

**Amelia Bonow:**

Welcome to Abortion Academy, a rescheduled abortion academy. So if you made it, thanks for following our beautiful guests to a couple weeks later. My name is Amelia Bonow and I use she/her pronouns. I'm the executive director of Shout Your Abortion, which is a nationwide organization working to normalize abortion and elevate paths to access regardless of legality.

We make resources, campaigns, and media intended to arm existing activists, create new ones, and foster collective participation in abortion access all over the country. Abortion Academy is a monthly webinar series where one of our brilliant colleagues takes a deeper dive into their area of expertise and these sessions are for anyone who's looking to deepen their knowledge, connect dots between issues happening at the regional, national, and international levels, or to just get some fresh ideas to take back into their communities.

We also have a relatively new study abroad series that is happening interspersed with our abortion academies where we pair a US activist with someone who's working on abortion access internationally because we do very much see ourselves as part of a global movement for abortion access. Global solidarity is incredibly important to us. We are fueled by these relationships and we are really excited about sharing the insight that we gather from our brilliant international friends with folks here in the US.

Audience members are going to be off camera and muted for security reasons throughout the session, but you'll be able to ask questions in the chat throughout the session. Sahar is going to be talking to us for about half an hour and then I will pop back up for a Q&A and we also have a live Spanish translation available. So if you'd like to listen in Spanish, you can go down to the bar at the bottom of your Zoom screen, click the globe and select the language that you would like to listen in.

So I am so excited to be speaking today with Sahar Pirzada from HEART to Grow. HEART works to promote sexual health, uproot gendered violence, and advance reproductive justice by establishing choice and access for the most impacted Muslims.

We know that Muslim bodies are already politicized and surveilled by the state, and so it's not surprising that Muslim abortion seekers navigate very specific and unique barriers to finding safe, compassionate, non-judgmental, culturally competent care. And that's why it's so beautiful and critical that HEART does this work so specifically, not just securing care, but decolonizing and destigmatizing abortion care for Muslims.

Sahar Pirzada is a Pakistani-American Muslim woman who grew up in the Bay Area of California and currently lives on Tongva land in Los Angeles with her family. Sahar is the director of Movement Building for HEART where she explores the intersections of gendered Islamophobia, reproductive justice and abolition. And Sahar's work with HEART has been

featured in Truthout, Teen Vogue, NowThis, NPR, and at the place where I first met Sahar, which was the People's Choice Awards in 2022, which we will talk about in the Q&A.

So with that, I'm going to hand it over to Sahar and also Lena who's going to be running the slides for us also with HEART. So take it away, Sahar.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Thank you, Amelia. And hello everyone. I'm so excited to be here. Such an honor. I'm such a fan of Shout Your Abortion and literally every single person that works at the organization. I have nothing but praise and good vibes and amazing things to say. So it's such an honor to be here.

Again, my name is Sahar Pirzada. I use she/her pronouns. I am the director of Movement Building at HEART and I'm joined by Lena Abbott who is our newly hired community organizer with HEART and she's going to be supporting me with a slideshare.

Today, we're basically going to be focusing on HEART's work when it comes to abortion and abortion access and the work we've done specifically around promoting a culture shift within Muslim communities to understand abortion. And so let's get right into it.

A little bit about the organization that I work at and for. I've been with the org for over a decade and we've been in existence for almost 16 years now. But as was mentioned, we work to promote sexual health, uproot gendered violence, and advance reproductive justice. We envision a world where all Muslims are safe and exercise self-determination over their reproductive lives in the communities they live, work, and pray in.

We're obsessed with acronyms at HEART. And so HEART itself is actually an acronym and it stands for Health, Education, Advocacy, Research and Training. And so we work towards this mission and this vision by using those various different tools. And so my work around Movement Building fits across the board, but more so within the advocacy and systems change advocacy work.

And you see in the middle there, that's my daughter, Safiya and myself. For us, it's really also building the world we want to see for our families, current and future.

A little bit about me beyond what was shared. I live in Los Angeles. I grew up in the Bay Area. I went to UC Berkeley for my undergrad. Go Bears, if anybody else is a Cal Bear on here. I also moved to Singapore for about three years right after graduating and worked at a gender advocacy organization out there. And it was the most amazing experience ever because I was taken out of this US-centric bubble and realized that there's ways of being, there's ways of learning, there's ways of doing activism outside of maybe what we have here in the US on Turtle Island.

Moved back in 2015 to the US and settled down in Los Angeles. My husband is a filmmaker and so needed to be in proximity to the industry, but I was really fortunate enough to get a job working with the youth in the Muslim community in the greater Los Angeles area. And at the same time, I was volunteering for HEART. We had no money then, it was volunteer based. And we got our first grant and I remember I got paid maybe \$100 to do a workshop and it was such a big deal. And now, we are an amazing team of eight people that are across the US.

I'm based in Los Angeles, but we have team members in D.C., New York, Chicago, Tennessee, the Bay. So it's really beautiful to see how much this work has grown. And that's also because with regards to the needs, the needs have grown and the needs have maybe always been there, but they've just become more visible in the past few years, especially.

