

‘The Mosques Are the Biggest Problem We’ve Got Right Now’ – Key Agent and Survivor Accounts of Engaging Mosques with Domestic and Honour-Based Violence in the United Kingdom

Introduction

There has been a great deal of negative attention placed upon mosques in recent years. Accusation of mosques as potential breeding grounds for terrorism and radicalisation have hit the headlines (Sanghani, 2014), together with the controversy surrounding Shari’a Councils, their legitimacy and of their ability to resolve disputes as part of the arbitration process under family law. A number of studies have condemned Shari’a Councils for ruling against Muslim women who wish to have an Islamic divorce because their husbands have been abusive (Bano, 2012; Zee, 2014; Zee, 2015; Manea, 2016). By refusing Islamic divorces, such institutions condone VAW by suggesting that Muslim women should tolerate abuse by staying within their marriages. Organisations such as www.onelawforall.org.uk and www.ikwro.org.uk have campaigned against Shari’a Councils for their lack of access to justice for Muslim women. A closely related issue concerns the ability of mosques to promote education and awareness on VAW and to develop strategies that allow members of their congregation to access support and intervention. However, there is evidence that some mosques are reluctant to discuss VAW, let alone implement strategies and policies that allow women to become part of mosque management structures or to access specialist intervention. In 2012, a consultation from the Muslim and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB) found that nearly 78% of the total responses from mosques said that there were no women representatives at mosque management levels and that

only 17% said that women played some kind of role within their organisations, such as running Islamic classes for children or organising women's activities (MINAB, 2012: 24). The refusal to allow women to participate and their denial, silence and even secrecy about VAW is interesting because it comes at a time when Muslims in Britain face relentless surveillance and scrutiny about terrorism and radicalisation post 9/11. Furthermore, the so-called 'honour killings' of Heshu Yones; Banaz Mahmod and Shafilea Ahmed link HBV and forced marriages to Muslim communities and to Islam. As Desai and Haffajee note, this is 'hugely problematic in that the lens of religion seems to be exclusively applied to Muslims with the intent to vilify Islam, while similar crimes committed against non-Muslim women in the West are often quickly forgotten and/or erased from the collective memory' (Desai & Haffajee, 2011: 129-130; see also Anitha & Gill, 2015). Being a Muslim in post 9/11 Britain becomes racialised, where religion (negatively) becomes the defining factor of the person (Desai & Haffajee, 2011: 130). As a result, Muslim women living in Britain may decide to remain silent about their abuse for the fear of attracting (further) unwanted attention to Muslim communities or stirring up Islamophobia. This might also be a reason why religious leaders are in denial about VAW – feeling under siege from racism and anti-Islamic sentiment from the majority population may force some leaders to create a false image of themselves and one as being 'harmonious' (Macey, 1999: 50). Against this backdrop, this article will explore the experiences of 38 key agents and survivors who are actively involved in attempting to get mosques to engage with VAW within their congregations. Participants opined that mosques are reluctant because of their patriarchal nature, which prevents discussion on women's rights. It will explore initiatives adopted by some mosques and how they raise awareness on VAW. It will also consider additional strategies in relation to

overcoming mosques unwilling to support VAW initiatives. The inclusion of the UK in relation to the subject of domestic and honour-based violence is important because it positions the critique of mosques' approach to VAW under the political context within the UK. Furthermore, as investigators we must also condemn VAW in any part of the world and in any culture. Whether HBV takes place in the UK, in other western countries or in South-Asia, it must be challenged.

A Literature Review on Intervention by Mosques

Some may question the legitimacy of writing a paper on a sensitive topic such as mosques as it might further fuel anti-Islamic sentiment at a time when Muslims are already an unpopular minority. However, as a South-Asian Muslim male, I have a duty to write about Muslim men's violence against Muslim women. I am very mindful that I may be accused of perpetuating stereotypes against Muslims, or that I am diverting attention away from the daily racism Muslims experience. I accept these arguments, but the oppression of Muslim women through religion that renders their 'needs and their suffering invisible' cannot be ignored (Macey, 1999: 49). The Muslim population is diverse and Muslim women in particular face additional obstacles when seeking to report abuse in comparison to white women (Rai & Thiara, 1997; Burman et al, 2004; Gill, 2004; Anitha, 2008; Izzidien, 2008; Thiara & Roy, 2010). Some come from immigrant backgrounds and may not have extended family or support networks in this country. Given their cultural background, Muslim women tend to live within homes that include in-laws and other relatives, which in an abusive environment can expose them to more perpetrators. Abusive husbands may also control immigrant women by withholding passports and other documents, threatening

to report them to the Home Office and with deportation in circumstances where women are unaware of their legal rights and have no recourse to public funds (Thiara & Gill, 2010). Muslim women face an additional barrier due to the stigmatisation of divorce and the shame levelled against them for leaving their families. A lack of understanding of the nature of VAW in Muslim communities can also lead Imams to discourage Muslim women from seeking outside intervention. This is unacceptable. Muslim women undoubtedly look to community leaders for help and support and from a Muslim male perspective, my research seeks to challenge and undermine the status quo that exists in mosques.

There is a general argument that places of worship across all religions (not just Islam) have tended to be patriarchal institutions where misogyny and racism form part of daily sermons. Mosques are an obvious place to raise awareness about VAW because large numbers of the community access them on a daily basis. This includes the five daily congregational prayers (including the much larger congregation during Friday 'Juma' prayers); religious education that includes teaching how to read, recite and understand the Holy Quran in Arabic); religious lectures; the obligatory fasts during the month of Ramadan; religious festivals such as Eid-UI-Fitr and Eid-Al-Adha; marriage bureaus, funeral and ceremonial functions; and other community-based activities that encourage the community to engage with their local mosques. Mosques, therefore, play a pivotal role in the life of Muslims. Given the very large numbers of worshippers involved, this places those on the pulpit in very influential positions. One would expect mosques to educate and inform worshippers that VAW constitute crimes not only in English law but also in Islam. Mosques are also able to convey these messages quickly and to large audiences. Birmingham Central Mosque in the UK (www.centralmosque.org.uk) for example is a three-floor mosque in the

heart of a multi-cultural city that accommodates over 4,500 worshippers at any one time. During religious festivals like the two Eid festivals when demand is high, both the Main and School Hall are used for prayers to accommodate over 8,000 people. On Eid day in particular, there are five separate prayer services during which between 15,000-20,000 worshippers in total are able attend the mosque for the special services. During the weekly Friday Juma prayers, the gathering can exceed 4,000. This is just the potential for one mosque in the heart of central Birmingham. Replicate similar numbers in other mosques across Birmingham and in other major UK cities and the ability of mosques to reach large audiences is undeniable. Mosques can be used as a forum to highlight issues concerning VAW and to educate the masses.

