who intentionally identify as having careers in religious leadership, are identified as such by Muslims in their locale, serve Muslims, develop long-standing relationships with them, and are employed by them. Most popularly, a *community imam* is employed by a mosque, although there exist exceptions of *community imams* who have their own centers. There are also *community imams* who work for a Muslim non-profit that is not a mosque, but they perform some of the roles expected of *community imams*, like leading congregational prayers, conducting marriages, or providing workshops and classes within a community. I highlight the *community imam* here because one of my goals in collaborating with Facing Abuse in Community Environments, or FACE<sup>1</sup>, was precisely to provide some sort of service for the population with which I conducted much of my research: *community imams*. I was regularly asked about my work by my research community, approached with questions such as when they could read it and what were “the result of the research?” Knowing very well the book would offer a lot of information and, I hope, important analyses for those invested in this field, I also knew it would likely not be a concrete tool which would offer a clear and immediate service to the communities I worked in. How could I serve more immediately and more concretely? This mattered to me as a part of what it means to decolonize scholarship: that scholarship cannot primarily aim to expand fields and disciplines and advance scholars’ ranks at the expense of servicing those the scholarship is with and about.<sup>2</sup> Searching for a path to resist strictly reinforcing academic ivory towers is, in part, what led me to connect with FACE.

## Community Collaboration and Locating a Service

FACE operates in a contentious space. Their public reports about abusive imams have been polemically received. The wide-ranging responses include a sense of relief that an organization finally exists to help protect community members, most often women, from abuse by imams while also resulting in aversion and discontent. Critiques often center on FACE’s public calling out methods that critics see as egregious and harmful to Islamic norms

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<sup>1</sup> FACE is a community organization which formed in 2017 specifically because of what they identified as a missing framework that can hold Muslim religious leadership in North America accountable for their actions. For more information, see their website: <https://facetgether.org/>

<sup>2</sup> There is a field of literature on decolonizing ethnographic scholarship that aims in method and content to think through what scholarship looks like when it is not serving colonial interests. For some examples in anthropology, see the following four: 1) Carolina Alonso Bejarano Lucia López Juárez, Mirian A. Mijangos García, and Daniel M. Goldstein. 2019. *Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrants and New Directions in Social Science*. Illustrated edition. Durham: Duke University Press Books. 2) Faye V. Harrison. 1997. *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology of Liberation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 3) Raminder Kaur and Victoria Louisa Klinkert. 2021. “Decolonizing Ethnographies.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 11, no. 1 (June 3, 2021): 246–55. <https://doi.org/10.1086/713966>. 4) Susanna Trnka, Jesse Hession Grayman, and L. L. Wynn. “Editors’ Note: Decolonizing Anthropology: Global Perspectives.” *American Ethnologist* 50, no. 3 (2023): 345–49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13192>.

of hiding sins, while FACE sees these methods as necessary to protecting the vulnerable from abusive leaders. Despite these polemics, FACE staff continue to make personal sacrifices to sustain the organization because they believe preventing abuse is paramount to a healthy community. The methods they employ are not arbitrary. To ensure a moral grounding to their work, they have a process in place that they diligently adhere to and approach with sincerity and sensitivity. As demonstrated through its assessment reports, site visits, verified evidence, a clearly identified benefit from publicizing the case, and trusted expert reviewers for their reports before release, FACE recognizes the gravity and responsibility of this work. It takes staff months, if not years, to fully and thoroughly conduct their research, verify, write, validate, and release a report.

When I reached out to FACE Director, Alia Salem, she almost instantly knew what project would work well for us to conduct together. FACE had responded to a public disclosure of an instance of sexual assault in a community by conducting an investigation to see if any of the mosque leaders or the imam were culpable. It is important to reiterate that the vast majority of cases FACE investigates either do not result in written reports or reports produced are not made public. Some of them lack enough verifiable evidence to make them public, while others are instances that can be handled privately with no clear community benefit identified to justify publication. What drove FACE to this particular case was the already public nature of the disclosure. The survivor did not name her assailant, but across social media, it was evident that many in the city were traumatized since the survivor posted publicly on Facebook describing the attack on her. This was only further affirmed when FACE arrived. After two site visits and after conducting many interviews with the survivor, different individuals the survivor had reached out to, and the imam of her mosque, FACE determined there was no report to be written, and that the imam was not involved in any behavior constituting abuse. It also became clear that there were many lessons to be learned on how leaders should respond if a sexual assault takes place and is disclosed in their community. Given the urgency of the reports FACE receives and often the time sensitivity needed to respond to them, FACE knew that releasing a written compilation of lessons learned would be beneficial. The organization, however, did not have the capacity for proactive work given its avalanche of cases that needed a reactive and immediate response. I told Ms. Salem that I had access to potential funds that would support their time, our traveling for follow-up research, experts to consult with when writing the case, and the production of the case study. Our funding application was successful, and we embarked on constructing a case study that could be a teaching tool in training or professional development settings for imams and mosque leaders.

### **How Can a Case Study Serve?**

Modeled after case studies written by Harvard University's Pluralism Project, which are themselves modeled after typical case studies used in business schools, *Disclosures Need Closure* took nearly two years to complete. I had prior experience with case studies from writing one for the Pluralism Project as a part of a summer-long graduate fellowship, being a Teaching Fellow for Diana Eck in her case study-based course, and later teaching my own semester-long case study-based undergraduate course on religious dilemmas in the US at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The case study approach was thus one that was

familiar to me and, I believed, quite fitting to achieve the specific goal in this situation. In form, case studies are typically written in two parts. The first is the more substantive of the two parts, introducing the dilemma the case is centered on, teaching background information on the tradition(s) the case is working with, and introducing the main actors in the case – including an identified protagonist. It most often reads like a story, and it intentionally ends at the climax of the story’s arc, leaving the reader wondering what decision the protagonist took or what outcome emerged. Leaving the closure of the case unknown to the audience creates space for a discussion to take place. Participants can engage the different details of the story while also theoretically exploring the risks and advantages of different possibilities – without yet knowing the actual ending. They are encouraged to role-play and consider what they might do in the situation, or what they think the protagonist could or should do. Most case studies have a set of teaching questions attached to them for facilitators to use to guide the conversation, although experienced facilitators may adapt the questions to the conversation unfolding and the interests of the audience. After a healthy discussion of about 45-60 minutes, participants receive a break and are given the much shorter, concluding part of the case study to read individually or collectively. Following the conclusion, another discussion takes place. Sometimes, participants are invited to chat with their neighbor about the conclusion for a few minutes before proceeding to the larger discussion. The concluding conversation is shorter, typically 15-30 minutes, and guides participants to identifying lessons the case encourages them to take away. Having worked with case studies for over ten years, first as a participant and then as a facilitator/educator, I can affirm that pedagogically, they are an excellent teaching tool that keep most participants continuously reassessing, learning, and engaged. A case study also felt like a perfect fit for the case FACE shared with me.

