Abstract: This article examines the way faith and Islamic values underpin the agency and work of Muslim women in providing domestic and family violence (DFV) support services. Focusing on the role and impact of Muslim Women Australia within the DFV space in the Australian context, this article demonstrates the way Muslim Women Australia utilises faith as a tool for empowerment. It illustrates the way that—despite governmental reforms that required transition from specialised to generalist DFV services—Muslim Women Australia, via their DFV service Linking Hearts, has maintained a strong commitment to providing culturally and religiously appropriate support. Drawing on fieldwork, this article explores the intersection of Muslim women’s agency, faith, and role as DFV service providers, to demonstrate the importance of culturally competent DFV support services within diverse communities. Through interviews with clients (victim-survivors) who accessed Linking Hearts services during the COVID-19 lockdowns, this article highlights the way the Islamic values of advocacy, agency, and dignity underscore the Linking Hearts model to effectively provide culturally and religiously competent support to all clients regardless of their personal beliefs and values.

Keywords: Muslim Women; agency; domestic violence; Islamic values; COVID-19

1. Introduction

Based in Western Sydney, Muslim Women Australia was established in 1983. Since its inception, a core pillar of Muslim Women Australia’s organisational ethos has been to use ‘faith as a tool for empowerment’ for Australian Muslim women (Krayem Abdo n.d.). In 1988, Muslim Women Australia established the Muslim Women’s Support Centre specifically as a faith-based domestic and family violence (DFV) service provider. The Muslim Women’s Support Centre was the first Muslim women’s refuge in Australia and specifically catered to the ‘cultural and religious needs of Australian Muslim Women’ (Krayem Abdo n.d.). In addition to the operation of an integrated and holistic DFV case management model, the mission of the Muslim Women’s Support Centre was to advocate for non-violence and the elimination of DFV based on a whole-of-community approach as well as empowering victims with information and skills to make their own decisions depending on their particular circumstances. The Muslim Women’s Support Centre operated for 25 years until state government funding reforms pushed Muslim Women Australia to transition their specialist DFV service to a generalist DFV service.

While the Muslim Women’s Support Centre was a specialist service based on culturally and religiously appropriate service provision for Muslim communities in particular, the service that succeeded the Muslim Women’s Support Centre provides services to culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in general. The current DFV service auspiced by Muslim Women Australia is known as Linking Hearts, a Multicultural Family Violence and Homelessness Support Service. While Linking Hearts as a DFV service provides support to
the CALD community as well as the Islamic community, the foundation for Linking Hearts’ service model continues to be the Muslim Women’s Support Centre model which seeks to implement Islamic values consistent with Muslim Women Australia’s organisational ethos. Linking Hearts continues to provide integrated and holistic DFV services including ‘prevention and early intervention, crisis and transitional accommodation, rapid rehousing, and intensive support for clients with complex needs’ (Muslim Women Australia 2020a). DFV service provision remains a ‘core service’ of Muslim Women Australia (Muslim Women Australia 2021). It is important to note that whilst the Linking Hearts model is centred on Islamic ethos and values (outlined below), it provides services to anyone in need of support regardless of their own personal beliefs and values and is effective in responding to the diverse needs of clients from a range of cultural and religious backgrounds.

In this paper, we outline the role of Muslim Women Australia in the DFV sector, in particular the leading role that the organisation played providing services to victim-survivors of DFV during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting their leadership in the sector historically. Based on fieldwork conducted in 2023, our paper explores the work of Muslim women as DFV service providers and the significance of their Islamic faith in this context through the lens of victim-survivors who are the recipients of this service provision and support.

2. Theoretical Background: Muslim Women and DFV Service Provision

Key issues that have been identified as barriers to DFV help-seeking for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, include: language barriers; a lack of knowledge about rights and how to navigate social, legal, and other government systems; visa status; and fear of social isolation or ostracization from the community (Vidales 2010; Satyen et al. 2018). In a service provision context, an understanding of, and responsiveness to, these barriers requires cultural knowledge/competency. Similarly, it is well established in the literature that expertise both in the DFV field and religious knowledge/competency are ‘required to effectively respond to violence in faith-based communities’ (Vaughan et al. 2020, p. 13; see also Krayem 2013; Ghafournia 2017; Rozario 2018; Ghafournia and Eastal 2019; Ahmed and Krayem 2021; Wright 2023).

