Envisioning Survivor-Centered Anti-Violence Spiritual Care

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Of all the violence I continue to survive, spiritual abuse from my family broke me the most. And of all the spiritual violence I continue to survive, the interpersonal dynamics of political violence cause me the greatest psychosocial injury. In this deeply personal reflection, I offer a glimpse into my experiences of spiritual violence as a Muslim survivor of gender-based violence and my preliminary visions of what survivor-centered spiritual care can look like.

I draw on my decade-long experience advocating for women's and girls' rights in various settings: non-profit, government, grassroots organizing, research, and political movement; and on various issues: child/forced marriage, domestic and gender-based violence (GBV), and human trafficking. I further illustrate my analysis with ethnographic interviews I conducted in Brooklyn, NYC of Bangladeshi Muslim marriage practices and the development of participants' decision-making capacity over time.[1] Almost all the participants are people I grew up with and my relationships with them illuminate the communal dimension of spiritual violence.[2] I end the article reflecting on my limited experiences with chaplaincy and how it has both further exacerbated the violence I experience and offered me unprecedented pathways to healing.

I. Experiencing Domestic and Spiritual Violence

At the age of 10, my parents threatened to send me to Bangladesh to be married off. At the time, I believed that God gave my parents the absolute authority to marry me whenever and to whomever they decided—Jannah (Heaven) was under my mother's feet after all.[3]

For me, the most soul-crushing aspect of family violence (FV) was the spiritual abuse. The rhetoric from the pulpit justified family violence: that children ought to

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[1] **Study Title:** Qubūl: An Ethnographic Investigation into the Islamic Legal and Ethical Integrity of Consenting in Current Marriage Practices in the Bangali Neighborhood of Church-McDonald Brooklyn New York

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[2] There were ten participants: six younger women (18–35 years old), two younger men (18–35 years old), and two older women (over 35 years old), who were parents of some of the younger participants. The ethnographic data supplements the current project through further exploration into experiences of spiritual abuse.

[3] Muʿāwiya ibn Jāhima reported that Jāhima came to the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, and he said, "O Messenger of Allah, I intend to join the military expedition, and I seek your counsel." The Prophet said, "**Do you have a mother?**" He said yes. The Prophet then said, "**Stay with her, for Paradise is beneath her feet.**" (*Sunan al-Nasā'ī*, no. 3104)

unconditionally obey their parents, parents had the authority to physically discipline their children, children must always care for their parents, and family ties can never be broken.

At 16, my parents renewed their interest in getting me married. Again, they acted as if I had no agency, but this time I was the inheritor of the ḥadīth that my spiritual ancestors had left to me:

> Ibn Burayda reported that his father said: "A girl came to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and said: 'My father married me to his brother's son so that he might raise his own status thereby.' The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) gave her the choice, and she said: 'I approve of what my father did, but *I wanted women to know* that their fathers have no right to do that.'" (*Sunan Ibn Māja*, no. 1874)[4]

This *sadaqa jāriya* (continuous charity)[5] that she had the foresight to bequeath us empowered me to say "no" despite all the retaliatory abuse. And at 19, unmarried, and the survivor of death threats from my own parents, I escaped the broken house.

II. Defining Spiritual Abuse in The Anti-Violence Movement

In the US, violence in the home or in familial/intimate-partner relationships were viewed as private matters. Through the efforts of the anti-violence movement,[6] attitudes have shifted to approaching it as a social justice issue requiring state intervention and services. When domestic violence was narrowly regarded as "wife beating," the primary services that the anti-violence movement offered was to provide safe shelter and have the police treat the incident as a battery case (Davis, Leidholdt, and Watson 2015).[7] The field also came to realize that "battery," although the most manifest sign of abuse, is not the defining characteristic of an abusive relationship. The Duluth model of domestic violence understands abuse as a tactic for someone to exert power and control over another, and this has become the field's mainstream theory (Davis, Leidholdt, and Watson 2015). According to this model, physical violence can be completely absent, but other methods of abuse can be used to achieve ***power and control***.[8]

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[4] This ḥadīth was classed as *ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Buwaysirī in *Maṣābīḥ al-Zujāja* (2/102). Shaykh Muqbil al-Wadi'ī said that it is *ṣaḥīḥ* according to the conditions of Imam Muslim. See "Ruling on the Validity of Forced Marriage," Islam Question & Answer, December 13, 2011, https://islamqa.info/en/answers/163990/ruling-on-the-validity-of-forced-marriage.

[5] *Sadaqa jāriya* is a charitable act that continues to benefit others even past the donor's death. It can come in any form, and is not restricted to being monetary. Common acts of *sadaqa jāriya* include transmitting knowledge, planting trees, raising a pious child, etc.

[6] In order to maintain the diversity, divisions, and decentralization that exists within the movement I have chosen not to capitalize the term.

[7] In the past, police officers would routinely treat incidents of domestic violence, no matter how gruesome, as a "domestic dispute" or a "private affair," often leaving the scene with no documentation or accountability. Many policy and legislative efforts have been made to require police officers to better handle domestic violence incidents.

[8] The Power and Control Wheel maps out the different types of abuse used to exert power and control: financial, verbal, physical, sexual, etc. As the women's movement has diversified and stepped away from universalizing White women's experiences, there have been more power and control wheels developed for specific communities.

As a believer, no form of abuse was more damaging and effective in controlling me than spiritual abuse. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline:

> Signs of spiritual abuse between intimate partners include when an abusive partner:
> - ridicules or insults the other person's religious or spiritual beliefs
> - prevents the other partner from practicing their religious or spiritual beliefs
> - uses their partner's religious or spiritual beliefs to manipulate or shame them
> - forces the children to be raised in a faith that the other partner has not agreed to
> - uses religious texts or beliefs to minimize or rationalize abusive behaviors (such as physical, financial, emotional or sexual abuse/marital rape) (The National Domestic Violence Hotline, n.d.)

With the realization that victims/survivors[9] face multiple types of abuse that affect their lives in different ways, the one stop shop/center (OSC) model for service provision was introduced, creating the space and structure to address intersecting harms in one place or through a referral network (Davis, Leidholdt, and Watson 2015, 6). For example, for tackling financial abuse alone, a number of professionals may need to step in. A survivor/victim may need help enrolling in welfare programs, receiving emergency funds, finding temporary or long term-housing, getting access to marital assets, assistance in job readiness, receiving mental health services for stress, etc. Such robust service provision comes from a commitment to supporting a survivor/victim holistically. However, there is a core part of myself that I have felt was unwelcomed: my faith.