### **Learning from the Case Study and its Production**

The case tells the story of a college student, Sakinah, who makes a post on Facebook detailing an instance of sexual assault, not naming her assailant (although many of her readers could discern who he was) and sharing her disappointment with how her local leadership responded when she appealed to them for safety and justice a few months after the incident took place. As a survivor, Sakinah’s goal in going public was to protect women from any such harm, but her post quickly went viral in the local community and left many people feeling deeply scared and insecure. Mosque leadership, including the imam in the case, wanted to help heal the fraught community, yet had little concrete knowledge of how to handle the situation. It was community members that contacted FACE and asked for their support. After traveling to the site and conducting interviews with different actors involved in the situation, FACE determined that the community clearly had some talented professionals among them that FACE could become an ally to and support. Yet, the process with which situations like this could be handled to center safety and healing of the community remained opaque. There were many lessons learned, some a model for other communities, while others were examples of things to take heed of.

Because of the COVID pandemic, FACE and I took longer than initially planned to complete the case. Applying for funding took almost four months; once received, FACE shared with me the material they had collected on the case. It took many weeks to sift

through and listen to hours of recordings, read many documents, and hold clarifying meetings with FACE staff and some actors involved. After starting to write the case, it became clear that details were missing that were necessary to construct an engaging case study. The time to visit the community had arrived. Even if all of the materials FACE had procured from their visit were sufficient to construct the case study, as an ethnographer, I did not feel comfortable writing about a community that had not met me. Owing also to the sensitivity of the situation, it was important for me that the community know who I am, know that I wanted to listen to them directly, and that their interests would also be centered. It took a few months to arrange the travel logistics because of the pandemic. Once the research trip was completed, a few more months were spent recruiting expert consultants while the case study was being drafted. The four consultants included an expert each from the following areas: mental health, law, religious leadership, and faith-based non-profit organizational interests. After the consultants' revisions were incorporated, the case study text was finalized, and then its layout and design were completed by staff at the University of Michigan from the office that funded our fellowship. Throughout the process, FACE staff had the opportunity to give feedback and offer corrections at each stage of the case study, but ultimately, I authored it and am responsible for its content.

### **Ethnographic Stewardship and the Importance of Scholarly Accountability**

I emphasize my authorship to draw attention to what I call *ethnographic stewardship*. It is an approach to ethnography that focuses on the process of production and the relationships of accountability between the scholar and those they work with. *Ethnographic stewardship* accepts as a premise that collaboration (with those the ethnographer is conducting research with) is a necessary presence in all ethnography, and it is a decolonial<sup>3</sup> commitment of the scholar that determines whether they engage the existing collaboration in their work. *Ethnographic stewardship* also pushes against the idea that shared identities necessarily need specific reflexive attention in ethnographic writing and argues that to be truly decolonial in our work is to acknowledge that there are all types of relationships of accountability regardless of a scholar's identity, and all relationships of accountability should be equitably engaged in ethical ethnography. To dismiss or erase this reality is to put added labor and expectations on scholars with shared identities, who are most often scholars of color, and that, in turn, reinforces a bias against them and their scholarship. In attempts at bridging colonial impact and rifts, expecting collaboration and reflexivity of an ethnographer's relationships of accountability only from particular types of scholars can reinforce the very colonial hierarchies decolonial work aims to disrupt. Thus, as the ethnographic steward of my work, I, as the author, need to be held accountable for it and to those I work with for the ethics with which I produced it. I do so here in my work with FACE to make transparent my interest in working with them and what purposes I aim to serve through that work.

I also cannot impose my words and intent on collaborators who did not have equitable control over the writing. Unlike traditional ethnographic writing, however, the

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<sup>3</sup> I use decolonial here in the same light I earlier described where the scholarship has valued benefit beyond the disciplines it is being produced in and foremost to the community it is produced with.

case study method typically asks for the approval of all involved in it before making it public, and this approval was pursued not only from FACE but from all the consultants who advised on the case. Despite that approval, I still believe that the principles behind *ethnographic stewardship* carry over. FACE did not, for example, read through or approve this chapter, and asking them to do so for anything I write that references FACE is both an unfair burden on them and also would impose a shared perspective or analysis that may not be present. One does not need to always agree with a collaborator to have a healthy and ethical working relationship with them. FACE is accountable to a different audience than I am as a scholar and needs to protect its relationships with those whom it serves. These are relationships I may not have, though I recognize that I do have a relationship with FACE to honor. FACE may intentionally exclude itself from spaces or conversations that could impact its ability to provide services without having conflicting interests, when I may choose to enter them because they are of benefit to my audience and my relationships. It is critical when collaborating that our roles and relationships as scholars are not collapsed with those of our collaborators and vice versa.

I use ethnographic stewardship in forthcoming publications to push against the idea that collaboration is equality between a scholar and those they work with in their co-production of knowledge. I push against this not because I believe there is a hierarchy in the ability to produce knowledge – there is not. Yet, there needs to be a hierarchy in accountability of the scholarship produced: it is, after all, the perceived absence of accountability that led to the formation of FACE to begin with. When an ethnographer writes, it is the ethnographer, not their collaborators, who needs to be held accountable for their words and arguments. Otherwise, there are disparate power dynamics where scholars can be interpreted or assumed to have been endorsed or approved by their collaborators when that may not be the case.

### **Valuing Public Service When Decolonizing Scholarship**

When I reached out to FACE to see if there was interest in collaborating on a project, I wanted to better understand the ways spiritual abuse manifests and the limits of the concept, meaning what simultaneous boundaries and possibilities it can entail. I was hopeful there was some service I could also offer FACE that would allow us to partner and benefit from each other's skills and knowledge. FACE staff and I identified the case study as the area of collaboration for us to jointly move forward both of our work and interest in regard to the work of imams. I emphasize this collaboration for methodological interests in my efforts towards demarginalization and decolonization of my scholarship. Part of our academic work pressures us to interrogate the purpose of our research. If it is primarily to further conceptual debates within academic disciplines and qualify scholars for promotions necessary to advance their careers, how can it also be decolonial? My scholarship argues that conceptual decolonization is not sufficient. Even when the research aims to theoretically challenge inequities that emerge from colonization, it can still reinforce academic structures and standards that are capitalist and colonial at their core by putting the success and wealth of institutions of higher education and their staff ahead of the needs of the communities they work with. I resist this, albeit insufficiently, by first calling it out and, secondly, by aiming to offer my scholarly training and skills in service of communities I work with in ways they find

valuable. In the case of FACE, we collaborated on a case study. While I stewarded the case study and am accountable for the writing, FACE and I co-produced it following their directive and our joint desire to fulfill a need FACE believed would be of service to their community. In our co-production, I met regularly with FACE, shared writing with them for feedback, returned to the site of the case with them for further research, carefully noted their goals for the case, as well as the case's community messaging, and FACE and I also worked together to identify and recruit area experts to consult on the case.