Cultural and religious knowledge provides the foundation for DFV service provision which is culturally and religiously competent or, in other words, offers cultural and religious safety in service provision (Williamson and Harrison 2010; Ashencaen Crabtree et al. 2017; Tsantefski et al. 2018; Pokharel et al. 2023). The literature shows that a victim’s faith affects where they seek help from and what help they receive (Afrouz et al. 2020). The need for religious competency, or safety, is particularly acute in Muslim communities given that Muslim victims of DFV tend to seek assistance within their own communities first (Wright 2023) and that Muslim victims face compounding barriers to accessing mainstream services, in particular due to Islamophobia (Aly and Gaba 2007; Muslim Women Australia 2023b). Anti-Muslim sentiment can lead to social isolation, particularly for Muslim women who wear hijab (Iner 2019a, 2019b, 2023). In a 2020 study of Muslim women who experienced DFV, Ibrahim found that victims’ reluctance to go to the police was compounded by Islamophobia, as not only did they fear the police judging them but also that formally reporting would ‘perpetuat[e] negative stereotypes about Muslims’ (Ibrahim 2020, p. NP2378; see also Lu et al. 2020; and Afrouz et al. 2020). Such stereotypes include that Islam condones violence, Muslim women are passive victims and Muslim men are inherently violent (Ghafournia and Eastal 2019).

The result of Islamophobia and the perpetuation of these stereotypes is the creation of spaces where Muslim women feel unwelcome and therefore do not seek vital DFV services (El Matrah et al. 2011). Within the DFV landscape there is a ‘double bind’ that emerges. In the context of DFV help-seeking, the double bind is where Muslim women find themselves trapped between Islamophobia and gender injustice (i.e., domestic and family violence) (Hussein 2010). The double bind shapes Muslim women’s help-seeking behaviour,
particularly in turning to informal or community sources of support over mainstream DFV services in the first instance.

As Nemat Kharboutli, manager at Linking Hearts, notes, faith has historically been ignored within this space:

When we’re talking about the history of the [DFV] sector, in this space, we also have to call it out—there has been a lack of the sector wanting to acknowledge faith and the role that faith can play within the sector. There were rightful, legitimate concerns about what that has looked like in the past for different faith communities but we need to grow and move beyond that and we’ve got the skills and the partnerships to do that. (Muslim Women Australia 2023a)

The value of adopting an intersectional approach cannot be overstated; such an approach acknowledges systemic inequalities and power constructs relevant to DFV. Intersectionality is more than ‘objective descriptors of an individual’s innate characteristics’ (Ajele and McGill 2020, p. 5). An intersectional analysis must deeply engage with socially constructed categories that reinforce privilege and compound vulnerabilities and bring into focus the structural inequalities that emerge based on these socially constructed categories of identity. As Tolmie et al. (2024, p. 63) note, an intersectional approach requires ‘focusing on the “-isms” (racism, classism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism etc) as interlocking social structures that perpetuate inequity’. Without an intersectional approach to DFV service provision, victims are prevented from having the option of seeking or continuing to access support because ‘historic and ongoing experiences of discrimination will impact on a victim-survivors’ sense of trust when interacting with service providers’ (Muslim Women Australia 2020a, p. 3).

Religious competency is also relevant more broadly to the success of gender justice advocacy in relation to the elimination of violence against women. For example, it is common for perpetrators of DFV to draw on religious language and concepts, ‘to justify, excuse or minimise violence against women’ (Lu et al. 2020, sct. 4.3). DFV interventions in Muslim communities must therefore strongly reject ‘notions of violence as culturally [or religiously] legitimate’ (Flood 2013, p. 8; Lu et al. 2020, sct. 4.3), while avoiding reliance on racist, colonial, or paternalistic tropes. Cultural beliefs and religious interpretations that justify, excuse, or minimise violence against women must be challenged, but this needs to be done by people who are qualified and well positioned to do so (El Matrah 2015). Muslim organisations which are committed to women’s equality and have expertise in the DFV field are uniquely placed to challenge men’s violence against women in CALD and Muslim communities in a way that does not reductively equate such violence with the culture or religion of these groups. The combined skill set of both religious competency and DFV expertise means that Muslim women’s organisations—such as Muslim Women Australia—can acknowledge and address violence against women within their communities ‘without contributing to the stigmatization’ of these communities (Abu-Lughod 2013, p. 114). Where gender violence intersects with other forms of violence such as racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia, the role of culturally and religiously competent DFV service providers comes to the fore (Muslim Women Australia 2023b).

