

# Considerations for Responding to Muslim Survivors

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*The victim specific or cultural consideration section is designed to help SART members understand victims from diverse cultures to ensure all victims are served with respect regardless of their background. This section is intended to be a tool to help professionals; however, it is the responsibility of each SART member to integrate culturally relevant and responsive care into their services for victims. It is hoped that SARTs will utilize these considerations to increase their understanding of diversity and learn ways to serve victims with respect to their cultural background and identities.<sup>1</sup>*

Muslims living in the United States represent an incredibly diverse community. They are diverse ethnically, racially, and linguistically and they represent a wide range of educational and professional backgrounds as well as socioeconomic levels. Muslims are often assumed to be immigrants or the children of immigrants, however, approximately one third of all American Muslims are African American. Muslim immigrants in the United States come from more than 80 countries. Refugee resettlement over the past several decades has brought Bosnian, Somali, Afghani, Iraqi, Burmese, Rohingya and Syrians fleeing war and oppression.

While Muslims represent 1.8 billion members of humanity, their number in the United States is only 2%. Although Pew Research lists Muslims as one of the most rapidly growing religious groups in the U.S., services that cater to this particular community are very limited. Within the entire United States, there are only a handful of culturally specific domestic violence and sexual assault support services for Muslim women.

When working with Muslim survivors, it is important to note the wide range of reactions to the same issue based on their cultural background, level of education, patriarchy, and ability to differentiate cultural practices from religious practices.

The following considerations are for sexual abuse and assault perpetrated against Muslim women with males as the perpetrators.

## **Forget The Stereotypes**

Many Muslim women will not seek services for sexual assault or violence because they believe biases and stereotypes exist in mainstream American society when it comes to Muslims, particularly Muslim women. Well-meaning advocates, law enforcement, medical and crisis support staff often respond as “saviors, working to “save” Muslim women from their faith and culture. This causes further trauma and lack of confidence in the services being provided.

Cultural competency and understanding are critical if one expects successful outcomes and confidence of survivors. For example, it is important to understand that public

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<sup>1</sup> *Georgia Sexual Assault Response Team Guide*. 2021. [2021sartguidev2-final.pdf \(svrga.org\)](#)

modesty practiced by many Muslim women, is not a form of oppression but rather an expression of faith.

In addition, discussing intimate details outside of one's family is culturally frowned upon in Muslim culture, so it may require more support and understanding to help build courage. Respecting modesty even during an exam or procedure following sexual abuse is an important aspect of cultural sensitivity.

### **Is It Rape?**

Some Muslim families come from countries where cultural practices as well as patriarchal systems are the norm. In some of these communities, it is assumed that a wife belongs to her husband and should be available to him sexually whenever he wants. This is in contradiction to the Islamic perspective on marriage, which requires love, respect, and concern for each other.

Sexual violence or rape by a stranger is incredibly traumatic. For Muslim women who come from patriarchal cultures, the stigma and self-blame can be overwhelming. It is not only important to offer support services but working with the victim to help her understand that she is not to blame is critical.

Refugees, particularly those who spent years in refugee camps, may have been victims of sexual abuse and sexual torture. Often times these survivors will refuse to acknowledge their experience but it will often manifest in different types of stress disorders.

The idea of shame, bringing shame to oneself or one's family is one of the most important reasons that survivors don't seek help, this puts the burden on the victim rather than the perpetrator.

A reluctance to work with law enforcement may be for a variety of reasons. Many of the immigrants or refugees are coming from brutal governments where law enforcement was a source of fear. In addition, if the perpetrator is the husband, some of the women may worry that they will be homeless and their children will starve if he is taken to jail or in the case of refugees, there is fear of deportation. It is important to help survivors understand their rights and the law as it pertains to them.

### **Leaving It to God**

Some Muslim women will put up with the situation they are in, believing that God put them in that situation for a reason, and with patience and perseverance, God will reward them. This is a very mistaken understanding of the Islamic concept of patience and perseverance and is confused with the concept of patience in the face of calamity, natural disaster, or an illness with no cure. The Islamic faith is adamant against allowing injustice, harm, or oppression to take hold in one's family or society at large.

Some Muslim women also believe that safeguarding the family honor is a priority, even at the expense of themselves. Silencing the victim to preserve family dignity and honor

simply perpetuates the victimization of the victim. These are patriarchal and cultural beliefs that have no basis in the Islamic faith.

Some women are not aware of the legal options available to them, or they are not educated as to their rights under Islam. They have likely lived in places where no one challenged the cultural norms.

### **Seeking Help**

When a Muslim victim has the courage to seek assistance for sexual violence or assault, the first stop is usually not law enforcement, but rather the imam or Muslim spiritual leader. Unfortunately, most imams are not equipped to direct these women to support services and they are not aware of the long-term effects of trauma. Those who work with Muslim survivors may find it very useful to establish relations with a local imam.

Very few Muslim women do well in a typical shelter environment. They often feel out of place due to their modesty dress, dietary restrictions, and language difficulties. Finding shelter solutions with more opportunity for privacy will help survivors feel safe.

Muslim women, particularly those who are unemployed and with limited English skills, are incredibly fearful of losing their children or not being able to provide for them, this is a major reason for not reporting violence or intimate partner assault.

### **Suggestions When Working with Muslim Survivors**

- Reassess your individual biases
- Participate in Cultural Competency Training
- Education on gender roles, marriage, and family from a formal Islamic perspective
- Evaluate the victim's country of origin, refugee or immigrant, education, employment
- Language ability
- What is her family's view on shame and responsibility?
- Have a "go to" Muslim organization or individual for clarification
- Reassure her regarding privacy, safety, and her children
- Seek a culturally specific organization to help her

***“And among God’s beautiful signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves that you may dwell in kindness and tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts.”*** Quran 30:21

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