

The Experience Of American Muslim Women On Leaving Abusive Relationships

Posted on September 30, 2019

Intimate partner violence occurs across religions, races, national origins, income levels, and family structures. It may include physical assault, sexual violence, threats, coercive control, stalking, psychological abuse, isolation, and economic control. The original article reviews Dena Hassouneh-Phillips's qualitative study of American Muslim women who left abusive relationships. The study is valuable because it centers cultural and religious experiences that were often missing from mainstream domestic-violence research. Several statements, however, need correction. Islam does not categorically forbid divorce, and abuse is not an Islamic marital right. Some survivors may encounter relatives, leaders, or communities that misuse religious language, prioritize family reputation, or pressure women to remain. Those barriers should be described as interpretations and social practices rather than as the essence of Islam or of all Muslim communities. (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a, 2001b)

Purpose of the Study

Hassouneh-Phillips examined how group-oriented cultural values influenced American Muslim women's experiences of leaving abusive partners. The study did not attempt to estimate the prevalence of abuse among all Muslims or compare Islam statistically with other religions. It used narrative accounts to understand a process: how participants recognized that the relationship had become intolerable, pursued religious or civil separation, confronted family and community responses, and rebuilt identity. Qualitative research is especially useful when the goal is to understand meaning and experience, though findings from a small sample should not be generalized automatically to millions of people. (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a)

Abuse as a Pattern of Power and Control

Domestic violence is not limited to isolated arguments or a single loss of temper. It commonly involves a pattern in which one partner uses fear, intimidation, surveillance, humiliation, money, children, immigration status, religion, or physical force to control the other. The pattern can continue after separation through stalking, litigation abuse, threats, or manipulation of family networks. Professionals should ask about coercion and safety rather than requiring visible injury. A survivor may remain in danger even when no recent assault is documented. (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

The Four Stages Identified in the Article

The participants described a process that included reaching a saturation point, obtaining *khul'* or another form of Islamic divorce, facing family or community disapproval, and reclaiming the self. These stages are not a universal timeline. A survivor may leave and return several times, seek civil divorce before religious dissolution, remain separated without formal divorce, or rebuild identity while legal proceedings continue. The model is most useful as a description of the women interviewed rather than a rule by which other survivors should be judged. (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001a)

Reaching the Saturation Point

A saturation point occurs when the survivor concludes that the relationship can no longer continue safely or meaningfully. It may follow escalating violence, threats to children, severe injury, betrayal by helpers, or recognition that promises of change have not altered the pattern. Outsiders often ask why a person did not leave earlier. That question overlooks danger, attachment, finances, housing, disability, children, immigration, religious commitment, and fear of retaliation. Leaving is a process of evaluating risk, not a simple moment of willpower. (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001a; National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

Separation Can Increase Danger

The period around separation can be especially dangerous when an abusive partner believes control is being lost. A recommendation to “just leave” without planning can expose the survivor and children to greater harm. Safety planning may include confidential communication, emergency documents, medications, transportation, money, protective orders, technology safety, school arrangements, and a secure destination. The survivor is usually the best source of information about the abuser’s patterns. Helpers should support informed choice rather than dictate one plan. (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

Islamic Divorce and Legal Divorce

Muslim marriages may involve religious and civil dimensions. Depending on the tradition, country of origin, marriage contract, and local legal system, divorce may occur through *ṭalāq*, *khul'*, judicial dissolution, mutual agreement, or other processes. A civil divorce in the United States determines legal status under state law, while a survivor may also seek recognition from a religious authority or community. When a husband withholds religious divorce as a means of control, the survivor may experience continuing social or spiritual uncertainty. Religious organizations should establish transparent, survivor-centered procedures that do not require reconciliation with an abuser. (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001a, 2001b)

Religion as Barrier and Resource

Religion can be manipulated by an abusive partner through selective quotation, claims of male authority, threats of divine punishment, or control over community access. Religion can also provide resilience, moral clarity, social support, and a language for condemning injustice. Survivors may draw strength from prayer, scripture, faith, and compassionate leaders. Culturally competent practice does not assume that the survivor must abandon religion to become safe. It asks how faith functions in her life and whether religious resources can support autonomy. (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001a, 2001b)

