The Role of Religious Beliefs and Faith-Responsive Resources in DVA Services: Findings from a Survey with UK Service Providers

RESEARCH BRIEF - PREPUBLICATION

Study Overview

Despite robust evidence demonstrating that religious beliefs and faith can both contribute to norms and attitudes that maintain domestic violence and abuse (DVA) and serve as a support system for survivors to cope and heal, there is limited research on how DVA service providers in the United Kingdom (UK) engage religious beliefs and resources in their practical work.

This paper, informed by 24 responses collected through a survey administered anonymously online across the UK, underlines that integrating faith-based knowledge is generally perceived as a helpful approach by service providers but that there are tensions and ethical concerns regarding the standardisation in faith-informed responses and services provision practice.

The current Research Brief is based on research started at Project dldl/ዶልዶል, SOAS University of London, and concluded at the Institute of Domestic Violence, Religion & Migration (IDVRM). The research was led by Dr Romina Istratii (SOAS) with co-Investigators Professor Parveen Ali (University of Sheffield) and Professor Gene Feder (University of Bristol), supported by Dr Mahmoud Afifi, Dr Natalia Paszkiewicz and Meron Shawel Aychiluhim. The research was funded by UK Research and Innovation under Dr Romina Istratii's Future Leaders Fellowship (Ref: MR/T043350/1). The current brief is a non-peer-reviewed prepublication summarising key findings for practitioners' immediate use.

Related Research Papers

Istratii, R., & Ali, P. (2023). A scoping review on the role of religion in the experience of IPV and faith-based responses in community and counseling settings. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 51(2), 141–173. https://doi.org/10.1177/00916471221143440

Istratii, R., Ali, P., & Feder, G. (2024). Integration of religious beliefs and faith-based resources in domestic violence services to migrant and ethnic minority communities: A scoping review. *Violence: An International Journal*, 5(1), 94–122. https://doi.org/10.1177/26330024241246810

Istratii, R., Paszkiewicz, N., Ahmed, A., Gezahegn King, E., Ali, P., Feder, G., & Teck Ascurra, M. (2025). Religious and cultural influences on domestic violence attitudes and responses in UK ethnic minority and migrant communities: A qualitative inquiry. *Violence: An International Journal*, 6(2), 234–263. https://doi.org/10.1177/26330024251391813

Study Background

Religious beliefs are a critical component of the lives of faith communities and have also been proven to inform and shape experiences of DVA. International evidence also indicates that religious leaders are generally influential in their communities through their teaching and mediation in situations of family conflict, but that they are often unprepared to respond with awareness of safeguarding, trauma-sensitivity and the required theological knowledge in situations of DVA. While many DVA organisations recognise this, existing research and consultations with DVA providers in the UK point to a challenge in distinguishing between religious teachings and culturally accepted knowledge and norms, which are often intertwined in the lives of faith communities.

This study sought to respond to some of these gaps by mapping the engagement of DVA service providers with religious beliefs and faith-based resources as well as identifying good practices and areas of improvement. By generating context-specific evidence, the study aimed to identify effective ways towards improving cultural and religious sensitivity in the DVA sector and to build preparedness among DVA service providers to support clients from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds.