With respect to religious competency, in addition to expertise in DFV service provision, Muslim Women Australia’s core values as an Islamic organisation shape the way service delivery is carried out and can have a profound impact on those receiving services. This is evident when it comes to the service provision of Linking Hearts, as reflected in the interview responses of former clients who received support during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Interview data revealed that key Islamic values, that guide the organisation in its everyday operation, were significant for women, regardless of their own faith background, in helping them to feel empowered and respected when accessing services.

The core Islamic values that are consistently drawn on in Muslim Women Australia’s work are empowerment/agency, dignity/respect, and advocacy/spiritual activism.

With respect to empowerment/agency, Muslim Women Australia seeks to ‘support women’s agency’ (Muslim Women Australia 2020a, p. 1) and implements a ‘strengths-based
model of empowerment’ (Muslim Women Australia 2021, p. 2). In an interview with the authors, Muslim Women Australia’s CEO, Hajeh Maha Abdo OA, reflected on the history of Australian Muslim women’s agency, remembering how in 1992, Australian Muslim women organised the first national Muslim Women’s Conference in an effort ‘to own our own agency and our ability to advocate for ourselves’. Advocacy and dignity are inherently interlinked with agency being the capacity for women to make decisions for themselves including decisions which uphold their dignity and decisions to advocate on their own behalf. Hajeh Maha Abdo reflected on the structural barriers to victim-survivors being able to exercise their agency with the need to create ‘more choice . . . more pathways for women who are in situations of escaping violence and trauma to be able to be supported’. Agency within Islam is considered to be inherent to human-ness, as Allah (God) gave humans the capacity to make choices (ikhtiyar). It is taught in the Quran (76:22) that while you cannot guarantee a particular outcome from your efforts, Allah rewards effort. Effort is comprised of both an individual’s intention (niyyah) and the actions that follow (Sahih al-Bukhari n.d.).

With respect to the second core pillar of Muslim Women Australia’s organisational ethos, frequent references can be seen in institutional documents to values of dignity and respect. One of the institutional mottos of Muslim Women Australia is ‘service with a purpose’ and that purpose is to serve Allah and all of Allah’s creations. Islamic principles bind Muslim people to serve every creation of Allah, regardless of whether their identity or opinions align with their own. Equality between people is a fundamental tenet of the faith, with many people citing the Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) statement that there is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab over an Arab, except in terms of taqwa (piety, consciousness of Allah). Another relevant Quranic concept is that all people have an inherent dignity (al-karamah) linked to the story of creation (Islamic University of Malaysia n.d.). In the context of COVID-19, Muslim Women Australia’s service delivery reports detailed the prioritising of ‘dignity in the delivery of services’ (Muslim Women Australia 2021, pp. 1, 7) as a key aspect of their response to the health crisis.

With respect to the third core pillar, Muslim Women Australia describes itself as a representative body for Australian Muslim women ‘advocating for equality and the rights of all women, through authentic leadership based on our Islamic principles’ (Muslim Women Australia n.d.b). Further, in a publication by Muslim Women Australia, it is explained that, in Islam, advocacy ‘holds great significance, aligning with the principles of justice, compassion and community welfare’ (Muslim Women Australia n.d.a). Drawing from the Islamic tradition, the advocacy of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is referred to in this publication, in particular the Prophet’s ‘unwavering commitment to justice and peace’ (Muslim Women Australia n.d.a). Reference is also made to the Prophet’s first wife, Khadijah, who used ‘her resources to support, empower and advocate for the community’ (Muslim Women Australia n.d.a). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, Muslim Women Australia ‘intensified its advocacy both within the sector . . . by sharing service learnings based on current experiences and informing service and sector resources about the reality of the experiences that vulnerable communities are facing’ (Muslim Women Australia 2021, p. 3). Further, the organisation stated that ‘spiritual activism should be acknowledged as part of the health response carried out by Muslim Women Australia’ (Muslim Women Australia 2021, p. 2). These values around agency, dignity and advocacy were key themes that emerged in client interviews. This article examines the way that Muslim Women Australia’s model of service provision, founded on these Islamic values, effectively delivers culturally and religiously competent support to clients from diverse backgrounds regardless of the client’s own personal beliefs and values.

