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Who Cares for the Carers? Understanding the Pastoral Burden on British Imams

This paper draws on findings from Understanding British Imams, the largest academic study of mosque-based religious leadership in British Islam, encompassing survey data from more than 2,000 imams across 159 UK towns and cities alongside 40 in depth interviews. Findings reveal how British imams, despite playing a pivotal moral, social and pastoral role within Muslim communities, operate within fragmented institutional structures typified by poor pay, unsociable working conditions, and limited opportunities for professional development. Within this context, the paper focuses specifically on how mosque based imams respond to mental health challenges brought to them by congregants.

During interview, many imams explicitly discussed mental health issues ranging from OCD and depression to hallucinations and cases perceived as jinn possession. Especially in diaspora contexts, imams often serve as the first or preferred point of contact for congregants due to a combination of shared cultural reference points, linguistic familiarity, and religious worldviews that may be absent in mainstream mental health services. However, imams themselves acknowledged that they are rarely trained mental health specialists and are sometimes required to navigate deeply entrenched notions of stigma. A number of imams identified the need for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in pastoral counselling and mental health literacy although, all-too-often, mosque management committees failed to provide the necessary time, funding or flexibility for them to attend courses and upskill.

The paper therefore argues that imams occupy a structurally under supported yet crucial role as 'spiritual caregivers' in British Muslim communities. Their work frequently involves navigating blurred boundaries between spiritual, medical, and culturally inflected understandings of distress. In several cases, the intervention of imams – whether simply through listening and providing reassurance or undertaking home visits – had demonstrably positive impacts on the wellbeing of congregants. Our dataset also includes examples of signposting and collaborative work with medical professionals to provide a holistic care experience.

The paper ultimately calls for a fundamental reimagining of community support infrastructures that recognises imams as important frontline pastoral actors – or 'spiritual caregivers' – and invests in their professional growth. It argues that strengthening CPD provision, expanding bottom-up funding, providing institutional backing, and cultivating a communal mindset that values holistic care are essential steps toward improving the effectiveness of mosque-based pastoral care provision within British Muslim communities.



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