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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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**When Sexual Violence Intersects with Spiritual Abuse:
Exploring the Misuse of Religious Tradition and Authority to Perpetuate
a Culture of Sexual Violence**

Sabreen Mohammed, Haddijatou Ceesay, Yasmeeen Khayr,
Hera Syed, and Nadiah Mohajir

Abstract

Sexual violence in religious communities often intersects with spiritual abuse. A recent study on its prevalence in Muslim communities indicates that 35.8% of Muslim respondents who reported experiencing unsuccessful rape attempts also reported that religion was used to minimize their abuse. 50.5% of respondents shared that religion was used to pressure them to stay silent about the sexual abuse they experienced. The impacts of spiritual abuse on victims of sexual violence are often lifelong and can lead to religious trauma and isolation from religious communities. Spiritual abuse may occur at any point in a victim's experience. From the moment of sexual violence to the moment of disclosure, religious scripture or authority could be misused to commit abuse, justify abuse, or silence the victim when seeking support after abuse. Most disturbingly, religious scripture or tradition may be misused to protect those who harm and evade accountability, leaving many in the community vulnerable to harm. This paper will explore the ways we've learned that spiritual abuse can intersect with experiences of sexual violence and how that can have profound spiritual consequences for entire Muslim communities.

Introduction

Sexual violence does not discriminate; it is a global phenomenon that impacts every community regardless of race, culture, or faith tradition. Despite this reality, many people do not understand the ways in which sexual abuse can manifest in their particular community, nor the ways it can intersect with other forms of harm. Sexual violence in religious communities is often accompanied by other types of violence as well, such as domestic violence, emotional abuse, or, disturbingly, in faith communities, spiritual abuse (Mattson, 2024). Some of the most prevalent scholarship around spiritual abuse has explored its impacts within Christian communities, and it has perpetuated a dominant narrative in which 'religion is a tool of oppression' in favor of secular social services and health care. While such narratives can and do exist across various faith traditions, including the Muslim tradition, faith is such a critical dimension for many Muslim communities that the occurrence of

spiritual abuse can further devastate a survivor of sexual abuse. Many Muslim survivors have experienced both a violation of their bodily autonomy and an attack on their spiritual health and their relationship with their faith. Due to the many examples of Christian spiritual abuse and the few studies centering Muslim experiences of spiritual abuse, this chapter will often reference examples from the Christian context to illustrate ways in which spiritual abuse can manifest similarly across different religious environments.¹

After more than a decade of working with Muslim survivors of sexual abuse, HEART's fieldwork indicates that spiritual violence manifests in several ways that further harm and re-traumatize survivors. The impact of spiritual abuse on victims of sexual violence is often lifelong and can lead to religious trauma and isolation from religious communities. This chapter has two parts. The first explores the ways we have learned that spiritual abuse can intersect with experiences of sexual violence and how that can have deep spiritual consequences for entire Muslim communities. The second part examines the results of an exploratory national study we conducted that explores the presence of spiritual abuse among Muslims in the United States and Canada. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and programming to disrupt spiritual abuse.

What Is Spiritual Abuse?

Spiritual abuse is defined as “the misuse of religious tradition, scripture, or authority for financial or personal gain, bullying, harassment, sexual misconduct, manipulation or exercising control over another person” (Qasim, 2018). It is also worth noting a distinction between spiritual abuse and malpractice. Among Christian scholars, spiritual malpractice is defined as the wrongful conduct or advice of a clergy member which causes a particular situation to inflict further harm (Fain, 1991). While this definition does not translate exactly within Muslim contexts, we can understand spiritual malpractice to apply to any trained Islamic scholar, imam, or religious authority that provides harmful advice or endorses a harmful practice that counters Islamic theological practice. Furthermore, it is without a doubt that any conduct of spiritual malpractice in conjunction with sexual violence or in response to a sexual violence disclosure constitutes a form of spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abuse may occur at any point in a victim's experience. From the moment of sexual abuse to the moment of disclosure, religious scripture or authority can be misused to commit abuse, justify abuse, or silence the victim when seeking support after abuse. Most disturbingly, religious texts or traditions may be misused to protect those who harm and evade accountability, leaving many in the community vulnerable to being harmed. We explore these various manifestations of spiritual abuse below.

¹ It is important to note that the availability of scholarship on Christian experiences is due to the dominance of Christianity within the United States and Canada, thus Christian experiences are seen as normative and often used to compare, undermine, or potentially weaponize experiences of non-Christian and minoritized religious communities.

How Does Spiritual Abuse Appear in Muslim Communities?

