



Mulvihill, N., Aghtaie, N., Matolcsi, A., & Hester, M. (2022). *Faith and Coercive Control: A briefing for faith communities and for practitioners working with victim-survivors of coercive control*. School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol.

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Faith and Coercive Control

A briefing for faith communities and for practitioners working with victim-survivors of coercive control

Findings from a study conducted by Dr Natasha Mulvihill, Dr Nadia Aghtaie, Dr Andrea Matolcsi and Professor Marianne Hester at the Centre for Gender and Violence Research, University of Bristol.

Funded by the Oak Foundation.

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Introduction

Coercive control within intimate relationships refers to pattern of behaviours which, taken together, serve to undermine the personhood and restrict the freedom of an individual.¹ These behaviours may include physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and/or financial abuse and threats as well as monitoring through stalking, harassment and tracking a victim's movements online.

Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 in England and Wales makes controlling or coercive behaviour within an intimate or familial relationship a criminal offence. The law requires that the behaviour should occur on at least two occasions between connected individuals² and have a serious effect on the victim.

In 2020, researchers at the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol were funded by the Oak Foundation to deepen understanding of the nature, measurement and impact of coercive control. This has involved several strands of work, including the use of medicines and drugs (so-called 'chemical restraints') and threats, abuse and killing of victim's companion animals ('pets'). The Oak funding enabled us in 2021 to launch an online survey on faith and coercive control, to conduct interviews with victim-survivors, and also to re-analyse interview data collected by the authors as part of the Justice, Gender Based Violence and Inequalities Project ('Justice Project'), 2015-2018. This briefing therefore draws both on re-analysis of the Justice Project work and new the data collected through 2021 (see p.17, 'Methods in Brief').

The purpose of this work is not to single out religious practice in general, or one faith in particular, as coercive. We recognise that the practice of faith and spirituality and the involvement in communities of faith, can provide comfort, meaning and hope for many victim-survivors of coercive control. Rather, this research explores how faith can be used as a tool of coercion by some individuals, including intimate partners, family members, religious leaders, and by communities, to threaten, manipulate, silence and dominate victims, as well to suppress or punish those who seek to help them.

In this briefing, we present the findings under four headings: Intimate partner; Family; Religious leader; and Community. We summarise how these different actors can both perpetrate, and be complicit bystanders in the exercise of, coercive control. We present recommendations for action articulated by victim-survivors themselves and list contact details for further information and support.

We hope that this briefing will further raise awareness about coercive control, so that faith communities are better able to identify and support victims and to challenge perpetrators and attitudes which endorse or minimise abuse. We welcome open dissemination and use of this document in training and discussions. Foremost, we are grateful to our participants who came forward with their stories. It is through their experiences that we are able to write this briefing and share their recommendations for change. For this reason, we draw extensively on their words.³

¹ Stark, E. 2007. *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

² Rights of Women (2015) advise that, "you are personally connected to your abuser if you are in an intimate personal relationship with them, for example if they are your partner, spouse or someone who you have a romantic or sexual relationship with" (see: <https://rightsofwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ROW-%C2%AD-Legal-Guide-Coercive-control-final.pdf>). The requirement to be cohabiting with that person was removed by amendment within Part 1 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-abuse-bill-2020-factsheets/amendment-to-the-controlling-or-coercive-behaviour-offence>). This still means, however, that individuals outside of these 'connected' relationship contexts, or indeed groups, could not be convicted for coercive and controlling behaviour under Section 76. This may be a gap in current criminal law in England and Wales.

³ In this briefing, participants' details (gender, faith, age) are deliberately omitted following their quotes to promote anonymity and focus also on faith practice in general.

Findings in brief

Types of coercive control, justified with reference to faith

Focus	Examples
Intimate partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spiritual abuse (leveraging faith as one among a number of tools of coercion, because faith is important to the victim). - Religious coercive control (perpetrator uses a totalising narrative of faith to justify physical, emotional and sexual abuse and control).
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coercive parenting, justified by faith (including harsh physical discipline; undue controls on dress, hair styles and engagement in popular culture; rejecting or repressing sexual identities; emotional abuse). - Coercing early marriage due to pre-marital sexual contact, even if this contact was initiated in an exploitative context. - Supporting abusive marriage as better than separation.
Religious leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drawing on the authority of office, on networks, on charisma and community leadership roles to coerce, and to conceal that coercion. - Where an intimate partner abuser is also a faith leader. - Pressuring members of faith community to remain in an abusive marriage.
Faith community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supporting coercive behaviours (for example, isolating faith members from 'non-believers'; tacitly supporting the behaviours listed below). - Silencing and minimising victims of coercive control. - Punishing those who seek to support victims of coercive control. - Non-intervention (being a silent witness to coercion). - Intervening in a way that claims to be 'faith-informed' but puts victims at risk of further or increased harm.

Victim-survivors' recommendations for change

Recommendation 1: Greater awareness and understanding within faith organisations about the nature of coercive control (as well as forms of abuse broadly) and more open discussion, including mandatory, meaningful and regularly updated training for all in positions of influence.

Recommendation 2: Encouraging faith community members to move from being silent witnesses to active allies for victims, but in a way that is safe and attentive to victims' wishes.

Recommendation 3: Unequivocal condemnation of abuse and of perpetrators of abuse by faith leaders and a clear directive from faith leaders that victim-survivors are supported in the decision to physically leave an abusive relationship.

Recommendation 4: The offer of a dedicated supporter for the victim-survivor, from within the faith community, who can provide non-judgmental, faith literate support and a listening ear.