However, in the prayer practices of mosques and other forms of religious learning encouraged and promoted therein, VAW seems only to be only partially addressed in the establishment of normative standards on marital relations and gendered expectations. For example, in marriage ('Nikkah') ceremonies where a formal Islamic contract between a husband and wife is created, the Imam conducting the ceremony may discuss the duties of the spouses to one another. According to Prophetic narrations, he may address the couple and discuss the 'rights of the husband over his wife' as well as 'the rights of the wife over her husband', which may also include a sermon about how Islam prohibits DV. Yet the 'Nikkah' ceremony itself lasts only a few minutes and any discussion about DV is brief. Having personally attended a number of local mosques during the research, in my observations there was a notable absence of discussions about VAW during religious sermons, activity classes and other forms of religious learning. Not that my personal experiences or snap-shot observations should count for much either – it is clear that there is much in the Holy Quran that condemns VAW and some mosques might actually teach this and

do this better than others. However, the mosques that I had frequented did not seem to be teaching the prohibition of VAW every day. This therefore prompted my research and I wanted to see if professionals working within the field of VAW had similar experiences. Given that MINAB (2012) highlighted the lack of involvement of women within mosques, it is probably true that many of Britain's mosques rarely cover VAW during religious sermons and classes.

Despite VAW being a widespread and global problem, there is a lack of literature on VAW specifically in Muslim communities living in the UK. More often than not, research and discussion about VAW amongst Muslim communities are subsumed within studies of ethnic minority groups in general (e.g. South-Asians collectively) and are not necessarily classified specifically as 'Muslims'. Even fewer studies have investigated real life experiences specifically related to mosques. To date, there appears only to be few studies that have attempted to gain access to individuals in order to extract important insights into whether mosques are addressing and intervening in cases appropriately within their overall role of serving the community (Potter, 2007). Some studies have noted that mosques and Imams often deny the existence of VAW within their communities and do not properly address VAW (Macey, 1999; Gill, 2004). Gangoli et al (2006) briefly discuss the 'Muslim Community' in their study of forced marriages and DV in South-Asian communities and go on to explain one example where a 'representative from the mosque committee said that he had never encountered any forced marriage cases and believed it only occurred when children were married abroad', whilst arguing 'in favour of non-intervention in personal matters' (Gangoli et al, 2006: 31). This account demonstrates that some religious leaders are in denial about VAW (Macey, 1999: 50; Khan, 2006: 79; Izzidien, 2008: 77-78). In 2010, Begikhani et al published a pioneering research

report on Iraqi-Kurdistan and on the subject of HBV (Begikhani et al, 2010). The authors also published their results in a book publication (Begikhani et al, 2015). The authors and their research team conducted one hundred and sixty-six semi-structured interviews with a view towards providing recommendations to combat HBV within that region and the Iraqi-Kurdish diaspora in the UK. In relation to the role of religious leaders and specifically in relation to Iraqi-Kurdistan, the authors dedicated a small section on faith leaders stating that they have ‘considerable influence on public opinion’ and noted their ‘deep concerns about the misinterpretation of Islam and the tendency to rectify this impression by saying that true Islam is against the violation of women’s rights and is the religion of peace’ (Begikhani et al, 2010: 90). However, they recognised through their fieldwork the lack of intervention by religious leaders to publicly condemn VAW, which ‘has neither been extensive nor strong enough to make a difference in society’ (Begikhani et al, 2010: 90). Apart from these studies, very few have undertaken empirical work on HBV. There is lack of research on key agents/survivors and their direct experiences with mosques in the UK. Research in this area is clearly needed to explore these experiences in detail and is the rationale why this study was conducted.

This paper has wider significance in that the existing literature has already established that intervention for women suffering abuse is highly problematic for BME women. Given the cultural and religious issues involved, BME women already face additional difficulties when attempting to report abuse, which increases their vulnerability and restricts their ability to leave abusive relationships. Language barriers, notions of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ for leaving a husband (and his family), insecure immigration status and even the ability to even recognise abusive behaviour may weigh heavily against a Muslim’s women decision to leave a relationship (Thiara

& Gill, 2010). However, this study adds to the existing literature by highlighting that religious leaders in mosques (a place where Muslim women should feel comfortable seeking intervention) are difficult to approach. As will be shown, evidence suggests that Muslim women find accessing appropriate services through mosques difficult. The existing literature focuses on incidences of racism and inequalities experienced by BME women nationally by nation-wide state agencies such as social services, the police and the criminal justice system in general in relation to cultural insensitivity that fail to acknowledge their different needs in comparison to white women (Wilson, 1978; Rai & Thiara, 1997; Burman et al, 2004; Gill, 2004; Chantler, 2006; Wilson, 2006; Anitha; 2008; Izzidien, 2008; and Wilson, 2010). However, this study exposes incidents of sexism and inequality experienced by Muslim women by non-state institutions *within* their own communities. This adds yet another layer of inequality/discrimination experienced by Muslim women that makes reporting abuse and seeking intervention that much more difficult. Alternative avenues for Muslim women must therefore be considered. This could also be termed ‘triple victimisation’, where Muslim women experience victimisation not only at the hands of perpetrators, but also by private institutions (e.g. mosques) and public/state institutions that fail to consider their individual needs as Muslim women.

As Macey describes, ‘Religion can be used by individuals, groups, and societies in a variety of ways; it can serve to oppress or liberate, to comfort or kill’ (Macey, 1999: 51). It is easy to take Islamic scriptures out of context and it is imperative that Islamic texts are analysed holistically to ensure that verses are not considered fragmentally or in isolation (see e.g. Kausar, Hussain & Idriss, 2010 and their discussion on verse 4:34 of the Quran). As perpetrators, some Muslim men may misrepresent Islamic teachings where the catalyst is to achieve power and control

over women. Some may refer to the Quran in a self-serving way to control women, by taking and applying verses out of context or beyond their original meaning. Imam Faizul R. Khan explains in his short article entitled ‘A Muslim Response to Domestic Violence’ that DV does exist in Muslim families and that being an abusive husband is contrary to the teachings of the Quran (Khan, 2006). Muslims are under a duty to follow the Quran, which is accepted by Muslims as the word of Allah (i.e. God) and are under a duty to follow the life and examples (i.e. the ‘Sunnah’) of the Prophet Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him, hereafter ‘PBUH’). The Quran is quite clear on the relationship between husbands and wives, emphasising that it is founded upon compassion, mercy and tranquility:

And among His Signs is this, that He created for you wives from among yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He has put between you affection and mercy. Verily, in that are indeed signs for a people who reflect (Holy Quran, 30:21).