3. Methodology

This research is based on data collection that canvassed Muslim Women Australia reports, submissions, and publications, as well as empirical work that was carried out in 2023. The empirical work included interviews with staff working at Linking Hearts, as well as victim-survivors of DFV who were clients of Linking Hearts during the COVID-19
lockdowns. The data are part of an empirical project focused on the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on DFV service delivery in CALD and faith-based communities in Western Sydney. The project was funded by the James Martin Institute for Public Policy and the University of Sydney (James Martin Institute n.d.). The project received approval from the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. The data analysis in this paper centres on interviews with clients who previously accessed Linking Hearts services (auspiced by Muslim Women Australia). The client interviews involved 17 participants from CALD communities located in Sydney, New South Wales, who had experienced DFV and accessed Linking Hearts services during the COVID-19 lockdown periods in 2020 and 2021. These clients were recruited through posters advertised by Linking Hearts. The interviews were conducted by at least two members of the research team. The interviewers adopted a victim-centred methodology for the client interviews, ensuring that the individual needs of the participants were catered to as much as possible. This included being responsive to access-related needs of clients, for example, conducting both indoor and outdoor interviews, conducting some in Arabic, ensuring that there was access to support for interviewees if needed. All members of the research team were familiar with a response-based practice framework in understanding and responding to DFV and had experience in interviewing victim-survivors.1

The participants came from a variety of cultural backgrounds including Samoan, Thai, Bangladeshi, Jordanian, Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, Tunisian, Egyptian, and Australian backgrounds. Their ages ranged from early 20s to 50s. Like all research, our project had some limitations. First, despite the victim-centred methodology, due to the distressing nature of the interview content at the intersection of DFV and COVID-19-related traumas, some clients were reluctant to share elements of their experiences. In terms of recruitment of participants for the interviews, some people who had accessed the services during the COVID-19 pandemic had moved and were not contactable. There were also access limitations, where potential interview participants were not able to engage with interviews due to not being able to take time off work. Further, language barriers limited the potential interview participant pool with interviews only being conducted English and Arabic.

The methodology applied is Grounded Theory Methodology. Grounded Theory Methodology can be defined as a systematic form of data analysis whereby context-specific theory is developed based on a combination of thematic coding and conceptual analysis (Ahmed and Krayem 2021, p. 8). In developing theory from data, Grounded Theory Methodology prioritises lived experiences and seeks to avoid essentialism by contextualising knowledge (Charmaz 2011).

4. Contributions of Muslim Women Australia in the DFV Field in the Context of COVID-19

In general, one in four Australian women have experienced violence by an intimate partner or family member (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023). With respect to culturally and linguistically diverse and Islamic communities specifically, the exact prevalence of DFV is ‘not readily quantifiable due to under-reporting and barriers to disclosure’ (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2015, p. 4). There was a documented increase in DFV during COVID-19, particularly during the lockdown periods. Official reports during the COVID-19 lockdown periods did not record increased reports of DFV to the police; however, given that many women experiencing violence do not engage with the police as a first step, this is unsurprising (Boxall et al. 2020). An online survey of women experiencing DFV, conducted in 2020 by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), demonstrates that over half the respondents (53.1%) experienced increases in frequency or severity of violence (Boxall et al. 2020). Of the women surveyed by the AIC, 43.2% indicated that they sought help from informal sources (Boxall et al. 2020). Further, a survey of service providers carried out by Morley et al. (2021) illustrates that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns exacerbated the vulnerability of women at risk of and/or experiencing DFV. The study also noted the way in which vulnerability was more pronounced for individuals from CALD,
First Nations, and LGBTIQ+ communities (Morley et al. 2021). Not only did the COVID-19 pandemic intensify the experiences of DFV within the community, it also ‘presented significant challenges’ for already-overburdened specialist DFV support services (Muslim Women Australia 2020a). It is against this backdrop that the work of Muslim Women Australia was given particular recognition by the former Minister for Prevention of Domestic Violence, Mark Speakman, for ‘the important role [played] in communicating and engaging with our culturally diverse communities as we address the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable women and families experiencing violence’ (Muslim Women Australia 2020b).