Recommendation 5: Consideration about how to manage the faith practice of a victim-survivor and a perpetrator, alleged or proven, who seek to practice in the same setting.

Recommendation 6: To consider how predominantly male leadership within a faith setting may present barriers for some victim-survivors in approaching faith leaders to report abuse, or to seek support for recovery following abuse.

Recommendations 7: Safeguarding officers should be resourced, trained and able to make independent judgments.

Recommendation 8: Stronger accountability structures to report abuse within faith communities, and by faith leaders, and confidence that reports will be dealt with fairly, without fear or favour. Regular, robust and transparent publication of case and outcome data to enable monitoring.

Intimate partner

Reading through our research participants' accounts, we identified two types of control being exerted in the intimate partner context. The first is '**spiritual abuse**'⁴, which we see as one technique among many that a perpetrator uses to exert control (other forms include, physical abuse; emotional abuse; or financial abuse, for example). The second we term '**religious coercive control**'⁵, which is where faith becomes the totalising narrative which informs all other forms of control in the relationship. We recognise that there may be some slippage between these categories in practice, but we believe that they are useful in communicating the lived experiences of victims of these forms of abuse.

Turning first to **spiritual abuse**, we identified different levers used by perpetrators. For example:

Lever	Participant example
<i>Use of holy texts</i>	<p>"He would use bible verses against me. He loved the verses about men ruling over wives, and about submission."</p> <p>"He would use extracts from the religion, from the Koran, and said, 'You're made of our rib, out of the man's ribs and so we are superior. You follow our way. You listen to what I do. The wife belongs at home.' He would interpret religious context in a different way. I kind of recognised that because that's not what my father or male members in the household did."</p>
<i>Preventing victim from practising</i>	"Whereas before we were married, my husband raised no objections to my churchgoing, and we were married in church, this changed after the wedding. He said my duty was to him and if he wanted me to spend Sundays in bed with him, that was what I must do."
<i>Hate speech</i>	In interview, one Jewish victim-survivor recounted how her abusive partner, as part of the verbal abuse he perpetrated against her, invoked her Jewish identity. For example, he told that her she, "should have died along with others in gas chambers", and called her and their son, "disgusting Jews".
<i>Gaslighting/undermining victim's sense of reality</i>	"Because my husband used his 'faith' to justify his behaviour, I also used it to excuse him. I said to myself, 'It's what he believes', instead of saying, 'This is not right'. I knew that wasn't right, but it got me very muddled. I am not good at arguing. I am not good at arguing a point. I can on paper, but not in person. Yes. I just got to the point where I just couldn't, like; I couldn't come up with anything. It was very confusing."
<i>Threats</i>	"He fed me this story that if we separated, the mosque [leaders] would not allow our boys to attend the mosque. Because no-one wants single parents."

⁴ In the UK Christian context, Lisa Oakley has written extensively about spiritual abuse within personal and congregational contexts. See: Oakley, L. and Kimmond, K., 2013. *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Oakley, L., 2018. Understanding Spiritual Abuse, [online 16 February 2018] *Church Times*; Oakley, L. and Humphreys, J., 2019. *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*. London: SPCK Publishing.

⁵ See Mulvihill, N., Aghtaie, N., Matolcsi, A., and Hester, M., [forthcoming], 'UK victim-survivor experiences of intimate partner spiritual abuse and religious coercive control and implications for practice' in *Criminology and Criminal Justice*. We acknowledge work by Shane Sharp (2014), who uses this term 'religious coercive control'. See Sharp, S., 2014. Resisting Religious Coercive Control. *Violence Against Women*, 20(12), pp.1407-1427. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1077801214557956>

In seeking support, victims of intimate partner coercive control in a faith context may experience added barriers. Victims may be told that speaking to secular authorities is a 'betrayal' of their faith community; they may be referred only to professionals who are sympathetic to the faith or professionals who are also members of the faith community; and victims may struggle with reconciling the requirement to forgive, with needing help.

"I found getting support from church and secular [domestic abuse] charities more confusing as I was getting conflicting advice. In the end, I ignored the church as it had only made it worse and dragged the separation process out further and, at times, put me and my son's life at risk."

"One of my friends spoke about [their coercive experiences of faith] in therapy when [they considered] self-harming. But the therapist was selected by their parents and was extremely unsympathetic."

"It was so hard to know where to go and whom to talk to. There's the whole Christian concept of love and forgiveness, so I felt that it was part of my Christian duty to keep on loving and forgiving him [her perpetrator]."

Intimate partner abuse has a long-term impact on relationships as well as personal faith:

"I find it hard to trust men now. Hard to trust in leaders. Hard to trust churches due to three not supporting me very well. My perpetrator is now training to be a vicar."

"During the later years of my marriage, when I had been to college and got a full-time job, I developed a habit of going in to empty churches before work or during the lunch hour, and praying to become a better, stronger, person. When I finally found the courage, through a love affair, to leave home and live alone, I felt very guilty."

"In later years, after the children had left home, I just wanted to die. I used to think about the different methods, and which would be the best way."

Second, a number of participants described how their abuser harnessed a religious narrative to exercise totalising control over them and their children. We term this **religious coercive control**.⁶ For example, one participant told us how her perpetrator dictated her practice in church (she was not allowed to speak in church; she could only teach women and children); she was overruled on family discipline; she was not allowed to express an opinion - her role was only to learn and listen to her husband; and she was sexually coerced despite having a medical condition which made sex painful, because he demand his 'rights' as a husband and implied she was denying them.

