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Religion and Domestic Violence

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Synonyms

Intimate partner violence; Spousal/marital abuse

Definition

Domestic violence refers to the physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and/or mental abuse of a spouse or intimate partner in order to gain power or control. Domestic violence can also include child abuse. Domestic violence may occur through action or threats of action that inflict fear, intimidation, humiliation, or injury. The partnership may be heterosexual, homosexual, married, or common law.

Religion is an organized system of faith and worship held by a spiritual organization.

Introduction

Domestic violence is a global issue that can include multiple actions or threats comprised of physical, sexual, emotional, mental, or economic abuse.

Affecting approximately ten million people in the United States each year, in 2006, 85–95% of reported incidents are violent acts against women; however, domestic violence is not limited to women or heterosexual relationships (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). Globally, since the year 2000, the Global Burden of Disease and the World Health Organization have reported nearly 1 in 3 women, or 31%, have experienced an act of violence (Sardinha et al., 2022). The prevalence of violence against men is 1 in 10 and ranges from 3.4% to 20%, which is believed to be significantly underreported, with most male victims stating the violence was reciprocal (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Huecker et al., 2022; Kolbe & Büttner, 2020). For example, Arnocky and Vaillancourt (2014) found that men were less likely to consider partners' psychologically, physically, and sexually aggressive acts toward them as "abusive," were less likely to seek help and more likely to minimize their experienced harm, and were more stigmatized than women. Transgendered people are reported to be four times more likely to be a victim of intimate partner violence than that of cisgendered people (School of Law Williams Institute, 2021). The rate of domestic violence worldwide has been described as epidemic, which diminishes the quality of life and overall health status of the victims and creates a significant economic burden, for example, in the United States, the economic cost of domestic violence is estimated at 12 billion dollars (Akbari et al., 2021; Alhabib et al., 2010; Huecker et al., 2022).

The consequences of domestic violence on a victim's health and quality of life include physical injury, increased risk of suicide, generational trauma, increased incidence of mental health diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), complex PTSD, depression, and anxiety disorders (Han Almiş et al., 2018, 2020; Kavak et al., 2018). Negative emotional experiences, such as heightened anxiety, can also feed into the perpetration of intimate partner violence. For example, men who perceive their partner as likely to commit an infidelity experience more anxiety, which in turn predicts more perpetration of physical, psychological, and sexual aggression toward their intimate partners (Arnocky et al., 2015). Violent acts and threats can be directly or indirectly isolating, which removes access to familial, community, and spiritual support systems for the victim. Religious organizations are often considered both community and spiritual support and may offer therapeutic options to families and individuals for a variety of issues including substance abuse and addictions, financial difficulty, grief, mental and emotional health, as well as traumatic experiences (Healy, 2005). However, the misinterpretation of religious texts by either the offender, the victim, or religious affiliates, as well as a lack of trauma-informed education can lead to increased acts of violence, further isolation, an abuse of power, subjugation roles, and an enhanced commitment to a dysfunctional relationship rather than a supportive and safe exit where necessary (Fortune & Enger, 2005; Haaken et al., 2007). Research studies over the past few decades have focused on ethnicity, race, and social-economic status as well as the role of religion as factors of increased risk, barriers to accessing resources, and recidivism in domestic violence. The results of various studies consistently report that religious organizations either play a supportive role or facilitate greater harm, depending upon education, awareness, and priorities.

Perpetration of Domestic Violence

Either directly or indirectly, religious organizations can influence and increase incidents of domestic violence. A number of factors ranging from lack of understanding to misrepresentation can induce feelings of guilt, preventing a victim from leaving a dangerous relationship or provide justification for the violent actions of the partner. The lack of proper support and counselling may lead to re-traumatization and further harm to the victim and their family.

