Article

"Gatekeeping Family Violence": The Role of Religious and Community Leaders in the Afghan Migrant Community in South Australia

Lana Zannettino [1], Marinella Marmo [2], Hossein Esmaeili [2,*] and Jenny Richards [2]

[1] College of Education, Psychology and Social Work, Flinders University, Adelaide 5001, Australia; lana.zannettino@flinders.edu.au

[2] College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University, Adelaide 5001, Australia; marinella.marmo@flinders.edu.au (M.M.); jenny.richards@flinders.edu.au (J.R.)

* Correspondence: hossein.esmaeili@flinders.edu.au

Abstract: Community leaders in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in Australia, particularly Afghan migrant communities, may play an important role in understanding and responding to family violence. This paper explores the role and perspectives of religious and community leaders in the Afghan community in South Australia in relation to preventing and responding to family violence. It is argued that these leaders play a pivotal role in their community as they can act as gatekeepers between their own and the Australian community. This paper concludes that it is imperative that governments and the legal system engage with CALD communities to better understand faith related factors such as the relevance of Islamic law and culture for Afghan Muslim communities in South Australia. At the same time, the education of the broader Australian and Afghan communities and their religious and community leaders in both Islamic law and the Australian legal system is a vital factor in combating and reducing family violence.

Keywords: family violence; religious and community leaders; Afghan community; culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD); Muslim and Islamic culture and law

1. Introduction

This article examines the role of Afghan religious and community leaders in shaping the understandings of and responses to family violence in their communities in South Australia (SA). The Afghan community is predominantly Muslim, Shia School, and the personal and social conduct of its members is informed, in part, by the Muslim religious code of conduct known as *sharia* law (Esmaeili et al. 2020). Religious and community leaders are prominent social and cultural figures in Muslim migrant communities in Australia (Sohrabi 2016). The settlement of these communities in South Australia has also given their religious and community leaders new opportunities to advise community members and intervene in their experiences of family violence. For example, these leaders can influence families' understandings of family violence and access to appropriate available services in Australia. Hence, the role played by religious and community leaders in this community is worthy of closer investigation as they may have a constructive role to play in reducing family violence in their communities. Indeed, it has been shown that leaders in Muslim migrant communities have a profound impact on the ways key issues or risks are perceived and addressed within their communities.[1] In this vein, Kroissenbrunner (2003) has explored the broader pastoral roles religious leaders have been playing in Muslim migrant communities in Europe.

More recent literature in the field of family violence points to the influence of community leaders (Kulwicki et al. 2010; Akinsulure-Smith et al. 2013; Truong et al. 2020, 2022). In Australia, there is emerging data on the role of community leaders in Muslim migrant

communities in relation to the way family violence is addressed within these communities (Ghafournia 2017; Ghafournia and Easteal 2021; Vaughan and Sullivan 2019; Vaughan et al. 2020; Davis et al. 2021; Ibrahim 2022, p. 2380). As the Afghan community is a new, emerging community in South Australia, there is thus far little research available about the role of Afghan religious and community leaders in preventing and reducing family violence within this community. Post-structural theorising in recent years has shown that local sites are an important source of knowledge in understanding social phenomena in the broader society and in building a more robust evidence base (Wendt and Zannettino 2015). Hence, understanding the role of religious and community leaders in the South Australian context has the potential to shed light on the role of these leaders at a broader national level.

This article draws on data collected from a small exploratory project on family violence in the Afghan community in South Australia.[2] The project aimed to explore the perspectives of religious and community leaders to understand how they advise and support community members affected by family violence. The project also had an interest in promoting a more progressive interpretation of Muslim religious law and a more constructive role for religious and community leaders in addressing family violence in their community (Esmaeili et al. 2022; Ghafournia 2017; Truong et al. 2020; Davis et al. 2021). As such, we used a participatory research approach to collect the data, and the data was analysed using an intersectional framework.

The article is divided into four further sections. Section 2 provides a brief background on the Afghan community in South Australia. Section 3 describes the research methods and analytical approaches. Section 4 presents the findings, Section 5 discusses the findings and provides conclusions and recommendations.

2. Background

Afghans have been migrating to Adelaide, South Australia, since the early to mid-1990s to flee internal conflict and war in Afghanistan (Esmaeili and Wells 2000, pp. 226–27; Ibrahimi 2017). According to the 2021 census, the population of Afghans who were born in Afghanistan and currently residing in South Australia is over 8200.[3] Notably, this figure does not include the children of Afghan parents, who were either born, or now live, in Australia. Most Afghan migrants are Hazara people who are largely Shia Muslims. Shia Muslims are a vulnerable minority in Afghanistan who were, and are still, persecuted by the Taliban due to a combination of factors including their religion, their Asian ethnicity, and their language, which is a dialect of Farsi (Persian) (Ibrahimi 2017).

Many Afghan migrants in Australia suffer from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from experiencing decades of internal conflict and violence (Alemi et al. 2013; Yaser et al. 2016; Hamrah et al. 2021). In Afghanistan, a high proportion of women (89%) and girls (63%) are illiterate, with limited access to education (Human Rights Watch 2017). In a 2011 UNICEF survey, it was reported that 92% of Afghan women (aged 15–49 years) held the belief that a husband has the right to beat his wife (CSO and UNICEF 2012; World Health Organization and Human Reproduction Programme 2015). Around the same time, it was reported that just over 87% of women in Afghanistan had been subjected to one or more forms of family violence (Equality for Peace and Democracy 2015; Nijhowne and Oates 2008).

