

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS



ABUSE IN WORLD RELIGIONS

Articulating the Problem

Edited by
Johanna Stiebert



Abuse in World Religions

This book opens out religious studies discussion on spiritual abuse to extend beyond the primary focus on Christian settings and situations. Emphasising the diversity and reach of manifestations of spiritual abuse, it offers snapshots and examples from five major religious traditions.

Following a definition of “spiritual abuse” and a qualification of the application of the designation “world religions”, five chapters – each by subject experts – demonstrate that spiritual abuse can be identified in contexts of Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhi(sm). The chapters draw on sacred texts, historical events, religious institutions, practices, or figures particular to each tradition, paying heed to how specific examples can relate to wider, or systemic tendencies. Throughout, there is emphasis on trauma-informed and survivor-centred approaches.

Abuse in World Religions (Vol. 1) will appeal to academics of religious studies with interest in rape culture and spiritual abuse, as well as upper-level undergraduates and postgraduates, and religious leaders, or leaders of faith-based organisations, seeking to understand and to confront spiritual abuse and rape culture in their own communities.

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Dedication

Elizabeth Pulane (“Lizzie”) Motswapong, Mma Tema (29 March 1973–6 May 2024) of Mahalapye, Botswana, died suddenly and unexpectedly as this volume was going into production. Lizzie was a person of warmth and spirit and the first scholar of Hinduism and Buddhism in her country to be educated to the level of PhD. She was a bold advocate for the rights of women, girls, and for members of the queer community of Botswana. Lizzie’s legacy continues through her daughter Tema, who was her heart, pride, and joy, and through her many students: *le ka moso*. We dedicate this volume, along with its companion volume, to Lizzie – may her memory be for a blessing.



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1 *Botho* is a Sotho-Tswana word and concept that captures such notions as humanity, personhood, and lovingkindness.

Introduction

Johanna Stiebert

The chapters in this volume explore spiritual abuse in multiple religious contexts and traditions. Both key themes – “spiritual abuse” and “religious contexts and traditions” – are highly complex and difficult to pin down. Both are central to the large research project that has given rise to this set of explorations: namely, “Abuse in Religious Contexts,” funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.¹ The aim of this volume is not to provide comprehensive definitions or explanations for either theme, let alone both, but to give snapshots and some sense of their complexity, reach, and range.

Spiritual abuse²

A useful working definition for spiritual abuse can be found in the open access position paper of the Christian safeguarding charity Thirtyone:eight. This definition draws particularly on the pioneering research of Lisa Oakley (2009) and her collaboration with Kathryn Kinmond (2013):

Spiritual abuse is characterised by an ongoing, systematic pattern of coercive control within a religious context. Key elements of this experience are manipulation, exploitation, control through the misuse and abuse of scripture and divine position, censorship of decision-making, pressure to conform, enforced accountability, requirement of obedience, and isolation. ... As in all other types of abuse, spiritual abuse will sometimes co-exist with and be used to legitimise other forms of abuse and harmful cultures. ... [T]here will always be an emotional or psychological element. ... [T]here may also be physical and even sexual abuse occurring allied to the spiritually abusive elements.

(“Spiritual Abuse” 2018: 2, adapted)³

The chapters to follow demonstrate the deeply harmful impact of spiritual abuse, and its entanglements with other kinds of violence. These include sexual abuse, gender-based abuse, and domestic violence and abuse, none of

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which are disproportionately prominent in, let alone exclusive to, religious settings.⁴ Hence, indications are that domestic abuse is as common in religious as in non-religious households, but that religious authority and scripture can be weaponised by perpetrators to justify it (see Paynter).⁵ Respectability associated with religious practice can mask and deflect from spiritual abusers (see the case study discussed by Kaur-Aujla and Wagstaff). Meanwhile, for the victim-survivor⁶ of spiritual abuse, the harm can be especially profound, “impacting at the core of identity, and essentially acting as a blockade to, or shattering, the Divine connection” (see Chowdhury and Hannan).

The authors of the chapters to follow identify associations between spiritual and other forms of abuse, as well as tendencies these different forms of abuse share in common (e.g. hierarchies and patriarchal structures, as well as prescriptive interpretations of scripture, are prominent in abusive, including spiritually abusive, cultures). All contributors demonstrate that abusive dimensions brought to the fore, or intensified, by religion are ignored at our peril.⁷

World religions

Each chapter focuses on one example or more of spiritual abuse within a major religious tradition. Collectively sometimes called “world religions,” these are: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhi(sm),⁸ Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This volume includes chapters on all, barring Buddhism.⁹ Admittedly, all these labels are reductive. Moreover, it is legitimate to criticise the world religions paradigm for multiple reasons, including for its misleading suggestions of internal cohesion, and for imposing or prescribing what constitutes a “proper” religious tradition (e.g. in terms of religious texts, doctrines, or places of worship). One damaging consequence of this paradigm has been to side-line, even to dismiss, religious traditions that are not part of the “big six” – notably, many small-scale and minoritised religious traditions, especially Indigenous ones (see Owen, 2011).¹⁰

The reason for chapters focused on five world religions is not to reimpose the world religions paradigm. None of the chapters attempts to provide or even suggest anything more than a briefly drawn characterisation of their respective religious tradition. All demonstrate awareness of a lack of unanimity within their religious tradition of focus. Sacred texts, places of worship, or doctrines are alluded to but not described in depth.

Up until now, the bulk of research focus on spiritual abuse has centred on Christian contexts.¹¹ This book seeks to emphasise that spiritual abuse is *not* confined to, or exceptionally concentrated in, Christian contexts but exists in other religious traditions also; demonstrating this is the primary aim of this volume. The companion volume (Volume 2, *Abuse in World Religions: Towards Solutions*) will direct focus onwards, to show that not only does

spiritual abuse exist across traditions, so does active and sometimes highly creative activism against and resistance to spiritual abuse.¹²

Aim and purpose

One compact volume cannot provide a thorough, let alone comprehensive, depiction of spiritual abuse in any one tradition, let alone across five internally variegated traditions, each diverse and with millions of followers. Instead, this volume is aimed at offering snapshots and at opening important conversations that extend beyond established ones in primarily Christian, or inter-Christian contexts.¹³ Together with the companion volume, it aspires also to cross-fertilisation and pooling of effective activist and healing strategies and ideas from multiple religious settings.

Taken together, the five chapters show up some common threads. These include that claims to authority and insistence on obedience and submission can tip over into abuse. There is also some correlation between gendered hierarchies and patriarchal structures, on the one hand, and gender-based and sexual abuse, on the other – in some religious settings as in some non-religious settings. Patriarchal and hierarchical authority structures need not bring about abuse – but they can and have.

Multiple contributors are at pains to stress that while women and girls are often disproportionately targeted and affected, men and boys, too, can be and are victims of spiritual abuse. Moreover, like sexual and domestic abuse of men and boys, spiritual abuse of men and boys, too, is very probably under-reported. There is agreement across the chapters that perpetrators of spiritual abuse, however, are overwhelmingly men.¹⁴ Poignantly, it was during the final stages of the production of this volume that Justin Welby resigned as Archbishop of Canterbury following the publication of the Makin Report, which exposes the Church's failures in responding to allegations of vicious abuse perpetrated over many years by John Smyth against boys and young men.¹⁵

Most contributors to this volume, though not all, are working from within their own tradition,¹⁶ navigating the difficult terrain of acknowledging that painful harm has occurred within their cherished faith or religious tradition. Almost all contributors take pains to provide and to amplify the perspectives and voices of victim-survivors.¹⁷ Some have direct experience of spiritual abuse, others have worked with victim-survivors, yet others centre on victim-survivors' own words. We are all in agreement that survivor-centred, trauma-informed approaches are essential for understanding spiritual abuse, its power and impact, and, from there, essential for gaining critical empathy and insight and for providing advocacy and support for victim-survivors.

As the editor, I have tried to give contributors to this volume relatively free rein and did not impose on anyone a particular thematic focus or methodological practice.¹⁸ Consequently, there is much diversity in terms of focus

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and method even in such a small volume. Robyn Ashworth-Steen and Yehudis Fletcher focus on scriptural passages and gender-based violence; Helen Paynter examines domestic abuse and violence; Elizabeth Motswapong and Tshenolo Madigele discuss the sexual enslavement of Devadasis; Rahmanara Chowdhury and Rabiha Hannan review institutional, domestic, and scriptural abuse; and Harjinder Kaur-Aujla and Christopher Wagstaff present the case study of a Sikh survivor of domestic and systemic abuse.

All chapters are the product of collaborations; the majority are co-authored. This gives insight into the emotional labour of conducting research on a topic as serious and as distressing as spiritual abuse. Research like this not only negotiates sensitivities and traumas, it also benefits from, and needs, inter-personal support. In all this, collaboration is key and gives also some sense of the networks that already exist and that are extending so that spiritual abuse can be better identified and then firmly resisted and eliminated. Our collective hope is that this book will strengthen these networks further.

Notes

- 1 The Principal Investigator is Gordon Lynch (formerly of the University of Kent, now at the University of Edinburgh) and the project reference is AH/W003112/1. The project has been active from March 2022 to June 2024. It was previously named “Abuse in Religious Settings” (see “Acknowledgements” for the full title).
- 2 There are other designations, such as “religious abuse,” “religious trauma,” or “spiritual trauma.” After discussion, our project changed its title from “Abuse in Religious Settings” to “Abuse in Religious Contexts.” The various denotations and particularly the subtle connotations of words are, again, complex. Several contributors to this volume evidence wrestlings with language. In the realm of our topic, two designations that regularly come into focus and under scrutiny are “victim” and “survivor.” The former acknowledges that something dreadful has been done to someone and allows for the possibility that this can be fatal (i.e. not all survive). Arguably, “victim” also implies object status and passivity (i.e. having something done to them). “Survivor,” on the other hand, could be said to confer more agency and to focus on overcoming and on recovery. “Victim” might evoke more protectiveness and “survivor” more admiration. For a fuller discussion, see RAINN (no [date](#)).
- 3 Both Justin Humphreys, of Thirtyone:eight and Lisa Oakley are part of the project (see note 1).
- 4 All of these forms of abuse exist not only across settings of multiple religious traditions but have been reported also in numerous other human organisations and communities and/or in the homes of persons affiliated with these (e.g. the military, boarding schools, the police force, and sports clubs). On the contours of spiritual abuse and its nuanced relationship with gender-based violence, see [Tomalin \(2023\)](#).
- 5 Where there is no further detail, as here, references pertain to chapters within this volume.
- 6 See note 2.
- 7 For a brief analysis of how sexual violence plays some part across religious traditions, and the various ways in which religious actors and factors enable such violence, see [Stiebert \(2022\)](#).
- 8 Singh Mandair designates the term “Sikhism” a colonial construct ([2013](#): 15). An “ism” implies something that can be labelled, captured and defined. The designation

“Sikhi” seeks to capture something much more dynamic that is closer to the Punjabi verb *Sikhana* (“to learn”) that gives Sikhi(sm) its name. Both terms – “Sikhi” and “Sikhism” – continue to be widely used.

- 9 We regret the absence of a chapter on Buddhism. A post by Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg (2020) reports on their important and extensive survivor-centred research on abuse in Buddhist communities. Their co-authored monograph is forthcoming with Yale University Press. The first Buddhist studies conference focused on sexual violence was held on 25 October 2024 (Gleig, Langenberg and Jacoby, 2024).
- 10 As some contributors to this volume mention (e.g. Chowdhury and Hannan, with reference to abuse in UK Islamic contexts), in-depth studies on spiritual abuse in traditions other than Christian ones (which are the focus of Oakley’s research also) are considerably sparser. I have not been able to locate academic investigations of any significant depth or scope focused on spiritual abuse in Indigenous religions. This is not to say such abuse does not occur – only that research in this area is particularly rare. The literature on spiritual abuse in New Religious Movements (with relationships to both Abrahamic, or Eastern religious traditions) is more prolific (e.g., Jacobs, 2007 and multiple contributions in the edited volume by Lewis 2011).
- 11 For an annotated and regularly updated bibliography of sources, see The Shiloh Project: <https://www.shilohproject.blog/resources/> (accessed 5 February 2024).
- 12 Power and Paynter (2023) aim for something similar in their edited volume on violence and peace across six world religions.
- 13 The organisation Thirtyone:eight (named after the biblical reference Proverbs 31:8, which inculcates speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves) is there to “equip organisations, churches, other faith groups, individuals and government with the safeguarding tools they need to protect vulnerable people” (see Thirtyone:eight, “About us”). Its origins and focus lie firmly in Christian contexts but do not specify any particular Christian denomination (see also “Spiritual abuse” 2018). One inter-faith independent charity operating across religious traditions is “Replenished Life,” which, according to its website, supports “those who have experienced abuse and trauma within faith.”
- 14 Patterns evident in other forms of abuse are widely reflected in research on spiritual abuse. Hence, those who tend to have more power and representation (disproportionally, hegemonic, heteronormative, cis adult males) tend also, more often, to be among abusers of power, while those with less power and less representation (disproportionally, women, children, queer, and non-binary persons) are considerably more vulnerable to abuse.
- 15 The Makin Report is available on the website of the Church of England (see Church of England). Allegations of Smyth’s violent abuse were documented in detail well before the publication of this report, most fully in the book-length investigation by Andrew Graystone (2021).
- 16 One contributor is an ordained rabbi, another is an ordained minister, both writing of abuse in their own religious tradition within which they have held positions of some authority and leadership.
- 17 Arguably, in the case of Devadasis (see Motswapong and Madigele), being subaltern, they cannot speak (see Spivak, 1994).
- 18 I have standardised some matters of style and have minimally edited textual portions that might have jeopardised anonymity.

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1 Judaism

Our Revolt-ing Women: Bringing Women Together to Highlight Abuse in Jewish Communities Today

*Robyn Ashworth-Steen and Yehudis Fletcher**

Introduction

On a subject as vital and vast as “Judaism and Abuse,” we ask ourselves the following questions: what can we, together, uniquely contribute to this growing field of scholarship? What power do our combined voices yield?

Significant scholarship exists on the experience of abuse. We, however, seek to explore the silencing that happens to women. We seek to demonstrate that power and liberation emerge when women come together, across and through differences, addressing the dark corners and rotten structures of our sacred texts and textual traditions upon which our institutions stand. A missing edge of our religious spaces is thus born and reclaimed – one of wild, fierce sisterhood. We write, together, for ourselves, for Batsheva, Rizpah, and Dinah (our “revolt-ing” women whose stories we will explore), and for all those seeking comfort and justice after abuse *and* those who need to be comforted in order to “let justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream” (Amos 5:24). We believe work such as this has the potential to expose the darkest elements in our communities. By “airing our collective dirty laundry,” past and present, we know the changes needed for safer communities will follow and communal cleansing will be possible.¹

There is little scholarly work from the perspectives of British Jewish communities on abuse. Reasons for this lacuna include the concern that if negative attention is drawn to the Jewish community antisemitism will be stoked, alongside the myth that abuse does not happen within our communities (see [Sztokman, 2019a](#)). Elana Sztokman’s response is succinct: “[abuse] is not *just* a Jewish thing, but it definitely *is* a Jewish thing” (2022: 214). When Jewish women raise their voices externally, we are often told that change must come from the inside and insiders. Whilst we are on the inside, by virtue of speaking

* Both authors feature in the open-access podcast episode “The Revolt-ing Women: Highlighting Abuse in Jewish Communities” (published on 9 August 2024). Both are interviewed here by broadcaster Rosie Dawson (Shiloh Podcast).

out, we then are designated as outsiders and become trapped and isolated. Further, it often seems that women are *only* allowed to speak when they talk about their victimhood, but *not* when they seek to make changes to community structures and lead systemic change.

Given our different backgrounds, we can speak to how abuse manifests in the various British Jewish communities of which we are part.² We testify that abuse is a reality in diverse religious Jewish contexts, and that the more it is ignored, the further harm will spread.³ We seek to show that much of the abuse uncovered in our communities is possible because of the inbuilt structures, ideologies, leadership models, processes (or lack of them), and the underpinning theology grounded in unchallenged, selective, interpretative traditions of our sacred texts.⁴ As Audre Lorde writes, quoting poet Kamlamu ya Salaam, “as long as male domination exists, rape will exist” (2019: 113).

Our *Chavruta*: women going out together

This paper is a record, in some ways, of our continued conversations over the years, in an informal and stop-start feminist *chavruta* (learning partnership). In choosing to struggle within our tradition, we note Rabbi Sheila Shulman’s z”l⁵ critique that “I [a radical feminist lesbian], and others like me, do not yet exist fully as persons, not in Judaism, not in the world at large” (2005: 82). Or, as Clare Hedwat writes, “The Jewish woman is vulnerable because she is invisible in a way the Jewish man is not. The Jewish woman is unequal in a way the Jewish man is not” (2018). How domination and the inferiority of women manifest may look different in various communities but it exists nevertheless.

Our *chavruta* means we must, out of necessity and desire, however dangerous, step out together in the hope that others will follow. With our informal, critical, and emotional *chavruta*, we recognise the reality of the Talmudic phrase *chavruta o mituta* (“*chavruta* or death”) (b.*Ta’anit* 23a), as without women coming together, abuse named, and justice done, we and our communities die.⁶

Our *chavruta* began with a question posed by Yehudis (an accidental activist, living within her *charedi*⁷ community) to Robyn (who was finding her way as the first female rabbi of a Manchester community) when Robyn was on a panel session at Manchester Limmud⁸ in 2018. Yehudis, sitting at the back, asked a searing question of institutional religious, political, and lay leaders from Manchester: “What are you going to do to make sure the abuse that happened to me does not happen again in this community?”⁹ Her question brought the hidden darkness to the fore, and awoke something in Robyn. Our conversations continue, following the curves of our experiences over these years and before.

Batsheva, Rizpah, and Dinah: Yehudis and Robyn

We join forces with three biblical women – Batsheva, Rizpah, and Dinah – to explore abuse within our texts and our communities and to create a sisterhood. We did not choose these three women; they chose us. Their stories came before ours. We call these women, “Our Revolt-ing Women,” to name the way in which they have been made “revolting” through interpretation and to honour their stories by creating the conditions for a revolution.

We recognise that the call of *lech lecha* (Gen 12:1), which Abraham heard, to “go out into the world, and act in it,” is generally within our sacred texts reserved for men (Shulman, 2005: 83). This is in contrast to the description of Sarah when angels visit Abraham and ask where she is. “There, in the tent,” he replies (Gen 18:9). The angels’ expectation that Sarah be present when she is not suggests that in a perfect Godly world she, and her sisters, are out in the world and acting in it. Therefore, we intentionally come together here as a female collective with our shared stories of abuse. We name the reality of the harm caused when women go out together, and also the power, necessity, and potential creative force born of women’s collective agency. Our questions are, “who keeps her in the tent? who keeps us in the tent?”

Not only are our synagogues and institutions grounded in and organised around Torah (both architecturally and otherwise), but much of our world, secular and religious, is shaped by this foundational text. And this text is violent: as David Clines points out, “on average, there are more than six instances of violence on every page of the Hebrew Bible” (2020: 24). We are choosing to listen (and not just “hear”) the women’s voices through text, rather than boycotting the texts as sites of violence.

Moreover, the pain, destruction, and harm perpetrated in our religious spaces is supported by text, if not directly, then at least tacitly: “there is violence both *in the text* and in the outworking *of the text*” (Stiebert, 2020: 21). It is incumbent upon us, therefore, to speak the language of our oppressors in order to engage in discussion and move forward. Not to adopt their positions or condone harm but to be able to challenge and bring everyone along and into redemption. Lorde’s words ring in our ears – “*for the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*” (2018: 19, italics original) so we must go further with these texts and with our activism. We face these violent texts and the violence that flows through them and into members of our communities and find power in the diverse, connected community we create through the process. As Lorde writes, “it is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women” (2018: 17).

Neither of us would go as far as Amy Kalmanofsky’s assumption that “feminist biblical scholarship can help individuals encounter these texts and *work to heal individuals who have suffered sexual violation*” (2017: 15, emphasis added). Indeed, this line of thinking risks replicating the abusive,

patriarchal structures we are attempting to address, by putting the onus on women to rectify harm by healing, yet without addressing the reality of on-going harm. In contrast, we are not seeking to heal women by encountering text. We seek to offer women the opportunity to orient themselves within the violence, to have a clearer view of what has happened to them and the women they walk with. Healing is individual and private and not for us to demand. We do not expect women who have been cut down, spied on, violated, raped, or abused, to heal themselves in isolation. How could this be possible without stepping back to understand the power structures, creating a sisterhood, reducing loneliness, and insisting on active deconstruction of harmful power dynamics (historical and current). As Johanna Stiebert writes, “understanding and then detoxifying the power dynamics in, and influence of, biblical texts plays a part in dismantling rape cultures” (2020: 1). Or, as Phyllis Trible writes:

As a critique of culture and faith in light of misogyny, feminism is a prophetic movement, examining the status quo, pronouncing judgment, and calling for repentance.