Guilt

A common question the victims of violent and abusive relationships are faced with is "why didn't you just leave?" The answer has many complex components to consider, such as emotional attachment, depression, isolation, and financial burden. When incorporating spiritual and religious beliefs, the answer may also include guilt. Numerous religious organizations consider marriage a sacred institution, whereby the partners must reconcile and forgive their differences to uphold their vows (Nason-Clark et al., 2018). This belief can be held by the victim, the offender, or the church and community.

Research investigating the numerous reasons why victims choose to stay in abusive relationships uncovered three overarching themes: investment, entrapment, and love (Heron et al., 2022). Investment included subthemes such as pregnancy, marriage, and keeping the family together, which mentally and emotionally tied the victim to their abusive partner. Entrapment included economic dependence, physical and social isolation, internalized blame, learned helplessness, and cultural and religious beliefs. Upon expansion, feeling shame and the fear of being misunderstand by family and community members were driving forces of religious and cultural entrapment.

The use of religious scripture to isolate and prevent a victim from leaving an abusive relationship can also lead to spiritual abuse – the forcible withdrawal or doubling-down of faith-based practices that perpetuate the abusive cycle (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). Research focused on both victim and spiritual leader accounts of religious involvement in domestic violence cases states that offenders were likely to use their faith's focus on forgiveness to pressure their victim (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006).

In an essay on religion and domestic violence, one author suggested that support staff in shelters require an understanding of religious systems, regardless of secularism or spiritual focus of the shelter, to be effective support against the victims' persistence on sustaining the relationship, which may stem from the concept of the sanctity of marriage and forgiveness (Ellison et al., 2007; Nason-Clark, 2004). The author emphasized that although there is no clear evidence of increased domestic violence in religious-founded domestic relationships, victims are at greater risk, once abused, with "commonly express[ed] guilt" in reference to their marriages (Nason-Clark, 2004). One article, examining the intersection of race, ethnicity, and religion in relation to domestic violence risk, provided a list of mechanisms that are used to encourage religious values such as self-sacrifice and marital commitment (Ellison et al., 2007). These mechanisms include ceremonial ritual, sermons and lectures, social congregation, and community. The messages from evangelical Christian churches that were not supportive of victims were quoted as "God hates divorce," "forgive, forgive, forgive," "marriage is forever," and "thou shalt not divorce" (Haaken et al., 2007). Another study highlighted positive and negative influences of Christian church involvement in domestic violence situations; respondents with negative interactions described feelings of guilt, failure, and loss (Wendt, 2008).

Justification

Another influence that religious institutions may exert on domestic violence is the propagation and continued support of justifications for the abuse. Whether the religious organization is directly involved is not a requirement for a violent partner to utilize scripture and religious teachings to rationalize their actions. Some leaders acknowledge that religious scripture and teachings may be misinterpreted and used as rationalization for violent and abusive actions (Wendt, 2008). Research using semi-structured interviews with service workers confirmed domestic violence offenders used religion as a justification for their actions, which is categorized as spiritual abuse (Ellis et al., 2022; Wendt, 2008). Religious texts have been

used to direct a victim into what behavior they "should" engage in to deserve better treatment, such as obeying their husbands or the right to punish wives. Such interpretations permit the abuser to pass the blame and externalize their actions onto the victim. These messages are used to control, manipulate, and remove power from the victim, which can lead to confusion, isolation, and despair in relation to the institution the victim had considered a source of spiritual and community support. Interview-based studies on the experiences of Muslim domestic violence victims displayed similar patterns to Christian religions, whereby the religion can be a source of healing, comfort, and protection, but can also be utilized to reinforce violent behavior and attitudes (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003).

Justification of abuse, either promoted directly by the institution, abuser, or victim, may lead to confusion, despair, and a lack of trust in religious and spiritual communities; the authority, focus on forgiveness, and submission are components of several religious institutions can be utilized to validate abusive behavior (Fallot & Blanch, 2013).