Most Afghan migrants practice their religion to some extent and its observance may occur in different ways. It may include attendance at mosques and other places of worship, observance of rituals, consumption of Halal products and paying Zakat. Several mosques, places of worship and other Islamic centres and institutions have been established by the Afghan community in Adelaide. It is also common for Afghan migrants to follow principles of *sharia* or Islamic law in conducting and formalising their personal relationships such as marriage, religious divorce, wills, and some private financial and non-financial agreements (Richards and Esmaeili 2012, pp. 145–46).

Afghan community members in South Australia follow certain Islamic legal principles—particularly those involving personal law—as part of their religious observance (Esmaeili 2015). This is because many Muslims accord religion and religious principles the same kind of moral authority and respect or "positive obligation" (Esmaeili 2015, p. 77; Parkinson 2010, p. 27) that Australians generally attribute to the law (Esmaeili 2015, pp. 77–78). However, it is worth noting that Afghan migrants and refugees who are religious are required to follow both secular and religious law, which means that it is common for practicing Muslims to follow certain principles of *sharia* law alongside Australian law (Esmaeili et al. 2022). Australian law does not recognise any other legal system, including Islamic law or *sharia*, and therefore courts only apply Australian law in their deliberations and decisions. However, principles of Islamic law, if they are not inconsistent with Australian law, may be practiced by Australian Muslims (Black et al. 2013).

The Afghan community has experienced rapid socio-cultural and economic change in a relatively short period of time since settling in South Australia. This is due to multiple factors such as experiences of past trauma, family separation due to relocation, and loss of or reduced status, revenues and/or informal networks of support. Limited knowledge of Australian language, laws and social norms, especially for older people, presents another set of challenges. While women and younger generations are exposed to new economic and non-economic opportunities in Adelaide, such as access to education and a different labor market, these opportunities can change family structures, including gendered norms and dynamics, which can lead to conflict and family violence.

In this article, we use the term "family violence" rather than the more commonly used term "domestic violence". The term "family violence" is inclusive of a variety of types of family violence and family-like relationships, making it particularly relevant to the experiences of CALD communities where violence may occur among various family members such as between children and parents as well as between intimate partners.

3. Research Methods and Analytical Approaches

Community-led responses to family violence came to national attention in 2015 as critical to the development of an inclusive and meaningful approach to understanding and responding to such violence in CALD communities (Vaughan et al. 2015). In the context of CALD communities, community-led responses draw on the assumption that solutions to family violence need to be ethnoculturally specific and grounded in the experiences and perspectives of the communities affected (Vaughan et al. 2015, p. 45; Truong et al. 2020). In response to this call, our study adopted a participatory research approach. This approach focuses on collaborating with key community members, rather than positioning them as subjects of research, to generate knowledge that centralises participants' perspectives (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995). This approach is designed to produce knowledge using "a bottom-up approach with a focus on locally defined priorities and local perspectives" (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995, p. 1667).

There is some Australian research into family violence among Muslim populations in Australia, including Afghan refugees (Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights 2011; Ghafournia 2017; Ibrahim 2022; Ghafournia and Easteal 2021; Versha and Venkatraman 2010). Since the Afghan community in South Australia is a new and emerging group, research focusing on their lives is still in its infancy (Ibrahim 2022). Studies on family violence against Muslim women living in Muslim and non-Muslim countries indicate that patriarchal interpretations of religious obligations, combined with a strong sense of privacy relating to family relationships, may disincentivise Muslim women from reporting abuse (Afrouz et al. 2020, p. 557; Chowdhury 2023; Le Roux and Pertek 2023).

International research into the place and role of religious leaders in addressing family violence recognises their pivotal role in responding to family violence given their status within their communities (Istratii and Ali 2023, p. 153; Waller et al. 2023; Nason-Clark et al. 2017; Jayasundara et al. 2017; Levitt and Ware 2006; Afrouz et al. 2020, p. 552). Religious leaders can either assist or hinder efforts at help seeking, and the importance of education in the dynamics

of family violence and partnership with family violence services has been well established in the literature (Istratii and Ali 2023, pp. 156–59; Ravi et al. 2022; McMullin 2018; Le Roux et al. 2016, pp. 27–29; Truong et al. 2022). As Ghafournia (2017, pp. 153–54) notes, some literature identifies the negative role of religious leaders in relation to family violence within certain religious communities (Horsburgh 2005; Mathur 2007; Nason-Clark 2004).

3.1. Methods

The primary method of data collection was in-depth, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with participants. In-depth interviewing allows for the collection of meaningful and contextual data in qualitative research (Creswell 2009). The secondary method of data collection was focus group discussions with participants. Focus groups provide an opportunity to gain insight into cultural norms and collective beliefs related to sensitive topics (Shiu-Thornton et al. 2005). These focus group discussions were a crucial element of our participatory research approach because they allowed us to ask permission to enter the community and helped us to ensure that our approach to the conduct and analysis of the interviews was culturally sensitive and appropriate. The focus group discussions were conducted prior to and following the interviews. These discussions also enabled the researchers to determine participants' knowledge and beliefs about family violence, and to provide information about family violence and Australian law.