⁶ See footnote 5.

Another participant explained how her controlling husband became convinced that he had a particular mission to preach the Gospel. His attempts to take his message to different churches led to multiple house moves across the country and acrimony, as the churches he sought to proselytise, rejected his approach:

“Eventually, I started to see through it all myself, and take my own stand against his nonsense, but this was when things went from nasty, to very nasty. The covert bullying, manipulation and name calling to which I had long been subjected, escalated to the point where I was being regularly woken up and harangued in the middle of the night, told what a wicked woman I was, how I was bringing the gospel into disrepute, dishonouring the Lord Jesus, and destroying my husband's reputation. He forbade me to go to church (but I kept on going anyway, even though this put me in danger from him), and daily tried to force me to pray with him and read the Bible with him, which I refused to do on account of his behaviour. He was very regularly using texts from the Bible to shame me, criticise me, and prove to me what a worthless and wicked person I must be.”

It is important to note that, for some victims of religious coercive control, the behaviour starts *after* the marriage. This makes it particularly difficult for victims both to leave the marriage practically and also spiritually, where they believe that marriage is for life. For example:

“He was more religious but didn't appear so when we got married. He slowly began forcing me to pray and at the same time he would never allow me time to myself whilst I prayed: he'd stay with me and watch me. He forced me to cover, wear hijab, baggy clothing, no makeup. I got called a 'whore' for wearing eyeshadow to university. I was forced to sleep with him and be intimate with him as he said the angels would curse me if I did not satisfy him. He said if I did not obey him, I would go to hell. He'd tell me constantly that women who are ungrateful to their husbands would make up most of the population of hell. He prevented me from getting a divorce.”

Where religious coercive control has been so profound, it can be very difficult for victims to seek secular help. For example, one participant described her friend, who was a victim of coercive control in a faith context:

“[She struggled to] seek help from official sources (police, social services) sooner than she did. She had been programmed not to trust any of these 'authorities'.”

As well the impact of coercive control on a victim physically, sexually, emotionally and spiritually, relationships with family members may also be damaged, and children raised in this coercive faith context may experience long term mental health issues. For example:

“[It has had a] very severe detrimental impact on one child's mental health, such that she has never been able to work full time and is always on medication. Two others are severely impacted; one always on medication.”

“I lost all my confidence, my relationship with my parents and siblings was ruined for years (now restored), and I was forced to move house multiple times to different locations around the country, disrupting all my friendships and my children's friendships and activities.”

Family

The use of faith as a tool of coercion by families, and particularly parents, was identified by a number of our participants. This included 'excessively' controlling dress; forbidding any engagement in popular culture or socialising outside the faith community; harsh physical disciplinary methods; repressing sexual identities; coercing into early marriage; or supporting abusive marriage as better than separation.

Childhood and adolescence are intensely formative periods and so, when individuals are raised in a family where faith is interpreted coercively, beyond what might be considered 'concerned but supportive parenting', the impact can be **profound and long-lasting**:

"It made me feel guilty constantly, this assertion that I could never be good enough, and if I ever thought I was good enough, that was evidence that I wasn't adequately convicted of my own sin, which is in itself a sin. The force and consistency with which I was made to believe I was unworthy of God's love, and simultaneously told that God's entire being WAS love, and that I ought to love God in return with my entire being because of what he had done to me, left me almost totally unable to understand what love actually was.

My parents especially seemed to believe that love was just another form of control - petrified that I wouldn't make it into heaven and doing everything in their power to make sure I wasn't corrupted by external influences. My parents were, and still are, members of a church and have very little social contact outside of that church, and I believe they rarely speak to anyone outside of the church about their faith or their children. As such, I don't think they have ever been confronted by anyone who thought they were doing something wrong."

"I was prevented from dressing how I wished, engaging in popular culture, doing anything secular on Sundays, listening to music, visiting the cinema, attending parties, or studying the subjects I wanted to at university. I was also raised to believe I was a sinner and was going to hell unless I repented and that all other versions of Christian faith were false."

"It led to crippling depression and anxiety - I couldn't handle the guilt. Even something like enjoying pop songs or secular television shows would cause me to believe I wasn't a Christian, and having to hide this from my parents only made it worse. So, I tried to be an atheist, to not believe in God, to assuage the guilt. But this led me to be certain that I was going to hell and caused me to be consumed by depression. I contemplated suicide many times although never took it further than fantasy. [In terms of relationships], my parents were always asserting that my clothing was too immodest, that I was provoking people, that I was providing temptation, and they saw this as a constant wilful display of sin and pride. As such, romantic relationships have been hard to enter or maintain without feelings of guilt."

The way in which **religious authority overlays parental authority** can serve to compound the coercive effect:

"My father was a deacon and Sunday school superintendent [...] I wish someone had made me understand that I could act and think for myself, and that religion need not govern every single aspect of my life, and that I need not live in fear of my soul or of the anger and punishment of my father. I did not leave the church until I was 27 and I consider that day the first day of freedom of my entire life."

Finally, some participants spoke of their families using beliefs about the **primacy and sanctity of heterosexual marriage**, and **notions of sexual purity**, to: coerce early marriage following extra-marital sexual contact; reject LGBTQ+ sexualities or gender identities within the family; and encourage their children to stay in abusive marriages. These behaviours have some commonalities with 'honour' based abuse and with forced marriage.⁷ For example:

"I was groomed and abused by a male in the church as a teenager, became pregnant and forced [by my parents] to marry him. Married for 14 years before managing to leave."

