



The Experiences of Black Muslim Survivors in the U.S.

Identity and Experience

Islam is deeply rooted throughout the African Diaspora. There are millions of Black Muslim people throughout the world and many countries with very large Black Muslim populations, such as Libya, Sudan, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Ivory Coast, and more (Pew Research Center, 2009). Although we often associate the Black Church and Christianity with Black American experiences, Islam and Islamic teachings have also played a central role in shaping the Black American experience as well. Today, Black people make up 20% of the United States' overall Muslim population (Pew Research Center, 2019). Most Black Muslims are either Sunni (52%), or do not identify with a particular Islamic Denomination (27%). According to a survey administered by the Pew Research Center, two out of every 100 Black Muslims identify as followers of the Nation of Islam. The Nation of Islam has influenced a much larger Black American Muslim movement, using the intersection of race and religion to construct a blueprint for liberation. Some notable figures of the Nation of Islam are Malcolm X, Minister Louis Farrakhan, and even Muhammad Ali (Pew Research Center, 2019). The Nation of Islam and other Black Muslim community members were integral to the development of various social, community-based, and civic programs geared at supporting and uplifting all members of the Black community.

As dual minorities in both race and religion, Black Muslims within the U.S. are subjected to unique forms of discrimination and oppression. For many Black Muslims and Black Muslim immigrants, intersectional violence has adversely impacted their experience within the U.S. While the number of African immigrants arriving in the U.S. continues to increase, there remains little examination into their experiences with intimate partner violence or coping strategies (Akinsulure-Smith et al., 2013). The lack of emphasis in research on foreign-born communities results from the racialized history of the United States, in which immigrants are broadly categorized as Black or African American. The gap in research on the Black Muslim Community has resulted in growing concerns for many Black Muslims. Sudanese-American interfaith and anti-racism educator Hind Makki states, "A lot of Black Muslims from immigrant backgrounds live at the intersection of Islamophobia and anti-Black racism, which affects how they see America

and how they raise their kids.” Despite the fact that some of America’s most notable figures are Black Muslims, the nation has maintained xenophobic narratives towards immigrant Muslim populations. The heightened fears of terrorism post the 9/11 attacks have specifically impacted men that wear turbans or long beards and women who wear hijabs. Many individuals within the Muslim community may now avoid wearing religious coverings as a protective factor (Ochieng, 2017).

Demographics of Black Muslims in the U.S

- ❖ Black people make up 20% of the country’s overall Muslim population (Pew Research Center, 2019).
- ❖ Nearly 70% of Black Muslims are born in the U.S.
- ❖ Geographically, Black Muslim American communities tend to reside in urban areas in Northeastern cities (Ismail, 2022).
- ❖ According to a 2017 study, American Muslims are one of the most racially diverse religious groups in the U.S, split as 25% Black, 24% White, 18% Arab, 7% mixed race, and 5% Hispanic (World Population Review).
- ❖ The states with the largest Muslim populations are New York (725,475), California (504,056), Illinois (473,792), New Jersey (321,652), and Texas (313,209). On the other hand, six states with the lowest Muslim populations below 1,000 residents are North Dakota, South Dakota, Alaska, West Virginia, Wyoming, Montana, and Hawaii (World Population Review).
- ❖ About half of Black Muslims (49%) are converts to Islam (Pew Research Center).
- ❖ Many Black Muslims come from sub-Saharan Africa, including countries such as Somalia and Ethiopia (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Black Muslim Survivorship

Power and Control Dynamics

While Islam promotes justice and healthy relationships, many abusers will misinterpret and misuse Islamic teachings or cultural traditions to further perpetuate abuse and control towards their intimate partners. The Qur’an emphasizes equality between men and women, and advocates for mutual love and compassion, while condemning the use of shaming, name-calling, and victim-blaming. However, statistics show that domestic violence within the Muslim community is still very prevalent.