Another verse describes husbands and wives as being the ‘garments’ of one another, which is understood as emphasising mutual respect, support and affinity; there are also general injunctions for men to treat women with justice and kindness (see e.g. verses 2:187; 2:229-237; 4:1; 4:19-25; 16:90; and 65:6-7). Under no circumstances is VAW permitted and the Quran contains many verses praising those who treat women with kindness. These verses require Muslim men to treat women with the utmost respect, as does the teachings of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) in his Sunnah. The Quran and the Sunnah have dealt with the issue of VAW from the perspective of prevention, conveying a general message that any act of VAW is a form of injustice and oppression. As an example to all Muslims, the Prophet (PBUH) never abused women emotionally or physically and encouraged men to respect women in the strongest terms. In various narrations, he is reported to have said that ‘the best among you is the one who is best for his family’. Thus, anyone who violates the limits set by

Allah and his Prophet (PBUH) is considered a transgressor.

Methodology

The sample in this study is based on qualitative interviews undertaken with 30 key agents and 8 South-Asian female survivors of DV and HBV in England over a three-year period. A feminist methodology involving personal narrative analysis was employed – paying close attention to the accounts and stories of (mainly) female participants and empowering them to ‘have a voice’ by speaking about their positive and negative experiences (Kelly, 1988: 3) and of their interaction and experiences with mosques. The study’s importance lies in giving a voice to those who may otherwise be unheard. The 30 key agents interviewed were 27 women and 3 men. Of the 27 female key agents, 13 were identifiable as South-Asian Muslims, the majority who had been born and brought up in the UK (only 5 were born in Pakistan); 12 were identifiable as White or White British females; 1 was a White female Italian; and the final female key agent described herself as Black African. Of the 3 male key agents, 2 were White British males and the other was a British-South-Asian male. Most of the key agent sample was drawn from refuge or support work (18); others were employed by the criminal justice system as serving police officers of various ranks (8), solicitors/legal workers in the Crown Prosecution Service (2); and local authority employees (2). Key agents interviewed were between 23-60 years of age. All but one of the 8 survivors were South-Asian and Muslim (one survivor was a South-Asian Hindu). All were residing in England at the time of interview. Five of the survivors were born in Pakistan, 2 were born in the UK, with the remaining survivor born in India. The survivors were between 20-50 years of age.

The researcher had no established contacts with participants and so a number of organisations were approached that the researcher thought would be interested in participating. Areas with large concentrations of Muslims were selected in Northern and Central parts of England. After initial meetings with key agents, the researcher (through snowball sampling) asked if they knew others who would be interested in taking part in the research. In-depth interviews were then conducted with a variety of people from a variety of backgrounds, ages and disciplines in order to draw honest and reliable conclusions about their experiences. With the use of an aide memoir and following established protocols on conducting research of an ethical nature (obtaining informed consent and respecting confidentiality), interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 1-2 hours each. Some included repeat interviews.

All interviews were conducted at the location of key agent organisations and were later transcribed. Each narrative was examined based on close readings. Statements made by participants were then grouped into themes, representing emerging themes that seemed to be considered important to the participants, or those themes and ideas that the researcher thought were important to raise. The resultant themes were then polished into overall themes that were applicable across the board.

Strengths and Limitations

Interviews with participants were relatively inexpensive in terms of time and cost. Several interviews took place on the same day and at the same location. The expertise and knowledge of key agents provided an invaluable source of information about the relationships with mosques that simply cannot be obtained from other sources. Likewise, the survivor interviews provided valuable data about their interactions with

mosques. In relation to potential limitations, there was a tendency to interview the first key agent available because they happened to be the ‘first’ available on the day interviews had been arranged. Similarly, key agents selected and recruited survivors who *they* believed would be ideal for the study. This could potentially affect the reliability of the data because key agents may have recruited other like-minded survivors who shared their views and opinions about mosques. However, qualitative content analysis was undertaken across the sample, minimising the chances of participants misreporting their experiences or survivors being over-influenced by key agents who had supported them through their ordeals. Emerging themes were extracted as a whole from the transcripts and not individual participants in isolation. Another important limitation of the research relates to the methodology – it draws only upon the perspectives of those outside of mosque cultures and cannot answer the important question of whether VAW work is actually undertaken in mosques in ways that outsiders (including myself as a casual observer) can recognise. The research does not include the voices of mosque leaders, Imams or any work that they do to promote VAW strategies. However, the existing literature already discusses the resistance and denial by mosque leaders (Macey, 1999; Gill, 2004; Gangoli et al, 2006; Khan, 2006; Izzidien, 2008; Begikhani et al, 2010; Begikhani et al, 2015). It was therefore felt that interviewing mosque leaders and Imams would not yield any new perspectives on the issue.

The Findings

Discussing VAW is a Threat to Patriarchy

Participants argued that more men are needed to address VAW at the community level to challenge patriarchal attitudes that condone such practices:

To combat honour-based violence, we need to get men involved. We have too many women screaming about it, we need other men involved and I think, it's where we lack as a community, there is not many men like you [i.e. the researcher], who say: 'Yeah, it happens, and I'm not going to make my [Muslim] sisters go through it'. We need men standing up for their sisters and we need men teaching this. I think that is so important, because they're going to be husbands in the future and if you don't teach them, some will just replicate that (South-Asian Female Support Worker).

Participants suggested Imams are the obvious group who should be actively involved in addressing VAW in front of their congregations. However, this has proven difficult, as some Imams are not born in the UK, have poor English-language skills and originate from areas that have poor records when it concerns women's rights. Some Imams have entrenched attitudes towards women and are reluctant to discuss VAW. Some participants suggested that appointing western-born Imams might be a solution because they are more likely to be educated in the West, likely to have strong command of English and be in a better position to explain that VAW is unacceptable:

A very approachable and intelligent Imam did not know this 'disease' of honour-based violence existed. That Imam was very upset to hear accounts of violence against women, honour-based violence and forced marriages taking place in the local community and wanted to positively undertake efforts to combat it (South-Asian Female Support Worker).

The key agent above was referring to an Imam called Shaykh Hamza Yusef, an American convert to Islam, who toured the UK and interacted with support organisations on DV and HBV in the Muslim community. He has posted a 26-minute sermon on YouTube about DV and how such behaviour is prohibited in Islam (Yusuf, 2009). The benefit of his sermon is clear to see – with over 80,000 views, English-speaking Imams are able to engage with a younger and much wider audience. Sermons posted on YouTube on VAW can act as a preventative tool to discourage men from such behaviour based on the commandments in the Quran and Sunnah. It

also demonstrates that there are Imams who are prepared to discuss VAW in front of their congregations from Islamic perspectives.