"[My perpetrator told me], 'We should not be dating. We will bring shame. You need to marry me. I am Muslim, you are a Muslim. We will bring shame to the community.' In [date] I was forced into his marriage."

"[When I was younger, and my father had seriously injured me], because I was under the age of 16, I couldn't go to the GP by myself and I couldn't go to the hospital by myself, so I had to have a parent or guardian with me. But neither of my parents wanted to address the fact that it was a result of my dad hitting me. And my mum ... because of the Jehovah's Witness organisation, the father is the head of the household – whatever he says goes ... so my mum's quite a submissive person anyway. [...] generally, she left my dad in charge of the discipline side of things, and he is quite heavy handed.

And then [following the participant, now an adult, disclosing to his parents that his then partner was abusing him] ... my mum and dad would say ridiculous things, like, 'This wouldn't happen if you were still a Jehovah's Witness', 'This wouldn't happen if you weren't gay', 'Now do you see why we're so concerned about your sexual orientation?' and I'm just like, 'Are you telling me that heterosexual people in Jehovah's Witness organisations don't experience domestic abuse? – cos I'm positively sure they do.'"

"Having sex meant that you were married in God's eyes: therefore, if you were to marry anyone else, you'd be committing adultery. (This led to me marrying my boyfriend as I feared God's judgement if I didn't). This marriage was emotionally abusive from the beginning and lasted for just short of 20 years. Boyfriend was 6 years older than me (I turned 15 when we started going out) and would manipulate me to be sexually intimate with him. [...] My mother found out, didn't tell my father for fear of his reaction, asked me what Jesus would think of me for my behaviour (i.e. disappointed in me) and left it at that."

⁷ See Mulvihill, N., Gangoli, G., Gill, A.K., & Hester, M., 2019. The experience of interactional justice for victims of 'honour'-based violence and abuse reporting to the police in England and Wales. *Policing and Society*, 29(6), pp.640-656, DOI: 10.1080/10439463.2018.1427745

Religious leader

It is important to underline that faith leaders may be among the first people that faith-practising victims of intimate partner coercive control turn to, for spiritual solace and practical guidance. In many cases, their experience will be positive. Further, leaders may themselves be victims of coercive control. However, the focus here is how the authority of religious office can both be misused and employed to conceal coercive behaviour.

Research participants identified religious leaders as perpetrating coercive control in two ways. First, **through their own behaviour**, either as an intimate partner abuser or through manipulating church workers or their faith community. To give a sense of proportion, within our Oak survey sub-group of 40 participants (see Methods Outline, p.17):

- five participants described their perpetrator as being both their intimate partner and a faith leader;
- a further six described being victims or witnesses of coercive control perpetrated by a faith leader in a non-intimate partner context – for example, against employees or volunteers in the place of worship, or through preaching, leadership and social interaction with community members.

The second method that participants identified as coercive was where faith leaders **pressured participants to stay in abusive marriages** by suggesting their faith required it.

Turning first to coercive behaviours demonstrated by faith leaders themselves. Participants identified that religious leaders who are perpetrators may hold multiple positions of authority or influence. For example:

“He was part of the local mosque and he was the ISOC [Islamic Society] leader at his university.”

“It is frightening to be told you have demons and be shown appropriate biblical references. Vicars are authority figures, so they aren't questioned. Equally, when a vicar says, ‘You are God's gift’ to him, this feels very special and carries a powerful need to please and maintain that message.”

“The pastor was physically abusing and controlling his wife and children - when challenged, he sought to control those who threatened to out or remove him from post.”

“Despite a huge police record of abuse logged by me [against intimate partner who is also a faith leader] and crime reference numbers, he led – and continues to lead – [an organisation for children].”

One participant saw some commonality between abuse in the domestic setting with abuse in the place of worship (‘God’s house’). For individuals who practise a faith, both settings may be intimate spaces, which require emotional investment and should provide structure, stability and contentment. Therefore, experiencing terror and control in a place of worship can resonate for those who experience terror and control at home, and vice versa.

“I think there are many links between spiritual abuse/coercion and abuse in domestic settings. [I knew] a woman who was subjected to a non-disclosure agreement [in relation to spiritual abuse perpetrated by a priest] and she had previously experienced domestic violence. Three women separately told me that being around this priest [which the participant identifies as coercively controlling] reminded them of domestic violence adverts.”

As well as deriving authority from their religious office, faith leaders may also be **charismatic, persuasive and outwardly charming and effective**. This may include the faith leader positioning themselves as the victim of an abusive spouse.

“He said I was mentally unstable and they seemed to believe him. [...] most people loved him. He was charismatic and charming - an evangelist after all.”

“In many ways my husband was a fantastic minister and very popular. However, I believe he groomed others in the congregation to enable him to perpetrate the controlling influence over me.”

“He was adored by many in the church. The elders accepted there were significant concerns and tried to address them with this man through discipling, but without the knowledge of the red flags that so many abusers show. They were generally manipulated by him.”

Faith leaders may also seek to coercively control those who work or volunteer for them:

“I worked as an assistant to the senior pastor. He did it all - pressed up against me, used crazy making, blamed all of his bad behaviour on me, isolated me, told me I'm the only one that can help him fulfil his mission, turned others against me. Kept me from my family (I worked 7 days a week). He used sleep deprivation. He would give me important assignments and wait until late on Saturday night (when the Holy Spirit spoke) to get it to me. [...] He would call early in the morning or late at night. If I took a day off there was always some emergency. There was much more, but the trauma keeps it mixed up in my head.”

