Religion and Domestic Violence

Information and Resources

KEY ISSUE

Working With Victims

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KEY ISSUE
Working With Victims

Religion and faith are part of deeply held belief systems for many people and can play a significant role in the experiences of victims and survivors of domestic violence. Battered women of faith may look to faith leaders as sources of spiritual nurturing and guidance and often seek their support before or in lieu of traditional domestic violence services. Religious scholars, however, have acknowledged that the institutional structure and lack of training in theological schools about how to address violence against women can contribute to the perception that communities of faith support batterers, blame victims and encourage them to return to dangerous situations (Fortune, 2003). Similarly, secular domestic violence advocates may feel ill-equipped to address the spiritual concerns of victims and survivors due to a lack of training. Both faith communities and secular advocates who are not prepared to respond to a battered woman of faith may inadvertently contribute to her feelings of abandonment, isolation, and guilt. Supportive faith communities can add a unique dimension to the sometimes overwhelming experience of seeking help, and secular domestic violence service programs that are sensitive to the values and beliefs held by battered women of faith can help them identify options and resources that are relevant and unique to their situation. Education and awareness can help faith leaders and secular advocates begin to create safe and supportive environments that honor individual choice, celebrate survival and help victims identify personal strengths and resources.

Because the overwhelming majority of domestic violence victims are women abused by a male partner, this packet most commonly uses “she” or “battered woman” when referring to a victim of domestic violence, and “he” when referring to a “batterer.” While women’s use of violence towards male partners does exist, close examination of the issue reveals that it is historically, culturally, motivationally and situationally different from male violence towards female partners (Das Dasgupta, 2001), and research shows that the overwhelming majority of domestic violence cases involve male violence against female partners. In addition, since existing analyses of domestic violence and religious/faith communities focus on consecrated unions between men and women, the discussion of domestic violence is limited to male-female couples (see Interpretations of Religious Doctrine for more information). All victims of domestic violence, however, deserve protection, support and responsive advocacy, including victims in same sex relationships and male victims abused by female partners.
WOMAN-DEFINED ADVOCACY

Batterer control stifles a woman’s right and ability to make personal choices and decisions. According to Jill Davies (1998), advocacy on behalf of victims and survivors of domestic violence must be built on the premise that she has this right and ability and starts from the woman’s perspective, integrates the advocate’s knowledge and resources into the woman’s framework, and ultimately values her thoughts, feelings, opinions and dreams. Neither telling a battered woman that she must leave an abusive relationship nor telling her to go home to her partner acknowledges her power to make decisions for herself based on what she believes to be her best options. It is very possible that what an advocate perceives to be a battered woman’s greatest risk is very different from what the battered woman knows and experiences. Life experiences and the experience of domestic violence are different, so what may benefit one woman may be detrimental to another. Battered women are the most familiar with and the most adept at responding to their individual situations, so the battered woman is the person most qualified to make decisions about her own situation. It is the advocate’s role, whether religious or secular, to provide each battered woman with resources and options and then to respect and support the decisions she makes.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Maintaining confidentiality is an important element in keeping victims and survivors of domestic violence and their children safe, as many are reluctant to speak to anyone out of fear that their situation will be made public, the batterer may retaliate if the abuse is disclosed to anyone, or that the authorities (criminal justice, human services or immigration officials, for example) will be required to intervene. Confidentiality laws vary from state to state as do mandatory reporting laws regarding spousal or child abuse. It is important, therefore, for faith leaders and secular advocates to familiarize themselves with the laws in their state and to inform battered women of those mandates before any detailed information about the abuse is disclosed. Clarity as to one’s role and obligations as an advocate or faith leader and the assurance, if possible, that her situation will not be discussed without her express permission may help a battered woman feel that she has found a safe place to talk about her experiences. This is particularly important if both the victim and the batterer have contact with the same person.

