The recent allegations of sexual violence against a prominent Chicago imam are an important opening to educate the public about the realities of sexual violence. Specifics of each case are different, but our role as advocates is always to support survivors and help the community at large understand sexual violence. With no community response, survivors may feel disheartened, disempowered and distrustful of the people around them. Because cases of sexual violence are difficult to process in our community, here are some guidelines to help you start the conversation.

**Sexual violence is becoming an endemic problem.**
1 in 6 women are victims of rape or attempted rape at least once in their lifetime. While we do not have data specific to the Muslim community, anecdotal evidence indicates that sexual violence is just as prevalent in the Muslim community. It is important for the community to know the signs and how to respond effectively in the way that respects the survivors who have come forward. Power and control are central to sexual violence. Furthermore, sexual violence is enabled and perpetuated in society at large. Subtle messages promoting sexual violence are present in every day life; the sexual harassment and objectification of women by men provides fertile ground for this type of violence.

**What is our responsibility towards addressing sexual violence as Muslims?**
We cannot remain silent. It is our moral, human, and Islamic obligation to stand up against sexual violence.

- We must not be concerned with destroying a perpetrator’s legacy, no matter how great the legacy. In the Qu’ran, we are called to stand up for justice “even if against ourselves.”
- Remaining silent as bystanders disempowers victims from coming forward and seeking justice.
- **Sexual violence against another is not just a sin. It is a crime that must be reported to law enforcement.** While Islam greatly values upholding the privacy of another individual and protecting their sins, this tradition does not apply to harm committed against another.

**We must create a culture of accountability in the Muslim community.**
- Sexual assault is one of the most underreported crimes in the country. 68% of crimes remain unreported, with over 95% of abusers not getting convicted. Because this issue is extremely taboo in our community, the likelihood of not reporting abuse is even higher for Muslims.
- Survivors who come forward to report their attackers/abusers deserve our support. We must allow an investigation to take place by law enforcement, and we must demand change in our institutions to prevent future abuses from taking place.
- It is our individual and collective responsibility to address it and challenge the misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy present in our media, our retail, our music, our institutions and our culture.

**We must create safer communities.**
- The shame, judgment, and stigma along with social and emotional consequences of being a sexual violence survivor have enabled a culture of fear and silence. Many do not come forward because of community pressure and live a life of anguish because of the crimes that have been committed against them.
- Survivors of sexual violence often suffer from lifelong consequences such as depression, fear, anxiety, increased risk of suicide and substance abuse, and an inability to trust others.
- Victim blaming and shaming is destructive to the survivor’s healing process. Victim blaming is a devaluing act that occurs when the victim(s) of a crime or an accident is held responsible—in whole or in part—for crimes that have been committed against them, or held responsible for creating divisions in the community. Victim blaming can occur through negative social responses on social media, from various professionals, as well as from the media and immediate family members and other acquaintances.
- Parents, teachers, imams and community leaders need to do a better job of talking openly about sex and sexual violence in our homes and our mosques, to begin creating healthier communities and empower those who have been sexually abused to come forward and begin their journey to healing.

**We must understand why survivors find it difficult to disclose.**
- Whenever there is a survivor that comes forward with allegations of sexual assault, they are often asked questions like “why didn’t you tell us before?” If the allegations are from years ago, the questions are laced with greater disbelief and lack of understanding of why the survivor waited so long to disclose. There are many challenges and barriers survivors face when disclosing. Some of these are included below. This is by no means an inclusive list.
  - Survivors may feel scared to disclose because they fear further harm.
  - In the case of a perpetrator that holds a leadership position such as a religious leader, many survivors struggle to expose because they have been taught to respect religious leadership.
  - Other survivors have tried to disclose only to find that no one believes them.
  - Some survivors block out the experience as a coping mechanism and may not remember until many years later. This is especially common in the case of child sexual abuse.
  - Survivors may also be worried about social consequences of coming forward – what will happen to their reputation, their ability to get married, whether their community will support them. Similarly, they may worry about permanently damaging certain important relationships if the abuser is in their family or close to their family.
  - In communities where sex and sexual violence is not openly talked about, survivors find it difficult to disclose because they may not have the language to articulate what happened.
  - Often, survivors (or others around them) may minimize the experience. For example, “It’s not like he raped you.”
  - In the case of intimate partner violence, many fear that they will also expose themselves and be shamed for being in a premarital relationship.
  - Many survivors are confused, because often times, sexual assault experiences are not violent and abusers are generally very loving and charismatic people, and often shower their victims with a lot of gifts.