"Social Work Practice and Domestic Violence: Faith-Based Implications"

Thank you for taking part in this home study text-based course. The purpose of this course is to help practitioners gain a better understanding of working with victims of domestic abuse, especially within the context of religion and faith traditions.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) affects women across cultural, socio-economic, and religious groups. IPV is an issue that is still prevalent and significant in most cultures. This violence occurs too often by the people they trust most and within the communities they have come to depend on. It is a problem that impacts social workers across many different fields of practice.

There tends to be little to no difference in the prevalence of IPV within religious groups as to that of the general population. However, the pressure to stay in abusive relationships and to conform to specific religious norms and beliefs may be greater than in other population groups. Women in faith communities tend to turn to their clergy, pastors, or religious leaders for help, thus raising the issue of preparedness of clergy for this task. In the same way, social workers and other service providers to whom these women will reach out need to understand the complexity and specific dynamics of abuse within a religious context, and the impact of spirituality on the healing process.

The following text-based course contains two separate readings pertaining to religion, faith communities, and intimate partner violence. The first article you will read is *Christianity and the Experience of Domestic Violence: What Does Faith Have to Do with It?* by Nancy Nason-Clark. The second article presented is *"Because of my beliefs that I had acquired from the church…': Religious Belief-based Barriers for Adventist Women in Domestic Violence Relationships"* by Marciana Popescu, René Drumm, Sylvia Mayer, Laurie Cooper, Tricia Foster,

Marge Seifert, Holly Gadd, and Smita Dewan. Contact information for each author can be provided upon request.

At the conclusion of each article you can find a complete reference section to support the readings.

After completing this course, you will be able to:

1. List four different perspectives or experiences, which collectively help illuminate the web of connections surrounding Christianity and violence in the family setting.

2. Identify no less than two findings of a study exploring religious belief-based barriers that deter women survivors of intimate partner violence in a conservative Christian Community from changing their circumstances.

Upon completing the reading section of this course, please take the 10 question post-test located on the website provided to you when you purchased this course. After achieving a score of at least 80% and completing the training evaluation, you will receive your CE certificate verifying that you have earned 1 continuing education contact hour approved by the Association of Social Work Boards.

We hope this course will help you in your work with or understanding of the issue of IPV within faith communities. Thank you again for your interest in this course, and for your interest within this critical interest within social work.

If you have any questions or concerns about the course or course content, please contact NACSW at info@nacsw.org, or 203.270.8780.

Christianity and the Experience of Domestic Violence: What Does Faith Have to Do with It?

Nancy Nason-Clark

Domestic violence is a pervasive reality that knows no boundaries of class, color, country, or faith perspective (Stirling, Cameron, Nason-Clark, & Miedema 2004; Timmins, 1995). Its prevalence around the world has been documented through statistics collected by government agencies, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations Secretariat (Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2001/2010). Yet, religious voices are often silenced, or sidelined, and a holy hush still operates in many congregational or denominational circles (Nason-Clark, 2004; Fortune, 1991; Potter, 2007).

From the earliest days of the battered women's movement, there was a reluctance to see any perspective informed by religious language or passion as part of the *solution* to abuse (Brown & Bohn, 1989). Yet, it was undeniable that a woman's religious faith might shape her experience and disclosure of battery and the road she would choose to travel in her quest for wholeness in its aftermath (Boehm, Golec, Krahn and Smyth, 1999; Clarke, 1986; Fiorenza & Copeland, 1994; Halsey, 1984). There was mounting evidence that some abused women were turning to their religious leaders for assistance (Rotunda, Williamson and Penfold, 2004; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Horton & Williamson, 1988; Weaver, 1993). But the story of what happened when men, women, and children looked to their faith community after terror occurred at home was yet to be told.

For almost twenty years, my research program has been attempting to fill this void through a series of studies—both quantitative and qualitative—aimed at understanding the interface between religion and domestic violence. Some religious survivors claim their faith sustains them through the protracted, ugly reality of domestic abuse. It empowers them, through spiritual and practical resources, to flee the abuse and seek safety and solace in a context free from the violence of the past. Others are consumed by the sacred silence, fighting demons both within and without. They are ultimately prevented from leaving behind the fear or reality of abuse.

There are many angles to the story of abuse in families of faith, some connected to survivors, or to perpetrators, or to those professionals who seek to offer them support or accountability in

its aftermath. In this article, I propose to begin to unravel some of the complexities in the relationship between faith and domestic violence, and the struggle to build bridges between secular and sacred community response networks.

This article draws on results that emerge from the following studies:

- Tensions, Contradictions and Collaborations between clergy and transition house workers in Canada (Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997; Nason-Clark, 1996).
- Pastoral Knowledge and Experience of Abuse in Congregational Life (Nason-Clark, 1997, 1998b).
- Pastoral Counseling and Abused Religious Women (Nason-Clark, 1999; Nason-Clark & Kroeger, 2004).
- Religious Women-Helping-Women Who are Abused (Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997; Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997b; Nason-Clark, 1995).
- _Clergy in Mainline Denominations and Experience Responding to Abuse (Nason-Clark, 2000a, 2000d).
- Faith-Based Batterer Intervention Programs: a 10 Year File Study (Fisher-Townsend, Nason-Clark, Ruff, & Murphy, 2008; Nason-Clark, Murphy, Fisher-Townsend, & Ruff, 2003).
- Professionals Working with Male Batterers (Fisher-Townsend, 2008; Nason-Clark & Fisher-Townsend, 2005).
- _Understanding the Stories of Men Who Act Abusively Over Time (Nason-Clark & Fisher-Townsend, 2008).
- Global Strategies to Understand and Respond to Abuse in Families of Faith (Nason-Clark, 2004).

I have attempted to harness some of the results from these selected studies to highlight four different perspectives, or experiences, which collectively help us to understand the web of connections surrounding Christianity and violence in the family context. Ultimately, we are challenged to ask: what does faith have to do with it?