Some of the challenges faced by DFV service providers during this period, as explained by Muslim Women Australia (2020a), included

- Effectively balancing the case management of clients presenting with intensified needs;
- Improving access to service provision, information and referral in a changed landscape;
- Providing culturally and linguistically appropriate communications and messaging;
- While managing teams and services remotely; along with caring for staff wellbeing in a sector where for many, it can be a matter of life or death . . .

The way in which Linking Hearts responded to the COVID-19 pandemic was also informed by the organisational ethos of Muslim Women Australia. As noted by CEO Maha Abdo, ‘a therapeutic and healing model was central to this process, in response to the increased levels of anxiety experienced by communities and the increased support women experiencing domestic and family violence required’ (Muslim Women Australia 2020a).

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, DFV was recognized as a ‘national emergency’, with one woman a week killed in Australia by a current or former partner (Valentine and Breckenridge 2016, p. 31). As outlined above, there was a rise in DFV during the pandemic, and victims from CALD backgrounds faced compounding barriers to accessing DFV services during COVID-19 lockdowns. Beyond the simple narrative that there was an increase in DFV during COVID-19, data from Linking Hearts reveal a more complicated pattern of client engagement with services during the pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Linking Hearts experienced both an increased demand on DFV services in terms of there being an increase in the number of cases incoming and a rise in the complexity of incoming and existing cases. The reporting categorisation used by service providers is scaled across low, medium, and high effort, with high being the most complex needs and also requiring a higher level of support. There was an increase in ‘high effort’ cases during both COVID-19 lockdown periods when compared to the period immediately preceding the lockdown measures. In the first lockdown (March–June 2020) there was a 12.5% increase, and in the second lockdown period (June–October 2021) a 5.8% increase in ‘high effort’ cases. There was also an increase in the time it took for cases to transition through the usual services, indicating extended client reliance on the services provided. Compared to pre-pandemic times, during COVID-19, almost 40% of clients requested further support including: assistance securing affordable/stable accommodation, income support, Legal Aid, food packages, assistance with accessing services online, and assistance communicating with health, education, and employment services (including translation and interpretation services).

5. Data Analysis of Client Interview Data

With respect to the ethos and operation of Muslim Women Australia (Linking Hearts) as an Islamic women’s organisation, the themes of cultural competence and non-discrimination emerged from the client interview data. The core principles of advocacy/spiritual activism, dignity/respect, and empowerment/agency came through in the client reflections on service provision, notably for both Muslim and non-Muslim clients, demonstrating the way that Muslim Women Australia operates with cultural competence and non-discrimination for all their clients.
6. Cultural and Religious Competence

The intersectional approach adopted by Muslim Women Australia in providing DFV support demonstrates a level of cultural and religious competence that creates a safe space for women to seek help when facing violence. The fear of being stereotyped or experiencing Islamophobia when accessing mainstream DFV services came through clearly in several interviews, with one interviewee (Anonymous 2023f) noting:

If they were not Muslim I would not have come—others just don’t understand. How can they understand all the different issues I have? When you go as a scarfie [hijabi]—they see you only as a Muslim in a negative way . . . Having case worker[s] that understood my religion was so important. I once had a support worker for my daughter who took her to eat something that was not halal—when I found out I can’t tell you how I felt. It is so hard if the support worker does not know our culture . . . I want my kids to be safe—everyone wants their kids to be safe.

Another client’s experience of Islamophobia was one reason why a different DFV service referred them to Linking Hearts for support as there was bullying from another refuge resident because the client wore a hijab. The impact of that experience was significant and led to physical isolation with the client essentially resorting to being locked up in her room for 20 days (Anonymous 2023e). The experience of this interviewee demonstrates the importance of providing a space that is culturally safe for all clients. A need for cultural safety was noted by another interviewee, who, coming from a refugee background, noted that ‘[t]here are difficulties when you come to a new place, you are lost, you don’t know where to go, like a worm with its eyes closed (Arabic saying)’ and that she came to Linking Hearts because ‘they are specialised in this assistance, they are safe and I would be protected with them’ (Anonymous 2023g).

