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**EPISODE 37 - POLICY & ADVOCACY IN ACTION - FAITH, SPIRITUALITY AND  
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE  
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>> Welcome to Policy & Advocacy in Action a channel of NRCDV Radio. Today you'll be hearing from Heidi Notario, our Vice President of Strategic Partnerships & Systems Change, as she discusses the role of faith and spirituality in the context of gender-based violence with Sally MacNichol and Quentin Walcott, co-Executive Directors of CONNECT New York. CONNECT New York is an organization that works with New York City communities to prevent intimate partner violence and promote gender justice. Much of the work of this organization happens with faith-based leaders and their communities. Let's get started.

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>> Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining us today as we begin some of our conversations around the topic of faith, spirituality and intimate partner violence. So with me today I have two guests from CONNECT New York. And I will have them introduce themselves in a second. And just to let the listeners know that CONNECT New York is an organization that's based in the city. And they do a tremendous amount of work with the community and through the lens of faith. So I have with me the two co-directors of CONNECT New York. So I will turn it over to you both now. Welcome.

>> Hi.

>> Thank you for having us.

>> Hello, everyone. Well, my name is Sally MacNichol from CONNECT New York. And I'm here with Quentin Walcott, co-Executive Director. And we'll just tell you a little bit about CONNECT and how we got into the faith work. In the early 2000s -- in the early 2000s, right before 2001, CONNECT came into being. And we came into being asking the questions of what the communities needed in terms of domestic violence. We had a lot of resources in terms of criminal justice remedies and shelters or those

had grown. But as we all know, things hadn't really changed that much.

So we went into communities in New York City and did research on the ground. And asked questions about what people thought about behavioral health and child abuse. And we found -- you know, it was a long process. We talked to about 500 people altogether.

>> Yes.

>> And -- but, you know, before we go on, why don't you introduce yourself. I just jumped in, I'm sorry.

>> My name is Quentin Walcott. Also known as Q. And I'm the co-Executive Director of CONNECT along with Sally. And I think to kind of segue to what Sally was just mentioning, when we did this research, when Sally says it was on the ground, it was really on the street. Street level. Going where people were in communities. And it was like laundromats, train stations, supermarkets. You know, and we really started doing our work in one section of New York City, which was [indiscernible] and Crown Heights. So the backdrop of what was happening in the city at that time. Where that was actually the highest incidence of domestic violence that were reported were happening in that section of Brooklyn. And it was also -- what was also happening there was really poor community relationships. Police brutality. There were issues around HIV and AIDS with young girls. There was also issues around men coming from across the nation back into Brooklyn. So there were multiple issues happening in the city at that time, along with domestic violence. And our approach was to really kind of see how domestic violence was connected to all of those things.

So we actually did our research. We stood in front of -- in the community. We spoke to women. We spoke to men. We spoke to youth. We spoke to community-based organizations, grassroots-based organizations, you know, dealing with domestic violence directly or indirectly. Primarily indirectly. Maybe seeing domestic violence more than we do as a domestic violence organization at that time.

>> Yeah, and so one of our findings, when we asked people where they wanted to go to get help, one of our findings was that they wanted to go to their faith community. And there are a lot of reasons for that that we can -- that we know. I mean, people feel comfortable in their faith communities. Especially when the outside world was not so hospitable to them. When they are newly arrived in this country, that's where they can get a sense of belonging. People can feel at home in their future communities. So that made a lot of sense.

So we also found out that often the response wasn't exactly what people needed. So we went on from there.

>> And this was right directly after 9/11. So communities were being surveilled based on their religious beliefs. In this part of Brooklyn. And we literally became a city-wide organization doing the same research across the city. But folks were really struggling with this idea of being deported. And not having a place to go to that they felt safe, if they were victims of domestic violence. Because there's also an added pressure

to the type of violence and the power and control that can be leveraged based on the fact that you're undocumented in this country. So that was another level of abuse that survivors and families were experiencing.

>> So we went on from there to try to develop and have developed relationships with different faith communities, different survivors of faith came to us, different faith communities decided that they wanted to delve deeper into ways that they could help survivors and help prevent domestic violence.