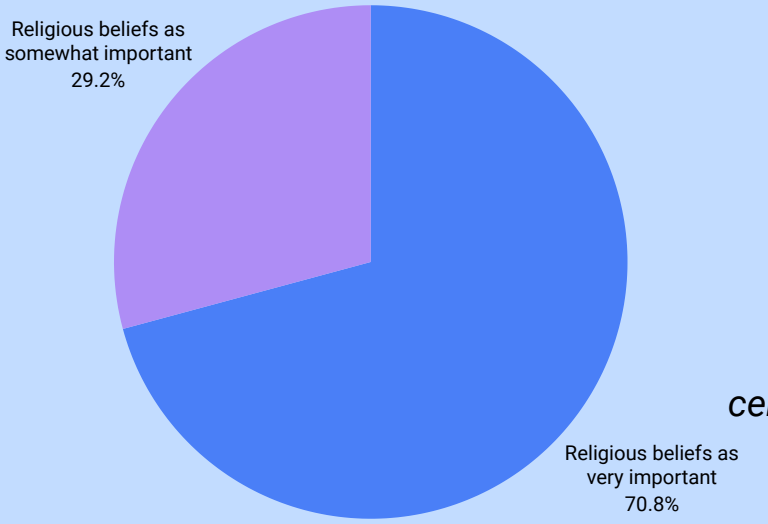
Methods

An online survey comprising 18 closed- and open-ended questions was administered through SurveyMonkey in 2023–2024, using purposive sampling to recruit UK-based statutory, non-governmental and charity DVA providers through specialised platforms, coalitions and organisational networks. Analysis combined descriptive and qualitative content analysis within a reflexive, decolonial framework that explored respondents' own understandings of religious and cultural diversity rather than imposing predetermined definitions.

The respondents had diverse ethnic backgrounds. Among the 24 participants, 17 were White English (about 70%), two Asian Indian (about 8%), two Asian Pakistani (about 8%), one Black Caribbean (about 4%), one White Irish (about 4%) and one White Eastern European (about 4%). Ethnic categories provided in the survey were adapted from official ONS categories.

The importance of religious engagement

Most respondents noted that religious or spiritual concerns came up frequently or sometimes in client conversations, with few reporting that they rarely did.

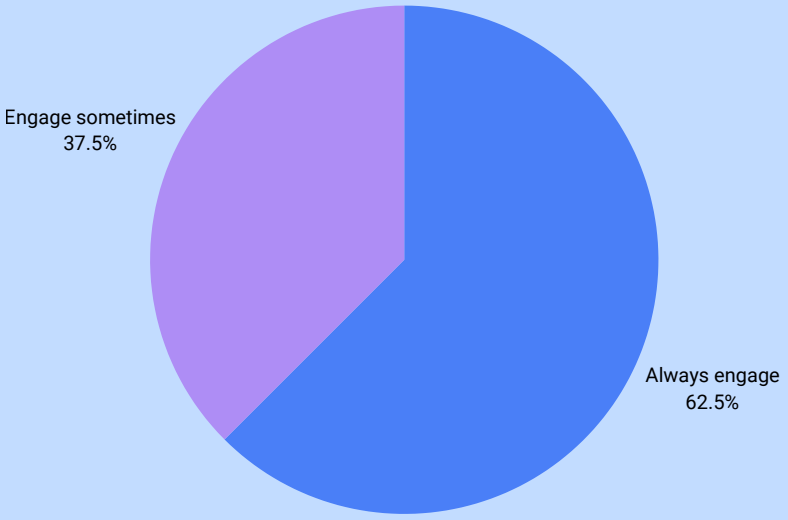


70.8% (17/24) considered understanding clients' religious beliefs very important, with the remainder viewing it as somehow important

"Understanding why and how someone feels certain things if influenced by belief/faith is going to be important, but I would let the client bring this up, rather than asking directly." (P11)

62.5% (15/24) of respondents reported always engaging with clients' religious backgrounds and spiritual concerns, while 37.5% (9/24) said that this depended or occurred only sometimes

"This [religious belief] may shape the way a victim/survivor understands their experience, feels about what has happened and approaches the perpetrator, situation and/or justice system. It also may impact on the risks they face, for example if 'forgiveness' is a key religious concept for them." (P11)



Several respondents said that they maintained connections to faith centres that offered support to their clients as and when needed

"We work with churches, temples, mosques and synagogues who offer support to our clients generically but also individual with permission at times." (P7)

Challenges to religious engagement

While most respondents reported no such limitations (70.8% or 17/24), a smaller group said they had encountered challenges centring around negative preconceptions, a lack of awareness or lack of general preparedness.