This potent combination of the authority of office, leadership in the community and personal charisma, can make it hard for victims to know where to turn for support.

“I think a key problem is that the nature of the relationship with a [Catholic] priest is one of deference. For many older people, it's unthinkable that they would criticise a priest, let alone complain about one. I ruled several people out. The previous priests because they were amazing, and I didn't want to disappoint them. The assistant priest because he was being bullied [by the faith leader perpetrator]. I tried to talk it through with some religious sisters I knew. Each said they couldn't do anything. They didn't seem to know where I should go.”

“My biggest concern was how and where to report my concerns, especially as the parish safeguarding officer was joined at the hip to the priest.”

Longer term, being a victim of, or witness to, coercive control perpetrated by a faith leader, had a significant impact on an individual's personal and spiritual life.

“It made me very wary about ‘church leadership’ though, and I hold that very lightly now.”

“My abuser is now training to be a vicar. I'm finding it hard to find a safe church or even believe there are any.”

[T]he church had been my everything. It was where I worked, where my friends were, where I felt closest to God... [Now] I don't go to church. I am struggling with my faith. It means so much to me, but it feels like God let me down. I don't trust Christian leaders (really any faith leaders).”

“Because he was a priest, I have found it difficult in churches where there are male priests or typical 'Vicarage' families. [I] found it quite triggering.”

The second method that participants identified as coercive was **where faith leaders pressured participants to stay in abusive marriages** by suggesting their faith required it. Our research participants were told by such faith leaders that they needed to pray more for their perpetrator, to forgive the perpetrator and make more effort at home.

“This [gyani or Sikh leader] that sits there, people see him as God, like, you know, they think he’s had premonitions. He can see. Then because when he said to me that, if I divorce [her abusive husband], I’m going to end up in the gutter, my dad was thinking, ‘How can you go against what this priest has just told you? He can see the future. You are going to end up in the gutter.’”

“I was told I had to stay in a marriage where there was ongoing coercive control. All sermons on marriage were that you had to stay and forgive and make it work.”

“[I spoke with] the imam at the local mosque but, as he was friends with the perpetrator, he did not help me. He advised me to have kids and that children will calm down the abuse and control. I did not want to bring kids into that toxic environment.”

“I told [the faith leaders that one of his control strategies] was keeping me awake at night by leaving his reading light on; I have severe migraine and this was affecting me badly. I was advised to get a sleep during the day so that I would be fresh when he came home.”

“Everyone goes to see the Babajis [Indian honorific term for ‘father’ or ‘priest’] if they’ve got any issues in marriage or whatever, and they just said [to me], ‘It’s not in our religion to divorce. [The abusive partner] will change. Don’t worry. He will change.’”

In some cases, participants linked this advice with manipulation by the perpetrator, who, as part of their carefully curated outward persona, would proclaim their apologies and commitment to change – yet privately continue the same abusive behaviour.

Another participant felt that her vulnerability to abuse as an adult had been fostered through her upbringing. This demonstrates how understanding the operation of coercive control in a faith context can require understanding the dynamics and associations between intimate partner, family and upbringing, religious leadership and faith community.

“I was brought up to believe that divorce was the ultimate sin and worshipped in an evangelical congregation where this was pretty much the view. I felt I could not leave my husband and should not agree to him leaving me. I wish I done this sooner. My personal beliefs were such that I felt a complete failure. I felt that faith and hope put me into a state of denial - that I believed God would make it all right because he hated divorce and, as long as I had faith, my husband would come to his senses. This didn't happen and I had to protect myself and accept that the relationship was irretrievable. Although this has led to greater maturity in me as an adult, it was very, very difficult at the time. I sought advice from church leaders after he had been gone a year and not one of them gave an opinion regarding divorce. It took a Christian friend to say, ‘It’s ok - give him the boot.’”

Community

Turning finally to faith communities, we recognise that such groups are often active allies for victims and survivors of abuse, providing practical and social support. For example, one of our participants explained how, having escaped with her children from a long abusive marriage, and moving to a new area, she was supported by a group of local women:

“And finding the new church was important to me, but it took me months to go in, I had to go other than a Sunday. They were so patient with me. And you know, for three months, they brought us two meals a week and then for another three months, they bought us one meal a week. On a Monday, without fail, they would turn up with homecooked food. Ladies in the church; they had a rota. And I wasn’t coping at all, I was not functioning when I left. And every time they said, ‘We just want to attend to your family. There are no requirements. You need never attend the church. There is nothing you need to give or do, you need never put your foot through the door of the church.’ And they would talk to us, as we wanted.

It astonishes me.”

While faith communities can provide the supportive counterpoint to coercive partners, families and leadership, they may also perpetrate or be complicit in that control. We identify five types of experience here: coercive communities; silencing and minimising victims; punishing those who seek to support victims; non-intervention; and endangerment through unsafe intervention.

Firstly, some participants shared experiences of what they felt was **coercive collective practice** within a faith community:

“During my teen years, head coverings and wearing of trousers was compulsory. It was enforced by parents and within the church. [There was also a] purity culture. Through Bible Class for teens, I was manipulated into believing I was responsible for the lustfulness of the men around me (no trousers as it showed off legs and males would therefore be lustful). [The community] used scripture to enforce [the] female position as subordinate. Prayer meetings were carefully controlled: only males were called to pray by name in order to ensure females didn't [lead the prayer].”

