"Safety is of utmost importance today."

Experiences of
gender-based violence
and resulting housing vulnerability
among racialized Muslim women
in Waterloo Region

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Acknowledgments

Contents

"Look for shelter homes and be independent. Being a victim doesn't help you in any way if you are not helping yourself. An abusive relationship is not better than ANYTHING in this world."

— Survey participant

Introduction

The purpose of this Project Willow research is to explore and create solutions for racialized Muslim women who experience homelessness or fear of homelessness due to gender-based violence (GBV). Gender-based violence is looked at as all inclusive, focusing on all the different forms it takes, such as physical violence, verbal violence, emotional/mental violence, sexual violence, spiritual/religious violence, financial violence, Islamophobia, and racism.

A quantitative survey, with a mix of multiple choice, ranking and short answers, captured the experiences of 61 racialized Muslim women in Waterloo Region. This research looks at participants' experiences of gender-based violence, reviews the formal and informal supports that were or were not used in response to gender-based violence and concludes with recommendations for systems change.

The research team is thankful to each participant who took the time to share their experience, to advocate for themselves and for better systems, and to help guide this project and the change it hopes to help facilitate in Waterloo Region. This research is one part of a larger initiative called Project Willow, funded by Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) Canada, that will build community capacity and mobilize invested parties to develop a community plan that enhances safety and access to justice for racialized Muslim women experiencing housing instability because of violence, as well as more broadly women and gender-diverse folks who experience magnified gender-based violence because of their experience with homelessness.

"Don't just wait for things to change by itself.

Go empower yourself with knowledge and learn new skills, because knowledge is power."

— Survey participant

Methodology

The criteria for participation in this research was identifying as a racialized Muslim woman who has personal experience(s) of gender-based violence or knows a woman or women from their faith/cultural community who has/have experienced gender-based violence. Participants were connected to and/or had previously participated in services provided by the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW.

This project was led by independent research consultant, Mitul Mahmud, on behalf of the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW and supported by the Project Willow lead researcher, Jennifer Gordon, Director of Advocacy at the YW Kitchener-Waterloo and member of the Project Willow coordinating team. All researchers involved in collecting data received TCPS2 training, the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. This is a certificate research ethics training developed and used by federal agencies, such as CIHR, NSWERC and SSHRC. Researchers also kept reflexive journals, highlighting and addressing any concerns as the research progressed. A built-in process for complaints and feedback regarding ethics was developed, encouraging participants to communicate any concerns to the lead researcher as well as giving the option to escalate their concerns to Fauzia Mazhar, Executive Director of the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW.

Participation was voluntary and consent forms were completed prior to participation. Participants were recruited through communication tools like posters, emails, social media and newsletters, and through the leadership of program staff in the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW's program, Towards Violence Free Homes, and their community support workers who spread word in their cultural communities about the opportunity to participate. The community support workers also offered English language support for participants requiring it. It was made clear to participants that there was no obligation to participate and that there were no consequences if they declined to participate or stopped their participation at any point in the process. We wanted to ensure participants felt they could be honest in their opinions and share freely without any perceived consequences or concerns about confidentiality.

Surveys were completed online via
a web link and could be completed
independently or with the help of a
community support worker, which were
then inputted into survey monkey, an
online survey platform. Participants
were given the option to be entered into
one of two draws for a $100 gift card.
In total, 61 participants completed the
survey. Surveys were administered and
collected throughout the summer and
early fall of 2022.
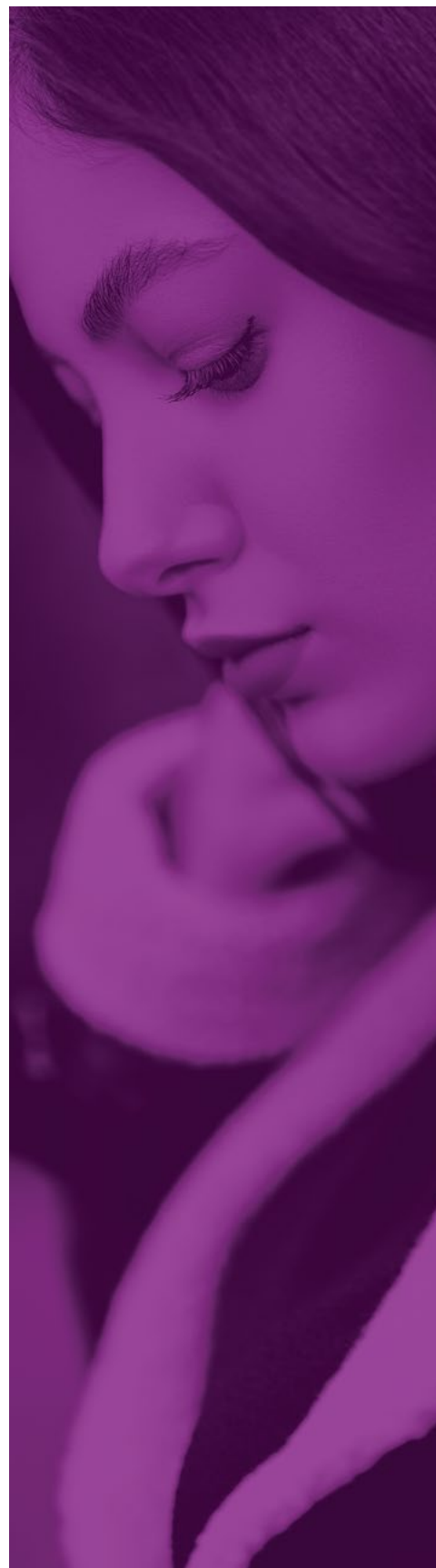
Demographics

Participants were asked a series of demographic questions, each giving options to choose one or all that apply, as well as options to prefer not to say. It's not uncommon for participants to choose to withhold some demographic information to ensure full anonymity, which is observed in some of the survey answers in the demographics section of this research.

Age

A total of 61 people participated in this research. The majority of participants were between the ages of 30–49, making up 34 of the 61 total participants. The next largest age demographic was 29 and under, making up 17 of the 61 participants, and then 50–59, making up nine of the 61 participants.