> *"I do think it is hard sometimes for the workers who strongly feel atheist/agnostic to understand the importance of faith in survivors' lives, and they may perceive faith as a negative or worrying thing, especially with stereotypes about religions or faith-based organisations being harmful, or supporting harmful practices, such as the Catholic Church and child sexual abuse, or Islam and a perception of reduced women's rights." (P11).*

> *"I used to be in Church leadership, so I can answer questions and offer support within the Church. (…) However, we lack the knowledge of other faiths and is something we have been looking to grow." (P15)*

Future collaboration

In general, collaboration between service providers and faith-based organisations was believed to be mutually needed to achieve better responses, with about 87.5% or 21/24 of providers demonstrating willingness to collaborate with faith actors.

The responses, however, suggest that both parties would need to be engaged in a process of co-creating a common language to respond to DVA and to identify appropriate support services for victims/survivors.

> *"The faith-based providers are able to complement services provided by mainstream DV providers and to enforce better practice and engagement in some communities." (P5)*

> *"It is important that mainstream DV and faith-based providers have common language around [issues of] DV and faith, so that we can ensure that our clients are getting the same messages about domestic abuse and what the future may look like." (P24)*

Key findings

1. *DVA service providers did generally consider their clients' religious beliefs in the provision of services*	**3.** *Providers tended to operate within secular institutional frameworks, which in turn shaped their practice.*
2. *Cultural and religious factors were largely understood as overlapping and were not clearly differentiated.*	**4.** *Providers did consider that there was room for greater collaboration, although this was approached cautiously.*

Recommendations for better religious engagement

Understanding the relationship between faith, DVA and coping/healing/help-seeking

"Understanding the complexity of faith and healing. Understanding how important faith is in decision-making and in barriers." (P15)

Engaging with faith communities and faith leaders directly

"Engaging with different faith communities." (P7)
"Engaging more with faith leaders." (P2)
"Invite religious organisations to attend networking and training events, and vice versa." (P21)

Building religious literacy and understanding among DVA providers and engaged stakeholders

"Understand what different religions say and learn how to respond rather than get annoyed or dismiss it as irrelevant." (P3)
"…enabling others to understand the impact of religious beliefs on domestic abuse." (P23)

Engaging 'by and for' actors, hiring staff from diverse cultural backgrounds who understand the conditions of their clients, and improving the visibility of religious diversity visible in organisational practices

"Have more 'by and for' services." (P4)
"Culturally appropriate staff from diverse backgrounds is essential." (P6)
"Be better educated, offer more refuges and support services that accommodate religious beliefs, know their local services and connect with them." (P16)

Note on study limitations: Respondents comprised a small, self-selected and predominantly White English sample, which is not representative of the entire sector. Findings should not be generalised, but used indicatively.

Practical implications

1. Religious literacy training

Focusing on distinguishing theological teachings from cultural norms, building confidence to engage with clients' religious worldviews and spiritual concerns without requiring deep theological exegesis/interpretation.

2. Structured referral protocols

With vetted faith leaders who have received safeguarding/trauma-informed training, ensuring safe referral, while respecting providers' theological boundaries.

3. Inter-organisational guidelines

For secular-faith partnerships, clarifying mutual expectations around gender equality commitments and decision-making roles. These steps leverage providers' willingness to collaborate with faith-based organisations, while addressing possible tensions between service providers and theological debate, as well as potential concerns about equitable treatment of all faith communities.

4. Policy advocacy

To support consideration of religious literacy modules within DVA commissioning standards (e.g., via VAWG Strategy updates), alongside funding for secular-faith partnership pilots that vet faith actors for safeguarding compliance while leveraging their community trust.

Credits and Contact

The Research Brief was developed by IDVRM Chief Editor, Marley Markham. If you'd like to discuss any of the research contents of this brief, please email the first author, Dr Romina Istratii, at Romina.Istratii@idvrm.org

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