(1984: 3)

We echo Martin Luther King’s demand that the white moderate must not “paternalistically . . . set the timetable for another [wo]man’s freedom” (1963). It is not on the women to come together, when conditions make it so difficult to do so. The responsibility lies on us all to make gathering possible. For us, it is *chavruta o mituta*. For us. We have come together and found comfort in sisterhood. For us, there is an urgency in our call outwards and upwards. We seek repentance and change; sisterhood and community.

Introducing Batsheva

We meet Batsheva in the context of war “when kings go out [to battle]” (2 Sam 11:1). A time of male agency – the ability to go out – the need to conquer territory and cement power and authority.¹⁰ David, whose name translates as “beloved,” stays behind as he sends his men off to fight his war. A favoured and charismatic, absent leader, left with power to use and time to fill. We read that late in the afternoon he “rose from his couch” (2 Sam 11:2) or, as the movement could imply, he became aroused.¹¹ Symbolically, this couch and then the roof of the royal palace, where David strolls, represents the hotel room, the rabbi’s office – any space where male power and authority lies.¹² As Barbara Thiede succinctly says of biblical male characters, “Men help plan rape, they enable rape, and they watch rape,” just as David is with at least one of his servants as he watches Batsheva wash (2022: 2, 57). We note the instances of *washing* and *purification* which occur in the text (vv.4, 8) and

which pertain solely to the victim: she alone must wash, be seen to be pure, and has the weight of expectation upon her.

Gazing down from his powerful vantage point, David sees Batsheva, described, typically, only in terms of her beauty (v.2). The text reports, “David sent messengers to fetch her; she came to him and he lay with her” (v.4). Again, the sending of messengers draws on the long history of male power, collusion, and authority in biblical texts.¹³ There is no record here of either mutual desire or Batsheva’s consent, and it is hard not to agree with David Clines’ conclusion that this act is “essentially an expression of royal power, and ... much more like rape than love” (2009 [1995]: 225–226).¹⁴ David’s attitude is not a relic of biblical times. Donald Trump said:

I did try and fuck her. She was married....Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything...Grab ‘em by the pussy. You can do anything.

(*New York Times*, 2016)

Whether Donald Trump or King David are speaking, the power of office seems to include access to women’s bodies.¹⁵

Batsheva is silent, trapped in the gaze and fancy of the king with nowhere to hide and no protection, not even from her married status. The text, and everyone who reads it, becomes a party to her objectification. Our worry is that as the text facilitates the objectification of women it also endorses the continued male gaze. Yehudis experienced the same – being watched as she washed by a man who later served time in prison for his offences. As we continue to use a “bifocal reading strategy, with one eye on ancient texts and the other on contemporary contexts” (Stiebert, 2020: 1) we think, also, of the victims/survivors of Barry Freundel, a rabbi who, from his high vantage point of power, secretly video-recorded dozens of women using the *mikveh* (ritual bath) (Boorstein and Alexander, 2020).¹⁶ All these are examples of male voyeurs and actors using women as their play-things and fancies.

In this text, the same verb (“send”) is repeated, drawing our attention to the movement and stark contrasts in the behaviour of the characters. David is the main actor in these verses, sending servants, messengers, soldiers, and notes, whilst staying on his couch, safe and horny, whilst everyone else runs around doing his bidding. In verse 5, the movement of the text changes as Batsheva *sends* a message: “she sent word to David.” This is not the sending of violence, or David’s sending for Batsheva (v.27) to become his wife, but a sending of word, of protest, perhaps.¹⁷ Along with Uriah’s acts of integrity, which serve to heighten David’s unethical behaviour, we find glimpses of critique of David’s actions.

The story ends with rebuke: “But God was displeased with what David had done” (v.27). What is not clear is *what* is displeasing – the rape, the taking of another man’s wife, the killing of Uriah, the misuse of power?

What is clear is that rabbinic interpretation and, therefore, the stories we have been told, clear David of any serious charge: “Anyone who says that David sinned [with Batsheva] is nothing other than mistaken” (b.*Shabbat* 56a). The Babylonian Talmud in *Sanhedrin* 107a concludes that Batsheva was, in fact, destined for David from the days of creation and David simply took her too early – that was his sin. Many Jewish spaces would reel from calling King David a rapist, and others are keen to sanitise his behaviour as being “not nearly as bad as it seemed” (Rosenfeld, 2016). In the words of Thiede, “men are not only entitled to perform any act of violence that assures them power, *they have to do so* if their aim is to rule. No restrictions apply” (2022: 13). The text seems to support this contention by relating David’s behaviour as his own, rather than as an act of his office: he is referred to as David, rather than King David. In separating the two, the text colludes with the idea that men who behave like this can (and maybe even should) retain their office, as we see with the Talmudic teachings above.

We sing *David Melech Yisrael*, “David is the King of Israel,” with our children. His star hangs from our necklaces, we sing his compositions, re-tell the tales of how he defeated Goliath. We have cried and comforted ourselves with David’s words in the Psalms. It is an extra violation to hear and understand the impact of the actions of our heroes within our texts and our synagogues. As with the discussions on whether we should continue to sing the songs of Shlomo Carlebach, given reports and allegations of his abusive actions (Blustain, 1998; Imhoff, 2016), we are left asking, “why do we never talk of David’s abuse? What does it mean for us, as a holy people, that our beloved was an abuser?” The very basis of our founding stories feels shaky; we are left with no doubt that our acceptance or our denial of David’s actions lead to acceptance and denial of abuse within our walls now.

Introducing Rizpah

Alongside Batsheva, we meet Rizpah, another wife (or, technically, secondary wife) of a king, this time King Saul. Rather than the context of war, we are in a time of famine (2 Sam 21:1). We hear again of David trying to settle and win conflicts and to get God on his side. To provide the necessary honour in a conflict with the Gibeonites, David agrees to execute the sons and grandsons of Saul, born to Rizpah and Merav. Again, David does not follow the ethical rules of engagement and leaves their corpses hanging, even though “an impaled body is an affront to God” (Deut 21:23).

We read that Rizpah takes sackcloth, stretches out her hand with an imagined deliberate, slow action, and lays it on a rock (v.10). Like Batsheva (2 Sam 11:26), Rizpah laments. She defends the bodies of her sons from beasts and prey – she is a protector, a silent warrior.

Again reminiscent of the tale of Batsheva, David is told and informed of a woman. But this time the movement and momentum comes *from the woman* – the messengers go from Rizpah to the king. She has rattled the world around her enough that David is told of what Rizpah has done. David is now compelled to act and buries the seven sons and goes further in restoring honour to Saul and Jonathan by finally burying their bones. God then responds to the plea of the land and the famine is lifted. Without a pause, we read that war again breaks out and the cycle of conflict is resumed (v.15).

The tale of Rizpah interrupts the flow of conflict. With her deliberate, silent, intense, and powerful protest, she calls attention to the failures of the king. She holds him accountable and calls into question the morality of his (in)actions. A woman who has suffered the fate of being a *pilegesh*,¹⁸ raped by Avner (2 Sam 3:7), raped by David (12:8), publicly raped by Absalom on the same rooftop where David spied upon Batsheva (16:22), traumatised by the death of her sons, Rizpah acts through her grief. We too cry tears for all of our grief, Rizpah's grief, and the pain inflicted on women throughout time and across the globe. We cry tears of anger for the lack of accountability for the abusive actions of those in our community.

We need not look far for more instances of when abuse is either ignored, or abusers are not held accountable, given the culture of synagogues and other institutions, as well as the knee-jerk concern to protect rabbis. The reality of abuse in our supposedly holy spaces is slowly being unearthed and belated ethics codes and safeguarding processes for clergy are being implemented. Core institutions, such as the Central Conference of American Rabbis, have undertaken an important, honest, and searing review of their ethics processes after extensive abuse was uncovered in rabbinic seminaries (Alcalaw, 2021). Comparable work is only in the beginning stages here in the UK, with an ethics code and committee just being set up for progressive rabbis (Sherwood, 2020).¹⁹ To our knowledge, there is still no such system for Orthodox rabbis, despite calls for the urgent organisation of one (Greenberg, 2019).

As already discussed through the story of Batsheva, there are many reasons for this painful reality. Sztokman helpfully talks about the “culture of exception” within religious institutions where those with a greater number of years of membership or with certain titles are revered and above reproach (2022: 258). There is a sense that “trouble-makers” like Rizpah draw attention to a community that likes to hide, given the real risk of antisemitism and long history of trauma. What Rizpah enables us to see is that we cannot risk falling from our own ideals of justice and the rule of law.

Shulman was clear that alongside sacred texts of oppression runs a stream of righteousness within our tradition which is ours to amplify (2007: 32). We are now called to join Rizpah and her quiet, moving, and solitary protest against injustice by leaders and institutions. We wonder why more of us have not met Rizpah. Who is hiding her story from us? We are angered

that Rizpah's dignity in the face of indignity was never deemed important enough to teach.

But now that we have met her, we choose to tell her story and, also, to draw attention to what was done to her, rather than only focus on the impact the men around her imagined her to have. We do not believe the men's story about how much destructive power she has – the ability to hold back the rains – which would make us complicit in their deliberate distortion of the devious, esoteric, dangerous power that women hold. Men often seem to ascribe power to women that they do not *fargin*²⁰ in any practical sense. Instead, we are listening, and we hear her story: that she cannot save her sons – all she can do is silently protest their deaths.

We are concerned that if we focus on Rizpah's agency, we veer into the murky waters of situational ethics, often employed to restrict critique of the lack of women's rights within conservative non-western cultures (Fletcher, 2022). Seeing ourselves as Rizpah, we demand that she and all other Rizpahs are seen fully and enfolded into the feminist project. The focus must remain on breaking down the barriers to equal distribution of power between sexes which was denied to her. Whilst we can celebrate her individual action of rebellion, our focus must not shift from a commitment to destroying patriarchal power and how it manifests in our unaccountable rabbinic structures and institutions.

We should not settle for glimmers of agency shown by a desperate Rizpah, prostrate in mourning over the dead bodies of her sons. We should instead notice and interrogate the brutal games played by the men around her and walk with her in her grief. We imagine her leaving her sons' finally buried bones and walking away, together.

Introducing Dinah

Dinah is introduced in relation to her family members – she is the daughter of Leah, borne to Jacob (Gen 34:1). Untypically, Dinah went out. As Shulman comments, “Women in the *Tanakh*, or in rabbinic texts, certainly don't go out into the world *together*, with the memorable exception of Ruth and Naomi” (2005: 83). Furthermore, in her going out, she seeks to visit “the daughters of the land.” Rashi, a medieval commentator, in trying to explain why Leah is mentioned in Dinah's lineage (another peculiarity), explains that Leah too was fond of “going out” (Genesis Rabbah 80:1, Gen 30:16). The midrash quotes the proverb, “like mother, like daughter” (see Ezek 16:44).²¹ How curious. How can we explain this lineage of women who like to go out? Who are the daughters of the land and what were they doing? The midrash appears to conclude the two women went out as harlots – for what else, in their imagination, could they possibly be? Whatever the women were doing, it was disrupted in the most violent of ways.

Shechem is introduced by aligning him with the establishment – “son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country” (Gen 34:2). It is clear already where the power lies. We then read, “he saw her, took her, and lay with her and raped her” (34:2).²² Not one act of sexual violence but many. Even Rashi, concise as always, notes that “lay with her,” means “naturally (vaginally)” and “he raped her” means, “unnaturally (anally).” The mediaeval commentator Ibn Ezra comments that Dinah was a virgin. Upon reading these commentaries, we weep.

At v.3, we read that Shechem’s “soul cleaved to Dinah.” After the assaults, he is obsessed – with her, with the violence. Now Dinah is only referred to as “daughter of Jacob,” her link to her mother and her freedom are severed. We are told Shechem “loved” Dinah and then spoke to her heart (v.3). This pattern of abuse and then the show of affection is a familiar one. Shechem’s true nature is shown when he demands from his father, “Get me this girl as a wife” (v.4). This girl – how old was she? Presumably, very young. Yehudis was taught Dinah was just 8 years old.

What follows is a story of male revenge and deception. Dinah is silenced, forgotten, as her brothers plot revenge. Jacob, hearing what happened to his daughter, is silent (v.5). We are told the rage felt by Dinah’s brothers was because Shechem “had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter – a thing not to be done” (v.7). We are struck by the phrase “Jacob’s daughter.” Here is the outrage, that another man’s property was defiled – a breakdown in the natural order of things.

Many verses later, after the negotiations and the subsequent massacre, we read with horror that Dinah had remained at her rapist’s house during this time (v.26). Her family finally walk out with their “defiled” sister and all of the town’s booty, *including* more women. We can thus be sure that the wellbeing of women is not at the heart of this tale. In answering their father’s concern about a counter revenge attack, Dinah’s brothers say, “should our sister be treated like a whore?” (v.31). A familiar, painful trope as the abused becomes implicated (cf. Deut 22:23–27).

It is clear to us that Dinah’s story is one that is far from victim-centred but, instead, victim-blaming. Dinah’s sexual abuse, rape, and kidnap is a tale of defending male honour, of stopping your women going out, lest they fall foul of the male gaze. We can hear the undercurrent and chatter of “she was asking for it,” and “her dress was too short.” The obsession with women’s bodies and the apparent freedom with which they are spoken about and to, including in religious communities, is chilling.

When Nechemya Weberman,²³ an unqualified counsellor in the Satmar community,²⁴ was finally reported to the police for sexually assaulting his teenaged female client, the Satmar Rebbe, Aaron Teitelbaum, railed at his followers, “Has our sister become a whore?!” (Yarrow, 2013). In modern-day Monsey (a hamlet of New York state with well over 100 synagogues), the dishonour is not in a sister being sexually abused, it is in the publicity that she

causes by reporting abuse to the police! The imperative is to try and prevent a conviction. Despite later, in 2013, being sentenced to 103 years in prison, Weberman still receives support from the Satmar establishment (Henry, 2022).²⁵

The cycle of abuse flows, from the sexual assault, perpetrated by Weberman whilst he was “treating” a teenager, to the Satmar Rebbe’s indignation at her reporting her abuse to the police, to the objectification and sexual harassment described to the “Task Force on the Experience of Women in the Rabbinate” of the Central Conference of American Rabbis who collected testimonies from female rabbis (CCAR, 2023). The anonymous testimonies included in the published handout by CCAR included offensive comments from unnamed individuals such as, “Don’t be nervous about this service. At least you *look* beautiful,” to “Hey sexy! I’ve always wanted to kiss a rabbi” (Pass, 2023).²⁶

Seeing the matriarchal line, from Leah to Dinah, trampled upon in the most violent of ways, with the honour of Jacob’s tribe being upheld, we also recognise the power dynamic inherent in the Torah. As Hedwat powerfully writes, “the Jewish institutional world suffers a sickness of ingrained, unethical gender and power relations. And power, not sex, lies at the heart of #Me-Too” (2018). The issues of power and gender start and end with the texts of sexual violence in our sacred scriptures and seep into all that we do in our religious, holy places. As Hedwat continues, “For if a woman is inferior, it’s not a jump to denigrate her. It’s not much more of a leap to assault her, either” (2018). Additionally, if we seek to protect an accuser’s reputation in preference to seeking justice for those abused, we fail.

It is vital for us to name that it is Dinah’s brothers who seek to take revenge. No legal authority is called upon, as is typical in today’s religious spaces. A literature review on sexual abuse in Orthodox Jewish communities (one of the only such scholarly works) shows that concepts such as *mesira* (the act of turning over a fellow Jew to the authorities); *lashon hara* (gossiping, harming someone’s reputation); and “fear of stigmatization, concern about the effects of harmful secular norms, and reliance on rabbinical authority in everyday matters” mean that reporting sexual abuse is obstructed and controversial within these communities (Lusky-Weisrose et al., 2021: 1087). The authors write, “Consequently, sexual abuse is often treated within the nuclear or extended family, or within the boundaries of the community, away from the public eye,” just as with Dinah (2021: 1087). Yet, we also know that many religious authorities do not act upon disclosure of abuse, with rabbinic bodies and others protecting their own, consciously or not (Sztokman, 2022: 54; Dreyfus, 2019). Just as “biblical rape culture is supported by male friendships, alliances, and shared homosocial experience” so too is present-day rape culture (Thiede, 2022: 14).

To deny abuse is taking place in Jewish communities is to remain silent, like Jacob. Look to our synagogues, our schools, our homes. Stories are beginning to be shared.²⁷ In 2021, allegations were made against British Jewish schools – allegations of sexual assault, and harassment (Judah, 2021). The

news article recounts one testimony: “I was in the lunch queue and he put his hand up my skirt and groped me... No one said anything” (Judah, 2021).²⁸

As Sztokman writes:

The backdrop of patriarchy in almost every aspect of communal life sends many messages about who is valued and who is not, and who deserves power and who does not. Those hierarchies enable abuse when the abuser is in a valued demographic and the victim is not

(2022: 364)²⁹

We learn that there is risk in women going out into the world, acting in their own interests, as leaders. Dinah’s world is our world. Lifting up stories such as Dinah’s is vital. They demonstrate that not only is abuse happening within our communities, but that the texts we lean upon and teach, promote harmful stereotypes, unjust laws, and unaccountable behaviours by predators. By holding our ancestors accountable, we begin to be able to hold abusive institutions, structures, and individuals accountable today. Dinah must no longer be left alone.

Together: a conclusion

Through our stories, those in our texts and those reported to us privately and publicly, we recognise the absolute, unconditional power granted to leaders (in the image of King David), and particularly rabbis: “The rabbi is like an angel of God with a halo around him, tasked with saving the people. This makes him untouchable – and it makes potential victims extremely vulnerable” (Sztokman, 2022: 167).³⁰ Even now, when reporting on abuse by rabbis, the media chooses to call abuse “affairs,” which sanitises and underestimates the immense power of rabbis over others (Jerusalem Post Staff, 2019). Over-reliance on rabbis in Jewish spaces; the invitation to narcissism; delight in a leader’s charisma; the myth that a synagogue community is a family rather than a professional body; and the presentation of the rabbi as parent, all make us pause and ask how the role of rabbi, and that of our communal leaders, can be transformed so the possibility for abuse is not inbuilt.³¹ Of course, not all abuse is perpetrated by rabbis and leaders but, as Sztokman writes, “it starts at the top. Patriarchal cultures that objectify women and promote gender hierarchies help promote cultures that support sexual abuse” (2022: 190). Unless the fabric of our institutions is changed, and the sins of King David and others recognised, even those with good intentions will fail. As long as we uncritically engage with texts that depict women’s bodies as a battlefield, there to be conquered or surrendered, with the act of penetration used as a living metaphor for invasion, how can we begin to talk critically about abuses occurring today?

If gender abuse “is a cultural dynamic rooted in patriarchal power structures that keep women and vulnerable people small” (Sztokman, 2022: 196), how do we tell Batsheva’s story and sing psalms in her name? How do we go out joyfully with Dinah to visit the daughters of the land? How do we ensure Rizpah has many happy years with her sons? We wonder how we can uproot the patriarchal core to our sacred texts to ensure male domination is no longer inbuilt into the fabric of our institutions and leadership models. It requires an honest re-telling of our ancestors’ stories from their viewpoint, the naming of the abuse by David and others, and a commitment to shaping our communities and leadership roles in ways which are always vigilant of these power dynamics. Their stories demand that we transform our understanding of how we construct our religious spaces, and how we use text to inform our practice.

In naming the abuse within our texts, our Jewish homes, and within our worlds, and in recognising the silencing of women’s stories, we, as women, go out into a new world together. Not as victims but as agents and sisters. We follow scholars such as Carleen Mandolfo who forge a way for us to read “*with...[women] toward God/male as object, thus automatically restoring the woman to a subject position, rather than the object position*” (2007: 83). Our gaze shifts and, with this first step, we draw attention to the structural, systemic, theological, spiritual, legal work that must be done to shift male positional power (in the name of Batsheva); bring perpetrators to account and make sure institutions consider their culture and safeguard properly (in the name of Rizpah); and ensure justice is always primary and the responsibility of all (in the name of Dinah).

In the words of our teacher Maureen Kendler (z”l), we are not threatening to leave, we are threatening to stay (2018). We remain within our texts and Jewish spaces to focus on the stream of righteousness and sisterhood that we love and know within our tradition. We seek to tell our stories as a group of women who will always choose to be trouble-makers and outsiders on the inside to bring about the totality of change needed for abuse and the protection of abusers to stop.

