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Reflections on an Imam's Guilty Plea

safe communities, Sexual Violence



by Nadiah Mohajir

[HEART Women & Girls](#) initially was founded to focus on improving access to sexual health information and education in Muslim communities. As we held workshops across the country, we quickly realized something: once facilitators set a safe space and gained the trust of participants, the sheer number of stories of sexual violence that were shared were overwhelming. As a result, we quickly made the deliberate decision to include sexual assault awareness education in every one of its sexual health workshops. We believed that it would be a disservice to participants to not also cover topics such as boundaries, consent, and healthy relationships in our sexual health education programming. While discussing sexual violence is different than discussing women's health, these two topics intersect in the experience of being a Muslim woman,

understanding one's body, and exercising bodily autonomy.

Last year, the importance of this work was more evident than ever. A young woman came forward with allegations of sexual assault against a prominent Chicago imam, Abdullah Saleem. HEART board and staff, along with a team of volunteers, publicly supported her, and within days, received dozens upon dozens of phone calls and emails from survivors of the same perpetrator. We began connecting these young women to the resources they needed: legal services, contacts in the criminal justice system, therapists, and awareness materials.

Of the numerous survivor stories related to this case that HEART initially collected, five survivors chose to move forward with civil legal proceedings, as reported in the [New York Times](#) in February 2015. The Illinois States Attorney filed criminal charges shortly afterwards. Both cases have been proceeding – and on August 25, 2016, [Abdullah Saleem entered a plea bargain for both charges in the criminal case](#). This means that the criminal case was resolved out of court through a process of negotiation. As a result, the victims do not have to face the exhausting ordeal of going to trial and testifying in front of the defense, which typically utilizes tactics that humiliate and tear down the witness.

The importance of this milestone is one that should be recognized. Abdullah Saleem has plead guilty and was sentenced to two years probation and must register as a sex offender. The survivors – both those participating in the criminal and civil cases, but also those who are watching silently from the sidelines, are able to witness some semblance of justice being served in this world. Those that worked to advocate and support them, in a community that is reluctant to address this issue head on, have found some reprieve on this uphill battle. Those that were worried more about the community's or perpetrator's reputation than enveloping the survivors in an embrace of mercy and safety, can no longer deny the power of justice being done despite their continuous pushback every step of the way.

This case and its public reaction highlighted the need for HEART's work more than ever and illustrates some important takeaways:

The incredible courage of survivors

The bravery, courage, and resilience of the brave young woman who first came forward, and the many women and men who followed, sought legal assistance, including those that just called to say, "me too," is unparalleled and should be at the forefront of every sexual assault discussion. These are men and women in our

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communities who knew full well that many would not believe them and knew the hostility they would face. Some of these men and women were disclosing to their families for the very first time, and beginning a very personal and private journey to healing and justice. These men and women lived with these experiences for months, years, decades, and came together in their own ways to very loudly and strongly say “No more,” so that no one else has to endure what they experienced. These men and women, who have not revealed their name or face publicly, but do have a story for all to hear regardless of their community’s unbelievable silence. This is what you call incredible courage and resilience.

Lack of awareness

Many Muslims don’t have the knowledge or the language to identify sexual violence. They often incorrectly attribute sexual violence to being limited to rape, and end up minimizing or ignoring all other abuses. Instead of identifying the actions of abuse, they are often excused as behaviors that “men/boys/elders do.” We also have found that many survivors don’t have an understanding of what is happening to them or even a basic understanding of their bodies and sexuality.

Lack of first responders or resources

There are not enough resources or first responders and professionals trained to address the needs of Muslim survivors in a religiously and culturally competent way. Among the stories we collected, we learned that often times, some of the first people Muslim survivors disclosed to were their local imams, teachers, and school administrators. Yet, due to limited training and knowledge, these individuals often missed the mark in offering a victim-centric response and connecting the survivors to the help they needed. Additionally, we also learned that the secular resources were also not meeting the Muslim communities’ needs. The organizations lacked the culturally competency to be able to provide an appropriate service to those who sought help. Muslim survivors also admitted to not even knowing that resources existed for them in the first place, and didn’t have the tools to appropriately navigate that system.

High rates of underreporting

We know that sexual assault is one of the most underreported crimes in this country, with nearly [68% of sexual assaults](#) never being reported to law enforcement. From our work with Muslim survivors, we know that the likelihood of not reporting **is even higher** among Muslims, due to the shame, stigma, and lack of awareness associated with sexual assault. While the data specific to Muslims, or even faith communities is limited, anecdotally, we have seen that more than 85-90% of survivors in the Muslim community do not report to law enforcement. To gain a better understanding of some of the barriers facing survivors and reporting, please watch this [short video](#) we developed.

This is just the beginning

This particular criminal case is over after nearly two years while the civil case continues. This was the work of many survivors, advocates, professionals, and experts coming together from the anti-sexual assault movement, law enforcement, legal services, media, and social services. Each one of these parties played a crucial role in shining a light on the stories of these brave survivors and demanding accountability and justice. A number of elder community members even made it a point to be present on each of the court dates to show their support for the survivors. The need for this kind of collaborative approach cannot be underscored. Yet, so much more work needs to be done. There is a dearth of research on the needs of Muslim survivors. There is a dearth of culturally-sensitive resources, services, and information available to Muslim communities on sexual assault. And there is a great need for all of us to work collectively to build safer spaces for our survivors and to hold their abusers accountable, so that those who are violated are heard and believed and no longer have to suffer in silence.

We, at HEART, are motivated more than ever, to continue building on this work. We hope to produce more resources, lead research studies focusing on the needs of the Muslim communities, and implement awareness workshops and trainings for community and religious leaders. The responsibility is on all of us to build safer communities for the most vulnerable. I hope that you can join us as we continue this crucial work.

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