

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE

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CHRISTIANITY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Christians consider the family to be a sacred institution. In fact, celebrating the virtues of family life and family values has become a cardinal feature of the contemporary Christian message in North America and beyond. So powerful is the nostalgia for family togetherness that keeping families intact and ensuring that the family unit is strong serves to undergird many of the activities that take place during the weekly routine of congregational life in churches that are otherwise markedly diverse from a theological point of view. The strength and vitality of the local parish, affectionately labeled the *church family*, is sometimes gauged by how fully members look out for each other in the face of a culture that is perceived to be ambivalent, or even hostile, to their life choices. Amidst all the enthusiasm for the family, there is a stark reality that must be faced. While the Christian family may be sacred, sometimes it is not safe.

Violence affects scores of church families. Millions of women around the world—many of them Christian believers—have been battered. Most abused women, whether or not they are religious, feel alone. Since abuse often occurs in the privacy of the home, others in the community or the church can be lulled into believing it is not happening. As a result, victims feel faceless and nameless; silence and secrecy abound. Yet, for religious women, there is often an added sense of betrayal: They may feel that not even God has heard their cry for help.

A holy hush pervades many religious settings when it comes to the topic of domestic violence. Even finding the right words to describe what has happened in a violent outburst between a husband and a wife can be contentious. Given the sociopolitical landscape regarding the issue of abuse in the family context, perhaps it is not too surprising that naming the issue becomes a political act. By and large, clergy and other religious leaders prefer the term “family violence,” downplaying the gender power imbalance. Moreover, many religious leaders are reluctant to condemn wife abuse from the pulpit and confuse reconciliation between a

victimized woman and her abusive partner as evidence of recovery, believing that since the violence has stopped (often only temporarily), the home is now a safe place for each family member.

The Religion and Violence Research Team at the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research at the University of New Brunswick in eastern Canada has been studying abuse in families of faith for over fifteen years (Stirling, Cameron, Nason-Clark, and Miedema 2004). The team’s research has sought to explore the relationship between woman abuse and faith communities, from the perspective of religious leaders, abused women, community resources (including transition houses) and congregations (Nason-Clark 1997, 2004). The research is coupled with a social action strategy including print resources for abused religious women (Nason-Clark and Kroeger 2004), congregations (Kroeger and Nason-Clark 2001), and developing a website (RAVE, Religion and Violence E-learning [Ruff n.d.]) that provides immediate information and other e-learning opportunities specifically for pastors and other religious leaders.

Through a variety of methodologies—including mailed questionnaires, in-depth interviews, community consultations, focus groups, and telephone surveys—the Religion and Violence Research Team have become acquainted with how violence impacts upon parishioner and pastor alike. While survey data explored how often, and under what circumstances, clergy were called upon to assist in situations involving abuse, personal interviews with religious leaders revealed both the advice and referral practices offered to those seeking clerical help. The research team learned both of the struggle of the pastoral counselor, poorly equipped for the task at hand, and yet pushed to provide more pastoral care (Nason-Clark 2000a), and the struggle of a religious woman who feels abandoned by her family, her faith, and even her God (Nason-Clark 1999). As a result, many religious leaders who do respond compassionately to victims and their families find themselves caught between an

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ideology of the family they are meant to uphold and the reality of families in extreme crisis (Nason-Clark 1996). In light of this, what happens in the average Christian church when there is a disclosure of abuse close to home? Is there still a holy hush, or has the silence been shattered?

The phrase "holy hush" is not meant to suggest that clergy directly dismiss an abused woman's call for help or diminish the severity of her distress. Rather, the most direct evidence of silencing occurs through the paucity of information available to women in faith communities about abuse, and the relatively obscure referencing to abusive acts in the burgeoning Christian family literature (Nason-Clark 1997). With limited training in counseling and virtually no background in understanding the severity or impact of abuse, many clergy find themselves caught in the cross-fire between enthusiastic support of family unity and the reality of families in pain. Since naming the issue clearly poses problems for the average pastor, and direct preaching against such violence rarely occurs, by default the reality of woman abuse is silenced. Clerical leaders are often reluctant to place responsibility for abuse solely on the shoulders of the violent partner, preferring instead to locate the problems and their eventual solutions within the broader family unit. Only among the most experienced clergy are there appropriate and adequate referral networks offering cooperation and collaboration between sacred and secular sources of support for abused women and their children (Hong and Wiehe 1974; Weaver 1993). Yet, in many church communities, there is a rumbling that cannot be silenced (Nason-Clark 1999).