At present, the case study is complete. It is ready and available to be workshopped (email me!) at conferences, with imam councils, at conventions, at seminaries training Muslim leaders, etc.<sup>4</sup> Constructing it was a generative experience that helped me better grasp the importance of the work at stake, who the stakeholders are, and who can be impacted. It also helped me better theorize the function of limits that my book engages, and how limits do not only restrict but also illuminate neglected sites of openings. From the case study, the imam was not able to respond to Sakinah in a way that made her see him as an ally because of the limits of his training. Limits are not only boundaries outside of our control. In the imam's case, those boundaries can be invoked to prevent higher expectations of people in leadership. At the same time, limits are also forces of new direction. In this instance, those manifested in the birth of an organization like FACE to demand leadership accountability and in projects like this case study that are designed as a training to help leaders serve their communities.

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<sup>4</sup> The author and FACE agreed to include the case study in this volume, with a request to contact them for further instruction and assistance on how to use it.

# Disclosures Need Closure: The “A” Case

## ***Post One – A Survivor Breaks Her Silence***

“*TRIGGER WARNING: Sexual Assault/Rape*”, Sakinah<sup>1</sup>, a survivor of sexual assault, titled her first of two Facebook posts. Invoking the allegations against Brett Kavanaugh, and a profound empathy for Dr. Blasey Ford and the public nature of personal trauma, Sakinah lamented the current (lack of) support for survivors<sup>2</sup>. She wanted to forget her own assault, but it had deeply traumatized her. Confronted with a rising surge of triggers, including the Kavanaugh hearings, she described the impossibility of forgetting what was now a permanent part of her. She described the incident in her post, asserting that she had been dressed in loose, long clothing, had not been inebriated, and that she was spending time with her assailant in his apartment like she had done many times before<sup>3</sup>. They were both students at the same university. He was also her close friend, she told her Facebook friends, before she described how he raped her. Fearing he impregnated her, he would not leave her until she took a Plan B pill that he went with her to purchase and pay for.

After her assault, Sakinah had to navigate her new identity as a survivor and her relationships with loved ones. It is important to understand that a survivor will forever now be a survivor, and the impact of their assault on them can change as they try to heal, or remain traumatized from it. Sakinah had the wherewithal to pursue therapy, which helped her recognize that she had been in an abusive friendship and named the assault for what it was. Her therapists helped her through the stages of grief she experienced, grief she couldn't hide from her family either. For weeks after the event, she would suddenly and uncontrollably burst into tears. When she finally opened up to her family, she described being shamed by them, accused of donning improper attire, and being further victimized by them. She also felt it necessary to cut off most of her friends because they were also

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<sup>1</sup> The name “Sakinah” is a pseudonym employed to protect the privacy and identity of the survivor.

<sup>2</sup> In September of 2018, then-nominee for the Supreme Court Brett Kavanaugh was undergoing his confirmation to the Court. During this confirmation process, California professor Christine Blasey Ford alleged that Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her during high school. She later addressed the Senate Judiciary Committee during hearings to testify about the assault.

<sup>3</sup> Today, after the famous Johnny Depp and Amber Heard case in which he sued her for defamation and won after she penned an op-ed implicating him in abuse, without explicitly naming him, posts like Sakinah's may decrease out of fear of a similar outcome.

close friends with her assailant. However, other friends became her lifelines and strong supporters as she navigated the aftermath.

In her last semester on campus, she walked into the only course she was enrolled in to discover her assailant in the same classroom. She had successfully avoided him for months, and now she had no alternative. She needed this class to graduate and couldn't enroll in another section. No longer the quiet and awkward girl he had once known, she mustered up the courage to ask him to drop the course. He refused. She informed the professor of the situation, and the professor, a mandatory reporter<sup>4</sup>, told the university administration, and they immediately turned it over to the Title IX office<sup>5</sup>. His hands were otherwise tied in regards to the assailant because he could not force him to drop the course. Only university administration could issue such a command. He could, however, care for Sakinah, and, according to her, he became an "extremely supportive" ally for her throughout the term. Sakinah did not want to pursue the Title IX case; recall, she wanted to forget the incident. Under the Trump administration, however, Title IX rules changed so that any complainant must give a full testimony and the accused must be allowed to cross-examine their accuser. This made the sexual assault reporting process much more adversarial, further intimidating survivors away from reporting<sup>6</sup>. Sakinah described how her assailant harassed her throughout the term, to the point that her classmates became concerned for her wellbeing. Whenever the professor observed these instances of harassment, he intervened, separating them or creating distance to help protect Sakinah. For Sakinah, this professor was more than an ally; he helped her feel safe. She expressed gratitude towards him for remaining attuned to the dynamics between her and her assailant in his classroom and intervening in the ways he did.

The professor provided Sakinah with a validation and protection that is important for survivors. Even though he did not gather facts, nor did he try to adjudicate between Sakinah and her assailant (because that was not his role), through his intervention, Sakinah felt protected because it sent a message to Sakinah that she was believed and she did not need to manage everything by herself.

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<sup>4</sup> Not all university faculty are necessarily mandatory reporters, duty-bound to report instances of sexual assault to campus administrators. This varies by university. This university either mandated their faculty to be mandatory reporters, or this particular faculty member had an additional appointment that came with the mandatory reporting responsibility.

<sup>5</sup> Title IX is a federal civil rights law that protects students from discrimination based on sex. The law has a broad scope and is often employed to address issues of sexual assault and harassment in educational institutions. According to its stipulations, university professors are mandatory reporters

<sup>6</sup> Bedera, Nicole. *Trump's New Rule Governing College Sex Assault Is Nearly Impossible for Survivors to Use*.

In the Facebook post, Sakinah stated that she would not name her assailant, but she recognized that some of them would learn his identity despite that. “If you know the person...and choose to be friends with them,” she instructed them, “do me a favor and unfollow me, block me, politely remove yourself from my life. Because it’s not ‘choosing one friend over the other’ or ‘staying out of it’, it’s choosing to side with someone who intentionally assaulted me. And I’m no longer going to stay silent about my story.” The culture of shame and silence was a culture she now wanted to rupture. Dr. Blasey Ford’s confidence and grace in the face of her sexual trauma offered Sakinah a model she was now committed to see as the new norm. In a screenshot of her initial post taken a few days after it was made, it had already been shared over 350 times and reacted to by thousands of people.

***The culture of shame and silence was a culture she now wanted to rupture.***

### ***Post Two – What’s a Mosque To Do?***

Sakinah’s Facebook was flooded with responses. She made a second post as a response to the reaction her first post received less than a day later. She wanted to address the mixed, and sometimes difficult, reactions she received. Although many of her friends commented with their support, others questioned Sakinah’s choice to disclose something like this. Some friends, although not the majority, went so far as to ask her to remove her post. However, most of the comments were expressions of love for Sakinah, and admiration for her courage and perseverance. In a way, this reassured her. She felt that the post could make a difference, and that it might produce positive change in her community.

Some people sent her direct messages of support, urged her to pursue legal action, and shared their own experiences with sexual assault and trauma. Sakinah was overwhelmed and infuriated by the culture of shame that led so many survivors to suffer alone or in secret. “I believe you,” her second post stated, assuring those who had disclosed their experiences with her, “and I promise to fight for us to be able to share our stories without fear of retaliation and judgement[sic].” One of the people who reached out to her in the wake of her post was Imam Bakar<sup>7</sup>, the Imam of her campus mosque that her post implicated. She was upset by the message he sent her. Imam Bakar told her that the “post makes the masjid looks [sic] bad.”