Divorce and Islamic Ethics

The claim that “Allah disapproves of divorce” is often presented through a saying that divorce is the most disliked permissible act, though the authenticity and use of that report are debated. Islamic legal traditions recognize divorce and provide mechanisms for ending a marriage. Qur’anic teachings emphasize kindness, justice, and either honorable continuation or honorable separation. No ethical reading requires a person to remain available for assault or coercion. Community education should distinguish the value placed on marriage from the preservation of abuse at any cost. (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001b)

Family Reputation and Social Stigma

Participants described pressure connected with family reputation and communal judgment. A woman might fear that divorce will shame parents, reduce siblings’ marriage prospects, or lead others to blame her. Group-oriented values can provide strong support in healthy circumstances but become dangerous when collective image is valued above individual safety. Families should understand that protecting an abuser’s reputation can increase harm and isolate the survivor. Confidential, nonjudgmental support is more consistent with family responsibility than forced endurance. (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001a)

Family Support

Family members can be decisive sources of housing, transportation, childcare, money, legal help, and emotional safety. They can also pressure a survivor to reconcile, disclose her location, or minimize violence. Professionals should ask which relatives are safe rather than assuming family involvement is beneficial or harmful. With the survivor’s consent, supportive relatives can be included in planning and education. Information should never be shared merely because a person is an elder or family representative. (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001a; National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

Community Leaders

Imams, chaplains, teachers, and respected elders may be among the first people a Muslim survivor contacts. Their response can influence whether she seeks additional help. Leaders need training in coercive control, lethality risk, confidentiality, child protection, and local resources. They should not conduct couples counseling or mediation when abuse is active because the process can give the abusive partner more information and leverage. Religious advice should never substitute for emergency protection, medical care, or legal options. (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001b; National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

Healthcare Providers

Nurses, physicians, social workers, and mental-health professionals may notice injuries, anxiety, chronic pain, sleep problems, reproductive coercion, or repeated visits. Screening should occur privately and with professional interpretation when needed. The provider should use nonjudgmental language, validate that abuse is not the survivor's fault, assess immediate danger, and offer resources. Mandatory-reporting duties vary by state and by whether children, vulnerable adults, or particular injuries are involved. Providers should explain confidentiality limits before detailed disclosure. (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

Culturally Responsive Communication

Cultural responsiveness means asking rather than assuming. Muslim women differ by race, ethnicity, immigration history, sect, language, class, disability, sexuality, and degree of religious observance. An Arab immigrant, African American convert, South Asian professional, and refugee may face very different barriers. Practitioners should not treat Muslim identity as one culture. Questions can explore faith, family, community, immigration, and preferred helpers without presuming that any one factor explains the abuse. (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001a, 2001b)

Immigration Status

An abusive partner may control passports, threaten deportation, misrepresent immigration law, or refuse to file promised documents. Some survivors depend on a spouse for status and fear that seeking help will separate them from children or relatives. Advocates should connect survivors with qualified immigration legal services rather than provide informal advice. U.S. law includes some protections for certain abused immigrants, but eligibility is complex. Confidentiality and language access are essential because mistakes can have serious consequences. (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

Economic Abuse

Economic abuse can involve preventing employment, taking earnings, creating debt, withholding necessities, or concealing financial information. Leaving may require deposits, transportation, legal representation, childcare, and replacement of documents. A survivor who stays for financial reasons is not consenting to abuse. Services should include benefits navigation, emergency funds, credit repair, employment support, and long-term housing rather than treating shelter as the only need. (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

Children

Survivors may remain because they fear losing custody, disrupting the children's lives, or exposing them to retaliation. Children can be harmed by witnessing coercion even when they are not physically assaulted. Abusers may use custody exchange, school contact, or religious education to maintain control. Planning should account for developmental needs, safe communication, trauma support, and court orders. Mothers should not be blamed for "failing to protect" without recognizing the constraints imposed by the abusive partner. (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

Mental and Physical Health

Intimate partner violence is associated with injury, chronic pain, gastrointestinal and reproductive problems, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic symptoms, and substance-related coping. These associations do not mean every survivor develops a disorder. Care should avoid pathologizing adaptive survival responses such as vigilance or secrecy. Trauma-informed practice emphasizes safety, choice, collaboration, trust, and empowerment. Mental-health treatment can support healing but should not imply that the survivor caused or imagined the violence. (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