When clerical leaders proclaim that God abhors violence, offer advice that is supportive and accurate, and use their religious authority to bring the "healing balm of Gilead" to a woman's physical, emotional, and spiritual pain, a religious woman's healing journey is augmented. When those with spiritual credentials fail to ask a victimized woman if she is afraid, fail to see her emotional or financial vulnerability, or misunderstand her sense of hopelessness, obstacles are placed on the road toward her healing and wholeness. The Religion and Violence Research Team has found that abused religious women generally require assistance that uses both the language of contemporary culture and the language of the spirit as they seek solace and support in the aftermath of battery:

The remainder of this article will address three particular questions related to the theme of Christianity and domestic violence. While none of the answers will be exhaustive, each will point to some

factors impacting the interface between abuse and the contemporary Christian church. Since research and scholarship in this important area is just beginning to surface, there is ample room for development from activists, social scientists, and theologians working alone or in partnership with one another (Nason-Clark 2005).

Inhibitions on Christian Community-Wide Awareness of Abuse

The first question to address is, What are some of the central features of the Christian tradition that inhibit community-wide efforts to raise awareness about violence against women and to encourage abused women to seek safety and assistance? When the tragedy of wife abuse is combined with the passion of a religious ideology, there are concerns both on the part of those who approach the issue from a spiritual perspective and those adopting a secular perspective. Religious leaders fear that abused women in their congregations will be told to leave behind their community of faith as they journey toward a life free from the violence of the past. Community advocates fear that religious leaders will minimize the violence in an attempt to "keep the family together." There is fear and skepticism on both sides (Bearman-Hall and Nason-Clark 1997). Yet, in order to most effectively assist women of faith who are victimized by their partners, bridges need to be built between the "steeple and the shelter" (Nason-Clark 2000b). The language of contemporary culture and the language of spirituality, when used in tandem with each other, will augment, rather than thwart, a religious woman's search for help and wholeness in the aftermath of violence at home (Nason-Clark 2005).

While researchers are still in the early stages of learning about the relationship between religion and wife abuse (Brinkerhoff, Grandin, and Lupri 1992; Knickmeyer, Levitt, Horne, and Bayer 2003), victim safety must be paramount for religious as well as secular caregivers. Statistics Canada (2005) reports that in 2004, 12 percent of female victims turned to a clergy member for some form of support. For groups that harbor a particular mistrust of secular society, the impact of nonsupport from their community of faith is especially pronounced, e.g., abused Amish and Mennonite women whose abuse was ignored or tolerated by their church leaders and who were silenced and abandoned by their faith communities (Espenshade 2004a, 2004b; Espenshade and Alexander 2004a, 2004b). Other researchers, such as Buxton (2000), claim

that victims who find their way to the sanctuary seeking help will find a double-edged sword: The people of the church will be loving and caring, but the church will not be a safe place to discuss violence or to disclose its reality.

A major criticism of the impact of religious belief in connection with family violence is based upon the strong patriarchal ideology of conservative Christian and other fundamental faith traditions which serve to "keep women submissive." Indeed, religious belief or practice can act as a root cause of violence (Dobash and Dobash 1979). Several scholars point to the mutually reinforcing relationship between patriarchy and religious traditions (Battaglia 2001; Brown and Bohn 1989).

Moreover, religious victims of abuse sometimes receive conflicting advice from secular and religious professionals (Shannon-Lewy and Dull 2005), in large measure because secular sources often have little understanding of the importance of the victim's beliefs, particularly at a time of crisis in her life. Additionally, those in the secular therapeutic community may attribute her abuse to her religion, believing that it is her faith that reinforces passivity and acts as a detriment to any effective confrontation of the abuse (Bearman-Hall and Nason-Clark 1997; Horton and Williamson 1988; Nason-Clark 1997, 2000a, 2000b). While unintentional, inappropriate responses of faith leaders may cause far more harm than good to victims of abuse (Horne and Levitt 2003).

Just as the victim's needs may not adequately be met, so too the church may fail to meet the needs of men who act abusively by reinforcing their grip on power in their intimate relationships and failing to recognize those specific needs that must be met for significant change to commence (Fleming 1986; Livingston 2002). Since the clerical focus is often on the sanctity of marriage, any threats to the marriage, such as separation and divorce, are met with resistance (Alsdurf and Alsdurf 1989; Miles 2002).