III. Towards a Spiritually Affirming Culture

The anti-violence movement is diverse and decentralized. In my experience working with different people and parts within it, I have found it to be generally critical of organized religion and to have a preference for modern-Western psychotherapy and secular rights-based frameworks. This results in a broadly faith-averse culture that may discourage survivors/victims from seeking services, or worse, that may inflict spiritual violence on them.

On Western Psychotherapy

In general, there is little to no space for survivors/victims to meaningfully bring in their faith. If a faith-oriented survivor/victim needs help due to spiritual abuse, DV service providers are generally ill equipped to address it directly but often offer mental health resources and therapy. The secular mental health field is neither designed nor prepared to effectively address spiritual abuse, in part due to tensions that exist in the field of psychology towards faith. Often therapists and other service providers will ask survivors/victims to compartmentalize their faith, leave it at the door, or, even worse, reduce religion to a source of violence.

[9] I will continue to say "survivor/victim" throughout the article to be inclusive of how people who have experienced abuse identify.

In my own experience, I have tried therapy thrice with service providers of various backgrounds and I have found it difficult to connect. Religion is not merely in my head, a psychological state, or behavioral, but is a set of beliefs I have chosen and been cultivated by that connects me with a higher purpose and Power. It defines who I am and what I am here for. I cannot put into words how broken that act of resistance against my parents made me feel, precisely because of the spiritual weight I knew that relationship carries. To exercise spiritual agency meant that I had to plunge myself into spiritual jeopardy. To do so as a teenager, all alone, was an unimaginable feat that I owe to Allah, my Guardian when my guardians failed me. There was no space to hold my spiritual anguish or my faith-oriented perspective in the anti-violence realm I was in.

Not only have I found mainstream DV service provision to be inadequate for addressing spiritual abuse, I have found a general bias against religion/faith. Many domestic violence service providers understand the problem of spiritual abuse as a problem inherent in religion. They believe religion is inherently patriarchal and will thus always produce gender-based violence. While working as a survivor advocate, I observed that even the Muslim service providers did not want to go anywhere near faith, despite me sharing how necessary and effective it had been in my own case. I felt they were satisfied that I left abuse but skeptical that I used religion to do it. Whether or not it was intentional, I felt my lived experiences were dismissed and my source of strength belittled.

On Spiritual Practice and Accommodations

Domestic violence service providers in the US are under the impression that they must maintain strict secularity to avoid violating the separation between church and state and thus losing eligibility for federal funding. I will revisit this issue in my later discussion on chaplaincy. Service providers may also feel that staying away from religion altogether is best practice. I understand religion/faith can be tricky to navigate, but I experienced double standards where secular spirituality was promoted and faith-based spirituality was made difficult or disappeared.

As an employee in the DV space, I have found it challenging to practice my faith even when I was told it would be accommodated. I had to find my own accommodations and my faith practice was at best tolerated; however, a secular spirituality was promoted. I have observed it to be common practice in the DV/GBV field to appropriate spiritual practices from faith traditions for the sake of mental health and wellness. Yoga equipment and weekly sessions with instructors were funded with taxpayer money for staff and service seekers to use at the NYC Family Justice Centers, one of the largest OSCs in the nation. Breathing, grounding, affirmations, and meditation exercises were often used during work meetings and with service seekers without any signs of the faith traditions they are rooted in. Yoga comes from Hinduism, and breath work, meditation, and grounding can be found in many faith traditions, most commonly associated with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Many of these practices can also be found in Islam. A straightforward example is *ṣalāt* (the obligatory five times daily prayer): a series of motions in a state of meditation where Muslims ground themselves in their relationship with God while reciting what they believe to be Divine Revelation through measured breaths. Although I was told in my HR training that City employees would have access to meditation rooms and the example of a

Muslim needing to use it for *ṣalāt* was explicitly given during orientation, I never had a place designated for prayer in any of the Family Justice Centers or ENDGBV[10] headquarters. I faced the same challenges while at major women's rights non-profits, even though many of their clients were Muslim. In my experience, the DV/GBV field encouraged the use of *God-less* spiritual practice and actively made accommodations for it, but burdened me to create my own space when I wanted to practice *God-centered* spirituality. I would have to find an empty conference room or a corner of a hallway, lay down my jacket or a piece of paper, and pray.

On the Letter and the Spirit of the Law

In general, the anti-violence movement heavily uses a legislative approach to create change. Survivor-advocates are often a part of those efforts. In my experience it was both empowering and soul draining. My positionalities as young, woman, and Muslim made me susceptible to a kind of political and spiritual violence that I am processing to this day.

Fig. 1. Speaking in the New York State Capitol in Albany at a press conference to stop legal child marriage. In the picture: Safia Mahjebin (me) in the center, Assemblywoman Amy Paulin (left), and unknown activist to the right. (Karlin 2017, "N.Y. lawmakers push to raise the age for marriage to 17," *Times Union*, February 15, 2017.

As I was escaping from my violent household, I was restlessly seeking opportunities to help the women and girls in my community who I knew were facing similar gender-based violence. At the time, a coalition of women's organizations had been trying unsuccessfully for years to raise the marital age in New York State from 14 to 17—part of a national movement that focused on state-level organizing to end/reform legal child marriage.[11] These were women 20 plus years my senior, many of them had been a part of the anti-violence movement their entire lives, and most of them were White. They called me in as a survivor-advocate in hopes that a face to the issue would render success. I put my blind trust in the coalition—in part because of their track record passing previous legislation, and in part because I was completely inexperienced in the legislative process. For months I lobbied and did press. I was asked to tell my story while I was still

[10] Acronym for The NYC Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence.