“The Buddhist order that we were part of required separation from family and children and along a gender divide. [...] My husband was [...] explicitly told that, to be ordained, he needed to leave me and our baby and move into a men's community.”

“There were certain vocal members of the community who were very anti LGBT+ and, as a recently out bisexual, I found it super hard to navigate. They were the type to ‘pray the gay away’, and would have likely shunned me had they known.”

“[The faith community] controlled most areas of my life – I was discouraged from talking with my parents. Any changes to work, study or where I lived had to be approved by the 'elders'. I wasn't allowed to date women and to continue the relationship with the person who is now my wife - we had to get engaged, which had to also be approved by the elders.”

“[The church] sent youth workers round to make sure we [as students] were living the right way. There was a huge ‘hooha’ when someone gay wanted to receive communion and the church would not let him. I struggled to see being gay as not God's will. I was told I was wicked to date a ‘non-Christian’ man and this really messed up my first wonderful relationship with a kind, shy, intelligent (atheist) guy.”

It was clear from participant accounts that leveraging faith to discipline and control is powerful for those who believe sincerely and who want to do what (they are told) is 'right'. This can be achieved by suggesting that those opposing or questioning the controlling behaviour are 'not religious' or are 'undermining the faith'. This is a powerful diluter of resistance. In the secular context similarly, a perpetrator may persuade an intimate partner victim that friends and family are 'undermining their relationship' and that the victim therefore needs to stop seeing them.

“[Participant was, at the time, living in a coercive religious community] I was denied access to a doctor although I asked to see one as I was told 'God is your healer'. To see a doctor would have been to doubt God.”

“At first, I thought it was biblical, but soon felt very trapped. [...] A friend's parents tried to warn me, but I saw them as 'compromised' in their faith and saw them almost as the enemy. [...] It was entirely about religion. If I didn't do it their [the faith community's] way, [it was implied that] I didn't want to follow God wholeheartedly and was a compromising Christian.”

“It was so powerful and effective (not just in controlling me but many others too) because it was grounded in faith. The messages of scripture were twisted to suit [the faith leader's] need to control people and 'own' them. I did feel owned - like a slave to him and the organisation. The organisation used my deepest beliefs to make me do what they wanted.”

As researchers in gender based violence, we have witnessed how the process simply of being asked about one's experience, to know that it matters, and to articulate it to a listening ear - perhaps for the first time - can be part of the recovery process. Participants in this research expressed eloquently how coercive control creates an 'unreality', making it very hard to even discern or name what is happening.

“Typing this now makes me realise how deeply I was involved, and it sounds like madness that I did not walk away. But this group was my entire friendship group and support network.”

“[The coercive community behaviour] was just normal and accepted: no one saw anything wrong with it.”

This unreality is intensified where members of the faith community seek **collectively to validate a coercive narrative**. For example:

“[My perpetrator] took the police statements into the mosque to show people, 'Look what this woman is doing to me!' So, people in the mosque would then contact me, or they would get their wives to contact me, come to my door. Oh, you know, 'You should pray for him; let him see the children; let him back in the house and get back together with him.'”

Some participants described feeling that their community sought to **minimise** their experience or **effectively silence** them by stigmatising their experience of abuse.

“[My experience of abuse lasted through] three churches and one Christian ministry. Nobody was trained in how to spot it [domestic abuse] and how to deal with it - all churches need this! They treated me like I was part of the problem and over-reacting. He got sympathy and support seemingly equal to me. I was told not to go to the police as it would make the issue worse.”

“People who knew minimized his behaviour and blamed me (there was a long list of people who had gone through this before me).”

“My ex-wife constantly abused me verbally, mentally and psychologically. As I was a member of the local Muslim community and did considerable work in the community, I wasn't able to discuss this abuse with anyone, as it would have been considered a taboo subject.”

“I feel in evangelical circles that I am treated as a second-class Christian because I am divorced and [...] a single parent. I have found it much harder to find a role. [...] I feel trapped by theology and still feel all the teaching is making people have to stay in abusive relationships.”

This silencing can also extend to those members of the faith community that sought to support a victim of coercive control.

“I spoke to a friend within the church [about the support that the church leaders had offered to the participant, when she had sought help from them about her abusive marriage]. My friend was angry at what they were forcing me to do, and she expressed this to the leaders at length. She herself was then removed from all her positions, and we were told we weren't to see each other as it was counteractive to preserving my marriage.”

“[My faith leader] was having an affair and he was abusive to his wife. Eventually, his wife confided in me. I was shocked. [...] I told my husband. We went and spoke to three church leaders with what I knew. [...] The elders went to the pastor and asked him if he was having an affair and he said, 'No, of course not'. So, they came back to us and said, 'He's denied it'. [...] And this situation went on for months. And although I was never directly threatened, there was an inference that I needed to keep quiet. [...] The pastor started to use the pulpit as a way of attacking me. [...] One sermon started off, 'There is in this church a member who is a gossip, a slanderer... that member is your tongue'. I knew that was directed at me. Then there were sermons about 'pruning' - getting rid of the deadwood in the church. It was incessant [and went on for months]. The other church leaders, who were meant to support people, did not give me any support. I felt very isolated. And I found it difficult to be in church. It also made me ill. [Eventually], thankfully, it came out independently of me. And the pastor was removed from his role.”