The Misuse of Religious Authority to Perpetrate Abuse

A religious institution or an individual with religious authority, such as a Quran teacher, imam, shaykh, or shaykha, who perpetrates sexual abuse on another individual within or outside of a religious context is perpetrating spiritual abuse by virtue of holding religious and/or institutional authority (Mattson, 2024). Examples include:

- A Quran teacher sexually abusing their student;
- A chaplain sexually harassing a student;
- A shaykh inviting a student to be his second or third wife, secretly;
- An imam sending sexually explicit texts to a congregant;
- A shaykha using her respected status in the community to groom children by gaining their trust and ultimately exerting control over them;
- A religious institution enabling the sexual abuse of their congregants by covering up the abuse.

The Misuse of Scripture and Religious Tradition to Perpetrate Abuse

An individual who misuses scripture or religious tradition to perpetrate or justify abuse is also committing spiritual abuse. For example, this can look like a husband using Quranic verses out of context to justify exerting control or physically abusing his wife. Spiritual abuse may also look like a spouse forcing sex upon their partner by arguing that they are granted unconditional sexual rights within marriage and do not need to ask for consent.

The Misuse of Scripture or Religious Authority to Force Marriage, Secret Relationships, or Polygamy

An individual may force a marriage, secret relationship, or polygamy with someone through deception or in a way that is kept secret from their community through religious manipulation or justification. A deceptive secret marriage or relationship may involve an individual hiding a separate relationship from another partner/spouse, or it may involve never publicizing the relationship to family, friends, or their community. However, secret relationships can also be spiritually exploitative if a partner misuses their religious power or scripture to justify keeping the relationship secret or taking sexual advantage of another individual (Mohajir et al., 2022).

Polygyny can also be an avenue for individuals to misuse scripture and motivate a secret marriage or relationship. According to *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), polygyny is permissible in Islam. Muslim men may justify having multiple marriages that are secret to the individual wives on the basis of arguing that polygyny is permissible by *fiqh*. While the legal validity of these marriages may be intact, and they may fulfill the minimum requirements as set by Islamic law, many scholars have interrogated the moral legitimacy of such secret arrangements (Fadel, 2016; Sheibani, 2024). These scholars argue that it is

necessary to examine not only the legal validity of the marriage, but also assess it in terms of moral justifications and “how it is sought, pursued, contracted, and in the manner that the concerned parties - wives, parents, children, and the community - are harmed and benefited and honored and dishonored in the process” (Sheibani, 2024: 16).

Deceptive relationships and marriages can threaten the state of a relationship causing spiritual, sexual, and emotional harm towards the victimized partner. Deceptive secret marriages may stunt the marital rights of the secret partner; they may increase the risk of sexually transmitted infections and emotional trauma, as well as lose the protection of community if they have no knowledge of the marriage (Fadel, 2016; Majeed, 2021; Nadwi, 2017). Additionally, they can also result in emotional trauma and betrayal of other parties that may also be impacted: parents, children, the current wife, and the community at large.

The Misuse of Scripture and Religious Tradition to Silence Survivors and Protect Perpetrators

Not only can spiritual abuse occur in interpersonal relationships, but families and communities can further spiritual abuse by misusing religious tradition or scripture to protect perpetrators and silence victims. According to scholar Rami Nsour, one of the most common tools abusers use to silence survivors is the manipulation of religious texts and traditions, which leads to further victimization (Nsour, 2022). Within Muslim communities, *hadiths* (Prophetic sayings) are commonly taken out of context to defend harm committed and to protect perpetrators from being held accountable. The hadiths often quoted cannot apply to the context of sexual or spiritual abuse as they are forms of harm; therefore, accountability is required of the person who caused harm, and the victim should not be burdened to provide evidence of their harm (Mohajir & Mirza, 2016).² Nsour further articulates that families and communities who do not respond appropriately to abuse are also guilty of perpetuating harm (Nsour, 2022).

Invoking Religious Values in an Attempt to Protect from Sexual Assault

Often, Muslim communities make the mistake of conflating religious expectations for dress, modesty, and gender relations with a framework for preventing spiritual and sexual abuse, and we believe this is a form of spiritual abuse. As such, they may contend that:

- Wearing hijab or dressing modestly can protect individuals from experiencing assault;
- Abstaining from dating or other romantic relationships can protect an individual from experiencing sexual abuse; and

² One hadith often invoked in defense of someone perpetuating sexual harm is a narration of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH): “If a friend among your friends errs, make seventy excuses for them. If your hearts are unable to do this, then know that the shortcoming is in your own selves.” This hadith is referring to mistakes and cannot be applied to an egregious harm such as sexual violence (Mohajir & Mirza, 2016).

- Not engaging in behavior that is impermissible, such as drinking, going to a party, or having an intimate interaction with another person, can protect an individual from experiencing sexual violence.

Unfortunately, individuals may use these values to victim-blame survivors of sexual violence who may not follow these religious expectations, especially at the time of the violence inflicted on them.