Notes

- 1 We use these expressions (“airing dirty laundry” and “cleansing”) intentionally, as these tropes are widely applied to silence victims, hide abuse within communities, and police women’s bodies.
- 2 It is beyond the remit of this chapter to undertake any exhaustive study of abuse within British Jewish communities but we will bring case studies alongside the exegesis of our chosen biblical texts.
- 3 We use the term “abuse” in its widest sense, from rape and sexual violence to institutional and other forms of spiritual abuse (as defined by Oakley and Humphreys, 2019: 31).
- 4 *Megillah* 4:10 from the Mishnah (formerly oral, authoritative Jewish traditions set down in writing around 200 CE) provides a powerful example of how texts from the Tanakh (i.e. the Hebrew Bible) are explicitly selected and either transmitted,

- restricted, or silenced. Notably, the texts mentioned here include narratives of sexual violence and abuse (Gen 35:22; 2 Sam 13).
- 5 *Zichrona livrachá*, may her memory be for a blessing.
- 6 “Talmud” refers to a body of Jewish literature comprising law and legend. It contains both Mishnah (see note 4) and Gemara (analyses and commentaries of Mishnah). There are two major Talmudic traditions: Palestinian (Yerushalmi) and Babylonian (Bavli).
- 7 [Editor:] *Charedi* (or *Haredi*) refers to groups within traditional or Orthodox Judaism that are characterised by meticulous interpretation of religious sources and strict adherence to *halakha* (Jewish law).
- 8 Limmud (from Hebrew “to learn”) is a British Jewish educational charity, which runs events to facilitate Jewish learning.
- 9 Yehudis was sexually abused by Todros Grynhaus – the son of a prominent *dayan* (religious judge), a Jewish Studies teacher, and youth educator. He was convicted and served a significant prison sentence.
- 10 We note this is a gendered stereotype and constructed model of masculine power as opposed to an innate biological truth.
- 11 Indeed, b.*Sanhedrin* 107a discusses how David attempts to satiate his lust but achieves the opposite by engaging in too much intercourse and thus “ends up” raping Batsheva.
- 12 It is important to note that we recognise that abuse can be perpetrated by women against men and boys, and by women against women and girls. Whilst writing this chapter, the news of former headteacher Malka Leifer’s 15-year prison sentence for sexually abusing two girls was publicised (Percival, 2023). The judge’s summing up can be found here: DPP v. Malka Leifer [2023] VCC 1443. Whilst most of this chapter references sexual violence by men against women, we recognise all types of abuse and stand with those affected.
- 13 See Gen 32:4, Num 20:14, Josh 7:22, and Isa 6:21, to name but a few.
- 14 Clines writes elsewhere, “This may be a contentious issue, but I would argue that all the language about sex [in the Hebrew Bible] describes acts of violence to the body of another. I found no case where the language of sex referred to an act of mutual desire” (2020: 35).
- 15 Indeed, Bible-using supporters of Donald Trump have (approvingly) compared him to both King David and, during the 2024 campaign, also to King Jehu. The consequence of the latter was to cast Kamala Harris in the role of Jezebel. Examples of this trope are abundant on the internet but we do not want to cite and thereby promote them here.
- 16 We have chosen to use the term “victim/survivor” with a nod to the complexity of finding a suitable label. We have found Lily Kay Ross’ article helpful in critiquing these labels (2022). Further details of Freundel’s legal case can be found here: United States v. Freundel, Bernard GMA [2014] CMD 018262.
- 17 The idea that Batsheva speaks up for herself is proposed by Frymer-Kensky, as reported and discussed by Kalmanofsky (2017: 27).
- 18 This Hebrew word is sometimes translated (anachronistically) with “concubine,” which refers to a Roman institution. It appears to designate a wife of secondary status.
- 19 Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber undertook a vital piece of scholarship where he explores the worrying fact that “throughout the entirety of Jewish history, only one rabbi has had his *semicha* [rabbinic authority conveyed at ordination] revoked for perpetrating sexual harassment” (2022: 95). This is underpinned by “a widespread and genuine belief that *semicha* is irrevocable” – even for acts of violence (2022: 96). Given what we know about the extent of abuse, this dearth also shows a profound failure in safeguarding and justice. This, Kanter-Webber concludes, with our agreement, is a *chillul ha-Shem*, a desecration of God’s name.
- 20 Yiddish – “to allow,” “to indulge.”

- 21 Midrash is a Jewish form of interpretation and commentary. The allusion to Ezekiel 16 is disturbing. This chapter is notorious for its depictions of Jerusalem using sexualised woman metaphors. The chapter is full of accounts of Woman Jerusalem's depravity and of justifications for using extreme violence to enforce her submission. Ezekiel 16 and 23 have often and justly been called misogynist and examples of "pornoprophetics" (e.g. see Stiebert, 2020: 30, 67–68, 80–81).
- 22 We have chosen to translate this verb as "raped," given the context.
- 23 This article is mostly focussed on abuse within British Jewish communities, while Webberman is American and his abuse took place in the USA. Nevertheless, Teitelbaum has thousands of followers (*chasidim*) in the UK, and the speech referenced was distributed to these *chasidim*. We therefore choose to include this anecdote as it exemplifies the global and rippling effect of male power.
- 24 Satmar is one of the largest *Chasidic* dynasties and characterised by extreme traditionalism. Its main synagogue is located in New York.
- 25 Further details can be found here: [People v. Webberman 2015](#) N.Y. Slip Op. 9128.
- 26 We note Sztokman's warning that "women rabbis are often on the frontlines" and subsequently "are at high risk of dropping out as a result of abuse coming from all directions" (2022: 325).
- 27 For example, the recent conviction of a rabbi for possession of hundreds of indecent images of children ([Rocker 2023](#)).
- 28 Safeguarding concerns were raised by [Ofsted \(2021\)](#).
- 29 Sztokman's infographic on the "Dynamics of the Patriarchy in Jewish Life" is illuminating: men dominate professional leadership; men in power often protect other men; the sexual objectification of women is often normalised; men dominate in forming communal agendas; men dominate opinion-making; men dominate Jewish lay leadership; and men make more money than women ([2019b](#): 38–39).
- 30 Especially as clergy "have a unique ability to garner trust at vulnerable moments" (Sztokman 2022: 17).
- 31 Sztokman's question of whether rabbis are being trained towards narcissism and charisma needs further investigation (2022: 161).

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2 Hinduism

From God's Slaves to Sex Slaves: The Plight of Devadasis in Hinduism

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Introduction

Violence and abuse are not peculiar to any one religious tradition but manifest in different guises from one to another. In this chapter, we discuss the system of Devadasi to demonstrate how elements of Hindu religious traditions¹ can justify and endorse the abuse of girls and women. We will show how in its earlier manifestations the Devadasi system provided temple patronage to Devadasis, who, alongside fulfilling ritualised sexual roles, also received an education as highly trained artists, enjoying some measure of prestige and autonomy. However, British colonial rule caused a profound shift, and from the 1860s, Devadasis' status came to be reduced, effectively to that of prostitutes.² We will look to Hindu scriptures and historical sources, alongside contemporary studies to establish the origins and developments of the Devadasi system. Moreover, we will examine how discrimination, intimidation, and abuse of Devadasis is multifaceted, hinging not only on dynamics of caste and economics but also on hegemonic masculinities, and gendered prejudices. We will argue that the role of religion is significant in coordinating these dynamics.

Devadasi

Devadasi is a Sanskrit word that combines *deva* ("god") and *dasi* ("female enslaved"). It can therefore be translated, "female enslaved one, or servant, of (a) deity." It refers to a Hindu practice in parts of India whereby at puberty, a girl is "married" to a deity and, therefore, cannot marry a mortal man (Orchard, 2007a and 2007b; Shingal, 2015).

It is generally agreed upon that the Devadasi system is an established historical tradition prevailing in southern India, yet *when* precisely it commenced remains a subject of debate amongst scholars. Some argue that it can be traced back to the third century CE (Bharathi Harishankar and Priyamvadha, 2016: 7). Others argue for the sixth century (Shingal, 2015: 109), or the seventh century

(Lee, 2011). Authors of both early and more recent critical works on the emergence of the socio-religious institution agree that the Devadasi role was initially honorific (see Varghese and Sharafunnisa, 2022). Hence, Devadasis were dedicated to the service of deities and temples, to perform the revered sacred arts of dance and music within and outside temple premises (Ragini, 2009 [1928]). Items of vocabulary that co-occur with *Devadasi* and yield more semantic clues are *gudisani* (“temple lady”), *bhogam* (“embodiment of enjoyment”), *kalavati* (“receptacle of the arts”), and *devaradiyal* (“slave of god”) (see Kersenboom, 1998). Above all, Devadasis were consecrated and *bramachariyas*, “unmarried for life.” In times past, they appear to have enjoyed a revered status in society (Soneji, 2011).

But during the rise of British rule, the kings who provided patronage for the temples where Devadasis danced lost their power and the practice of Devadasi dedication was banned and associated with prostitution. It has not, however, disappeared but has instead become a means to bond and exploit impoverished girls and women.

In Hinduism, as in some other religious traditions, there is an expectation and ideal for a woman to preserve her “purity” (that is virginity) before marriage and even to confine contact with the opposite sex so that she is not only virginal but *performing* virginity and respectability (i.e. being seen to be pure) (see Le Roux and Pertek, 2022). But in the case of the Devadasi, she is popularly regarded as “married to the deity.” This does not, however, impose celibacy but, instead, leaves her sexually accessible to temple priests and thereafter many temple attendees but without requiring them to marry the Devadasi. Any of the protections or respectability that marriage to a man might confer are closed to Devadasis. The debased religious role of Devadasis in modern times instead justifies their sexual exploitation and also justifies their abusers – including on religious grounds: the Devadasi is an exception; her body is available for sex but without the man using her incurring either the stigma of seeing a “proper” prostitute or of infidelity to his spouse. Sex with the Devadasi can be depicted as a religious act. She is pure and impure, married and unmarried. Because social and even legal structures conspire against Devadasis, their abuse continues and the men who exploit them are rarely impeded, let alone convicted of any crime. Moreover, the religious traditions that imbue the system serve to reinforce it.

Devadasis often have association with the cult of the Goddess known by various names, including Yellamma and Renuka. According to Maria Torri, the majority of Devadasis today are consecrated to the Goddess (2009: 35). Female followers of the Goddess are, like present-day Devadasis, also most often among the poorest and low caste of the Indian society.³

Devadasi status was traditionally conferred in a ritual of dedication: the ceremony of a first night, or a “deflowering ceremony.” Once a girl had her menarche, she would participate in this ceremony with her “patron,” usually someone rich with connections to royalty or with the King of the time.

The deflowering ceremony served also to secure the patron (Desai, 2007: 287). Another associated tradition was that Devadasi dedication would occur in cases where parents were childless and would make vows whereby a firstborn daughter would be devoted to the role. Also, if there were no sons in a family, a Devadasi girl effectively became like a son, in that she contributed to her family's livelihood (see Sithannan, 2006: 19–20). These customs combine elements of religious devotion and economic need. They have been referred to as “unwritten rules” (Orchard, 2007a: 2379) and continue to be observed by devotees, particularly in southern states of India and in Maharashtra.

The profile of a Devadasi, with resonance up to the present, is as follows: she is most often from a low caste, and is made subservient to a higher caste male, usually a priest, often in the setting of a temple. Devadasis carry out maintenance work around the temple and are expected also to perform sexual acts with patrons, priests, or higher caste men. Their role is constructed as a religious one, which has the consequence of exonerating the men who have sex with Devadasis from any impurity or moral onus. Ostensibly, Devadasis derive honour from being dedicated to a god and (as wives of a deity) are protected from widowhood (this status has the name *nityasumagali*), with widowhood in Hinduism being acutely inauspicious.

In times past, there was indeed status and prestige accorded to Devadasis. These were once the only women in India who enjoyed the privilege of leaning to read, dance, and sing (Shingal, 2015: 122). Daughters born to Devadasis became Devadasis too, creating respected matrilineal lines. They followed devotional routines, attending to the deity and “they would sing hymns in praise of the deities, dancing before the idol and following with the processional deity carrying light while singing and dancing” (Giri, 1999: 208). But it was known, too, that alongside performing various temple duties, Devadasis also had sexual obligations to (historically) their patron kings, and later to temple priests (Dasgupta, 2000). Devadasis' sexual acts received societal and cultural acceptance and endorsement on account of religious sanction (Shingal, 2015).

In times past and present, the Devadasi dedication ritual announced her availability for sexual service. As mentioned, traditionally, this service was to a patron king (Bharathi Harishankar and Priyamvadha, 2016: 14) and Devadasis received gifts in exchange. Once a patron had secured his “right” of first sexual access to a Devadasi, he would pay a sum for a fixed period of time, or for a permanent arrangement with her (Shankar, 1994).

While it is difficult (and some would say anachronistic) to speak of, let alone assert, such things as Devadasis' “rights” or “consent” (particularly given the very young age of Devadasi dedication and the complete absence of historical sources by Devadasis themselves), it is possible to recognise signs of status and prestige in depictions of earlier Devadasi tradition. Her role was firmly religious, albeit a role involving sexual services. Nowadays, however,

sexual services – more aptly, sexual exploitation and maltreatment – are what predominate, and the low rank and status of Devadasis is pronounced, rendering her vulnerable to sexual abuse (see [Evans, 1998](#)). Nowadays, Devadasi dedication is driven less by religious devotion than by poverty. Indeed, it appears as though any appeal to religious devotion is aimed at justifying Devadasis' denigration.

Spiritual abuse

When perpetrators weaponise the powerful hold of religious beliefs and philosophies and the hopes and ideals associated with them to legitimise their abuse, then the abuse is often felt particularly keenly by survivor-victims ([Carlson, 2005](#)). It is not uncommon for such abuse to go hand-in-hand with other systems of power that create hierarchies and scope for abuse, notably with patriarchy. Across many cultural contexts and religious traditions, evidence points to the predisposition of men with power (including religious authority) to cause considerable harm, disproportionately to girls and women. This harm often takes sexualised forms, such as sexual grooming, and other types of sexual predation.⁴ Where patriarchal dominance applies religious tropes, there is debate as to whether this derives from religion or its misrepresentation. Hence, Muslim survivor-victims in Australia, for example, have reported that “[i]t was not the patriarchal precepts of religion but the patriarchal interpretation that facilitated the abuse” ([Ghafournia, 2017](#): 159).⁵ Abuse of many kinds causes feelings such as separation, self-blame, and emotional anguish in victim-survivors but when abuse is of a spiritual nature this can add complex dimensions, such as separation and isolation from one's faith community, or self-reproach that is perceived as divine disapproval (see [Alkahteb, n.d.](#)).

Spiritual abuse can integrate and manipulate not only gendered hierarchies but also other hierarchies, such as those pertaining to class or majority versus minority religious movements. This applies in the case of the Devadasi system, which targets not only those discriminated against by patriarchy (i.e. girls and women) but those socially and economically vulnerable and those with affiliation to a minoritised religious group. Arguably, therefore, the abuse of Devadasis is not only about sexual predation and domination but about the assertion of religious dominance (see [Bidner and Eswaran, 2012](#)).

Devadasis and the Hindu scriptures

As in some other religious traditions, in Hinduism, too, scriptures are cited and interpreted up to the present to explain, maintain, validate, or legitimate ongoing practices. Hence, in order to understand better the Devadasi system and its origins, it is imperative to visit Hindu scriptures. There are only

few scriptures that can be drawn on to illuminate the system. One of these is Padma Purana Srishti Khanda (chapter 52):

- 96b. A man giving (i.e. who gives) his daughter to (anyone of) these obtains (i.e. goes to) hell.
- 97a: (A man, who gives his daughter to any man) through greed, through being honoured or who exchanges the bride (at the time of marriage), goes to hell.
- 97b-98a: By offering a dear young beautiful woman (i.e. a maiden) along with ornaments and beads to (one of) the sages, a man would obtain unending fruit.
- 98b-99a: The young fruit of a virgin and a girl eight years old is the same. One should be given to a suitor, the other to a Brahmana/Brahmin.
- 99b-100: A wise man, without troubling himself should offer a purchased daughter to God. Till the end of the *kalpa* [an aeon or vast period of time in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology], he would get (i.e. live in) heaven and would be king or a very rich man on earth, and in every birth, he would get a very beautiful, fine wife.⁶

Padma Purana,⁷ therefore, stipulates that a girl should be dedicated at eight years old to a Brahman, a wise man (sage), and a God, in that particular order. The donor is promised heaven. The dedication to the wise men (sages) will earn the donor “unending fruit,” or abundance. The next verse becomes very specific and talks about “a fruit,” which is a word that commonly has sexual connotations. In religious contexts, it can function as a euphemism (cf. “forbidden fruit” in Christian contexts). The “fruit” of either an eight-year-old girl or a virgin (presumably, of any age) is deemed the same, with one to be presented to a suitor and the other to the Brahmana/Brahmin (used synonymously to refer to a man belonging to the highest caste, also known as the priestly class). The last portion is also disconcerting, because it talks of a “purchased daughter,” rendering her as goods owned (by virtue of being bought). This might imply that she can be used by her “owner” as he wishes. The rewards for the donor are enticing: till the end of the *kalpa* (an aeon or a very vast period in Buddhist and Hindu cosmology), he is granted a very comfortable life, be it on earth or in heaven.

Matsya Purana,⁸ 70.56-57, mentions that “a temple woman should satisfy all sexual needs of the Brahmin.” The word “temple woman” has been applied to the Devadasi, by virtue of her, too, staying in the temple precincts and carrying out temple duties. However, this is the first time there is explicit mention of women’s sexual services within the temple, swiftly deviating the Brahmin’s role to that of a *kamadeva* (*kama* means “pleasure” and *deva* “god,” hence *kamadeva* is translated “god of pleasure”).⁹ Therefore, any Brahmana/Brahmin coming to Devadasis (if identified with the temple women of this text) for the sake of sexual enjoyment was within his rights and did not jeopardise

his entitlement to respect and honour. It seems at least possible that Brahmins could and would use both their status and the sacred text to legitimate their sexual access to women and girls.

There is also mention of *apsaras* (“dancers”) and *devadasi* in *Devi Bhagavata Purana*¹⁰ 9.1/142-143,¹¹ especially their association with the Indra court. Indra is one of the Hindu gods and his court would refer to his abode. The maidens residing in these courts are referred to as courtesans. Initially, it must be noted, there was no clear line drawn between the two designations, that is, *apsaras* and *devadasi* were viewed as synonymous. The widely held belief was that the god Brahma created *apsaras* as celestial dancing nymphs and that these were early avatars of *devadasis* (Vishwanathan 2008). Hence, *Devadasis* were dancers in sacred (e.g. Indra’s) courts. They performed dances in temple settings to please the gods, emulating *apsaras* as beautiful and erotic embodiments of pleasure.

However, in time, women designated as *devadasi* and *apsara* came to be depicted as wicked and degraded. For instance, *Brahma Vaivarta Purana Prakriti Khanda*¹² (1.149) stipulates, “devadasis are wicked women of the earth and the *apsaras* are whores of the heaven who are created out of *tamas*¹³ part of nature and they are designated degraded women.” *Brahma Vaivarta Purana Krishna Janma Khanda* 32.55), to give another example,¹⁴ says, “some of the ladies become whores and earn their living by selling away their body. I am an *apsarā* of the heaven and am used by the gods in the heaven and am quite respectable.” This text is ambiguous but does draw a distinction between earthly and divine sexual service. It could also legitimate males’ use of sex (including prostitution) in terms of it constituting something (even or also) the gods do.

As is the case in some other religious traditions, too, having a text to which authority is ascribed can pose harm when such a text is read out of context, or interpreted, or manipulated by persons who assert authority regarding the text’s meaning and application. These texts may or may not pertain to *Devadasi* practice. It is clear however that they could be used to demand, force, and sanctify women’s and even girl children’s sexual abuse. It is not knowable if such was ever the intention but literalistic use of such texts, in particular the possible scope for sanctioning the abuse of a young girl-child (aged just eight) is to be firmly rejected, not least because it flies in the face of important modern notions of human rights and dignity and of modern knowledge and understanding about the harm of sexual exploitation, such as from clinical psychology.

Devadasi and the law

Devadasi practice is now outlawed in India; but it continues illegally, usually driven by destitute poverty. Famously, India is the world’s most populous democracy. Alongside free elections, India has strong laws against the kinds of violence central to this chapter – namely, discrimination on the grounds of

caste, religion, or sex,¹⁵ the institution of Devadasi,¹⁶ and rape. Indeed, the maximum sentence for the rape of a girl under the age of 16 is life imprisonment, and for the rape of a girl under the age of 12, it is the death penalty.¹⁷ But the presence of such laws, proscriptions and deterrents has not eliminated gender-based, sexual, and spiritual abuse – not in India, or elsewhere. The Devadasi system persists, and girls and women continue to be abused as part of it. Given the religious underpinning of the Devadasi institution and given how strong the attachments to and binds of religion can be, the tenacity of the system, in spite of long-standing activism and laws to abolish it, can possibly be accounted for in part due its religious roots and foundations.

