

# **Religion and Domestic Violence**

**Information and Resources**

## **OVERVIEW**



prepared by

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# OVERVIEW

The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRCDV) has developed this collection of information packets to serve as an introduction to the complex and varied issues that religion and faith can present for victims and survivors of domestic violence and their advocates in both the faith and secular communities. These packets explore and support innovative strategies created by faith communities and secular domestic violence programs to develop a collaborative and holistic response to domestic violence that is responsive to and respectful of victims' and survivors' expressions of faith.

There are at least two important limitations to the current information available with respect to the discussion of domestic violence and faith. The first is that the materials primarily address issues that are specific to the Jewish, Muslim and Christian faiths. Therefore, the diversity of the religious landscape in the United States is not accurately reflected within the content of these packets. There exists a need to acknowledge and address the needs of individuals and communities whose spiritual or religious beliefs remain unmentioned throughout available literature relevant to domestic violence. These groups include, but are not limited to, people who identify strongly with indigenous spiritual traditions, Afro-Caribbean religions (Santeria, Palo Monte, Vodou, Macumba, Candomble and Rastafarianism as examples), Buddhism, Hinduism, Baha'i, Jainism, Neo-Pagan religions (Asatru, Druidism and Wicca as examples), Sikhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism and new religious movements. Information that addresses the complexity of issues for victims and survivors whose religious and/or spiritual identities exist beyond the scope of the three Abrahamic religions will be included as it becomes available.

The second limitation of note is that available information focuses almost exclusively on heterosexual marital relationships, or those unions most likely to be consecrated by faith communities. An ongoing challenge is to further develop analyses, support and responses for victims and survivors of faith abused in other relationship contexts, including those who are separated or divorced, in dating or cohabiting relationships, or abused by same-sex or gender-variant partners.

Issues of religious faith, or the belief in a specific system of principles and practices that give reverence to a higher power, 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

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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.

Certain interpretations of particular religious tenets are often used by batterers to manipulate and control their partners. The use of these teachings to justify abusive behavior and the imbalance of power within a relationship can further contribute to the feelings of guilt and self-blame many victims experience as a result of the abuse. It is important to note that while women's use of violence toward male partners exists, a close examination of the issue reveals that it is historically, culturally, motivationally, and situationally distinct from male violence toward female partners (Das Dasgupta, 2001). Research shows that the overwhelming majority of domestic violence cases involve male violence against female partners. Although interpretations may be given to religious teachings and traditions that imply the absolute authority of a husband over his wife, many scholars argue that it is inappropriate to use these teachings in their full contexts to support misogynist behavior in marital relationships or sociocultural arenas. The most frequently referenced Judaic, Islamic and Christian tenets that focus on the nature of heterosexual marriage and the gender roles within that relationship have been included for discussion in this packet.

Communities of faith play a unique and vital role in the response to and elimination of domestic violence, as they carry the responsibility to protect and nurture the spiritual wellbeing of the community as a whole and its individual members. Victims and survivors of domestic violence may turn to faith leaders for spiritual guidance and support before or in lieu of secular domestic violence services, because of the unique dimension they can add to the sometimes-overwhelming experience of seeking help. Similarly, batterers may also turn to faith leaders, perhaps either as a means of legitimizing the abuse or to seek guidance and support in understanding and changing behaviors. Faith leaders may be asked, then, to provide spiritual guidance and counseling to both the victim and the perpetrator. This requires efforts by faith leaders to not only acknowledge domestic violence but also to continually educate

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themselves and the entire community and to join in creating responses to domestic violence that are safe and supportive for victims and survivors. Yet responses to domestic violence cannot exist without some form of accountability for the batterer. When faith communities make an effort to examine issues of batterer accountability, in addition to those of victim safety and empowerment, they are better able to create a response that meets the needs of individuals and their communities.

Secular programs that are sensitive to the values and beliefs held by victims and survivors of faith can help them identify options and resources that are relevant and specific to their situation. Partnerships and collaborations between secular programs and faith-based groups enable the development of more comprehensive and supportive responses to victims. Through the joint provision of education, resources and advocacy, communities are bridging the gaps between diverse faith-based and secular responses. This collaborative approach can provide a much more holistic approach to helping victims and survivors of faith that honors individual choice and identity, celebrates survival and helps victims identify and utilize personal strengths and resources.

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Funding, however, is often a barrier to programs and communities seeking to create comprehensive and supportive responses to domestic violence by expanding available resources or developing new programs. With the recent introduction of the federal faith-based initiatives, efforts have been made to increase faith-based and other community organizations' access to federal funding for the provision of social services. This packet will briefly examine the resources that have been developed as a result of these efforts.

Material within the packets is organized according to content. Following the *Overview*, the packet titled *Interpretations of Religious Doctrine* examines texts that reference the use of violence against women in marital relationships. Key points to consider in *Working With Victims* are discussed, as well as the importance of *Batterer Accountability*. A discussion of *Developing Collaborative Responses to Intimate Partner Violence* is followed with information relative to *Funding* for faith-based and secular programs. The collection of packets concludes with listings of resources—*Statistics*, *Bibliography*, *Website* and *Video* resource lists—as well as articles and referral information designed to promote increased knowledge on each sub-topic.

*Additional information on religion/spirituality and domestic violence issues are available through the Faith Trust 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).*

## Works Cited

Das Dasgupta, S. (2001). *Towards an Understanding of Women's Use of Non-Lethal Violence in Intimate Heterosexual Relationships*. Harrisburg, PA: National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women (VAWnet), a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.

Miles, A. (2002). *Violence in Families: What Every Christian Needs to Know*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press.

## 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:

Fortune, M.M. & Enger, C.G. (2005). *Violence Against Women and the Role of Religion*. Harrisburg, PA: National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women (VAWnet), a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.

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