However, participants provided accounts where Imams had been unwilling to discuss VAW. One support worker explained an example where a mosque contacted her support organisation to obtain support for Muslim women who had reported DV. The women were able to obtain intervention, yet when the same support organisation approached the very same mosque suggesting that they should collaborate and run educational programmes on VAW for worshippers, the Imam responded by saying that they were not 'interested'. This really surprised the support worker:

It is interesting because the Imam in that mosque has been frequently the first point of call for women and has organised meetings with key agents in the homes of victims. Imams are very familiar with what is going on in terms of domestic violence and honour-based violence inside the homes of their worshippers. So [the support organisation] thought it would be a good idea to provide those educational courses, but I still cannot get my head around why mosques are still not allowing that. There could be a number of reasons for their reluctance. Firstly, [support organisation] is a women's-based organisation, the educational trainers are women, but there will be men attending such training courses, which the mosque leaders are uncomfortable with, either because they will be taught by a woman or because it violates the established cultural practice of segregation between the sexes. Secondly, even if some women are present in the training sessions, it is possible that many will be related to the men within the mosque establishment, either as worshippers or as mosque committee members. Such women may take advice from [support organisation], but the men may see those training courses as a threat to their marriages, relationships or even their dominance and this is the real reason why mosques are reluctant to hold such courses. This then raises the question whether or not mosques are really the appropriate institutions or forums to undertake training courses and to discuss these issues. The mosque leaders are fearful that [support organisation] may 'brainwash' people, interfere with people's lives, and break up marriages, when that is not the intention of [support organisation]. Our intention is to help women overcome violence and to raise awareness about the help available. [Support Organisation's] training is wide – it covers many things, including people trafficking, domestic violence, honour-based violence – it even covers things like Islam, how a woman is supposed to be treated. It is not like we say: 'If you are treated this way, leave home'. It is how people perceive we offer advice and teach our courses, but until they attend a training session, they're not going to understand (South-Asian Female Support Worker).

The support worker believed the mosque's reluctance was down to the perception of Imams that anti-DV courses are a threat to patriarchy. One of the survivors, a UK-born university graduate, a qualified schoolteacher and part-time mosque tutor validated this account. This survivor had been subjected to terrible abuse and had

experienced DV and HBV on three separate (yet related) occasions. First, her father had subjected her to a forced marriage to a man in Pakistan she had not met. She was forced into marriage because her father was concerned about his reputation since there had already been two failed (forced) marriages with his two other children. Second, she experienced horrific domestic abuse by her husband, which had lasted sixteen years. The survivor had sought her parent's help but they declined to intervene. As a result, her husband inflicted further abuse because the survivor had 'tarnished' his reputation in front of his family and the community. Third (and almost at the point of death), the survivor managed to seek intervention from a support organisation who then contacted the police. After a series of events (which also saw her husband escape to Pakistan to avoid punishment), her husband was eventually arrested on his return to the UK and sentenced to a lengthy custodial sentence. Having sought intervention and having given evidence against her (now ex) husband, distant family and community relations threatened the survivor and her children for damaging the reputation of the family. This included threats to life and tampering with the wheels of her car. Having experienced DV, HBV and a forced marriage, the survivor subsequently wanted to champion the rights of women. She is now an activist and regularly undertakes part-time support work with other survivors. She also taught children at her local mosque, explaining that DV and forced marriages are prohibited in Islam. However, she was prevented from discussing VAW because she had 'upset the men' and was subsequently ousted from the mosque. Members of the mosque committee felt her classes threatened male power and control over women:

These are the people that sit on our masjids [i.e. mosques] and make the decisions...they have a lot of power in the community, the community decisions of how things are structured, and how things will happen. Last year, I was told to leave the sessions on Honour-Based Violence and Forced Marriages from the Islamic perspective, that, 'Your daughters have a choice'. And they didn't like that word, 'choice'. 'What, you're telling our daughters to have boyfriends?' I said: 'No, that is not what I'm saying, I'm saying you need to consult your daughters before

you sell them off and if the daughters say no, it is a no and she doesn't actually have to give a reason why...I was told, then, that my views were unacceptable and obviously I stood my ground. 'Well if you can prove what I have said is unacceptable from the Quran and the Sunnah, I will resign, and I will apologise to the people, to the Masjid Committee'. They're still waiting for that apology but I'm not going to apologise for what I said (Survivor).

She continued:

So, a year later, pressure from the women in the community and pressure even from the children to the point that they had petitions sent, they've said that: 'We want [Survivor] to return and start teaching again'. The Masjid and the Committee have said: 'OK, we'll give her a trial period'. In other words: 'We want to monitor what she says'. I said: 'That's fine, you can monitor what I say, cos I say it from the Quran and Sunnah anyway, so if you find anything outside the Quran and Sunnah, then you can like...', then they said: 'Is she ready to apologise?', I said: 'I will not apologise. I will not apologise because what I have taught is correct. Your daughter's do have a choice'...they see me as a threat. This is one of the, er, one of the Committee members said: 'You are upsetting the men'. And I said: 'I'm sorry, I'm upsetting the men? Why? Of the truth?...Why do we not deal with real issues? Is not [Friday prayers] about a weekly reminder, weekly reinforcement of our Deen [i.e. religion]? Looking at real issues...I said: 'We can't address these because the members of this Shura [i.e. mosque committee] are guilty of beating their wives themselves', which I know for a fact, cos I've had enough complaints from their wives. They are the perpetrators, this is why they don't want me to voice any of these, because 'You are guilty of marrying your daughters off without their consent'. These are forced marriages, you are guilty of domestic violence, you are guilty of honour-based violence...(Survivor).

This survivor had been excluded from the mosque and had lacked power and influence even over the subjects that she could teach. This was a clear illustration of patriarchy in practice, which limited and controlled Muslim women and for which the survivor was asked to 'apologise' for informing pupils of their rights when it concerned choice in marriage. In relation to her own experiences of abuse, she explained that her father, members of the community and even religious leaders had completely invalidated her experiences, even blaming her for the abuse:

At that time, everybody in the community became involved and it was mostly because he [i.e. her ex-husband] got people involved. My grandfather, uncles, my father kept it just where it was at home, he hadn't gone with anybody or discussed it with anybody, but he did, my ex-husband did. As a result of that, we ended up with a huge posse, this whole community of elders, day and night, coming, abusing me, yes, coming to the house, and at least: 'Now dad, you need to speak up, this is your house, your daughter, you deal with it'. He didn't, he entertained it. So then I had the community hurling abuse at me: 'Six years is nothing, give it another six years, you'll be fine'. I said to them: 'This has nothing to do with you'. 'We're your uncles. We're so and so's uncles' [and religious leaders]...(Survivor).