Being from Southern California and having roots here now, this is home. And so just wanted to take a moment to acknowledge it's been a really, really hard week for my community. There was a horrific school shooting that happened in San Diego at the masjid there and just hopped off a call, Lena and I with a bunch of other community members and got an eyewitness from somebody that is an activist in San Diego and just a reminder of we keep each other safe.

We've always been the ones to keep each other safe. And the state and the cops and elected officials are partially responsible for the kinds of violences that we experience on our bodies given how Muslim bodies in particular are politicized in this country. So just honoring the lives that were lost, the three Muslim men that put their lives on the line to defend our community and just a reminder of how precious community really is in these moments where we can only build solidarity with each other and protect each other.

Yeah. So just taking a moment to sit with that. But again, this is what guides me to do the work that I do and why I do it is really grounded in community and it comes ... We're guided by the lived experiences of folks in our community with how we do our work. So I am really humbled to share a small part of what that work looks like with regards to bodily autonomy and abortion access and reproductive justice.

Back in 2024, we launched a campaign, which is called RAHIM. And it stands ... So rahim, the word, is an Arabic word and it actually means womb. And the letters within that word are the same letters that are the root of the word rahma, which means compassion. And for us, it was really about embodying compassion in all matters of the womb and beyond, knowing that reproductive justice and our reproductive and sexual lives go and extend way beyond just that.

But we centered on RAHIM as our acronym, which stands for Reproductive Agency Honoring Impacted Muslims. So again, really just coming back to we do this work for and with and by Muslims in our community. Our team is like eight people. We're all directly impacted Muslims.

So a lot of it is responsive to what our personal needs have been over the years and what we felt like we have needed and we haven't received, whether it's structurally at a community level or interpersonally.

So let's jump into it. With this campaign that we launched back in 2024, we were really trying to position HEART as this sibling that you can trust within the community. If you're seeking any sort of advice, services, information, we wanted to be the folks that people could go to when they needed that. And judgment-free zone for us, we see this as a deeply religious responsibility to be present and to take care of each other.

And so again, it's also rooted in this idea of abolition. We know that the state doesn't give a shit about us and we know that there are very few institutions that also center us. And so we have to center ourselves and be present and be available for each other. And so how does HEART fit into that ecosystem is really thinking about the needs that folks have when it comes to their sexual and reproductive lives and how we want to be positioned as the folks people can call within the community when and if they need anything at all.

And so the campaign itself offered a few different things and addressed a few different barriers as well. So we looked deeply into the faith itself. Islam as a religion is so diverse and it's not a monolith. There's many different ways of being Muslim. There's many different ways of understanding the faith. And so we looked at the variety of opinions that exist about various different sexual and reproductive healthcare topics and tried to offer that information for folks, for those that it's important for them to know before making a decision.

General medical information, resources that we build. We also trained and offer chaplaincy services. So for folks that are maybe going through various instances and their spiritual health is being impacted or their emotional health is being impacted. We have trauma-informed chaplains that we also have offered to be made available in the community. We have a referral network as well of doulas, birth workers, like medical professionals that specialize in various different things, therapists, lawyers, because unfortunately that's a reality too.

I'm forgetting some of the other folks that are in our referral network, but generally speaking, it's supposed to be pretty comprehensive. And so as you're going through your lived experience of having a sexual and reproductive life, if you needed to get in touch with somebody to support you along that journey, we're trying to build that out within this referral network. And then, I think also just partnering with abortion funds, other reproductive justice organizations, clinics that we trust with regards to their politics and with regards to making and ensuring that any kind of experience of anti-Muslim racism that folks might have to deal with is at a minimal with the folks that we're referring them to.

And let me go to the next one. Okay. So for us as we were doing our work, there were many different stages to how we built RAHIM. We talked to doctors and doulas and got an idea of

what are the things that people face with regards to their sexual and reproductive wellbeing. And it was like every other community, it's like literally everything. But that some of the things that were coming up where people wanted to know what does Islam say or what are the Islamic opinions about X, Y, Z, whether it's like IVF or abortion or using milk from a breast milk bank, what are the Islamic legalities with regards to accessing these different things?

And so we have a beautiful group of Muslim feminist scholars that we did deep dive interviews with on a range of topics. And just as we expected, when we spoke to each of these scholars, they all give us different opinions about things. They're like, "Oh, well, I would say this is permissible for this reason, and that's actually maybe not the most ethical approach." And, "Forget about the laws, just go to the spirit." It was amazing. And it reaffirmed for us that there's no one way of being Muslim. You can approach things from different standpoints. And for us, it was more about, okay, we're going to offer this information and ultimately support people with whatever decision they want to make. What do they need access to in order to act on that decision?

But in general, when it came to abortion, I feel like there was a consensus that this is something that is supported within the Muslim community. And so there was a survey that was done by another organization called ISPU, the Institute of ... Islamic ... Actually, I don't know what it stands for. We'll see it in the next slide, but they did a survey and they asked questions about different political issues. So one of them ... Sorry, Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, ISPU, and this was specifically for the American Muslim population and this was conducted in 2022.