The participants were recruited using a purposeful sampling method. This method enables researchers to choose participants with specific and relevant knowledge or experience of a topic (Patton 2014). Twelve community leaders from the SA Afghan community were invited to participate because they were identified by the researchers as having demonstrated knowledge and experience in supporting families affected by family violence in their relatively small community. As such, the contributions of these religious and community leaders to this project can be viewed as representative of the whole Afghan community in South Australia. The project lead is a member of the Muslim community in SA and the researchers used his knowledge of the community to identify relevant community leaders[4]. Furthermore, these participants are recognised by their community as leaders with both formal and informal community roles.

All the community leaders we approached agreed to participate in the one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions. To engage participants over the course of the study, it was important to build a relationship of trust with religious and community leaders. We believe that this was facilitated by the composition and predisposition of the research team, which was made up of two CALD people who speak English as an additional language (one Muslim man and one non-Muslim woman) and are specialised in migration studies, and two women whose research is focused on family violence in CALD communities and South Australian family violence legislation, respectively. We acknowledged throughout that family violence can be an extremely sensitive topic of discussion, particularly when the focus is on a particular minority community, and at all times we remained open to learning from the community about how we could do things better to facilitate community participation.

Of the twelve participants interviewed, three were senior clergy who would lead the prayer in the Mosques (known as Imams), two were lawyers and/or migration agents, two were young community leaders, including a person who facilitates young people's sport in the Afghan community, two were philanthropists, and three were women who were considered well educated to lead their communities. Currently, men make up most community leaders in the metropolitan Adelaide Afghan community. The Afghan community in SA is relatively small, comprising less than 1 percent of the total SA population, which is approximately 1.8 million. Hence, twelve participants can be considered a proportional sample size. All participants were born overseas and were members of the new and emerging Afghan community in SA.

The purpose of the one-to-one interviews was to understand the perspectives and roles of religious and community leaders in responding to family violence in their community.

Participants were asked both descriptive and reflective questions relating to this focus. The interviews were conducted in Farsi or English depending on the preferences of the participants. The project lead took responsibility for conducting the interviews in Farsi as he is fluent in this language, and where this was not possible a Farsi translator was used.

The purpose of the pre-interview focus groups, which comprised both men and women, was to gain participants' insights about family violence in their community and what outcomes they wanted to see stemming from the research. The purpose of the post-interview focus groups, which were made up of separate men-only and women-only groups, was to gain participants' feedback on the presentation of themes emerging from the interviews. Every care was taken by researchers to present these themes in a way that protected the identities and confidentiality of individual participants.

3.2. Analytical Approaches—Thematic Analysis and Intersectional Framework

We used thematic analysis to analyse the data generated from the one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions (Braun and Clarke 2012). Thematic analysis is one of the most common approaches used in the analysis of qualitative data because it is suited to a wide range of research interests and theoretical perspectives, including constructionist and participatory research. Thematic analysis is an inductive approach that enables themes to be identified from the data rather than beginning with an existing hypothesis. This method fits with the exploratory nature of the study reported on herein and the fact that little is known about the topic.

The researchers each read and re-read the transcripts of the one-to-one interviews along with the notes taken during the focus group discussions to familiarise themselves with the overall content of the data. Inductive coding was carried out manually by two members of the research team. Once the initial coding was completed, the codes were reviewed and discussed by all four members of the research team and a consensus was reached regarding the key themes identified.

Further analysis was undertaken, using an intersectional framework, once it became evident that the data was rich and nuanced enough to permit a higher-level elaboration. Very little research is available in Australia about migrant religious and community leaders' perspectives on family violence. However, it is evident from recent studies that these leaders are of strategic importance in assisting community members in situations of family violence because they are often the first people to whom women turn for help (Ghafournia and Easteal 2021; Ghafournia 2017).

An intersectional framework acknowledges and interrogates the ways that race, class, gender and sexual identity can interlock to create unique structural and cultural contexts for women who experience family violence (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). Intersectionality has been used before to shed light on women's experiences of domestic violence (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). As such, the interlocking effects of oppressive structures in women's experiences of abuse are well established (Cardenas 2023). However, an intersectional framework can also assist researchers to analyse both macro-level and micro-level influences on individual and group behaviours, and this article applies the framework in this way to shed light on the structural and cultural elements that shape the role of the religious and community leaders in our study.

4. Findings

Through an approach centred on the voices of religious and community leaders, three key themes were identified from the data analysis:

(1) Religious and community leadership occurs at the intersection of the Afghan community and the broader Australian community;
(2) Religious and community leadership occurs in a transient cultural and religious context;
(3) Religious and community leadership can be a form of gatekeeping.

