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Design: B: justice / power dynamics / balance

[H/L] Faith and coercive control

[S/L] Natasha Mulvihill shares the faith-related findings from her interviews with individuals who have experienced coercive control

[P/Q] Listening to our participants, we recognised that faith identity can inform understandings of justice but also that faith institutions, practices and communities may be instrumental in providing justice

For some of our participants, their intimate partner perpetrator was also a faith leader

[Article begins]

‘Coercive control’ is arguably the defining characteristic of domestic, or intimate partner, abuse. In 2007, Evan Stark described how perpetrators use coercive control to undermine, restrict and ultimately ‘entrap’ victims in a ‘condition of unfreedom’.¹ Commonly, though not exclusively, control is exercised by men over women and this behaviour can therefore be understood within the broader patriarchal configuration of gender relations. Perpetrators often have a ‘repertoire of control tactics’.² These may include physical, sexual or financial abuse, combined with efforts to isolate victims from friends and family and to secure their compliance by, for example, threats to hurt children or companion animals.² Less well recognised is the way in which perpetrators may use faith to coerce. This article presents the findings of a study that I carried out in 2021 with colleagues at the University of Bristol into faith and coercive control.^{3,4} We explored the exercise of control by intimate partners, but also by family, faith communities and faith leaders.

The work emerged from an earlier 2015-2018 project (the ‘Justice Project’³) looking at what justice means, and how justice is sought and experienced, by individuals who have experienced gender-based violence. One strand of the Justice Project involved semi-structured interviews with 251 victim-survivors of physical, sexual, emotional and ‘honour’ based abuse or harassment, experienced as children or adults, and more than 60 practitioners working to support victim-survivors.

Listening to our participants, we recognised that faith identity can inform understandings of justice but also that faith institutions, practices and

communities may be instrumental in providing justice. For example, for women of faith seeking to end a marriage in which they have experienced domestic abuse, it can be as important to receive religious, as well as civil, recognition of divorce or separation. That recognition, commonly through a religious tribunal, court or panel, may identify the perpetrator as responsible for the marriage breakdown and may enable women (and sometimes also their children) to continue full participation in faith practice.^{5,6}

In 2020-2022, we were funded by Oak Foundation⁶ to investigate emerging (and under-recognised) forms of coercive control. This allowed us to re-visit the interview transcripts from the Justice Project and to conduct new data collection. We identified 59 interviews from the Justice project that mentioned issues related to faith, and within that sample, 27 interviews that discussed faith and coercive control specifically. We also created an online anonymous survey for individuals who had experienced or witnessed coercive control within a faith context to share their experiences. We sought feedback on the draft survey from relevant domestic abuse and faith organisations, before releasing it online for 8 weeks. We received responses in relation to Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Judaism and Buddhism.

Following analysis of this collective data, and in relation to coercive control in an intimate partner context, we identified two distinct forms of experience. First, participants described how perpetrators would use faith as one of a number of levers of control. For example, they may draw on holy texts to dictate behaviour; they may prevent victims from practicing their faith or coerce them to practice in particular ways; they may seek to undermine the victim's faith by suggesting God does not exist or God does not love them. Such behaviour can be termed 'spiritual abuse'.^{7,8} Here, the abuse in relation to faith forms "part of an assemblage of perpetrator tactics... but religion did not appear to sit at the heart of the abuser's controlling behaviour" (Mulvihill et al., 2022, P.9). So the perpetrator may additionally engage in emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse or financial abuse, but without reference to faith.

This is qualitatively different from the experience described by a smaller group of participants within our sample. For this group, a "distorted narrative of religion underpins all aspects of the perpetrator's behaviour (Mulvihill et al., 2022, p.4), such that religion becomes the "central and subsuming dynamic (op cit., p.9). Drawing on Sharp (2014), we define this as "religious coercive control" (Mulvihill et al., 2022, p.4). Here, explicit reference to faith is used to justify sexual violence, physical violence and curtailing of social contacts, for example. The perpetrator commonly draws on ideas of religious marriage or

male leadership in the family: for example, regulating social activities and dress code and demanding sex, included unwanted sexual practices, as a ‘marital obligation’.