[11] See Tahirih Justice Center's map on the status of child marriage legislation state by state, https://www.tahirih.org/pubs/50-state-map-of-legislative-reforms-to-limit-or-end-child-marriage-since-2016/.

processing the years of trauma I had been through and all the new challenges I was facing after leaving. I was asked to share the most vulnerable parts of myself over and over again to a media and political machine that was manipulative, self-absorbed, and deeply Islamophobic. I was at the mercy of people who had participated in creating the anti-Muslim NY I grew up in, where my masjid was surveilled, my Islamic school had informants, and my father was abducted. Even though I was fighting to change New York State marriage laws, people took one look at my hijab and infected my work with their own racist imagination of "sharia law." No matter how many times I repeated that it was precisely because of my faith in a Just and Merciful God that I was leaving relationships that were absent of what I believed to be Godly qualities, people's anti-Muslim racism would talk over me. Experiencing Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism while doing gender justice work results in a unique type of gender-based, political, and spiritual violence that I still need time to process. What I can name now is how exploitative the entire process was and how deeply my DV colleagues broke my trust. They gave me no preparation, support, or space to name what I was experiencing all at once and as I navigated that constant barrage of racism on my own, I felt abandoned and unprotected by them. I suffered in silence and soldiered through, fueled by a hope that it would all be worth it if we could just pass the law.

"Albany"[12] arbitrarily determined that raising the marital age to 18 was not politically tenable at the time, so advocates had to get creative. They inserted stipulations that minors who married at 17 would have to go through an in-person interview with an attorney trained in domestic violence without the presence of their parents or partners, who may be coercing them. By the time the legislation passed, I wondered, exhausted and flabbergasted, why such common-sense marital reform (which most Americans thought already existed) required so much effort and augmentation. Even more, I was disgusted and jaded at the amount of subsequent political pandering and back patting—it felt more like a win for politicians around election time than for the women and girls in my neighborhood who I was working so hard to protect. Every time I shared my frustrations about the political system with my fellow advocates, I felt pressured to believe that this was the best we had and that playing the political game was a strategic necessity for achieving women's rights.

In her book *Decriminalizing Domestic Violence*, Leigh Goodmark illustrates how the anti-violence movement in the last few decades has opted into a legal and criminal justice approach, relying heavily on government and law enforcement. She warns that as anti-violence work shifts away from community and into the hands of the state, the community becomes more dependent on punitive and power-reliant approaches to violence that are often themselves violent. ***When the movement compels a young and desperate survivor like myself to participate in a corrupt marriage between establishment politics and the non-profit industrial complex towards ends that I had no decision-making power or say in—while subjecting my Muslim identity, faith, and community to racism—it inflicts political and spiritual violence.***

[12] The capital of New York State and where the state legislature is.

Over the years, I continued to peel away at the veneer of women's rights to reveal the silent contract between the anti-violence movement and the state. While working at the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence (ENDGBV), I led a social media campaign to raise awareness about the different ways in which sexual violence (SV) manifests. Each staff member participated by sending in a short video. Some raised awareness by saying what a woman wears is not an invitation to SV. As the only Muslim female staff person, I submitted a video raising awareness of how the US military and contractors have used sexual violence as a weapon of war with no accountability in the US-led War on Terror. The head of the communications department informed me that I could not post that video, and when I asked why, I was told that the Mayor's Office wants to keep the focus domestic. The lived experiences of some Afghan, Iraqi, and other women I knew living in the US were dismissed. The women's movement in general contains a strain of feminism that has been used to justify disastrous American militarism. Afghanistan is a prime example and now so is Gaza (Abu-Lughod 2015).[13] The inability and unwillingness of the anti-violence movement to distance itself from pro-war feminism continues to inflict spiritual and political violence on Muslim survivor-advocates like me. ***The more the mainstream women's movement is an accessory to American militarism and the surveillance state, the less freedom survivor-advocates like myself have to speak truth to power and the more we become susceptible to violence by the powerful*** (Goodmark 2018; Alimahomed-Wilson and Zahzah 2023).

On Community-Based Solutions

Goodmark also argues that as anti-violence efforts continue to enable the state to intervene in and determine matters of DV, it disables communities from being able to handle violence among themselves with their own tools. Relying on the law alone, especially when it comes to family laws, is ineffective and often inaccessible to the very people who need it the most. Religion holds the most power of persuasion in many communities across the US, such as the one that I grew up in and now study. Faith is the most important identity for members of such communities—including survivors/victims. God is the most meaningful reference for empowerment in these contexts, for God is more *real* than legislation is within these intimate spaces and relationships. The movement favors a secular rights-based framework

[13] Laura Bush marketed American military aggression against Afghanistan to the public as a way to save Afghan women. Currently, we are witnessing feminist Zionists play a crucial role in the ongoing Gaza genocide by legitimating Israeli propaganda of mass sexual violence. Such claims have repeatedly been investigated, although they have yet to be verified and rely heavily on anti-Muslim racist ideas of Muslim men as hypersexual predators. Even more egregious is how these same feminists beat the drums of war over the outcry of sexual violence by Israeli soldiers in Gaza (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights 2024). The fact that at least 70% of casualties of the US-Israel genocide are Palestinian women and children, as well as the disastrous impact that Israel's "total siege" had on Palestinian women's health (UN Women 2024), are well-documented facts, as is the fact that general Israeli society has a history of using sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon of occupation and war (Abdulhadi 2019). Furthermore, Muslim advocates have been warning us about the collusion of US counter violent extremism (CVE) programs with gender justice initiatives, both internationally and domestically (Alimahomed-Wilson and Zahzah 2023). When will the mainstream movement respond? Shall we perpetually be on the margins?

that is viewed as universal, whereas religious laws are seen as particular and susceptible to patriarchal interpretation. When the movement makes no practical space for faith-based solutions, it is denying the justice oriented, restorative, healing, and transformative qualities of religions (Fortune and Enger 2005).

The New York State (NYS) legislation was amended to 18 instead of 17 in 2021 but I do not know who, if anyone, it helped—that data was not tracked. What I do know is that it didn't help anyone I knew of in my community.

When Shurjomukhi, one of my research participants, was 16, she went on a family vacation to Bangladesh and was surprised to find out her mother had arranged for her to marry a maternal relative. At the time, it was *illegal* for her to marry in Bangladesh but *legal* to marry in New York State. For her parents and her social circles in Bangladesh and NYC, what determined a valid marriage was not the laws of the state (be it Bangladesh, NYS, or the US), but parental approval and the relevant Islamic ritual (*nikāḥ*). Shurjomukhi believed that it was her Islamic obligation to obey her mother and now her husband. In Shurjomukhi's case, the laws not only failed to protect her; they failed to be relevant—a faith-oriented approach could have been more effective.