4.1. Religious and Community Leadership Occurs at the Intersection of the Afghan Community and the Broader Australian Community

Most participants indicated that family violence is a problem in the Afghan community and that it is damaging to both families and the community as a whole. The response below summarises some of the complexities of family violence in the community:

> Domestic violence is very dangerous, and it is the worst type of violence. I have seen many people with family issues whose lives get ruined from family violence and their kids have many problems. Domestic violence is not about separation of a husband and wife only, it can burn the whole family—young kids growing up without a proper family and without mum and dad, what will happen to them in the future? (Participant 3—male)

Participants understood psychological and emotional abuse to be a form of family violence and suggested that such abuse is the most common type of family violence in their community:

> [There is] not much physical violence nowadays, psychological violence is more common in families. Starting issue is the lack of respect for each other's needs. (Participant 12—female)

> Most domestic violence happening in the community in Adelaide is emotional or mental. (Participant 9—female)

The impact of unique traumatic experiences, such as persecution and violence in their country of origin, displacement, detention and asylum issues, was openly discussed by some participants as a contributing factor in family violence in Afghan communities. Furthermore, participants were aware of the continuities and synergies between pre- and post-migration experiences and family violence as well as how family violence can exacerbate previous traumatic experiences:

> Those who have come by boat and have been in war, have been subjected to violence, they are more prone to family problems. (Participant 1—male; clergy)

> The perpetrators in the Afghan community always have a background of issues managing emotions because of war and issues such as PTSD. (Participant 10—male; lawyer)

However, despite recognising family violence in the community, participants indicated that most women subjected to family violence do not seek help and protection from the justice system or do not take legal action. Rather, they use the informal support network within their community, especially family members. Community and family members usually try to help them, but as they do not know the Australian legal system or supports for family violence, they usually advise them according to Islamic law or sharia:

> Not many Afghan women ask for advice from lawyers or go to courts, but they do ask for advice and help from within the family and extended family . . . Most members of the community try to solve their issues according to Islamic sharia . . . there are only a few who try to get advice and resolve their disputes according to Australian law. (Participant 8—male; clergy)

> Most domestic violence is not spoken about due to family, honor, or safety. (Participant 11—female)

Some of the reasons for not going beyond the family and community to seek help for family violence are cultural, as it is not an accepted practice to discuss family disputes or conflict openly with people or services outside the bounds of family and community. Furthermore, some women affected by family violence may not conceptualise it as anything out of the ordinary. As previously indicated, most Afghan women in Afghanistan believe that a husband is permitted to beat his wife (CSO and UNICEF 2012; Esmaeili et al. 2022), and this view was still evident in some responses:

> I know that many people don't want to talk about their family problems as they are very personal issues. Some women think it is normal to be beaten by their husband and they do not want to let others know about it. (Participant 4—female)

Some participants were in favour of women seeking help via informal channels such as counselling, extended family and community, or through Islamic *sharia*, rather than via formal channels of justice and support services such as women's refuge services. Police and courts were viewed as a final option or last resort for dealing with family violence:

> I think those who witness mistreatment and domestic violence must first seek help from their extended family and the community. We are a traditional, close community and we try to solve the problems ourselves. Then, I suggest that victims get legal advice from lawyers as to their rights under Australian law. As the last resort, if those two steps did not work, then they have to get help from police and the court system. I do not advise people to seek divorce unless there is no other option to solve the problems in the family, particularly domestic violence. (Participant 5—male; clergy)

> I think before police, it's good if couples go to counsellors for help. But it's also good if they separate from each other temporarily to think about their actions and to find a way to live with each other peacefully. (Participant 4—female)

Most participants acknowledged that in their community there is a widespread lack of knowledge of rights within a family, particularly the relevant provisions of Australian family law:

> A lot of families don't know their rights based on Australian law. They think it's like their background country ... if they [women] know their rights, they can do something for themselves and their children. (Participant 9—female)

> ...in a husband and wife dispute, if a woman who has migrated knows that the Australian law supports her and gives her rights, she may not tolerate many things happening at home. If the man knows the law very well, he may not do the many things that he does now. (Participant 1—male; clergy)

> [Victims of family violence do not seek legal advice] because they are not aware of their rights and they do not know what their rights are. (Participant 5—male; clergy)

Furthermore, some participants suggested that knowledge of rights under Australian law can prevent or reduce family violence in their community:

> The physical [violence] problem is not that much in the community because the husband knows that if he punches his wife he will be in jail and that the law is strict with him. So, when they know the law, these problems become less. (Participant 9—female)

Some participants understood the lack of sufficient English, the inability to access information in Farsi/Dari and the lack of literacy among some women in the community as obstructing access to justice or support for family violence:

> Women from other countries know English language, but women from Afghanistan are illiterate in some cases and this causes them more problems. (Participant 4—female)

In addition to knowing one's rights in Australia, participants also reported that understanding the nature of family violence, including the behaviors it involves, is an important factor in preventing the problem. Hence, being able to identity and name abusive behaviours beyond physical violence, also contributed to reducing non-physical forms of family violence:

> ...years back they learned that physical violence is domestic violence. But that violence is not the only thing ... now they say that if they [perpetrators] knew

psychological violence and social and financial violence is family violence they would have refrained from this too. (Participant 10—male; lawyer)

Some participants talked about how traditional gender roles, including rigid divisions of labour and gender segregation, can limit women's capacity for independence and can negatively impact women's sense of self-worth, both of which can make them more vulnerable in situations of family violence:

> What can a woman who doesn't know English do here? It's much easier for men, even those who do not know English or those who are uneducated. This is because they have enough self-esteem to start a new life, while women have always been at home looking after kids and they don't have enough self-confidence. Also, women can be more sensitive and it's harder for them if they don't have any help here. (Participant 4—female)