Shelters and Mainstream Services

Mainstream domestic-violence services may be unfamiliar with Islamic divorce, halal food, prayer, modesty, language, racism, or fear of community exposure. Muslim-specific services may offer cultural understanding but can be difficult to access or may be connected socially to the survivor's community. The strongest system provides options. Shelters and agencies should train staff, accommodate religious practice, protect confidentiality, and build partnerships without requiring survivors to use a faith-based service. (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001a, 2001b)

Muslim-Led Advocacy

Muslim advocates can challenge the false idea that criticizing abuse attacks Islam. Community campaigns can use religious ethics to emphasize consent, mercy, justice, and accountability. Men and boys should be included in prevention without making women responsible for educating potential abusers. Mosques can publish clear anti-abuse policies, vet counselors, create confidential referral pathways, and refuse to provide institutional cover to influential perpetrators. Public statements are useful only when matched by practice. (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001b)

Limits of Couples Counseling

Ordinary marital conflict involves partners who can speak without fear and negotiate in relative safety. Abuse involves unequal power and retaliation. Joint counseling can expose disclosures, imply shared responsibility, and allow the abuser to perform cooperation. Individual assessment should determine whether any conjoint process is safe and appropriate. The priority is ending violence and coercion, not preserving the marriage. An abuser's participation in a program does not guarantee change; accountability requires sustained behavior over time. (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

Legal Options

Survivors may consider protective orders, criminal reporting, divorce, custody orders, immigration remedies, workplace safety planning, or civil claims. No single option is safe or desirable for everyone. Some survivors distrust law enforcement because of racism, immigration concerns, disability, prior experiences, or fear of escalating the abuser. Advocates should provide accurate information and respect informed decisions except where law requires action. Survivor-centered practice does not equate empowerment with one predetermined legal response. (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

Technology-Facilitated Abuse

Modern abuse may involve location tracking, shared accounts, spyware, smart-home devices, password control, image-based abuse, or impersonation. A survivor should not be told simply to delete every account, which may alert the abuser or remove evidence. Technology safety planning can include a safer device, account review, two-factor authentication, documentation, and consultation with trained advocates. Religious and community organizations also need secure communication practices so that requests for help do not become visible to an abusive partner. (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

Reclaiming the Self

The final stage described in the study involves rebuilding identity after abuse and community disapproval. Survivors may rediscover education, work, friendships, parenting confidence, spirituality, and bodily autonomy. Healing does not require forgetting or following a fixed schedule. Some continue to experience legal conflict, grief, financial pressure, or trauma while also building a meaningful life. Services should support long-term goals rather than ending assistance when physical separation occurs. (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a)

Contribution of the Research

The study demonstrated that leaving must be understood within cultural and relational systems. It encouraged healthcare providers and advocates to work with Muslim communities, develop appropriate educational material, and create safe referral networks. Its continuing contribution is methodological: it listens to women's narratives rather than assuming that a universal service model fits everyone. It also shows that community ties can create both constraints and potential sources of support. (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a)

Limitations

The study was published in 2001 and included a small group of participants. Muslim communities and service systems have changed, and digital abuse, post-9/11 discrimination, new immigration policies, and newer advocacy organizations may shape current experiences. The participants cannot represent all American Muslim women. The concept of leaving may also center a particular outcome when some survivors pursue harm reduction, legal protection, or economic preparation before separation. Later research should include diverse identities, men and nonbinary survivors, disabled people, converts, immigrants, and different family structures while keeping women's safety central. (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a)

Further Research

Future studies should evaluate culturally responsive interventions, religious-leader training, shelter access, immigration support, and long-term outcomes. Researchers should examine how racism and Islamophobia affect willingness to contact institutions and how community accountability can occur without exposing survivors to pressure. Participatory research involving survivors and advocates can improve relevance. Quantitative studies may measure patterns, while qualitative work remains necessary for understanding meaning and barriers.

Conclusion

Hassouneh-Phillips's study offers an important account of American Muslim women leaving abusive relationships through saturation, religious divorce, community response, and reclamation of self. Its findings should not be converted into the stereotype that Islam forbids divorce or Muslim communities uniformly support abuse. Intimate partner violence is a pattern of power and control, while religious belief can be manipulated by abusers or used by survivors as a source of strength. Effective support is survivor-centered, culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and connected with safety planning, healthcare, housing, legal assistance, and economic resources. Families, mosques, clinicians, and advocates should protect autonomy and hold perpetrators accountable. The preservation of a marriage or community reputation can never be valued above a person's safety and dignity. (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a, 2001b; National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026)

References

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