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<sup>7</sup> Please see Appendix 1 for a guiding timeline and list of key figures to facilitate reading this case study.

<sup>8</sup> The pseudonym “Imam Bakar” will be consistently used throughout this case study to refer to the mosque’s religious leader.

Sakinah wanted the Imam to provide support instead of, “pretending publicly to not know it [the assault] occurred,” indicated by his comment on her post, nor his making any official public statements in response. It seemed it took her publicly posting for him to understand that what Sakinah experienced was an assault. In his attempts to help Sakinah, Imam Bakar strongly suggested she contact the police. He, like many others, believed the police must be the proper path to best address an assault. He could not fully understand why she did not go to the police on her own. Imam Bakar wanted to resolve the situation, but he did not understand what his options were, nor which of them would be the best to proceed with. Sakinah told those who asked her that the Imam “knew about this assault months ago.” She had gone to him and told him about it soon after it occurred. Imam Bakar told her he would handle it internally and then later questioned her assailant, who denied all accusations. Imam Bakar did not know how to proceed with two completely conflicting statements and no additional witnesses involved. He was not equipped or knowledgeable on how to manage this situation, and he did not know who to ask. When he saw the public disclosure, he presumed this would now move the incident beyond a he said/she said situation and the police could resolve it.

The student-run executive committee of the mosque reacted differently than the Imam. Like most people, they first heard of the incident through the Facebook post. They reached out to her after her post and according to Sakinah, they made her feel supported and recognized. Sakinah expressed gratitude to the executive committee for helping her “deal with this situation.” Sakinah, thinking about Imam Bakar, also indicated that she hoped area mosques would hold their leadership accountable for how they reacted to her assault. It wasn’t clear if Imam Bakar consulted with his mosque’s board before reaching out to Sakinah, but it was clear that Imam Bakar was outside his area of knowledge on the best way to handle this situation for himself, for Sakinah, for her assailant, and for a community now intimately aware of Sakinah’s trauma.

### ***The Posts Spread***

Alia Salem’s direct messages had a lot of activity that Thursday. People asked her, had she seen the Facebook post? What needed to be done? What were her thoughts? Some folks sent her screenshots of the post, wanting to ensure she was aware of it. Despite starting her organization only a year prior, many already identified Salem, Executive Director and co-founder of FACE (Facing Abuse in Community Environments), as a critical resource on issues related to sexual assault and spiritual abuse within the Muslim community. A survivor herself, Alia Salem didn’t come into this space easily. She previously worked in a number of nonprofits, acquired multiple degrees and certificates, is a widely

requested public speaker, and is published on a wealth of impressive platforms including The New York Times, Times Magazine, Dallas Morning News, and NPR. She is kind, boisterous, and committed to the truth. One doesn't often wonder about Salem's thoughts on a topic; Salem will not hide them. Much like the name of her organization, she faces uncomfortable moments and topics head on and immediately confronts them. She hoped her skill set, prior experiences, and community relationships would allow her to build an organization to fill what she identified as a gap in accountability for leaders in a faith community.

Salem already knew Sakinah and was connected to her on Facebook. She wasn't surprised by the content of the post. Noting her feelings when she read it, "I remember thinking, oh, this seems to be a pattern." She had already received a call that day from another woman who disclosed she was assaulted by her secondary school teacher. The Kavanaugh hearings were motivating what Salem observed to be an influx of disclosures, of people coming forward with their sexual abuse experiences, reminiscent of the #MeToo hashtag that became a worldwide movement. Salem remembers feeling overcome by sadness that this was the reality for so many young women. It's telling the extent of the situation that someone in Salem's line of work, regularly exposed to these kinds of reports, experienced such an emotional response to this influx.

### ***Before the First Post: Addressing the Stay Safe Program***

These two Facebook posts weren't the first actions Sakinah took. She said her assault took place over a year earlier, in the spring of 2017. A few months later, in the fall of 2017, she disclosed her assault to a friend, Ali<sup>9</sup>. While she thought he was a mosque student executive committee member, he was actually just a dedicated participant in campus mosque activities.

Sakinah was concerned about the safety of students participating in the Stay Safe program, a ride-share program organized by campus mosque members that Muslim students used to request safe rides at night when they felt vulnerable or unsafe walking to their destinations on campus. It was primarily a GroupMe text of people, mostly students, consisting of those offering to drive others, along with those who may need a ride. Sakinah's assailant was in the group as a driver (as was another accused man whose accuser had only told Sakinah and refused to disclose elsewhere). Sakinah was worried

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<sup>9</sup> The pseudonym "Ali" will be consistently used throughout this case study to refer to Sakinah's friend.

that the involvement of those two assailants, and the structure overall, threatened riders, especially women.

Ali worried about Sakinah after her disclosure to him. Did she have support? How was she managing this trauma? He felt that Sakinah had shared a lot of personal information with him that day beyond just describing her assault. She also described her spiritual journey, how the lectures of religious scholars now impacted her, and how she had taken off her hijab recently. Ali reported that Sakinah never used the words “sexual abuse<sup>10</sup>,” but called what had happened to her an “assault.” Sakinah also told him the identity of her assailant. At first, Ali was shocked because the assailant was someone he knew personally, rather than a stranger. However, as he thought about it more deeply, he realized it wasn’t that surprising. Ali considered the man’s behavior often off-putting, his conversations frequently misogynistic. Afterwards, Ali approached the mosque Executive Committee<sup>11</sup>, or EC for short, about the weaknesses in the Stay Safe program, sharing that there was an accusation of assault against one of the drivers without disclosing Sakinah’s or the assailant’s identity, and giving only a vague description of what she had shared with him. The EC decided by vote to clean up and semi-structure the Stay Safe group of volunteers. They agreed to use a dispatcher system to send drivers to riders and that the drivers would be of the same gender as the riders they were picking up. Additionally, the drivers would be approved and pre-screened by the EC.

Retrospectively, it seemed the EC did the best it could given the sparse information they had. Given how opaquely the incident was described, the EC took a vote and decided not to publicize that there was an accusation of assault in their community. They were afraid to scare the community and incite fear that they had no capacity to address or resolve. They had Imam Bakar, but they did not see him as equivalent to a chaplain who they believed would be trained to heal a community through such a trauma. This perception of Imam Bakar persisted despite his reputation as an imam that championed women’s rights and as an Imam who was known to invest substantial time and resources pursuing trainings and developing a network to support him as an Imam.

Clearly, there existed a gap between Imam Bakar’s ability to guide his own professional development and the growing and varying needs of his congregants. Thus why the EC felt that it would be prudent not to publicize that an assault was disclosed to them. One of the

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<sup>10</sup> It appears Ali is using abuse and assault interchangeably in his conversation and here is emphasizing that when Sakinah first disclosed to him, she did not indicate that the type of abuse/assault was “sexual.”