It is clear that the reputation of Linking Hearts – as a service founded upon cultural and religious expertise in addition to DFV expertise – makes women feel more comfortable in seeking help in the first instance. The service’s understanding of religious and cultural values was significant for many women, with one interviewee stating ‘they supported me, they looked after me. In a country where we have no one, they were like family, they understood me, my culture, my religion, my values’ (Anonymous 2023d). This is particularly important in light of the discrimination that victim-survivors from CALD and faith-based communities experience in the context of mainstream service providers. For example, where mainstream services have historically made ‘sweeping generalisations’ about women from diverse backgrounds and ‘made little effort to understand their accommodations’ (Krayem and Krayem 2022, p. 81).

7. Non-Discrimination

The second theme that emerged from the data of “non-discrimination” is complementary to the first theme of cultural and religious competence. This is perhaps unsurprising considering the experiences of women seeking DFV support and experiencing racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia—and the fear of this being a key barrier to help-seeking for women within CALD and faith-based communities. As noted earlier, one of the core Islamic values that Muslim Women Australia strives to provide services with is that of dignity and respect (Muslim Women Australia 2021, pp. 1, 7). For many of the clients interviewed, regardless of their own cultural and faith background, they felt, firsthand, the values of respect and dignity embodied in the service provision and also observed it broadly for other women that they met whilst receiving DFV support. For example, one client noted, in relation to her cultural and religious background, that ‘There was no judgment . . . It’s not about where you come from . . . we all have one blood’ (Anonymous 2023a). Another client noted the way in which Linking Hearts treats clients equally: ‘Linking Hearts deal with all people the same regardless of their background. Even I was living with a Vietnamese lady, she was so nice, she had two kids and we got the same services, equal’ (Anonymous 2023i).
This was echoed by another client who stated that ‘they’re equal with everybody. They treat everyone the same I’ve seen that . . . I still call them my family’ (Anonymous 2023j).

One respondent (Anonymous 2023g) noted the value of the service for DFV victims from migrant backgrounds:

When people are settling into a new country, I believe everyone is in need of a service like this. They light up the path for people. I sincerely feel that all new migrants should visit them. They help with new laws, language, culture, customs. They respect everyone regardless of religion or nationality.

Significantly, the interviewee also noted Muslim Women Australia’s roots in the Islamic faith: ‘Their Islamic background I believe allows them to help everyone unconditionally because Islam says you need to help anyone in need’ (Anonymous 2023g). The idea that Linking Hearts treated clients in a way that was culturally safe and non-discriminatory came through in various interviews and relates to the values of dignity and respect that MWA fosters in their service provision.

The provision of services for DFV victims, which from the victim’s perspective (as reflected in the interview data) are culturally competent and non-discriminatory, can also be linked to Muslim Women Australia’s historical and ongoing advocacy for Muslim communities, in particular Muslim women who have experienced violence. The intersectional approach which characterises the organisation’s advocacy translates, in practice, to the elimination of barriers for DFV victims from Muslim backgrounds when accessing services. The intentional creation of a culturally safe and non-discriminatory service founded upon dignity for all—and advocacy for Muslim women specifically—results in the elimination of the double bind for Muslim women when seeking support for DFV as well as culturally safe service provision in general for victims regardless of their faith background. Importantly, these principles apply to all clients irrespective of their cultural and/or religious background.

Further, in relation to the value of dignity, victims interviewed explained how Linking Hearts case workers ‘upheld our dignity. During COVID-19 they were tireless in their efforts . . . They value[d] our struggles and they help[ed] us sincerely. Their service is a blessing and I thank God for them’ (Anonymous 2023g). Another interviewee (Anonymous 2023f) stated that:

I was going to live in the car with my five kids, because I couldn’t handle the stress anymore. I couldn’t continue living like this. After moving into the house [organised by Linking Hearts], the case worker would call and ask how I was—I felt that I was no longer alone. I realised that for the first time someone cared, someone was asking about me and my kids.

It was such a hard time. I never ask for help because you feel embarrassed and it is hard to reveal private details about your life, you lose your dignity, but then I realised that it is ok—my kids are safe, I am safe, the house has a garden and my daughter who has a disability ran for hours and hours because she was so comfortable. It changed my life—it changed my life for good.