Four Perspectives on the Experience of Religious Women Who have been Violated

Spiritual Dimensions of the Journey for a Survivor of Abuse

When religious women seek assistance from their pastor in the aftermath of domestic violence, they are looking for help with practical, emotional and spiritual needs (Nason-Clark

and Kroeger, 2004). For women of faith, even some of the practical and emotional issues that surface have spiritual undertones. *Is it okay for a Christian to seek refuge at the local shelter? Should an abused woman enter the workforce, or continue to be a full-time mom? Does God expect a victim of her husband's abuse to forgive her husband seventy times seven?*

As a result, abused Christian women report that sometimes they feel pulled between what they perceive as the teachings of their church, including the behavior or advice of its leaders, and their personal safety and emotional health (Nason-Clark, 1999). Moreover, since many pastors do not refer abused women who seek their help to secular community-based agencies, women who look for help in a variety of contexts (both within and beyond the household of faith) may feel that they have let their faith community down. Religious women suffering abuse are often disappointed to find that there is limited awareness and understanding of domestic violence by their leaders, modest knowledge of the resources available, and a lack of ability (or discomfort) to offer them help of an explicitly religious nature (i.e., prayer, Bible readings, spiritual counsel) (Nason-Clark, 1998).

When religious leaders speak out about violence during the weekly routine of church life, its impact on those who have been violated is profound (Kroeger, Nason-Clark and Fisher-Townsend, 2008). However, one of the best-kept secrets of congregational life is the support that women of faith offer to each other in and beyond the local church setting (Beaman-Hall and Nason-Clark, 1997b; Nason-Clark, 1995, 1997). One of the implications of this finding for those who practice social work is to gently encourage a woman of faith (who may feel cut off from her congregation or its leadership) to seek out other women in her church or religious network at her point of need. Like any disclosure of a personal nature, she will need to choose her confidantes wisely.

For over twenty years, through my research and speaking engagements, I have been hearing the stories of abused Christian women, told by survivors and those who have walked alongside them. Often their spiritual needs are primary on the road to personal well-being. Like a shattered window, an abused woman reports that her life as she knew it has been blown apart. Yet, the pastor and other community-based professionals, such as her lawyer, social worker, or advocates at a shelter, can help her to pick up the pieces of her broken life and reclaim strength and safety.

Many religious women want to maintain the illusion of an intact family (Nason-Clark, 1997; 2000a). She may be very reluctant to leave her husband and seek alternative solutions for

personal safety and emotional health. She may cling unrelentingly to the promise she made, many years before, to love and honor her husband until death. She may feel it is her responsibility to keep on forgiving, to keep on trying to salvage the marriage, and to never give up hope that her husband might change. In point of fact, through our research we have found that most religious women who are abused do not consider themselves to be battered wives (Nason-Clark, 1996; 2004). On the contrary, they feel simply like their lives—and their families—are falling apart.

The resources that religious women seek in the aftermath of domestic violence in part differentiate them from other abused women. They are often very reluctant to seek secular, community-based sources of support, preferring to look to others of like-minded faith for assistance—pastors and lay alike. Since many faith communities place the intact family on a pedestal, religious women are especially prone to blame themselves for the abuse, believe they have promised God to stay married until death, and experience both the fear and reality of rejection at church when attempts to repair the relationship fail.

It is imperative that those in the helping professions—like social workers—understand some of the unique and specific needs of clients who are very religious. As a bridge builder, a social worker can help to build an alliance between a community-based agency and communities of faith. Sometimes these bridges will be one person at a time: an abused woman on her caseload and her pastor. Sometimes these bridges will be agency or congregation specific: the mental health clinic and a downtown historic church. Other times, as a case manager, the social worker may be encouraging other professionals with whom she or he works to include a faith perspective around the collaborative community table.

In the aftermath of violence in the life of an abused woman, there are so many questions to be answered, questions that can only be addressed by someone with spiritual credentials, like a religious leader, or in-depth religious knowledge, like a faith-enriched therapist. Whether an abused religious woman first seeks help in a community-based agency or a church, she should be able to expect that her story of abuse is taken seriously, that she is given accurate, practical advice, that her safety and security is the top priority, and that her faith perspective is understood and respected. For many Christian women of deep personal faith, the experience of domestic violence in the family context is intricately intertwined with her spiritual life in such a way that it would be impossible to understand one separate from the other.

Perspectives of Men Who Participate in Faith-Based Batterer Intervention Programs

Justice, accountability, and change are all imperative features of intervention services offered to men who abuse their wives or intimate partners. While some come voluntarily, most men who attend batterer intervention classes do so because they have little or no choice in the matter—they have been mandated by the courts as a result of a conviction for domestic violence, or referred by wives, therapists and/or clergy as a final gasp before the relationship is considered dead.

Religious women, in particular, are very hopeful that intervention programs can change violent men. Since many abused *religious* women do not wish to terminate their relationship with the abuser—either temporarily or forever—they hold out great faith that if only their partner were to attend such a program, the violence would cease and peace would be restored to the marriage. But is there any evidence upon which to base such hope?

In the first ever attempt to document empirically the characteristics of men who sought assistance from a faith-based batterers' intervention program in the United States, we analyzed over 1000 closed case files. Comparing this data to men in secular programs revealed that the faith-based program had a higher proportion of men who had witnessed or experienced abuse in their childhood homes, while rates of alcohol abuse and criminal histories were similar (Nason-Clark et al., 2003). Another finding to emerge from this data is the role of clergy in encouraging or "mandating" men who seek their spiritual help to attend a faith-based intervention program. In fact, men who were clergy- referred were more likely to complete (and graduate from) the 26 week program (followed by the six month monitoring phase, making a total of 52 weeks) than those whose attendance was mandated by a judge (Fisher-Townsend et al., 2008). Since the faith-based program participants have more life stability factors (currently married, employed, higher education, etc.) this may reinforce their willingness to complete the program and to alter their abusive ways (Nason-Clark et al., 2003). Sharing a religious worldview with the other men in the program may actually provide a *safe place* for these abusive men to challenge themselves and each other, and look toward a day when their abusive past will no longer control their present reality (Nason-Clark, 2004).

Some men in the program do not complete the entire 52-week program and "graduate." Rather, they drop out, or attend only periodically—when a crisis occurs or an ultimatum is given. Those who are court-mandated must complete 52 classes or face the implications of their non-

compliance. In this state-certified program, there are several groups a week, each with at least 15 men and two facilitators.

The Curriculum is not dissimilar to that of a secular program, but the agency's staff includes only men and women committed to their Christian faith. When the men raise issues of spirituality, religion, or the Bible, the facilitators respond using the language of their various faith traditions. They are knowledgeable about the Bible and well prepared to counter any claims made by program participants that Scripture justifies abuse or violent acts. They hold men accountable using both secular and religious language. For men of faith, this is very powerful. Here a man's religious ideology is harnessed in ways that have the potential to nurture, monitor, and reinforce a violent-free future.