Race

Arab and South Asian were the primary races represented in this research. A total of 32% of participants identified as Arab and 30% identified as South Asian. In addition, 12% identified as Caucasian or white, 3% identified as African, 3% preferred not to say and 18% (or 11 participants) identified as 'other.'

Languages spoken

Participants were asked what languages they speak, and given the opportunity to check all that apply. Overall, 14 spoken languages were reflected in the participants who completed the survey. More specifically, the languages most spoken were English (49% of participants), Arabic (31%), Turkish (26%), Urdu/Hindi (26%), and Punjabi (13%).

Figure 1: Languages spoken

Participants were asked to identify all the languages they speak.

Language	% of participants	Language	% of participants
English	49%	Punjabi	13%
Arabic	31%	Amharic	3%
Turkish	26%	Pashto	3%
Urdu/Hindi	26%	Other	7%

Marital status

Participants were asked about their marital status at the time of completing the survey. The majority of participants (35 or 57%) identified as being married, 14 identified as being single, six stated they were divorced, two were in common law/domestic partnerships and four did not wish to disclose.

Number of dependents

Participants were asked how many children they are the primary caregiver to, with options between 0 and 5+. The most common response was zero children (24 participants or 39%), two children (12 participants or 20%), and one child (10 participants or 16%).

Living situation

Participants were asked about their current living situation. A majority (56%) of participants were living with their spouse/partner and children (if any). The next largest demographic, at 21%, lived alone, and 15% were living in multigenerational homes, with partners, grandparents and siblings.

Household income

The majority of participants (51%), had an annual household income equal to or less than $40,000, of that group, 26% had an annual household income equal to or less than $20,000 yearly. A total of 11% of participants had an annual household income of $41,000–$60,000, and 10% preferred not to say.

83% of participants revealed that their safety and that of other women in their faith/ cultural community was currently an important concern.

Results

Our community understanding of racialized Muslim women and their experiences of gender-based violence in our region is limited, particularly details such as frequency and types of violence experienced, as well as the systems of support used/accessed. One alarming statistic revealed by this research is that 83% of participants were concerned about their safety and the safety of other women in their faith/cultural community. This concern relates to experiences of gender-based violence across a spectrum of types and frequency.

Frequency of violence

Responses to our survey showed that the majority of participants experienced GBV themselves or knew a woman or women in their faith/cultural community who was experiencing GBV at least weekly (45%). Broken down, 20% stated that violence was a daily experience, 18% stated violence was experienced at least twice weekly, and 7% stated that violence was experienced once a week.

Figure 2: Frequency of violence experienced

Participants were asked to report the frequency of their experience of violence or that of a woman or women in their faith/cultural community.

20%	experience violence daily
18%	experience violence approximately twice a week
7%	experience violence once a week
15%	experience violence 1–2 times a month
10%	experience violence less than once a month
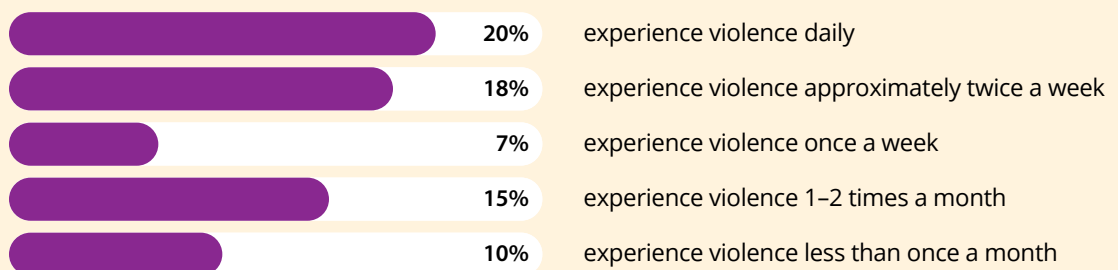
A deeper analysis of survey results found that, of the 20% experiencing violence daily, 50% were in married relationships, 25% were divorced, and 17% were single. Another trend in the research was that 30% of those participants with an annual household income of $40,000 per year or less, experienced violence at least weekly or knew a woman or women in their faith/cultural community who did. Participants in this income bracket were over two times more likely to experience violence or know a woman or women in their faith/cultural community who did than any other income group surveyed.

Breaking down the demographics further: of those experiencing violence daily themselves or who knew a woman or women in their faith/cultural community who experienced violence daily, 58% were South Asian.

This same population was also more likely to experience violence themselves weekly or know a woman or women in their faith/cultural community who experienced violence weekly (48%). Additionally, 33% of Arab women experienced violence themselves or knew a woman or women in their faith/cultural community experiencing violence at least once a week.

In relation to age, the dominant age bracket of survey respondents was 30-49 and within this age bracket, 75% experienced violence themselves at least once weekly, or knew a woman or women in their faith/cultural community experiencing violence at least once a week. They also comprised 58% of those experiencing daily violence themselves or who knew a woman or women in their faith/cultural community experiencing violence daily.
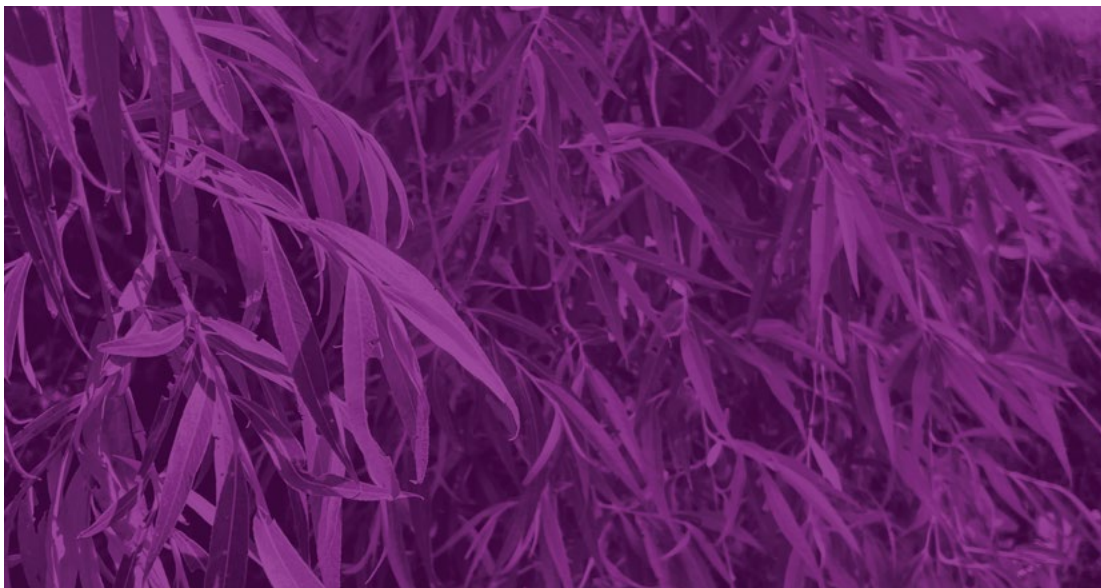
Experience of violence

