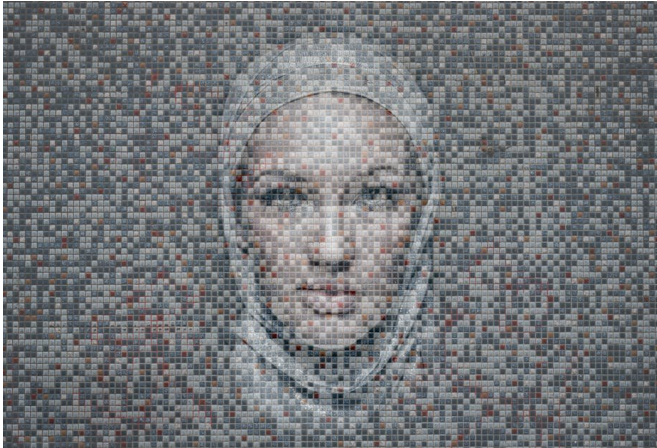


Debunking three common myths about divorce and abuse in Muslim communities

2 May 2018, by Sandra Elhelw Wright



Many Muslim women in Australia struggle to secure a religious divorce when trying to leave abusive relationships. Credit: Mark Zed/Aspect Photographics, Author provided

A recent [ABC News investigation](#) highlighted the difficulties some Muslim women in Australia have experienced in trying to obtain a religious divorce from imams. This in turn can many times trap Muslim women in abusive relationships for years.

Issues surrounding divorce and abuse in Muslim communities are shrouded in stereotypes and myths. Given the media coverage on the issue in the past couple of weeks, it's an opportune time to debunk three common myths surrounding divorce and [domestic violence](#) in Australian Muslim communities.

Myth #1: This is Australia. They don't need an Islamic divorce.

Fact: Some people in religious communities believe there is a difference between 'divorce before God' and 'divorce before the law'.

Muslim women have an unfettered right to obtain a

civil divorce through the Australian legal system. Some Muslims consider this sufficient to [trigger an Islamic divorce](#).

However, many believe [separate rules](#) govern whether a woman is considered divorced before God. This "divorce before God", as opposed to "divorce before the law", is what "Islamic divorce" refers to. It's similar to how divorce is treated in some [Christian and Jewish communities](#).

Many Muslim women believe that without a religious divorce, they are still married before God—even if they are physically separated and legally divorced. This can be [emotionally and spiritually difficult](#), especially if the woman has left a violent relationship and her ex-husband is blocking a religious divorce as a form of control and further violence.

Myth #2: If the women leave Islam, they'll have a better life.

Fact: Religion can have a positive impact on people's lives.

Although the Islamic divorce process can make it difficult for women to leave abusive relationships, I've found in my research that being religious also has many benefits. For the majority of practising Muslim women, religion is a useful coping mechanism. It helps them deal with traumatic situations, provides emotional support, and plays an important role in healing by offering a sense of hope and purpose. Other [Australian](#) and [American](#) studies have made similar findings.

Islam can also be a useful tool to change community attitudes. In [Fighting Hislam](#), Susan Carland demonstrates how Muslim women have challenged sexism by using religious arguments from the earliest days of Islam—and continue to do so today in Australia.

In my survey of Australian Muslims, the overwhelming majority believed violence was always unacceptable. A key driver for that belief was that it is against the principles of Islam.

In interviews and workshops with religious and community leaders, many said they used religion to promote respectful relationships and believed using an Islamic framework was an effective way to create change in the community.

Myth #3: Imams are the problem.

**Fact: Violent people are the problem.
Everybody needs to be part of the solution.**

People who choose to use violence are responsible for their own behaviour. They should be held accountable by the law and their communities. However, broader communities and societies can sometimes fuel violence and make it harder for women to get support. Muslims and non-Muslims alike play a role in this.

As the [ABC reported](#), it is not uncommon for imams to do this by refusing to grant an Islamic divorce and pressuring women to return to violent relationships.

There are Muslims [working to change this](#), and there are certainly imams who prioritise the safety and wellbeing of women. However, focusing on fixing imams' attitudes and behaviours alone is a simplistic solution to a much more complicated problem.

It's important to remember that imams are mostly unpaid volunteers. They don't generally have the resources for training, education, and professional development. This is not to excuse imams from their personal responsibility in such divorces, but we need to acknowledge that the broader issues around how Islamic institutions and communities are structured [have an impact on](#) how they operate.

There is also the wider question around [whether it's appropriate](#) for imams to be providing any marriage counselling [at all](#). Some Australian Muslims want imams to become trained in marriage counselling. Others want to see professionals take over the

marriage-counselling roles that imams have been performing.

Beyond this, it's crucial to emphasise that imams are only one part of a multifaceted problem. There are many [other issues](#) facing Muslim women in [abusive relationships](#).

One of the main problems is the current climate of Islamophobia in Australia, which can make Muslim women [reluctant](#) to seek help. They may worry that a mainstream service will blame their faith for the violence, that police will be overly harsh on the perpetrator, or that by disclosing violence they are compounding existing stereotypes.

Other problems include the lack of culturally competent services, [social isolation](#), and a lack of [perpetrator interventions](#) for women who want the violence to stop but don't want the relationship to end.

This is in addition to the [well-documented issues](#) facing all women—Muslim and non-Muslim—who experience [violence](#) in relationships.

Muslim [women](#) need the Islamic [divorce](#) process to change, but they also need social services, policymakers and broader society to change. Muslims can't solve the problem alone, nor can mainstream Australia. Both are part of the problem, and need to be part of the solution.

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