One step forward in the margins of the movement is the increasing number of Muslim faith sensitive and culturally sensitive DV organizations. Muslim activists have developed a Muslim version of the now ubiquitous Duluth Model Power and Control Wheel (see appendix), which offers a faith-centered lens on how spiritual abuse can intersect with other forms of abuse (Alkhateeb 2012). In the last few decades, Muslim DV organizations have focused a great deal of their efforts on educating Muslim women about their Islamic rights. The most common tactics I have seen employed are know-your-Islamic-rights trainings and campaigns, obtaining *fatwā*s[14] from *fiqh* councils and *muftī*s,[15] searching for different textual interpretations, diversifying religious authority with female scholarship, and changing laws in Muslim majority countries.[16] Muslims in the anti-violence movement have demonstrated that the Islamic tradition can just as effectively advocate for women's wellbeing, whether it be the lone framework or in conjunction with secular-rights frameworks (Alkhateeb 1999; Alwani 2022).

Another way the anti-violence movement disempowers families and communities is the common practice of isolating victims from their abusers. Because DV situations can become fatal, advocates may create a safety plan to help the survivor/victim escape, disappear to a secure location, and cut all contact. When the so-called abuser is your entire family and you are a minor faced with child and forced marriage in an immigrant household, you are being told to abandon your entire social system for a kind of safety that feels like solitary confinement. Cutting ties with your family, even if for safety, carries heavy spiritual implications for Muslims, and can cause severe spiritual harm to survivors/victims.

[14] Islamic jurisprudence-based answers to questions posed by lay Muslims, usually around personal Islamic practice or contemporary social issues.
[15] A person that gives *fatwā*s.
[16] The work of Musawah, WISE (Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity), Karamah, and the early work of the Peaceful Families Project are good examples.

When I introduced my research participants to the NYC Family Justice Centers, one of the leading OSCs in the nation, and the growing number of culturally sensitive DV resources, many of them said they would *not* use them. Patha experienced severe family abuse when she decided to drop her engineering degree three years into the program. Her parents were furious. She said:

> *I dropped engineering for many reasons, but the main one was cheating. Bro, you can't make it if you don't cheat, and everyone cheated. But I couldn't because I knew that if I got a degree with cheating, it would be a ḥarām (Islamically forbidden) degree and that means that any money I made from it would be ḥarām income. I talked to my parents about it, 'cause you know I was getting the degree for them, but they said if other people cheat then it's ok if I cheat. I didn't feel right doing that. The other reason was because I realized my whole life I did everything for my parents and that they were going to make the two biggest decisions of my life for me: who I was gonna marry and what degree I got. If I was gonna get an arranged marriage, then at least I wanted to decide what my degree was. They weren't going to decide both for me. I wanted to have some choice too.*

Patha's faith was the core of her decision making. She believed obeying her parents was the most important thing, but she navigated that with what she felt she owed herself and God. For some time, Patha left home to stay with other relatives because the abuse became unbearable. I asked her if she ever considered reaching out to domestic violence services. She said:

> *Hell no! I don't want to explain to them that the abuse is not from my religion. It would be exhausting to have to explain all the time that Islam doesn't oppress women. Even if they don't say that, I know they are thinking it. They would probably tell me to leave my family and they wouldn't understand me. No matter how bad the abuse got I could never leave my parents. When I left to my relatives' houses, it gave them time to cool off a little bit. Those years were tough, but I had patience with them and things changed. Now they're way more chill.*

No matter how bad the abuse got for Patha, she, like all my participants, would not seek help from DV organizations, even if they were Muslim run:

> *With Muslim domestic violence organizations, they do shelter. I don't need shelter.*[17]

When providers ask faith-oriented people to compartmentalize their spirituality or to self-secularize, they are practicing a form of spiritual violence towards religiously-oriented survivors/victims that may discourage survivors/victims from seeking services. The movement should move towards creating a *faith-affirming culture* that is welcoming for survivors and advocates of all backgrounds. They should work towards ensuring that all DV organizations are deeply rooted and in relationship with the communities they claim to serve.

[17] Though Muslim DV organizations do offer more services, Patha's response indicates an undeniable disconnect between communities and DV organizations and the need to do community outreach.

IV. The Case for Making Spiritual Care a Domestic Violence Service

An effective way by which the anti-violence movement can usher in a more faith-affirming culture is by introducing spiritual care as a domestic violence service. The chaplaincy model has long been used in the US as a means to: 1) offer professional spiritual and emotional care while also, 2) upholding people's First Amendment right guaranteeing the freedom to practice one's religion even in secular spaces. Institutions can hire chaplains directly or through a third party. One finds chaplains in many kinds of institutions: private and public universities, corporations, the military, prisons, Congress, and hospitals—all paid for by private funds and/or taxpayer money. Interfaith chaplains are becoming increasingly common, where spiritual care is offered to people of various or no faith traditions (Cadge and Rambo 2022). Chaplains tend to care seekers' emotional and spiritual needs by offering empathetic listening, non-judgement presence, prayer, ritual, advocacy for religious accommodations, and more. Becoming a board certified chaplain (BBC) is a rigorous process. One must complete a three-year master's degree in divinity or pastoral care, 1,600 hours of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), receive endorsement from their faith community, and achieve competencies in key areas of spiritual care (ACPE 2025).

At the time of writing, I have completed my Master of Divinity (MDiv) and am 200 hours into CPE at a Catholic hospital. Although I have a long journey ahead of me until I become a board certified interfaith chaplain, I am developing tools which I am already using to spiritually care for the open wounds I carry as a survivor.

On Serving Emotional and Spiritual Needs Through Non-Judgmental Presence and Empathetic Listening

A lifetime of emotional abuse made me incapable of making space for my own feelings and unable to receive the feelings of others. As a chaplain I must be able to identify a care seeker's emotions in real time while also being aware of my own, in order to appropriately respond. In all of my service-oriented positions, I was of the opinion that my feelings shouldn't matter because it will take away space from the care receiver. CPE has taught me that it is impossible to negate myself in any interaction. The best way to give space to others is to be aware of how we share space with each other. For the first time, I can begin to name some of the pent up emotions I carry to this day.