The denigration of Devadasi

The rise and fall in the status of Devadasi can be seen to run parallel with the rise and fall of Hindu temples (see [Altekar, 1956](#)). When the northern Indian kingdoms fell to Islamic invaders, many Hindu temples were destroyed and with them their sacred practices. But it was British rule of the nineteenth century which had the most far-reaching impact for the institution, and it was from the 1850s that Hindu temples were left penniless and Devadasi, in consequence, found themselves without their traditional structures of support, patronage, and prestige ([Lee, 2011](#)).

British colonial rule called into question the ritual and economic connections between temples and the rulers who sustained both them and the Devadasi system ([Sreenivas, 2011](#): 67). Devadasis came both to be exoticised, and to be regarded with suspicion, as colonial officials vacillated between characterising them as wives of a deity, or as prostitutes. Gradually, the religious aspects of their role became more and more nebulous. Their prestige, too, evaporated and, without their training in the arts and the support of patron kings, they became dependent on sex for survival – in effect, prostitutes (see [Orchard, 2007b](#)).

The majority of Devadasi families are extremely poor and often illiterate, which submits Devadasis to economic forms of bondage and deprives them of access to legal and other forms of protection ([Bej, 2018](#)). All of poverty, patriarchy, caste hierarchy, and religious superstition contribute intersectionally to Devadasi subjugation (cf. [Bharathi Harishankar and Priyamvadha, 2016](#): 2).

Poverty drives poor families to dedicate their young girls as Devadasis, with religion both sanctioning and sanctifying their prostitution ([Nag, 2001](#); [Bharathi Harishankar and Priyamvadha, 2016](#); [Deepa and Suvama, 2016](#)). Ostensibly, “dedication” goes some way towards resisting the social stigma attached to prostitution but there is little distinction between the sex trade of the temple or the brothel context ([Black, 2007](#): 7). Both, moreover, save impoverished parents the cost of a dowry for a girl’s marriage, which can be prohibitive ([Chawla, 2002](#)).¹⁸

Caste, gender, and the Devadasi

The Devadasi system has devolved into institutionalised, if illegal, sexual exploitation targeting girls and women from the poorest segments of Indian society. Almost all Devadasis are Dalits, with the majority belonging to the Madiga, Valmiki, Mahar, and Matang castes, which are among the most underprivileged castes of India (Desai, 2007). Looking more closely at who “deflowers”¹⁹ a Devadasi girl after dedication, in temple precincts it tends to be the priest, or Brahmin, and elsewhere, too, a man from a higher caste. Following this, she is often required to have sex with, or, more accurately, to be raped by – other men (Torri, 2009: 40). Devadasis, therefore, are subjugated to and abused by structures of gendered hierarchy.

Dalit status determines that Devadasi have virtually no autonomy, including over their own bodies, which facilitates their sexual exploitation (Sampark, 2015). B. Deepa and S. D. Suvarna cite a Marathi proverb, which captures this: “[The Devadasi is] servant of God but the wife of [the] whole town” (2016: 63). By using Dalit Devadasi women as prostitutes, men of higher caste affirm and reinforce their claim to social and economic superiority over lower castes. The Devadasi system, indeed, is a particularly severe and gendered, caste-based form of forced labour, targeting girls and women, compromising their safety and health, and putting them at high risk of routine and persistent sexual exploitation (Arun, 2011; Sampark, 2015). The one time when Devadasis are celebrated and revered for semi-holy status is during certain celebrations, notably the five-day festival of Jatara. Torri, citing an interview with a Devadasi, reports that aside from these occasions, they are ridiculed, used, and abused, and made fun of (2009: 41).

Sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls has a firm and persistent presence in India. Reported incidence is not declining, even since the particularly horrific case of the gang rape of Jyoti Singh, known as the Nirbhaya case (2012), which caused widespread mourning and outrage across India and well beyond.²⁰ Arguably, sexual violence against women and girls is endemic and normalised in much of India, and the claim has been made that in rural areas in particular rape of women is a common weapon and a way for men to enact masculinity (e.g. see Torri, 2009: 35). As elsewhere, rape in India, too, is about power and intimidation. It asserts gender and caste dominance, yes, but religion is not absent either. Given how deeply enmeshed matters of religion are in much of everyday life and everyday politics in India,²¹ this should not surprise. Notorious cases, such as that of the conviction of six Hindu men for the rape and murder of an eight-year-old Muslim child, a crime apparently aimed at inter-religious intimidation (see Schultz, 2019), or the widespread use of rape and public stripping in the inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts in Manipur (Saikia, 2023) make shockingly clear the co-presence of religious and sexually violent dimensions in India. The example of Devadasis is yet another instance of a much bigger pattern of the entanglements of power (including religious power) and sexual violence.

The challenges: sexual offences and diseases

Studies focused on the socio-economic profile of Devadasis reveal that overwhelmingly they belong to the poorest castes in Indian society, have exceedingly low social status, and lack education. Dedicated by their families under the auspices of religious devotion, usually to the Goddess Yellamma, the majority of whose devotees are impoverished, they enter prostitution when they are most often between 13 and 15 years old. Unable to marry any man, and poorly equipped for any other work, they eke out a difficult and dangerous existence with what they receive for having sex with men. With these earnings they support themselves and sometimes their families, too (Orchard, 2007a: 2379). They are entirely vulnerable to the men who use and abuse them (Kumar, 2008). Alongside the likelihood of suffering physical violence, Devadasis are also at a high risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (Ramanaik et al., 2014), and often conceive and give birth before they are fully mature, with no access to birth control (Chidambaranathan et al., 2009), which also exacerbates health problems and compromises life expectancy. There is no question that the system destroys and/or mars Devadasi lives, quality of life, prospects, and potential. While Hindu religion is not the sole driver of this harm, the Devadasi system is infused with spiritual abuse, because Hindu religion is part of its origins, legitimization, justification, and persistence (Deane, 2022). This is underpinned by patriarchy, poverty, and ineffectual laws.

Devadasi: unfading system

No matter the religious justification of the Devadasi system, at its heart is the sexual exploitation of impoverished girls and women by men. The men who use Devadasis for sex possess agency, autonomy and control; the Devadasis themselves do not. Especially given the young age of typical Devadasi dedication, their sexual use, unequivocally, is rape.

Alongside sexual exploitation there is also economic exploitation. Devadasis are vulnerable above all because they are poor with no options or access to the existing laws that could protect them. A number of modern commentators make the criminal nature of this explicit in their terminology; hence, Maggie Black (2007) refers to the Devadasi system as “ritual slavery” and Hyun Jin Lee as “human trafficking” (cf. Hartmann, 2019).

Religion exacerbates vulnerability further with its veneer of a marriage. Hence, by virtue of being married to a deity, Devadasis are permanently exempt from the stigma of widowhood. However, they are also barred from any of the protections of conventional marriage and prey to men intent on sexually abusing them. Moreover, even a man who already has a wife can sexually use a Devadasi without incurring ritual pollution. It strikes us as transparent *who* stands to gain and *who* stands to be exploited from this religiously sanctioned system.²²

In conclusion, in spite of indications that the historical origins of the Devadasi system may have offered some means of education and prestige to women, in its current form, it reflects systemic gender-based violence powered by a toxic confluence of religious, patriarchal, and socio-economic forces. Spiritual abuse, consequently, forms part of the abuse of the Devadasi system.

Notes

- 1 “Hinduism” refers to highly diverse religious, philosophical, and cultural beliefs and practices of the subcontinent of India. Hinduism is widely held to have the most ancient continuous roots of any of the world religions and has (after Christianity and Islam) the third highest number of adherents.
- 2 As with the terms “victim” and “survivor,” there is considerable dispute around terminology. (We will use “survivor-victim” in acknowledgement of the shortcomings of each individual term on its own.) While many within the sex industry prefer the designation “sex worker” to “prostitute” or “prostituted person,” we are opting for the term “prostitute,” because “sex worker” reflects a level of empowerment and autonomy that modern-day Devadasis simply do not have. Deepa and Savarna qualify the Devadasi system as constituting “ritualised prostitution” (2016: 63). [Parker \(2021\)](#) uses “prostitute” of Devadasis but only in inverted commas. We are aware both of the widespread use of “prostitute” in the literature (see the bibliography), as well as of the way “prostitute” has been applied to denigrate and scorn women in particular. (There is another designation, namely “male prostitute,” but the very addition of “male” makes clear that the word used on its own is understood to apply to females.) We condemn discrimination in all its forms and manifestations and are, therefore, against the dehumanisation of sex workers and prostitutes. We do not use the word with such intent, as we hope will be clear in this chapter.
- 3 [Parker \(2021\)](#) uses Dalit theology to illuminate the plight of Devadasis. Contemporary Devadasis are almost by definition also Dalits. Dalit (a name from a Sanskrit word meaning “broken” or “scattered”) is someone who in the religious caste strata is the lowest of all, below the four varnas (or castes) first identified in the sacred Vedas. These varnas are the Brahmin (priestly peoples), Kshatriya (rulers and warriors), Vaishya (merchants and artisans), and Shudra (labourers). This strong association between Devadasis and Dalits makes explicit their shared denigration. On how caste determines notions of “purity” and “pollution,” including patterns of women’s segregation and mobility, see [Dasgupta \(2000\)](#); cf. [Bidner and Eswaran \(2012\)](#).
- 4 For some recent studies on the collusion of religion and gender-based violence in a wide range of contexts, see [Le Roux \(2014\)](#), [Le Roux et al \(2016\)](#), [Eisenbruch \(2018\)](#), and [Pertek \(2020\)](#).
- 5 This reflects an interesting concern to protect religion or faith and designate any perpetration of harm using religion to some other aspect, in this case (mis?)interpretation.
- 6 We are using the translation of [Deshpande \(1988\)](#).
- 7 *Padma* literally means “lotus flower.” *Padma Purana* discusses the origin of earth and the world as achieved by Brahma, the Creator. It is one of the 18 major Puranas, a genre of texts in Hindu literature that treats ancient religion, philosophy, history, sociology, politics, and other subjects.
- 8 We are using the translation of [Joshi \(2023\)](#). *Matsya Purana* narrates the story of Matsya, the first of the ten avatars of Hindu god Vishnu.
- 9 Our own translation unless otherwise stated.
- 10 *Devi Bhagavata Purana* is one of the most important works in Shaktism, a branch of Hinduism focussing on the veneration of the divine feminine.

- 11 We are using the translation of [Vijayanand \(2011\)](#).
- 12 *Brahma Vaivarta Purana Prakriti* is a voluminous Sanskrit text and a major Purana (Maha-purana) of Hinduism. It is an important Vaishnava text. This Purana centres around the Hindu deities Radha and Krishna.
- 13 *Tamas* is a Sanskrit word meaning “darkness.” According to yogic philosophy, *ta-mas* is also the name of one of the three *gunas*, meaning “quality” and referring to the basic qualities of nature. The other two *gunas* are *rajas*, meaning “passion,” and *sattva*, meaning “purity.”
- 14 We are using the translation of [Nagar \(2003\)](#).
- 15 Article 15 of India’s Constitution prohibits discrimination on the grounds of all of religion, race, caste, gender, and place of birth.
- 16 The institution of Devadasi was formally abolished by the Madras Devadasi Act of 1947. [Hartmann \(2019\)](#) dates the abolition even earlier, to 1924.
- 17 This law is enshrined in Section 376 of the India Code (last updated in [2018](#)).
- 18 “Dowry” refers to the goods or money that a bride’s family gives to the groom and his family as a condition of marriage. The dowry system has ancient roots in India and Hinduism. There are laws to regulate abusive dowry practices (e.g. the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961), just as there are laws to prohibit discrimination on the basis of caste, yet both persist.
- 19 Again, the word is problematic. It refers to (almost invariably) a girl or woman being sexually penetrated for the first time, i.e. “losing her virginity.” Both the notions of “losing” or having one’s “flower taken” have overtones of the end of something desirable, or of being despoiled. This contributes to the fetishisation of female virginity. Moreover, in the case of Devadasis, given the young age of girls, such “deflowering” in many jurisdictions constitutes rape, or statutory rape. There is (particularly given the context of destitute poverty) little likelihood of (being able to give) consent. Unfortunately, the vocabulary available does not capture such layers of meaning.
- 20 Reports of violence against women and girls in India continue to rise across the board and include high rates of domestic violence, rape, and gang rape, and selling girls into prostitution/the sex industry. This violence has not fallen since the horrific Nirbhaya (meaning “fearless,” on account of Singh’s efforts to resist her assailants) case ([The Economic Times, 2023](#)). The most recent Amnesty International report on the world’s worst places to be a woman, ranks India at number 5. The report assesses countries according to indexes of rape and violence, lack of health services, poverty, and human trafficking. India’s high rank is due to very high rates of domestic violence, female infanticide, acid attacks, economic discrimination, and sex slavery, all of which disproportionately target and harm women and girls ([Amnesty International, 2023](#)).
- 21 India’s current political ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is deeply infused with Hindu nationalist ideology. Politics and religion are strongly intertwined in India.
- 22 It is to be noted, however, that a simple equation where only men benefit while women only suffer is not completely accurate. It is the case that women, too, have been complicit in the Devadasi system – both as family members who dedicate their daughters and as overseers or brothel keepers for younger Devadasis. The former might be explained by economic need and the latter by internalised victimisation, but women cannot be entirely exonerated.

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3 Christianity

Violence and Abuse in Christian Contexts: The Example of Domestic Abuse

Helen Paynter

I have come that [my sheep] may have life, and have it to the full.

(John 10:10)

It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.

(Luke 17:1–2)

It is the most evil of ironies that adherents of the religion which was inspired by, and is centred around, the man who spoke these words have been complicit in abuse in a multitude of contexts. Yet, tragically, that is the case. In this chapter, I will attempt to give an indicative account of the breadth and depth of such abuses, before considering one particular form, domestic abuse (DA), in more detail.¹

Church-based abuse: four representative examples

For many readers and for me, newsfeeds in recent years have been befouled with scandal after scandal involving abuse by church leaders and systems of power and control within churches and parachurch organisations. Unsurprisingly, the Church has become thoroughly tainted in many people's minds with these high-profile and disgraceful incidents.

Although some of these scandals are perpetrated by individuals acting covertly rather than a group acting in collaboration, a recurrent pattern is that these individuals' actions are facilitated by wider structural problems: incompetence, indifference, self-interest, or cultures of toxicity. A few examples will be given here.

Child sexual abuse scandals of the Roman Catholic Church have been well-documented in recent decades. While isolated reports of molestation of children by priests were made as early as the 1950s, the issue began to emerge as an international, structural problem in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2004 the John Jay College of Criminal Justice reported that credible allegations of abuse had been made against 4,392 Catholic priests in the USA between 1950 and 2002 – a figure estimated to represent around 4.3% of active clergy (2004: 6–7). The majority of complainants were male, and 47% were aged twelve or under when

the abuse began (2004: 70). A wide range of abuses were reported. The acts most frequently reported were: touching over the victim's clothing (52.6%), touching under the victim's clothes (44.9%), cleric performing oral sex (26%), victim disrobed (25.7%), and penile penetration or attempted penile penetration (22.4%) (2004: 9). Diocesan responses to allegations varied but there are some troubling patterns. In the group of allegations that the report terms "substantiated," the priest was reprimanded and returned to duty in 9.2% of cases, and in a further 2.6%, no action at all was taken (2004: 97).

In 2018, in acknowledgement of the Church's systematic failure to act in these matters, Pope Francis wrote a circular letter calling for the Church to "acknowledge and condemn, with sorrow and shame, the atrocities perpetrated," to undergo a "personal and communal conversion," and to reject clericalism, a term he does not define but which appears to mean the restriction of power to small clerical elites, to the exclusion of the majority of the Church:

Clericalism, whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today. To say 'no' to abuse is to say an emphatic 'no' to all forms of clericalism.

(2018)

Of course, such systemic abuse is not confined to the Catholic Church. The largest Protestant denomination in the USA, the Southern Baptist Convention, has recently been reckoning with its own scandals, also marked by abusing clergy (and others) being protected by church institutions. As the detailed independent report ultimately revealed:

For almost two decades, survivors of abuse and other concerned Southern Baptists have been contacting the Southern Baptist Convention ('SBC') Executive Committee ('EC') to report child molesters and other abusers who were in the pulpit or employed as church staff. They made phone calls, mailed letters, sent emails, appeared at SBC and EC meetings, held rallies, and contacted the press...only to be met, time and time again, with resistance, stonewalling, and even outright hostility from some within the EC.

(Guidepost Solutions, 2022: 3)

The driving force behind the EC's slowness to act appears to have been fear of legal liability. As a consequence, complainants were ignored, disbelieved, or even smeared. For instance, Jennifer Lyell, who wrote an account of her sexual abuse for the EC's press agency Baptist Press (BP), found her report modified to cast blame upon her:

Rather than publishing Ms. Lyell's corroborated account as BP staff had originally drafted it, the account was changed to read as if Ms. Lyell was consensually involved with her alleged abuser. The article as published

reported that Ms. Lyell alleged that she had a ‘morally inappropriate relationship’ with her former seminary professor, making it appear that she engaged in a consensual sexual relationship with him.

(Guidepost Solutions, 2022: 6)

Using the excuse of church autonomy (a key Baptist principle), the EC repeatedly claimed that it was powerless to intervene (Guidepost Solutions, 2022: 29–32). Repeating the pattern seen in the Roman Catholic Church, abusive pastors were quietly dismissed or permitted to relocate (Guidepost Solutions, 2022: 5, 70, 163–64), without the allegations being passed on to police (Guidepost Solutions, 2022: 179, 202, 257–58).

Facilitating the physical, psychological and sexual abuses that we have been considering, is spiritual abuse, which may be defined thus:

Spiritual abuse is coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context... This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a ‘divine’ position, and isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context.

(Oakley and Kinmond, 2013: 20–21)

Key to many forms of spiritual abuse is the employment of Scripture for its “horizontal” power. As opposed to the “vertical” power which a sacred text may contain by dint of its connection with the Transcendent, “horizontal” power refers to the authority that any book considered to have divine authority exercises over the faithful; vesting power to those who interpret it to them (Oakley and Humphreys, 2019: 29).

Spiritual abuse is frequently part of the mesh which functions within church cultures to entrap victims of abuse. The authority accorded to pastors or so-called apostles, along with the narrative of “touch not the Lord’s anointed,”² and this horizontal power of Scripture, can combine to render them unaccountable. I will consider the dynamics of spiritual abuse in more detail below.

Spiritually abusive systems can become effective cults, where extraordinary demands are placed upon believers. Here we move beyond the cumulative actions of depraved individuals, to the directly abusive structures of whole organisations or groups within them. Valerie Hobbs describes the *modus operandi* of Sam Fife,³ a Dominionist leader who founded a cult that controlled her own parents in her early childhood:

Any disobedience, any sign of so-called worldliness Fife attributed to demon possession, which he and his carefully selected posse would expel through prolonged ritual exorcisms, often involving humiliating violence

with a paddle or a whip... Some children horrifically abused in these violent episodes report that their parents not only knew about the harm they suffered, but some also stood by impassively as Fife's disciples battered their own flesh and blood.

(Hobbs, 2023: 124–125)

Of course, church-related abuse extends far beyond Western Europe and North America. As in Western settings, in other parts of the world, too, religious themes may be brought to bear upon abusive practices active beyond the church in ways which intensify them. Hence, Elisabet le Roux describes how in parts of Africa, too, Scripture is drawn in to endorse and sustain practices harmful to women:

Religious ideas are used to justify harmful practices that many understand as cultural practices. For example, Biblical evidence that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was married as a child is used as a religious justification for child marriage... the Biblical emphasis on purity and chastity until marriage is used to justify female genital mutilation and cutting... and Biblical calls to be a 'good wife' is [*sic*] used to justify husbands' complaints to their pastors if a wife does not submit to labia elongation.

(2023: 36)⁴

Domestic abuse: definitions

With these few indicative examples given, I will now focus more closely on one particular form of abuse in Christian cultures: male-on-female DA. At the outset, let me note that DA is by no means exclusively enacted by men upon their female partners. It is also perpetrated in same-sex relationships, and by women against men. Here, however, I will focus on male-on-female abuse since it is most widespread, and the most likely to result in violent injury or death.

A note about terminology: the term "domestic abuse" is preferable to the slightly narrower term "domestic violence" (DV) as it encompasses mental torture, coercion, threats and gaslighting, in addition to the physical and sexual violence which many victims experience (cf. Collins, 2019: 2). In some contexts, this same phenomenon is referred to as "intimate partner violence" (IPV), or "family and domestic violence" (FDV). While there may be some definitional distinctions, my broad evaluation of this violence will transcend the differences between these types of crime.

A second terminological note relates to the language of "victim" or "survivor." I am mindful that some survivors dislike the language of victimhood. However, I am also mindful that not everyone who experiences DA survives it. For these reasons, I will use both terms on different occasions, with awareness of their drawbacks.

Statistics and survivor stories

Studies of the prevalence of DA within Christian populations are scant. Those accessible to me are summarised in [Table 3.1](#) below.