Ammons (1999) claims that in a similar vein to the courts—which have been slow to recognize the illegality and inhumanity of spousal abuse—many religions have been slow to reevaluate their traditions and reluctant to acknowledge their culpability in turning a blind eye to domestic violence. Moreover, they are averse to actively challenging any of the ideological underpinnings that might be regarded as support for violence against women within the belief structures (Ammons 1999; Brown and Bohn 1989; Fortune 1991).

Yet there is reason for cautious optimism as one reads of theologians working to clarify notions of

headship and submission (see, for example, Kroeger and Beck 1996, 1998; Kroeger and Nason-Clark 2001; and the groundbreaking work of Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune and the Faith Trust Institute [2006], established in 1977). Moreover, faith-based organizations in the United States are increasingly offering batterer intervention programs to violent religious men, and in Canada secular agencies are beginning to consider the importance of spirituality in the lives of men who have acted abusively (Fisher-Townsend 2006).

The Vulnerability of Abused Religious Women

In what ways are religious women more vulnerable when abused? Where strong religious faith interweaves with the family unit, it is common to observe that many of the patterns impacting abusive relationships within mainstream society are exacerbated, such as the fear, the isolation, and the covenant proclaimed before God at the marriage ceremony. Although there is no compelling evidence that abuse happens more frequently or that its forms are more severe in families of faith, religious women are more vulnerable after abuse takes place. In short, they are less likely to leave, are more likely to believe that the abuser can and will change his violent ways, frequently voice reservations about seeking respite in a community-based transition house or shelter, and commonly express guilt—believing they have failed their families and even God in not being successful in making their marriages work (Nason-Clark 2004). To be sure, most women victims are reluctant to see their marriages end, but, for women of strong spiritual conviction, these beliefs are commonly and strongly reinforced by a religious ideology that sees women's role in the home as pivotal to her sense of self-worth, believes that happy families build strong nations, and accepts divorce with great reservation. Central Christian notions such as forgiveness or women's identity with Jesus the sacrificial lamb stymie her ability to grasp the full extent of her current suffering or to even sound a cry for help. Could battering be her "cross to bear"?

Any discussion of the healing journey of religious victims of abuse eventually ends up on the doorstep of Christian beliefs surrounding forgiveness. The famous cry of Jesus from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34), is often portrayed as the exemplary pattern that abuse victims ought to imitate as they approach their aggressors. Yet, forgiveness does not eradicate the pain of the past, nor does it erase the implications to follow. Rather,

when forgiveness is placed within a broader context of the journey from victim to survivor, it is achieved when the events of an abusive past no longer control the future and the victim is freed from the complicated web of anger and despair (Nason-Clark and Kroeger 2004).

But achieving this fine balance is extremely difficult. Marie Fortune (1991) believes that forgiveness is the very last step on the healing journey, the top rung on the ladder of a woman's valiant effort to overcome the brokenness of her past. As such, it cannot precede justice or the offender's accountability for his violent ways. Interestingly, premature forgiveness actually thwarts the very goals it may be trying to achieve: the possibility of healing and growth for both perpetrator and victim. Any pressure, religious or otherwise, on the victim to quickly "forgive and forget" must be avoided. Yet, forgiveness, it might be argued, is the most charitable and compassionate gift that religious groups can offer victims in their midst (Fortune 1988). However, forgiveness should be approached carefully: It cannot be put on a timetable by someone other than the victim herself, and never should forgiveness be touted as a guarantee for safety or protection. Religious professionals need to ensure that they do not employ language which suggests that once forgiveness is sought and granted, the life for the family returns to normal, as if the abuse never happened.