There we go. So going back to the last chart, there was a question that was asked about should abortion be allowed in Islam under any circumstance or should abortion be not allowed in Islam under any circumstance? And so overwhelming majority of folks disagreed with this. They were like, no, basically it should be allowed. And then, if you go to the next slide, views on abortion amongst Muslims. So almost 60% of those that were surveyed believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

So this idea that abortion is not accepted, I think there's maybe two layers to this. There's within faith communities and then more specifically within Muslims. So within the Muslim community, it's actually majority of folks believe that it should be legal. And then if you go ... Keep going. We put together a lot of resources in our project that talks specifically about abortion and the Islamic rulings that exist around it and why those Islamic rulings are the way they are. And again, at the end of the day, we support everyone with whatever decision they want to make, but recognizing that for some Muslims, it is important to know and take this into consideration when they are making decisions.

And so, one of the things is this idea of there's a point during the pregnancy at which the soul enters the fetus and there's different schools of thought within our Islamic tradition and the

different schools of thought have different opinions about when that point is. And so majority of them believe it happens at around 120 days. So that takes you to second trimester kind of vibes. But at the same time, there could be other factors that would weigh heavier on whether or not an abortion is Islamically permissible or deemed acceptable.

So if there's a threat of harm or endangerment to the pregnant person, if there's a presence of fetal anomalies that get discovered during the pregnancy and then in general, it's like centering the person that's carrying the pregnancy and they could have a variety of different reasons for why they might want to terminate or have an abortion. And so this was one of the resources that we put together that we as an organization still recognize that the law is oftentimes created, these rulings and the laws within these different schools of thought are oftentimes created by cis hetero men who may never have carried a pregnancy and maybe don't have lived experience themselves. So there's only so much that they can take into consideration and there's limitations to it. So for us, it's always about centering the directly impacted, centering the folks that are making these decisions themselves and honoring that their lived experience and their lived realities way more than whatever laws are.

I have the shirt that Shout Your Abortion made that says laws aren't real. And that's my favorite shirt to wear everywhere every day. I wore it just this past weekend and I take that into consideration even with regards to Islamic law because I feel like there's the divine word of God and then there's the interpretation of that, that guides are legal rulings. And I take the divine nature of God's word very seriously, but the laws that are man-made, I sometimes feel like there might be missing pieces.

So we have this amazing book that I would highly recommend folks get, especially if you're Muslim and exploring sex and healthy relationships. It's called *The Sex Talk*. And in there, this is just an excerpt that I pulled from the book itself, but it talks about the history of abortion and how it was practiced in Muslim societies. And historically, it's always been a decision that's between the pregnant person themselves and then their provider. They consult their provider, maybe it's their birth worker or doula or doctor. But in terms of the interference of the state or interference of male authority or religious authority, that's been actually very minimal historically.

So I think there's something to be said about going back to our tradition and thinking about like, okay, where did this turn take where all of a sudden people feel like they have a right to the decisions that are being made? Sure, give your input. But in terms of having control over it, whether it's from the state or religious scholarship or any other entity, there isn't really a basis for that Islamically.

And then if we go next, where did this idea even come from, right? That Islam is this super restrictive faith that is perhaps anti-abortion or anti-feminist. I mean, I think a part of it is white Christian nationalism and supremacy that has seeped into parts of the Muslim community, but also whose voices get uplifted when it comes to these topics. These are just some excerpts that

we got of around the time Roe v. Wade was being overturned, even folks within liberal Dem spaces were being Islamophobic. They were talking about, "Oh, what are you trying to implement Islamic Sharia, blah, blah, blah."

And I'm like, "Actually, if you were to implement Islamic Sharia, it'd be a lot more nuanced and it would be a lot more permissive and it would actually center the person that is pregnant." But that take is very much drowned in the noise and because there's been a long history of seeing Islam as a faith and Muslims as a community as being, again, controlling and violent and anti-feminist and that seeping into the larger public in this country.

And even, unfortunately, going back to the shooting that happened in San Diego earlier this week, it's like they were white supremacists. There were white Christian nationalist supremacist boys who were 17 and I think 19 who were like, they had been fed the narratives about who Muslims are and how they're a threat to this country, how they're a threat to Christian ideals, whatever it might be, and targeted the Muslim community because of the narratives they've been fed by the government, by elected officials, by the media, by the fact that there's literally multiple genocides happening of Muslim populations globally, whether it's in Gaza or Sudan or what's happening in Iran, it's like Muslim bodies are disposable. And so just wanted to very much uplift that this doesn't ... When it comes to the narratives about abortion and Muslims, those narratives seep into that experience as well.

I remember when I had my abortion, I was worried about how it would be perceived by my larger community and I feel like it was almost like a sigh of relief and an embodiment of what I actually believe my faith to be because there was nothing but an outpouring of love and support. And it was just like, we're here for you. We're here for you with whatever you want to do, whatever decision you want to make. Whatever you need from us, we will show up and center you. And I'm like, wow, that's what my faith teaches and that's what I want embodied by everybody that is making a decision about whether or not to have an abortion, that the community centers the person and screws the laws, screws the policing that might happen and just offers an immense amount of care and access.

And so I mean, a lot of what RAHIM is and with regards to how we framed what we can offer the larger community for abortion access is based on my own experience. And that experience was based on how the Muslims in my life that were my family and my friends and my community showed up for me and that was guided by their own faith and understanding. So shout out to us.