By **not intervening**, members of the faith community may be complicit in attempts to exercise control. Sometimes, witnesses and bystanders may be worried (not unreasonably, given the examples above) about the implications for themselves, their families and their standing in their faith community. Some may feel that controlling behaviour is a 'private' or 'family' matter or, where the perpetrator is a faith leader, they may be unsure how to provide or seek help. In other cases, the perpetrator may be devout and charismatic and so bystanders may rationalise that this seemingly coercive behaviour signals only the perpetrator's fervour and commitment to the faith. Again, in common with victims of gender violence and coercion broadly, having someone ask the question (Are you experiencing abuse? Are you afraid? Do you want to talk?) can be a critical lifeline.

“They tiptoed around him [participant's abusive husband], trying not to upset him. He was a Methodist minister (and held other positions of responsibility in the church) for 25 years until he was removed for bullying.”

“I wanted my parents to say, 'Come back and bring the children with you'. I wanted the church to say to him [participant's abusive husband], 'This is wrong - you are not treating your family right.’”

“I wish somebody had raised my husband's behaviour with me. Apparently, lots of people could see exactly what he was like - but nobody approached me with a listening ear. [...] In all other areas of life, domestic abuse is not acceptable, and you are helped to escape as soon as possible. The church made me feel I was a failure for even considering leaving, and even worse for not forgiving him.”

“I wanted someone to rescue me - rescue us all. The police to break down the door and stop it all. For someone to say, ‘This is not OK, and we will help you’ [Participant was, at the time, living in a coercive religious community]. I thought I was the problem - the rebellious one who let God down.”

“I felt powerless, confused, deeply hurt that others were allowing some of this to happen, and not stepping in.”

Interventions to support potential victims of coercive control should be **carefully planned**, to ensure the individual is not put at further risk. For example, confronting a perpetrator directly is likely to increase abuse towards the victim, particularly if the perpetrator suspects they have sought help.

“In 2012, I disclosed to my senior pastors that I was subject to domestic abuse - physical, controlling, financial. I was in a position of leadership also at the time. I was immediately removed from this position, as well as removed from any volunteering that I did. We were ‘referred’ as a couple to another couple in leadership to mentor us. We had weekly meetings with all four of us present. Then, each day, I was sent texts by the other female, including quotes from the Bible on forgiveness and submission. I had to respond to each message with how it had changed my attitude towards my husband. We then all discussed my responses together weekly face to face. [It made me feel] Pressured. Anxious. Unsafe. Like I was a failure because I did not forgive him. I felt even more at risk as I was having to tell him my feelings in front of everyone, then return home alone with him.”

Unless there is a statutory duty to report (for example, if children are at risk of harm), then any intervention to support victims of coercive control should proceed with their consent and at their pace. Indeed, faith organisations are strongly advised to seek specialist advice, as this participant urges:

“They [faith communities and leaders] need to acknowledge [when] they are not trained in dealing with perpetrators, not skilled in understanding the dynamics of power and control - the pattern of behaviour - that is present in domestic abuse. [...] They must seek to understand their role [...] so that they don't do more harm than good.”

Finally, one participant recounted a case of marriage abuse in her parish which the church leadership initially struggled to respond to, but which eventually became a turning point.⁸

“At the time, I thought a wider conversation about domestic abuse within the church and within the church membership would have been good. But, in retrospect, the events were probably too fresh to do that well. There has been strong leadership in condemning domestic abuse from the eldership in the following years and this has definitely raised awareness.”

⁸ The invocation of faith by a faith leader or community in order to coercively control, described here in pages 10-16, could also be understood as a form of ‘structural coercion’. For further explanation, see Aghtae, N., Mulvihill, N., Abrahams, H., & Hester, M. (2020). Defining and Enabling ‘Justice’ for Victims/Survivors of Domestic Violence and Abuse, *Religion and Gender*, 10(2), 155-181. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18785417-20200001>

Victim-survivor recommendations for change

Recommendation 1: Greater awareness and understanding within faith organisations about the nature of coercive control (as well as forms of abuse broadly) and more open discussion. This includes mandatory, meaningful and regularly updated training for faith leaders and other influencing roles, but also knowledge dissemination through the faith community. Training should be delivered by individuals who understand the dynamics of coercive control and are also faith literate. Materials should underline that coercive control can present in different forms, irrespective of gender, age, ethnicity or role in the faith community.

Recommendation 2: Encouraging faith community members to move from being silent witnesses to active allies for victims. At the same time, and drawing on external expertise where needed to understand of the dynamics of control and abuse (Recommendation 1), those intervening must exercise sensitivity in supporting victim-survivors to ensure they are not put at further risk, and that the intervention moves at their pace, where possible.

Recommendation 3: Unequivocal condemnation of abuse and of perpetrators of abuse by faith leaders and a clear directive from faith leaders that victim-survivors (and their dependents) are supported in the decision to physically leave an abusive relationship.

Recommendation 4: The offer of a dedicated supporter for the victim-survivor, from within the faith community, who can provide non-judgmental, faith literate support and a listening ear.

Recommendation 5: Consideration about how to manage the faith practice of a victim-survivor and a perpetrator, alleged or proven, who seek to practice in the same setting.

Recommendation 6: To consider how predominantly male leadership within a faith setting may present barriers for some victim-survivors in approaching faith leaders to report abuse, or to seek support for recovery following abuse. This may require reflection on gender and leadership within faith communities.

Recommendations 7: Every faith community place of worship should have a safeguarding officer, possibly supported by a deputy, and these individuals should be resourced, trained and able to make independent judgments. Their remit should include all members of the faith community, beyond the statutory requirements around children (*Working Together to Safeguard Children*, Department for Education, England and Wales) and 'vulnerable' adults (Care Act 2014).

