



Talking Points – Responding to Allegations of Sexual Violence in the Muslim Community

The recent allegations of sexual violence against a prominent Chicago imam are an important opening to educate the public about the realities of sexual violence. Specifics of each case are different, **but our role as advocates is always to support survivors and help everyone understand sexual violence. These actions are a grievous breach of trust.** When a faith leader in any mosque, synagogue, church or other house of worship commits harm against someone, he/she breaks the bonds of trust and honesty with that community. He/she has abused the responsibility they have been given by the community and should be held accountable for his/her actions. During these instances, it is important for us to reflect on how our faith and values guide us. It is important for us to not act out of fear or past loyalty but rather to act in the spirit of our tradition, which asks us to enjoin good and forbid injustice.

What is sexual violence?

Sexual abuse/assault is **any unwanted sexual contact** that happens to a person **without their consent**. Sexual assault can happen through coercion (pressure), threats, or force, usually by someone the survivor knows. As such, it can encompass a range of offenses, including but not limited to:

- rape
- attempted nonconsensual sex act
- abusive sexual contact (unwanted touching) and
- non-contact sexual abuse (threats, verbal harassment, etc)

What can you do?

Believe Survivors when they disclose abuse.

- It takes an incredible amount of **courage for a victim to report rape and sexual violence**. A majority of sexual assaults, approximately 63%, are never reported to law enforcement. Moreover, when disclosing, often victims face many barriers including media scrutiny, retaliation against themselves and their families, and re-traumatization.
- Circumstances of sexual violence **are not a result of anything the victim did, but rather because the perpetrator abused their power**. The most harmful thing we can do to a survivor is not believe them, or blame them for the circumstance. Instead, we need to support survivors, and make them feel safe to seek resources, as this is crucial for their healing and gives others the strength and hope to come forward in the future.
- **Recognize there may be others**. Right now, some other young person in our community is likely suffering from sexual abuse and should not see trusted adults and community members victim blame or publicly rally around accused perpetrators. In all communities and in all contexts, abuse thrives in secrecy

This is not about 'two sides of a story'.

- It is in our interest to **let law enforcement do their job**. The authorities must be given due time and access to investigate this serious matter. At the same time, investigations can be lengthy and draining on the victim and his/her family and the large percentage of sexual violence cases are dropped or not brought forward due to these difficulties.
- **Please respect the victim**, her/his family, and the process. Even in the rare case of innocence, to diminish these claims or publicly support the accused will perpetuate a dangerous culture of silence with respect to reporting sexual abuse.

We cannot remain silent. Together, we must seek community-based solutions.

- **Prevention before intervention**. As we seek out community-based accountability strategies for arising and known situations, we must also focus on developing awareness, tools, and the necessary skills for all community members to talk about sexual violence and work to prevent it. As such, our call to action is the following:
 - Hold the perpetrator accountable and pressure him to step down from all leadership and teaching activities
 - Do not participate in victim blaming and honor the family's privacy
 - Hold the institution accountable and insist that the educators and administrators get formal training
 - Join us as we build a coalition of trained chaplains, leaders and professionals in the Muslim community on how to effectively address sexual violence