While we might be tempted to conclude that these results relate only to faith-based programs, there are some very important lessons here for those who work with the violated or those who act abusively. It is extremely useful to harness any spiritual resources that might add weight to either the criminal justice or therapeutic response to violence in the family context. For men of faith, the word of a pastor carries weight (Fisher-Townsend, Nason-Clark, Murphy and Ruff, 2008). Since many faith traditions offer a *language of hope* and a theology that includes *new beginnings*, building bridges between a religious man who acts abusively and his pastor increases the possibility of the man doing the work needed to change his behavior, while at the same time providing enhanced accountability as that work progresses.

Yet, there is great reluctance amongst batterers to assume responsibility for their actions (Ptacek, 1988b; Scott & Wolfe, 2000). When they begin the program, most of the men are unwilling—and some are unable—to interpret their acts as abusive. *I am not violent* is a common phrase used by the men in their early days of program attendance (Fisher-Townsend et al., 2008). Some interweave spiritual overtones. They talk about submission, or authority, or hierarchy in the family. But most talk only indirectly about these issues, choosing instead references to how she *pushed their buttons*. Men both justify what they have meted out to their partner and blame her for the abuse. Essentially, most of the men believe, at least in the early days of coming to the agency, that they are entitled to certain things in a relationship and angry when their expectations are not met.

When religious leaders are able to walk alongside abusive men who are committed to their religious tradition, everyone in the family has the potential of direct benefit. It is very powerful

for a man who has acted abusively to see his faith community as supportive of his decision to change and pursue wholeness. In this way, pastors and other religious leaders are uniquely positioned to augment the process of recovery.

For social workers and others involved in the helping professions, it is critical to see the centrality of the religious belief system for many men who have acted abusively. It is a key component of their social context (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1998; Ptacek, 1988a), used to justify or defend their proclivity to power and control (Bancroft, 2002; Gondolf, 2002). Concepts such as submission reinforce these notions of religious entitlement (Shupe, Stacey, & Hazlewood, 1987). In this way, religious leaders and faith-enriched therapeutic staff are unique resources in any community-based efforts to create safe and peaceful homes. Faith is a core construct, central to any understanding of male entitlement, power and control.

Clergy Responding to Domestic Violence

From our studies of religious leaders, we have learned how difficult it is for pastors to see their intervention as successful if the marriage ended in divorce. Many clergy feel pressure to keep families together and marriages intact. In this way, pastoral counselors frequently find themselves in a very difficult double-bind: they are stalwart supporters of family values, including a reluctance to see any couples divorce, yet many of the families who seek their counsel need to separate in order to ensure the safety of all. Often with limited training, and a lack of resources at their disposal, they have not yet learned to identify that it is the relationship that has failed, not their advice.

Based upon data from over 300 conservative Protestant ministers, we learned that 98 percent have counseled a woman who has suffered from her husband's verbal aggression, 53 percent have helped a woman where the physical aggression of her partner involved activities like shoving or pushing, and 29 percent of pastors have been called upon to respond to a woman who has been repeatedly battered by her intimate partner.

While pastors differ greatly in their counseling experience and the advice that they offer, we found no evidence in our studies with pastors that they deliberately or directly dismiss an abused woman's call for help (Nason-Clark, 1997). Translating the rhetoric of "happy family living" into practical help for women, men, and couples in crisis is no easy task. It is time consuming and emotionally draining for the pastor, it is often discouraging, there are few simple answers, and the rewards can seem to be in short supply. As a result, pastoral counselors sometimes feel

like they are caught in the cross-fire between the ideology of the family that their denominations and churches hold dear and the nature, severity, and persistence of male aggression and abuse. In reality, clergy are far more likely to offer practical advice and support than they are to provide direct spiritual counsel, or explicit religious activities like prayer.

However, pastors are often slow to suggest dissolution of even a violent marriage and quite optimistic about the possibility of change in the life of a man who has acted abusively. But clerical optimism is frequently tempered by the unwillingness of such men to engage in the therapeutic process or to change their violent ways. When abuse is obvious and unrelenting, clergy appear to be motivated to bring safety and security to all. However, when the severity and the impact of abuse are obscured by other factors like alcohol abuse, clergy appear to have greater difficulty both identifying the battery and understanding the need for safety or healing for the victims.

Referral networks can help to ensure that the experts are identified and that inadequate pastoral training does not translate into poor or life-threatening counsel for abused women and their children. For many religious leaders, faith is integral to any response to abuse. Through referrals, faith-enriched counselors in secular agencies, or personnel in faith-based counseling agencies have the opportunity to bridge the gap between religious and non-religious resources. By inviting religious leaders to participate in any coordinated community responses to combat domestic violence, secular workers in therapeutic or criminal justice environments become acquainted with the unique needs of highly religious men and women. As an added impact, religious leaders who may be reluctant to make the first step are educated about domestic violence and also benefit from their interface with counselors. As a result, clergy become better equipped to offer best practices to people of faith who suffer the impact of domestic violence, victim and victimizer alike.

The Coordinated Community Response

Building bridges of collaborative action between community agencies and religious congregations is an enormous challenge. While recent years have witnessed many innovative projects that involve selected features of a coordinated community response, such as specialized domestic violence courts, or law enforcement officers who are uniquely trained to respond to cases of domestic violence and work in a multi-disciplinary context, most community-enhanced efforts to combat domestic violence or respond to its victims do not include a role for spiritual

leaders. However, pastors and other religious professionals play a critical role in calling religious men to accountability and offering spiritual and practical support to women and children who have been victimized by male aggression in the family context.

Over the years, our data has revealed several reasons why it is central to include religious leaders as part of any collaborative community response to domestic violence (Nason-Clark, 2006). These include the fact that religious leaders are chosen by many victims, chosen by some abusers, invested with moral authority, regarded as experts on marriage and the family, able to offer spiritual comfort and guidance, in regular contact with many who are marginalized by society, able to provide ongoing support after the crisis period is over, and skilled in talking about hope. Moreover, religious leaders provide educational and other resources to all age groups and many clergy have access to men, women and children at the point of individual crisis.