Use of Gendered Islamophobia to Silence Survivors

Gendered Islamophobia is a phenomenon of harmful, gendered stereotypes used against Muslims where, for example, Muslim men are portrayed as inherently violent and Muslim women as inherently oppressed (Deighton-Mohammed, 2024). Unfortunately, Muslim survivors of spiritual and sexual abuse are often silenced under the pretense that speaking out will perpetuate these harmful stereotypes.

Tania Saeed particularly notes how Muslim women, queer, and trans people disproportionately experience gendered Islamophobia, especially when also experiencing spiritual abuse from Muslim men (Saeed, 2016). The compounded experiences of gendered Islamophobia and spiritual abuse have become quite normalized within Muslim communities, especially at the hands of mainstream shaykhs in the form of grooming, religious duress, and boundary violations against their students and congregants (Awan, 2020). Despite the harms of sexual and spiritual abuse, these popular shaykhs are more likely to be defended against any accusation of abuse, leaving survivors with little support within their Muslim communities (Deighton-Mohammed, 2024).

Additional example case studies of spiritual abuse, as well as detailed explanations of each case, are included in the Appendix.

What Do We Know about Spiritual Abuse among Muslims?

Although research around spiritual abuse has been explored, limited research has been conducted in regard to experiences of spiritual abuse in Muslim communities. This gap can be attributed to a lack of nuanced discussions around harm within Muslim communities as well as the barriers imposed by Islamophobic and white supremacist values upheld in the United States (Deighton-Mohammed, 2024). Moreover, Muslims often avoid discussions of spiritual abuse based on a characterization that spiritual abuse is a Western, liberal, or feminist concept (Nsour, 2022). However, according to Nsour, spiritual abuse is not a new concept in Islam, and discussions of this form of abuse can be dated back to prophetic times and can be applied to our current Muslim contexts (Nsour, 2022). While minoritized religious groups, including Muslims, face disproportionate scrutiny around religion and abuse, our religious communities are still responsible for addressing actual spiritual and sexual harms that occur (Goodwin, 2020).

Impact of Spiritual Abuse on Survivors

Because spiritual abuse is often intertwined with other forms of abuse, such as financial, sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, the harm to survivors is compounded. In addition to the psychological impact a survivor might experience, such as depression, anxiety, trauma, or self-harm, the presence of spiritual abuse can also disrupt their relationship with their faith and with their religious community. Muslim survivors of spiritual abuse have shared anecdotally with HEART that they find it difficult to pray, recite or hear the Quran or be a part of Muslim religious spaces due to the spiritual trauma and abuse they have experienced. These experiences have been recognized by other religious communities and other survivors of spiritual abuse, which furthers the argument for more empirical research with Muslim survivors and their particular experiences of spiritual abuse within Muslim spaces (Prusak & Schab, 2022).

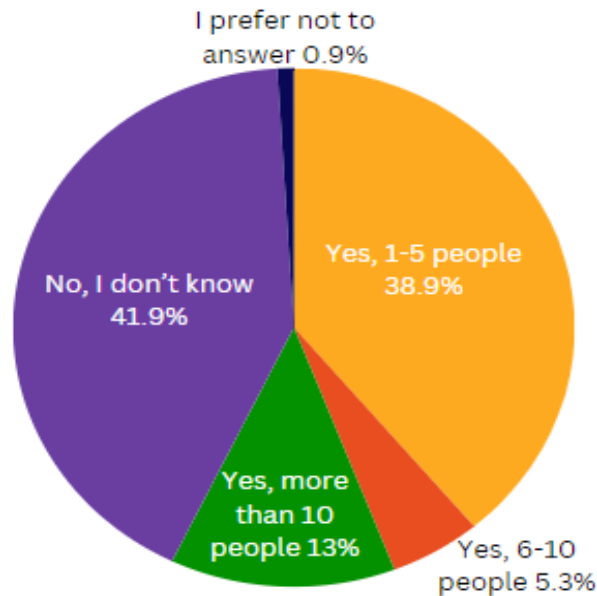
HEART Study on Spiritual Abuse and Sexual Violence

From 2020 to 2023, HEART conducted a cross-sectional, online survey with Muslims in the U.S. and Canada centered on the sexual violence experiences of Muslim communities. The survey asked participants about their perceptions and experiences of sexual violence as well as their experiences with spiritual abuse. The aim of these questions was to explore the presence of spiritual abuse amongst Muslims and to examine the relationship between experiences of spiritual abuse and sexual violence. A total of 792 eligible Muslims in the U.S. and Canada between the ages of 18-45 participated, and of those, 530 participants responded to the questions about spiritual abuse. More information about the study design, methodology, and participant demographics can be found detailed in HEART's chapter in this volume, "Who Experiences Sexual Violence in Muslim Communities?" (Ceesay et al. 2024).