- ❖ 66% of Muslims reported that they knew a Muslim that had been physically abused (Peaceful Families Project, 2023).
- ❖ More than 40% of those abused as adults said their spouse abused them (Peaceful Families Project, 2023).
- ❖ 80% of Muslims surveyed by Peaceful Families & Project Sakina have experienced emotional abuse, with 77% of victims experiencing verbal abuse.

Abusive partners will often misuse scripture, tradition, or other cultural norms to prolong abuse and encourage a survivor to forgive abuse. Abusive partners will also use coercive tactics like approaching elders or Imams from the community to counsel or educate their partners on how to be respectful partners and good wives while completely shirking accountability for the violence they are enacting within their relationships. Abusers often use isolation, reproductive coercion, and sexual abuse to harm their victims. Abusers often use social and community expectations or norms against their victims as well as influence third parties to advocate that the survivor stay in the relationship. Coercion in this sense may include letters or phone calls on the abuser's behalf, comments in social settings and on social media (Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse, 2020).

Using fear mongering techniques to prevent a victim from reporting are common tactics of violence used within Muslim communities. These tactics may include:

- ❖ Threatening to call immigration enforcement.
- ❖ Threatening to report the victim as a potential terrorist threat.
- ❖ Threatening to spread gossip or private images of the survivor throughout their faith and ethnic community.
- ❖ Convincing the victim not to speak out against the abuser because the abuser may be tried as a terrorist.
- ❖ Shaming the victim for not upholding religious practices by not forgiving the abuser.
- ❖ Using physical violence in conjunction with isolation to prevent the survivor from reaching out for help.
- ❖ Isolating the victim from friends, family, and mosque.

Barriers to Accessing Services for Black Muslim Survivors

Black Muslim survivors experience multilayered trauma as they navigate intersectional identities and systemic barriers. Therefore, it is important to note that the following list of barriers when seeking resources accounts for just a few of the many potential barriers experienced as part of their lived experiences.

- ❖ Cultural/religious beliefs that restrain survivors from leaving the abusive situation.
- ❖ Fear of reporting due to pressure from religious communities, friends, and family.
- ❖ Fear of interacting with law enforcement, the criminal-legal system, and shelter programs.
- ❖ Many immigrant survivors have a history of trauma, especially when they arrive as refugees or asylum-seekers. Once in the U.S., immigrants may also experience racism, poverty, and language barriers that make access to services difficult. (API-GBV, 2021).
- ❖ Migrant and refugee women are at increased risk of experiencing intimate partner violence due to intersecting vulnerabilities. Many are separated from family, are unemployed, are economically dependent, and lack access to suitable support services (Wenham et al., 2022).

- ❖ African women have difficulty accessing services specific to their needs. The lack of culturally relevant services often results in the underestimation of IPV within these populations (Wenham et al, 2022).
- ❖ Language access remains a huge barrier for immigrant populations. Many immigrants who arrive in the U.S are not English proficient. Language barriers impact almost every aspect of their lives, especially in the following areas:
 - Employment
 - Housing
 - Healthcare
 - Education
 - Transportation
 - Victim services
 - Legal services
 - Food security

Survivor-Centered Advocacy

- ❖ Identify and address any exclusionary actions taken towards Muslim women within shelter. For example:
 - Identify when dietary restrictions are not considered.
 - Identify and address language barriers.
 - Identify when a survivor's spirituality or religious practice is ignored.
 - Acknowledge and respect Muslim holidays.
 - Assess your shelter or organization to see if there are dedicated rooms for survivors to practice their faith. If not, provide spaces for survivors to access a prayer room.
- ❖ Advocates can empower victims of abuse by allowing survivors to determine how they'd like to lead.
 - Educate yourself on the survivor's religion, practices, customs, and belief systems.
 - Allow the survivor to make their own informed decisions.
 - Do not assume, always ask questions.
 - Ensure proper language services are being provided to the survivor.
 - Be conscious of implicit biases and privileges that may impact how you provide service to a survivor.
 - Center your service provision through a trauma-informed care framework.

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