

The Experience Of American Muslim Women On Leaving Abusive Relationships

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Introduction

Intimate partner violence occurs across religious, racial, national, and socioeconomic communities and can include physical assault, sexual violence, threats, stalking, psychological abuse, economic control, isolation, and coercive monitoring. Dena Hassounah-Phillips's qualitative research on American Muslim women is important because it examines how leaving an abusive relationship can be shaped by faith, family expectations, community reputation, and the search for both civil and religious forms of separation (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001a, 2001b). The study should not be interpreted as evidence that Islam causes abuse or that Muslim communities respond uniformly. Islamic legal traditions recognize divorce, and abuse is not a legitimate marital entitlement. More recent research reinforces the complexity of the relationship between religion and domestic violence. A 2025 meta-ethnography of thirty-three qualitative studies found that Muslim women, like women in other communities, experience varied forms of abuse while religion can function as a barrier to help-seeking in some circumstances and as a source of coping, meaning, and support in others (Sharifnia et al., 2025). Culturally responsive analysis therefore requires attention to individual experience rather than stereotypes.

The Study and the Meaning of Leaving

Hassounah-Phillips examined women's narratives to understand how group-oriented cultural values influenced the process of leaving abusive partners. The study was qualitative and did not estimate the prevalence of intimate partner violence among American Muslims or compare Muslims statistically with other religious populations. Participants described experiences that included reaching a point at which the relationship became intolerable, seeking *khul'* or another form of religious separation, confronting family or community reactions, and rebuilding a sense of self (Hassounah-Phillips, 2001a). These stages are best understood as themes from the participants' narratives rather than a universal sequence. A survivor may leave and return several times, pursue civil divorce before a religious dissolution, remain physically separated while legal matters continue, or prepare financially and emotionally long before leaving. The word "leaving" can therefore describe a process rather than one event. This distinction matters because outsiders often interpret continued contact as indecision, while the survivor may be balancing safety, housing, children, immigration status, finances, faith, and

anticipated retaliation. Qualitative research is valuable precisely because it makes these interacting constraints visible.

Religion, Divorce, and Cultural Interpretation

Religion can be used in very different ways within an abusive relationship. An abusive partner may selectively invoke religious language about obedience, shame, or family duty to justify control, while a survivor may draw on prayer, scripture, spiritual identity, or a trusted religious leader as sources of strength. Hassounah-Phillips (2001b) shows why these functions must be distinguished rather than assuming that faith is either inherently protective or inherently harmful. Muslim marriages may also have both civil and religious dimensions. Depending on tradition and circumstances, religious dissolution can involve *ṭalāq*, *khulʿ*, judicial dissolution, mutual agreement, or other procedures, while a U.S. civil divorce determines legal marital status under state law. A spouse who obstructs religious separation can create continuing social or spiritual uncertainty even after civil proceedings begin. Istratii et al. (2024), reviewing faith-sensitive domestic-violence services across migrant and minority communities, found that religious beliefs and mediators can influence help-seeking positively or negatively. Service providers therefore need to understand how faith matters to the individual survivor rather than assuming safety requires abandoning religious identity or accepting one community interpretation.

Coercive Control, Separation, and Safety

Domestic violence is better understood as a pattern of power and control than as a series of isolated arguments. Coercive control can include monitoring communications, restricting money, threatening immigration consequences, isolating a partner from relatives, using children as leverage, controlling religious participation, or creating fear without visible injury. Separation does not automatically end this pattern. An abusive partner may escalate stalking, threats, litigation, technology-facilitated surveillance, or attempts to manipulate family networks when control appears to be slipping. For this reason, the National Domestic Violence Hotline emphasizes individualized safety planning rather than assuming that one immediate departure strategy is appropriate for every survivor (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2026). Safety planning can involve documents, medicines, secure communication, transportation, finances, children's arrangements, legal information, and a safer place to stay. The survivor usually has detailed knowledge of the abusive partner's behavior and should remain central to decisions about timing and risk. Framing departure as a simple test of courage ignores the practical dangers and dependencies that may make careful preparation necessary. It also risks blaming survivors for circumstances created by coercion.