The Role of Faith-Based Agencies in Dealing with Abusers

The third question to be asked is whether there is a specific role for faith-based agencies in bringing religious men to accountability for their abusive behavior. As connections between religion and wife abuse are uncovered, several issues have become clear. North American courts are increasingly referring perpetrators of wife abuse to batterer treatment or intervention programs. Researchers Healey, Smith, and O'Sullivan (1998) demonstrate that 80 percent of clients in batterer programs are referred by court mandate. While women of faith who have been victimized want the violence to end, they often hope that there can be reconciliation of their marital relationships within the context and support of their faith communities. They live in family situations that may not be peaceful and safe, yet their faith traditions highlight family-unity and celebrate the divinely ordained nature of family life (see Ruff 2006). In interviews with women of faith experiencing abuse, Boehm, Golec, Krahn, and Smyth (1999) found that many religious

women spoke of their spiritual anguish in the midst of abuse at home. To offer hope to abused religiously committed women, it is important that therapeutic staff condemn the abuse they have suffered using the language of their faith traditions (Nason-Clark and Kroeger 2004). Yet, secular therapists report that they find it frustrating to work with religious clients, in part because they find themselves often unsuccessful in challenging their seemingly erroneous religion ideation (Whipple 1987). Consequently, this leaves a significant gap in the ability of community-based services to meet the needs of the religious. Fitting into this niche are faith-based services for victims and perpetrators.

An essential feature of a faith-based intervention program is the ability of therapeutic staff who are knowledgeable of sacred texts and various religious traditions to counter any use of religion to support abuse in intimate relationships. Men in a faith-based intervention program cannot justify their violent behavior by using the language of their faith tradition. Here, the rationale of any abusive man that his belief system encourages or even justifies the abuse he has meted out on his victim will not be tolerated.

It may be that faith-based services differ not only in content but also in the constituency that they serve. In a recent study, Nason-Clark, Murphy, Fisher-Townsend, and Ruff (2003) found that men who sought help from a faith-based agency were more likely than those enrolled in a secular program to report demographic characteristics suggestive of life stability (e.g., currently married, older, higher educational and employment levels), yet they were as likely as other abusive men to abuse alcohol or drugs. Interestingly, men in the faith-based program under study were more likely than others to have witnessed or experienced violence in their childhood homes.

Yet, in areas of the United States that are highly religious, researchers have found that even in secular programs religious justification for violence occurs. In two secular Texas batterer intervention programs, it was revealed that men of faith appealed to the Bible as support for their violent ways. "The most common word they used was submit: She will not submit, she did not submit, she should submit" (Shupe, Stacey, and Hazlewood 1987).

If men of faith who act abusively are to be challenged to alter their violent ways, it is essential that their religious convictions and misunderstandings be addressed in an environment where their faith is not attacked, they cannot justify

their actions based upon their faith traditions, and they can share experiences with men who have a common worldview. It cannot be overstated: If perpetrators hold their faith in high esteem, in order for their violence to stop, it must be condemned using the language of religious conviction, rooted in the Scriptures they believe to be sacred.

Conclusion

Violence against women knows no boundaries—not of color, ethnicity, class, religion, or region. Rich women, poor women, educated women, beautiful women, frail women, spiritual women, indeed all categories of women can and have been victims of aggression at the hands of someone who promised before God to love, cherish, and care for them under and through all circumstances. The words “until death do us part” are meant to convey the sense that the covenant of marriage is forever, witnessed by friends, family, and the Creator of life itself.

When men act abusively toward their partner, the promise unravels. The journey toward healing and wholeness for religious victims is replete with both secular and sacred overtones—as are its causes and the factors that reinforce it. Breaking the cycle of violence in the family requires both the language of secular culture and the language of the spirit. Researchers and activists alike must unravel the many layers involved in the interface of faith, family, and fear for victimized women and their children. The time has come to shatter the silence.

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See also Corporal Punishment, Religious Attitudes toward; Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Domestic Violence; Jewish Community, Domestic Violence within the; Medical Neglect Related to Religion and Culture; Qur'anic Perspectives on Wife Abuse; Rule of Thumb; Worldwide Precedents Supporting Domestic Violence from Ancient to Modern Times

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Variouly referred to as coerced persuasion; conjugal, patriarchal, or intimate terrorism; nonphysical abuse; emotional abuse; indirect abuse; psychological abuse; and mental or psychological torture, coercive control describes the pattern of sexual mastery by which abusive partners, typically males, employ different combinations of violence, intimidation, isolation, humiliation, and control to subordinate adult victims. In marked contrast to the incident-specific definition of physical assault

that dominates domestic violence research and intervention, coercive control is ongoing, extends through social space as well as over time, exploits persistent sexual inequalities, and focuses its regulatory tactics on enforcing stereotypic sex role behaviors. Although coercive control can cause physical injury and psychological trauma, its harms tend to be cumulative rather than incident specific and include the suppression of autonomy and basic personal liberties as well as violations of