Some participants suggested that a significant barrier to women seeking legal help for family violence is their fear of family breakdown and the consequences of possible criminal sanctions against the husband which may impact on the economic survival of the whole family:

> In cases of domestic violence, police can imprison the husband and separate him from the family, but the woman doesn't want this. She just wants to give a lesson to her husband that violence is not right, and that the government is on the women's side ... a warning ... but then the law makes it a very serious case and legal actions would follow up ... but that's not what the woman wants. (Participant 9—female)

> Women say, "I don't want him to go to jail. I just want to live my life and I can't live with him". They don't want to criminalise the man for the kids' sake and for the man's honour. (Participant 10—male; lawyer)

Most participants expressed general dissatisfaction with police involvement, suggesting that police intervention can lead to further complications in resolving family violence matters:

> If there is no love in a family, then the family will be destroyed. When police are involved, the love goes away. They can never recover if police are involved. (Participant 2—male)

> [It is not a good idea to call the police first] but it depends on the violence, if it is physical violence, it is a good idea as it can lead to a worse case. But once they are separated, the families become despairing which can lead to more problems. (Participant 11—female)

Most of these participants also suggested that police involvement should be a last resort in dealing with family violence such as physical abuse or the significant threat of physical abuse of women and children. Participants were of the view that involving police can interfere with the community being able to provide support to affected families:

> We had some cases where we asked the police to let us talk with the families, but the police didn't let us. I don't blame them, maybe they are doing their role. When people don't go to the police, we can do something but when police get involved, it's their responsibility to do something, so they don't allow us to do something to help. (Participant 9—female)

The participant responses show that religious and community leaders have engaged in reflection about the impact of family violence in their community as well as about their role in responding to it. Religious and community leaders' reflections on family violence demonstrate their capacity to recognise how family violence manifests in their community. They also demonstrate a willingness to respond in ways that align with Australian laws and social expectations while also being culturally sensitive. The Afghan community leaders find themselves at the intersection of their community and the broader Australian

community, which means they have had to tread carefully in how they advise and respond to their community members. They understand that their responses need to be sensitive to the Australian cultural–legal context while at the same time respecting their own tradition and others' religious positions.

4.2. Community Leadership Occurs in a Transient Cultural Context

Religious and community leaders not only need to navigate the different legal and socio-cultural expectations of a dual society (Afghan and Australian), they also must consider the cultural shifts within their community over time arising from settlement in a different culture.

Regarding this point, most participants agreed that the differences between the Afghan and Australian cultures could lead to family violence due to the social and cultural differences between these groups. Tradition was mentioned as relevant, articulated through examples of government, values, religion and family life. Afghan community culture emphasises family cohesion and there is potential stigma associated with family division:

> There is so much more reliance on family so that a woman victim not only suffers emotionally at the hands of the perpetrator, but also socially, as divorced or separated women are perceived negatively. Same with children of divorce . . . The impact on men is tied to collective families and societies. Issues of honor. A man whose partner divorces or leaves him has lost honor in the community . . . the man was not strong enough to keep his family together. (Participant 10—male; lawyer)

Some participants viewed intergenerational differences, due to a clash of old and new values and upbringing experiences, as contributing to family violence:

> . . . we can see that our kids and teenagers in the community are more distanced from the Afghan community. They don't practice their mother tongue and they don't value the behaviors that we practice in our community. (Participant 11—female)

The issue of intergenerational differences, particularly concerning gender norms, was also highlighted by some participants in relation to younger women being less tolerant of a partner's abusive behavior:

> . . . we see many young couples getting divorced . . . they can't get along together . . . we are living in a society that is absolutely democratic and they pay so much attention to women's rights and they have their own kind of freedom, but because most of the time our teenagers only see these apparent freedoms and rights, they think they can easily put family aside. (Participant 11—female)

> Women are now more aware compared to previous generations . . . they want to be emotionally and psychologically supported and they need this as well. In previous generations, women tended to ignore their own needs and not listen to them, they were more patient and tolerated ignorant behavior from their partner but now they might not tolerate it and want to be supported. (Participant 12—female)

Differences in cultural values were also raised in relation to arranged marriages, which were described by some participants as bordering on forced marriage, where the woman's explicit consent to marry was absent. Interestingly, while some participants talked about marriage between two people who do not know each other as a contributing factor to family violence, only one female participant used the more direct terminology of "forced marriage", which is illegal and a criminalised practice in Australia:

> If marriage is by force, it's not acceptable . . . The man and woman need to know each other . . . when they don't know each other properly, problems happen easily. (Participant 9—female)

> I think that one important problem is that when our young children go to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran and marry there, they do not know their partners before marrying them. Then they marry there and come here, and they don't know each other very well. (Participant 2—male)

> Boys who come from Afghanistan and Iran to Australia don't want their wife to be freely in contact with people at work, for example. Afghan girls who have been living in Australia and have grown up here don't tolerate this and they don't want to live like girls in Afghanistan or Iran. This is the main problem in families at the moment. (Participant 3—male)

> …if a girl has gone to university, the mother should not insist that this girl should marry her cousin overseas. The girl has grown up here, knows English, knows the culture, and marrying someone who is not familiar with this culture may create problems. (Participant 1—male; clergy)

The Afghan religious and community leaders acknowledge these cultural shifts within their community and recognise that these changes are making their community more heterogenous and dynamic. The community leaders have had to come to grips with the rapidly evolving complexities of cultural differences between younger and older generations, between children and parents, as well as the gender role differences that come from being members of a new and emerging community in Australia. The younger female members of the community are exposed to a society that shows them vastly different expectations and identities to those they have experienced previously.