Moving along. So, yeah. So again, you know these rulings on abortion are varied in Islam and it's very much depending on your situation or whatever. So then where does this idea that it's more restrictive come from? And we blame it on the state, but we also blame it on something we call gendered Islamophobia. So this term has been around for a lot longer than since 2019, but we use the definition that Darakshan Raja came up with, which is that gendered Islamophobia

consists of the ways the state utilizes gendered forms of violence to oppress, monitor, punish, maim, and control Muslim bodies.

So a lot of the anti-Muslim racism and the anti-Muslim hate that we experience that it's guided policies that have controlled our bodies and seen our bodies as disposable and that trickles down and is experienced in gendered ways as well. And so we have a few different layers to how gendered Islamophobia shows up. Sometimes when people try to police each other, even in the community, I'm like, "That's your internalized gender Islamophobia showing up or the communal gendered Islamophobia showing up."

You think that this is part of our tradition and our practice. Where did you learn this from? But we see this as a structural issue. The fact that parents and people that are in Gaza don't have access to sexual and reproductive healthcare at a very basic level and it's withheld from them and it's seen as acceptable that it's withheld from them is part of this.

Folks within ... There was a Planned Parenthood in Wisconsin where the chief of staff was an Islamophobic, anti-Muslim, anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab racist who posted multiple social media posts that made that stance very clear and she was the chief of staff of a Planned Parenthood. So imagine somebody from our community is trying to access services there to take care of their body, to support them in their acts of sexual and reproductive wellbeing, would they feel comfortable knowing that that person is employed there and not only employed, but given a position of leadership there?

So those are the layers that we're dealing with when it comes to how gendered Islamophobia shows up at a structural level, institutional level, and then also still trying to figure out how to support folks in that community to access the care that they need.

These are just some comments that might demonstrate what we mean when it comes to gendered Islamophobic tropes. And this is reminiscent of what we also see with regards to pinkwashing and with regards to queer liberation. We see this with regards to ecofeminism as well. There's a lot. There's a lot to unpack, but both within the community beyond within our movement spaces and then beyond institutionally and structurally with the state.

Moving on, I think I'm pretty much wrapped. This is just an overview of some of the resources we've been able to create. For us, we're inching along with regards to this culture shift within our community. We're inching along with regards to the narrative shift we want to see in the larger movement spaces as well as the communities that we serve around how, yeah, you can have an abortion and there's nothing wrong with it. And actually, we shouldn't have stigma when it comes to abortion because from historically how abortions took place in Islamic societies, there wasn't a stigma. And so where did the stigma come from, especially in a US context? We're trying to better understand as perhaps a symptom of colonization and white Christian nationalism or supremacy that's rubbed off on our Muslim communities.

I'll pause there and then happy to take questions or jump into a conversation, but I'm just really grateful to be able to share more about our work and how we support Muslims trying to access abortion in our communities. And for me, as somebody, as a Muslim who's had an abortion, it's also just so ... it means a lot to be able to share about this and to share about our experiences because they continue to be there, but they're not as visible. So thank you all, and thank you, Lena, for sharing slides.

**Amelia Bonow:**

Thank you, Sahar. Okay, everybody. You can drop your questions in the Q&A box and Sahar and I are going to chat. Lena, did you want to be in on the chat too or ... Yeah?

**Lena Abbott:**

Sure.

**Amelia Bonow:**

Okay. Thank you so much for talking to us about just this loving radical work. It just makes my heart feel good to listen and I'm just grateful for you spending time with us and also want to acknowledge just the incredible pain that exists in the community, especially this week, but constantly and especially over the last few years as we've seen this genocide in Gaza continue.

There was so much in your presentation where I was finding parallels to all sorts of frameworks that SYA feels ... There was a lot of stuff where it was like, "Oh, this is really similar." There's a parallel and also this is really specific and acknowledging the specificity is crucial and is not done in a lot of movement spaces, which are often, even if they are RJ spaces, they might be sort of ... And even if they are posed as a or framed as a reaction to Christian nationalism and stuff, it's still being shaped in reaction to Christianity, if that makes sense, as opposed to being something that is centered around understanding specific experiences and concerns of Muslim community.

And so I wanted to talk about stigma off the bat because I think that was a place where I heard a lot of similarity. And Sahar, I love that you used this data from the jump off that's like, this is how Muslim community really feels about abortion. And a huge similarity that I think I saw is this isn't as ... people aren't as against this as people think they are, and that misconception is part of what keeps people isolated in their experience, which I think was really reflective in what you said, Sahar, about your own experience.

So does that resonate?

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Yeah, totally. Because I feel like there's ... I mean, we talk about this a lot in HEART in general of whose voices are centered and whose voices are the loudest, but they might not be the most

representative. It's just the ones that are known. We call them the celebrities that maybe are not ... It's not always for good reasons, but they have the mic and oftentimes, it's because of patriarchy and privilege and how that functions within our own community and beyond.