Figure 3: Types of violence experienced

Participants were asked what types of violence they, or a woman or women they know from their faith/cultural community, were likely to experience on any given day:

70%	64%	61%	44%
experienced emotional/mental violence	experienced racism	experienced verbal violence	experienced Islamophobia

38%	31%	26%	8%
experienced financial violence	experienced physical violence	experienced spiritual/religious violence	experienced sexual violence
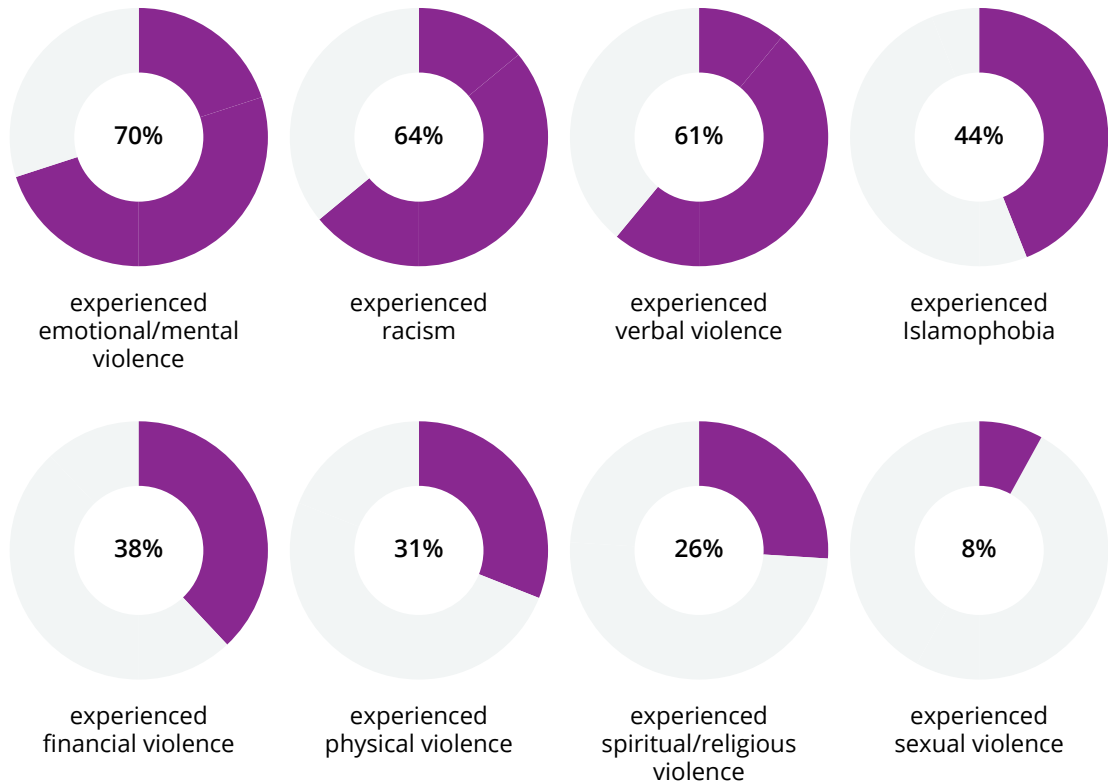
This research saw strong correlations between annual household income and the experience of a number of different types of violence. Specifically, participants who reported an annual household income at or below $40,000 per year were at greater risk themselves of experiencing verbal violence, emotional/mental violence, sexual violence, financial violence and spiritual/religious violence, or of knowing a woman in their faith/cultural community who has experienced these forms of violence. Participants with an annual household income equal to or less than $20,000 per year were three times more likely than their peers to experience physical violence themselves, or to know a woman or women in their faith/cultural community who experienced physical violence.
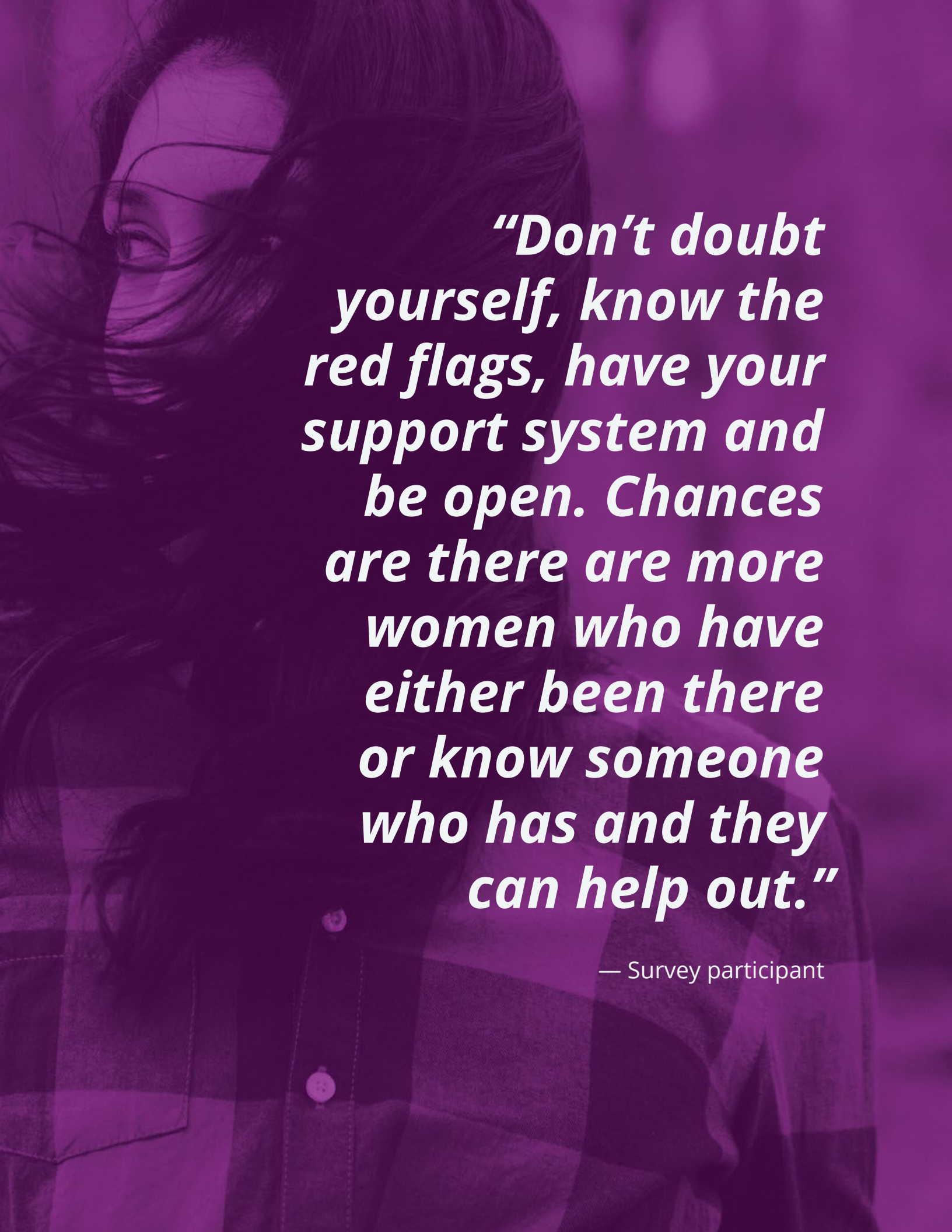
Figure 4: Correlations between annual household income and type of violence