The contrast between the traditional cultural values and norms of older people and religious leaders and the more progressive Australian values embraced by women and younger generations can be a source of contention in the community, as the literature confirms. This is evident in the existing literature (see for example, Australian Migrant Resource Centre and Myriad International Consulting Services 2017; Bartels 2010; James 2010; Rees 2004; Vaughan et al. 2019). These cultural differences were seen by religious and community leaders as contributing to family violence. For example, during a focus group meeting a few all-male religious leaders explained to the researchers that women did not understand the consequence of calling the police, but they did not articulate an understanding that women may call the police to protect themselves from violence. This view is understandable in some respects because, according to criminal law in SA, once the police are involved, the accusing party has limited ability to withdraw or change the claim. This situation can render the women and men involved powerless to alter the ensuing course of events such as criminal procedures. Nevertheless, the ways that religious and community leaders described these episodes of women calling police also revealed underlying negative stereotypes about women's capacity to understand complex matters occurring in a new society. It could also be demonstrative of the leaders' desire to be the first point of contact for women in cases of family violence. Indeed, Kulwicki et al. (2010, p. 730) highlight the pressure women face to minimise the "intervention by formal authorities", "whereby the first to be consulted are [supposed to be] relatives and religious leaders". Furthermore Akinsulure-Smith et al. (2013, p. 119) explain that the "male and female participants [of their research] expressed differences in their sense of satisfaction with how their [family violence issue] was handled at this [community leader] level", with women being quite frustrated.

While religious and community leaders value the new opportunities afforded by change, they also see new challenges arising from the potential or real conflicts that these differences can precipitate. For example, gender relations in Australia may be characterised as attributing equal power to women, which is different than what they may experience in their own community. In such a transient cultural context, family violence can be seen—by the leaders too—to be an expression of the difficulties of forming identities across both cultures and participating in relationships where gender power dynamics have shifted.

Community leaders are themselves subject to these shifts and are coming to terms with how their own identities and roles may be changing as a result. However, because they sit at the intersection of their own culture and the broader Australian culture, they have a great deal of influence in how their community members understand and respond to family violence.

4.3. Community Leadership Can Be a Form of Gatekeeping

Most of the Afghan religious and community leaders saw themselves as playing a central role in shaping how community members understand and address family violence:

> Our community is new. There are many problems, including lack of information about law, legal institutions, and rights of individuals. In my view, education, giving information and advice, including by the police, is important. The leaders of the community must help to create culture. (Participant 1—male; clergy)

Some participants described examples of the ways in which family violence could be addressed, including by providing more information and education to community members about rights and cultural differences:

> I think raising awareness is very important as well as giving consultation to families. It's good if community leaders make the community aware of their rights and cultural differences between Australia and Afghanistan. (Participant 4—female)

> When there is ignorance, there are problems that can cause bigger issues in the society. First of all, we need to give information and the leaders in the community should be in charge of this. They should arrange seminars and classes in regard to children's behavior and upbringing, marriage and family. (Participant 11—female)

Some participants described the steps they took to advise community members in times of crisis or great need, including in situations of family violence:

> I ask couples to sit and talk to each other about their problems first and then go to others for help if they can't solve their problems. It's good if community leaders have meetings with people and speak to them about Australian law and answer their questions. (Participant 4—female)

> [I tell couples] they should wisely and honestly talk to each other and try to solve the issue, and I would give them advice to help them build their relationship. (Participant 11—female)

Some participants argued they were in a better position than government organisations to address these issues, simply because their own community is traditional and religious whereas government organisations operate largely from a secular perspective:

> I think that those who are active members of the community and religious leaders can have a better role because we have a traditional community; our parents listen to clerics more than the government. (Participant 3—male)

> A religious person can give advice to a religious couple and they will listen to that person whereas if a couple is religious and the person who gives the advice is against religion, they wouldn't accept his/her ideas. (Participant 9—female)

A few participants openly acknowledged that community leaders are the intermediary between the community and government organisations. Therefore, they may have an important role to play in building relationships between Australian institutions and the practices of the Afghan community in SA:

> There is a gap in the connection between government and community. If there is more connection between these two, the community can solve their problems better ... The government needs to give more freedom to the community to work

with them and show the community how to connect with the Australian Government and to know about the support the government can give the community and also what the community's responsibilities are. (Participant 9—female)

If we only put police in charge and there is no other help for them [the family], everything will be destroyed, but it can be helpful if the police or other agencies ask for help from the community leaders. (Participant 11—female)

5. Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

Afghan religious and community leaders have acquired an even more powerful position as their community strives to settle and evolve in South Australia. They can explain the options and clarify to their community members the modalities of support the leaders agree on and sustain. At the same time, they may minimise and undermine certain options and methods of support that they do not view as culturally appropriate (e.g., such as involving the police). Religious and community leaders can also be influential within certain Australian institutions, including the police, in shaping policy. They are often at the forefront in, and representatives of, community values and needs, including those related to the issue of family violence. The role of religious and community leaders is more evident as the community is rapidly changing due to socio-cultural and economic shifts in the labor market, access to education and family structure.