So I did a fun activity where I just Googled abortion and Islam on YouTube and saw what popped up and most of the discussions were Muslim men who I'm like, "Have you got an abortion? I don't know." And then, even within that, it's racially which groups are also offered a mic to talk about their experiences and the barriers they face, where are they located geographically, what specific sect of Islam are they from? All of that stuff is flattened. And so that's something I think about. And that's with a lot of issues, whether it's abortion or queer liberation or you think about anti-Black racism within our communities. It's either like, "Oh, that's not an issue for us and therefore, we're just not going to talk about it" or it's like, "Oh, that doesn't relate. That's not relevant to our community, blah, blah, blah."

We work a lot on gender-based violence as well where it's like people are like, "Oh, that doesn't happen in Muslim communities." I'm like, "It absolutely happens in our communities." The statistics are not different for us, whereas the statistics around abortion and Muslim communities is 100% not different from the normal population. It's one in four. It's one in four.

And so what does that mean? That means you know someone who's had an abortion. You love someone that's had an abortion. And so whether or not it's visible to you, it's a reality and we have to destigmatize it so that people can get the support that they need. That part of the conversation is what we're trying to do with RAHIM is make it visible through storytelling, make it visible through just naming it.

The number of effing social media influencers from the Muslim community that talk about sexual health and will never say the word abortion. They will say miscarriage and termination or whatever, but they won't say abortion. And it's like, why? Why recreate that stigma when that's not our stigma to hold as Muslims? We don't need to have that stigma. It's not part of our tradition. If we look at Muslim societies dating back to the time of the prophet, peace be upon him, birthing people were having abortions and it wasn't stigmatized. So where did that stigmatization come in? I blame colonization?

**Amelia Bonow:**

Yeah. Well, I wanted to ask about the roots of stigma specifically, because I think that this is another thing where it's like stigma exists everywhere across demographic, faith, the world, history, and it also operates differently in every micro community. And you've talked a lot about gender-based violence and gender-based Islamophobia. And I guess I wonder as a person who is fairly ignorant in my understanding of the faith and of literally all faiths, how much do you think abortion stigma as it exists in Muslim community, is it in the same kind of way that it is in Catholicism or Christianity rooted to women shouldn't be having sex outside-

**Sahar Pirzada:**

It's not about the sex, I would say. I mean, yes and no. There is a stereotype that it's like, I don't know, 50 people-

**Amelia Bonow:**

Or if women have, I guess is the stereotype, if women are having sex, it should be procreative. Is it-

**Sahar Pirzada:**

No. No, no, no.

**Amelia Bonow:**

No.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

So that isn't as much of a thing. I think that there's a healthy relationship to sex and sexual pleasure within Muslim communities. So you don't just have sex to procreate.

**Amelia Bonow:**

That's some Catholic shit.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Yeah, you can, but you also support birth control being used and access to birth control is part of the teachings. But I think where it comes in is around this idea of the sanctity of life. And so the point of ensoulment therefore is so important for people. And I'll say even when I had my abortion, I found out at 12 weeks, we scheduled it for 14 weeks. Should it have been some scheduling conflict where it went beyond the 120 days, I feel like I might've held a little bit more hesitation and/or spiritual guilt or something because for me, I'm like, okay, most of the schools Islamically agree that abortion is permissible up to that 120-day mark. So if I clear that 120-day mark, then the point of ensoulment hasn't reached.

So I would say there's definitely a divide when it comes to that. When is that point of ensoulment? And if you were to get an abortion after the point of ensoulment, I feel like there would be more stigma around that-

**Amelia Bonow:**

That makes sense.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

... versus before that point of ensoulment, I feel like most people are like, okay, it's accepted Islamically. So there's that part of it, but people don't know about the rulings for the most part

because they've never had to grapple with these decisions in whatever, an actual way. Or sometimes decisions are made for them and they don't even realize.

I had some conversations with elders in the community where they were like, "I had an abortion and I did not realize I was having an abortion. The decision was made for me" because there was language barriers or because there was barriers when it comes to understanding their bodies or they were just told, "Take these pills." And then they were like, "What is happening?" So there's a little bit of that. And then there's also just like there is, and I've seen this. This is specific to the context of Pakistan. I don't know in other communities or countries if this is a thing, but premarital sex or sex outside of marriage, if it results in a pregnancy, then they're like abortions all the way through because-

**Amelia Bonow:**

Yeah. Abortions all around. Yeah.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

... the stigma around ... Right? Weigh the stigma. Is the stigma around sex outside of marriage and then carrying a pregnancy to term when you're not married is higher than the stigma of having an abortion? So pick your poison kind of thing and there's going to be structurally ... And then this idea of shame comes into play in that regard. What are people going to talk about more? What are people going to bring shame to your life or your community or your family more?

So there's that, but I don't think that is universal because the Muslim community is so diverse racially, religiously, with cultural experience. And even just within communities, it just varies. So I don't think that sense of what holds stigma is going to be universal.

**Amelia Bonow:**

Yeah, totally.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Even there's huge Black Muslim population and that's divided between immigrant Africans that have come here from Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, wherever it might be versus Black American Muslims that have been here for generations because of transatlantic slave trade. So even their experiences of what holds stigma and what are people going to talk about might be very, very different.