And since that time, we have developed a faith program where we tailor each -- we respond to what the community needs. And each faith community is different. And probably one of the biggest mistakes that advocates can sometimes make and all of us can sometimes make is having general assumptions about different faith traditions. And thinking that they are all -- all Christians are the same. Or all Muslims are the same. So when you approach survivors, you just have some ideas that are not complex and not open and questioning.

So we tailor our work with every faith community based on what their resources are. What they think is the best way to approach the problems found in their community.

>> Right. And I would say that in terms of the work we do at CONNECT and we really apply -- particularly at the beginning when we first started -- apply community organizing approaches to this work around domestic violence and gender-based violence. And from my experience growing up with family members that were really leaders in their faith communities, that people of faith are really great organizers. So we really wanted to tap into that ability that existed for, you know, community organizations. Particularly faith communities that organize in their communities. They addressed not only the religious, the theological issues but also the issues that were happening in that community. And one of the things that we recognized when approaching this work from a domestic violence, gender-based violence lens with faith communities, is where they -- kind of their histories around organizing around social justice or health issues. And for me, one of the things I noticed that the faith community did not do well is in organizing around the HIV and AIDS epidemic. So we used that information as a starting point for some faith organizations that really didn't do well in that. But now, because of the fears around, you know, homophobia and what it meant to admit that somebody in that congregation was dealing with that, so we used that as like a -- as a foundational piece. So how do we introduce this issue of domestic violence? Which is also a very personal issue. But has a very public implication to it. And that how can the faith community approach this issue better?

And in some cases we found out that some of the faith institutions we worked with tried to couple all of the issues together as a strategy to deal with HIV and AIDS, domestic violence, re-entry into communities. So some churches try to deal with so many issues, not to specifically target, you know, domestic violence or HIV or whatever they were dealing with.

>> I think also understanding domestic violence as a social justice issue is a critical

part of how we frame the issue. And very often people in general and faith communities, it's looked at as -- as you said, it's a very private issue. And it's looked at more as an individual pathology, even a family pathology, sometimes a community pathology that's separated from other communities.

So to reframe it around social justice was actually a challenge. And actually it was a bigger challenge with folks that named themselves social justice churches.

>> Right.

>> Or mosques or synagogues. And so that was challenging. Oftentimes people, we don't see the connections, the inner connections, the ways that oppressions are interlocking. The ways that when you're talking about for instance, re-entry, there are always issues around intimate violence there that need to be addressed. But they are often dropped out, they are ran through prison reform or prison abolition or gun and gang violence. So that's one of our strategies, too, is to get the social justice issues that people do care about to inform around how domestic violence is a critical part of that issue. And if that's your faith mandate and you feel strongly that you have to address that issue, we try to make those connections.

>> Yeah, and we're called CONNECT. And it's a pun. People think it's an acronym. But it's really actually connecting people, connecting communities, and connecting issues, and making sure people understand just like really in a safe context when we talk about re-entry and the reason why someone was incarcerated, if you dig a little bit deeper. If it wasn't the primary reason why someone was arrested, if you dig a little bit deeper, you'll find that there's some form of domestic violence connected to that.

HIV and AIDS, for instance, people being infected can be a reason based on domestic violence. Someone forcing you to shoot drugs. Or to have sex, unprotected sex. All of these different things that really made people connections for people. And even around health issues. Survivor experience in domestic violence is impacted in health because of the violence that they receive in terms of how their body responds to trauma and also can lead to issues of things of unresolved oppression and trauma to mental health issues.

So we really made a lot of these deep connections with people. And made it this private thing, seemingly so private thing, more palatable because we showed how it shows up in everyday life. And shows up in witness violence in the home. And shows up in Bible study. Where Bible teachers were noticed that the child, the children who were in the class, were impacted by what they said or how they behaved. So there were many ways how we approached this subject with faith communities to make it seem like this is not so private or so taboo. That it's really common. And a lot of people are dealing with this all the time.

>> Yeah, I think that's actually just getting folks to know that -- for instance, the Pew Forum has a statistic I wanted to read. People in the pews, and that's in the Christian context, are affected by domestic violence. So oftentimes, faith communities, because that's a place where good people are, you know, no, it's not happening here. And of

course it's a secret that it is happening there. So just making it a space where people can be able to feel free to come forward is a starting point. Getting people to acknowledge and see what's going on.

