

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Capstones

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

Fall 12-13-2020

How a Culture of Silence Is Threatening to Burn Down an Entire Community

Hafsa N. Quraishi

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/445

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

How a Culture of Silence Is Threatening to Burn Down an Entire Community

By Hafsa Quraishi



Islamic Center of Irving in Texas, where two prominent Islamic leaders faced scandals. Photo Credit: Islamic Center of Irving

My immigrant mom instilled an important lesson in me when I was barely old enough to register her words. She didn't do it to spark fear in me, or turn me into a paranoid adult who can't socialize with men - though that rings true to some degree. She did it, because even with her traditional upbringing, she knew I would experience what she and every other woman alive had at some (or every) point in their life. In her own way she was preparing me to save myself. But, as they say, the road to Hell is paved with the best intentions, and the worst follow through.

My mom grew up under the patriarchy more than I did. As a born-and-raised Pakistani woman who married a dominant Indian man, she was more conditioned throughout her life than I was to never challenge the patriarchy and the rules that kept us subservient to the men in our life. For me, the idea of the patriarchy was passively taught. For my mom, it was embedded in her organs, like a thriving malignant tumor that branched out and poisoned the very cells that composed her lifeblood.

Still, she managed to instill the most twisted lesson you could teach a young girl: “Don’t ever be alone in a room with any man -- it doesn’t matter if he’s your doctor, your uncle or your imam. You don’t know what he can be capable of.”

She said it low and firm, and just like that the carousel kept turning: a generation of women passing the burning torch silently to their daughters. The rest of the world kept spinning while we played the stationary horses, stuck in this horrendous cycle of telling young women that this would be the way it remained forever.

I understood my mother’s heart was in the right place, but this strategy of teaching young girls that we must do what we can to avoid getting caught in a hairy situation - that can happen even despite our best efforts - is perverse. It’s always cover up, remain vigilant, don’t give anyone any excuses to justify if something happened to you. It is placing the onus and the responsibility on us to do something about a societal issue that was never cured. The worst part is this warning typically serves as the most support these girls are given - then they’re left to fend for themselves, like gazelles without their herd.

.....

When you visit the website for Facing Abuse in Community Environments (FACE), a large disclaimer pops up, overtaking the length of the screen. It says:

“Attention Everyone! We are currently experiencing a high volume of reports and victim exposures and we want victims to know we are here to

support you and help you get the support you need to cope with what you are experiencing. If you or someone you know firsthand is a victim of abuse at the hands of religious or community leaders please complete a report under the 'Report Abuse' tab.”

FACE is a non-profit organization that was founded in 2017 to address the gap in accountability that exists among American Muslim community leaders. The initiative was met with mixed reactions from the community when it first launched. Alia Salem, FACE's founder, told me that when they released their first report they were called “femi-nazis and imam hunters,” with community members telling them they were giving Muslims a bad look.

“ People who were saying it’s haram, we’re uncovering sins, you’re not supposed to do that. This is not about sin, it’s about abuse...and abuse should be exposed. ”

- *Alia Salem*



Their first report ended up leading to a lawsuit, during which they testified in 2019 and ended up winning. The case, Jane Doe vs Zia Sheikh, was against an imam who had been accused of exploiting a woman he counseled from the young age of 13, grooming her to confide in him and trust him emotionally so he could manipulate her sexually when she reached a certain age.

On their website, Sara Bawany, a FACE social worker, writes how she felt during that time.

“As I reflect back to that day, I can’t help but think of the most bitter pill I’ve had to swallow, which is that our religious and community leaders are not always who we think they are,” said Bawany.

The lawsuit was a landmark victory for FACE and for the victim, who was granted \$2.55 million in damages to be paid by Sheikh. Sheikh had been working as an imam at the Islamic Center of Irving (ICI) during which he counseled Doe. BuzzFeed News Reporter Hannah Allam writes in her investigative piece on the subject that Sheikh was “more like a savior or a Svengali than a counselor, using his power over Doe to make her dependent on him.”

Through helping her buy a car and other necessities, and providing his emotional support as she navigated a bumpy home life, he became more than Doe’s spiritual guide; Sheikh essentially stepped into the role of her absent father, supporting her in ways that surpassed his duty as her imam and counselor. His power over Doe led him to further their relationship, introducing sexual elements to their sessions. Eventually, Sheikh summoned Doe to a motel where he had sex with her then left to, as ironic as it seems, get back to the mosque in time to lead prayers. FACE’s in-depth report on the situation also alleges that he later gave Doe a pregnancy test to ensure she wasn’t pregnant because he didn’t want to lose his job as a religious leader of the community.