Recommendation 8: Stronger accountability structures to report abuse within faith communities, and by faith leaders, and confidence that reports will be dealt with fairly, without fear or favour. This may require mechanisms which provide scrutiny that is sufficiently external and impartial, yet also respected by the faith community. Regular, robust and transparent publication of case and outcome data to enable publicly accessible monitoring.

“Freedom means some are abused: I was a child when the religious teachings started. I didn't know any different. Should my parents be allowed to teach what they did? Should they be able to control clothing etc? Should a church be able to do the same? I don't have an answer because it's a yes/no. Who controls? The government? Sadly, freedom means some experience trauma.”

“No-one has ever asked about this. This has been really hard to write but so important. I've never told anyone about all of this. No one has ever wanted to know. Thank you for hearing my story.”

Methods in brief

The Oak Foundation enabled analysis of two datasets:

<p>A re-analysis of interview data collected as part of the ESRC-funded work on Justice, Gender Based Violence and Inequalities (2015-2018)⁹</p>	<p>We identified 59 out of 251 semi-structured interviews conducted for the Justice Project which related to issues of faith, and 27 interviews within those 59 relating specifically to intimate partner violence, including coercive control.</p> <p>Of the 27 intimate partner cases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 25 identified as female, 2 as male ▪ 23 as heterosexual, 1 as bisexual, 1 as lesbian, 1 as gay* ▪ 13 described themselves as White British or White European; 10 as Asian British; 2 as Black African and 1 as Arab* ▪ 13 participants described their experience of abuse in relation to Islam; 10 to Christianity; 2 to Judaism, 1 to Buddhism; 1 to Sikhism
<p>New data collection on faith and coercive control (2021)¹⁰</p>	<p>We circulated an online in-depth survey which yielded 56 completed responses. 40 responses provided sufficient detail for qualitative analysis, and 7 individuals within this group additionally participated in an online semi-structured interview.</p> <p>Of this group of 40 participants, 5 had experienced coercive control in what they described as a coercive faith community context; 6 by faith leaders (who were not also intimate partners); 2 by parents; 3 in the workplace and 24 with an intimate partner.</p> <p>Of the 24 intimate partner cases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 18 identified as female, 6 as male ▪ 24 as heterosexual ▪ 16 described themselves as White British or White European, 8 as Asian British ▪ 17 were practising Christians across 10 denominations (Anglican; Baptist; Evangelical; Methodist; Non-denominational; Pentecostal; Presbyterian; Protestant; Quaker; Reformed); 6 respondents practised Islam (all Sunni); 1 identified as agnostic

* One participant did not disclose ethnicity or sexuality

⁹ For more on the Justice Project, see: <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/projects/justice-inequality-and-gender-based-violence>

¹⁰ For more on the Oak Foundation funded work, see <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/projects/unrestricted-programme-support-on-understanding-and-responding-to>

Further information and organisations

Examples of faith-informed organisations working with victim-survivors of coercive control and domestic abuse in the UK

Jewish Women's Aid - <https://www.jwa.org.uk/>

Muslim Women Network - <https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/>

Restored - <https://www.restored-uk.org/> (working in Christian contexts)

Sikh Women's Aid - <https://www.sikhwomensaid.org.uk/>

Other useful UK organisations

Asian Women's Resource Centre - <https://www.asianwomencentre.org.uk/>

Faith and Belief Forum LGBT+ Interfaith Network
<https://faithbeliefforum.org/programme/lgbtfaith/>

National Association for People Abused in Childhood - www.napac.org.uk

National Stalking Helpline - 0808 802 0300 www.suzylamplugh.org

Mankind - 01823 334244 <https://www.mankind.org.uk/> (helping men escape domestic abuse]

Refuge - <https://www.refuge.org.uk/>

VAWG and Faith Coalition - <https://www.standingtogether.org.uk/faith-vawg>

Women and Girls Network - www.wgn.org.uk

Women's Aid - <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/>

Reading and Resources

Domestic Abuse in Church Communities: A Safe Pastoral Response (2018), by Nikki Dhillon-Keane (Redemptorist Publications). Available at: <https://www.rpbooks.co.uk/domestic-abuse>

Domestic Abuse Can Kill (2017), a report by Muslim Women's Network UK. Available at: [https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/Domestic Abuse Can Kill 23 factsheets.php](https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/Domestic%20Abuse%20Can%20Kill%20factsheets.php)

Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures (2019), by Dr Lisa Oakley and Justine Humphreys (SPCK Publications). Available at: <https://spckpublishing.co.uk/escaping-the-maze-of-spiritual-abuse>

Faith and Domestic Abuse: Recommendations for Faith Leaders (no date), published by Faith Action. Available at: [https://www.faithaction.net/portal/wp-content/uploads/FaithAction Faith and Domestic Abuse.pdf](https://www.faithaction.net/portal/wp-content/uploads/FaithAction%20Faith%20and%20Domestic%20Abuse.pdf)

Keeping the Faith: What Survivors from Faith Communities Want Us To Know (2021), published by the Faith & VAWG Coalition. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee0be2588f1e349401c832c/t/5fe1d167fdf2bb19a0be17e5/1608634729601/Keeping+the+Faith+FINAL.pdf>

What is Coercive Control? Published by the CEDAR Network. Available at: <https://www.cedarnetwork.org.uk/about/what-cedar-achieves/what-is-coercive-control/>



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Funded by the Oak Foundation.