**Amelia Bonow:**

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And it makes me think of a lot of what you talked about. It made me think of person-centered or patient-centered care in a clinic and how much it's not about some kind of universal one-size-fits-all empowerment or this is what it should be like, but it's about listening to what a person's ... Trying to figure out what is important to you and what

are your values and then helping a person navigate a supported experience within that. And it feels like something that you're a national organization, obviously, but that feels like something that's so hard to do in a national way. And so I guess I wonder how do you approach that? I don't know if that question makes sense.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Yeah. I mean, I would say given that our community is so diverse, it still feels very small. It still feels very relational. You're two degrees of separation away from everybody else. And so people will find your number when they really need to get ahold of you. People will reach out in some way or another. You just have that one auntie in the community. You go to this person and it doesn't matter if they're actually your auntie, they're somebody's auntie and you trust that somebody, so therefore, you trust the auntie. So it's like that kind of vibe.

**Amelia Bonow:**

That literally, I just had a memory, Sahar. I don't know if I've ever shared this with you, but I was in Detroit a couple of years ago and I was talking to an abortion doula who was telling me about an experience that they were having with a Muslim abortion seeker in, I don't know, Dearborn or something. And I was like, oh, my friend Sahar works for this amazing Muslim RJ org. And they were like, "Oh yeah, I talked to Sahar."

So I was like, literally what you were talking about, but in another city. I was like, great, nevermind. Don't need to make that intro. Or I think that they had even said that you had talked to the abortion speaker, which is even better.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Yeah. And then our plan is working, right? That's what we want to hear. We're available to you regardless of what part of [inaudible 00:46:08].

**Amelia Bonow:**

The sibling that you need and love.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

The sibling you need. The sibling you trust. Yeah.

**Amelia Bonow:**

It's really beautiful. I guess that makes me think of ... I think of Muslim community as being very centered around families. And I guess I wonder if people having abortions ... I think that sometimes in ... definitely people who are coming from a Christian or Protestant or whatever background, there's some idea that abortion is antithetical to parenthood, that they feel messed with by when they're having an abortion.

And I guess I wonder how much you think that work needs to be done or do people see ... Because I think that part of what you said out the gate was that HEART is about helping people

build families, that you are positing abortion is part of the way that we do that. It's not really a question, I guess. It's more of a conservation, but ...

**Sahar Pirzada:**

No, no. This is such a great ... Yes, because I would say most of the Muslims we have supported through their abortions have been existing parents ...

**Amelia Bonow:**

Parents, yeah.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

... that are making that decision in service of being an existing-

**Amelia Bonow:**

Of their families, yeah.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

... parent to another child and/or realizing their own limitations with being able to care equitably for the families that they have. And some of them have communicated a sense of guilt of like, "Oh, there's others in the community who have been struggling for years to conceive and they can't and I've been blessed with this pregnancy, what do I do?" Blah, blah, blah. And it's just reaffirming and reassuring folks that, "Look, every person's situation is their own, right? No two persons' lived experiences are going to be the same."

And we do believe deeply in this idea of struggle or what gets ... Mainstream definition of it is jihad. There's the understanding of jihad as holy war, but there's also your personal jihad of the difficult decisions you might have to make in your lifetime. And do you feel like this decision is going to bring you closer to God or move you away from God and for what reasons? And is this a challenge or a struggle or a jihad that's been given to you by God?

It might not make sense and it doesn't have to make sense. It's not like a punishment. I mean, if we refer back to the stories of the prophets and we believe in many prophets, but every single prophet was given such immense struggles and it's not as a reason they've done something wrong and that's why they're getting it. It's like how do we move through that onto the other side still with faith in mind, with still trusting God that this happened to me, I'm being tested. How am I going to come out on the other side and I'm going to be shaken. You have emotional ... The prophet, peace be upon him, had a depressive episode after he lost the love of his life and his dear family members and that was normalized.

It's like you're supposed to feel when grief strikes you or when things happen that are difficult in your life. Nobody is entitled to live a life that is nice and perfect and struggle-free. If you are, I'm questioning, "What are you not telling us?"

**Amelia Bonow:**

What's going on internally?

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Because there's stuff happening you're just not telling us. But the prophets went through all of that and they made it visible and they talked about it and they talked about their processing of those struggles. And so, then who are we? As just regular people, obviously, we're going to feel things and it's totally valid to have those emotions and hold complexity and then still make decisions based on your individual situation.

**Amelia Bonow:**

That complexity and it's not even that complex, it's just human, but I feel like so much faith tells or so many interpretations of various faith, it's like don't do that thing. And what you were just saying, that guilt is a signal of you've gone astray. But what you just described as these are things that you move through with your eyes open and your heart open and you feel them and ask yourself, how is this moving me further or closer to faith? That's so beautiful and it's so non-punitive and it's like that's the way life works.

There's a good question in the chat or I guess an observation, but they say, "Hearing the story of people not knowing they had an abortion and how abortion is expected for unmarried women, I want to make sure we're recognizing that this is coercion ..."

**Sahar Pirzada:**

100%.

**Amelia Bonow:**

"... and not in line with RJ principles and how Islam plays a part in enforcing this" is the comment.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Well, yeah, because none of those people that experienced those things, if it was done without their consent, that's violence, right? That is reproductive violence. And so for me, I'm like, I believe in God, God is going to judge the people that coerce these people into those actions. So if somebody's body is being violated, whether it's to have an abortion or not have an abortion, I can't wait.

