

How Is the Church Combating Domestic Violence Among Its Ranks?

Domestic violence is one of the leading forms of injustice across the world and in the Christian church. One in three women are affected by domestic violence in their lifetime.

Domestic violence is a deeply rooted, regularly hidden and alarming communal reality. Churches can be a haven for people escaping domestic violence. But every so often, they can help propagate abuse by failing to help when necessary.

There are various reasons for this, including the church leaders failing to understand or being unwilling to admit that domestic abuse happens within their congregations. Churches have provided spaces for solace, belonging, support and fellowship for individuals suffering from racial discrimination; they have played a significant role in countering inequalities in health due to the trust bestowed upon them by local communities. The Christian church is among the most prominent institutions globally; therefore, it is vital to address the church's role in addressing domestic violence, supporting survivors, counseling and healing.

But how do we define domestic violence?

Domestic violence is defined as any behavior that an individual uses to control their partner through intimidation and fear. It comprises sexual, physical, economic, psychological and verbal abuse. Some examples of domestic abuse include insults, beating, threats to harm or kill, marital rape and forced abortion or sterilization.

According to a U.S. government survey, 53% of the perpetrators of domestic abuse were former or current boyfriends or

girlfriends. A third of all the abused were abused by a spouse, and 14% by an ex-spouse. Women ages 16-20 are three times more vulnerable than other groups to attacks by intimate partners; abuse victims between the ages of 35 and 49 face the highest risk of being killed.

Although abuse happens across economic and ethnic backgrounds, some groups face higher obstacles. Women of color are particularly at risk. Besides, in some communities, women are often required to keep marital issues within the home and ensure their family stays together regardless of the suffering and abuse.

Some suffer in silence with the fear that they might become outcasts in the community if they leave their marriages. Women in rural areas have fewer resources and their situation is made worse due to the distance and lack of transportation. Domestic violence is usually hidden in silence.

Many times, people are reluctant to interfere, even in situations where they suspect the occurrence of abuse and violence. Some have argued that intervening from outside endangers the sanctity of the home. Abuse and violence are as grave when they occur at home as in other places. However, even when reported, occasionally there are failures to protect the victims adequately or to scold the abusers.

Domestic violence has become common in some churches. According to Carol Winkelman, author of *The Language of Battered Women*, women often use religious language to justify abuse. Christian women suffering from domestic violence tend to use religious language and imagery and Christian symbolism to discuss evil and suffering, and to justify or tolerate abuse and stay in an abusive marriage.

Although the language of religion assures the women recovering from abuse, many churches use it to offer solid backing for a convention of patriarchal marriage. According to a 2012 study

by Steve McMullin et al., many women used religious language that implied submission and the notion of violence and suffering as their lot in life to justify abuse. Furthermore, abused Christian women are more likely to return to or remain in an abusive and unsafe relationship, quoting religious beliefs to back their decisions.

Domestic violence among Christian families is not uncommon. For that very reason, churches and church leaders must assist in exposing such atrocious behavior by refusing to remain hesitant to take on the topic of abuse. Our role and responsibility as the church is to speak out against all forms of injustice, even among our ranks.

Silence isn't the answer. As God's prophets, we are mandated to cry aloud and spare not, exposing sin and providing an opportunity for repentance. Stay tuned as I continue to bring awareness, expose the darkness and give answers to the topic of domestic violence within the church in future articles.
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