SAFETY PLANNING

The experience of a victim of domestic violence is often much more complex than a decision to stay in or leave an abusive relationship. The ability to assess personal risks, strategize and make decisions that protect self and children incorporates the resources available at each point in time. Battered women’s advocates refer to this as “safety planning,” but for a battered woman it is a matter of survival. By the time a woman has approached a trusted member of her faith community or a secular domestic violence program for help, she
Battered women must constantly modify and re-evaluate these plans, often minute to minute, not only to adapt to their changing situations, but also to proactively protect themselves and their children based on their familiarity with their partner’s behavior and what they recognize to be their greatest risk or concern.

has already developed a safety plan of her own. Battered women must constantly modify and re-evaluate these plans, often minute to minute, not only to adapt to their changing situations, but also to proactively protect themselves and their children based on their familiarity with

their partner’s behavior and what they recognize to be their greatest risk or concern. Faith-based and secular advocates can help a woman build on the plans she has already devised for herself by helping her identify and analyze additional options.

ADDRESSING RELIGIOUS CONCERNS

Victims of domestic violence who have deep-rooted faith or religious beliefs may experience particular crises, such as acute feelings of abandonment by their faith (Fortune, 1991). Victims of domestic violence may feel that they are meant to suffer at the hands of their abusers because an interpretation of their religion permits it, or that the abuse is a form of punishment for their failure to live their lives according to their faith. Batterers may know this and use faith or religious precepts as tools to manipulate and control their partners. The feelings of abandonment may be by design of the abuser, as isolating the victim from sources of support such as family, friends and faith community is a powerful means of enhancing control over a victim. An advocate’s ability to respond to some of these concerns may help a battered woman to find support and healing through her own faith or religious belief systems. Information on interpretations of Jewish, Muslim and Christian doctrine and traditions relative to marital relations and violence against women are discussed in further detail in the Religion and Domestic Violence: Interpretations of Religious Doctrine packet.

ACKNOWLEDGING PERSONAL LIMITATIONS AND BIASES

Faith leaders who are familiar with the dynamics of domestic violence can effectively identify the problem, be available to address the issues of faith that a battered woman may experience, and make appropriate referrals (Fortune, 1991). Much in the same way, secular advocates who educate themselves about the role of faith and spirituality in a battered woman’s experience are more conscious of where their expertise ends and where someone else’s begins, and can also make appropriate referrals. A critical aspect of assisting victims and survivors of domestic violence who may also experience religious or spiritual conflict is for all advocates to identify the personal biases and professional limitations that influence their attitudes and behaviors toward a battered woman and hinder their ability to respond to the complexities of her situation. Unrecognized and unexplored biases that make
assumptions about victimization on the basis of religion or any other aspect of identity perpetuates oppressions in the lives of battered women. Evaluating assumptions and limitations in working with victims of domestic violence will enable advocates to respond more effectively and sensitively. There are numerous resources and tools available that are designed to assist secular and faith-based advocates identify and examine personal assumptions and other biases (see Religion and Domestic Violence: Resources) and, in addition, many theological schools and universities with theology programs offer courses on multicultural issues in counseling which help develop the student’s awareness of their own assumptions, values and biases. Collectively, educated and sensitive faith-based and secular advocates can provide a much more comprehensive approach to helping battered women identify and utilize the resources available to them. Information on developing a collaborative response to domestic violence will be discussed in further detail in the Religion and Domestic Violence: Developing a Religious Response packet.

COLLABORATIONS

Faith leaders and secular advocates each have unique and parallel roles in the effort to eliminate domestic violence from the lives of women and children. The ability of each to respond appropriately to the experience of a battered woman of faith can be significantly impaired by a lack of sensitivity and education relative to the dynamics of domestic violence and to her faith and the role it plays in her life. By attempting to fully understand domestic violence and how her faith can be a resource for her, faith-based and secular advocates can begin to develop comprehensive and supportive responses to domestic violence that remain sensitive to the uniqueness of each woman’s situation.

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).
Works Cited


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:


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