<sup>11</sup> The Executive Committee (EC) is a student-led body that operates in collaboration with the imam to oversee events and activities at the mosque.

attempted resolutions Imam Bakar had taken after Sakinah disclosed the assault to him, and before she posted publicly, was to invite the campus police to the campus mosque, which actually ended up making the students highly uncomfortable.

He thought connecting the Muslim campus community with their police may offer them a sense of safety that there was an authority that was present and wanted to protect them. However, considering the rise in news and attention to issues of police brutality against minority communities, which many students had been advocating against, the students instead felt threatened and uneasy. Given that Sakinah did not want to pursue a criminal investigation, it was unclear what benefit a police presence could offer. Additionally, when the EC announced the changes to the Stay Safe program rules, they alluded to safety concerns without offering any details. This also frustrated participants because the rules were more limiting and several students found them annoying and restrictive.

Everyone wanted to do what was right and wanted to help, but despite these positive intentions, feelings were fraught and the community was uncomfortable and tense, long before Sakinah made her Facebook post.

What was “right” was often hard to figure out. Given that the sexual assault had not yet been officially disclosed, students were sharing bits and pieces of information with each other to the best of their knowledge as they all wondered why their Stay Safe program was being revamped. The absence of an official disclosure also made it difficult to recognize the need for students’ emotional and social support.

***Everyone wanted to do what was right and wanted to help, but despite these positive intentions, feelings were fraught and the community was uncomfortable and tense...***

### ***Imam Bakar***

When Sakinah first told Imam Bakar about her sexual assault, she expected him to support her unequivocally. He listened to her and reached out to her accused assailant to question him. The accused assailant denied any wrongdoing and then presented Imam Bakar with a letter from the university Title IX office, stating that the investigation was

inconclusive based on the lack of evidence. This letter was the result of Sakinah deciding she was not emotionally able to participate and withdrawing from the investigation, therefore not supplying the necessary evidence for the Title IX office to reach a conclusion. In this context of what presented to the imam as a he said/she said case, many imams, like Imam Bakar, may think there is no additional action for them to take or expert advice to solicit. The EC he regularly turned to was as much, or more, outside their knowledge and experience as Imam Bakar was in dealing with disclosures of sexual assault in their community, and, at this moment, this was not yet a community-wide disclosure.

*The gap in Imam Bakar’s know-how in dealing with an instance of sexual assault disclosure is not intuitive to address, nor is it one many mosques or mosque leaders may think of proactively.* Any existing trainings for imams in the US are supplementary and not required because there is no particular certification or association membership an individual must have to be hired as an imam. These ad-hoc trainings are also decentralized, voluntary, and organized by random issue-oriented organizations who recognize a void around the issue they serve. This includes causes like domestic violence, addiction, serving the youth, etc., where the organizations try to fill the void – making it hard for many imams to be aware the trainings even exist. When they are aware of such trainings, an imam may not attend because their job does not offer them the time to invest in professional development nor the financial support to help them pursue it. A few imams have pursued degrees or certificates in counseling to help them feel more equipped to serve as an imam, but many counseling degrees do not properly train for navigating communal responses to sexual assault disclosures either<sup>12</sup>. Amidst these training limitations, imams are often left to imagine on their own what their leadership roles entail and often look to precedent based on Islamic texts and history they studied – many of which use either a legalistic or a judicial framing to determine actions and roles of an imam, particularly in dealing with disputes and accusations.

Such a legalistic mindset loses track of the desired pastoral support of a congregation, meaning, instead of thinking, “How might disclosure of a sexual assault (even if not public) hurt my community as a whole, who will need my support, and how do I provide it?” an imam will instead think, “*How do I discern truth from falsehood so that I can take a course of action that is justice centered?*” Neither of these thought processes is necessarily

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<sup>12</sup> Khalil, Nancy. *He’s not an imam, lol he’s a postal worker: Locating the imam in the USA. The Politics of Islam in Europe and North America*. December 2018. [http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/POMEPS\\_Studies\\_32.pdf](http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/POMEPS_Studies_32.pdf).

problematic, but they can become so when there is dissonance between the community's expectation of their imam as pastoral and the imam's expectation of his role as judicial. Such a dissonance can lead to an imam not serving the community in the way they need, nor being informed enough to recognize this is what is taking place - like the case of Imam Bakar, despite all of the trainings he proactively chose to attend and the network he had built to support him as an imam. Thus, what Sakinah described as a failure of Imam Bakar's was not due to lack of effort on his part.

***Thus, what Sakinah described as a failure of Imam Bakar's was not due to lack of effort on his part.***

Imam Bakar was highly educated and highly invested in doing justice within his role as a religious leader. He worked hard to pursue the support and network he needed when his own expertise faltered. If someone like Imam Bakar could appear as lacking, the challenges he faced were clearly systemic rather than weaknesses in him as a person or leader. One piece of these systemic challenges was the unique organizational structure of his campus mosque, a student-run institution. Student-based leadership has many benefits and can appear progressive and forward-thinking. However, the mosque and student leadership were also completely unaffiliated with the university. As such, there was no infrastructural support from the university. There were no meetings with other staff and leaders organized by the university, and the Imam did not have a direct connection to staff or university administration nor access to its professional development programming. Students, while intelligent and dedicated to their community, also had limited experience and little expertise regarding sexual assault.

Shortly after Sakinah's public disclosure, Imam Bakar resigned from the campus mosque after more than five years of serving there, and after his handling of Sakinah's sexual assault disclosure caused a ripple effect through the community, jeopardizing their feelings of trust and safety in the community leadership. When describing his resignation, the Imam explained that he had outgrown the position. It's not that he was looking for the next professionally stimulating step, but that he believed he was actually aged out. He stated that he felt that he was no longer young enough to connect with the college-aged demographic and therefore unable to serve the youth properly. Many in the community were distraught by this development.

Then in a devastating turn of events, a year after Sakinah's public disclosure, Imam Bakar passed away, seemingly suddenly to his mosque community. Those who knew him

closely, however, were aware of his precarious health and said it wasn't a surprise. He was only 45 and beloved to so many members of his community. When he died, the pain was visceral and widespread. He left behind a young widow and three children. Community members crowd-funded for his family, raising close to half a million dollars within a week. Donations came from far and wide, including from many who had never met him or known him. Clearly, his legacy was not defined by the case that led to his resignation. Imam Bakar was an imam and a mufti, or a scholar who was learned enough to make jurisprudential decrees. He spent a large portion of his career trying to fill his self-identified training gaps. Before being hired as an imam, he had traveled abroad for over a decade and studied a traditional Islamic Sciences curriculum. After completing this standard curriculum, he decided to specialize in jurisprudence. While his imam peers considered him of sound and advanced knowledge, he felt he had much to learn to do his job sufficiently and he advocated for other imams to pursue as much training as they could. Whenever an institute would promote a professional development opportunity, he would seize it. He invested time developing relationships with other experts in his city, includ-

ing mental health workers, domestic violence organizations, women's empowerment groups, interfaith councils, and law enforcement officials.