>> Right. So the -- one of the main pieces with churches and faith communities was to make them understand that people, particularly if you're undocumented from another country, come to the United States, New York City in particular. And wanted to have a place of sanctuary, a place where to go. So we wanted to create a space where survivors that come forward get the help that they need without being blamed for the abuse that they were receiving. So this is some of the facts that we understood to be what the community wanted. What were some of the pitfalls and disclosing in their communities? So we wanted to address that. And connect faith communities with domestic violence organizations and partnerships and really build their capacity to address survivors' needs.

>> That's great. I think you both have touched on a number of things here. Super important. And I'm really -- I was really moved by, Q, your connections between community organizing and they follow the church or the faith community in general. Also utilizing some of the community organizing tools, if you will, I think that's very interesting.

In general, you know, based on your experience, are there any questions that survivors commonly ask related to their faith?

>> Yes; yes. I mean, I think that when violence is happening to survivors and they are people of faith, those are primary questions. The questions of why is this happening to me? Have I done something wrong to make this happen to me? God is not hearing my prayers. Am I, you know -- am I going to be forgiven? So there's a lot of shame of guilt. And there's a lot of questioning. There's a sense of, has God abandoned me? Sort of a ricocheting back and forth between has God abandoned me? Am I being punished? What have I done to deserve this? So it's very deep and painful for people of faith. It's a violation of betrayal. A sense of meaning very often.

>> Yeah, and I think there's so many mixed messages that we get from the Bible, from our families who were kind of entrenched in faith tradition, about burden and sacrifice. Am I as a survivor doing something wrong about talking about what is happening? Is it part of that burden or sacrifice? And we give these ideas that women in particular are built a certain way. They are supposed to be able to endure a lot of men's attitudes, belief systems and behavior. And if they feel that there's something wrong with this and that they are complaining or even the bigger question is the big D word, and that's not domestic violence, that's divorce.

>> Yeah, right.

>> Like am I duly sworn to stay in this relationship, even though I'm being abused?

>> I've made a vow.

>> Right, I've made this vow. And also -- and that's where like spiritual abuse, this idea of spiritual abuse, one example of it is misinterpreting the Bible and how

relationships are kind of laid out in the Bible. It can be manipulated. And that can be the form of abuse to keep someone in a relationship or make them feel like they are doing something wrong to be -- and that's the reason why they are being harmed. So there may be questions.

>> No doubt. So in your work within the different faith communities, what role do you think faith leaders can play in providing leadership on this issue of ending violence?

>> Oh, really important, critical role. These leaders have a critical role. Of course they have a moral voice and a powerful, you know -- powerful way to influence the community. So I mean, for one thing, faith leaders can take this issue on first by looking at themselves. And doing some self-awareness, self-review, of their own experiences of domestic violence. And I think one thing that you could say is people who go into helping professions -- and being a faith leader is very much a helping profession -- often have their own traumas and their own wounds. And so first of all, it's important that faith leaders really look at those experiences around domestic violence and the way they have been shaped by their theological understandings and their understandings of sacred scripture. So that's important. But then faith leaders can preach about domestic violence, preach about mutuality, about equality, about partnership, about healthy relationships. And also not just keep it in the faith leaders -- in the power there. The power has to be analyzed how power is organized in the faith community. And just open up the conversation to make sure that people feel unafraid to come forward and won't be judged.

So it's important that faith leaders get a lot of education. And partner with domestic violence programs. Understand -- keep in contact with the resources around them. So when someone does come to them, that they don't just take it on themselves. Because sometimes faith leaders have a sense of like, I'm going to fix this. And this is something that we'll handle inside here.

But faith leaders really need to partner with people in the community that do this work.

>> Right. I think that's so critical, that last piece Sally mentioned. So realize they are not all knowing. They are not going to master this issue. Because you don't have the background in it. And when you profess to be all knowing and, I'll take care of this and I'll handle it, it recreates the system and the dependency that survivors may have on a system or a person to get them out of that situation. So it's very important that -- just to be honest that, I'm not a professional in this. But I do have some resources I could connect you to.

I think one of the other things that faith leaders can do is to really interpret text in a real objective way so it kind of counters a narrative that a survivor believes to be the interpretation or also the person who is being abusive in the relationship can use that text to justify, rationalize the harm that they are doing in a relationship. Because there's always that piece of -- Sally and I have worked in groups together. And working with abusive partners or people who do harm is a better term for it. And they have used this

idea that what this -- what the Bible says or what the standard says and interprets it to be, I can do this to my wife. I can do this to my children. When in actuality if you read the full passage or the next passage, it really explains really this idea that you are not to control your wife or your partner in a way. You have to really kind of demonstrate and model this relationship that you have with God in a way that does not exemplify power or abuse. So I think that piece is really important to kind of really interpret in a way.