While reporting, Allam recalls hearing a number of allegations against prominent leaders in Islamic institutions. Like many other communities, the women had a whisper network informing each other which leaders were to be avoided.

My jaw was on the floor reading FACE’s report and Allam’s story, but the feeling I was experiencing - that tingling in the back of my brain - wasn’t surprise. I couldn’t name it then, but I know now it was familiarity. Though I had never experienced anything like Doe had, it felt familiar to me somehow. It brought to mind the lesson my mom had instilled in me - that I shouldn’t be in a room alone with any man. Reading Doe’s story, I

realized that this is what she had meant; this was what she was trying to protect me from.

Doe is a rare voice who did decide to speak up. The unfortunate truth is that nearly 80% of rapes and sexual assaults go unreported, and that number is even lower for Muslim women. For every Doe out there, there are countless others who remained silent. Her decision to speak up prompted FACE to be created and subsequently prevented Sheikh from victimizing other women.

ICI wasn't the first place Sheikh had abused his power as an imam. In fact, FACE's investigation into Doe's initial report against Sheikh uncovered that he had done it at least twice before when he served as an imam for masjids in Tampa, FL and Richmond, VA. In both of those instances, Sheikh was fired but the reasons were never shared with the multiple other masjids who later employed him - he even received a "modest severance package" from the masjid in Virginia.

“ These individuals just go hopping from masjid to masjid with no accountability. ”

- *Alia Salem*



FACE's report outlined how his pattern continued as he bounced from masjid to masjid, touting religious ideals while sporting the same traditional garb and abusive M.O. all while his previous employers quietly protected him. Mere months after he was asked to resign from his post at ICI following Doe's allegation, Sheikh was rehired as an imam at another mosque just nine miles away.



FROM MASJID TO MAS

This is a timeline showing how Zia masjid, allowed to continue preach history.

When Jane Doe processed what had happened to her, she knew she needed to tell someone. She turned to the president of the board of the masjid at the time, Nouman Ali Khan, a highly renowned Islamic scholar

and lecturer. But FACE's report notes that after Doe confided in him her experience with the imam, Khan didn't show sympathy or compassion. Instead he berated her. He told her to seek mental health services and advised her to not speak of this incident to anyone else, lest she ruin the religious leader's reputation.

Doe eventually went to other board members and was able to successfully convince them of what went down between her and the imam and they took further action.

Days after Sheikh's forced resignation, FACE's report says Khan mysteriously stepped down too -- except it's not mysterious at all. Because the scholar, unbeknownst to many at the time, was facing his own allegations that allege he performed secret nikkahs (religious weddings) to multiple women in order to fulfill his desires and then divorce them. By late 2018, Khan's reputation briefly crumbled, due to emerging reports and screenshots of his affairs with multiple women, despite the sanctity that he preaches.

When I first read the allegations against Khan, I bristled. This was a man I had seen speak in person numerous times. He was someone whose videos I shared and binged during Ramadan when we limit our traditional entertainment. It hurt me that someone I looked up to was being accused of such things -- with evidence -- but, again, I wasn't surprised.

Khan was a renowned scholar, married and with seven children, so women naturally felt safe around him. After all, how could a man who followed the word of The Book so well be a dangerous man? As it turns out, his reputation served as both a defense and a way to continue his behavior.

“ Women were afraid to come forward because of his unique position. This wasn't just some imam in a far-flung Texas town that nobody's heard of - this

was a superstar preacher with a following of probably millions. ”

- *Hannah Allam*



Khan's modus operandi was pretty well-oiled, according to another one of Allam's stories in BuzzFeed News: he would be approached by female students of his who attended his lectures, asking for clarification or questions they didn't get the chance to ask during the seminar. Khan zeroed in on the ones he thought were most vulnerable and would offer additional access to his knowledge, telling some women to text or call him if they had any questions or needed anything.

A texting relationship would go from discussing the interpretation of the Quran to more personal matters, discussing intimate details about life. When the relationship escalated, he would convince the women to secretly marry him (religiously).