Table 3.1 Studies of the prevalence of DA within Christian populations.

<i>Sponsoring organisation or researchers</i>	<i>Population studied</i>	<i>Methodology and sample size</i>	<i>Prevalence of abuse</i>
Methodist Women's Network and the Family and Personal Relationships Committee (Radford and Cappel, 2002) Wang et al. (2009)	UK, 2002, Methodist	Postal questionnaires to ministers and lay-workers, <i>n</i> = 557	1 in 4 female respondents had experienced abuse (including emotional)
Evangelical Alliance (2012)	Memphis, USA, 2009, all denominations	Random telephone interviews, <i>n</i> = 1,476 "religious" Christian women	50.7% had experienced some form of DA in lifetime
Restored with Christianity Magazine (Van der Hart, 2013)	UK, 2012, evangelicals	Survey sent to existing panel of subjects, <i>n</i> = 1,219	10% of respondents had experienced physical abuse in their current marriage
Aune and Barnes (2018) with Restored Christian Alliance	UK, 2013, multi-denominational	Survey circulated through domestic abuse charity networks, <i>n</i> = 443	19% had experienced marital/IP rape with current partner 16% had experienced domestic violence (physical) with current partner
National Anglican Family Violence Project (Powell and Pepper 2021) Selon (2022)	UK (Cumbria), 2018, cross-denominational	Survey distributed via local churches, <i>n</i> = 438 churchgoers	1 in 4 had experienced abuse, including emotional, in their lifetime
	Australia, 2021, Anglican	Random mailing to 2,000 adults, <i>n</i> = 1,382	44% had experienced IPV in lifetime
	France, 2021, evangelical	Semistructured questionnaire circulated within evangelical networks. <i>n</i> = 180	36% lifetime prevalence, including psychological abuse
Kanyeredzi and Wilson (2023)	UK, 2023, Black majority churches	Survey distributed among interested parties, <i>n</i> = 34	38% in lifetime

Sample sizes are relatively small, and there is almost always an element of selection bias.⁵ (If a survey is sent around, even randomly, the choice whether or not to participate is likely to be influenced by one's interest or stake in the subject of DA.) Further, in some secular states, such as France, laws prohibiting researchers from asking a person's religion make the extraction of relevant data more difficult.⁶ Yet overall, it appears that abuse rates are at least as high in church membership as in the wider population (cf. [Westenberg, 2017: 71](#); [Radford and Cappel, 2002](#)).

At least as valuable as statistics (and I would say, even more so) is the testimony of survivors and witnesses, and here there is a larger pool from multiple locations to draw upon.

Australia: My ex really set himself up as God in my world. He created God for me in his own image, really. So that God was basically, and I mean obviously not literally, but it was basically a 50-50 whether God would, you know, backhand me or reach out in love (survivor testimony cited in [Powell and Pepper, 2021: 57](#)).

UK: After pouring out my heart (it took a long time to summon the courage) the vicar blamed me for the abuse (survivor testimony cited in [Aune and Barnes, 2018: 51](#)).

Australia: He used to get triggered by small things ... For example, if I didn't cook dinner, he used to hit me. If I didn't clean the house, he used to hit me. And I never understood why that happened. In my family, that never used to happen ... Because those days, I had to call in sick all the time because I would be bruised all over (survivor testimony cited in [Powell and Pepper, 2021: 52](#)).

USA: His thing was God created man first and man ruled the household ... It was always he wore the pants (survivor testimony cited in [Knickmeyer, Levitt and Horne, 2010: 103](#)).

USA: Before we got to the church, he would have slapped the fool out of me, cursed me, literally and figuratively hit me on the head with the Bible (survivor testimonies cited in [Knickmeyer, Levitt and Horne, 2010: 103](#)).

USA: Although he backed down by not making our getting married contingent on my belief in a six-day creation, he did insist (and I agreed) that I would read [a book of his choice]... He assured me that once I read the book, I was free to come to my own conclusions. I carried up my end of the bargain and read the book, but I found it unconvincing. Throughout our marriage, I simply wanted the matter dropped. He refused. Time and again, he tried to compel me, sometimes violently, to accept his "science" of six days ([Tucker, 2016: 37](#)).

Botswana: It has been revealed that a male military boss, in the rank of Major, a pastor, who was also a medical doctor, a father, and a husband, killed his female junior colleague who was a single, unmarried woman. It is alleged that the two were in an intimate relationship which turned fatal, apparently due to the lady's unfaithfulness... Botswana men, whether Christian or not, traditionally believe that they are entitled to women's bodies.⁷

USA: She is in her 40s, a strong capable woman, albeit a wife who has been beaten and battered and pummelled and terrorised on many occasions by her husband. So one morning, she is packing her bags to make a car trip to speak at long-scheduled meetings. The husband enters the bedroom, his mood dark and foreboding. And then the threat. There is no physical violence this time, but the demand for sex – sex or stay home. No alternative. She would not be leaving the bedroom or the house until she had submitted to sex. He, as he had told their minister, and had reminded her on many occasions, was the “head of the home from the bedroom to the kitchen” (Tucker, 2016: 137).⁸

Ghana: I must respect him, be humble, trust him, accept what he wants. It doesn’t make you less of a human to be submissive, but it does make some men feel very important, and then they control you and make all the decisions, so that sometimes we feel he is a slave master. Then they say: “I am the head and you were just made from my rib so you are nothing”, and they hit because they want sex or money because they paid bride-wealth (survivor testimony cited in Koepping, 2021: 117).

USA: I was a faithful churchgoer ... But where was God when one month after our wedding my husband first blackened my eyes? ... My course of action seemed clear. God’s will, as the Bible instructed, was that I stay with my husband, forgiving him when he hurt me, countering his evil behaviour with my love, cooperating with God’s plan of salvation for him (survivor testimony cited in Koepping, 2021: 118).

Theological and ecclesial complications

[Some religious survivors] are consumed by the sacred silence, fighting demons both within and without. They are ultimately prevented from leaving behind the fear or reality of abuse.

(Nason-Clark, 2009: 380)

Religious women are more vulnerable after abuse takes place. In short, they are less likely to leave, are more likely to believe that the abuser can and will change his violent ways, frequently voice reservations about seeking respite in a community-based transition house or shelter, and commonly express guilt – believing they have failed their families and even God in not being successful in making their marriages work.

(Nason-Clark, 2008: 163)

As mentioned, DA is found approximately as frequently in self-identifying Christian homes as in the general population. In these faith settings, however, there is an added complexity. In addition to the usual entrapment devices (such as abuser narcissism, victim shame, financial precarity, the presence of children), in the “Christian” home, theological tropes and biblical verses are

frequently drawn into the abuser's mesh. I cannot bring myself to call these truly Christian (see [Paynter, 2020](#): 11 and *passim*).

Methodological background

Lori Heise uses a helpful “ecological approach” to violence against women, which conceptualises it with concentric rings of influencing factors. These include the abuser's personal history; the microsystem in which abusers operate (the immediate context for the abuse); their exosystem (institutional and social structures); and finally, the macrosystem of the prevailing culture ([Heise, 1998](#): 263–264). Some examples are given below.

Individual factors

Witnessing or experiencing abuse as a child
Absent father in childhood

Microsystem

Pattern of male dominance and authoritarian decision-making in the home
Male economic control
Verbal conflict in family
Excessive alcohol consumption

Exosystem

Low income/unemployment
Isolation of the female partner
Perpetrator having delinquent peer associations

Macrosystem

Dominant, tough cultural definitions of masculinity
Rigid gender roles
Male ownership or entitlement towards women
Approval of physical disciplining of women
Cultural ethos that employs violence to settle masculine disputes
(see [Heise, 1998](#): 267–282 for much more detail)

It may immediately be apparent that theological as well as cultural factors are likely to be at work at every level, with much scope for interaction between the levels.

It has long been anecdotally apparent⁹ that certain theological themes tend to be weaponised in abusive homes, and that churches that teach these themes carelessly can become complicit in abuse. Recently, however, these impressions have been given a firmer basis with the emerging results of a study by Lisa Oakley and Clea Wright, which explicitly sets out to identify and explore such theological themes and their impact.¹⁰

In a survey made available to church members and adherents, they investigate the intersection of abuse and church teaching, along with patterns of

disclosure. From 166 responses to their question,¹¹ themes prominently identified that are used in a problematic way are:

- Submission of wives
- Male headship
- Teaching on divorce and marriage
- Patriarchal structures and complementarian theology
- Forgiveness
- Scripture not taught in context

At a lower frequency, the list also includes:

- Loving others and unity
- Roles of women
- Suffering
- Teaching on sex

It seems likely that churches' enabling of abuse with such teaching is usually unintentional, but as indicated above, it may be exacerbated by the decontextualisation of Bible verses, and by biblical literalism.¹² Further, perpetrators may deliberately weaponise the Bible to promote their abusive activity. From 55 responses obtained, Oakley and Wright identify that themes used by perpetrators are (in descending order) "using scripture to justify abuse," "submission of wives," "divorce," and "forgiveness."

Let me consider some key themes in more detail.

Teaching on suffering and sin

Uh, I forgive him, because that's my religion. We forgive the husbands. We take it, you know, and you give chances to people.

(Survivor testimony cited in [Knickmeyer, Levitt and Horne, 2010](#): 102)

As is widely known, themes of sin and forgiveness are foundational to the Christian faith. Sadly, they may be taught carelessly by churches, or employed cynically by perpetrators, to condition women to accept their abuse.

Widely reported is the teaching that because God has forgiven them, the victim must also forgive. However, this is often asserted without nuancing the meaning of forgiveness, implying – or explicitly stating – that it permits the abuser all spousal privileges, moving forward.

Across the world, women were angry, weary or depressed by being expected... to forgive an abuser whose only intention, far from leading a new life, is to maintain power over her.

([Koepping, 2021](#): 128)

How “sin” is taught can affect the way a couple operates. When sin is primarily conceptualised as disobedience to God, it is a short step to viewing spousal disobedience as sinful, and – based on a conflation of divine authority with husbandly authority – liable to punishment. However, when sin is primarily viewed as the rupture of a relationship, spousal violence is more likely to be viewed as sinful (see [Davis, 2018](#): 152–155).

A further strand in the mesh is how suffering is viewed. Christ’s suffering on the cross might be considered exemplary: “Christ suffered and died on the cross... Can’t you bear some suffering too?” (see [Nadar, 2005](#): 20). Because Christ’s suffering effected human salvation, human suffering is valorised as a holy vocation or virtue (e.g. [Shannon-Lewy and Dull, 2005](#): 650–651; [Winkelmann, 2012](#): 10).

Conversely, other churches will teach abused women that if they pray hard enough (and are sufficiently submissive – see below), then God will protect them from their abuser (see [Alsdurf and Alsdurf, 1988](#): 167; [Vengeyi, 2016](#): 266; [Koepping, 2021](#): 118).

Teaching on gender roles and marriage

God hates divorce, and therefore hates me if I get divorced.¹³

Although law from what Christians term the Old Testament permits divorce for adultery or neglect (cf. Exod 21:9–10; Deut 24:1), many Christian leaders erroneously teach that Jesus permits divorce *only* for adultery.¹⁴ Unfortunately, this ideal is often elevated at the expense of teaching about DA, with promotion of the sacramental nature of marriage ([Shannon-Lewy and Dull, 2005](#): 85). Consequently, victims of abuse commonly feel unable to seek divorce or even to leave the marital home.

This is often compounded by teaching – enthusiastically reinforced by abusers – about female submission and silence, and male headship and authority. These teachings, arguably mainly derived from a decontextualised reading of parts of the Pauline corpus, serve to disempower women, to justify harsh practice in the home, to create a culture of female subservience, and to groom women into tolerating male bullying and worse.¹⁵

Some evangelical churches teach “complementarian” theology: that men and women are of equal value to God but have distinct and complementary roles in church. The outworking of this theology ranges from women being excluded from only overall leadership of the church, to women being prohibited from speaking at all during the service and being forbidden to occupy any secular leadership positions, too.¹⁶ Many “soft” complementarians are eager to deny that their teaching promotes abuse. In Ephesians 5, for example, wifely submission is followed by an exhortation to husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church (Eph 5:25–33).

However, even this can be distorted, as Heidi Levitt and Kimberly Ware describe:

Although both parties are to make sacrifices, the husband's sacrifice only becomes relevant in rare life-or-death circumstances, whereas wives are expected to relinquish their decisional power on a daily basis.

(Levitt and Ware, 2007: 1180)

Indeed, some have argued that there is an inescapable link between complementarian theology and the logic of DA. Here is one example:

Patriarchy and complementarianism are both predicated on the belief that men should lead and women be submissive. The problem with this is that virtually all the scholarly studies on domestic abuse and violence agree that the patriarchal premise, men should lead, making all the important decisions, and women should be submissive, is the most consistent predictor of violence against women.¹⁷

(Giles, 2020: 37)

In parts of the evangelical church, this complementarian teaching has shifted from being a peripheral issue to one which is central, both practically and theologically. As one parishioner comments,

Our pastor must mention headship teaching almost every week and he preaches on Ephesians 5:22-24 two or three times a year.

(Cited in Giles, 2020: 57)

Such is the *Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* movement, which frequently results in a culture of hypermasculinisation and emphasised femininity, aligned according to biological sex (Deshotels et al., 2019: 733–735). Here are two extracts, from the pastor Mark Driscoll and the “True Woman Manifesto,” respectively, which capture these extreme gendered stereotypes:

In Revelation, Jesus is a pride fighter with a tattoo down His leg, a sword in His hand and the commitment to make someone bleed. That is a guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, diaper, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up.

(Driscoll, 2007)

All women, whether married or single, are to model femininity in their various relationships, by exhibiting a distinctive modesty, responsiveness, and gentleness of spirit... We will seek to glorify God by cultivating such virtues as purity, modesty, submission, meekness, and love.

(True Woman Manifesto)

Internalisation of such stereotypes may manifest in the self-infantilisation of women (Deshotels et al., 2019: 743; Hobbs, 2023: 61), the systematised physical chastisement of wives known as “Christian Domestic Discipline,” and in purity culture. Purity culture, with its emphasis on women as the exclusive guardians of sexual virtue for both sexes, in turn, may result in victim-blaming, as is captured in the following account of spiritual abuse:

When I was sexually assaulted by an older male church member, he told me what the [church teaching] had told me: ‘It was all your fault that I couldn’t control myself.’ When a woman is raped or otherwise assaulted, the first question is generally about her behaviour rather than that of her attacker. What was she wearing? Why’d she go to his apartment? What was she doing out at night alone? Why did she marry such a creep in the first place?

(Survivor testimony cited in Gillett, 1998: 107)

Intersections of theology and culture

As Beth Allison Barr (2021) has persuasively argued, such patriarchal teaching derives at least as much from culture as it does from Scripture. The blending of patriarchal theological argument with cultural assumptions and practice appears to be a widespread, even global, phenomenon.¹⁸

A Tearfund study conducted in 2014 in partnership with the Anglican Church examines attitudes towards faith and masculinities in the DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo). 346 people were interviewed through group surveys and focus-groups. It became clear that gender roles were tightly defined through an overlap of cultural pre-commitments *and* religious teachings. Some representative findings are shown below in Table 3.2 (Tearfund, 2014).

Table 3.2 Attitudes towards faith and masculinities by members of the Anglican Church in the DRC.

	Percentage of respondents agreeing (%)	
	Male	Female
“A woman should obey her husband.”	100	100
“To be a man you need to be tough.”	33	30
“A woman needs to tolerate violence in order to keep the family together.”	60	67
“There are times when a woman deserves to be beaten”	41	28

Sadly, colonial memories may exacerbate such problems. Hence, biblical scholar Joachim Kügler describes male attendees at a gender justice conference in Zimbabwe:

So many men... uttered the wish to get rid of the colonial heritage of Christianity, which destroyed pre-colonial gender order, especially by fighting against traditional polygamy. [This is seen to reflect] a foreign Western agenda, which causes gender troubles – understood as troubles among the genders – by inviting African women to challenge the traditional ideal of the submissive woman.

(Kügler, 2019: 8–9)

Church as hindrance

I knew the violence against me wasn't right, but the Bible was being used to prevent me from calling it out... I became the problem in the church's eyes.¹⁹

There was a culture of silence, a culture of submission. There was no context to resist or complain.²⁰

Too often churches are unprepared to deal with DA. Researching in the Australian context, Mandy Truong and colleagues identify seven barriers that hinder faith communities from addressing FDV adequately:

- A lack of awareness and skills
- Perception that the task is too hard
- Stigma and shame
- Pushback from men
- perceived conflict between statutory and theological priorities
- Migrant-specific challenges
- Insufficient funding (Truong et al., 2020: 2)

Unawareness is a common factor. In the study Kristin Aune and Rebecca Barnes conducted in Cumbria, they discovered that over 70% of churchgoers were aware of DA in the community, but only 37% believed that it was an issue in their own church (2018: 6). Over half of churches they researched rarely or never spoke about DA or heard it preached about (2018: 26). Consequently, in the Cumbria study, the majority of survivors sought help outside church rather than within it (2018: 48–49).

Writing in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, Ezra Chitando describes a similar silence in the church, for a complex set of reasons: the issue is off the radar, or it is muted because of stigma, or there is a perception that DA belongs to the domestic realm, or it is ignored to protect the sacred institution of the family (2019: 19).

Around the world clergy misconceptions and indifference appear to be major factors. For instance, James Alsdurf and Phyllis Alsdurf sent a two-page

survey to 5,700 pastors of Protestant churches in the USA and Canada, 99% of whom were male. Fewer than 10% of the surveys were returned. Many of the responses which *were* received placed an emphasis on the wife's responsibility for the abuse, for lack of submissiveness (1988: 166–167).

Pressure to conform serves as another silencing factor. For women experiencing abuse, the need to present as “model Christians” may promote silence and denial, while abusers who themselves present as exemplary make allegations against them appear implausible (Knickmeyer, Levitt and Horne, 2010: 99–102).

In their study, Oakley and Wright (2023) look at patterns of disclosure, noting that of those who make a disclosure within the Christian faith community, these are generally made to the church minister or equivalent (67%). Reasons given for failing to disclose are mainly because survivors anticipate that they will receive a negative response. Less common reasons are failure to identify the behaviour as abuse, or shame, with both acting as inhibiting factors.

Sadly, fears of a poor reception are often well-founded. A common clergy impulse is to try to “save the marriage,” and as most clergy tend to see divorce as failure, they can be slow to promote the termination even of a violent marriage. Self-interest is another reason that churches fail to respond well. As we saw in the sexual abuse scandals discussed above, fear of litigation or of besmirching the church's reputation may lead churches to attempt to hush a scandal. When the man that allegations are made against is also a leader in the church, this can further accentuate conflicts of interest.

107 unhelpful responses to disclosure are recorded in Oakley and Wright's study. These include:

- Being ignored, isolated and judged
- A lack of effective response and intervention
- Not being believed
- Being blamed
- Support for the perpetrator
- Christian rationale for abuse, for staying or for lack of intervention
- Lack of knowledge of DVA and/or safeguarding
- Told to stay with perpetrator
- Confidentiality being broken.

Theological and ecclesial positives

...you are in that space where you feel safe...with like-minded people I feel un-judged...I feel I can just... [exhales loudly] ...take a moment and breathe and just be recuperated you know... that's how I feel about church! There's very much a sense of you know...family, togetherness ...uhm... peace ... it doesn't matter what your day's been like, or your social economic or your racial, sexual ...it doesn't matter.

(Survivor testimony cited in Kanyeredzi and Wilson, 2023: 46)

At their best, churches can be places of support and nurture.²¹ Survivors of DA who are Christian frequently state how their faith sustains them, providing a source of comfort, strength, and awareness that they did not deserve the abuse. Indeed, some religious women are reluctant to seek help from secular agencies for fear that their beliefs will be misunderstood or misrepresented (cf. [Shannon-Lewy and Dull, 2005](#): 648).

Religious women who experience abuse need to have the religious aspects of their response taken seriously; they have “unique and specific needs” ([Nason-Clark, 2009](#): 383). The church is often well-placed to help in many ways, including practical ones.

While clergy may feel ill-equipped and disempowered, they are often very well-placed to offer constructive support. They have the power to bring the topic of DA into the general discourse, and they can influence the uses of resources such as volunteer time or physical space (see [Shannon-Lewy and Dull, 2005](#): 649).

Perpetrator programmes may be quite successful within faith community contexts. This is because pastors can “mandate” attendance; and because such contexts can provide a safe place for challenge and confession; while abusers can be held accountable using both religious and secular models. The religious community can help an abuser to unpick the privilege and expectations he has held and which have provided a basis for his abusive behaviour ([Nason-Clark, 2009](#): 384–385). Churches have the capacity to respond appropriately to allegations when they are made. More negatively, churches are in a position to disqualify ministers, and to exercise church discipline, even ex-communication. And, of course, clergy are ideally placed to provide good teaching and counselling, including effective pre-marital counselling ([Koeping, 2021](#): 88) and the correction of misguided theological notions, as in this example:

I’d had a conversation with our minister at one point and he said, ‘no I don’t think that’s what the Bible says at all, I don’t think God would oblige you to remain in that situation. There’s clearly a power issue in this marriage and there’s no place for that in a Christian marriage.’