Religious women can be especially vulnerable when abused, for they are very likely to hold the intact family in high esteem and to consider separation and divorce as unsatisfactory options. Thus a community response needs to include input from various faith traditions if it wishes to meet the needs of all people who live in any given jurisdiction. When a pastor or other religious leader explains to a follower that "abuse is wrong" and a violation of how their faith tradition understands marriage before God, it has a powerful impact, much more powerful than the same words spoken by a social worker to an abused religious woman. Of course, not all members of faith communities will want assistance from their religious leader when domestic violence impacts the family home. However, for those who do, it is critical that such help be made available; it is critical, too, that the religious leader be informed and comfortable with referring parishioners to community agencies that work with victims or abusers. Referrals between resource providers are essential, yet our data has revealed that among those clergy who are poorly trained to respond to domestic violence, there is a great reluctance to refer those who do come for their help.

Since many faith traditions celebrate "family values," it is imperative that the leaders speak out when abuse becomes the reality of family life. A coordinated community response needs to include these voices—especially since they are invested with credibility by substantial numbers of people. As a result, they can offer comfort and guidance that is distinct from that offered in community-based agencies. As religious leaders, they speak the language of the spirit—using the sacred texts, prayers, and other rituals inherent in their faith tradition. Breaking the cycle of

violence often requires both the input of secular culture and support from the religious community and its leadership. There are specific religious contours both to the abuse that is suffered by people of deep faith and to the healing journey. As a result, many in the secular therapeutic community do not like to work with clients who are particularly religious (Nason-Clark, McMullin, Fahlberg and Schaefer, 2009; Whipple 1987). Without spiritual credentials, these workers find it difficult to challenge the religious ideation that is believed by the victim or perpetrator to give license to abuse.

For collaborative ventures between churches and community agencies to be successful in the fight to end to domestic violence—what I like to call paving the pathway between the steeple and the shelter—personnel from both paradigms must recognize the need to work together (Nason-Clark, 1997). A cultural language that is devoid of religious symbols, meanings, and legitimacy is relatively powerless to alter a religious victim's resolve to stay in the marriage no matter what the cost. Moreover, curbing violent behavior amongst religious men who believe they are entitled by their tradition to behave in this way must include spiritual language condemning the violence and religious resources to empower hope and change. Correspondingly, the language of the spirit must also include references to practical resources and secular knowledge. Otherwise, spiritual language alone may compromise a *victim's* need for safety, security, and financial resources to care for herself and her children or a *perpetrator's* need for justice and restraint. Building bridges takes time. It is hard work. It involves negotiating the delicate terrain of egos, values, disciplinary boundaries, and divergent strategies for a common goal. Yet, there is evidence that when you choose carefully with whom you will build bridges—looking for those with skills, training, and commitment—it is amazing what a coordinated community response can achieve (Nason-Clark, Mitchell, & Beaman, 2004).

What Does Faith have to do with Domestic Violence?

Based on twenty years of social science research, there is ample evidence that religious faith and domestic violence are co-mingled. The story of why a religious woman, man, teen, or child looks to his or her faith community for help in the aftermath of domestic violence is replete with spiritual overtones, as it is with practical issues. The story of what happens when help is sought is more diverse. Looking at the interface between religion and domestic violence from different vantage points reveals several unique features of the journey towards justice, safety, healing, and wholeness for a religious victim or perpetrator of abuse. Whether an abused

religious woman, or a religious man who acts abusively, is offered help first by their church, or through a community-based agency, it is critical that those who respond understand *both* the issue of domestic violence and the nature of religious faith. While safety and security must always be the first priority, accurate, practical advice is also imperative, offered in a way that respects one's faith traditions and professional best practices. Assisting men and women of deep faith in the aftermath of abuse in the family context often requires an in-depth knowledge of that community of faith. Many of the religious issues that surface require dialogue with someone possessing spiritual credentials—like a pastor—or spiritual sensitivity—like a faith-enriched therapist. In this way, religious leaders and agencies that offer either a faith-perspective or faith-sensitive staff are unique resources in any community-based effort to create safe and peaceful homes.

Perspectives informed by faith must be *part* of the solution to a community-based response to domestic violence. Perspectives informed by secular training, experience and credentials must be *part* of the solution to a faith-based response to domestic violence. For this to happen—for bridges to be built between churches and their communities and for the movement between them to be bi-directional—there must be mutual respect and mutual understanding, built on a foundational belief that ending domestic violence involves the entire community.

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"Because of my beliefs that I had acquired from the church…': Religious Belief-based Barriers for Adventist Women in Domestic Violence Relationships"

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Intimate partner violence (IPV) affects women in all socio-economic and religious strata. The belief systems women rely on affect their ability to acknowledge and challenge the abuse in their relationships and move towards safety. This study explores religious belief-based barriers that deter women survivors of IPV in a conservative Christian community from changing their circumstances. The religious belief-based barriers identified by women in this study consist of an internal layer of religious beliefs and external social reinforcers strengthening these beliefs. Using the Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984), we explore these belief barriers as they affect women primarily during the precontemplation and contemplation stages. The study contributes to the current literature in two ways: by presenting a set of beliefs that affect women in conservative faith communities, thus informing the practice of both social workers and clergy; and by introducing a new conceptual approach to change for women survivors of IPV in conservative faith communities.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) affects all population groups across cultures, socio-economic levels, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). While prevalence rates, risk factors, and health effects of IPV have been explored extensively and are well documented in the current literature (Hamberger & Phelan, 2006; Kropp, 2008; Riggs, Caulfield, & Street, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), there is less research on religiosity and the impact of religion or religious beliefs on IPV. In the past ten years, social scientists have had an increased interest in religious differences and the role of religion as a protective factor or a risk marker contributing to IPV (Drumm, Popescu, & Kersting, 2009; Ellison & Anderson, 2001; Popescu & Drumm, 2008).