***She needed someone to recognize her pain and stand by her as she navigated what safety would now look like for her, but, as time moved on, her needs increased to wanting to ensure that no one else experienced trauma like hers.***

He regularly reached out to this network when he needed support or counsel. Creating this network often relied on serendipitous encounters with individuals who had crossed his path and were willing to join his circle of resources and support. There was no manual or pre-existing network to ensure he had guidelines and support as he began his position. He genuinely cared about his role as Imam, and, consequently, his community cared

deeply about him. But even the most beloved of imams can make mistakes. Not all mistakes are egregious, despite the fact that they can still result in emotional harm, like the emotional pain of Sakinah when she felt her Imam was not attuned to her needs and unable to support her through her trauma. She needed someone to recognize her pain and stand by her as she navigated what safety would now look like for her, but, as time moved on, her needs increased to wanting to ensure that no one else experienced trauma like hers.

### ***FACE-ing the Disclosure:***

When FACE (Facing Abuse in Community Environments) is called in after a complaint related to abuse by a religious leader, the organization can struggle to find support and relevance from mosque congregants who love their imam. In fact, many congregants can see FACE as a threat, if not explicitly offensive. FACE's first visit to Sakinah's city after her public Facebook disclosure took place before Imam Bakar passed away. They quickly determined that the Imam had no reason to be under investigation. Despite the fact that Sakinah felt unsupported by Imam Bakar, he was not guilty of any violation. FACE also quickly recognized that there were many lessons to learn from this incident. There's much more to an imam's belonging to a community and the effective relationship they develop than any single instance. The speed with which such large sums of money were fundraised after his death is evidence of the support his community had for him. Imam Bakar was loved tremendously.

FACE was founded in 2017 in Dallas, Texas, and is a completely remote organization working in the US and Canada. Alia Salem founded FACE to address what the organization describes as the "accountability gap" for imams, or other Muslims in leadership positions, in North America. The imam, as a figure leading in a mosque, is regulated by the state in most Muslim-majority nations, and increasingly in European ones as well. The lack of regulation towards a profession for imams in the US leaves the title ambiguous, and, consequently, the one who holds it struggles to locate his professional identity. When a religious community has no central authorizing body, like a centralized, national religious organization that affirms who can serve as a religious leader for their followers, or when the state does not explicitly manage and regulate religion vis-a-vis its institutions, leadership, funding, or establishment, the ambiguity, perhaps even opacity, of religious authority is the only clear thing about it; Alia Salem experienced this firsthand.

***The law often fails individuals in its technical requirements and interests.***

As a former director of a civil rights organization in her hometown, Salem encountered enough cases of women and youth complaining about religious leaders' offensive and inappropriate behavior, and even assaults that she believed something formal needed to exist to

collect, investigate, track, report, and finally publicize these issues so there is, at minimum, community transparency. The law often fails individuals in its technical require-

ments and interests. When leaders aren't legally culpable, when already stigmatized and marginalized communities struggle with airing "dirty laundry," how does religious and spiritual abuse get defined, much less, addressed? How are victims served and potential victims protected? How do communities hiring imams learn about their prior records before offering them a job? This is the gap FACE seeks to fill.

It became clear to FACE very early on that there were many lessons to extract from how this public disclosure unfolded in the community, including constructive lessons that are important to highlight and disseminate to other communities. There were also lessons on structural complications that leadership contends with that can only be solved by a wider collective interest and investment in addressing them - including what kind of professional development can best support someone serving as an imam and how can a community ensure their imam pursued it?

Additionally, it is important to ensure that the community does not have unrealistic expectations for what the imams' role should entail.

In 2022, FACE celebrated its 5-year anniversary and by the end of the year, it had over 175 reported allegations of abuse against North American Muslim leadership alone. FACE has a formal process in place to determine whether they are able to conduct an official investigation when a case is reported. Many cases don't get investigated, but despite that, FACE had to freeze accepting new cases for a period beginning in 2021 because they were beyond capacity. In a question on the American Muslim Poll, a national survey conducted by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, 8 percent of Muslims reported<sup>13</sup> having experienced undesired sexual advances by a religious leader. Accepting a conservative estimate that there are 3 million Muslims in the US, that means over 240,000 US Muslims have had such an experience. FACE's work focuses on the Muslim community's leadership, and their investigations are not limited to sexual abuse but include financial, physical, and spiritual abuse as well.

### ***September 2018: The Muslim Educational Institute***

The weekend Sakinah made her posts, the Muslim students on campus already had an event planned in collaboration with other Muslim groups on and beyond the university campus. The event speaker, Amir, directed the Muslim Educational Institute (MEI)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The name "Amir" and organization "Muslim Education Institute" are pseudonyms that will both be used consistently throughout the case study.

and it was his first year taking on the position full-time. Before joining the MEI, Amir had worked with the Muslim community for many years, including over ten years as a Youth Director. At the event, people were buzzing. Talk of a toxic masculine culture on campus and men taking advantage of leadership positions were filling the soundscapes. One of the student leaders disclosed the situation to Amir, informing him about the public post, and letting him know that although neither the victim nor accused assailant were in the room, many of their close friends were present. Amir said, “I appreciated her vulnerability at the moment” as a student leader responsible for an event during this highly emotionally charged time. Amir knew these were problems many Muslim campus groups faced, and he felt they were missing strong leadership in that moment. Whether it was empathy for Sakinah’s situation, or recalling instances of their own vulnerabilities or assaults, the people in the room were experiencing an emotional wave triggered by Sakinah’s disclosure, and some of them were visibly emotionally distraught. Amir decided he needed to face this situation head on, and discarded his previously determined program for the event.

As Amir remembers it, he and the students spent an hour or two debriefing the situation. The students talked about the culture among the Muslim students and a lack of accountability. They were frustrated that some people were consistently inappropriate in their interactions and that it had become normalized. Instead of speaking out, patterns of poor behavior had become common with some people, including, many echoed, the accused assailant. The ability to publicly voice these feelings felt healing for some students and made them realize they needed something more. “Honestly, I didn’t do much,” Amir insisted. “It’s not actually my expertise [sexual assault trauma], and I’m not trained in handling situations like that.” Like many leaders, Amir wanted to be clear that he did not identify as an expert on dealing with sexual assault.

Nonetheless, it was clear that the students deeply valued the presence of a speaker that acknowledged their feelings and validated their need to collectively process. For a friend of Sakinah’s that had broken down during the session, Amir said, “what I did was to show support, and, obviously the first thing I told

***Nonetheless, it was clear that the students deeply valued the presence of a speaker that acknowledged their feelings and validated their need to collectively process.***

her was to reach out to Alia [Salem] right away,” and she did. After the event that organically transformed into a healing session with Amir, it became clear to Sakinah’s friends that a more formal conversation was needed.

### ***The Town Hall Event***

What does a community do when a victim declines to cooperate with a university investigation because she wants to forget her trauma and the university is then forced to close the case due to inconclusive findings and a lack of evidence? What does it do when, for similar reasons, the victim does not want to engage law enforcement and the accused denies a rape took place? Is there any further action needed? How should leaders respond to a victim’s plea for support without deferral to an existing institutional authority, like the university or police? When leaders do not satisfy the victim’s needs, what happens when an entire community witnesses a public disclosure unfold and wonders who is responsible for her – and their – protection and healing?