Members of the community insisted that the survivor exercise patience and return to her husband, trying harder to please him. No one from the mosque intervened or signposted her to useful resources – no one called the police or provided safe shelter. Their non-intervention, silence even, allowed the survivor's abuse to continue.

In relation to getting mosques to engage with discussions about VAW, participants explained this had proven very difficult. Imams are perceived to be positive role models, trustworthy people and are ideally positioned to provide a message that can contribute to changing attitudes over time. Yet participants explained that they found it difficult to access mosques, believing that highlighting VAW makes Imams unpopular with their congregations or because Imams are the very people responsible for perpetuating VAW. There is no progression with women's rights because many mosques do not involve women:

Women have nothing to do with that – in most cases, if not all, all the members of the Bangladeshi or Pakistani mosque committees are men. There is a lack of understanding on the part of men who don't move with the times – the men rule. Even with the men who have come over here and settled, they are still in that time capsule and haven't moved on with the times, there is a lack of understanding about equality issues...When I see groups and organisations set up to deal with issues, because those groups do not involve women, that is one of the reasons why they fail. It is often very political – who can say what, who has the most power, it is often about male egos and I don't think that however much they try to set up something, when it is not conclusive, it becomes a token effort when it is just only operated by men. A few years ago, I did try to get a lot of work around honour-based violence done, and we had a Muslim women's organisation set up, and it was creating some thinking totally independent of any organisation including men, which had already existed because of the associated problems. We now have a women's organisation in [city], and it is working, because it involves women from all different cultures going and being part of that...it is a really good example of that because I've seen all the infighting for years, it's all men and although Pakistani women set up their own organisation, since the main committee was run by the men, it all fell apart...(White British Female Police Officer).

Participants recommended that Muslim women should become more involved in the day-to-day management of mosques if women's rights are to fall more prominently within the overall objectives and philosophy of mosques:

...there is no sort of Shari'a ruling why women shouldn't be on that committees. We're like half the community and we are not even represented. We're not even given a voice in the House of God, where else are we gonna be given a voice...the committees are totally

comprised of men, yes. There isn't a single one, there's not a single one [i.e. mosque consisting of women]...The biggest harm to our communities, which would be the central point in a Muslim's life, is the masjid [i.e. mosque], but right now the biggest harm is the masjids. Not only are they misguiding people, they're silent and silence is a bigger ignorance issue. That they will not raise these issues, not speak about them. Silence is approval. And because they're silent on these issues, it's approval for the men to continue behaving the way they are. All the Imams, all the committee members, know the crimes that are committed in their congregation. They know who the perpetrators are. And still they will applaud them...The mosques are run by perpetrators, the mosques are run by the men who commit these crimes. So they are not going to allow you to voice these concerns there (Survivor).

Engaging Younger, British-Born and English-Speaking Imams

Some participants suggested that younger Imams should be recruited because they are likely to understand issues concerning equality. However, even younger and British-born Imams may be difficult to approach because they may be influenced by mosque committees or Imams at other mosques and encouraged not to discuss VAW:

It would have been nice to have had one of the local Imams to discuss honour-based violence, or the mosque to discuss such issues, but it is difficult to engage Imams on all sorts of issues and they will only talk about issues when it suits them. We work with the mosque group, and we've engaged through the EDL or the extreme right-wing groups by talking about hate crimes, subjects that they are comfortable with, but honour-based violence is one subject I put to one side because I don't know how such groups are going to accept it or what they're going to do with it. I'm unsure whether some groups will take a positive stance against honour-based violence or merely pay lip service to such issues. There is one young Imam, who I feel might be a good starting point, but I've been informed that this young Imam has been heavily influenced by an Imam at another mosque down the road, and he is terribly difficult to engage, he would only do what he wants to do. It is a difficult thing. We need to find individuals out there who do have influence within the community and I think that mosques and other religious institutions are the best starting place for this. How do we do that? I'm quite nervous about it because I think it's difficult enough to get them to work constructively with us (White British Female Police Officer).

One survivor believed that recruiting younger Imams would not work because they are paid and employed directly by mosque committees. Reflecting on one conversation she had with one Imam, she explained that if they do attempt to discuss VAW, which is not supported by the mosque, Imams would ultimately lose their jobs:

It's taken them 40 years to get an English-speaking Imam. And now that we have an English-speaking Imam, he's gagged...I've had this dialogue with him. He's born and bred here, but he's silenced again. And I said: 'Where does that fit in with your job role? You are supposed to be, sort of, for the people, appointed by the people. Are you not a representative of Allah in

his house?'...He said: 'Yes', and I said: 'Well, yes what?' He said: 'Well, the Committee pay me?' So I said, 'Your Rizq [i.e. sustenance], your livelihood is in their hands?' He said: 'Well if I do raise these issues, I'll be turfed out. So either way, I'm silenced. So I will continue with whatever they ask me to do for [Friday prayers]. 'Either you do this, or go find yourself another masjid' [i.e. mosque] and this particular Imam said: 'Which Masjid do I go to? Cos every Masjid is gonna have this old school committee system where they dictate what is being taught, what's being said' (Survivor).

What Are the Alternatives?

Participants were adamant that preventative measures such as education in schools should be pursued to raise awareness about VAW. Some had recommended the use of interactive-based approaches that include student-orientated interaction (such as role plays), delivered by those of a similar age in schools and colleges and discussing scenarios concerning healthy, respectful and positive relationships:

So mosques seem to be the obvious places, but it's not happening there, so it's then where else do our families, sort of, meet or go daily? Schools, nurseries, I honestly think it's too late, but college time, because by that time, you're on the first plane back out there or something's happened. But it needs to be early on, so a program needs to be introduced. There's no harm in doing it in colleges, absolutely no harm at all, because you've got girls who are being told 'You can go to college, get an education, but still then you're going to marry your cousin'. So that whole conditioning is still there. They're still going to be forced. So of course, the information, the education still needs to be there as well...(Survivor)

You need to deliver training sessions to the community, schools, colleges, sure starts, other organisations and partnerships with multi-agencies, police, volunteers, we recently went to the mosques. It was like 'We don't need to know, we are fine where we are', but [the support organisation] insisted and insisted and said 'It is not just for the women, it is for men also, it is beneficial for everyone', but [the support organisation] are still trying to get their feet through the door yet. It has been difficult, but mainly with mosque leaders... there is a lack of response from some mosque leaders because there is a bit of truth in it, which they don't want to hear (South-Asian Female Support Worker).

