

The Shameful Secret of 'Christian' Domestic Abuse

Last Saturday, police responded to a call from a home in the tranquil Minneapolis suburb of Eden Prairie. Inside they found that Lyuba Savenok, a 23-year-old mother of two small children, had been stabbed multiple times. She was pregnant with her third child. Both died that morning.

Later, Lyuba's husband, Yeveginy ("Eugene"), confessed that he had killed his wife and fled the house with his kids. They are now in the custody of family members while he awaits trial.

This cute couple with the adorable son and daughter attended a large evangelical church. It was later reported that Lyuba had filed for police protection from her husband when they lived in the Chicago area. She told authorities that Eugene hit her repeatedly, gave her a bloody nose, pulled her hair and once broke a window in a fit of rage.

Police were called to the Savenok home last August, where they learned that Eugene had hit his wife so hard on the back that bruises were evident. He was supposed to answer for that crime in court this week. Now he will be tried for murder.

We all know domestic violence goes on behind closed doors in this country, even in the suburbs. But what is tragic is that it goes on in Christian homes—and this sin is rarely addressed from our pulpits.

Because I have many friends in Russian-speaking churches in this country, I was horrified to hear of the case of Lyuba Savenok—who was from an Estonian heritage. But when I talked to some of my Slavic friends, I learned that domestic abuse is a shameful secret that people only whisper about at church. It is seldom confronted.

“My sister was raped, drugged and hit for 17 years,” one Slavic woman from a midwestern state told me. “I have witnessed emotional abuse, physical abuse and a lot of sexual domination—even the use of drugs—to control women. I think there should be a wide investigation into abuse in the Slavic community.”

One woman from Florida said when her friend sought help from a pastor after being in an abusive marriage for 20 years, she was told to submit to the cruelty. “They told her to become a better wife, and that might change his behavior,” she said.

Some of the people interviewed for this article were even worried about using their names because it is considered inappropriate to talk about abuse in the Slavic church.

“When abuse is brought to light, it is swept under the rug because religious practices have priority,” said one Slavic Christian woman from California. “Unfortunately, church leaders are not equipped to deal with this issue.”

Research shows that domestic violence is rampant in Russian families. And many Slavic women are afraid to even report abuse because their husbands have threatened to hurt them if they do. Tanya Levchyk, who started a Facebook group for Slavic Christian women, said it is past time for Slavic pastors to deal with the elephant in the room.

“Many times Slavic women are afraid to voice their fears because of the great emphasis that is made on reputation in our community,” she said. “They feel they will be ridiculed instead of protected, and it will always be their fault simply because they are female.” Levchyk’s Facebook group now reaches 14,000 women.

My Slavic friend Paul Muzichuk, 31, who has done missions work in eight countries, said he believes the death of Lyuba Savenok should serve as a wake-up call to church leaders—both in the Slavic community and in the wider body of Christ.

“My heart is broken for Slavic women who hide in abusive relationships and hidden pain,” he said. “Fear, religious pride and the Slavic ‘macho’ attitude needs to be confronted so Slavic women can be set free from years of abuse.”

Stephan Karnauch, who grew up in a Slavic home in New York, said it’s past time to expose the painful truth of abuse and to teach men how to treat women with respect. “By exposing this truth we will finally be able to protect families and we will equip our children how to be godly spouses, parents and lovers of Christ,” Karnauch said.

We need to face the fact that Lyuba’s murder doesn’t just represent an issue among Slavic believers. For years American pastors have been telling women to “just submit” to abusive husbands without realizing that such advice can actually provoke more abuse.

Instead of misusing Ephesians 5:22 (“Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord”) to put women at risk, we should be using the Bible properly to warn abusers that God strongly opposes men who view their wives as inferior. First Peter 3:7 warns a husband that his prayers will be hindered if he does not honor his wife “as a fellow heir of the grace of life.”

Let’s have the courage to pull the rug back. Let’s confront abuse, heal its victims and stop twisting Scripture to protect abusers. {eo}