At the time, Dalilah<sup>15</sup>, a member of this specific community, happened to work for Stopping Abuse, an organization that specializes in, among other areas, sexual assault response. When Dalilah heard about Sakinah’s public disclosure, she referred the campus mosque leaders to her colleagues to help guide them through the public trauma. The college students also learned about FACE from Amir at the MEI event within days of the disclosure. The students had also been in conversation with their university Title IX office since they tried to launch an investigation that Sakinah later declined. Within just a few days after the public disclosure, the Muslims on campus ultimately began planning a larger, public conversation. They organized a town hall with a panel that included three women: Alia Salem from FACE, Candace<sup>16</sup> from Stopping Abuse, and a representative from the university mental health staff.

Candace emphasized that day that these kinds of events were important. When it comes to sexual assault, the data indicates that engagement with law enforcement takes place at an extremely low rate, and some prefer it stays this way. Criminal charges do not necessarily offer victims healing or restitution, and some communities, particularly minority

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<sup>15</sup> Dalilah is a pseudonym employed to refer to an employee from Stopping Abuse who was also a member of this community. Stopping Abuse is a pseudonym used consistently throughout the case study to refer to an organization specializing in instances of sexual assault.

<sup>16</sup> Candace is a pseudonym employed to refer to an employee from Stopping Abuse who participated in the community town hall.

communities, can feel that engaging law enforcement reinforces problematic structures many of them are advocating to disrupt. Stopping Abuse has been working to determine what community accountability that does not involve criminal charges looks like. The District Attorney and the state shared interest in their work and attended an annual conference for organizations against sexual assault that aimed to go beyond the theory of community accountability and begin the conversation of what that may look like in practice. In fact, FACE presented this case study at their conference in July 2022.

***Criminal charges do not necessarily offer victims healing or restitution, and some communities, particularly minority communities, can feel that engaging law enforcement reinforces problematic structures many of them are advocating to disrupt.***

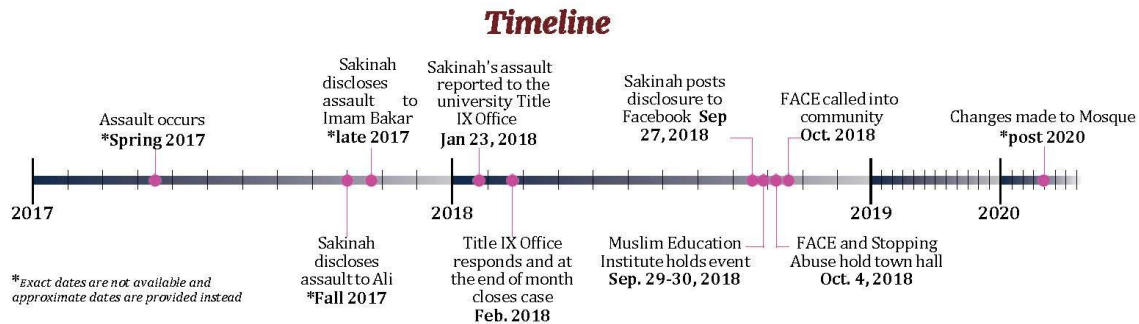
Clearly, the team in place at this town hall, all trained women, was well equipped to facilitate this much-needed conversation. The town hall organizers wanted the meeting to take place as soon as possible and be in a private place so that attendees would feel comfortable having difficult conversations. The campus mosque allowed them to reserve the main prayer hall within a week of the disclosure to hold the town hall. The goals of the town hall were modest, but sometimes those can be the most powerful. None of the panelists wanted sexual assault or abuse to be minimized, dismissed, or excused. They wanted to empower attendees with education and data on sexual assault, and to provide them resources should they encounter it in any form. Those in attendance included students on campus, but it also included Muslims from the broader community and those in leadership positions in the Muslim student group, the campus mosque, and the local mosque. Before questions and dialogue between attendees and the speakers, the panelists offered data and foundational information on the topic of sexual assault and abuse. They made sure everyone knew it was common in all communities and Candace's presentation debunked common myths on how assault and abuse are understood. Together, the panelists raised awareness of common red flags so those in attendance knew how to recognize and disrupt sexual assault and abuse when it may be present among them.

***There needed to be more education for both men and women, on and off campus, on the spectrum of what constitutes sexual violence. The more that community members can be given opportunities to speak concrete truths about people committing harm, the healthier for the community.***

When it came time for the audience to share their thoughts, it took a little work. At first, people were reluctant to raise their questions out loud. It was an integrated conversation with men and women in the room. Panelists later theorized that this co-ed environment created some timidity. The organizers thus shifted to collecting written questions and the conversation quickly gained steam from there. “There was a lot of anger,” Candace noted, reflecting back on the event in an interview for this case study. “People needed to talk about it.” The pieces of paper didn’t just include questions, but also some disclosures of other assaults. A community leader even stood up and apologized for his limited knowledge that prevented him from offering

the kind of support that could have been helpful after he learned about the assault. The experts in the room felt this conversation was just the beginning of the needs this traumatized community had. There needed to be more education for both men and women, on and off campus, on the spectrum of what constitutes sexual violence. The more that community members can be given opportunities to speak concrete truths about people committing harm, the healthier for the community, and this town hall, Candace said, “was an event that needs to be modeled in other areas.”

The town hall served as pain medication for many attendees. It offered some relief, but it was also medication for an infection that could continue to spread and potentially harm members in the future. How does a community move beyond pain medication to attack an infection at its core? The local mosque determined a task force was needed to discover this cure.



### Case Study Key Figures:

- 1. Sakinah:** The name Sakinah is a pseudonym used to refer to the survivor of sexual assault in this case study. Sakinah posted the disclosure that this case study describes and analyzes.
- 2. Imam Bakar:** Imam Bakar is a pseudonym referring to the Imam of the masjid that Sakinah attended while a university student.
- 3. Alia Salem:** Alia is the Executive Director and co-founder of FACE (Facing Abuse in Community Environments), one of the organizations called in to help the community heal after Sakinah's disclosure became public.
- 4. Professor:** This professor taught a class in which Sakinah and her assailant were both enrolled in. Throughout that semester, he became a supportive ally and helped Sakinah feel safe.
- 5. Ali:** Ali is a pseudonym used to refer to a friend of Sakinah who was a frequent participant in campus mosque activities.
- 6. Amir and the Muslim Educational Institute (MEI):** Both the name Amir and the organization Muslim Educational Institute are pseudonyms. Amir was a speaker from MEI invited to the campus, and he led the students in debriefing and processing the disclosure and the subsequent community reaction.

7. **Executive Committee (EC):** The EC is the campus mosque board and its governing body. It is a body composed of university students that determine policies, organize programming, and manage the facilities.

8. **Board of Directors:** This body was created to act as a bridge between the mosque's Executive Committee (EC) and its Board of Trustees. Its goal is to guide and provide resources to the EC as needed, but also empower its members to make independent decisions.