If you identify these things for children, they will learn what is right and what is wrong. Children will then act as a guard against themselves, so they won't become a victim themselves. And also it might help to identify things that are wrong for their peers, if there is a friend in need, and to know what to do if a situation like that arises (South-Asian Female Support Worker).

Other participants suggested other preventative and community-based initiatives that will help to encourage dialogue and information exchange about VAW:

Go out and talk to the community about a range of issues – that's what I do. I go out with hate crime officers and raise awareness. Since I've been involved within the Honour-Based

Violence Forum, I've been working to raise awareness within the communities, to get people in the community to talk about honour-based violence, with some success with some small groups, people who want to talk about it, but it's how we'd open that up to the wider community, and how we reach people who are victims, who probably never come to an event we would put on, the public don't access normal services, and how we engage parents (White British Female Police Officer).

Charity events at [support organisations] and plays inform women about the real-life situations and dangers that exist out there...Charity events and plays like this empowers women and tells them what to do when they are faced with a situation (South-Asian Female Support Worker).

I find it difficult to approach – how to tackle honour-based violence – it is a dilemma for me – so I try to engage with the community affairs in a positive way, to build up relationships with the police and to build up confidence. I'm very mindful that I have to be careful who I approach because there are certain individuals who would deny that it is happening or they will try to play honour-based violence down and they will not have any effect on the local community. So what I do is rather low level stuff and try to get information out to the local community and raising awareness, doing leaflets, displaying contact numbers and do the community talks with local women to spread the word about honour-based violence. I helped to organise a conference with mainly agencies to discuss honour-based violence, but I think the issue still lies with the communities and for communities to try and make that change, and stronger individuals to help to achieve that. Finding those strong individuals is extremely difficult because I know there will be certain people trying to intervene when I get there... (White British Female Police Officer).

Discussion

This study highlights the inequalities and discrimination Muslim women experience that continue to affect their lives and compound their sense of abuse. The literature review highlighted that BME women often experience 'double victimisation' in that they are abused in the home and experience discrimination by state agencies when reporting abuse and seeking intervention (Gill, 2004; Thiara and Gill, 2010). By failing to recognise the additional obstacles BME women experience when reporting abuse in comparison to white women, it can compound their sense of victimisation. However, this study highlights that some Muslim women can experience 'triple victimisation' or three levels of violence – not only in the home or insensitivity at the hands of state agencies (Burman et al, 2004; Gill, 2004), but a layer in between – Muslim women can experience a *third* form of violence and discrimination in the (private) religious domain when approaching religious institutions for support and

intervention. It confirms existing research that some mosques collude in the oppression of Muslim women by not discussing VAW with their congregation, or encouraging survivors to stay within their marriages because it is a ‘private matter’ and that they should not seek outside intervention (Macey, 1999: 50). It also supports existing research that some mosques prevent the participation of women, trivialise their issues and are both resistant and difficult to engage with when it concerns VAW (Izzidien, 2008: 78). In the participants’ experiences, mosques tended to be very male-dominated. The institutional and organisational structure of mosques supports patriarchy and is very reminiscent of Dobash and Dobash’s classic discussion of patriarchal structure and ideology (Dobash & Dobash, 1979: 43). Patriarchal structure is determined by the hierarchy of the unit that assigns power roles, leadership and privilege to particular individuals, whilst at the same time assigning subordinate roles to others. The authors explain that roles of leadership are institutionalised and assigned to men based on status or the possibility to achieve high status in the community. The structure of the group then determines who holds power, occupies positions of subservience and who is next in line to positions of authority. In the current context, Muslim men use mosques to legitimise and further their own agendas and enhance their status in the community. As far as the structure goes, women have no role to play in the structural unit. Women have little power or authority to manage, define or challenge policies by mosque committees. This is a useful tool to maintain women’s subordination as they are confined to the lower ranks, unable to acquire positions of power and unable to communicate ideas ‘from the bench and the pulpit’ (Dobash & Dobash, 1979: 43). The patriarchal structure is then supported by the ideology. The continuation and support of the structure is dependent only if they are ‘accepted by the many’ meaning that the structure is reinforced by acceptance, so

long as the people who operate within that institutional structure support it. This acceptance has negative consequences for women. Not only does acceptance legitimise the subordination of women, it creates an environment where women cannot challenge inequalities either – if Muslim women challenge inequalities, they are made to feel unnatural, immoral, or at worst, they will be met with resistance and violence. This is similar to the survivor who wanted to pursue her activism and highlight HBV and forced marriages to children at her mosque. She was subsequently met with comments such as ‘You are upsetting the men’, to ‘leave the sessions on honour-based violence and forced marriages from the Islamic perspective’ and that ‘they’re still waiting for [an] apology’ because her ‘views were unacceptable’. She had faced intervention both to prevent and punish deviance for straying away from the role expected of her. Ultimately, male intervention led to her expulsion from the mosque and she was only able to return after petitions had been signed. Even then, it was only on a ‘trial period’ to ensure that the mosque committee could monitor what she taught.

In the excerpts, some key agents provided nuanced explanations of the resistance that they face towards the running of DV prevention classes in mosques. However, in some of those excerpts, it was also clear that some Imams are active in monitoring and finding appropriate support for those women experiencing DV. There was even evidence that some Imams had actively supported women experiencing DV. One should therefore avoid an over-simplistic analysis by declaring that resistance to DV work is because such work poses a ‘threat to patriarchy’ within mosques. From the data presented, it is perhaps more complicated than this. Intervention by some mosques actually demonstrates a resistance to patriarchy and so the inclusion of this understanding is also needed in order to provide fair treatment to the issue of the role

of mosques in supporting VAW strategies. Claims that there must be more women within mosques also need placing in their cultural and political context. When some key agents state that the solution is to have more women make decisions in mosques, one must question whether this is stated from a western cultural perspective and whether the traditional South-Asian cultural perspective underlies an assumption that shows resistance to this approach? We cannot assume that there is but one way to advance the struggle to counter VAW in mosques because the data suggests that some mosques are trying to engage with VAW strategies, although admittedly in different and frustratingly very slow ways. Having female instructors in mosques violates the pedagogical and instructional approach towards teaching men religion and religious practices. No one can deny that patriarchy underlies all of these aspects, but would Imams be open to other methods or forms of instruction about issues relating to DV? What would be the reaction if male support workers led and instructed DV prevention programmes within mosques on behalf of women's organisations? Would they see a better response than the female key agents did in the sample?

