

# Religion and Domestic Violence

Information and Resources

## KEY ISSUE

### Developing Comprehensive Responses to Domestic Violence



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# KEY ISSUE

## Developing Comprehensive Responses to Domestic Violence

Issues of faith are often central to the experiences of many victims and survivors of domestic violence. Faith communities and secular domestic violence programs are becoming increasingly aware of the need to create an awareness of domestic violence within faith communities, as well as the need for cross-training and education about dynamics of domestic violence and the role that faith plays in individuals' lives. Yet there exist misconceptions between faith communities and secular advocates that have served as barriers to collaboration between these two entities. Faith leaders may fear that secular advocates encourage women to divorce, for example, while secular advocates may fear that faith leaders and community members pressure women to stay in dangerous relationships, using religious beliefs to justify abuse and potentially blaming women for their own victimization (Miles, 2002). Some secular advocates hold the perception that faith leaders, as a part of a larger socio-cultural structure, may be reluctant to involve themselves or their communities in responding to domestic violence for various reasons, including denial of the existence or prevalence of domestic violence, a sense of fear and hopelessness, lack of appropriate training, the culture of patriarchy, and the possibility that some of these faith leaders are perpetrators themselves (Miles, 2002). Yet many faith communities are making public statements that denounce domestic violence and the use of religious teachings to justify it. Moving beyond the misconceptions to work together enables secular programs and faith communities to develop supportive networks that provide comprehensive responses to victims and survivors of faith.

Awareness and intervention efforts may overlook issues specific to victims and survivors of domestic violence who identify strongly with a particular religion. The special issues of Jewish women, for example, have not been comprehensively studied, despite the acknowledgement that culturally-specific education and intervention programs for domestic violence are more successful than more generalized approaches (DeVoe, Borges & Conroy, 2001). According to Jewish Women International, the goals of any awareness efforts are fivefold: acknowledge that domestic violence happens in religious communities and provide resources, create an environment that supports victims and survivors, promote healing and justice for victims and accountability for perpetrators, send the message that abuse will not be tolerated by the community, and change the communal

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paradigms that allow abuse to happen (Gardsbane, 2002). Similarly, Islam has been cited as one of the fastest growing religions in the U.S., however, “despite its growing presence, little information is available to guide culturally competent intervention strategies in health care and domestic violence intervention” (*Women’s Health Weekly*, 2000).

In response, several local and national religious communities have begun educating their constituencies and raising awareness of the issue in a variety of ways. By speaking out against domestic violence in mosques, synagogues, churches and other places of worship, faith leaders publicly acknowledge the existence of domestic violence and denounce religious-based practices that support or condone domestic violence. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ 2002 statement on domestic violence, available in both English and Spanish, outlines the Catholic church’s position on domestic violence, gives a brief overview of the dynamics, and offers suggestions for priests and other Catholic faith leaders to address domestic violence within their churches. The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism passed a resolution at its 1993 convention that called upon affiliated congregations to address the issue of domestic violence within their communities (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 1995).

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In April 2006 the FaithTrust Institute, a U.S. multifaith resource organization working to end sexual and domestic violence, organized perhaps one of the first nationwide collaborative and cross-denominational public statements denouncing violence against women. The *National Declaration by Religious and Spiritual Leaders to Address Violence Against Women*, signed by over forty national religious leaders from around the country, declares violence against women to be intolerable and pledges commitment to its eradication. The intent is to distribute the declaration to every domestic violence program in the U.S. and demonstrate to victims and survivors that “when people of faith join with other community leaders to address domestic violence [...], ancient roadblocks turn into resources that save lives and bring healing” (FaithTrust Institute, 2006).

**Partnerships between secular programs and faith communities also exist to address issues of domestic violence through holistic and culturally-relevant approaches to serve communities often marginalized by mainstream programs. These partnerships examine the social, historical, political and economic realities of these communities while honoring religious beliefs and practices.**

In many parts of the country, secular programs and faith communities are coming together to create supportive environments that promote healing and justice for victims and survivors and their children. Many communities have formed task forces and other collaborative efforts, comprised not only of members of diverse faith communities and secular domestic violence programs, but also of other community-based programs and survivors of domestic violence. These coalitions strive to improve the accessibility of services to victims of domestic violence and develop tools for all community members and programs to use that promote

the prevention of domestic violence in and through communities of faith. Partnerships between secular programs and faith communities also exist to address issues of domestic violence through holistic and

culturally-relevant approaches to serve communities often marginalized by mainstream programs. These partnerships examine the social, historical, political and economic realities of these communities while honoring religious beliefs and practices.

By working together to provide education, resources and advocacy, faith communities and secular programs create, enhance and improve access to comprehensive and supportive responses to domestic violence. These initiatives are specifically intended to improve access to services for all persons affected by domestic violence and generate public awareness of the issue. Resource lists and bibliographies developed for this collection of packets provides the reader with information about promising collaborative approaches between secular programs and faith communities.

*Additional information on religion/spirituality and domestic violence issues are available through the FaithTrust Institute (telephone: 206-634-1903, fax: 206-634-0115 and email: info@faithtrustinstitute.org) and the Black Church and Domestic Violence Institute (telephone: 770-909-0715, fax: 770-907-4069, and email: bcdvorg@aol.com).*

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*Women's Health Weekly* (2000). *Religion, Culture Influence Muslim Women's Reluctance to Seek Help from Domestic Abuse*. Retrieved August 2003 from: <http://www.NewsRx.com>

## ENCLOSURES

The enclosed materials (reprinted with permission) provide research findings, examples of promising projects and referral materials that offer basic information on religion and domestic violence:

Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice (1998). New directions from the field: Victims' rights and services for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *OVC Bulletin*, 12.

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