There was a notable intersection in our dataset between victims of DFV and mothers with caring responsibilities for children who have disabilities. In the context of DFV service provision, the value of “dignity” must be understood as being underpinned by intersectionality to avoid the essentialisation of clients from CALD or faith-based backgrounds. While cultural and religious competency are important, these values cannot be applied without engagement with other intersectional identities. The victim-survivors interviewed included clients who were disabled, who have caring responsibilities, who have caring responsibilities for disabled children, who are on insecure visas, who are experiencing insecure housing, who are experiencing financial hardship, who are socially isolated (particularly without familial support), who are suffering from health issues both physical and psychological, as well as one client interviewed who is gender-diverse. Based on the perspectives of the clients interviewed dignity in service provision is deeply intersectional
in practice, meaning that services do not cater only towards DFV victims from CALD or faith-based backgrounds but also a myriad of different intersectionalities based on the particular client’s needs.

In addition to the values of dignity/respect, the value of empowerment—to empower women to exercise their agency in making decisions for themselves and their children—was reflected strongly in some of the clients’ experiences. The respondents interviewed shared their perspectives from a range of positions in terms of their ongoing need for services. For example, whilst some interviewees continued to stay connected with Muslim Women Australia in general after they no longer accessed services from Linking Hearts, others had ongoing service provision needs from Linking Hearts, and some interviewees no longer required Linking Hearts services in the past but later re-connected with these services when their circumstances changed. When reading the quotes below, which reflect on empowerment for clients in the subset of interviewees who no longer access Linking Hearts services, it should not be implied that client access to DFV services is (or should be) linear in any way.

For context, half of the interviewees (eight) explicitly self-identified as no longer accessing Linking Hearts services. With respect to empowerment and supporting victims of DFV to exercise their agency, one interviewee (who was the adult child of a DFV victim and, in and of herself, a victim of her father’s violence) stated, ‘Mum’s confidence is supporting us now. We got this’ (Anonymous 2023b). A respondent who had caring responsibilities explained that Linking Hearts case workers ‘helped me to know how to keep my kids safe’ (Anonymous 2023h). Another interviewee (Anonymous 2023j) said the following:

Respondent: If it wasn’t for them [Linking Hearts] . . . I don’t know what would have happened. I’m alright but . . . I needed counselling to get out of what I went through. The domestic violence that I went through. Everything that strained me. They supported me a lot.

Interviewer: And how are you doing now? You said before that you’ve moved on and are no longer receiving services, do you feel established independently in your home now?

Respondent: I am a lot stronger, I can get up and I can go, I can do this.

Other respondents made comments to similar effect. One respondent shared that Linking Hearts case workers were the ‘first people to make me understand that what was happening [DFV] was not OK and that I made the right decision to not try and stay. And, in hindsight, that was very important for me and for [my son] as well’ (Anonymous 2023c). Victims’ statements, to the effect that they were able to gain knowledge and skills as well as intrinsic gains such as self-confidence and inner strength, reflect the empowerment model that Linking Hearts services are founded upon.

8. Conclusions

This article has established how the Linking Hearts DFV service provision model, as a service run by Muslim Women Australia, is founded on Islamic values including the values of advocacy, agency, and dignity. Whilst the model is based on a distinctly Islamic ethos, interviews with clients illustrate how the Linking Hearts model is effective in responding to the needs of clients from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, reflecting the value of cultural and religious competency in DFV service provision. Importantly, the DFV services provided by Linking Hearts are available to clients regardless of their personal beliefs and values, reflecting the complimentary value of non-discrimination. Our study documented a broad range of diversity in the Linking Heart client base, not just in terms of cultural and religious diversity, but also across a range of other intersectional identities, including disability and parenthood status.

Reflecting on how the Islamic principles that underpin the Linking Hearts model translate in practice to DFV services that are both culturally and religiously competent and non-discriminatory, this article also reflects on the role that Muslim women are playing in
the DFV space and the significance of their Islamic faith in doing so. As described above, this is not a new role for Muslim women in Australia, as this advocacy and service provision has a long history, beginning with the establishment of a specialised service in 1988 to a much larger generalised service currently found in Linking Hearts. This demonstrates the need and opportunity that Muslim women have in utilising their faith principles to lead the way in the provision of DFV services in Australia.

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

Notes

1 For further information about response-based practice see Insight Exchange: https://www.insightexchange.net (accessed on 15 March 2024).

2 The therapeutic and healing model referred to here is underpinned by best practice approaches ‘so that all women can rebuild and live healthy lives, free from violence’. Therapeutic methods utilised in service provision during COVID-19 included ‘twice daily check ins with clients, virtual visits and weekly home visits’ (Muslim Women Australia 2020a, pp. 10 and 18).

References


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