One key finding from this research is that religious and community leaders themselves may play a central role in supporting the view that family violence is a matter to be dealt with by the family in the first instance. When situations of family violence cannot be prevented within the family, then the community members are encouraged to address the issue with their leaders rather than going outside the community, particularly if external support involves the police.

In this way, the significance of cultural and religious beliefs in the community can generate both risk and protective factors for families affected by family violence. In terms of risk, participants viewed community members as more likely to approach religious authorities than secular leaders because the former are seen as central to preventing and reducing family violence. This perception can create barriers to accessing support and justice for family violence as religious leaders are more likely to take a conservative approach to action outside the community. Hence, this finding is consistent with existing research on faith leaders and their role in responding to family violence (see, for example, Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence 2014, p. 104; Truong et al. 2020; Victorian Government 2016, Chapter 29. See generally Bartels 2010; Ghafournia 2017; Vaughan et al. 2020; Vaughan and Sullivan 2019; Davis et al. 2021; Islam et al. 2018; Truong et al. 2020; Nason-Clark et al. 2017; Chireshe 2015; Istratii and Ali 2023; Behnke et al. 2012; Perkins 2019).

On the other hand, religious leaders are a vital source of support for victims and families, especially as they provide pastoral support. What is of pivotal importance here is that religious leaders who participated in this study agreed that Islam does not in any way excuse or promote family violence. Further, Islam can be used to educate people about and respond to instances of family violence, particularly when understood alongside Australian law and socio-legal knowledge about family violence. Other studies have also promoted this view of Islam (Truong et al. 2020, 2022; Ibrahim 2022; Jayasundara et al. 2017). This study demonstrates the potential for religious leaders in this community to utilise a more progressive understanding of Islam which can be a bridge to the wider Australian community and the legal system. To that end, it is recommended that religious leaders are equipped with knowledge about the nature and incidence of family violence and best practice in how to respond to disclosures. Further, any training could occur alongside education about Australian law. In combination, this kind of equipping would enable these leaders to provide important contextual information to their communities about Islam's condemnation of family violence and assist women to access support services, potentially including the justice system.

It is evident from this study that Afghan religious and community leaders play an active role in imposing and propagating a narrative that they are the first point of reference for family violence issues and that they are sufficiently equipped to manage the various issues linked to family violence. In this way, individual religious and community leaders can act as "gatekeepers" to help-seeking outside their own community, and this can be detrimental to people impacted by family violence.

An intersectional framework has shown how women from diverse cultural backgrounds face additional vulnerabilities and challenges due to compounding oppression, which can place them at higher risk of experiencing family violence (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). Our interviews with religious and community leaders revealed that women in the Afghan community in South Australia may face additional cultural barriers to reporting or seeking support for family violence, such as poor English language proficiency and not knowing if and what services exist outside their cultural community.

It was also evident, however, that an additional cultural barrier to women's help-seeking was the advice provided by religious and community leaders themselves who encourage women to resolve these matters within their own families and community. As religious and community leaders hold powerful sway over how members of their community think and behave (Ghafournia and Easteal 2021), they can become the unofficial "gatekeepers" of their communities, particularly in terms of when and how personal and familial matters are dealt with. Service providers need to be aware of these potential barriers and how to address them, and it is recommended that education for religious and community leaders be provided which counters any tendency to view family violence as a private matter, rather than a criminal offence, and thus a public one. This need has been identified in relation to Christian religious leaders also (Chireshe 2015; Richards 2023 and research discussed therein). Such education would also assist in enabling religious leaders to view justice system involvement as another viable option in addressing family violence in their communities, rather than it being viewed as a last resort. This reservation about police involvement only for serious physical violence also occurs for some Christian religious leaders (Chireshe 2015; Istratii and Ali 2023; Perkins 2019, p. 247; Behnke et al. 2012, p. 1267). A reframing of family violence as clearly against Islam and an understanding of the congruence of Islamic teachings and the inherent values of the justice system would enable Muslim women to be protected by the justice system more readily.

An intersectional framework can be useful in helping us to understand the motives and behaviours of the Afghan religious and community leaders in our study.

A culture of collectivism is evident in the Afghan community in South Australia, and this may be due to it being a minority community as well as a community bound by a common homeland and traumatic experiences that have led them to migrate to another country. A collectivist culture tends to prioritise harmony within a community and encourages group, over personal, well-being as well as family unity (Cardenas 2023). Consequently, the religious and community leaders may be conflicted between advising women to access support for family violence outside their cultural community and their pivotal role in maintaining the integrity and bonds of their community. Moreover, as women are also viewed as integral to family unity in Afghan culture, which is commonplace in cultural communities that follow traditional gender roles (Barrios et al. 2021), encouraging women to seek support for family violence outside their families and cultural communities may be viewed by leaders as a potential threat to their being able to maintain the integrity and cultural values that hold their community together.