Why Women Stay: Barriers to Moving Away from Abuse and Towards Safety

Factors affecting women's decisions to leave an abusive partner are mentioned repeatedly in

the literature. Petersen, Moracco, Goldstein, and Clark (2004) examined motivators and barriers for leaving abusive relationships. They identified three main categories of motivators (gaining knowledge, reaching an emotional or physical breaking point, and growing concern about children's safety) and six core barriers (pressure not to talk about or address IPV, failure to recognize events as IPV or that IPV was wrong, self-doubt and low self-esteem, fear of losses, fear of perpetrator, or desire to protect the perpetrator). Other barriers identified in the current literature and mentioned by this study include shame (Liao, 2006), fear of retaliation from perpetrators (Anderson, Gillig, Sitaker, McCloskey, Malloy & Grigsby, 2003; Hamberger & Phelan, 2006), denial of abuse or minimizing the seriousness of abuse (Leung & Monit, 2008), feelings of entrapment and disempowerment (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002; Bealaurier, Seff, & Newman, 2008), belief that health/social service providers would not be able to provide an appropriate level of individual assistance (Anderson et al., 2003), and fear of reporting policies (DeVoe & Smith, 2003). One study underscored the common feeling that, despite the abuse, many women find it easier to remain in the abusive situation rather than face the many obstacles to seeking help (Petersen et al., 2004).

The barriers to leaving an abusive relationship are both internal and external. A number of studies address external barriers, varying from service-related barriers and the women's perceptions of such barriers, to lack of resources (Fugate, Landis, Riordan, Naureckas, & Engel, 2005), race (Kaukinen, 2004), and cultural barriers (Erez, Adelman, & Gregory, 2008; Liao, 2006).

Religious Beliefs as Barriers to Moving Towards Safety

A number of studies identify religiosity as a protective factor that lessens the negative coping behaviors of abuse survivors (Pargament, 1997; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Specifically, one study notes that an increase in church attendance is associated with less emotional disturbance and spiritual disengagement among abuse survivors (Drumm et al., 2009). Conversely, religiosity can contribute to secondary IPV victimization. According to Nason-Clark (2004), among families of strong faith where abuse is present, there may be patterns of fear, vulnerability, and isolation paired with the promise to stay together until death do us part. Thus, the vulnerability to abuse is higher for religious women as they are less likely to leave, more likely to believe the abuser's promise to change, and commonly assume the blame for failing "their families and God and [for] not being able to make the marriage work" (p. 304). Nason-Clark (2004) finds women in faith

communities reluctant to end their marriage due to a religious ideology that portrays worthy women as wives and homemakers. Explicit religious notions such as forgiveness and sacrifice make it especially difficult for IPV victims in faith communities to acknowledge the abuse and seek outside help (Nason-Clark, 2004).

Besides internally developed barriers for women of faith, Neergaard, Lee, Anderson, and Gengler (2007) identify some of the external barriers posed by clergy and faith communities to women seeking a way out. Their study finds that religious leaders have a valuable role to play in providing counsel to women in their congregations as well as to women in the wider community who come to them for guidance. Because clergy are often sought out first by women of faith, it is important that clergy are prepared to respond appropriately to the problem of abuse. Beaulaurier, Seff, Newman, and Dunlop (2007) state that clergy responses were most often characterized as maintaining the status quo while offering little practical help. The belief that marriage is for life, which may prevent women from leaving an abusive relationship, is further strengthened by clergy's most frequent response (Miles, 2000). Miles (2000) finds that ministers tend to believe marriage must be saved at all costs and prefer "quick-fix" solutions such as "forgiving and forgetting the abuse" (pp. 149–150).

The current literature, when referring to barriers that affect women's decisions to challenge the abuse in their relationships, includes language that mostly refers to leaving the relationship as the only solution to abuse. This study introduces a new conceptual approach to addressing abuse and change that is more inclusive and strength-based: *moving away from abuse and towards safety*. Under this approach, change, safety, and healing are central, while recognizing that leaving the relationship may occur.

Theoretical Framework

Women victims of IPV in faith communities encounter a number of internal and external barriers that affect their ability to seek help and pursue change and move toward safety. The Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984) is one model researchers have used in understanding the change process. This model proposes six stages of change: precontemplation, contemplation, determination/preparation, action, maintenance, and relapse. While originally used with people struggling to change addictive behaviors, the Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change has been applied to individuals in abusive relationships as well (Anderson 2003; Dienemann, Campbell, Curry, & Landenburger, 2002;

Haggerty & Goodman, 2003). This model has important limitations when applied to the process of leaving an abusive partner (Khaw & Hardesty, 2009) because it focuses on individuals' efforts to change their own behaviors, and thus, it fails to account for the relational components that may be unique to the process of leaving an abusive relationship..

In the first stage of the model, precontemplation, people are seen as in denial of the problem. There is only a vague recognition that something may not be "right"; there is no full awareness of what the problem is. This lack of awareness may normalize abuse and prevent women from naming their experience as IPV. Generally, when a woman remains in the precontemplation stage, there is little hope of improving her situation.

In the contemplation stage, people weigh costs and benefits of change, start to define IPV as a potential issue, and wonder what to do about it. People in the determination/preparation stage of change try to determine the best course of action. There is an increased commitment to prepare for change, for example gathering phone numbers and resource information for the future. People in the action stage are actively involved in the change process. In the case of domestic violence, this would include taking actions to leave the abusive situation or in some ways actively seeking safety. Finally, in the maintenance stage, people use their efforts to sustain the change and prevent relapse.

This analysis focuses on the religious belief-based barriers that Seventh-day Adventist (Adventist) women encountered as they moved from abusive relationships to safety. The Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change will be used as a general framework only, to the extent to which it allows us to integrate findings in a larger context of change. Viewing these religious belief-based barriers through the lens of the theoretical model, we make some recommendations about how social workers and congregations can work together to reduce barriers to safety for women in conservative faith traditions.

Methods

Research Design and Procedures

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of Adventist women victim-survivors of spouse abuse. Our research question is: What religious belief-based barriers do Seventh-day Adventist women encounter as they move from abuse toward safety in their relationships? Because little is known about this particular subculture in terms of victimization and help-seeking, the methodology of choice was an inductive, qualitative approach. While

religious beliefs differ within as well as between various church denominations, this study aimed to identify issues that might emerge from the perceptions of a sample of Adventist women. Researchers gathered data through in-depth interviews and focus groups.

For the in-depth interviews, researchers recruited participants through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling procedures. By contacting pastors, conducting church presentations, and advertising in denomination publications, researchers recruited and interviewed 40 Adventist women who self-identified as survivors of spouse abuse. All participants were age 18 or older. Prior to collecting data, the research team received permission to conduct the study from Andrews University's Human Subjects Review Board and followed standard guidelines to protect research participants.