I *feel* immense and irreparable loss. When I decided to leave my abusive family, I had to leave my entire community of hundreds of people I love dearly. So many of my childhood friends have gotten married and now have children, and I have missed all the weddings, graduations, and *ʿaqīqa*s[18]—invitations are between heads of families, and I have been disowned by mine. My departure was ineffably hard for my little sister, and the pain that comes with that distance is an open wound that only gets deeper.

I *feel* painfully and repeatedly betrayed. No one in my community stood up for me, even those who saw some of the abuse. All of the aunties and my sisters in faith didn't even stay in touch to look out for me as I transitioned into isolation. After I lost my community and family, I was seeking justice-oriented relationships and actions. I had

[18] Islamic ritual for a newborn baby.

hoped that the women's rights organizations would give me that. And as I was struggling to make meaning of my trauma by doing whatever I could to stop violence, I *felt* used like a political show pony of suffering for hollow notions of women's rights. I had believed that this country actually cared about women. At times, I would effectively argue with my parents that they could not marry me off if I was under 18 in the US because we shared a false understanding that child marriage was illegal in the US. When I came to know that most US states allowed child marriage, it baffled me. I had seen the US admonish other nations for allowing the practice on the principle of girls' wellbeing. But when given the opportunity, NYS, the very headquarters of the UN, refused to comply with international law and raise the marital age to 18. The belief I had in legal consistency and in the US being progressive in regards to women's rights was broken. I had thought that outside of my violent home was a world that cared for women and girls, but I found it to be a heartbreaking facade with convoluted personal interests. ***I had escaped a violent home, but how do I escape a violent world?***

I *feel* exhausted living in an anti-Muslim and Islamophobic world where forever wars forever put targets on Muslim backs. How could I complete my master's thesis on Islamic marriage contracts and their potential to prevent abuse when a 6-year-old Palestinian boy was murdered hours away from me by his landlord who once played with him?[19] The murderer screamed, "You Muslims must die," as he stabbed him lifeless. ***Every time I try to focus on addressing gender-based violence in my own community, I am reminded in some horrific way that I don't have the privilege of being a woman.***

I *feel* nothing I do is enough because I keep witnessing the same cycles of violence.

I *feel* misaligned with all systems, structures, and frameworks because the institutions of family, religion, law, the academy, and society that have produced them have also justified violence against me and others. This positionality makes me *feel* free but it also makes me *feel* ungrounded and unsafe.

I *feel* grateful that I can now begin to feel that my feelings matter. To validate my own feelings was a major step to being able to hold the hands of a grown man in a hospital gown and make him feel he could cry even while his family in the room told him to keep it bottled up. Through non-judgmental and empathetic listening, chaplains can create sacred space for people to be vulnerable with themselves and allow that inner world to come out even as the outer world tries to suppress it back in.

In my view, empowerment does not come from rights, at least not alone. It comes from a person believing in themselves in spite of what others say and do. Jesmine, another research participant, knew she had the Islamic right to stipulate monogamy in her marriage contract and she knew that polygamy was illegal in NYS. When Jesmine was getting married at 17, she wanted to exercise her rights and her fiance was amenable to it. However, her sister-in-law convinced her otherwise, arguing that there is divine wisdom in God allowing men to have the option and that she should not take that away from her husband. So Jasmine removed the condition for monogamy. Now divorced, she looks back to that decision and acknowledges:

[19] May Wadea Al-Fayoumi rest in peace and power. May he and all the children murdered in hate have Justice. May we be able to protect our children.

> *It made sense in theory to allow it [polygamy] but it wasn't the best decision for me. I'm such a jealous person. You know why you've never met my husband? I don't let any of my friends meet him because I'm afraid he might catch feelings, even a little bit. I don't want to take any risk.*

Jesmine invalidated her own feelings and self-knowledge in order to act out of duty and reason. In cases where survivors/victims know their rights but are unwilling to exercise them, seeing a chaplain can help them navigate how they feel and what they want, and have the confidence to take the action that makes sense for them.

Therapy can also be a space for exploring emotions, but chaplaincy allows a faith-affirming environment where faith-oriented care seekers, like Jesmine, can receive support navigating the religious aspects of their situation. Jesmine is caught between wanting to exercise her Islamic rights and considering her relative's Islamic wisdom to waive it. For survivors/victims to see traditional religious authorities (such as imams) in these cases could be like calling the cops when you need a mental health professional. The spiritual and emotional dimensions of spiritual care can be tricky. The normative and prescriptive angles one finds in traditional religious authority are replaced in chaplaincy with a non-judgmental presence and empathetic listening. Interfaith chaplains are not meant to proselytize, admonish, or tell care seekers what they should or shouldn't do. With a chaplain, Jesmine could explore her religious options, process how she feels about them, weigh the consequences of those decisions, and ultimately, she would decide what is best for her. In other words, a chaplain is someone to walk with on a journey led by the survivor/victim themselves versus an authority figure whose objective is to ensure orthodox observance and compliance. Advocates may recognize this practice as being *survivor-centered*, where the service provider is a thought partner but the survivor/victim is to be believed and is the decision maker. In this way, chaplaincy already has a survivor-centered orientation.

On Advocacy, Meaning Making, and Resilience

On a most basic level, chaplains can do the draining job of informing service providers and people in systems about basic religious observances, accommodations, and religious/cultural ways of thinking—a responsibility that often falls on the already heavy shoulders of survivors/victims. An anti-violence chaplain could ensure that survivors/victims who want religious accommodations can receive them regardless of where their battle against violence takes them: an OSC, the courts, shelters, and anywhere else.