I can't wait for the day of judgment where God is going to punish those people that are acting from a place of power and control and making those decisions for those sacred beings. We have this idea of hurma and of every individual person is a sacred being and to violate their bodies is a grave sin. And so I'm like, "You committed a sin and you're going to be accountable to that."

So my approach to faith and my understanding of Islam is one that honors each individual as a sacred being and any violation of their bodies is people will be accountable for that.

**Amelia Bonow:**

Mm-hmm. Yeah, that totally makes sense. And I think that sometimes reproductive coercion ... I mean, obviously there are many, many examples articulated in work like Dorothy Roberts' work about how all sorts of populations in this country have experienced reproductive coercion at the hands of the state. And a lot of times, I think that the practitioners of said coercion were operating from a less than conscious place. They were essentially just doing the institutionalized racism of the state that was their job as opposed to, I'm going to trick this person into having an abortion to violate their autonomy. But all to say there, I think, has long been ... It's like a horrible, horrible, highly racialized form of paternalism that says that some people deserve ... some people can have choice, some people will do the choosing for you and that is so ... Thank you for whoever pointed that out in the chat.

It's antithetical to everything that you're talking about, which is just this very individual centered, you and your sacred body get to make this decision and let's talk about it.

I wanted to ask, so you used a phrase throughout your presentation that was, I think you were saying impacted Muslims or most impacted. And I wanted to ask if you could just extrapolate a little bit what that phrase means and maybe talk about just how do you center those folks? How do you define that and how do you center those folks in your programming, in your decision making, in how do these experiences and people guide your mission and your work?

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Ooh, so good. It's a great question. Okay. We're not reaching every impacted Muslim. I'll just start off the gate. I wish we were and we have a long way to go to reach the most directly impact. When we say impacted, it's basically anybody and everybody in the Muslim community that has a sexual and reproductive life. That's pretty much everyone. That's pretty much everyone. And there's some folks because of their proximity to systems of oppression who might have to experience more barriers to access, more barriers to information, more barriers to be able to make the decisions they want to make. And so when we're thinking about most directly impacted, it's who's at the center of those systems and the target of making sure those systems are working against them.

So it's oftentimes Black, queer, trans, potentially immigrant, potentially there might be language barriers, there might be also citizenship barriers to be able to have access to things like health insurance. They might be in states that have restrictive policies and bans in place. I mean, the list and then age even could play into that. So the list goes on and on. We're 100% not reaching everybody and we'll do whatever we can to support and prioritize folks that are more directly impacted.

So another thing we like to think about is that it's not just cis women who have abortion. And so we're trying to also move away from the language of women and abortions to something more gender-inclusive, something more expansive. And so that was an intentional thing to also make it known that regardless of your gender identity, you have a sexual and reproductive life, we're going to be here for you.

So yeah, those are some things we think about. We have three mutual aid funds. One of them is called our Reproductive Justice Fund and it supports people with accessing money to be able to cover their medical bills or get access to childcare or their basic needs met if they've just had some sort of medical procedure. So we've had folks who recently had hysterectomies and they're like, "I just need groceries for the week," or meal train situation or folks that have had abortions and they need, again, practical support, either post or pre. Folks that just had babies and they're like, "I need a lactation consultant, can you pay for the services?" or doula birth worker services or physical therapy.

I mean, the range is so vast.

**Amelia Bonow:**

Amazing.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

And so we're just like, yeah, whatever-

**Amelia Bonow:**

It's like, what do you need that's related to your-

**Sahar Pirzada:**

What do you need?

**Amelia Bonow:**

... reproductive health and life and how can we help you meet that need? That's so beautiful.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

So that's in a pilot phase. We have about four agencies that we're working with to try to get money back into the community with them.

**Amelia Bonow:**

How do people find the RJ fund or I mean, does it function like an abortion fund?

**Sahar Pirzada:**

So right now, we have four collectives and agencies that we're working with where they're connected to community and then they-

**Amelia Bonow:**

Okay. Gotcha.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

... submit applications on behalf of their community members.

**Amelia Bonow:**

I see.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

So it's like one that works with refugee populations, Project Hadra, there's Birth Workers of Color Collective, there's Muslim Birth Workers Collective.

**Amelia Bonow:**

Awesome.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

And I'm missing ... DuPont Clinic and Feminist Center. So that's the collective we're currently working with.

**Amelia Bonow:**

I see.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

We don't have enough funds to open it up publicly, but HEART acts as an agency as well. So if there's folks within the HEART community that need access, then I'll just be the person that fills out the application for them.

**Amelia Bonow:**

Yeah. So amazing.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

But you can also donate to the RJ Fund because-

**Amelia Bonow:**

Yeah, I was just going to say. That was going to be my next question is I don't know if Erin can find that in the chat. If folks want to support that work, would they just be donating to HEART or is there a specific place?

**Sahar Pirzada:**

That is such a great question, which I'm about to pull up. So we do have a way you could donate specifically to the RJ Fund. I'm going to drop it in the-

**Amelia Bonow:**

Amazing.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Yeah. And for those that are Muslim, it's also like zakat eligible, which means you can ... Whatchamacallit? We have to pay 2.5% of our income and wealth to charity and so this fund can qualify for that. So if you want to give your zakat to us, we will take it.