Three focus groups were conducted: two community focus groups with women living in an Adventist university community and a third focus group with women in a domestic violence shelter operated by a private Adventist entity. Researchers recruited participants for the community focus groups by distributing brochures in churches, health care facilities, schools, and shopping areas. For the shelter focus group, information about the study was mailed to the shelter's director, who distributed it to women in the shelter. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were emphasized when inviting women in the shelter to participate in the focus group. A total of 25 women participated in the three focus groups. There were no overlapping participants with the interviewees and the focus group participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

Researchers used an open-ended interview guide to assist in getting similar information from all participants. All interviewers were trained using the interview guide prior to conducting the interviews. The interview guide inquired about participants' victimization experience, their attempts at help-seeking, the effects of abuse, and ways in which the church might implement programming for prevention and intervention. Researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with participants who were offered $75 to honor their participation in the study. The interview time ranged from approximately one and a half to four hours in length.

The first step in organizing the raw data was to transcribe the recorded interviews. The research team members then reviewed the transcriptions for completeness and accuracy. Researchers used Provalis Qualitative Data Miner (QDM) software to facilitate the coding process. The analysis used the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Researchers initiated analysis by coding participants' themes throughout the data. As coding continued in the analysis process, researchers examined specific instances of the codes to clarify similarities and differences between the researchers' use of these codes, improving inter-coder reliability. Researchers addressed the issues of credibility and trustworthiness of the data by using peer debriefing and conducting negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research team met weekly to reach consensus on the emerging categories, themes, and types in the data.

Limitations of the Study

In addition to the limitation inherent in qualitative studies and snowball sampling, this study is limited by its focus on a single denominational group of women. It would be beneficial to interview women and men of many faith groups to further understand religious belief-based barriers. In addition, the study is limited by the nature of self-selected participants in the research process. It is likely that Adventist women who were currently in abusive relationships may not have had an equal opportunity to participate in the study as women who have left their abusive relationship.

Findings

Adventist women in this study encountered a number of religious belief-based barriers as they moved from being in their abusive relationships to experiencing safety. The findings highlight three categories of internal religious belief-based barriers that emerged from the analysis. Nearly all of the women in this sample (93%) held at least one of these belief barriers. These include beliefs about marriage and divorce, stereotypes about Christians, and beliefs about Christian gender roles. As women shared beliefs that held them in abusive relationships, they also revealed how these beliefs were externally reinforced by other people in their lives such as clergy, church members, family members, and partners.

Beliefs about Marriage and Divorce

More than two-thirds of the women in this sample shared a belief about marriage and/or divorce that discouraged them from moving towards safety in their relationships. These beliefs did not permit participants to readily recognize that they were in an abusive relationship, to weigh the pros and cons of changing their situations, to get help, or to feel confident after leaving their abusive marriages. The types of beliefs about marriage and divorce that emerged from the

analysis include the belief that marriage is for life and that divorce for any reason other than adultery is a sin.

Marriage is for life; divorce is not an option.

A predominant theme in the data regarding marriage and divorce is that marriage is for life; therefore, divorce is not an option. The women's religious belief system then translates into a mandate to stay married. This view acted as a barrier by eliminating the possibility of change for the victim, or by promoting the idea that the sanctity of marriage outweighs the abusive circumstances. The following quotes from participants relate how this belief was a cognitive obstacle to altering their situations.

> I believed that marriage was 'til death do us part and it never entered my mind that anything else would ever happen (Myrna).

> And that's why I struggled with that [leaving] too, being a Christian and thinking, you know this is just the way it is…My husband would get mad and he would scream right in my face…but I promised, 'til death do us part (Fanny).
> I didn't know if I was gonna survive it or not when we separated. I just always had the idea that I was married for life; there was no such thing as divorce in my vocabulary (Amy).

> To me, you know when you got married, that was forever. You know, you forgive seven times seventy and God only gave us divorce because of our hardheartedness…I think that [my religious beliefs] may have hindered, for making me believe that I needed to stay (Florence).

Divorce for any reason other than adultery is a sin.

Women in this sample voiced the belief that God hates divorce; they interpreted Bible teachings as allowing for divorce, but only in the case of adultery. Women did not give consideration to violence and abuse as a biblically-sanctioned reason for divorce; therefore, to get a divorce would be a sin. When their abusive marriages did not include adultery, women automatically excluded divorce as a possibility. These beliefs then became a barrier to change and movement towards safety. The following quotes from participants reveal their understanding

of God's comparative regard for divorce and abuse that created barriers to change.

> I would not have stayed…if I knew he was also unfaithful. And, 'cause see, then I had the biblical grounds because all that time I thought, "I can't leave him anyway."…[If I hadn't had biblical grounds] I would have gone on and endured (Lana).

> God is not happy without a good [marriage] relationship but He still hates divorce. Marriage is not problem-free. We believe we have to sacrifice (Emma).

> I felt like you could [divorce] only if there was adultery or the husband remarried (Darlene).

External Social Reinforcement of Marriage and Divorce Beliefs

Other people in the participants' faith community reinforced the belief that marriage is for life and that to divorce for any reason other than adultery is a sin. The following quotes from women note how clergy, church members, their husbands, and family members reinforced these beliefs. These external social reinforcements can intensify the women's own internal cognitive resistance to change, adding a layer to the already existing barriers.

Clergy.

> There has only been one pastor that has been positive…but the rest of them always believed that we should stay married no matter what (Joanne).

> He's [the pastor was] more the person where it's [marriage is] a process; you just have to live through the process. Satan will try to get you at all angles; you cannot let him win (Florence).

Church members.

> Some people thought I should have stayed in the marriage no matter what and worked it out.

> *Interviewer:* And who were those people?

> A lot of them were Adventists...There was another religious neighbor across the street that wasn't Adventist, but very religious, that did not want us to get divorced

(Kara). Eventually I finally got to the point where I felt like I had to stay in the marriage because godly people were saying, "You need to just pray more. God can work this out. God can change his heart" (Mindy).

Husbands.

And, uh, then he started to use God's Word and [church writings] pretty much on me. You know…"You should never entertain the thought that your marriage is a mistake," and because spiritually he was a person that God used to open my eyes to spiritual things. And I was really in love with God and I was really in love with him (Nora).

Family members.