Chaplains can also provide deeper spiritual care by helping faith-oriented survivors create meaning with the option of drawing on their faith tradition to do so. In the book *Muslim Women, Domestic Violence, and Psychotherapy: Theological and Clinical Issues*, Nazila Isgandarova presents four heuristic cases[20] to demonstrate the importance of

[20] "Heuristic case studies investigate the phenomena of subjects' experience, confirming what is known and/or seeking new meaning. As an individual participates in the affairs of living, a situation may arise (phenomena) that invites an expanding awareness of human experience… The subjects of these cases do not

understanding a person's theology in order to administer effective Islamic psychology. She shows how the theology of victims/survivors can make them susceptible to abusive theology and impact their healing (Isgandarova 2019). Though I don't think categorizing care seekers into formal schools of Islamic theology or law is particularly helpful or even possible, ***I can envision a chaplain helping service seekers to map out their theology to identify where the knots of abuse which disempower their agency and their direct connection with God exist, along with their theological strengths that can be a source of resilience, and theological grey zones that need attention.***

"I wanted women to know that their fathers have no right to do that," said the young woman in the ḥadīth. That one bit of Islamic tradition was enough to stir a revolution within me. Dissatisfied with the political/legislative process and still feeling the urgency of helping other women and girls, I felt I had a spiritual obligation to piece together the shards I had collected for myself and offer them a window of possibility. I created a workshop series that integrated what I was learning from the anti-violence movement about healthy, unhealthy, and toxic relationships and connected it to textual excerpts from the Qurʾān and Sunna that encouraged healthy relationships and discouraged abusive practices. It felt like I was bridging the divide between faith and advocacy. In these workshops, I invited my participants, who ranged from middle school to college aged, to imagine what kinds of relationships and future homes they wanted. My ultimate goals for the program were: 1) to offer the tools they needed to maintain their spiritual and legal autonomy, 2) to offer foundational knowledge to cultivate the spiritual agency they needed to say "no" to GBV/FV, and 3) to inspire the audacity to dream their own future as a God-given trust. I made sure to include sessions in which they developed the skills to be critical consumers of culture and resist anti-Muslim tropes of GBV—that no people, tradition, or culture was inherently good or bad. We were critically reflective of our parents' culture, mainstream American culture, and the ways in which music and film perpetuate and romanticize unhealthy and toxic behaviors.

It has been almost a decade since I conducted those workshops and passed legislation. Those girls, now young women, have told me that they never had the framework to speak about the gender-based violence they experienced and to address gender issues until they took my workshop. The participants were most interested in religious frameworks and felt most empowered by knowing their Islamic rights, rather than their civil and human rights. ***I pray that they are living in the homes and with the relationships they had imagined, rooted in a theology that they joyfully believe in.***

I only ran the workshop series for one cohort. Though I knew I made a positive impact on participants, there were many unanswered questions and inner work I had to tend to before I could feel confident in offering "solutions."

represent any specific individuals…rather, each case presents a composite of the many faces of Muslim women who experience domestic violence" (Isgandarova 2019, 8).

This is a common practice among social service providers to draw upon actual cases they have had in order to make up fictional cases for training purposes. This allows the case studies to be tailored to training objectives and, most importantly, protects the confidentiality of survivors.

Because of CPE, I can now self-evaluate that I am experiencing severe psychosocial spiritual distress from repeated rupturing of social relationships which has caused forced isolation, the failure to find value-aligned relationships which has caused alienation, and the constant rejection and misperception of my worldview, sense of self, and perspective by others around me which has caused me to distrust. My feelings of betrayal, loss, exhaustion, misalignment, and nothingness stem from psychosocial relationships and need to be remedied.

Fig. 2. Logo for the Right to Say "NO!" workshop series. Designed by Safia Mahjebin.

I lost everything… but I gained a great deal of clarity on what it means to "stand up for justice, even against yourself, your parents, or your closest relatives."[21] I do not regret leaving a broken home and never looking back. But why am I the social outcast in my decision to leave when I know others experience similar situations of abuse? I would also wonder why I would stick my neck out to protect others in abusive relationships, but they wouldn't do the same for me. Do they lack courage or faith? The chaplaincy tool of reframing and the practice of non-judgmental presence has helped me begin to create a new narrative about myself and others. Religion is a vast ocean and different believers are inclined to different aspects. I am justice and loyalty oriented and they are peace and social harmony oriented. I need truth and reconciliation, transformation, and addressing root causes; and I need them urgently. My participants, who are also people from my community, may view justice differently in a way I don't understand. They may be able to forgive injustice in return for familial unity in the long term. Or perhaps they have found love and kindness along with the abusive practices that I did not. My CPE educator asks me, "How is this narrative serving you?" Before I would feel resentment, but with time and non-judgmental presence I am able to craft a story that makes me feel more resilient and open. Although it won't address the feeling of injustice I experienced as a child and teenager, it does allow me a path forward as an adult and makes hope of reconciliation with people I had resented as spiritually bypassing bystanders. Religion is communal and when faith is not reflected and affirmed in relationships, it isolates and causes spiritual violence. The betrayal of my faith community directly impacted my ability to connect with ritual observances and that continues to be a painful point of resentment and mystery.

[21] "O believers! Stand firm for justice as witnesses for Allah even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or close relatives. Be they rich or poor, Allah is best to ensure their interests. So do not let your desires cause you to deviate [from justice]. If you distort the testimony or refuse to give it, then [know that] Allah is certainly All-Aware of what you do" (Qurʾān 4:135, trans. Mustafa Khattab, *The Clear Quran*).

To gain relief from some of the abuse, I would go to Jesmine's house. She and her mom would sympathize with me but urge me to never leave my family and to always keep good relations with them. While interviewing her for my research, I asked her why she took that approach. She said:

> *I would see how much you loved your mom but she was so cold to you. I would even tell my mom about this. You see my mom—she is so loving and sweet. I couldn't see what you were going through or what you needed at that time, I could only see what you should be doing. You should have good relationships with your parents, you should forgive them. I kept thinking that's how it should go in the future. Now I can see you did the right thing and I don't have those expectations for you anymore.*

I spent many hours in Jesmine's room processing the abuse and sharing why I couldn't do it anymore even though I know it doesn't align with what we had been taught religiously. At the time, her prescriptive approach only isolated me further. I felt validated to hear her witness some of those intimately abusive moments, but it pained me that she didn't share it with me when I felt like I was going insane processing how unjust the environment I was born into was—when I needed it the most. To see such self-reflection, growth, and for her to no longer prescribe what I should be doing, has allowed me to continue my relationship with Jesmine as a childhood friend onto a life-long friend (*in shā Allāh*, God willing). She could not see the perspective I was living, and I could only see it because I was living it.