The percentage of participants with an annual household income equal to or less than $40,000 per year who have themselves experienced these types of violence or know a woman or women in their faith/cultural community who has/have.

56%	53%	53%	49%
spiritual/mental violence	emotional/mental violence	financial violence	verbal violence
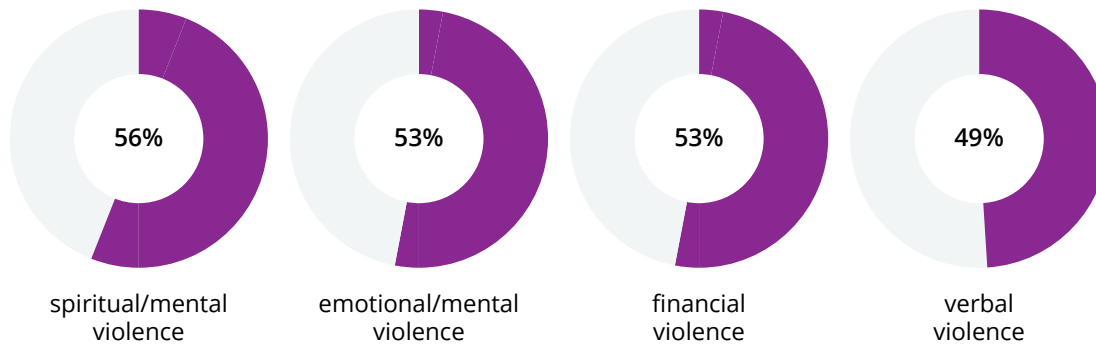
Violence was more prevalent for Arab and South Asian women; however, they also made up the majority of participants in this study. South Asian women were more likely to experience themselves or know a woman or women in their faith/cultural community who has/have experienced physical violence (42%), verbal violence (41%), and financial violence (45%). Arab women reported slightly lower levels of violence overall, but were more likely to experience financial violence (41%) and spiritual violence (38%) themselves or know a woman or women in their faith/cultural community who has/have experienced it.

The majority of participants were between the ages of 30–49 (56%). Among that age group, 61% had experienced emotional/mental violence, 60% experienced verbal violence, 59% experienced racism, 56% had experienced spiritual/religious violence, 52% had experienced physical violence, 28% had experienced Islamophobia, and/or knew a woman or women in their faith/cultural community who has/have experienced these types of violence. With regards to financial violence, 52% of those 40–49 had experienced it, or knew a woman or women in their faith/cultural community who has/have experience of it.

"Don't doubt yourself, know the red flags, have your support system and be open. Chances are there are more women who have either been there or know someone who has and they can help out."

— Survey participant

Figure 5: Participant safety advice

Participants were asked to share some advice that they would give a woman in their faith/cultural community experiencing gender-based violence.

"Start from somewhere."

"Patience and ignore situation"

"Head to mosque, get them to touch base with local Muslim organizations."

"Search for ways to leave."

"I will advise her to contact CMW, mosque, and police."

"Contact local women's support services"

"Seek help. Talk to people who you trust about your situation."

"I would advise them to go to the police and seek help, or seek help from a friend at any of the organizations"

"I will advise her to contact any organizations that support women who lives in abusive situation."

"Seek help from the different resources in the community and speak up."

"Try to speak up, and raise your voice to avoid affecting your mental health"

"Trust yourself."

"I will give her the contact of Coalition of Muslim Women community support worker that speaks her language."

"Seek support in the community, utlize the resources available to you."

"Avoid going to places alone and avoid leaving kids alone, if any."

"Do not stay in that house. Look for job to find your own house— a safe one."

"Stay away from the abuser and leave the place immediately."

How are women dealing with the threat of violence?

Safety advice

Participants had much to say when asked what advice they would give to someone in their faith/cultural community who was experiencing gender-based violence. Advice included seeking help from informal and formal supports, trusting in themselves, and finding safe ways to exit the situation. One participant shared:

> *"Don't be afraid to reach out to the police or any support agencies. Ask for help from friends and families. Safety is of utmost importance today."*
>
> — Survey participant

Figure 5: Participant Safety Advice

Participants were asked to share some advice that they would give a woman in their faith/cultural community experiencing gender-based violence.