It seems that DV organisations are able to work and develop collaborative (and culturally appropriate) approaches with mosques because the answers how to achieve this are actually embedded within the interview excerpts themselves. There is evidence that some mosques include women in the teaching of Islamic classes, some Imams do consider the inclusion of instruction on DV and some mosques do have UK-born Imams who have an understanding of VAW issues. Although key agents and survivors had criticised mosques for their particularly piecemeal approach to VAW strategies, the little work undertaken is nevertheless an integral part in the development of strategies to counter VAW. By including more instruction on DV

within sermons and by including more women to teach within mosques, this will help to deal with the topic of VAW in religious institutions in the long term.

The data highlights that mosque committees control the subjects taught within mosques and in religious sermons, revealing an account of ‘organised religion’ where certain matters are selected for discussion, while others are not. Religion is a ‘higher’ law and some religious leaders can (sometimes purposefully) confuse matters of religion and culture. While a number of authors consider ‘religion’ to be a part of ‘culture’ in its wider sense (see e.g. Raday, 2003: 667), the problem is that the misapplication of religious teachings between husbands and wives are being driven by cultural practices not derived from religion. Those ‘cultural’ practices do not form part of ‘religious’ instructions at all. The majority of Muslims living in Britain are from South Asia and some cultural practices stemming from South Asia are detrimental to women, even though Islam itself preaches that men and women are equal. Those that support forced marriages or the subordination of women use ‘religion’ amongst their pious communities to defend their positions, especially when it concerns defending cultural practices or maintaining power roles. Consequently, religion is ‘interpreted’ and ‘defined’ by men and impact Muslim women very negatively and disproportionately (Macey, 1999: 51). Mosques also exercise power over employees by controlling what Imams can discuss during Friday prayers. Some mosques, therefore, silence Imams. The threat and pressure placed upon them (that they will lose their jobs) contributes to this (Izzidien, 2008: 78). This made it difficult for some of the participants to challenge attitudes and address VAW directly within mosques and through Imams.

This study supports existing research that mosques and Imams have an important role to play in changing people’s beliefs, attitudes and perceptions on VAW

(Khan, 2006: 82; Izzidien, 2008: 77; Begikhani et al, 2010: 93). There were pockets of some positive work undertaken by some religious leaders, but this was considered very limited and short-term. Mosques could draw inspiration from the Muslim Family Safety Project (MFSP) in London (Ontario, Canada) concerning a community-based collaborative project within the local Muslim community funded by local government and charities. The project was set up in February 2004 at the London Muslim Mosque with over 250 members of the Muslim community and representatives of local women's support organisations participating. The objectives, *inter alia*, included empowering Muslim women to define and articulate their needs and to enable the development of prevention and intervention services to meet the needs of Muslim women (Baobaid & Hamed, 2010: 47). Imams took a central role and led by example by undertaking professional training and knowledge exchange with accredited practitioners in the field of DV. The collaborative approach enabled members of the Muslim community to learn not only from one another but also from local service providers, making it possible for those involved to exchange knowledge. Similarly, service providers were able to obtain a deeper understanding of the experiences, needs and values of the Muslim community. Imams were also able to generate valuable knowledge by improving their understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of VAW within the Muslim community, thereby supporting meaningful strategies for change and reporting abuse (Baobaid & Hamed, 2010: 48). This created a formal partnership with existing organisations and projects that served to support Muslim women. Imams were made aware of their roles and the important role they play in the prevention and intervention in DV cases. The training also explained how Imams were expected to work in collaboration with other professionals in the field, so that a consistent and coordinated community response could be achieved. It enabled Imams to intervene in

cases referred to them and where they suspected that DV was occurring within a family. It enabled Imams to devise exit plans and discourage any couple counselling until the safety of the woman had been guaranteed.

The essence of the collaboration was one of mutual understanding, respect and partnership and to support the development of a safe environment for Muslim women. The MFSP required the involvement of Muslim men *and* women in the community (Baobaid & Hamed, 2010: 49). Although the main strategy concerned empowering women through awareness-raising activities and women's support services, a significant part of the strategy concerned the inclusion of Muslim men. The involvement of Muslim men in the development of MFSP had a 'positive impact' on the acceptance of the project by the Muslim community because it helped build 'a sense of ownership' towards the project and supported the stance that the challenges of VAW is the responsibility for the community to deal with collectively. By engaging men and women, the issue of VAW gained further legitimacy by enabling the creation of an environment where Muslim women affected by abuse felt that they could seek support directly from those at the mosque (Baobaid & Hamed, 2010: 49).

There are additional approaches and strategies that mosques can adopt. Imams need to be a resource for the people and to understand 'Fiqh' (i.e. philosophy of Islamic law based on the Quran and Sunnah) in order to respond to VAW from Islamic perspectives. Mosques could sponsor educational programmes on VAW, inviting mainstream service providers and support organisations into mosques to educate the Muslim community about their services. These activities should take place in mosques and other places where members of the Muslim public are able to gather or have access. These educational programs could be delivered several times each year to teach members of the congregation how to identify risk and abuse (Khan,

2006: 82), devise safety plans and where they can access support. Strategies should also be put into place to ensure appropriate access to Muslim support organisations, shelter and accommodation for victims (Khan, 2006: 82). This could be funded through the allocation of a certain percentage of donations, charity funds and the obligatory 'Zakat' (i.e. alms, the fourth pillar of Islam) to help victims of DV. This will ultimately enable mosques to become approachable and safer places for women to disclose abuse. Displaying brochures, posters and monthly newsletters from women's organisations, as well as bulletin boards that include contact numbers for support organisations would help to improve approachability. Posters and brochures should also be translated into different languages to ensure information reaches a wider number of people. However, lack of resources and funding could mean that projects between mosques and voluntary organisations will be piece-meal as is currently the case (Izzidien, 2008: 78). This will restrict networking and partnerships if additional funding from government is not provided for in this important area.

Imams could also lead by example by volunteering to serve on the board of directors for local DV support organisations or become crisis volunteers in their local areas. Leading by example will encourage other worshippers to do the same, including men. Perhaps most importantly, mosques need to include more women on their committees so that women's issues can feature more prominently within the overall structure, philosophy and delivery of sermons (MINAB, 2012: 31). For some mosques, this would require a complete overhaul of the power dynamics that currently exist, but addressing this imbalance will enable Imams to take advice on women's rights and to be a safe resource for victims. All this can be achieved without the fear that Imams will lose their jobs, an issue that was identified with some participants in this study.