Victims of religious coercive control – and possibly victims of spiritual abuse – may be conflicted about approaching secular organisations for help, fearing this would constitute betrayal of their perpetrator or faith community, or both. In addition, secular organisations may not have the required faith literacy to appreciate the additional dynamics of coercion in this context (although many are investing in such training). At the same time, secular organisations can offer victims practical and expert advice and have the advantage of ‘neutrality’, which some victims may welcome.

For some of our participants, their intimate partner perpetrator was also a faith leader: we had a small additional number who told us that their perpetrator was now in training to be a faith leader. Commonly, religious leaders are confident, authoritative and socially skilled: this can make it hard for others in the community to discern their abusive behaviour. They can therefore better control the victim and the narrative, should the victim try to speak out.

For other participants, the faith leader drew on religious teaching on marriage, and/or notions of shame, to dissuade them from leaving their abusive partner. This influence could be compounded by familial and friendship networks within the community, meaning that perpetrators might be ‘tipped off’ or protected, and a victim ostracised, if they disclosed abuse.

The predominantly male leadership in many faith communities was noted by some participants as problematic. Victim-survivors, already traumatised by men in their intimate and family life, could find that lack of support from male faith leaders strongly undermined their confidence in the religious community, if not in God. Post-abuse, they could find it hard to re-invest trust in new places of worship with male leadership.

Our wider data set demonstrated how families could also use faith to discourage leaving an abusive marriage or even entering a marriage as a way of religiously ‘resolving’ sexual violence: for example, a young person being forced to marry someone older in the religious community who has sexually groomed them.

Finally, while faith communities can of course be a source of support for victim-survivors, we heard also how these communities can silence, minimise and isolate those who speak out about coercive control and domestic abuse. The same tactics may be applied to anyone within the community who seeks to support the victim. For this reason, our research participants called for more

training and open discussion about abuse, so that faith communities can become better at identifying behaviour markers and more confident in supporting the victim-survivor in a way that is safe and empowering. Participants also requested resourced, trained and independent safeguarding leads in all places of worship. And they felt it important to offer a supporter within the faith community, who could provide a non-judgmental and listening ear for those considering leaving, in the process of leaving, or recovering from, a coercive relationship.

To read more from the Faith and Coercive Control project, please refer to this practitioner briefing:

[Faith and Coercive Control: A briefing for faith communities and for practitioners working with victim-survivors of coercive control — University of Bristol](#)

and this Open Access article:

[UK victim-survivor experiences of intimate partner spiritual abuse and religious coercive control and implications for practice – Natasha Mulvihill, Nadia Aghtaie, Andrea Matolcsi, Marianne Hester, 2022 \(sagepub.com\)](#)

References

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² Mulvihill N, Aghtaie N, Matolcsi A, Hester M. (2022). UK victim-survivor experiences of intimate partner spiritual abuse and religious coercive control and implications for practice. *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 2022. [Online.] <https://doi.org/10.1177/17488958221112057> (accessed 5 February 2024)

³ Justice, inequalities and gender-based violence project. Economic and Social Research Council. [Online.] <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/projects/justice-inequality-and-gender-based-violence>

⁴ Understanding and responding to coercive control project. Oak Foundation grant. [Online.] <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/projects/unrestricted-programme-support-on-understanding-and-responding-to> (accessed 5 February 2024)

⁵ Aghtaie N, Mulvihill N, Abrahams H, Hester M. Defining and enabling ‘justice’ for victims/survivors of domestic violence and abuse: the views of practitioners working within Muslim, Jewish and Catholic faiths. *Religion and Gender* 2020; 10(2): 155-181.

⁶ Mulvihill N. How far do faith communities facilitate justice for victims of domestic violence? [blog] London: London School of Economics 2018. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2018/06/how-far-do-faith-communities-facilitate-justice-for-victims-of-domestic-violence/> (accessed 5 February 2024)

⁷ Johnson D, van Vonderen J. *The subtle power of spiritual abuse*. Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers; 1991.

⁸ Oakley L, Humphreys J. *Escaping the maze of spiritual abuse*. London: SPCK Publishing; 2019

Biography

Dr Natasha Mulvihill is an Associate Professor in Criminology at the University of Bristol. She writes on issues including domestic abuse and coercive control, sexual violence, perpetrators, and the sex industry. See: <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/persons/natasha-mulvihill>