Overall Exposure of Individuals to Spiritual Abuse

Within the spiritual abuse section of the survey, participants were asked to identify the number of people they know who have experienced any form of spiritual abuse. Of the 530 Muslim participants who responded, the majority of participants (57.2%) knew at least one person in their community had experienced some form of spiritual abuse overall. See Table 1 for more reported data.

Table 1. Number of people the participants know who experienced spiritual abuse



Participant Experiences with Various Forms of Spiritual Abuse

Participants were then asked to reflect on their experience with specific types of spiritual abuse as well as to reflect on others they may know who have experienced spiritual abuse. Participants were specifically asked if religion or spirituality have ever been used to force them or others they know to (a) make decisions they opposed, (b) to engage in a non-consensual relationship, (c) to isolate from others, (d) to minimize or deny the abuse they/someone they know experienced, (e) to prevent them/someone they know from speaking out about their abuse, or (f) coerced to engage in a temporary or permanent marriage unknown to others (secret marriage). As shown in Table 2 below, the majority of Muslim participants (76.4%) reported having religion or spirituality used to force them into decisions they did not agree with. Many participants also reported experiences of someone manipulating religion or spirituality to isolate them from others (57.9%), to force them to minimize or deny their experience of abuse (48.7%), or to prevent them from speaking up about their experience of abuse (54.0%). Participants were less likely to report experiences with spiritual abuse that forced them to engage in non-consensual relationships (14.7%) or secret marriages (4.7%).

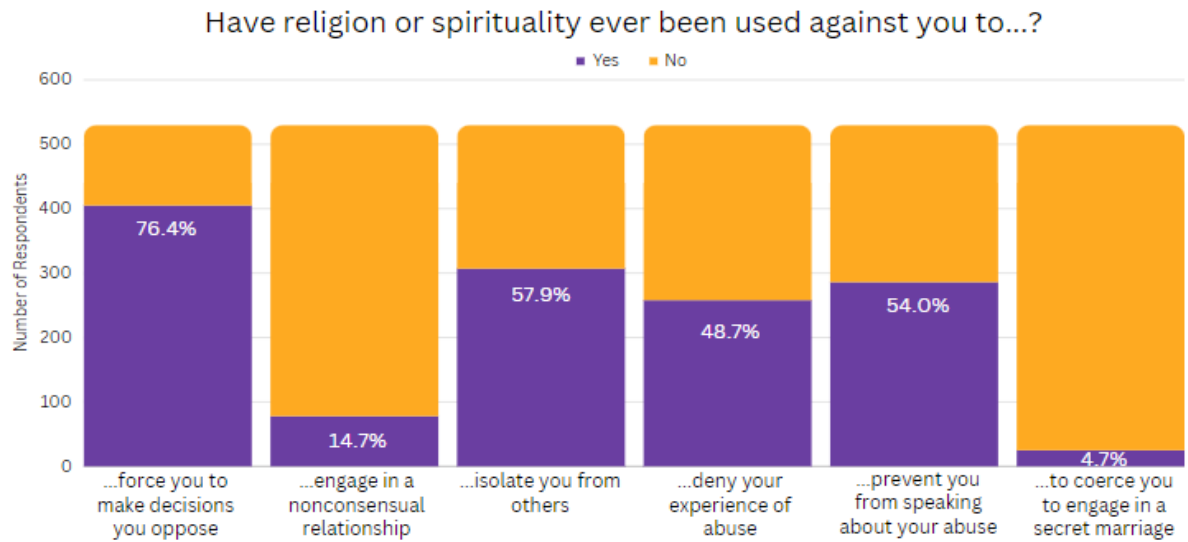


Table 2. Types of spiritual abuse experienced by participants

Participants were also asked to report if they know other people who have experienced specific types of spiritual abuse. Participants reported similar, if not higher, rates of spiritual abuse overall for individuals they know. Seventy-six percent of participants knew individuals who were forced into decisions they did not agree to through religious or spiritual means. Many participants also reported experiences of individuals they know who were religiously/spiritually manipulated to isolate themselves from others (67.9%), to force themselves to minimize or deny their experience of abuse (63.1%), or to prevent themselves from speaking up about their experience of abuse (64.1%). Participants also reported individuals they know who experienced spiritual abuse that forced them to engage in non-consensual relationships (38.9%) or secret marriages (24.0%). All data is reported in Table 3 below.