Support systems

When considering support systems, three themes or categories emerged in the research: informal supports, formal services, and the third was no support at all, with responses discouraging engagement with any form of support. Responses of the third category gave advice like 'waiting things out' and 'having patience and ignoring' the situation.

Trust, trusting yourself and trusting those you ask for help from remained central to the decision of which approach participant used. One participant wrote:

> ### *"Seek help. Talk to people who you trust about your situation."*
>
> — Survey participant

Unfortunately, trust wasn't implicit in either system of support, formal or informal. Each comes with strengths, challenges and with well thought out apprehensions from participants. There did not appear to be a clear system of support that participants could fully trust.

Participants, in their advice and in sharing their experiences, often referenced accessing supports in both formal and informal networks. The existence of both these networks does give a unique opportunity for racialized Muslim women to customize the support they feel they need in order to move forward from experiences of gender-based violence. However, both types elicited a significant fear of being judged or shunned by the community. A total of 44% of participants had this fear when it came to telling anyone about their experience with gender-based violence, whether it be an informal support or formal support service. This was a strong determinant of whether participants engaged in either system of support.

Of those who would access support, it is a mix of informal and formal supports that participants stated they use or would use to deal with the violence they experience. The top three supports identified were, friends/family/community members (46%), community-based organizations (38%), and emergency shelters (26%). However, you can see within the flip of these numbers that participants also often chose to keep their experiences of gender-based violence to themselves and not share or seek out help.

Informal support network

An informal support network is characterized by supports that are not part of a formal system where they have a paid job or recognized volunteer position providing support. A number of informal supports were referenced by participants in the research, including: peers, family members, friends, the mosque, religious leaders, cultural leaders, other Muslim women who have experienced violence as well as Muslim women who are community members but also champions of support, referred to in survey responses by name.

This research explored how informal support networks were utilized by participants. The majority of participants in this study (51%) had their own experience staying with a family member/friend or community member to escape violence or they knew a woman or women in their faith/cultural communities who had. When it comes to disclosures of violence and safety concerns, it's more likely for participants to disclose violence to people in their informal support network than formal. A total of 38% of participants shared experiences of violence with friends/family/community members, 54% specifically talked to friends about their safety concerns, 46% talked to other Muslim women who had experienced violence, 44% talked to family members and 16% talked to faith/religious/cultural leaders.

The statistics changed a bit when it came to who actively helped participants in their experience of gender-based violence or the violence experienced by a woman or women they know in their faith/cultural community. Participants were overall less likely to utilize informal supports in these situations, but still 46% stayed with a friend/family or community member to get away from violence, another 18% received support from the local mosque or religious/faith centre and 10% stayed with a religious or cultural leader from the community.

One of the strengths of this informal support network is when participants found champions in the community to support them. One participant relayed the information for the woman who had helped her and some others with their experiences with violence:

> *"I know a women in my community who helped me a lot her name is X, she is very helpful."*
>
> — Survey participant

"No need to stay in an abusive relationship, it's better late than never. There are so many women-led organizations helping women. Seek their help, stay at those temporary homes, gather yourself and get up strong. You've got this!"

— Survey participant

Overall, participants were more likely to disclose and ask for help from informal supports. Particularly powerful, is the opportunity for racialized Muslim women to talk with their peers about their experiences of violence and where they could get help. Also interesting to note is that when it came to receiving housing/shelter support when fleeing violence more participants knew of someone with experience staying in the local mosque than in an emergency or women's shelter.

A major challenge with the informal support network was that, for all those wanting to use it to get help, there were those who did not see this as a viable or safe option. Specifically, 46% of participants have decided themselves or know someone who has decided not to share an experience of violence with their friends, family or community members. The reasons for this are varied but likely relate to the fact that 41% of participants were scared of being judged/shunned by the community if confidentiality was broken while using informal supports. Many participants brought up judging and shaming as the reason why they do or do not reach out for help or accept help from their community. We asked participants what advice they would give to another woman from their faith/cultural community. The answers brought out some of the challenges with an informal system as well as advice from those who didn't find comfort in informal supports. One participant suggested:

> ## *"Avoid meeting family and friends that have connection with abuser...avoid telling people where you are currently located or doing."*
> — Survey participant

Participants also talked about gossip, and often gossip led to a greater probability of being judged/shunned. Avoiding that experience was very important to participants. One participant echoed this:

> ## *"... avoid shunning by fellows"*
> — Survey participant

Lastly, participants were asked about their level of satisfaction with the experience of, or that of a woman or women from their faith/cultural community, staying at the mosque for shelter while escaping violence. The results showed a 35% satisfaction rate, and 41% were neutral.

Formal support network

A formal support network is characterized by support from agencies and organizations that have a mandate and receive formal funding to provide support through services and programming. Formal supports identified by participants included women's organizations, domestic violence organizations, lawyers, shelters, government organizations, therapists/counsellors, police, and community-based social service organizations, of which Coalition of Muslim Women of KW was the primary named.

Among participants, formal support services are largely underutilized. Only 18% of participants talked about using an emergency or women's shelter and 28% said they were avoiding co-ed shelter spaces because of safety and religious concerns. Overall, 82% of those who were avoiding co-ed spaces, did not speak English. Another 31% stated they avoid using shelter services due to fear of racism or discrimination and isolation due to their racial and religious identities.

Also along the continuum of the formal support network was social programs. The research found that only 15% of participants used one or more social programs or services related to the violence they have experienced. On the topic of services, participants who spoke English made up 75% of those avoiding male-dominated spaces (mosques, police stations, co-ed shelters, etc.)

The data also found that South Asian participants were more likely to utilize shelter services than Arab participants, who were more likely to use one or more social programs or services (aside from shelters). In addition, participants who were married made up for 78% of those using one or more social programs or services and made up the majority of those who would stay with a family member/friend/community member to be safe.

When it came to who participants, or women in their faith/cultural community, felt comfortable talking to about their safety concerns, community-based social service organizations were the most likely formal service engaged (34% of participants). Also identified were counsellors/therapists (25%) and lawyers/legal services (16%). Overall, participants were less likely to talk to formal supports about violence (compared to informal supports), but among all formal supports, it was community-based social services that showed the strongest likelihood of being accessed to disclose violence and seek help.