9. **Stopping Abuse:** The name Stopping Abuse is a pseudonym that refers to an organization that specializes in, among other areas, community-wide sexual assault response. Alongside Alia Salem and a mental health professional, this organization co-hosted a town hall to facilitate public conversation on responses to sexual assault.

10. **Dalilah:** This pseudonym refers to a community member who happened to work for Stopping Abuse. After hearing about the assault, she referred the campus mosque leaders to this organization to help guide them through the public trauma.

11. **Candace:** The pseudonym Candace refers to an employee from Stopping Abuse that participated in the town hall as a panel speaker.

12. **Task Force:** This was a unit organized by the campus mosque leaders to evaluate their response to the disclosure and generate new strategies for future incidents of assault.

### ***Acknowledgements***

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## Disclosures Need Closure: The “B” Case

According to former members, the task force fizzled out before it could do much. The same community member who connected leaders to Stopping Abuse attended a meeting that was meant to launch the task force. The idea was to put policies and procedures in place and perhaps officially introduce these measures to the community through another town hall-like event. Such a public announcement would facilitate some movement towards closure to the concerns raised by the Facebook disclosure. According to most involved, the task force met rarely and did not achieve momentum. It did not host a public event sharing outcomes. The task force had begun to compile some documentation around policies and procedures, but several of its members left Austin before their work concluded or reached a critical point. Nonetheless, this work did plant a seed. There were some changes made by the local mosque leaders that were in response to what had happened and what they learned throughout the process.

In addition to the changes made to the Stay Safe ride-share program before Sakinah’s public disclosure, the local mosque leadership faced the task of replacing Imam Bakar for the campus mosque. Before doing that, they concluded that an organizational restructuring was important as a stronger foundation for the new imam. During Imam Bakar’s service, the campus mosque had an Executive Committee (EC) comprised completely of university students. The EC, in collaboration with the imam, governed the campus mosque. They determined policies, organized programming, and managed the facilities. The local mosque had a Board of Trustees that was legally responsible for both the local mosque and campus mosque, although it was largely hands-off in the latter. One of the major structural changes introduced by the Board of Trustees was an added layer to bridge communication between them and the campus mosque EC. They called this new group the Board of Directors. Most of the Board of Directors are not college students – though several of them are alumni – and all of them are committed to the campus mosque’s success and service to the student population. They serve as resources and mentors to those on the EC, and, by and large, want the EC to feel empowered to determine its own course at the campus mosque. There is a member from the Board of Directors that attends EC meetings regularly and another member regularly attends Board of Trustees meetings, thus providing consistent communication between the levels of leadership. Importantly,

this new structure adds new points of contact between these various bodies instead of the imam having the primary responsibility of bridging the two leadership groups. Both the EC and the Board of Directors go through an election process and have fixed terms. The idea for an additional board began before the public disclosure, but the trauma of the disclosure motivated its full fruition.

As students graduate and new students enroll, the knowledge of the incident is dissipating, but the emotional imprint is long-lasting. “I don’t know if we can really heal from something like that,” a member of the Board of Directors said several years after the incident. A community-wide incident that traumatic has made sexual assault a concern they now actively think about as they do their work on the Board. “It would be great if every [mosque] board [around the country] could do the same without ever having such an awful incident in their community,” the Board member continued.

One of the fruits that the task force did bear was the creation of the mosque’s official Code of Conduct on its website. In it are principles and behaviors expected of all mosque attendees, but also protocols in case of any aggression, including sexual assault, physical abuse, or inappropriate behavior. It also includes an incident report process so community members know what first steps to take and it includes a link to mental health resources for anyone. These procedures, and their subsequent consequences, were outlined in a document both online and printed in the mosque after Sakinah’s public disclosure. They also created a resource binder for the EC that has a variety of support information and an expanded list of resources. Finally, the Board of Directors recognized the importance of having relationships in place with community organizations that can expand their allies, as well as organizations that can provide support services for particular needs, like Stopping Abuse. They began to participate in the programs of other organizations, partner with them on events, and invite their leadership to give talks and trainings at the mosques and reciprocate for other organizations’ constituencies. When searching for a new imam, a key attribute they looked for was an interest and ability to continue engagement at this new level and help the community continue to grow and develop in this arena.

## **Case Study Support Resources**

### **Educational Resources for Institutional Leaders**

- FACE Code of Conduct: [www.facetogether.org/thecode](http://www.facetogether.org/thecode)
- FACE Defamation Toolkit: [www.facetogether.org/defamation-toolkit](http://www.facetogether.org/defamation-toolkit)
- FACE Community Response Toolkit: [www.facetogether.org/crtoolkit](http://www.facetogether.org/crtoolkit)
- Peaceful Families Project Imam and Chaplain Toolkit: [www.peacefulfamilies.org/imam-toolkit.html](http://www.peacefulfamilies.org/imam-toolkit.html)
- Community Leaders Intervention Guide: [static1.squarespace.com/static/578d998be6f2e196244e3d46/t/58049b9046c3c4d114\\_da14b0/1476696982429/Working+with+Muslim+survivors+of+sexual+violence.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/578d998be6f2e196244e3d46/t/58049b9046c3c4d114_da14b0/1476696982429/Working+with+Muslim+survivors+of+sexual+violence.pdf)
- Institute for Social Policy and Understanding Imam Toolkit: [www.ispu.org/imams](http://www.ispu.org/imams)
- Faith Trust Institute Responding to Misconduct Handbook: [www.faitrustinstitute.org/news/new-resource-responding-to-spiritual-leader-misconduct](http://www.faitrustinstitute.org/news/new-resource-responding-to-spiritual-leader-misconduct)
- The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network Safety and Prevention Resources: [www.rainn.org/safety-prevention](http://www.rainn.org/safety-prevention)
- Defamation Toolkit: [www.facetogether.org/defamation-toolkit](http://www.facetogether.org/defamation-toolkit)
- Imam and Chaplain Toolkit: [www.peacefulfamilies.org/imam-toolkit.html](http://www.peacefulfamilies.org/imam-toolkit.html)

### **Mental Health Resources for Victims/Survivors:**

- Directory of Support Programs: [www.peacefulfamilies.org/dvdirectory.html](http://www.peacefulfamilies.org/dvdirectory.html)
- Muslim Association for Psychological Services: [www.mapsnetwork.org](http://www.mapsnetwork.org)
- The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network Survivor Assistance: [www.rainn.org/after-sexual-assault](http://www.rainn.org/after-sexual-assault)
- Muslim Mental Health and Islamic Psychology Lab: [med.stanford.edu/mmhip/publications.html](http://med.stanford.edu/mmhip/publications.html)
- Trauma informed Communications: [medium.com/rallybrain/trauma-informed-comms-894874873e80](https://medium.com/rallybrain/trauma-informed-comms-894874873e80)
- Gomez, Jennifer M. Cultural betrayal trauma theory. Diss. University of Oregon, 2017. [scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/23086/Gomez\\_oregon\\_O17IA11510.pdf/sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/23086/Gomez_oregon_O17IA11510.pdf/sequence=1&isAllowed=y)