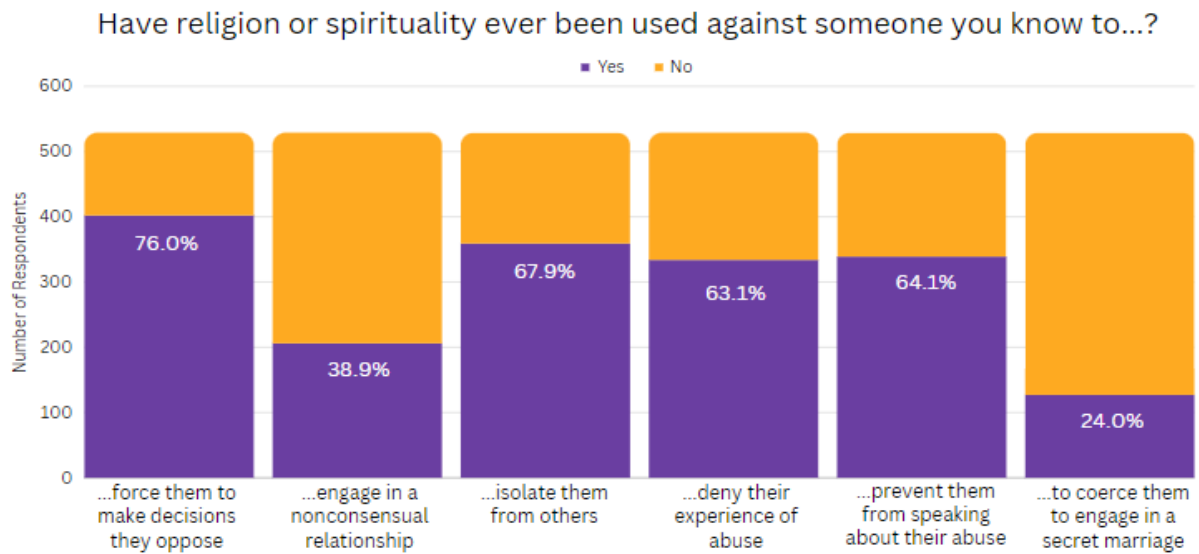


Table 3. Types of spiritual abuse experienced by individuals known by participants

Experiences of Spiritual Abuse by Gender and Sexual Identities

When assessing the reports of spiritual abuse among Muslim participants, we also examined the demographic spread across gender and sexual identities and whether these characteristics have a relationship and impact on whether participants experience spiritual abuse. Among our participants who experienced some type of spiritual abuse, 88.7% (399) were women, 6.4% (29) were men, and 4.2% (19) were transgender or gender non-conforming (TGNC) individuals. See Table 4 for all reported data. In other words, the majority of women (87.3%) and TGNC (95%) Muslim participants within the sample experienced some type of spiritual abuse. A chi-square test was utilized to assess the likelihood of gender identity impacting experiences of spiritual abuse; our results identified a strong relationship in which gender identity can predict a greater likelihood of someone experiencing spiritual abuse.³

Among the participants who experienced some type of spiritual abuse, 85% (301) identified as heterosexual, and 15% (53) identified as LGBTQIA+. See Table 5 for all reported data. Thus, the majority of both heterosexual (84.8%) and LGBTQIA+ (74.6%) Muslim participants experienced spiritual abuse. Fisher’s exact test was utilized to assess an accurate relationship between sexual identity and spiritual abuse; our results revealed some relationships in which sexual identity can somewhat predict the experience of spiritual abuse.⁴

³ Chi-square test resulted in a statistically significant *p*-value of 0.001 at an alpha level of 0.001.

⁴ Fisher’s exact test resulted in a statistically significant *p*-value of 0.032 at an alpha level of 0.05.

Table 4. Spiritual abuse by gender identity

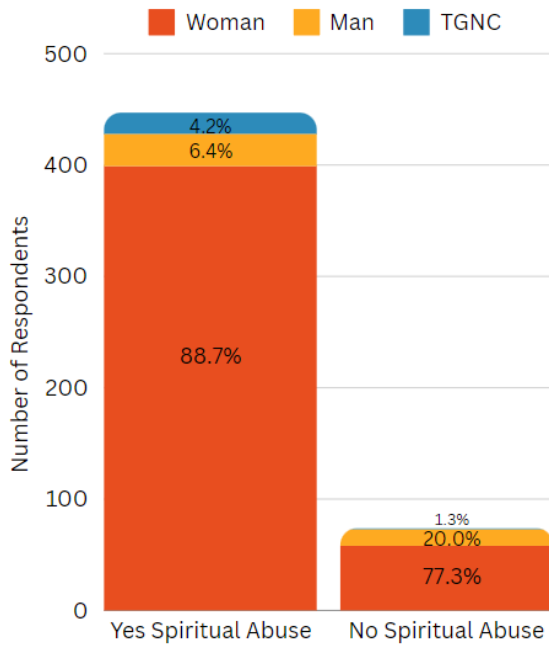
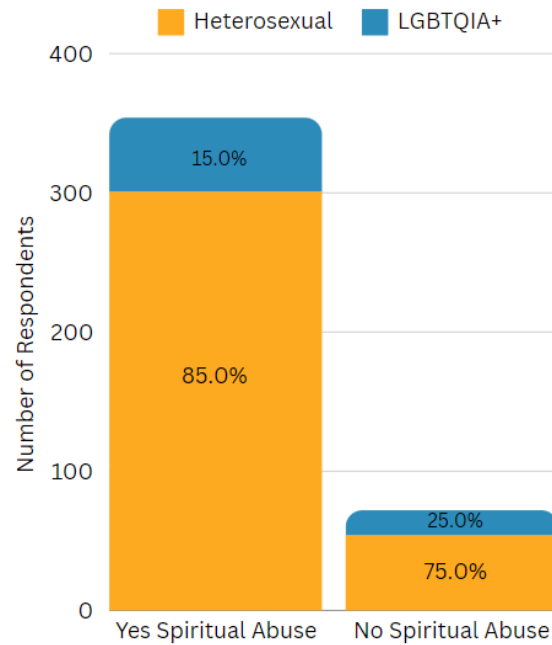