Similarly, when it comes to my colleagues and fellow advocates who caused me such psychosocial injury, perhaps they were unaware or did not have the tools to give me the support I needed. If I was not born into this world in the ways that make me susceptible to violence, then I may not have the unique insights on violence that I do and I may have operated in the same ways they did. Reframing my experiences with others who have harmed me to varying degrees in a non-judgmental and empathetic way helps me cope with social injury, but it cannot heal it. I had to leave my community because people in my social circle weren't prepared to handle my situation and my choices. And I had to disengage with the mainstream anti-violence realm until I found my own way, but I will not leave the movement to end violence. Justice and accountability, no matter how imperfect, is needed for healing. I don't know what that would look like yet, but spiritual care gives me language to express my spiritual needs and chaplaincy provides an actionable pathway to meet them. ***I argue that if we acknowledge that there is such a thing as spiritual abuse, then we ought to acknowledge that there is such a thing as spiritual healing and wellness, and that requires faith-affirming spiritual services.***

V. Envisioning Anti-Violence Chaplaincy

In my opinion, if anti-violence spiritual care comes to fruition, survivors/victims must play a leading role in its development, regulation, and oversight for it to be truly survivor-centered. It is highly inadvisable that someone with no personal experience as a survivor/victim or extensive work experience with survivors/victims be an anti-violence chaplain.

Most of the chaplains I have met so far are people I would *not* trust with the spiritual care of survivors/victims. I came to a Master of Divinity program without knowing what chaplaincy was but wanting to do research in a faith-affirming environment. I immediately felt misaligned and alienated from my cohort and professors. There were repeated instances of Islamophobia and racism. And when the genocide began in Gaza and I was in the thick of student anti-war protesting, I was immensely disappointed in chaplaincy, religious, and Islamic organizations for being silent when it mattered the most and them doing little to nothing when actions were the bare minimum, especially as their Muslim and Palestinian colleagues were being doxxed, discriminated against, harassed, and kicked out of institutions. Most of my personal experiences with chaplains have been at universities. Some are champions for the community, whereas others act like a token cog in the shallow DEI scheme at institutions (Alsultany 2023). After completing three years of a chaplaincy degree, I have observed that chaplaincy education prepares people to manage interpersonal relationships, regulate people's internal states, talk things out, and make the other person feel heard; unfortunately, it does not prepare people to be adequate advocates for their communities under the systems and institutions of oppression that sign their paychecks. I have also observed that although chaplaincy education emphasizes working with suffering and grief, many chaplains are incapable of holding adequate space for oppression-based suffering. They can create sacred space when someone dies or is sick, because there is no one you can point to as the cause, except for maybe God. But when it comes to suffering from oppression—like discriminatory hiring practices, White sensibilities made into institutional standards, and arbitrary rules against political expression and protest—chaplaincy education as it currently is does not train you to handle these situations.

I once met with a well-known female scholar and chaplain to advise me on ethical dilemmas I had about my parents. After almost an hour of me trying my best to explain the situation, she recited the last two verses of Sūrat al-Baqara, "Allah never burdens a soul more than it can bear…," and left. I felt completely unheard and unseen. To be honest, most of the time I don't know what I am bearing. I didn't ask for a spiritual feel-good. Chaplaincy as it is currently practiced, I have witnessed, is notorious for spiritual bypassing because it is inherently an institutional accommodation for spirituality.

While working as a survivor-advocate I had come across chaplains working on the margins of DV and never fully registered who they were, what they did, or how I could benefit from them, even though I was in need of spiritual care. In my experience, chaplains who work in DV do not have a formal place in the DV service provision structure and that keeps them underutilized and underdeveloped for anti-violence work. A way of making faith leaders and chaplains better at serving survivors/victims is by going through DV trainings. These trainings, ranging from a few hours to a few days, can equip them to make the right referrals, understand abuse, be more aware of their biases, and not perpetuate harm, but I argue that is simply not enough to enable the spiritual care survivors/victims need (NYSGC 2025; Alliance for Hope International 2025; USCG 2019).

I propose the development of clinical pastoral education (CPE) specifically for domestic and gender-based violence. Currently, CPE is primarily accredited in and tailored for the hospital setting, with some hospitals offering paid year-long residency programs that would result in 1600 hours of specialized training. Anti-violence CPE could be based

in OSCs with similar long-term programs that specialize in DV/GBV. As an advocate, I had many trainings on being aware of bias and best practices, but it was always theoretical. CPE training demands deep personal reflection and exploration of one's personal narrative, identity, internal biases, and how we can use consciousness of those parts of ourselves to give spiritual care to others. Chaplaincy teaches through repeated practice with the support of an educator, peers, and significantly more experienced staff chaplains. Anti-violence chaplains would be well prepared by CPE to navigate issues of internal bias, while the anti-violence movement would prepare them for navigating systematic oppression (though there is much work to be done on anti-Muslim racism) for the sake of providing the best faith-affirming survivor-centered spiritual care. And similar to hospital spiritual care teams, the chaplains ought to be diverse in the faith traditions they represent so they can cater to survivors who want a chaplain of a specific tradition and interfaith so they can hold space for religious diversity.

Undoubtedly, the reason why I am having a transformative experience in CPE is because my educator is a Muslim survivor herself. For survivors like us, spiritual care is a tool of bringing our full selves while creating space for the world we want to see.

Demanding and striving to be free of domestic, family, and gender-based violence, was a triumphant act of spiritual assertion: that my Islam is mine and no one can shake my belief in Allah, the Most Just, the Most Merciful, and no one can convince me that suffering through injustice and abuse is what God wants or would even tolerate.

Sometimes I feel I have nothing but my experiences and faith, and I offer both here in hopes that it can plant a seed towards justice, no matter how imperfect. Perhaps if I had had access to an anti-violence chaplain as a teenager escaping a violent home and as a young woman fighting for policy and systems change in the face of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism, I wouldn't feel as alienated, burnt out, and broken as I do now. ***I pray that survivors/victims no longer have to choose between domestic violence and spiritual violence. I pray for a more faith-affirming and anti-racist culture in the anti-violence movement, where survivors/victims of all faith traditions can bring God in with them as they seek peace and justice instead of leaving a core part of themselves at the door.***