(Survivor testimony cited in [Powell and Pepper, 2021](#): 59)

The significance of teaching in the church is supported by the work of W. Bradford Wilcox, who studied 2,785 married men in the USA. Based on spousal reports of physical violence, he compared the rates of violence conducted by “conservative” Protestant married men with “mainstream” Protestant married men, and with unaffiliated married men. There was no statistical difference between the groups in the gross figures. But when the groups were broken out by church *attendance* rather than *affiliation*, the differences achieved statistical significance. *Nominal* conservative Protestant husbands had a DV rate of 7.2%, which was significantly higher than all other groups

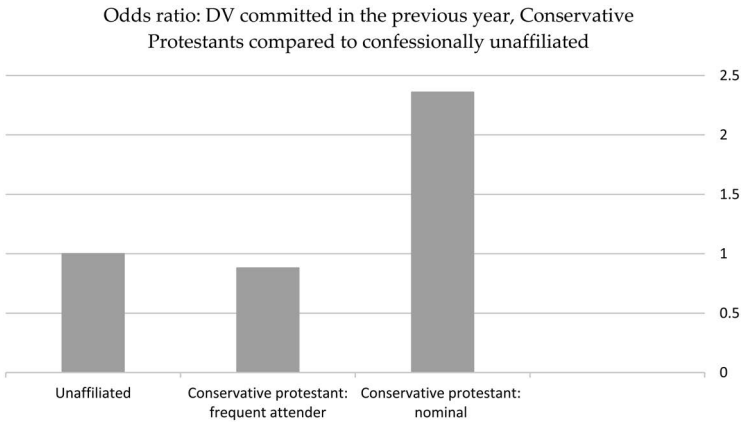


Figure 3.1 Rate of DV amongst Conservative Protestant members, both nominal and frequent Church attenders, and the unaffiliated.

(Figure 3.1). By contrast, *active* conservative Protestant husbands were the least likely to commit DV, with rates lower than all the other categories (Wilcox, 2004: 181–182).²²

One possible explanation is that nominal conservatives receive just enough of the patriarchal teaching to validate any latent tendency to domination and violence, whereas men who are attending church frequently are more likely to receive also teaching that embraces such biblical themes as husbands loving their wives as Christ loved the church (Eph 5:25–29).

[A]ctive conservative Protestant husbands benefit from the intense focus on marriage and family life found in many conservative Protestant congregations... it may also be that active conservative Protestant husbands wish to set clear moral boundaries against peers they see headed down the wrong path.

(Wilcox, 2004: 182–183)

From their major Australian study of abuse in the Anglican Church, Ruth Powell and Miriam Pepper identify a number of theological themes which abuse victims find helpful:

- Marriage is a covenant and it takes both parties to uphold it
- Both partners in a marriage are equal and neither should control the other
- God is merciful and would support the victim leaving
- God doesn't want vulnerable people to suffer
- Acknowledgement of IPV by churches helps victims have confidence to come forwards and makes the church more prepared to respond appropriately (Powell and Pepper, 2021: 58–59)

As I have discussed, some significant Christian themes such as forgiveness need to be taught with sensitivity towards their possible misinterpretations. This is well captured by a clergy respondent:

I think theologically not many people have put their time and energy into thinking about how some of the real basics of the Christian faith... that because we've been forgiven by God we have the resources to forgive others. Some of those things I don't think have kind of been passed through the domestic violence lens to say how do we teach that in a way that's sensitive to how that is heard and kind of misused by abusers?

(Cited in [Truong et al., 2022](#): 887)

Teaching, of course, extends beyond the local congregation. Denominational leaders and seminaries where ministers and priests are trained also have a valuable role to play in teaching good theology and trauma-sensitivity.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a necessarily brief and partial account of abuse in Christian settings, with particular focus upon DA and its complicating theological entailments. But neither theology nor the Church is inherently problematic. There are many Christians across the world working to mitigate DA, both theologically and in practical ways, and this will be the subject of a chapter in the companion volume to the present one.

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to the following people who generously collaborated with me in the preparation of this chapter: Mmapula Kebaneilwe, Lisa Oakley and Clea Wright, Sithembiso Zwane, Valerie Duval-Poujol, and Murielle Selon.
- 2 This phrase is a quotation from Psalm 105:15. I discuss this misappropriation further elsewhere ([Paynter, 2020](#): 90–92).
- 3 Having repeatedly proclaimed his own immortality, Fife died in a plane crash in 1979 (see “Protestant Sects,” 1979).
- 4 For a similar set of examples, including forced virginity testing within African Initiated Churches (AICs) in Zimbabwe, see [Vengeyi \(2016\)](#).
- 5 See, for example, the caution offered in [Aune and Barnes \(2018: 31\)](#).
- 6 I am grateful on this point to Valerie Duval-Poujol (personal correspondence, 2023).
- 7 I am grateful to Mmapula Kebaneilwe for sharing her unpublished account “Domestic Violence in Christian settings in Botswana: An anecdote” (personal correspondence, 2023).
- 8 Tucker is here reporting her own experience in the third person.
- 9 I refer to informal anecdotes and small qualitative surveys, including from my own research.
- 10 I am indebted to Lisa Oakley and Clea Wright for generously permitting me to view and reproduce some of their data prior to publication. Their findings can now be found in [Oakley and Wright \(2023\)](#).

- 11 The specific question on the survey is, “Are there any Christian teachings or values that you think may contribute to domestic abuse, even if unintentionally?”
- 12 For comparable examples of biblical literalism beyond the Western world, see [Ven-geyi \(2016: 257–268\)](#).
- 13 Survivor testimony from an interview transcript of my own research.
- 14 This perspective is persuasively challenged by [Instone-Brewer \(2002\)](#). For a further discussion of divorce in the Bible, particularly as it relates to Malachi 2:16 (often quoted as, “God hates divorce”), see [Paynter \(2020: 66–74\)](#).
- 15 For examples from diverse parts of the world, see [Knickmeyer, Levitt and Horne \(2010: 103\)](#), [Biri \(2016: 226\)](#), [Chitando \(2019\)](#), and [Koepping \(2021: 88, 114\)](#).
- 16 See, for example, complementarian John Piper’s teaching (e.g. [Piper 2015](#)).
- 17 Let me add that a study conducted in the Southern USA ($n = 1,476$), which compared conservative with liberal/moderate religious beliefs (and which included complementarian teaching), showed no statistical difference in IPV rates between the two groups ([Wang et al., 2009: 230](#)).
- 18 Sithembiso Zwane describes a couple he worked with in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The husband, a follower of African Traditional Religion, and his wife, a Christian, were involved in a conflict over polygamy, which had erupted into domestic violence. In his defence, the husband used his wife’s religion, claiming that the Bible commands wives to submit to their husbands (Eph 5:22) (Zwane, personal correspondence).
- 19 Survivor testimony from an interview transcript of my own research.
- 20 Survivor testimony from an interview transcript of my own research.
- 21 For positive accounts, see [Gillum, Sullivan and Bybee \(2006\)](#), [Nason-Clark \(2009: 380\)](#), and [Wang et al \(2009: 231\)](#).
- 22 The chart is constructed using data from [Wilcox \(2004: 254–255\)](#). This study, using late twentieth-century data, is borne out by the more recent study of [Wang et al. \(2009\)](#).

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4 Islam

Developments in the Field of Understanding Spiritual Abuse within Muslim Contexts

Rahmanara Chowdhury and Rabiha Hannan*

This chapter offers an overview of research to date in relation to spiritual abuse in Muslim contexts and with a particular focus on UK settings. Research in this area remains limited. Our focus is on three primary areas present within the literature: the faith institutional context, the domestic sphere, and exploration of misuse of sacred scripture. We do not however limit spiritual abuse to these areas and recognise that they deeply connect to the sacred inviolability of a person, and that therefore multiple more contexts potentially apply. Specific contexts, however, do bring with them distinctive implications and we draw attention to some of these. We end with tentatively offering a definition of spiritual abuse as the violation of a person's spiritual self, through the direct or indirect misuse or use of religious or spiritual position, trust, sacred text, or faith principle(s). Whilst its manifestations can present in all forms of abuse, its impact reaches a person's core being.

Introduction

Research to date relating to spiritual abuse within faith settings predominantly focuses on Christian traditions. The remaining chapters within this collection evidence abuse linked to other traditions; however, this remains scarce. Not labelling it as spiritual abuse, in their rapid literature review, Antonia [Simon et al. \(2012\)](#) outline abuse of children linked to faith or belief as more in line with witchcraft, spiritual possession, and ritual and satanic abuse (RSA). Whilst this may highlight aspects of some spiritual abuse, it demonstrates the need for a broader understanding across faith and other spiritual spectrums. Medical neglect is also known to fall within abuse related to faith or belief. Lisa [Oakley et al. \(2017\)](#) call upon the need for increased awareness amongst practitioners in order better to address the abuse of children within such contexts.

* Rahmanara Chowdhury, together with Farooq Mulla, features in the open-access podcast episode "Abuse in Religious Contexts: Working with Muslim Survivors of Abuse" (published on 9 November 2023). Both are interviewed here by broadcaster Rosie Dawson (Shiloh Podcast).

This chapter explores current knowledge pertaining to UK Muslim communities in relation to spiritual abuse. In the light of the purpose of this volume, we endeavour to present the current knowledge and understanding from existing research. Understanding of spiritual abuse within Muslim contexts, however, does remain limited. In contrast, activism in this area has witnessed considerable traction as will be explored in our complementing chapter in the companion volume.

Before we proceed with our exploration of academic developments in this area, it is important to elucidate some of the structural hierarchies within the Islamic Faith. Islam as a faith tradition extends to all demographic populations. There is, however, no singular hierarchy and no established leader within the tradition. The Prophet Muhammad¹ is upheld as the final Messenger of God and the ultimate role model for Muslims across all times. Since the prophetic era, Muslims recognise various denominations in the practice of the faith: predominantly, Sunni and Shia, with further sub-sects in each of these. It can be expected that, as with any organisation, groups inwardly organise themselves and set self-defining hierarchical structures, which may vary from one to another. Alongside this, whilst Islam is recognised as a formal and organised religion, Muslims would argue that it extends beyond this to what is more commonly understood as a spiritual way of being² (Eaton, 2012: 3–19). This is considered to extend into all aspects of life, rather than being restricted to specific acts of worship. These are both significant considerations within the topic of spiritual abuse and its subsequent manifestations.

This chapter explores first, the existing knowledge pertaining to spiritual abuse within Muslim faith institutions. Whilst there is a specific focus on UK contexts, there are some references made to international contexts. There is acknowledgement of spiritual abuse including both child and adult victims. Developments in the understanding of spiritual abuse within the realm of domestic settings is then explored. The chapter also briefly considers the use of scripture within spiritual abuse, from what is known to date. This is an area requiring further investigation. Before concluding, we considered it vital to mention some of what is known to date in relation to how victims and survivors have reclaimed their spiritual and/or religious identities. We end by offering a tentative definition of spiritual abuse in Muslim contexts.

“Victims” is the word used here in reference to Muslim individuals who have experienced spiritual abuse without opportunity for recompense. “Survivors” is used for those who self-identify as survivors. This is in line with precedents respecting the rights to self-determination of individuals who have experienced abuse (Chowdhury et al., 2021: 199). The term “faith” is used to denote the belief of Islam as a way of living and how that belief manifests in daily life. The term “religion” is adopted when discussing the more formal and theological aspects of the faith.

Spiritual abuse within faith institutions

There remains a paucity of research relating to abuse within Muslim faith institutions. One of the first applied works in this area known to us was carried out by the first author, Rahmanara Chowdhury, together with collaborators (Chowdhury et al., 2021) and explores the experiences of six adult survivors of childhood abuse by those holding positions of religious authority. This abuse included sexual, spiritual, and physical abuse. Two of the victims were individuals who as adults held their own positions of religious authority, leading to questions surrounding how many other victims there may be holding such positions and what their specific experiences are. Those with religious authority are often upheld by communities as role models and as the default point of support for religiously based advice on social and wellbeing issues (The Lantern Initiative et al., 2021). The religious dimension in the Muslim context extends to all aspects of life, as previously outlined. Within their findings, Chowdhury et al. (2021) note that abuse experienced within a religious context consequently holds significant and far-reaching negative repercussions for victims, extending to both short- and long-term negative consequences. This is particularly salient, given that victims within this study were children at the time of the abuse. This profound impact is in line with findings reported by Alexis Jay et al. (2021). Therefore, when considering spiritual abuse within faith institutions, default consideration must be given to minors and the heightened power imbalances they are likely to face. Aisha Jane Hutchinson et al. (2014) outline the communal responsibility of care for children within the Muslim tradition. As per established theology, they further outline the religion-defined rights of every child under Islam as right to life, sustenance, property, freedom of conscience, parentage, inheritance and maintenance, a proper upbringing, and to guardianship, both of person and property (Islam, 2015). Any form of abuse contradicts several of these basic rights.

Poor accountability and handling of abuse cases within Muslim faith institutions has been found to exist, often with internal collusion and silencing of victims and witnesses (Chowdhury et al., 2021). Whilst within the Church context there exists a hierarchical structure which holds potential for the recording and escalation of disclosures (Jay et al., 2021), within the Muslim context there exists no such central hierarchical structure for faith institutions. This is in part a reflection of the faith itself whereby all persons have individual accountability. It should be noted that even where such hierarchies exist, abuse can and does still occur and go unchallenged (Oakley and Humphreys, 2019). Scholars trained in theology are approached for advice, guidance and upheld as role models; however, within the theological basis of the Muslim faith itself, allegiance and obedience is primarily to God. This is depicted within the primary pillar of the Muslim faith: namely, belief in the Oneness of God (Eaton, 2012: 3–19). In practice, when considering group identity and

formations, this does not result in the prevention of placing individuals holding positions of religious authority on a pedestal (Hammer, 2019: p119–151). Where faith institutions operate independently, accountability remains internal. Both these features hold potential to create spaces within which abuse can occur (Chowdhury et al., 2021). Craig Harper and Colin Perkins (2017: 30–31) advocate for the critical role congregation members hold in preventing and challenging abuse and the covering up of such abuse by faith institutions, particularly where children are concerned.

This becomes significant when considering what is known about to date within faith institutions. In the IICSA [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse] report exploring the presence of sexual abuse in faith contexts, significant Muslim stakeholders, such as the East London Mosque and Green Lane Mosque, reported *no* disclosures of sexual or other abuse in the ten years prior (Jay et al., 2021: 16). This was further reported by the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB). Given the 552 membership of MINAB, this is indicative of a silence beyond under-reporting. And this is all the more pertinent given that there is no obligation upon members to report disclosures to MINAB. In the light of the general silencing that happens around abuse more broadly, this lack of reporting is not surprising. Rania Awaad and Tabish Riaz (2020) argue that there are specific and nuanced social, cultural, and religious factors within Muslim communities which hold potential for enabling abuse and overlooking accountability. These include considerations around honour and stigma, cultural modesty preventing proactive safeguarding conversations, and preferences for group wellbeing, such as of families, over that of individuals. The lack of procedural hierarchy for reporting was found to facilitate the free movement of those perpetrating abuse between institutions (Chowdhury et al., 2021). This vulnerability spot has also been noted in cases seen in the USA (Salem, 2018).

In Scotland, there is current and ongoing research being undertaken in relation to abuse more broadly by a grassroots initiative, SACRED (body:mind:space). Through use of a multi-perspective and mixed methods approach of individual interviews, focus groups, and an online survey, the researchers of SACRED hope to elicit an in-depth understanding of the nature and occurrence of abuse in Scottish Muslim communities. This method has been deliberately adopted in recognition of the sensitivities in conducting such research within close-knit communities wherein members are often known to each other. In line with what is known to date, preliminary findings demonstrate the internal silencing enforced upon victims and the risk victims take in speaking out. Essentially, victims stand to lose everything that is familiar to them, whilst those perpetrating abuse are often enabled through avoidance of any accountability. By implication, research conducted in this area with close-knit communities must be cognisant of what is being asked of victims in taking part in such research. If there is no intended

change, no protection, or long-term gain for victims, then victims will often question the purpose and value behind participating in such research. This may go some way towards explaining the paucity of research in this area to date. Future outputs from this research will expand on this further.

Spiritual abuse within a Muslim faith institutional context thereby has to date primarily focused on sexual abuse by those holding positions of authority, usually religious authority, within such institutions. Notwithstanding significant gaps in this area too, understanding the experiences of adult victims of abuse, which extend beyond sexual abuse remains almost entirely unexplored. The authors are aware of internal conversations within communities alluding to other forms of abuse in faith institutional contexts. However, due to the potential stigma and shame disclosure that such may unleash within communities, these conversations will remain unreported here, at the request of survivors. In time, the research in Scotland holds potential in developing our understanding further.

What is becoming evident within the growing body of work being carried out in this area is that the more the topic is spoken about, the more victims speak up. Indeed, in the burgeoning works to date, researchers have embedded themselves within communities to build trust, and have witnessed new informal disclosures being made by individuals who previously had no safe spaces in which they could speak. More often than not, such disclosures have remained internal to communities, with victims expressing the need to be culturally understood and worried about repercussions in speaking out. Equally, there have been signs of underlying fear when speaking out as a Muslim. Muslims are often within mainstream narratives depicted as one homogenous entity to be feared (see [Awan, 2012](#)). Therefore, speaking out as a member of a marginalised and stigmatised group is accompanied by internal and external alienation and isolation (see [Chowdhury and Winder, 2022](#); [Younis, 2022](#)).

Amid this are important lessons to be learned and reflections to be had regarding how such research is carried out, with what intents, and the positionality of researchers, particularly as insiders. Whilst insider researchers may share the identity and concerns of victims and are better able to navigate sensitive community spaces, they too risk facing internal and external scrutiny and potential ostracism. Equally, without such research, appropriate support mechanisms for victims remain inadequate.

Spiritual abuse within domestic settings

The presence of spiritual abuse in domestic spheres also demands consideration. Oftentimes, abuse within domestic environments is labelled as domestic violence and/or abuse (DVA). DVA is often understood as referring to physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, or financial abuse, inclusive of coercive control ([Gov.uk, 2012](#)). What tends to be omitted in this definition to date is spiritual abuse in domestic contexts. Whilst faith institutions are widely

acknowledged as significant for identifying and addressing spiritual abuse, it could be argued that the domestic environment is just as important, given that everyday living, which for many is inclusive of and thoroughly enmeshed with religious practice, takes place within this space.

In Muslim tradition, marriage is considered sacrosanct (see [Chaudhry, 2013](#)). The family unit is the pinnacle of society, and therefore much of prescribed social conduct relates to the preservation of marriage and the family unit ([Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001](#)). Intimate relationships outside of the fold of marriage are generally frowned upon and not advocated within the faith tradition, though individuals' private practices may differ. Social and psychological preparations for marriage often take place early on in life. The marriage contract (*nikah*³) is viewed as a trust with the Divine and an act of worship in itself ([Uddin, 2018](#): 404). This may lead to questions surrounding how abuse could take place under such a banner. The Islamic faith is explicit in the fluctuating nature of the human and the competing drives which can shape human behaviour ([Keshavarzi and Nsour, 2020](#): 238–40); yet this is not a licence or excuse for abuse within any context. When messages such as unconditional obedience to one's husband at any cost are portrayed as part of being a good Muslim wife ([Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001](#)), it becomes easy to see how coercive control can play out within a theological framework in the domestic sphere. Being "a good Muslim wife" can therefore in some communities, equate to being submissive and not questioning any actions on the part of the spouse or wider family ([Isgandarova, 2019](#): 59). This then creates environments ripe for abuse.