Table 5. Spiritual abuse by sexual identity



Relationship between Spiritual Abuse and Sexual Violence among Participant Experiences

To further understand the occurrence of spiritual abuse, further analysis was conducted to assess the relationship between spiritual abuse and sexual violence broadly. Overall, of the participants that experienced spiritual abuse, 98.7% (439) experienced some form of sexual violence (harassment, stalking, and/or assault). This high number is attributed to the 96.6% (432) of participants that experienced both spiritual abuse and some form of sexual harassment. Additionally, of those that experienced spiritual abuse, 63.6% (286) experienced some form of sexual assault. Across each of these measures, a chi-square test identified a strong relationship between experiences of spiritual abuse and sexual violence, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.⁷⁴ See tables 6, 7, and 8 for all data reported regarding sexual violence, harassment, and assault.

⁷⁴ Chi-square test resulted in a statistically significant *p*-value of 0.000 at an alpha level of 0.001.

Table 6. Experiences of spiritual abuse & sexual violence

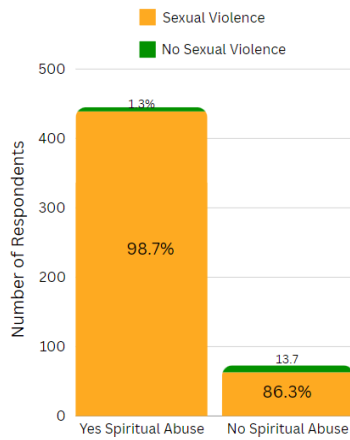


Table 7. Experiences of spiritual abuse & sexual harassment

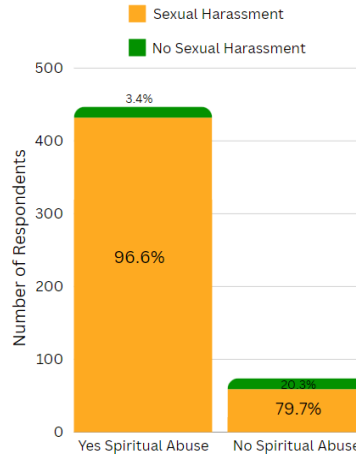
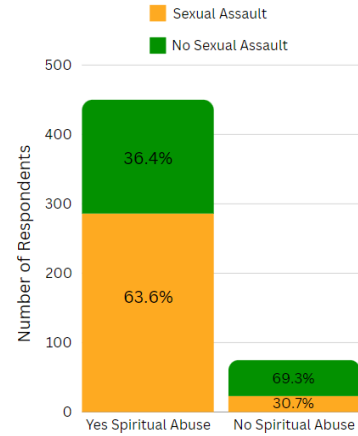


Table 8. Experiences of spiritual abuse & sexual assault



Discussion

Taken together, our fieldwork and our study findings invite the need for further research. Our study findings are consistent with and reinforce our fieldwork findings from the last fifteen years. Below, we summarize our findings and recommendations.

Finding 1: Those who have experienced some form of sexual violence have also experienced sexual abuse.

Our first finding is that those who have experienced some form of sexual violence have also experienced sexual abuse. While these experiences may have been independent of each other, our findings suggest a robust correlation between reports of spiritual abuse and incidents of sexual assault, harassment, and violence. This association highlights how all forms of violence are interconnected, and it requires the necessity of comprehensive solutions to prevent violence that targets all forms of harm. In order to effectively prevent violence, it is essential that the many facets of abuse—including spiritual abuse—be acknowledged and addressed. Our findings emphasize how critical it is to recognize and treat spiritual abuse in addition to other types of violence in order to provide effective support for survivors and stop more harm. One way to do this is by offering tools and services for help that are tailored to the particular dynamics of spiritual abuse in Muslim communities.

