

## **FAMILY VIOLENCE: A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

Family violence refers to a pattern of violent and coercive behavior exercised by one adult in an intimate relationship over another. It may consist of repeated, severe beatings, or more subtle forms of abuse, including threats and control.

Statistics reflect that 95% of the victims of family violence are women, although men may also be victims. But regardless of who is being victimized, family violence is a serious problem that needs to be addressed by religious communities worldwide.

### *Four Basic Types of Family Violence*

**Physical assault** includes such behaviors as shoving, pushing, restraining, hitting or kicking. Physical assaults may occur frequently or infrequently, but in many cases they tend to escalate in severity and frequency over time.

**Sexual assault** occurs any time one partner forces sexual acts which are unwanted or declined by the other partner.

**Psychological assault** includes isolation from family and friends, forced financial dependence, verbal and emotional abuse, threats, intimidation, and control over where the partner can go and what she can do.

**Attacks against property and pets**, which may include the damage or destruction of household objects or treasured objects belonging to the victim, hitting the walls, or abusing or killing beloved pets, also constitute domestic violence.

### *Profiles of Battered Women and Their Batterers*

Women who are being battered are as different from each other as non-battered women. They come from all walks of life, all races, all educational backgrounds, and all religions. Anyone experiencing any of the patterns of abuse listed above is a victim of domestic violence.

Just as with battered women, men who batter fall into no specific categories. They also come from all class backgrounds, races, religions, and walks of life. They may be unemployed or highly-paid professionals. The batterer may be a good provider, a sober and upstanding member of the community, and a respected member of his church.

### *Why Women Stay in Abusive Relationship*

A victim often stays in an abusive relationship because she is terrified that her abuser will become more violent if she leaves, just as he may have threatened. Many are appropriately fearful for their lives. She may believe he will try to take her children away from her. She may fear she cannot support herself and her children alone. Often she is too embarrassed and ashamed to admit that she is a battered wife. She may stay because she needs love and affection, and because she is afraid no one else will want her.

Then perhaps she has reached out for help but has been advised by well-meaning church leaders and friends to try harder to be a good wife, to pray more, and have faith that things will get better. Or maybe she has been told it is her Christian duty to remain in her marriage, for the sake of her children and her responsibility to her husband. Such responses have only led her to believe there is no hope for escape from her problem.

Many need help to understand the deeper issues such as the Christian's understanding of suffering, mutual submission in marriage, the difference between discipline and punishment, repentance which includes a change in behavior and restitution wherever possible, forgiveness as a process, and the discernment which will enable the persons involved to know whether a relationship should be restored or its loss grieved.

Victims of family violence need to understand that the abuse is not their fault. They need assurance that they are not alone and that help is available. They need practical assistance to identify and access the resources available to them. They may need protection and help to process the spiritual questions that arise in their minds.

Perpetrators also need help to take responsibility for the pain they are bringing into the lives of family members who should be able to count on them for love and support. They need to be held accountable for their actions and encouraged to seek the professional intervention necessary to bring about a change in behavior if relationships are to be restored.

### *Understanding the Abuse Cycle*

In some abusive relationships, a cycle reoccurs which often prolongs a woman's tolerance of the situation because she believes the situation will surely improve. The cycle has three phases:

**Phase I.** During this tension building phase, the wife tries very hard to avoid the behaviors she knows will upset her husband. She learns to coax, cater, and defer. She tries to read the signs of building rage, carefully picking her way through daily contacts. The batterer, with mounting tension, watches her and looks for reasons to blame her for his rage.

**Phase II.** This acute stage is predominated by the battering incident. Realizing his rage is out of control, he finds reasons to blame her, to teach her a lesson. The least incident triggers his action. The reign of terror can last for hours or for days. Fear that any effort on her part to seek help will only escalate the violence often keeps her from telling anyone.

**Phase III.** A period of kindness, contrition and loving behavior from the husband usually follows. Often he will beg for forgiveness and make tearful promises. She wants so much to believe he will change. Many times she feels it is her responsibility to hold the family together, to give him another chance to improve. But when she assumes that his kindness or his promises constitute a long-term change in attitude and behavior, she is unrealistically optimistic.

Women, misled by the abuse cycle, need to understand that family violence is a learned behavior. Abusers have seen abuse modeled, often in the families in which they grew up. They have also experienced personally the power and control which abusive behavior offers them. They are not merely the victims of stressful circumstances, they choose to exert power and control over another through abusive behavior, and they pick their victims selectively. Apart from a change in the attitude and behavior of the abuser, the abuse will predictably escalate and relationships cannot safely be restored.

Professional intervention can put an end to some future family violence if the batterer is willing to accept responsibility for his actions and seek treatment. But abuse will not just go away. Intervention is essential. The goals of this intervention are to protect the victim, stop the abuse, hold the abuser accountable and help those involved access the professional services needed.

### *An Appropriate Church Response*

The Bible clearly indicates that a distinguishing mark of Christ's followers is the quality of their human relationships. Christian relationships are characterized by love and mutuality rather than

tyrannical control or the misuse of power and authority. The New Testament metaphor of the church as the "household of faith," suggests that the church should function as extended family, offering acceptance, understanding, comfort and practical help to everyone, especially those who are hurting or disadvantaged.

The Church can do much to stop the downward spiral of abuse and violence in families, to assist the abused and their abusers in finding help, and to prevent the continuance of violence in families of future generations. The gospel calls the community of faith to:

- Affirm the dignity and worth of each human being and decry all forms of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and family violence.
- Recognize the global extent of this problem and the serious, long term effects upon the lives of all involved.
- Hold abusers accountable for their actions and highlight the injustices of abuse and speak out in defense of victims.
- Break the silence and create an atmosphere where secrets can be told and help found.
- Guard against ostracism within the family or church community.
- Seek expert assistance and cooperate with other professional services to listen and care for those suffering from abuse and family violence, loving and affirming them as persons of value and worth.
- Provide a ministry of reconciliation where changed attitudes and behavior open possibilities for forgiveness and new beginnings.
- Assist families in grieving relationships that cannot be restored.
- Address the spiritual questions confronting abused persons.
- Seek to understand the origins of abuse and family violence and develop better ways of preventing the recurring cycle.
- Strengthen families through education and enrichment opportunities which empower them to relate to one another in more healthy ways.

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