Participants were also asked who they, or women in their faith/cultural community, would feel comfortable going to for help in a situation of gender-based violence. A total of 38% of participants said community-based social service organizations helped them or a woman or women in their cultural community that they know, trailing the informal support of friends and family by just 6%. Second to that, 26% used emergency homeless or women's shelters and 25% got support from emergency services like police, paramedics, fire department, etc.

The formal support network comes with challenges, even with formal processes and mandates to support women, they aren't always utilized by participants, and if they are, it isn't always an ideal experience for the participants who accessed them. When talking about not reporting violence to police, law enforcement, or social service agencies, 54% stated that they had experienced violence and not reported it. Among the top reasons (46% of participants) why they did not report was because they were in fear of being judged/shunned by the community, and the fear of being discriminated against (33%). Further, for those who utilized shelter, or knew of a woman or women in their faith/cultural community who had, there was a 29% satisfaction rate, 40% neutral rate, and 14% dissatisfaction rate on the experience.

Advice given by participants to women experiencing violence in their faith/cultural community was more likely to suggest getting help from formal services. However, very few organizations were actually explicitly named. Typically, participants suggested general services, for example 'services that support women.' One could infer from this that there is still a lack of education around formal support services and processes in Waterloo Region as it relates to gender-based violence and the formal supports available to individuals experiencing violence.

That said, Coalition of Muslim Women of KW and the police were often referenced by participants as people to go to for help. Some of the participants' advice around accessing formal supports included:

> ### *"If she feels unsafe, I will advise her to contact any organizations that support women who live in an abusive situation."*
>
> — Survey participant

> ### *"I will give her the contact of a Coalition of Muslim Women community support worker that speaks her language."*
>
> — Survey participant

Disengaged from systems of support

We saw a range of experiences and advice given by participants around informal and formal support systems that helped them, or women they know in their faith/cultural community, there was still an unavoidable trend that emerged which centered on participants recommending and themselves avoiding both systems of support (formal and informal). This was undoubtedly fueled by the risk and fear of being shunned or judged for asking for help in either system of support. One participant shared:

> ***"Stay there [in the home] until you find some better options"***
>
> — Survey participant

Another suggested:

> ***"Patience and ignore the situation"***
>
> — Survey participant

We saw this preference for disengaging from any form of supports come out in the statistics as well, with 15% of participants not seeking support for the violence they experienced, and another 7% were unsure of who could help. Another element fueling this disengagement is a lack of understanding of formal supports and services. When it came to disclosures, 46% did not report experiences of violence to family/friends/community leaders and 54% did not report experiences of violence to police, law enforcement and/or social service agencies. In both these scenarios, the main reason for not reporting was fear of being judged or shunned. One participant suggested going to a different city as a way to avoid this judgement:

> ***"...move to another city and look for a women's shelter."***
>
> — Survey participant

There was definite stigma and concern about being homeless that played into the disengagement from formal and informal supports. A total of 36% of participants stated they have or would stay in a violent situation rather than being homeless. When the survey asked participants about sheltering services, 42% selected "non-applicable" to a question asking about their satisfaction with services, meaning they themselves neither accessed a shelter nor knew of a woman in their faith/cultural community who had. In the next question, 25% of participants selected 'non-applicable' to the same satisfaction question about staying in their mosque or faith centre. This again points to women not reaching out for or accessing support at all.
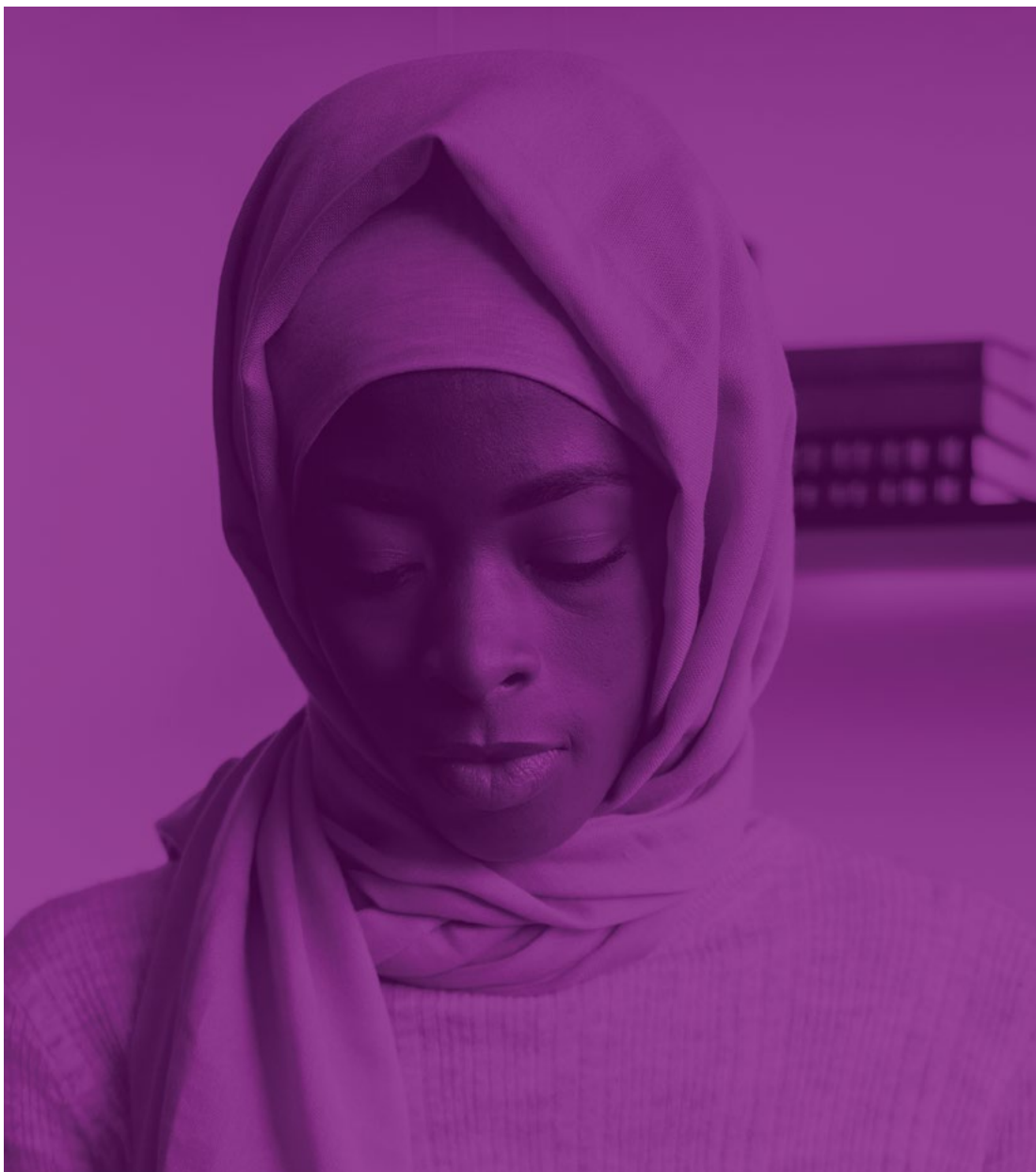
Experience with the justice system