Through this M.O., Khan victimized several women, all while legally married to his wife. Following the publicization of these allegations, he and his wife divorced.

Allam spoke to some victims, but as she explained to me, most of them wanted nothing to do with it. Perhaps they, too, had been taught silence was the only way.

“ It's like the same old issues with #MeToo in a conservative Muslim lens that can really make it

even harder for women to come forward. ”

- *Hannah Allam*



Almost immediately upon learning of the allegations, a hazy memory came to me from a few years before then: One December when I was in my preteens, I heard my dad in his bedroom arguing on the phone with the rest of the masjid board. This wasn't an unusual occurrence, as they often butted heads when it came to decisions. Nevertheless, I always enjoyed eavesdropping on the behind-the-scenes details that gave me a glimpse into masjid operations. It also gave me a leg up on my friends whose dads weren't on the board and to whom I would divulge these inner secrets.

That night, I sneaked into my parent's room and gently sat on the bedside chair, trying not to make a sound, as I listened to my dad debate loudly with his peers. My dad ignored my presence, too engaged in the discourse occurring on the call. He had them on speaker phone, so I didn't have to strain to hear what was being said. The voices of the others on the conference call jumbled together in a crackle-y, static sound, an overlapping cacophony as people spoke over each other desperately trying to be heard. My dad's voice carried the loudest, thereby leading the call; when he spoke, everyone defeatedly gave up their floor.

He insisted that it was unnecessary to bring Khan, a scholar I knew, to speak to the community at the next gathering and instead proposed another scholar I hadn't heard of. His peers uproariously disagreed and sang Khan's praises. My dad tried to implore his peers to hear him out, trying to explain that Khan's attitude wasn't the greatest, but the majority prevailed and he was outvoted.

At the moment I would've voted against my father too; I was surprised that he was not pushing to bring Khan as a speaker, considering Khan's popularity in our community, especially among the youth who would surely attend the masjid in droves if Khan were to speak. He had a certain way of relating with younger people, using our lingo and analogizing religious concepts back to my favorite musicians and shows like Justin Bieber and Dragon Ball Z. I didn't understand why my dad didn't want him. But when I asked, my dad sighed.

"He's not who he seems." I furrowed my eyebrows at that vague response. He didn't elaborate on it any further and I didn't ask. At the time I figured it was about politics, as much of his issues were. In hindsight, I wish I had asked.

Years later, in late 2017 after the news broke, I was driving my dad home from the airport where he worked as a fleet service agent. It was typically a long drive which he usually slept through since he was always tired after working overtime, but I wasn't one to embrace the silence. I tried to engage my dad in conversation and with widened eyes informed him of the latest news - that this renowned scholar we knew was facing these allegations.

I struggled to keep my eyes on the road as we crossed Dames Point Bridge, frequently turning to my dad to see his reaction to the information I was dumping on him. I tried to make out the emotion on his face, searching his features for surprise, but all I saw was anger. He sat up in the passenger seat and abruptly asked me a series of questions: "Who told you this? Where did you read this? How did they come to know?"

I gushed to him about Allam, the reporter who had broken the story - a reporter I personally looked up to quite a bit because she was one of the few Muslim reporters I knew of at the time. I described her deep investigation into the allegations; how she spoke to his victims, obtained screenshots of his affair, confirmed the account with other clerics who had also investigated Khan. With each burgeoning detail my dad got more and more upset.

“How could a Muslim reporter speak these things about her own community?” He cried out, feeling betrayed. “What will others think about our community now? They already hate Muslims, this just makes us look even more bad in their eyes.”

I was taken aback. I definitely didn't expect this response from my dad. He was the man who always spoke up for people. His generosity was well-known within the Jacksonville Muslim community, always getting people jobs or helping them attend school and events they couldn't afford. He was where I got my loud opinions and advocating skills from, as well as my stubborn search for justice. Looking at him from the corner of my eye I saw a man who I usually hated to admit was right being so clearly in the wrong in this situation.

I rushed to defend Allam and confronted my dad for his absurd perspective.

“Whose side are you on?” I challenged him. “What about all the women who were victimized by him? We should protect and defend them, rather than worrying about how this will look for our community.”

He argued with me, trying to justify his point of view. He brought up the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal broken by The Boston Globe in the early years of the millennium and the way it impacted how people view the Catholic Church.