The Islamic faith is central to the lives of the Afghan community in South Australia and can be a driving force in how religious and community leaders advise women affected by family violence. Ghafournia and Easteal (2021) report on how religious leaders (Imams) have used their own interpretation of Islam to advise women in their community to put up with abuse and be patient. At the same time, they state that spirituality and religion themselves were viewed as empowering forces for the women to respond to the abuse. Ibrahim's (2022) study suggests that Muslim women do not report family violence to police

because they are unsure if doing so adheres to Muslim religious procedures. This is another point at which religious and community leaders can use religion to keep women from seeking help outside their communities. As mentioned above, education for religious and community leaders and members on domestic and family violence, which includes legal information and demonstrates the congruence between the values of the justice system and Islam, is an important part of responding to family violence in a way that empowers and protects women in religious communities. This is especially the case given that Muslim women have both legal rights and "Faith-based rights. . . to live free from abuse" which can be drawn upon as a significant source of support in responding to family violence (Chowdhury 2023, p. 17).

Experiences of historical and contemporary trauma in addition to perceived and actual racism directed towards their community, may also have an impact on how religious and community leaders address family violence in their community. It was apparent that religious and community leaders encourage women to address family violence within their cultural community because they were concerned about culturally inappropriate responses and interference, such as reporting to police, leading to further trauma and family separation. Additionally, while it was not directly articulated, it was strongly implied that some religious and community leaders were concerned about reputational damage and negative cultural stereotyping of their community from stories of family violence being disclosed outside their community.

In view of these concerns, regarding police engagement, it is critical that engagement with the justice system factors in two considerations: first, that this engagement is not viewed as a last resort, (Chireshe 2015; Behnke et al. 2012, p. 1267; Perkins 2019; Richards 2023; Ibrahim 2022) and second, that police investigation following reports of family violence is culturally sensitive and competent. This accords with a similar need for faith and cultural factors to be considered in relation to engagement with family violence services (Chowdhury 2023; Vaughan et al. 2015; Zannettino et al. 2013). This can mitigate the risk of increasing violence as well as concerns about over-policing/overresponding, (Ibrahim 2022; Douglas 2019).

It has been argued herein that religious and community leaders can act as gatekeepers between their community and the broader Australian community in relation to many social, cultural, religious and legal issues, particularly family violence. It is fundamental, therefore, that the Australian community, governments and the legal system work with Afghan migrant communities to improve the lives of community members affected by family violence. This collaboration has significant potential to reduce family violence as well as improve responses to it, given the status and influence of religious and community leaders. This may include engagement with the justice system where appropriate. This study has shown that religious and community leaders are a heterogenous group, even within the confines of a small community, and this diversity can play a vital role in shaping an open-minded and progressive narrative about family violence. This is particularly the case when the leaders have undertaken training in family violence dynamics and are able to understand and mitigate safety risks as part of the support that is offered to women. In such circumstances, leaders would be able to integrate this knowledge with their knowledge of Islamic law and *sharia* to reassure women that responding to family violence through the vehicle of State law is not inconsistent with their faith (see also Ibrahim 2022).

Some sections of the CALD community, including members of the Afghan community, may have specific views about the role of women in society. However, the broader Australian community may also hold some misunderstandings about the position of Islam with respect to family violence. A view of family violence as a private family matter to be resolved using personal and religious beliefs and strategies rather than a socio-legal response can reinforce inaccurate beliefs held by the broader Australian community about Islam, and may pose additional barriers to Afghan community members engaging with the legal and other support systems, particularly when accompanied by a fear of attendant family breakdown and alienation (Judicial Council on Cultural Diversity 2016; Reamer

2004). This kind of interpretation of family violence should be interrogated and resisted by religious and community leaders.

These views of family violence highlight the importance of governments and the legal system engaging with the Afghan community in SA in order to better understand the impact on family life of Islamic law and other faith-related factors as well as to educate the community about Australian law (Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights 2011; Bartels 2010; Ghafournia 2017; Truong et al. 2020; Esmaeili et al. 2022). This religious literacy (Bartels 2010; Crisp et al. 2018; Ghafournia 2017; Truong et al. 2020) on the part of governments and the legal system, combined with the involvement of faith and community leaders in both community education and pastoral support, could assist vulnerable community members to access the criminal justice system and other support services in relation to family violence (Vaughan et al. 2019; Zannettino et al. 2013; Ibrahim 2022; Vaughan et al. 2020). This article also points to the need for more empirical studies that explore how socio-cultural discourses in CALD communities inform responses to family violence occurring within these communities, and how these are propagated or contained by religious and community leaders.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization: all authors; methodology: all authors; validation: all authors; formal analysis: L.Z., M.M. and H.E.; investigation: M.M. and H.E.; resources: all authors; data curation: all authors; writing—original draft preparation: all authors; writing—review and editing: all authors; visualization: all authors; project administration: M.M. and H.E.; funding acquisition: all authors. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee of FLINDERS UNIVERSITY (protocol #8292, 6 May 2019).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Research data is unavailable due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1]   Including in other fields such as health studies, with regard to the healthcare behaviors of Muslims in the US (Padela et al. 2011) and UK (Ahmed et al. 2006).

[2]   This study was approved by the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC).

[3]   Data available at (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021).

[4]   The lead researcher, Hossein Esmaeili, is an eminent Australian international law academic with significant expertise in Islamic law both in Australia and globally. He has published extensively in Islamic law.

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