Police use

Police were quickly and frequently referenced as a support to utilize in experiences of gender-based violence, particularly in the advice that participants would give to other women in their faith/cultural communities who are experiencing violence. One participant wrote:

> *"Go to police, they will guide. Report abuse ASAP."*
>
> — Survey participant

However, when we break down the statistics, it seems participants may not always be following their own advice, as 54% of participants admitted to having experienced violence but did not disclose it to police and only 11% felt comfortable talking to police officers about their safety concerns.

Figure 6: Police Reporting

Have you ever decided not to report an experience of violence to the police?

Percentage	Response
54%	Yes (I have experienced violence and not reported it)
23%	No (I report the experiences of violence I have)
12%	Decline to answer
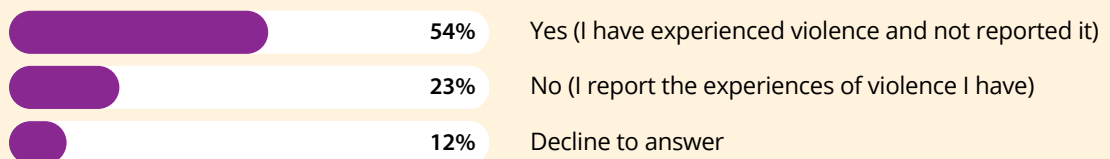
Further analysis revealed that 38% have avoided the police or decided not to report a situation of violence because it felt unsafe. South Asian participants were almost four times as likely to not report gender-based violence to police than they were to report it. Arab participants were twice as likely to not report gender-based violence to police than to report it. Further, those who were married make up for 26% of those who have not reported violence to police and only 17% of those who said they would report violence they experienced to the police.

Participants had legitimate reasons for not accessing police, including being concerned for the repercussions of punitive measures like prison. One participant shared:

> ## *"I avoid the police because I'm scared if the abuser will face prison or financial penalty"*
> — Survey participant

Participants shared a number of other reasons for not accessing police to report violence, largely stemming from being concerned about the outcomes of reporting. Participants avoided accessing the police in situations of violence over fear of losing their children (26%), fears of losing their housing (25%), fear of being separated from family (33%), and fear of being discriminated against (33%). Further, 46% avoided utilizing the police for fear of being judged/shunned by the community and 41% stated they had 'other' reasons why they didn't access the service.

The concern of losing their children should they access police to report an experience of violence was particularly felt among participants who were married and those who spoke English, making up 62% of the overall number of those participants with this concern. Those who have an annual household income of $20,000 or less, as well as those who were divorced, shared concern about being separated from their family if they accessed police services, as did married women in this income bracket.

When it comes to a fear of losing housing, married participants again had this concern as well as South Asian participants, representing 60% of participants with this concern.

The number one unifying fear among participants (46%) was of being judged or shunned by their community for accessing police services to report violence. Among Arab and South Asian women, as well as those who do not speak English and those who are between the ages of 30-39, there was a collective concern of judging or being shunned.

Moving forward in this work

Restorative justice

We've learned from participants' responses that there are barriers in our systems when it comes to engaging in police services, most of which come from a fear of the outcomes of reporting. Also, punitive measures are not necessarily what participants considered a desirable solution or outcome. One participant wrote:

> *"I don't want to be blamed if the police charge the father of my children and send him to jail, I lived long life with him, if I was the reason for sending him to jail I will be cursed by my community."*
>
> — Survey participant

Participants made decisions about reporting and using police services that sometimes left justice undone. One participant wrote:

> *"I reported sexual abuse of my daughter by my husband. I never reported mine."*
>
> — Survey participant

And still some participants looked to wanting a different way of engaging their abuser to stop the violence. One participant talked about a contractual agreement:

> **"I prefer that there is a way that the abuser sign a paper to not disturb me like from police or social worker. Or receive a call or in person warning to sign it."**
>
> — Survey participant

Participants were asked about restorative justice as an opportunity to address their justice needs. Due to existing collaborative restorative justice programming between Community Justice Initiatives of Waterloo Region and the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW, there was a baseline understanding of restorative justice among a number of participants. Participants were given scenarios to assess whether they felt restorative justice might be a way of responding to and preventing situations of gender-based violence. This section of the survey was optional for participants to complete.

Among the most likely scenarios where restorative justice could be used was in situations where they were the violent person towards someone else (84% answered maybe or yes), situations where they experienced racism/Islamophobia or physical violence in response to their skin tone, culture, or religious identity (72% said maybe or yes). Further, there was support to use this method in situations where someone physically and/or verbally attacked them or someone they knew (73% stated maybe or yes). Further, participants felt that this approach could be useful in situations where they or someone else they knew experienced violence based on gender presentation or identity (71% of participants said maybe or yes).

There was more divide among participants when it came to using restorative justice in situations like big fights or feuds with friends, family or others (with just 62% saying maybe or yes), as well as in situations where someone controlled or manipulated them (with 64% saying maybe or yes and 36% stating no). Participants also seemed less likely to use restorative justice in situations where someone used religion as a way to control and shame them (with 66% saying maybe or yes but 34% stating no). Lastly, the least likely situation where participants would utilize restorative justice was in situations where they were sexually assaulted (with 57% of participants saying yes or maybe and 43% saying no).