Well, maybe if someone had spoken up or reported on it before then it wouldn't have gotten so bad, I rebutted. This report is an important step in breaking the silence on these issues and maybe we could stop it from getting as bad and prevent any more victims.

My father huffed in disagreement. I couldn't get him to see my side and I didn't understand the logic of his.

But one thing failed to escape me: throughout our entire conversation, in none of his questions did my father question the truth of the situation. Perhaps it was because he knew the world more than I did and this

information of yet another male abusing his power wasn't so surprising. Or maybe he and other men had learned, without realizing it, that this was the safest way to react to the crimes of other men in the community, learning to protect their community at any cost. That lesson of avoidance that is being taught to young girls feeds the lesson of silence and complicity that men are taught.

In the end, Salem argues, it's always about reputation.

“ This culture of silence is perpetuated under these fake auspices of good intentions. ”

- *Alia Salem*



But the same community that is trying to protect itself is making the situation even worse than it could have been. Rather than acknowledge such issues and do what needs to be done to rectify the situation, the community is trying to ignore a fire in its own house without realizing that, eventually, someone will notice the flames and smoke. The question is, how many people will it burn while it's being ignored by the people inside the house?

Just like the Catholic Church, Islamic institutions in America are allowing harmful behavior to continue occurring out of their fear of looking bad. That line of thinking didn't work out too well for the Catholic Church. There is also the added fear of giving people a legitimate thing to criticize about the American Muslim community, one that has already been marginalized for so long on mostly illegitimate criticism rooted in islamophobia. In spite

of that, we can't avoid the inevitable: we need to face this soon and we can't be afraid of being criticized.

“ We're going to look bad no matter what we do. There's always going to be abusers - you either clean up the mess and be lauded...or you can be smeared because it will eventually come out. ”

- *Alia Salem*



While the issue has been largely swept under the rug, between the #MeToo movement and more survivors coming forward, the situation has gained some traction within the Muslim community. Such high profile cases like Sheikh's and Khan's have brought up issues that the community has to confront.

First is the hidden nature of spiritual abuse, combined with no accountability mechanisms for American Muslim leaders. For such a sensitive

topic, it makes sense to incorporate some sort of checks and balances to serve as both a guide and an accountability measure. The Catholic Church has the United States Council of Bishops - where's Islam's parallel organization?

Second, allegations must be addressed. There is a cultural tendency to dismiss such allegations, and oftentimes they even get turned around to blame the victim, both of which are harming the possibilities of more

victims coming forward. If the American Muslim community truly wants to rectify this ongoing problem, they need to encourage and embrace the victims who do speak up, rather than punishing and vilifying them. Instead of teaching daughters avoidance by telling them to not put ourselves in a situation where we are alone with a man, as my mom advised me, we should be teaching them how to speak up if something does happen.

Third, the American Muslim community needs to realize that when they come to deify a religious figure and place them on the level of a superstar, they are doing a disservice to the message and intention of the words they're preaching. It's a delicate balance between learning from religious scholars and their interpretation of religious texts to equating them with infallible prophets. By placing them on a pedestal, we are putting them on a level seemingly beyond accountability and that's when this sort of criticism gets dismissed.

There is some hope that this culture may be headed towards a shift: Sheikh was let go from his job at the Grand Prairie Mosque (nine miles away from ICI) after he lost his case against Doe. Khan largely withdrew from public life and his army of supporters diminished. Of course, occasionally, these predators try to stage a comeback. In November, Khan was invited to speak on a podcast called "The Mad Mamluks." The announcement was met with outrage by mainly younger Muslims, who questioned why he was being given a platform considering his history. Though the podcast was still live streamed, the reaction on social media and in the live chat shows that people haven't forgotten.

Still, the change is miniscule and going much slower than it needs to be. If we want to truly put out the fire, and stop passing down the torch of avoidance to our daughters, we need to abolish this culture of silence. More women like Doe need to make the decision to disobey the avoidance and silence tactics they're taught to ensure that predators like Sheikh and Khan are held accountable. In turn, to allow for more victims to feel comfortable speaking out, the community needs to back them and, at the very least, put an investigation and accountability process in place.

The few women and organizations, like Doe and FACE, that are already doing these things are having a palpable impact on ending the careers of predatory and dangerous men in the community. The impact could be multiplied tenfold if the American Muslim community banded together to hold such leaders accountable. If we don't, the fire won't just burn the victims - it'll consume the entire community.