About six months after we were married, I decided that I had made a huge mistake and that I needed to reverse it and I left. The day I left he threatened to shoot me with an M-16 machine gun. He pulled it out and starting shooting the tires on my car. I left and went to my parents' house, explained to them what was going on, and their thought process was that this was the decision that you made. And you know when you get married it is for life. You have to take the good with the bad. And I guess I always reached out to my parents thinking that they were going to be there to kind of console me and help me, but the attitude was always a pretty strict Adventist belief that once you're married it is for life regardless of the circumstances. That God obviously put you in that situation for a reason and you need to deal with it and make the best of it. So I did. I went back (Dora).

Stereotypes about Christians

The stereotypes that many women (68%) in this sample held regarding Christians became barriers to understanding the nature of their abusive situations and therefore to addressing abuse in their marriages. These stereotypes included the notion that Christians do not abuse others and that Christian marriages are essentially happy.

Good Christian men do not abuse their spouses.

Some women believed that if a person subscribed to a religious code of conduct, then abuse would not be possible. When women saw their husbands as otherwise "good Christians," they were reluctant to see their husbands' behaviors as possibly abusive. Therefore, this stereotype

that Christians did not abuse their spouses served to block the thought that they might be in an abusive marriage, which in turn kept them from contemplating change. The following quotes from participants offer insights into how these thoughts played out in terms of a barrier to change.

> And now as I look back I think, "What an idiot, why didn't I just leave?" You know? …but I kept thinking, I had met his parents, wonderful Christian parents, I thought…But his dad was an elder at the church. His mom, you know, was always doing stuff in the church and they were good Christians. I thought, "So this is ok"…. [I began] confiding in the counselor to where she helped me realize it [abuse] is not normal. I mean she kept pounding into me, "This is not normal. What he's doing to you is not what a Christian man does" Because in my mind, he was a Christian man (Karla).

> But I didn't have enough sense to question him because he was up preaching and teaching and leading. And I used to look at him and just be in awe at how the words would just flow (Nora).

Christian marriages are happy.

Women in this sample held stereotypes that maintained the belief that Christian marriages were essentially happy. As women began to grasp that "something is wrong" with this marriage, they often felt compelled to maintain an image of an ideal marriage or family. This need to project the expected picture of a contented marriage created a barrier for women to acknowledge to themselves and others that they were in abusive situations. The following quotes illustrate how their stereotypes about Christian marriage interfered with authenticity and their ability to admit their reality of being abused.

> You are part of a group of people who are looking at your life and you usually present yourself on Sabbath or Sunday with a perfect look and your family is just right. You don't want to mar the image. About the things that hold you in the marriage, you belong to a subculture and a different group of people who are on show all the time (Olivia).
> In my case, I tried to hide it, because I didn't want people to know, you know. It's kind of a stigma and you don't want people to think of you that—how could you do

something like that? How could you marry somebody like that? How could life be like that? (Dora).

I stopped going to church for about eight years because I couldn't continue living like this, you know, going to church every Sabbath and pretending like everything was so sweet and nice (Andrea).

External Social Reinforcement of Stereotypes about Christians

Women received messages from others in their faith communities that reinforced their stereotypes that good Christian men do not abuse and that Christian marriages are happy. The following quotes from participants reveal reinforcement of these stereotypes by others.

Husband.

But in the meantime, while he's doing all of this to me, at church he is charming, he is loving. When the preacher asked us to come to the front, those who want prayer, my husband helps me to kneel down, he helps me to stand back up. You know, everybody is seeing how attentive he is and so forth (Betty).

Clergy.

And I said "Bobby is sexually abusing me and tying me up," and I felt that I could confide in him [the pastor] a little bit. And I said "I need help." And then he says . . ."This is hard for me to believe . . . I have never seen any evidence of that in him. All the times I've ever been with him, he never even said a curse word or anything, so it's hard for me to believe" (Karla).

Church members.

Well, the church family had a hard time understanding because whenever we were at church, he always had his arm around me. He'd be so good to me at church, but the minute we got in the car and drove off the church property, he'd let me have it for something…. When I finally left him, people wouldn't even talk to me. I was doing him some wrong. They only saw his good side. I got so uncomfortable that I started going to another church (Darlene).

Faith Community and Leadership.

In the Adventist church is that number one, the leaders want the church to appear that everybody there is so righteous. Everyone there is ready for transla-tion…Nothing bad can happen in the church, so therefore if you are having a bad

marriage, you are too embarrassed to talk about it. You will not talk about it. And there you will wear this façade and you'll say and go on as if everything is ok (Nell).

I think people think that Adventists are really good people and that [abuse] doesn't happen in the church (Kara).

Beliefs about Christian Gender Roles

The man is the head of the house and women must submit to their husbands.

More than half (58%) of the women in this sample held beliefs about Christian gender roles, specifically the concept of men being the head of the household, which kept them from moving out of their abusive marriages. For this population, this idea of male headship refers to the belief that men are to be the head of the household and that women must submit their will to that of their husbands. The following quotes reveal how this belief affects the daily lives and decisions of women in the case of abuse..

We have an idea that whatever the situation we have to submit to [our husband] and we believe God expects that no matter what (Kassy).

I felt that divorce was unthinkable and that I had to submit to my husband, that I had to somehow make this marriage work (Judy).

He was sexually very demanding and very violent during sex and I thought…that because it had been drilled in me by the church that I was supposed to submit to my husband. I thought that I was supposed to submit to whatever he wanted no matter how perverse, vulgar, or vile, and he would force me to perform sexual acts that I wasn't comfortable with and beat me during those acts (Kay).

External Social Reinforcements about Christian Gender Roles

The following quotes illustrate how the participants' beliefs about Christian gender roles were externally reinforced by other people in their lives.

Clergy.

We'd had several sessions with the local pastor. You know, about problems in the home and I felt that he didn't see anything my way. The man is the head of the house and you know you've got to pretty much do what the head of the house decides. He believed man was the head of the house and I couldn't see that he got to

make every single decision (Barbara).

Husband.

He was one of those that would see the text and zero in on it. "Well, this text says the wife should be submissive to the husband." He zeroed in on that and took it radically (Veronica).

Christian friends.

And I got all kinds of Christian friends saying you're never supposed to say no to your husband. I tried not to say no (Brittany).

Why couldn't somebody show me that there was a way out sooner? That I didn't have to stay, because people were saying, "If you pray enough. If you have faith enough. If you just do good to him and meet his needs. Give in to him wherever you can, be kind to him. Fix his favorite meal" (Mindy).