Systemic changes needed

When it comes to systems change needed, there were three general areas that emerged from this research that were supported by participants' survey responses. These areas are, a. Development of more services, b. Updating current services to be culturally responsive, and c. Community education and social change.

When it came to additional services needed in the community, participants recommended the following:

Develop housing for racialized women

Housing was a central reason participants stayed in violent situations. Losing housing was a fear they had in response to reporting and asking for help around violence. In our survey, 59% of participants want to see women's only housing created that caters to racialized groups.

Develop restorative justice opportunities

There were a number of barriers to asking police and law enforcement for help in experiences of gender-based violence. A total of 46% of participants wanted a different way to deal with violence rather than relying on police or court systems. This statistic, in combination with the interest in exploring restorative justice activities for certain circumstances of violence, indicates an opportunity for restorative justice programs to help fill justice and healing needs as well as aid in the stopping of violence. Another opportunity is to engage in transformative justice through working with the existing informal support network utilized by participants.

Enhance trauma support for racialized women

Participants referenced utilizing therapists and counsellors as supports helping them with their experience(s) of violence. More generally, local services providing trauma support around violence need to more universally consider the unique needs of racialized women. A total of 57% of participants asked specifically for more trauma support and programs in their faith/cultural communities.

Build peer support opportunities

It was clear in the research that for some participants, there is a preference for accessing an informal system of support to help address their safety concerns and respond to the violence they experience. Participants talked about their desire to connect with friends and families as well as women with lived experience for help. One participant even directly referenced a peer worker role through Coalition of Muslim Women of KW that they would send women to for help. The recommendation would be to build on peer support processes, programming and opportunities to support women who choose to be supported by their peers informally when it comes to gender-based violence.

When it came to strengthening existing services in the community, participants recommended the following:

Strengthening existing informal support networks

In knowing that participants chose and were able to use informal support networks to receive the support they needed in situations of gender-based violence, we must acknowledge this positive role played by the community and look for ways to leverage informal support and build its potential. Further, it would be valuable to help informal support networks address the challenges that can arise in this model, such as inconsistent opportunities for support, gossip, judging, and shunning.

Programming needs to be gender and culturally responsive

Programs that were not created with a culturally responsive lens run the risk of causing further harm to racialized women. As an example of one change that would help mitigate this problem, 53% of participants wanted to see staff at social service organizations that speak their languages or are from their faith/cultural background. Participants also wanted to see the creation of spaces exclusively for women (46%), this aids in trust building. A great example of this work is in the services Coalition of Muslim Women of KW have built. Programming that is being adapted, created or edited should engage racialized Muslim women and gender-diverse Muslim folks in its consultation and planning process. Lastly, if organizations adopt these approaches, there is opportunity for women to experience less risk of judging or shaming for using services and/or services can be made with responding to this barrier in mind. Further, this speaks to participants' need for specialized gender-based violence services (domestic violence and sexual assault support) to be more accessible and rooted in the experiences of racialized women.

Strengthen shelter options

At various points in this report, barriers to accessing shelter emerged and, overall, the level of satisfaction with a shelter experience for those who did utilize it was low. Emergency and women's shelters need to work to provide easier access, be language responsive, be culturally attuned and intentional. Shelters should build on the experiences of those racialized women who have used their services, building on positive experiences and addressing those things that contributed to negative experiences or apathy. There is also opportunity for shelters to connect with informal supports in an outreach way to create more opportunities for services for those choosing not to stay in shelter. This can include connections with local mosques and cultural centres to strengthen their approach to service for women choosing their support in situations of violence.

Lastly, women's shelters have a role to play in reducing the stigma of gender-based violence for racialized Muslim women and gender-diverse Muslim folks. They should be part of the conversation on destigmatizing the experience of gender-based violence.

The last area of systems change needed is around community education and social change:

Social change around judging and shunning

For participants, the largest barrier to accessing formal or informal services, or even disclosing to anyone the violence they were experiencing, was a fear of being shunned or judged. This led to reinforced attitudes that gender-based violence is okay and as a victim to 'look past it' or 'wait it out.' It also led to the really alarming trend of people disengaging from both formal and informal systems of support, leaving them alone and in violent situations that could escalate and lead to imminent harm. To help combat some of this prejudice around gender-based violence, it is important to engage in destigmatizing and normalizing social change work in the community that can create a new narrative that is more inclusive of women experiencing violence and those seeking support.

Community education on formal services

This research revealed that many participants were aware of the general concept of services that could be offered to support women experiencing gender-based violence, but most lacked the knowledge to name these organizations directly. We also saw a number of folks refer to processes for support that reflected services offered in other countries or cities, which were not present in our community. We also know that community-based social service organizations were identified as the entry way to support for many participants seeking help in the formal support system. More community education is needed around what services are available to women experiencing violence and how they are responsive to the needs of racialized Muslim women and gender-diverse Muslims. Further, mainstream organizations that purport to support all women in the community need to intentionally include racialized women and their needs in their communications, marketing, education and outreach activities. All of these actions again will support the community in moving from stigmatizing gender-based violence to being responsive to it.

Our commitment

Our commitment to the racialized Muslim women who shared their life experiences and vulnerability with us throughout this research is that it will not be in vain. We are dedicated to weaving together the different branches of community to create solutions that prioritize the wellbeing of women, to develop stronger systems that address safety and justice and help women who have experienced gender-based violence move forward from their experiences. This work must always have roots in their shared experience.

It's with optimism that we introduce Project Willow, a community building project dedicated to supporting systemic change to support women experiencing housing vulnerability or homelessness due to, or in addition to, gender-based violence. Together, the Coalition of Muslim Women of KW, YW Kitchener-Waterloo, and Community Justice Initiatives of Waterloo Region will be working with community stakeholders to create a five-year community safety and justice plan that will respond directly to the shared experience and needs identified through our research, this report included. We welcome the community to follow this work and get involved. Now is the time.

Project Willow advocates for systems change
that enhances the safety of women experiencing
homelessness from gender-based violence,
while also exploring ways of using non-punitive
measures to achieve justice and healing. This
project is rooted in, and guided by, the voices
of those with living experience.

For more information visit:
feministshift.ca/project-willow

Feminist Shift

Coalition of Muslim Women
Kitchener-Waterloo

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