**Amelia Bonow:**

It's like a spiritual 501(c)3.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Yeah. It's a way to cleanse your wealth because we also know our wealth is most likely coming from-

**Amelia Bonow:**

Dirty.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Yeah.

**Amelia Bonow:**

That's amazing. Lena, do you have anything to add? I get you're just ...

**Lena Abbott:**

No, I really see HEART as ... The work the HEART does is really, really amazing and very comprehensive. And I feel like as a young woman growing into myself, I'm 22 by the way, but I feel like I'm still discovering parts of my reproductive health and sexual health. And so, at least for me, I can say that HEART is doing amazing work, especially as somebody who attended, and this is a whole other can of worms, but I attended an Islamic school and a lot of the layers of gendered Islamophobia that Sahar was talking about, I faced myself and other community members faced that as well.

And so I think I only recently discovered HEART in the past couple years or so. So as somebody who attended that school and was in that environment and faced those barriers, I know that the work that they do [inaudible 01:01:37] is really amazing. And I hope that folks on this call can benefit as well as share the work that HEART does with other folks as well, because it's very comprehensive, but Sahar definitely has a lot more training than me to answer a lot of the questions that you asked. Thank you.

**Amelia Bonow:**

No, that was beautiful. Thank you for ... Sorry to have called on you, put you on blast, but that is really ... It's so, so cool that you are now getting to work towards being that sibling that you needed maybe. It's really cool.

**Lena Abbott:**

Yes. No, I agree because I know we have to probably go in a little bit, but in high school I've worked with ... I don't know if people know about the organization Period. And so my sister and I, actually, we were seeing a lot of these barriers and we're like, "What can we do about it?" And so we started a chapter of the nonprofit organization Period in Sacramento where I'm from. And we talked a lot about menstrual stigma and the various forms that that takes place both in the Muslim community, but also outside of the Muslim community.

So that was certainly a big thing for us is just trying to start with that baseline education because unfortunately that is severely lacking in many different forms. But yeah, so HEART is definitely tackling that in many ways. And I think The Sex Talk book I think is really a great resource for people as well, for people who are Muslim or non-Muslim, or wherever you are on the faith of or the spectrum of being Muslim.

**Amelia Bonow:**

I love that. And I was going to ask, I mean, I want to ask if there's just anything else that we didn't get to that you'd like to share or shout out. But I guess, Lena, you just mentioned that book, I forget the title already, but I don't know if y'all want to just shout out some of your resources that you love that folks can find on your website or specific programs.

And my last question is just how can people listening to this support your work? How can we lift you up? How can we be better movement partners, all of that?

**Sahar Pirzada:**

I think follow us on social media. That's a big one. We're @HeartToGrow. If you want to meet us in person, we're going to be in L.A. Soon and we're having an Eid party. It's called our HEART L.A. Summer Soiree or something. So come to our Eid party. And then, we work a lot in coalition as well.

So we're a part of a collective called Fund Abortion Not War. We're trying to bridge the gap within our moment spaces to recognize being anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist, pro abortion, pro bodily autonomy, all of those things are very much tied to each other. And so looking for like-minded folks within movement spaces who might want to join our coalition and the work that we do. We support abortion funds that are pro Palestinian that have lost funding for the politics that they hold. And so that's a part of the work.

HEART itself, I feel like we're also just constantly looking to train up folks that maybe are working with Muslim populations. And so if there's ever an opportunity for us to come and do a professional development training for your org, your clinic, your community, please let us know because we have a lot-

**Amelia Bonow:**

Oh yeah, I was going to ask about that because I remember you mentioning that a while ago that you do ... I don't know if you consider it TA, like technical assistance training, but cultural competency training for clinics. Can you talk a little bit about that and about how someone might seek that out?

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Yeah. So we have a training department and we do workshops. They range from two hours to a few days kind of thing on a range of topics. So we have a few different frameworks that we could train folks on about at the individual level, how do you work with Muslims to respond with compassion if you get a disclosure of sexual violence.

So we have stuff on sexual violence, sexual health, and then also reproductive justice. So depending on what you need training on, we have different trainings per issue area and then different trainers would conduct those different trainings. But if you do need to get in touch with us to request a workshop, let me send you the form for that and somebody from our training department will get back to you.

Usually, we ... It's a fee-for-service, so yeah, we have different tiers depending on what you're requesting and what topic it is that you want us to train you on.

**Amelia Bonow:**

Amazing. You are doing so much beautiful work and it is an honor and a privilege and a pleasure to be in movement with you.

And Lena, it was so lovely to meet you and hear from you a little bit today. And thank you, everybody, for being here. Everybody, please be good to yourselves and it's a lot. It's so much right now and we're in this together and I believe that we're going to win.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Me too. Thank you so much, Amelia and Shout Your Abortion. And Lena, first public appearance by Lena.

**Amelia Bonow:**

Yay. And it was perfect.

**Lena Abbott:**

Thank you all. Thankful for having me.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Take care, you all. Stay in touch.

**Amelia Bonow:**

Okay. Thanks everybody. Bye.

**Lena Abbott:**

Bye-bye.

**Sahar Pirzada:**

Okay. I think we hop off. Bye.