Finding 2: Those who experience spiritual abuse experience it in a number of ways.

Our study sheds light on the different forms of spiritual abuse that Muslims endure; several of the participants described being isolated, minimized, and silenced. Notably, our study indicates that by distributing false information and misinterpreting religious traditions, communities may intentionally or unintentionally commit spiritual abuse. For

Muslim victims of violence, this could have major ramifications for their spiritual well-being in the future since it could cause them to feel isolated and cut off from their religious community.

Finding 3: Women and TGNC people are more likely to experience spiritual abuse.

Our analysis revealed some impacts on the likelihood of experiencing spiritual abuse based on participants' gender and sexual identities. Transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) individuals experiencing spiritual abuse alongside sexual abuse is consistent with existing experiences captured in scholarship and highlights the doubly harmful impact of spiritual abuse and gender-based violence (Campbell et al., 2019; Collie, 2022). Additionally, our findings highlight the disproportionate rates at which women experience both sexual violence and spiritual abuse within Muslim communities. Women, who serve as the backbone of many faith communities, may face heightened vulnerability to abuse and its long-term implications for their spiritual well-being. The potential dissociation of women from faith communities due to the abuse they have experienced raises important questions about the future spiritual health and cohesion of Muslim communities.

Conclusion

It is clear that spiritual abuse is common in Muslim communities and can manifest in a number of ways. While our fieldwork and findings make a compelling case for incorporating prevention efforts around spiritual abuse, more robust research is warranted. Addressing spiritual abuse within Muslim communities requires a multifaceted approach that involves promoting ethical leadership, challenging harmful interpretations of religious teachings, and providing comprehensive support services for survivors. By addressing the root causes of spiritual abuse and prioritizing the safety and well-being of all community members, we can work towards creating inclusive and supportive religious spaces that uphold the dignity and rights of every individual.

Sabreen Mohammed holds a Bachelor of Arts in Public Health and Ethnic Studies from the University of Colorado and a Master of Public Health from Emory University. She is the Manager of Health Education and Research at HEART. Sabreen's professional experience includes program implementation, community development, and public health education. She has also worked directly with women and adolescent girls in violence prevention and sexual health programs, as well as creating new public health initiatives for communities.

Haddijatou Ceesay is a health educator with HEART and recently graduated with her PhD from City, University of London. Her research is centered on young people's sexual and reproductive health education in low and middle-income countries. She has experience working with survivors of sexual and gender-based violence both in the U.S. and abroad, including FGM and early child marriage survivors, and as a sex educator. As a Muslim, especially as a black Muslim woman, she believes it's important that we have culturally competent conversations about our bodies and sex without fear or stigma and from sources

that teach instead of shame. She is also a co-author of *The Sex Talk: A Muslim's Guide to Healthy Sex and Relationships*.

Yasmeen Khayr, MA, is a Research Coordinator at the Center for Urban Research and Learning at Loyola University Chicago. She has worked on various community-based research projects since 2017 with the purpose of uplifting marginalized communities and creating practical knowledge with community partners. She has partnered with HEART as a research consultant to collaborate, implement, and analyze various research projects centering Muslim communities and their experiences with sexual violence. Her skills include qualitative and quantitative research methods, community-based research approaches, program evaluation, and project management. Ms. Khayr earned her Masters in Sociology and her Bachelor's degree in Sociology-Anthropology, History, and Spanish from Loyola University Chicago in 2019 and 2018, respectively.

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Nadiyah Mohajir is the co-founder and Co-Executive Director of HEART Women & Girls. For over a decade, she has led the organization to provide reproductive justice, sexual health education, and gender-based violence awareness programming and advocacy to thousands of individuals, organizations, and campuses across the country. Nadiyah has worked in public health and reproductive justice for over twenty years in a variety of settings, including, but not limited to, research, academics, policy, and community health. She earned her Master's degree in Public Health in 2009 from the University of Illinois at Chicago and her Bachelor's degree in Public Policy Studies from the University of Chicago. Most recently, she co-authored the first edition of *The Sex Talk: A Muslim's Guide to Healthy Sex and Relationships*.

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Appendix: Case Studies

When Sexual Violence Intersects with Spiritual Abuse: Case Studies

The following are example case studies of spiritual abuse and descriptions demonstrating how spiritual abuse was perpetuated, types of spiritual abuse specifically experienced, as well as other harms that resulted in each case.