Religion has been noted as playing a significant role across the spectrum of how DVA is experienced ([Chowdhury, 2023](#)). This extends from the individual, psycho-social-spiritual level, to broader macro levels. Also, in the frame throughout are additional stakeholders and intersectionalities. Internal to abusive relationships, coercion and control grounded in the abuse of faith principles have been noted to cause significant spiritual anguish and distress. This has been further noted as emanating from both abusive partners, as well as members of the wider family who may act as secondary perpetrators of abuse, or indeed, may be the primary abusers. Within this context, the misunderstanding of ethnic cultural norms as faith tenets, or an equation of the two, has led to further exacerbation and maintenance of abuse in domestic spaces ([Chowdhury and Winder, 2022](#)). Central to this is that these abusive spaces are then upheld by wider family structures, including by females ([Isgandarova, 2019](#)). Mohammad Idriss (2020) has put forward that some mosques adopt processes and procedures that allow for the continuation of abuse. He stipulates that this occurs first, through the exclusion of women from such spaces, thereby stifling female voices, but also through missed opportunities to inform congregants about violence against women and its prevention, both from the pulpit and in smaller workshops – particularly where there is awareness that congregants use scripture to justify abuse. Idriss states that

this is further intensified through encouraging abuse survivors to remain in abusive marriages and not seek intervention. Indeed, preventing women from opportunities for nurturing their spiritual connections with God within sacred spaces could itself be interpreted as a form of spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abuse in such contexts, therefore, takes on various forms, with more diffuse repercussions. Victims and professionals alike describe the difficulty in disentangling abuse from the faith, alongside the embedded nature of abuse as part of Muslim marital life (Chowdhury and Winder, 2022; Chowdhury, 2023). The detrimental spiritual consequences are further magnified when individuals holding positions of religious authority, but not trained in responding to DVA, are turned to only for them to provide inappropriate advice, guidance, or intervention (Hammer, 2019; Nowrin, 2021). The tangible consequences include victims having no safe spaces accessible to them, the continuation of silent suffering, and the continuation of abuse. Within a psychotherapeutic context, Nazila Isgandarova (2019) brings to the forefront the specific needs of DVA victims to contextualise the abuse within a theological framework. This includes differentiating between abuse and Divine tests, satanic interferences, and the evil eye. Of significance within this is the need to have an insider understanding of cultural and religious norms. Without this, there is a definite risk of misunderstanding what constitutes abuse and potential missed opportunities for interventions.

The consideration of spiritual abuse within the domestic sphere further extends to divorce proceedings. Within a UK context, the use of Shariah councils (Muslim family advisory bodies) for pursuing religious divorce is often the default source for many DVA victims (Ghauri, 2023). This is particularly the case for those who have only religious ceremonies (Uddin, 2018). However, within these processes, it is clear that DVA practices have continued to proliferate, usually due to non-compliance by the husband (Uddin, 2018: 424–25). Moreover, victims have reported problems with the lack of female representation on such panels and the lack of DVA training and understanding. Both Islam Uddin (2018) and Naheed Ghauri (2023), however, highlight the necessity of Shariah councils in meeting the religious needs of DVA victims. Despite their shortcomings, such services are able to facilitate a life free from abuse for Muslim females, where others are unable to. In response to the shortcomings of Shariah councils, Muslim Arbitration Tribunals (MAT) were set up by Faiz-ul-Aqtab Siddiqi. As a dual-trained theologian and barrister, he ensured MAT processes were compliant with both religious laws *and* the laws of England and Wales, thereby ensuring processes were recognised within national judicial processes (Akhtar, 2010). The continuing expansion of MATs across the UK is indicative of the demand for services that meet the religious needs of Muslim females in the UK. Such services require interventions cognisant of both the religious and secular legal contexts. Amin Al-Astewani (2020) argues that MATs hold promising

potential in mediation for family disputes. The specific experiences of Muslim female DVA victims and survivors is yet to be fully ascertained. Whilst requiring more detailed analysis specific to MATs, the work of [Ghauri \(2023\)](#) is a first step towards this.⁴

Spiritual abuse within the domestic sphere thereby becomes a critical consideration. Where harmful cultural norms become embedded within communities, it becomes all the more important to distinguish all forms of abuse for what they are, on both individual and collective levels ([Chowdhury and Winder, 2022](#); [Chowdhury, 2023](#)). It is also important to recognise how spiritual abuse can manifest within sacrosanct elements of the faith. This section has examined female victims, which reflects understanding and predominant focus to date. But this does not imply that there are not male victims of spiritual abuse within the domestic sphere; indeed, the nuances of how this might manifest is an area requiring study. [Idriss \(2022\)](#) is one of few commentators who presents detailed accounts of South-Asian male victims of DVA. Whilst these are not necessarily investigated from a spiritual abuse perspective, there are potentially indications towards spiritual abuse whereby the male body and what is perceived as promiscuous behaviours, are associated with the family name and standing. This requires further investigation. Related to this, an additional area requiring further exploration is the potential presence of spiritual abuse within the home. Due to space limitations this cannot be fully explored here, but is important, particularly in the light of overlaps with abuse in faith institutional contexts ([Nsour, 2022](#)).

Spiritual abuse, scripture, and language

The final area we explore briefly in this paper is the role of scripture and religious language in spiritual abuse. The examples provided here will be extracted from the aforementioned contexts. It is evident that scripture can and is used within abusive contexts. These can be in the form of direct threats and intimidation, coercion, or control, or via more indirect means. Abdallah Rothman and Adrian Coyle (2018) outline that within an Islamic epistemological framework a person's central component is their connection to God. This means, regardless of outward practice, a Muslim is understood as connected to God in a sacred manner. Therefore, the use of scripture within abuse has been found to cause extensive harm, impacting at the core of identity, and essentially acting as a blockade to, or shattering, the Divine connection ([Chowdhury et al., 2021](#)).⁵

Within spiritual abuse in the domestic sphere, one of the primary misuses of scripture relates to 4:34 of the Qur'an.⁶ There exist many debates regarding whether this verse permits the use of violence against one's wife. We conclude (see [Chowdhury, 2023](#)) that given the high ethical standards stipulated for divorce proceedings, the permissibility of violence and abuse

within the sacred bounds of marriage presents a distinct contradiction. What is important to note is that discussions surrounding 4:34 are often within the remit of scholarly contexts, whether academic or theological in nature. Evidence of use of the verse to justify abuse within UK everyday community contexts has been found to be limited (Chowdhury, 2023), though this may not be the case for all international contexts (Chaudhry, 2013; Isgandarova, 2019).

Practitioner work in this area indicates preponderance of narratives inculcating obedience. This corresponds to the next point regarding the indirect use of scripture or principles of the faith as part of spiritual abuse. The first point goes back to what we raised previously and relates to abusive tendencies in the use of narratives on wives' obedience to their husbands. Obedience has also been found to be used abusively within faith institutional contexts, where disobedience to those holding positions of religious authority is equated with eternal damnation. Spiritual threats such as, "God will curse you eternally," or disobedience risking "becoming an enemy of God" (Chowdhury et al., 2021: 208) are examples. Whilst both might also qualify as coercive control, their spiritual nature is significant. Further examples from our research include, "remember every part of your body that gets struck by a teacher that part of the body will never go to heaven... er hell, the hellfire" and the acceptance of physical abuse by those holding positions of religious authority as a means of "becoming better humans for it" (Chowdhury et al., 2021: 207). When faith is significant to the individual, such spiritual threats have a debilitating impact on the victim. On a spiritual level, these cause spiritual anguish, feelings of guilt, and consequentially a distancing from one's faith.

The lead author encountered further examples of language with spiritually abusive impact including, "the angels will curse you," and "divorce is the most hated thing in the sight of God," as well as, "you're married now, my family is your family, your family don't matter anymore," "have *sabr*" (patience), and "you're not allowed to speak of other people's sins" (Chowdhury, 2023: 12–14). All of these are indicative of blame and responsibility being placed on the victim, whilst simultaneously exonerating those perpetrating abuse. We further propose that harm is caused by social norms, which by implication make positions of religious authority akin to the position of God (cf. Chowdhury et al., 2021). Again, this creates profound power imbalances within which abuse can occur and be sustained by both insiders and community or congregation members alike.

The use of scripture and language, therefore, requires careful consideration, particularly to capture the nuances that may exist across different contexts and the resulting implications for interventions. Abuse transmitted by means of sacred texts or using spiritual language has considerable traumatic impact on spirituality, faith identity, and belonging.

Recovery process: reclaiming of faith

As researchers with insider positioning and practitioner experience of working with victims and survivors, we advocate the need to place lived experience alongside academic discussions. This is important in acknowledging the lived reality behind what may appear to be clinical discussions within academic and policy contexts. Furthermore, this is essential to the consideration of appropriate interventions and support services.

In the light of this, it is important to consider how victims and survivors cope in the aftermath of abuse and the resulting implications on their faith and/or religious identity. Overwhelmingly, research demonstrates two things in this regard. First, as mentioned, the impact of spiritual abuse extends to the very core of the person and causes what appears to be much deeper and personally significant levels of harm. This of course is stated with the caveat that no two experiences of any form of abuse are the same or can be empirically quantified. Such harms exist at the time of the abuse as well as in the aftermath (Hammer, 2019; Isgandarova, 2019; Chowdhury et al., 2021; Chowdhury, 2023). Sometimes access to support is possible, but often it is not. Instead, victims are faced with the challenges involved in disclosure: such as stigma, ostracisation, and loss of belonging (Awaad and Riaz, 2020). In terms of specialist support services within the UK, there is very limited provision of which the authors are aware.

Second, when recovery does become possible, it usually involves an active reclaiming of one's faith. Based on the research carried out to date and on practitioner engagement, here are our key markers of the recovery process (see Figure 4.1).

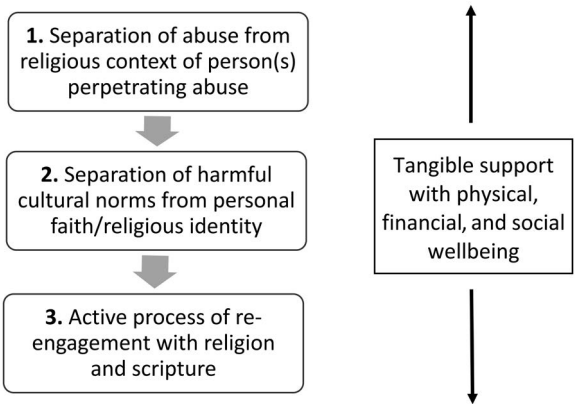


Figure 4.1 Key markers of the recovery process from spiritual abuse (by the authors).

The very first step is that a separation of the abuse from the person(s), and critically, the religious identity of the person(s) perpetrating abuse, must take place (Chowdhury et al., 2021; Chowdhury, 2023). This may also extend to separating out the faith institution from the religion itself. Without this, recovery and reclaiming of one's faith and/or religious identity become limited, as the abuse remains intertwined with the religion. This cognitive separation allows individuals to distinguish the abuse from their faith and/or religion, thereby facilitating the removal of some of the negative schemas held in relation to their religion and the practice of their faith. In extension to this, individuals must then separate out any harmful cultural norms from their faith and/or religious identity. This also serves to enable them to reclaim their faith and/or religious identity, whilst placing the abuse within a framework that can be contextualised (Chowdhury and Winder, 2022; Chowdhury, 2023). Thereafter, an active process of re-engagement with religion and scripture is more possible (Chowdhury, 2023). Re-engagement with scripture was particularly important for disentangling abusive narratives from the religion. This was often accompanied by specific boundaries stipulated by the victim/survivor themselves, including who they engaged with in the process, and the frequency and nature of that engagement.

Dena Hassounah-Phillips' research on DVA and Muslim women in America (2003) outlines the dual role of spirituality within the recovery process. On the one hand, she identifies spirituality and belief systems as providing meaning and purpose: hence, she describes spirituality as central to the women's coping capacity, such as through prayer, meditation, and Qur'anic recitation. However, spirituality also poses impediments to safety, such as when beliefs about the patient wife as the epitome of a good Muslim wife transpire in minimising or ignoring abuse.⁷ Hassounah-Phillips (2003) further stipulates that recovery post abuse usually manifests in three types of responses to religion. First, there are those who retain their faith in line with existing forms of conformity; second are those who reject their faith, which works along a spectrum, with some leaving Islam altogether (sometimes abruptly) and others navigating towards rejection but by stages, or degrees. Finally, there are those who re-interpret their faith (very much in line with Figure 4.1 above), actively re-engaging with religion and scripture to derive renewed holistic meaning and understanding. The spiritual abuse research centred on abusers who hold positions of religious authority (see Chowdhury et al., 2021), shows that all of the victims who participated in the investigation reconnected with their religion and faith in line with re-interpretation as outlined by Hassounah-Phillips. However, this re-connection was preceded by a painful and traumatic process of rejecting their religion, before re-visiting it through a holistic lens and subsequently returning to their faith. Within the DVA context there were also those who left their faith (see Chowdhury and Winder, 2022). Equally, those who had access to faith-based resources and thereby a more holistic understanding of the faith and its overarching principles, were better able to

retain or re-interpret and re-claim their faith and religious identity. These are important nuances which must be taken into account.

The key markers of recovery from spiritual abuse outlined in [Figure 4.1](#) are simultaneously accompanied by specific support. Some of this relates to physiological health concerns, resulting from trauma. For others the support may take more emotionally and psychologically centred forms. The need for further help in relation to more tangible aspects of life, such as relocating, improving financial stability, or developing new social circles, were also present. Trauma-informed support becomes critical to this and has been noted to bring benefit for survivors, such as those who came forward in the Truth Project ([Barker et al., 2023](#)). This approach includes ensuring respect for individualised experiences, the fostering of trust, empowering victims through all stages of the process, preventing re-traumatisation through prioritising safety, and, finally, recognition of the broader impact of child sexual abuse. Of further significance within this trauma-informed approach is ensuring adequate support is in place prior to, during, and after engagement with the project. This need has been mirrored in all the existing research in Muslim communities.

Concerning child sexual abuse cases more generally, not every survivor requires intervention post abuse on reaching adulthood ([Saunders, 2012](#)). Some adult survivors engage in a meaningful life without intervention or therapeutic support, or indeed may only use such support to supplement their resilience. Helen [Herrman et al. \(2011\)](#) in their review of the literature conclude that resilience relates to the positive adaption and the regaining of wellbeing despite adversity. In the context of Muslim DVA cases, we identify resilience as the positive utilisation of resources already available to individuals (see [Chowdhury, 2023](#)). In the case of spiritual abuse by those holding positions of religious authority, resilience manifests in the reclaiming of faith as an individualised entity, not as governed by others ([Chowdhury et al., 2021](#)). The right to self-determination within this proves critical, which is in direct contrast with religion being accessible only through a third party, as in some spiritual abuse cases.⁸

Conclusion

The current research in the field of spiritual abuse within Muslim contexts demonstrates the pressing need for more understanding in this area. This includes understanding the barriers to reporting, manifestations of spiritual abuse in a variety of contexts, how environments in which spiritual abuse can proliferate are created and upheld, and, consequently, how we can protect potential future victims. There is critical need for tailored provision of support services, given that these remain scarce at present.

A significant factor within the existing research demonstrates that spiritual abuse is not necessarily gendered, as has been argued with some other forms

of abuse. Initial research indicates that both males and females are likely victims, experiencing similar tactics. Equally the profound impact of spiritual abuse is visible across all victims. What does seem to be prevalent, however, is the consistency in male perpetration, though female perpetrators also exist, such as in domestic spheres. This tendency may be a reflection of existing patriarchal systems whereby males are the dominant holders of religious authority (Chaudhry, 2013). Although this dominance is not reflected in all international contexts, neither is it the historical backdrop to the traditional knowledge dissemination from the time of the prophet Muhammad⁹ (Ayubi, 2019). Spiritual abuse also extends to children, often cloaked in other forms of abuse. This consideration is critical to intervention work, given that children hold added layers of vulnerability and are likely to experience additional power imbalances.

In the light of the existing research, we end by tentatively offering a definition of spiritual abuse within Muslim contexts, in order to guide future researchers and those involved in the provision of support services. In putting forward this definition, we considered whether the word “deliberate” is required. Based on practitioner work, we conclude that when abuse is hidden by those committing the abuse, it necessitates the use of the word. If such actions are *not* deliberate, then there is no need to hide them. Equally, we recognise that some traditions have become so ingrained within communities and domestic spheres that they would be classed as internalised cultural norms and therefore potentially carried out without fully understanding either the actions or their repercussions upon others. These are important distinctions to draw, particularly in relation to interventions, and care needs to be taken when considering more nuanced cases. We further draw on the reflections of Rami Nsour (2022) who proposes that the violation of human rights constitutes a transgression and thereby spiritual abuse. As a trained theologian, Nsour posits three elements of spiritual abuse. These are: the misapplication of Islamic teachings, which cause religious harm (termed *al-gaish*, or deception); the misuse of a position of religious trust and authority (*al aklu bil deen* or *khi-yanatul amanah*); and distortion of the principles of Islamic scripture (*talbis*). We further explored the work of Ingrid Mattson as part of the Hurma project, where *Hurma* is put forward as the sacred inviolability of (all) persons.¹⁰

Taking these into account, we propose the following definition:

Spiritual abuse is the violation of a person’s spiritual self, through the direct or indirect mis-use of a religious or spiritual position and corresponding trust, sacred text or faith principle. Whilst its manifestations can present in all forms of abuse, its impact reaches the core being of a person.

We further recognise that spiritual abuse can occur in a variety of contexts. In this chapter we have explored institutional faith contexts and domestic spheres. We have also looked at the misuse of scripture and language within these. We do

not limit spiritual abuse to the context of faith institutions alone. Rather, we recognise faith institutions to be an extension of the social constructs within communities and vice versa. Encompassing all the possible contexts within which spiritual abuse can occur is imperative for validating the lived experiences of victims. By highlighting that spiritual abuse can involve both direct and indirect methods, we hope this brings to light how manifestations of spiritual abuse can feel highly complex to victims. What remains clear however is the transgression of rights and the resulting distressing torment and anguish this causes.

Notes

1 Peace be upon him.

2 Often referred to as *deen* in Arabic.

3 *Nikah* refers to religious marriage in Islam.

4 Other steps important for researchers' consideration include Mahmood's appeal to redress the inadequate attention paid to historical concerns surrounding the potential vulnerabilities of women (2012), and Prief's (2019) calling out of the lack of transparency between MATs and academic communities.

5 Loss of the self, or loss of faith at one's core, has also been identified in adult spiritual abuse survivors within the Catholic Church context (Demasure 2022).

6 Given our limited space here, we encourage readers to refer to existing comprehensive explications of this verse by Chaudhry (2013) and Chowdhury (2023), alongside broader supportive works by Isgandarova (2019) and Ayubi (2019).

7 This dual role has been elaborated on with the web model of DVA (see Chowdhury 2023; Chowdhury and Winder 2022).

8 This is exemplified in Chowdhury et al. (2021) when some survivors could only access religion through individuals holding positions of religious authority. In such cases, this authority governed which aspects of the faith the survivor could access and implement in their life, with threats of hellfire and eternal damnation as consequences for disobedience. Only through severing this hold could survivors act with autonomy over their own religious and spiritual path, free from abusive practices.

9 Peace be upon him.

10 See www.hurmaproject.com for further information.

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5 Sikhi(sm)*

What's Faith Got to Do with It? Domestic Violence and Abuse in Sikh Communities

Harjinder Kaur-Aujla and Christopher Wagstaff

Tribute: Written to acknowledge those who never got justice and to validate them to always believe in their truth.

We embrace the words of Shri Guru Granth Sahib, living Guru (teacher) for Sikhs: “In that place where the ‘lowly’ are cared for-there, the Blessings of Your Glance of Grace rain down” ||4||3|| (SGGS, 15). These words remind us to remain humble and that those who have been denigrated are valued in the eyes of our supreme teacher.

Preliminaries

Over two chapters – one per volume – we aim first, in this chapter, to describe abuse and its manifestations and entanglements with religion in one British-Sikh context, and second, in the chapter of the companion volume, to propose strategies for working towards addressing one common form of violence, namely Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA), in a way that takes meaningful account of Sikh religiosity.

Our title’s reference to “Sikh communities” (plural) serves to remind that Sikhs, even in just the UK, are not a homogeneous group; instead, British-Sikh communities comprise factions, and represent various political and other opinions, which cannot here be fully explored, a weakness we acknowledge.¹ No one Sikh faction or group represents all UK Sikhs. Indeed, as Jasjit Singh puts it, “So who does speak for Sikhs? – nobody and everybody” (2013).

Our focus here, namely DVA, is neither the sole form of abuse in Sikh contexts, nor is it particular to or particularly pronounced in Sikh contexts (see [Truong et al., 2022](#)). The first author’s perspective is of a British-born woman

* See the note in the Introduction on the terms “Sikhi” and “Sikhism.”

of Sikh heritage and my research and work focuses on survivors' perspectives. DVA, we maintain, should be a concern to all, a common ground to work and improve on together, not a topic that isolates or makes any one of us a target. We take account of the particular and intersectional vulnerabilities and needs of minoritised women, who include Sikh women (Thiara and Harrison, 2021),² and of the pioneering work of our Sikh ally, Eleanor Nesbitt (2004), who reminds us to be sensitive, too, to those of mixed heritage.

This chapter applies a critical incident approach of analysis to a Sikh DVA case study from Great Britain,³ with a view to discerning learning points for support services. The survivor account is anonymised but only minimally edited, to centre her voice and story while removing identifying characteristics. It is the story of one individual but it also illuminates wider patterns. DVA response systems globally are overstretched and struggling; this analysis will extrapolate systemic failings and go on to make recommendations for supporting survivors in a meaningful way. It is our hope that these recommendations will make the appraisal of faith and culture an integral part of DVA survival trajectories. This is a resource-intensive process, and the survivor's appraisal of their journey is mapped out. The "expert by experience" approach has precedence but is complemented by research literature. Reflecting back on Singh's statement, in this first chapter, the survivor speaks for herself, a model we want to encourage so that disenfranchised populations in Sikh communities find voice, agency, and representation.