Family, Community, and Religious Leadership

Family and community networks can either expand or restrict a survivor's options. Participants in Hassouneh-Phillips's research described concerns about family reputation, divorce stigma, and the reactions of relatives or community members (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001a). These pressures should not be generalized to every Muslim family, but they illustrate how group-oriented values can become harmful when social image is prioritized over safety. The same networks can also provide housing, childcare, transportation, money, emotional support, and advocacy. Religious leaders may be among the first people contacted, which gives their response substantial importance. Istratii et al. (2024) found that faith-sensitive domestic-violence services benefit from understanding religious beliefs while also recognizing tensions between generalist and community-based responses. Leaders who minimize violence, disclose confidential information, or pressure reconciliation can increase risk, whereas trained leaders can affirm that abuse is unacceptable and connect survivors with specialized services. Active abuse also changes the meaning of ordinary couples counseling because unequal power and fear can make joint disclosure unsafe. Supportive intervention should therefore distinguish marital disagreement from coercive violence rather than treating both as symmetrical conflict.

Culturally Responsive and Structural Support

Culturally responsive practice begins by recognizing diversity among American Muslim women. Race, ethnicity, immigration history, language, class, disability, sect, age, conversion history, sexuality, and level of religious observance can shape both vulnerability and access to help. A South Asian immigrant, an African American Muslim, an Arab professional, and a recent convert may share faith while experiencing very different family and institutional contexts. Sharifnia et al. (2025) found across global qualitative evidence that help-seeking is shaped by social, cultural, religious, and economic factors rather than by one Muslim experience. Services therefore need language access, confidentiality, informed immigration referrals, economic assistance, trauma-informed healthcare, and options for religiously sensitive support without requiring faith-based intervention. Economic abuse can make housing or legal separation difficult, while immigration-related threats can create fear of authorities even when legal protections may exist. Technology can add another layer through location tracking, shared accounts, password control, or spyware. Culturally competent care does not excuse harmful norms; it improves the ability to identify barriers accurately while respecting the survivor's identity, priorities, and preferred sources of support.

Reclaiming Identity and the Contribution of Later Research

The final theme in Hassouneh-Phillips's study involves reclaiming the self after abuse and community disapproval. Recovery can include renewed education, employment, parenting confidence,

friendships, bodily autonomy, religious meaning, and the ability to make decisions without surveillance or fear. Separation may be an important transition, but it does not end every consequence. Survivors can continue to face custody disputes, financial instability, trauma symptoms, social isolation, or religious questions while simultaneously building a meaningful life. Later research strengthens the study's central insight that domestic violence services work best when they understand culture and faith without stereotyping either. Sharifnia et al. (2025) synthesize evidence showing that Muslim women use varied coping strategies and that religion can serve as both a complicated social context and a resource for resilience. Istratii et al. (2024) similarly document efforts to integrate faith-sensitive approaches into domestic-violence services. These findings extend rather than replace the 2001 study. They suggest that survivor-centered practice should provide multiple pathways to safety and recovery, allowing women to decide which family, community, religious, healthcare, legal, or secular resources are trustworthy in their own circumstances.

Conclusion

Hassounah-Phillips's research remains valuable because it shows that leaving an abusive relationship is embedded in relationships, culture, faith, economics, and community rather than being one isolated decision. Its findings should not be converted into claims that Islam forbids divorce or that Muslim communities uniformly tolerate abuse. American Muslim women are diverse, and contemporary evidence confirms that religion can be manipulated by perpetrators, create help-seeking barriers through particular interpretations or community practices, and also provide survivors with resilience, meaning, and supportive relationships (Sharifnia et al., 2025; Istratii et al., 2024). Intimate partner violence is fundamentally a pattern of coercion and control, and separation can involve heightened risk as well as new opportunities for autonomy. Effective support therefore depends on privacy, safety planning, economic and legal resources, culturally informed healthcare, and respect for the survivor's own assessment of trustworthy helpers. Families, religious leaders, advocates, and professionals can either reinforce coercion or expand a survivor's choices. The enduring contribution of the study is its insistence that women's own narratives are necessary for understanding both barriers to leaving and the process of rebuilding identity afterward.

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