In response to these concerns, Muslim women in some countries have taken the initiative by establishing feminist projects and all-female mosques to facilitate worship ‘on women’s terms’ so that the needs of Muslim women are met (Lytton, 2016). This includes Copenhagen, Denmark, which has witnessed the creation of the Mariam Mosque, which houses women in both management and prayer leading roles. Interestingly, all-female mosques is not a new idea – in China, women-only mosques have survived since 1820 (BBC News, 2016). At the Daughters of Eve Annual Conference held in Bradford on 20 May 2016, the Muslim Women’s Council officially launched a fundraising strategy after it had announced plans for a women-led mosque (not a women-only mosque, men and families will be welcomed) (www.muslimwomenscouncil.org.uk). In the face of lack of support from male-led mosques, women-led mosques may be the only way forward, although women’s continued exclusion from mosque management positions in Britain could be challenged under the Equality Act 2010 on the grounds of sex discrimination and/or victimisation in employment opportunities, in the provision of a service for worshippers, or as guests of a private association. Muslim women might consider taking a test case to the courts against their local mosques who operate as a ‘men’s only club’, and have been preventing Muslim women from entering or becoming involved in the day-to-day activities or management of such organisations (Sanghani, 2015). Although such a test case would likely rile patriarchal forces within those mosques, if successful it could send a powerful message that mosques must treat Muslim women equally and in a non-discriminatory manner. The MINAB Report highlighted that 83% of the mosques who took part in the consultation did not have a policy on equality and diversity (MINAB, 2012: 24-25), demonstrating a lack of

vision on equality. Lack of policies on equality and diversity will surely improve the chances of a successful test case in the courts.

Given the proposals made in this paper for the role that mosques can play in addressing the problem of VAW in Canada and Denmark, and given the evidence presented that there is the possibility of this type of work in the British context, how is the conclusion that mosques are the problem supported? What is it about the British context that has not enabled mosques to become part of the solution as they have elsewhere? Is it that the participants see this from an ethnocentric perspective, where they are evaluating other cultures according to their own preconceptions characterised by the attitude that their own cultural group is superior? As noted in the methodology, 15 key agents had been drawn from BME and South-Asian backgrounds. This is in addition to the 8 survivors from South-Asian backgrounds. This was, therefore, a study of ‘cultural insiders’ explaining their experiences and interaction with mosques, which were also validated by the experiences of ‘cultural outsiders’ and who made up nearly half of the other sample. It is therefore submitted that the key agents did not view the issues through an ethnocentric lens because a large proportion of them were drawn from South-Asian Muslim communities. Key informants believed that mosques are stagnant institutions with outdated styles of teaching, who fail to engage with VAW strategies in order to protect Muslim women. Mosques are community centres with a lot of power and influence over congregations and some seem to demonstrate a strong reluctance to change. These sharp images of mosques being unyielding patriarchal, gendered, institutions undermines their true potential – like the mosques in Canada, Denmark and other places, mosques in Britain have so much potential for spirituality, growth, change and recognition for women’s equality. Instead, Britain’s mosques follow a patriarchal model with poor access and

representation for women, which was confirmed by MINAB (2012). There is an urgent need to revitalise mosques to meet the demands of the 21st century and to embrace women's rights wholeheartedly.

The main challenge in this area obviously is to engage mosques and Imams to undertake positive work on VAW. However, resistance may also come from women's organisations. Radical feminists often argue for a division between the secular and the sacred; that religion is generally not supportive of women; and that all too frequently sacred texts are used to justify the abuse of women (Baobaid & Hamed, 2010: 56). A major concern about any collaboration between mosques and women's organisations is that radical feminists will argue that, within a religious context, collaboration would compromise their position and their core beliefs on equality. There may be some hesitancy from women's organisations who may question whether a true collaboration can really be achieved if mosques remain committed to an explicitly patriarchal doctrine (Baobaid & Hamed, 2010: 56). Culture, religion and patriarchy allocate more power to men than women and so no level ground can truly be achieved. In this study, there was little evidence that the safety of women featured prominently within some mosques. Furthermore, the media continues to sensationalise representations of Islam, whether it concerns radicalisation, Shari'a Councils or VAW and this may discourage women's organisations from working with mosques. Their concern would be that they are effectively 'being asked to support abused women in a way that upholds the very systems that inevitably puts women at risk' (Baobaid & Hamed, 2010: 56). Any wide collaboration or partnership between women's organisations and mosques may therefore be optimistic. If so, the challenge then is to pursue alternative routes if mosques and women's organisations are reluctant to work together. Other, more creative, routes need to be proposed. The Muslim community itself needs to take a

more hands-on approach where education and raising awareness must be a priority. Muslim professionals and activists, men and women, need to promote education within their local communities, informing that VAW is unacceptable and that Islam does not condone DV, HBV or forced marriages. Information could be disseminated through leaflets, posters and made available in multiple languages and in places likely to reach Muslim women. This can include community centres and Asian shops. TV programmes, dramas, Asian radio and plays should dedicate time on such issues. The government must also ensure a system where Muslim women are able to communicate easily with state agencies, as some may not speak fluent English. The government should look to increase its pool of translators in all public agencies, so that Muslim women are able to disclose abuse, understand their legal rights and understand that help and support is available. All public sector organisations, including the police, social services, hospitals and housing departments should have suitable translators available to provide help and support BME women as separate studies indicate that survivors within the Muslim community specifically have interpretive issues with public sector departments (Idriss, forthcoming). Another recommendation concerns the availability of shelters to accommodate the cultural needs of Muslim women (including prayer facilities and dietary requirements). This would enable Muslim women to access support, protect themselves and live a life in accordance with their Islamic beliefs.

Conclusion

This paper is a contribution to the academic debate surrounding the role of mosques in raising awareness about VAW. The results presented in this study are not

necessarily unique to mosques and may equally be applicable to Christian Churches and other religious institutions (Potter, 2007). Dealing with VAW within Muslim communities is a very challenging experience for women and for the practitioners working in the field. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that some mosques are not properly serving the needs of Muslim women. This reluctance and denial stems from a combination of factors – culture, ‘religion’ and patriarchy (Macey, 1999: 52). The Muslim community must play a more influential role in highlighting the problem of VAW. It is increasingly becoming more and more difficult for mosques to ignore the issue of VAW and Imams must use the opportunity within their weekly Friday sermons to educate and inform worshippers about VAW from Islamic perspectives. However, a lot of work needs to be done and this will be complicated further if women’s organisations and mosques show a reluctance to work with one another. Alternative avenues must be pursued to enable important messages about VAW to penetrate the Muslim community, if mosques are unwilling to do this themselves.

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