And then also recognize where they land in that. We have done work in many faith communities. And the pastor or the deacons or someone has been connected to the cycle of violence in some way, either being a child witness to it, you know, seeing their parents do harm to each other. Or abusive partner doing harm to their mother per se or sister. Just seeing the harm that can be done. And just really recognizing that this is an issue. We can't mask it through faith and through text in a way that's not helping people.

And then the whole idea around socialization. A lot about socialization comes from who we see Biblical figures are and how men are and how women are in the faith context. So to really be honest and open about that and breaking that down about what are the images that people see. What are the words that are being used to describe text. And then putting all of that together to really kind of break down what is healthy, what is unhealthy, what is acceptable in terms of relationships, and using the tool of faith or the book of faith as a way of breaking that down.

>> Uh-huh, yeah. And it's a long-term process. It's not just getting a training and having a telephone number. Because there are, as Q said, issues around interpretation of sacred text. But what does accountability mean in church and how do you understand marriage. And one of the biggest mistakes that a lot of faith leaders make is that they try to but for couples counseling. And as we know in the situation of domestic violence, that's the last thing that should happen. So that's probably in every training and workshop we do, that's the main thing we want people to walk away with. The idea that do not call the person who is abusing up and tell them to come to your -- to meet with you and the person who is being abused. And try to, you know, work something out. And we don't want to sacrifice peoples' lives for the idea of having a family and marriage work out. And that is really an impulse that happens.

And just to understand what accountability is. And to believe the person -- both the person who is being victimized. Very often there's that same tendency that the whole society has not only to deny but to rationalize or justify or minimize what's going on. And it's just -- I think after significant training, people do get the idea like, okay, I can't do that. I have to listen, listen, listen. And not make assumptions about what I want to have happen.

>> Right. And I think Sally and I from just doing co-facilitator trainings together with faith clergy leaders and faith communities, we have so many examples and stories of that. I think just to underscore what Sally mentioned about like this idea of couples counseling. Like we could be on this podcast and Sally and I are in an abusive relationship. And you ask us a question, Sally, is Q harming you in any way? And I'm

sitting right next to her, looking at her, staring at her, threatening her in some way. You're not going to get a genuine answer, right? And if she does say that and you, as the facilitator or the faith leader, does not know what to do with that information, you could really exacerbate the violence once the people leave out of that room. So it's important to really be honest about what it is, the techniques. And discern. You have to really figure out is there a power or control dynamic here? How does that manifest itself?

And as men who are helpers in the work around domestic violence and intimate partner violence, it's important for us I think to even do more deeper work, as Sally and I mentioned, there's more work that has been done with men than survivors. Because this choice to be abusive or this rationalization to be abusive is very different from the choice to -- the prohibiting and limited choices that survivors have to just leave an abusive relationship. So I think it's important that faith leaders, we're taking those that are male, can really discern what is happening. And can see through the same socialization that we have received as men from each other when it's in front of us. So I think that critical thinking or that analysis of family dynamics, relationship dynamics, just how power works I think is important to be able to recognize. And if they can do that -- and the work that Sally and I do with faith communities, it's not just working with the victim survivor and giving them the respite and health and care and safety that they need, it's changing the culture of the faith community. So it's not just the pastor and the leader. They play a role. Attitude is a reflection of that leadership that they give. But also the rumor mills that are connected to churches. If there's a lack of a policy or protocol when there's a domestic violence situation in that church, things can go very, very wrong very quickly. And if the pastor is not preaching about it along with the protocol, all with the services that are available within with the church or connected to a community-based organization, all of those things kind of need to be in place. And they play a role in making that happen.

>> This is such an important topic and I want to thank both of you for such wonderful information and so many tips. And I think I want to extend an invitation to continue talking about this topic. As we all learned, 30 minutes is really not enough. So this is just the beginning of our collaboration here between CONNECT New York and the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. So again, thank you both for joining us today. Have a wonderful rest of the day. And we --

>> Thank you.

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