Family.

I had already been programmed by my dad that when anybody superior asked you to do anything, especially if it was a male, that you were supposed to say yes. No was not an option (Joanne).

Discussion

The impact of IPV on women in faith communities is amplified by a belief system that obscures the notion of partner abuse and by the constant responses they receive from others in their immediate community. We have found three major categories of cognitive religious belief-based barriers that keep women in abusive relationships identified by the women in our study—beliefs about marriage and divorce, stereotypes about Christians, and beliefs about Christian gender roles. Each of these barriers acts internally, based on beliefs held and professed by women in faith communities, and externally, supported by views and perceptions of friends, family members, partners, church members, and clergy. These beliefs create cognitive barriers to change, manifested predominantly in the precontemplation and contemplation stages of Prochaska and Clemente's Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change.

Internally, the beliefs about marriage and divorce affect women's definition of violence and implicitly support a normalization of violence in their relationships. If marriage is forever and divorce for any reason other than adultery is a sin, then Christian women are presented with two options: either IPV does not occur in the person's conscious awareness or abuse becomes

normalized. With normalization of IPV comes the acquiescence to abuse as a cost worth paying for the gain of an everlasting marriage. Divorce without adultery is considered a sin, which creates a premise of guilt for any woman that would consider such a way out. These cognitive contexts result in keeping women from initiating any substantial movement toward safety.

The second internal barrier is formed by stereotypes about Christians and Christian marriage that preclude women from acknowledging abuse in their marriages, naming abuse for what it is, and challenging the ingrained expectation of a perfect happy marriage as the norm for Christian families. The stereotype that good Christian men do not abuse keeps women in denial as they struggle with a deep contradiction between beliefs/expectations and reality. Although they might start to see the abuse for what it is and begin to contemplate possible options for safety in their lives, women in faith communities deal with the pressure of presenting an image of an ideal marriage to fit with their notion of being good members of their Christian community.

Christian gender roles constitute another internal barrier, contributing to women's tolerance of abuse in intimate relationships. This polarization of roles between male authority and women's submission, seen as divinely prescribed, intensifies the indecision when it comes to moving from abuse to safety for women in faith communities.

All of these categories of internal faith-based barriers have an external layer that reinforces and maintains a belief system contributing to abuse and preventing women from seeking safety or pursuing change. These external barriers are represented by the women's perceptions of the community's expressed views on marriage and divorce, Christian gender roles, and Christian marriage expectations.

Our findings reveal that many times women's most significant support systems are contributing to keeping them in abusive relationships, as marriage is preserved and valued above individual worth and safety. As women contemplate change and start moving towards safety in their lives, they are pushed back by their partners (who use religious beliefs to keep them in the marriage), as well as friends, families, and communities of faith.

Within the faith community, the pastor's position and message on marriage and divorce and on patriarchal gender roles may seriously limit women's options when it comes to pursuing change and safety. Women in our sample also referred to an institutional/corporate belief that Adventists are called "to protect God's reputation" (Ada), with any attempt to disclose IPV being a threat to this quest, and a mark of imperfection that will affect the entire community.

The implications for social work practice include the need for understanding these double-layer barriers that may prevent women in faith communities from moving towards safety, especially if this leads them to leaving abusive homes. Furthermore, these findings contribute to a better response to what can sometimes be perceived as women's reluctance to talk about the abuse, or seek help outside their homes. The religious beliefs on marriage and divorce, Christian living and gender roles affect women's identity as well as their access to resources. These beliefs become crucial for social workers when discussing safety plans with women in abusive relationships or deciding on therapy approaches for women survivors of IPV in faith communities.

The Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change serves as a framework to enable social workers in identifying religious belief-based barriers that affect women's decision making during the precontemplation and contemplation stages. Additionally, we can explore the impact of these barriers on the other four stages of change: How do these barriers continue to prevent women from determining what to do (stage 3), from acting upon their decision (stage 4), and from maintaining the change they achieved and preventing relapse (stages 5 and 6). As social workers assess the impact of trauma on women's lives, being familiar with the faith-based internal conditioning that is so obvious in these initial stages of change will assist understanding women's decisions and identifying factors that contribute to resiliency and healing. Using the strength perspective (Saleebey, 2006), social workers become facilitators in the process of change, empowering women to progress from the precontemplation and contemplation stages to the action stage, moving from abuse towards safety.

Knowing that deeply held religious beliefs often play a part in abused Christian women's decisions about their marriages, Christian social workers may benefit from a careful examination of their own beliefs about marriage and divorce, the stereotypes they hold about Christians, and their own convictions surrounding Christian gender roles. It may be important to ask, "How do my beliefs impact my thoughts, feelings, and actions toward Christian women struggling to make decisions about their marriages? Do I believe that the sanctity of the marriage vows take precedence over the well-being of the individual? Conversely, is it possible that my beliefs lead me to urge women in abusive marriages to "get out" of their situations, or to become frustrated with women for holding such beliefs?

Once Christian social workers take a closer look at their own beliefs, we would recommend

that they take a more proactive approach in advocating for Christian IPV survivors. Christian social workers must bridge the gap between secular advocacy and shelter services and Christian IPV victims/survivors. Christian social workers could educate advocacy and shelter workers about typical beliefs that Christian women may hold so that they can be better prepared to work with the survivor from their own value system.

Finally, social workers also have a responsibility to educate pastors and church leaders about how religious beliefs impact their members' personal safety. Starting where the client is, social work practitioners will then take on their role as agents of change, and become proactive in advocating for pastor training on IPV, providing such training for clergy/religious leaders and faith communities, and creating empowering safe environments for women experiencing abuse in these communities. Ultimately, we hope that a better understanding of faith communities and barriers created by religious beliefs will empower social workers to build institutional networks and promote policy changes that will expand resources for women survivors of IPV, among secular and faith communities alike.

Social workers are uniquely positioned to act as educators, enablers, and advocates for religiously affiliated women suffering from IPV. We must become more intentional about educating congregants and clergy about the hidden nature of abuse among people of faith. In our roles as negotiators, mediators, and group facilitators, we must bridge the gap between churches and secular domestic violence programs by initiating dialog and developing meaningful working relationships. Above all, social workers should act to empower the faith community to gain increased competence and capacity to understand and break down barriers for those who come to the church hurting as a result of IPV.

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