Case Study 1

Arefa is a woman who works in a madrasa as the assistant to a revered Quran scholar, Shaykh Aziz. She recently shared on social media that she was sexually assaulted by Shaykh Aziz. She shared that she tried to resolve the situation by going to the madrasa's leadership and was instead silenced. The community is in an uproar at the news, confused and angry at the allegations against Shaykh Aziz and is demanding evidence. They do not believe that Shaykh Aziz is capable of such an act and that the madrasa has strict gender separation and dress codes in place to prevent this exact type of abuse. Moreover, the madrasa denies all allegations and releases a statement that it is unlawful to falsely accuse someone according to the Islamic tradition. Ultimately, they terminate Arefa's employment due to mental health issues. Arefa files a police report. The criminal case goes ahead, and Shaykh Aziz pleads guilty to several forms of sexual violence but is not given a jail sentence. The story makes national news and is reported on all local and national media outlets. Some right-wing media outlets also pick up the story and report how Muslim men prey on women half their age and that Islam promotes violence. The community is in further uproar, blaming Arefa for throwing Shaykh Aziz under the bus and feeding the Islamophobe's fire, and that Shaykh Aziz was forced to plead guilty because the system is prejudiced against Muslim men.

In this case study, Arefa experienced several types of spiritual and sexual abuse. First, she experienced sexual assault. Because the person who assaulted her is a religious authority figure, this assault also intersected with spiritual abuse. This spiritual abuse was further perpetrated by the madrasa leadership, who silenced her, and Arefa's community, who refused to believe it happened. Arefa further experienced harm when the madrasa publicly denied the allegations and used religious tradition to justify their denial. Arefa's termination is another form of spiritual abuse, along with workplace discrimination, as the madrasa is no longer a safe space for her. The media pushing a right-wing narrative about Islam promoting violence is Islamophobia, which leads to another wave of community backlash toward Arefa.

The following people perpetrated spiritual abuse against Arefa:

- Shaykh Aziz
- Madrasa leadership
- Community at large

The types of spiritual abuse experienced by Arefa are:

- Sexual abuse by religious authority

- Religious institution protecting Shaykh Aziz, retaliating, casting her out of the madrasa and using religious tradition to justify their denial of the allegations
- Community members using Islamic dress codes and gender segregation as justification for why the abuse was not possible
- Community members blame Arefa for adding fuel to the Islamophobia fire and protecting Shaykh Aziz.

The other harms experienced by Arefa are:

- Gaslighting
- Islamophobia
- Victim Blaming
- Employment discrimination
- Sexual assault

Case Study 2

You are an imam, and a distressed woman has come seeking a divorce from her husband. When you ask her more about her situation, you learn that she is a recent convert and a second wife. She had been unaware of her second wife status until three months into the marriage. The husband has a first wife and three children in his hometown and married this woman in the city he regularly travels to for work. He convinced her that it was not necessary to have a civil marriage, as they had an Islamic ceremony. When she confronts him about being a second wife, he explains to her that it is his Islamic right to have more than one wife, and that he does not need consent from his first wife. She reveals that he forces sex most nights even when she is not feeling well because he has a right to sexual pleasure. You ask who officiated the marriage and it was the imam in the neighboring town. He is now refusing to grant the divorce because the woman's wali is not corroborating her story. She also shares that there was no civil ceremony: every time she asked, the husband would make an excuse to delay it.

The following people perpetrated spiritual abuse against the second wife:

- The husband

The types of spiritual abuse the wife has experienced:

- Marital rape using Islam as a justification
- Uninformed secret marriage

Other harms that the wife has experienced:

- Gaslighting by the *wali* who did not corroborate her story
- The imam officiating the marriage (spiritual malpractice)
- The second imam denying the divorce (spiritual malpractice)

Case Study 3

A female student of knowledge, Radia, reaches out to discuss a confidential matter regarding the madrasa (Islamic school) she attends. The institution maintains strict gender norms, such as gender segregation in classrooms, separate entrances for men and women, and curtain barriers. The female student has respected all of these guidelines and is being spoken to disrespectfully when she tries to engage in discourse with male faculty. Moreover, she is noticing that she is being graded poorly on her assignments, which she feels is not indicative of the quality of work she is putting in, but instead, as a way of taking revenge for her "behavior" in class. When she raises concerns to the administration, she is told that she is being put in her place for acting like she is smarter than the faculty, which is arrogant and poor adab (manners), and that if she continues such disrespect, she will be suspended or expelled. Radia is told that in Islam she is to respect her teachers even more than others. She seeks advice from other traditionally trained scholars about whether this behavior is right, and they respond by saying "it is not right but good luck finding another school with a different culture. This is just how it is in traditional schools."

The following people perpetrated spiritual abuse against Radia:

- The male faculty member
- Madrasa administration

The types of spiritual abuse experienced by Radia are:

- Misusing scripture to silence
- Misusing religious authority to assert control

The other harms experienced by Radia are:

- Gaslighting by other scholars