The survivor account shows how ever-present religious aspects are within other parts of life. As Nesbitt (2018) points out, and as is the case with other religious persons, Sikh religious identity exists within and is sway to other structures, such as cultural ones: "Sikhs are influenced by the often contradictory pulls of: Punjabi culture for instance, marrying within caste—in contrast to religious principles, maintaining family honour, respecting elders, the cultural pressure to have lavish weddings" (2018: 33).⁴ All of these complexities need to be kept in view.

Briefly, and for context, Sikhi within the UK, while, according to the 2021 UK census the fourth-largest religion, accounts for just 0.85% of the population, numbering in the range of just over 520,000 members. In recent years, various forms of abuse perpetrated by Sikhs and/or in Sikh communities have been reported, including DVA, Child Sexual Exploitation, grooming, and honour-based violence. All of these abuses are not confined to Sikh communities but, as in other contexts, are propelled by gendered inequalities, in particular patriarchal ones, which work to the detriment of women and children.

Between the river and the deep blue sea (Punjabi: *Ek pasa toya, duje pase gasiye*)

The subtitle depicts the no-win situation the survivor of abuse underwent for over ten years of her life, alongside ongoing discrimination following her disclosures. The case study is anonymised, with some details changed to prevent

jigsaw-identification. It remains a true account in the survivor's own words. For context: the case is of a woman of Sikh heritage (non-*amritdhari*)⁵ in Great Britain who reported and disclosed DVA. It recounts how she navigated systems that minimised and downplayed her abuse at multiple stages. This, in turn, served to blame and placate her. And yet, there was also allyship with faith, good friends, and family that helped her along her way. It highlights that faith/spirituality can be a source of support in a survivor's journey. The second chapter (in the companion volume) will return to this case and explore what can be learned from it.

First-person Account

When I was diagnosed with fertility problems, despite having some spiritual teachings from my parents, I had a realisation that we as humans do not have the free will and determinism that the Western culture so often advocates. You don't get what you want if you just try and work hard enough. However, my educational background taught me some ethical principles and I'm glad I nurtured them – the Sikh principles as far as I could interpret, advocate empowerment of women, and I certainly pushed for that in my career and supporting others. The model of *grihasti*,⁶ a Sikh family principle to bear a family, was important; in my case, it would not have been ethical to seek that. Knowing full well the cost that a wedding could burden both sides with, it would not have been possible to go through the traditional process of marriage.⁷ Instead, the prospect of never having a child was a grief I chose to bear on my own, in silence; it was never a pressure from good friends and family. Notably, the Sikh ethos does not advocate for expensive weddings but rather is based on moral principles. But the cultural practices and human nature have “commercialised” weddings, and this was not something I aspired to. How I presented my identity was as someone with freedom and independence, so that those around me could not see the desperation for motherhood in me. I displaced it with being a careerist – and what else was there to do? The rift between Sikhi doctrine, which supported a focus on career and independence, and Sikhi cultural expectations to carry a child and create a family brought with it layers of friction, creating bubbles of religious and cultural disappointments. Religiously, the expectations were about women's empowerment and liberation, but culturally the expectations of a woman were enmeshed with how “others” perceive and treat single women and women of low status, despite educational and career success. Reflecting on the concept of *haumai*,⁸ here it was honest to declare the fertility problem, but incompatible with the cultural expectations to bear children. For all the internal conflict this caused me, the Sikh principle of *grihasti* did not cause in me a detachment from what I'd call my spiritual faith.

As I got older, I managed to evade most of the usual pressures of marriage expectations – but I was acutely aware that I wanted a child, and at that stage, the clock was ticking. I resorted to online dating and this procured some

interesting results but none fit for purpose. At this point, I prayed and did *sewa* at a Gurdwara and recall saying, “all I want is a child and I’ll never ask for anything else again.”⁹

It could be argued that my *sewa* was not quite unconditional, and actually, my prayers were answered. Unfortunately, I met X, the abuser – I have to say, he was really not my type – but as he was “hooking” (increasing dependency), he very quickly agreed to try for a child with me, at which point I became blinkered to any error of his ways. Commonly, abusive men do not come with a sign on their heads, and here his unpredictability combined with my desire to have a child became a hook. He was very up and down – I was fun-loving, and he disappeared often and also lacked entertainment value in the main. But the relationship was not so important to me. Despite being of Sikh heritage, he was non-practising and along the way was sexist, and a cheat – getting upset if I did not tolerate his behaviour. Still, family life would never have happened for me, he was not a catch – hindsight is a wonderful thing. That said, when I finally realised that he was in other relationships as well, I challenged him and he assaulted me – not because I found out but because I asked him if he got his mother to lie for him. The police told me there was no point in reporting this incident as his mother was the only witness. However, Women’s Aid supported me in reporting the incident. I was injured due to his actions but his mother told the police there was an argument but no assault.

Upon reflection, I had to question that his mother, who he claimed was religious, was really who she said she was; but it was not the religion, it was the actors that portrayed themselves as religious that were the problem. These “actors” exist, and they did nothing to advocate for me. Instead, I found myself in a cycle of cruelty and bad behaviour, something that I had not seen before. However, even at that time, I believed these behaviours to be incompatible with Sikhi. With hindsight, I see this as a “guise,” as abuse that defies Sikhi, and comes from ego and a sense of entitlement: in our religion, the direction is that “acting in ego, they lose, and nothing comes into their hands” – so I see no good or gain coming of their behaviour.

As events emerged, I went to the GP to have IVF through a donor. After a month of the abuser managing to stay away, he turned up outside my house seemingly watching the house; it emerged that he often stalked his exes, to get back with them. I then got pregnant and of course, one would question why after the assault – but the reasons aforementioned drove my actions. Some would argue I deserved it, but those are the people who have no understanding that abusers always hook into your weaknesses. Somehow, I spiritually framed his behaviour as “meant to be,” or maybe he loved me and was confused, or controlled by his family? The reasons for not following *grihasti*, for both of us, were different: mine due to medical circumstances, and his due to choice and in hindsight, I believe he enjoyed that control.

The news of pregnancy overjoyed me – as one would expect. Sadly, my abuser was mortified; he demanded I have an abortion and I was left confused

as to what was going on. His family treated me with disdain and eventually, I learnt that it was all to ensure that I didn't have the child and for financial reasons. His mother, who appeared righteous, was the orchestrator, as were his family who presented themselves as pillars in the community. However, they were apparently "good Sikhs" – no they were not! They described themselves as Sikhs but hadn't even entered the spiritual journey yet, and they were not *amritdhari*. The Sikh community received them into their Gurdwara as they did myself. They had a love-hate relationship with the faith, and I was consistent – I did not expect faith organisations to intervene but later on in my life, it would be men from the Sikh community, and the Gurdwara, that listened to me and empowered me, regardless of my religiosity. Yes, they were men, and part of male-dominant structures, yet these individuals made Sikhi proud. Therefore, I find it hard to say that Sikhs or faith spaces were not helpful; they never turned me away. The majority of Gurdwaras are male spaces, but that space was for me to seek spiritual peace, and gave me opportunities to do *sewa*, and listen to prayer, and it didn't fall short of that at my most vulnerable points.

During emotional states in pregnancy, my abuser and his family tried to control my life and stifle my independence; keeping me in a confused state was what they wanted. There was physical abuse in pregnancy and the first six months of my child's life. During this time I kept a journal and recorded threats made against me. I tried to analyse whether I was losing the plot after birth, or causing the incidents in any way. This journal shows that challenging the abuser's cruelty led to physical abuse despite my attempts to walk on eggshells for weeks. He used silence after the incidents to control me to the point that I got even more distressed. This was all whilst adapting to the challenges and joys of motherhood.

I eventually concluded I was not going through postnatal depression; it was not my fault. I disclosed to the police, he was arrested, but no further action was taken again. I was put on a high-risk MARAC.¹⁰ Social services were involved and recognised that I was a good mom and advised me not to give the abuser contact with my child. *Girhasti* guides followers to encourage family life; however, by this time I had never seen him care for the child or take responsibility, and due to his abusive behaviour I could not trust him to do so. I was not practising, but religion was spiritually helpful during this time, even if my abuser's family blamed me for refusing an abortion and having a child out of wedlock. The faith leaders and allies that were attuned to the scriptures did not judge me this way, and nor did my own family. Sikhi is based on humanity, and such charges are inhumane. As I see it, society's patriarchal values fueled my abuser's sense of entitlement and control. He and his family were not above using religious notions to transmit this control. This was *not* what I wanted my child to see or come to accept.

My abuser wrote to me asking me to drop child support, which I had claimed after our split. He rarely paid for anything and I needed to move

closer to my mother's for childcare support. I demanded respect. I started feeling myself again, engaging with the wider family, proud of my parenting and guiding my child with prayer and good values – note, being a victim does not make you a bad parent. I prayed that he and his powerful family never took my child away as he threatened, and I often wondered if I hadn't made that claim for child support, whether the events that followed would have occurred. I relied on Women's Aid and received good support. Why not a Sikh organisation? Because nearby Sikh places felt too close-knit and I was afraid of community judgment. Once I contacted a woman in another city on a telephone helpline for Asian women, because that felt safer. I avoided local community and faith spaces.

Sadly, my new sense of freedom was short-lived, as my abuser's threats became a reality three months after the split and I started receiving legally worded letters in the post stamped from where his solicitor relative lived; he helped the family to stay above the law and respectable in the eyes of the family. He had no insight how his actions would impact the lives of myself and my child; I received letters about a two-year family court case whilst I worked six days a week and ended up with a huge legal bill. I learnt that family court was for parents who could afford to keep arguing. I was also surrounded by allegations by now and risked losing my child to an abuser who had never cared for them, or ever proved to be a good parent. I analysed his police transcripts and his allegations were unfounded and twisted. During this time, prayer and attendance at the Gurdwara sustained me and my family; it gave us hope at a time when facts were muddled and when various unreliable witness statements were being presented against me. Any evidence I had, including journals and recordings of threats, was disregarded.

My allegations with evidence that I still hold were ruled out; several incidents were cross-examined in court. Eventually, the abuser got supervised contact and my allegations were thrown out. I was accused of fabricating abuse (except for the first incident that was reported to the police), but I have the evidence to prove I did not fabricate any of it. The reason this verdict was made, I feel, is because two years went by and there were only two options: either I was not a protective mother who didn't call the police every time there was a threat, or I was a liar. I took the second bullet but it is *not true*. I was in a deeper web now that no one was going to believe me and I had court officials threaten that if I didn't allow contact, they would put me through a mental health assessment to reveal why I was really so anxious about contact! This made me so upset; what is going on? If ever I was going to have a full-blown breakdown, it was then. They all played a dirty game with our lives and I had to get out of this web of abuser courts where they understood only the abuser's initial contact application fee. It was seen as some sort of "quality-indicator," because of course some fathers didn't bother to pay the fee. Meanwhile, I was told I was too intelligent to be a victim, no shrinking violet, and my journal was not good enough evidence. Photos of injuries didn't prove abuse, despite

a thorough cross-examination. On the other hand, his version of events did not stand up. Supervised contact and parenting courses eventually deemed the perpetrator as a good enough dad, but in the eyes of a survivor, this was poorly assessed and more leeway than I was ever given. The words of a health worker still reassure me, “If they didn’t believe you, they wouldn’t have given you a residency order.” Perhaps I was lucky then?! I prayed throughout the ordeal and was really fearful that the child that I wanted so much was going to eventually be manipulated out of my care. The faith aspect here gave me strength at those times when I felt my child and I would never get out now; this was my life, and they had silenced me.

I was advised an appeal would be very expensive and my best option to keep my child safe was to reconcile with the perpetrator; and so I was again back in his game. I was very trapped but had faith still. At the date of the final hearing, I read the best Chaupai prayer,¹¹ despite going through many injustices. I also read a Lord Shiva prayer, which is Hindu, but I left no spiritual stone unturned; it was my child. I was even told it was not my child, it was “our” child. I still find it difficult to believe that a man like that could ever be considered a parent.

I told the courts we had reconciled. I got a residence order. He got around eight hours of a contact order, which he never used but threatened me with every weekend. I spent months having to listen to further threats from his family and him; he never took any responsibility and I paid for everything. Very soon after he got his court order, I felt pregnant. His world fell apart again; he would now have to explain this to his supporters and for that I ended up with a black eye – the first attack in my second pregnancy. By now disclosure was not an option for me anymore. I had lost all trust in the police and legal systems.

My second child coming along was a blessing in disguise, and we eventually got rid of my abuser. But the stalking never stopped to this day. During the latter parts, I tried to reach out to the police a couple of times but by now they weren’t interested. By this time my abuser’s family was very immersed and “reputable” in the community; I really had nowhere to go, and reaching out to anyone eventually resulted in silence and not wanting to get involved.

Child support was very little and my abuser was earning a lot more and took back in food. I paid to ensure my child did not have to endure what I had to. I couldn’t care less about the money but it’s worth noting that to date the abuser owes me thousands in child maintenance and I’ve not claimed this. Including family court costs that adds up to a huge amount. In our faith and culture, it is a sin to keep a daughter’s money, but for these chameleons, they relished in their control and watching me suffer. Meanwhile, I worked day and night so my child could have everything; and we succeeded! Sikhi believes that *maya*¹² traps people and enables lust, anger, greed, attachment, and ego. At the time, my father told me to let go of these things and be self-reliant, but the unfairness was hard to watch.

This was Britain; but I felt like I was in some country infested with corruption. It was like a torture chamber and I wasn’t allowed to speak out; even since, I’ve sometimes silenced myself, due to the power that members of the

abuser's family appear to have. I had to wait for my children to be old enough to make this disclosure, because I'm still being threatened to return to family court. But my testimony remains steadfast, and is part of the reality of the life of many victims in Britain who seek out the family court system. Many have shunned me because they question my credibility but not one person asked to study the evidence. The more I disclosed, the more I went through domestic violence discrimination. I am grateful for those who believed in me, and for prayer and hope (when there was very little).

My children are with me. However, many women have suffered a lot more by this system; and I hope that this narrative will ensure they are not discriminated against for their disclosure. I can say that faith in my case helped give my family strength, and a level of certainty, whilst systems and many people were ineffective and passive. There have also been kind friends, family and others, who saw the ongoing abuse that I still am subject to, and the stalking that will never get resolved. The issue is, if you fight back, you get called angry; if you don't, you're not protective of your children; and when you reach out, those with power go quiet or don't wish to be involved. And that is where it is.

The faith and non-faith allies gave me a great source of strength and therefore how can we say faith is bad? For some of us, faith is a saviour.

Our Reflection

The woman in the case study describes her situation as a Sikh woman in Great Britain, negotiating a difficult set of circumstances: first, fertility problems, then a relationship with an abusive man who is also Sikh and protected by his family and wider community, including the religious community. The woman and her abuser are in some ways on the periphery of the Sikh community – she describes herself as not *amritdhari* and him as not devout. She describes how this, on the one hand, leaves her open to being judged – such as for not being married and for having children out of marriage, against the cultural norms and ideals associated with Sikhi, but on the other hand, she relates the comfort she finds in prayers and in the Gurdwara, which she acknowledges as a male-dominated locale where she nevertheless finds support.

The woman is negotiating the structures of Great Britain to see her abuser punished and to obtain protection for herself and her children. She encounters obstacles, disappointments, expenses, frustrations, and injustices. Some of these stem from corrupt individuals (the abuser's family members), others from ineffective services (police and courts).

The woman of the case study is reluctant to depict her religion in a negative light but she acknowledges that some persons who are, or who purport to be, religious are capable of harmful behaviour. More often, religion is depicted as a solace, comfort, and support. This applies to private prayers and *sewa*, and to reading formal prayers (*Chaupai*) and attending the Gurdwara.

Alongside her religious practice, she has to find her way as a victim of DVA and single mother in secular structures, which are expensive and which she feels are stacked against her. She feels keenly that patriarchal dominance – in her own community and the wider social context – affect her adversely. But it is also a secular organisation, Women’s Aid, that helps her. It is notable that she avoids a Sikh support organisation and that when she rings a helpline for Asian women, she rings a branch in another location – this is because she fears exposure and judgement in her own community.

The woman in the case study is articulate, values education and her career, and acknowledges some support (from her family, Women’s Aid, the MARAC, her faith, her faith community). She is also clearly a person who is vulnerable at some points of her life – a woman from an ethnic and religious community that is poorly understood and minoritised within the British context; a woman who suffers DVA, including physical abuse during pregnancy, and struggles with costs and with supporting her children on her own. The strains she is under explain some of the poor “choices” she describes – such as, having a child with a man she is never drawn to, and having a second child following abuse. Such “decisions” or “choices” (both words are deliberately in inverted commas) are more typical of persons experiencing vulnerability.

What emerges clearly from this case study is that religion plays a part in multiple layers of the woman’s story: it possibly plays a part in her “choosing” and perhaps initially trusting her abuser (who is, like her, Sikh); it plays a part in her maintaining some equilibrium and some centre and hope; the religious community provides support – both for the woman and for the abuser. At times, she avoids her local community because it feels too tight-knit and possibly judgmental. All of this shows the complex machinations of DVA in the Sikh community, with one case study possibly giving insight into wider patterns. This will be explored more fully in our second chapter (Volume 2).

Notes

- 1 On contemporary Sikhi(sm) and its diversity, see [Takhar and Jakobsh \(2023\)](#), and particularly the chapter by [Jakobsh and Takhar \(2023: 1–30\)](#). On Sikhi and a snapshot of the contemporary UK, see [Bloom \(2023\)](#).
- 2 The vulnerabilities of minoritised communities which, in the UK, includes the Sikh community, are multiple and not confined to those in the case study to follow (i.e. DVA, mental health strain, poverty, lack of access to support services). Not only are diaspora Sikhs at risk of racist discrimination ([Jhutti-Johal and Singh, 2019](#)) and scapegoating ([Gill 2023](#)) but also of substance abuse and misrecognition of health concerns and treatments ([Thandi, 2011](#); [Sandhu, 2009](#); [Sandhu, 2022](#)) – to name just a few of many more examples of increased vulnerability.
- 3 There is a small but growing number of DVA and VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls) studies focused on Sikh women in both South Asian settings, e.g. [Ahluwalia, Walo-Roberts and Singh \(2015\)](#) and diaspora settings, e.g. [Badyal \(2003\)](#) and [Basra \(2018\)](#), both focused on Canada; and [Kaur-Aujla, Shain and Lilley \(2019\)](#) and [Kaur-Aujla, Wagstaff and Lillie \(2022\)](#), with focus on the UK.

- 4 It is also widely claimed that honour (*izzat*) and shame are values particularly prominent in South Asian family contexts. Again, these values and the abuse, sometimes called honour-based violence (HBV) they generate, are sometimes tied to religion and sometimes to culture. In the case of *izzat*, the concept is prominent across Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities and not particular to Sikhi (Virdi, 2013). Truong et al (2022) distinguish between religion and culture in acknowledging that whilst *faiths* do not generally condone violence such as DVA, *faith cultures* can enable and ignore abuse against women.
- 5 *Amritdhari* refers to one who has undergone the *amrit* ceremony and therewith become ritually admitted to the *Khalsa*, or community of fully initiated Sikhs. The identity of non-*amritdhari* Sikhs and where they fit in plays a part in the case study of this chapter.
- 6 The word *grihasti* can refer to a household, a family, family life, and everything connected to looking after and maintaining it.
- 7 She is saying that because she knew she might not be able to bear children, which is an expectation of Sikh marriage, she felt it unethical to pursue marriage. The economic strain of the costs of a wedding also contributed to her decision.
- 8 The Sikh concept of *haumai* pertains to egoism or self-centredness, which obstructs spiritual development.
- 9 The Gurdwara is the Sikh place of worship and assembly. In Sikhi, *sewa* refers to unconditional, selfless service, which can be performed in places of worship or elsewhere, such as through giving to the vulnerable and needy.
- 10 A MARAC (multi-agency risk assessment conference) takes place to share information on the highest risk domestic abuse cases. It involves representatives from police, health, child protection, and housing practitioners, as well as Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs), and sometimes also probation and/or other specialists, such as from statutory and voluntary sectors. The presence of a MARAC gives some indication of the acute risk being perceived not only by the victim in this case but by others, too.
- 11 Kaviyo Bach Benti Chaupai, or Chaupai Sahib (also Benti Chaupai) is a hymn by Guru Gobind Singh and a composition that is part of a Sikh's Nitnem, the daily scripture reading.
- 12 Literally, *maya* means "delusion." It refers most often to money and material wealth.

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