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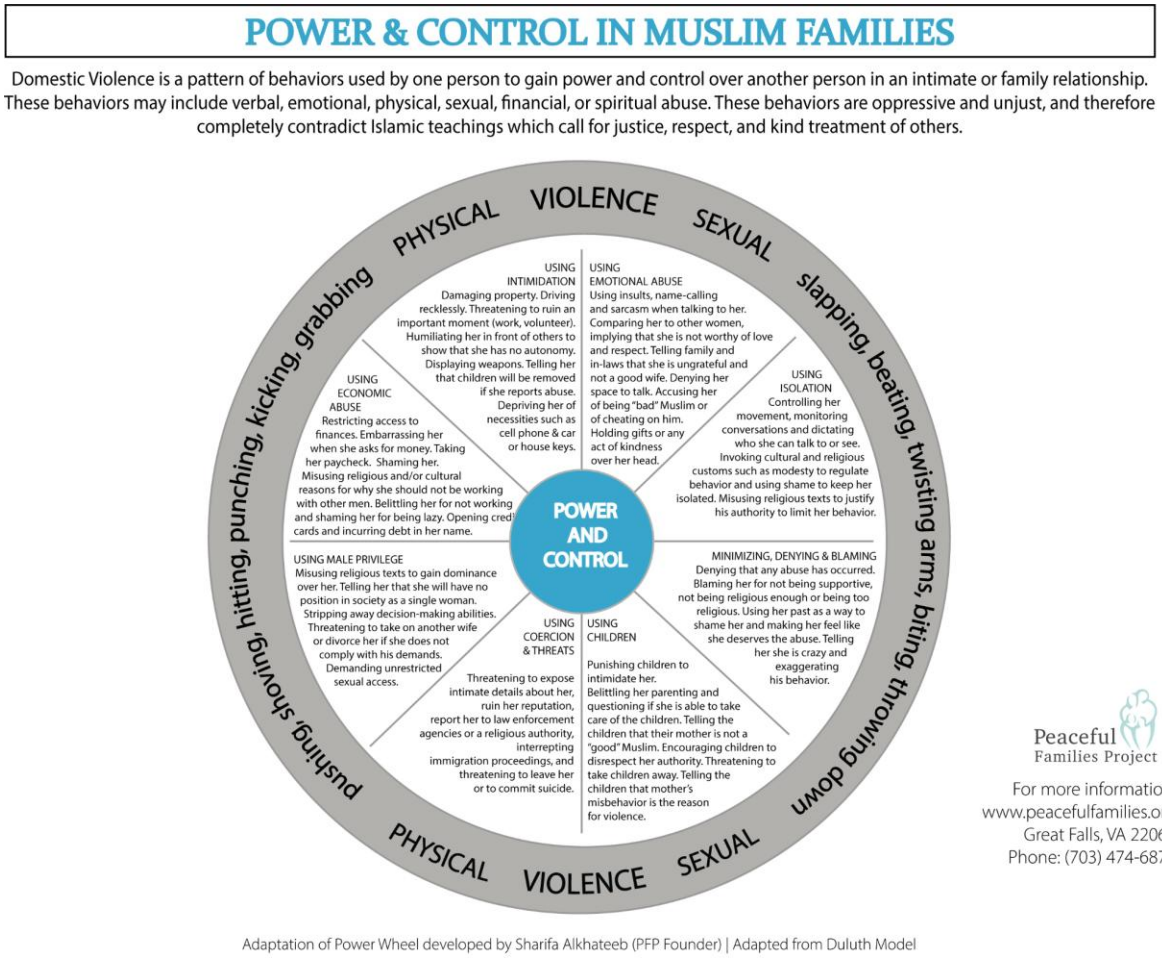
Appendix


POWER & CONTROL IN MUSLIM FAMILIES
Domestic Violence is a pattern of behaviors used by one person to gain power and control over another person in an intimate or family relationship. These behaviors may include verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, financial, or spiritual abuse. These behaviors are oppressive and unjust, and therefore completely contradict Islamic teachings which call for justice, respect, and kind treatment of others.
PHYSICAL VIOLENCE
SEXUAL
slapping, beating, twisting arms, biting, throwing down
PHYSICAL VIOLENCE
SEXUAL
pushing, shoving, hitting, punching, kicking, grabbing
POWER AND CONTROL
USING INTIMIDATION
Damaging property. Driving recklessly. Threatening to ruin an important moment (work, volunteer). Humiliating her in front of others to show that she has no autonomy. Displaying weapons. Telling her that children will be removed if she reports abuse. Depriving her of necessities such as cell phone & car or house keys.
USING EMOTIONAL ABUSE
Using insults, name-calling and sarcasm when talking to her. Comparing her to other women, implying that she is not worthy of love and respect. Telling family and in-laws that she is ungrateful and not a good wife. Denying her space to talk. Accusing her of being "bad" Muslim or of cheating on him. Holding gifts or any act of kindness over her head.
USING ISOLATION
Controlling her movement, monitoring conversations and dictating who she can talk to or see. Invoking cultural and religious customs such as modesty to regulate behavior and using shame to keep her isolated. Misusing religious texts to justify his authority to limit her behavior.
USING ECONOMIC ABUSE
Restricting access to finances. Embarrassing her when she asks for money. Taking her paycheck. Shaming her. Misusing religious and/or cultural reasons for why she should not be working with other men. Belittling her for not working and shaming her for being lazy. Opening credit cards and incurring debt in her name.
MINIMIZING, DENYING & BLAMING
Denying that any abuse has occurred. Blaming her for not being supportive, not being religious enough or being too religious. Using her past as a way to shame her and making her feel like she deserves the abuse. Telling her she is crazy and exaggerating his behavior.
USING MALE PRIVILEGE
Misusing religious texts to gain dominance over her. Telling her that she will have no position in society as a single woman. Stripping away decision-making abilities. Threatening to take on another wife or divorce her if she does not comply with his demands. Demanding unrestricted sexual access.
USING COERCION & THREATS
Threatening to expose intimate details about her, ruin her reputation, report her to law enforcement agencies or a religious authority, interrepting immigration proceedings, and threatening to leave her or to commit suicide.
USING CHILDREN
Punishing children to intimidate her. Belittling her parenting and questioning if she is able to take care of the children. Telling the children that their mother is not a "good" Muslim. Encouraging children to disrespect her authority. Threatening to take children away. Telling the children that mother's misbehavior is the reason for violence.
Peaceful Families Project
For more information:
www.peacefulfamilies.org
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Phone: (703) 474-6870
Adaptation of Power Wheel developed by Sharifa Alkhateeb (PFP Founder) | Adapted from Duluth Model