Re-traumatization

Re-traumatization occurs when a person relives the stress and experiences of a past event due to a new situation (Alexander, 2012; Duckworth & Follette, 2011). Reviews of literature examining diverse trauma victims such as child abuse victims, sexual abuse victims, and war veterans provide a complex picture of the relationship with religion and spirituality, where most groups, including Christian women, display a shift away from their religious institutions and practice (Fallot & Blanch, 2013). In contrast, victims from other religions, agnostics, and atheists have previously shown a shift towards spiritual practices. Further research has delineated the difference between positive and negative religious coping skills, as well as the influence of the time since the traumatic event and the involvement of religion, to expand upon the decline away from or shift towards religion (Fallot & Blanch, 2013).

Re-traumatization in a religious or spiritual setting occurs in the same manner as the induction

of guilt and the promotion of justification – through the misuse and interpretation of religious texts that endorse forgiveness, hierarchy, and misguided perceptions on sex and gender roles, as well as the condemnation of divorce (Ellis et al., 2022; Nason-Clark, 2004). The endorsement of forgiveness, prior to justice, resolution, or a change in behavior, reduces the accountability of the abuser and indirectly supports recidivism (Nason-Clark, 2004). Along with these beliefs, overtly siding with the perpetrator leads to victim blaming, isolation, and minimalization behavior through religious and spiritual community members and leaders, and, subsequently, re-victimization.

Healing and Support

The interaction between religion and domestic violence is not simple. Institutions can play a significant and harmful role in a victim's mental state and in their spousal and community relationships as discussed; however, religion can also promote post-traumatic growth, healing, and support (Fallot & Blanch, 2013). Religious and spiritual institutions often offer safety as well as counselling programs directed towards the couple, the victim, and the abuser.

Safety
Victims of abuse may seek out their religious institution or community for refuge as well as mental and spiritual support in either leaving or working through a violent relationship (Nason-Clark, 2004). Abusers themselves may also find safety in discussing their actions and working towards better behavior in a religious-based program of like-minded offenders. Multiple researchers in fields of psychology, sociology, justice, and gender studies highlight the value and importance of religion in both domestic violence victims' and abusers' lives as a preventative education source, as well as a community to provide aid and they challenge the institutions to gain appropriate trauma-informed education (Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997; Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Nason-Clark, 2004; Shannon-

Lewy & Dull, 2005; Wendt, 2008). Individual experiences vary from institution to institution regardless of religion; however, multiple survivors state their religion aided them in safely exiting their partnerships and providing them with a space to unburden without judgment or to set up a temporary residence (Wendt, 2008).

The ability to disclose details about domestic violence that may be causing the victim to feel confusion, humiliation, fear, and pain to a religious leader that, in many cases, offers confidentiality can be a pivotal step in healing (Nason-Clark, 2001). Safety from further traumatization, from the perpetrator, and from the judgment of people who misunderstand the complexities around domestic violence such as why victims stay, whether the victim reciprocated the abuse, or what is the best course of action, is pivotal in emergence from the relationship.

Counselling
Religious communities and institutions often offer a multitude of healing services that include marital counselling, grief and loss workshops, spiritual and emotional work, and mental health and addictions counselling (Healy, 2005). Through pressure from various feminist groups, including women's groups within churches, institutions have begun to focus on and understand the suffering and harm domestic violence causes in relationships (Nason-Clark et al., 2018). Accessibility to counselling services provided by social services, health care, and the government is not always attainable for individuals who are not eligible for insurance or other financial aid programs. Religious institutions, on the other hand, often offer their services to their members as part of their service to the community. For both victims and abusers, these services include a spiritual component that may be of particular importance for their well-being and ability to fully disclose.

Counselling programs directed at the perpetrator are often more likely to be completed by a religious partner than their violent nonreligious contemporaries (Nason-Clark, 2004). If a religious leader focuses on admonishing the behavior and supports the counselling programs, the violent partner is more likely to complete the program.

Recidivism

A common concern related to domestic violence is recidivism, the repetition of abuse after they have received punishment for their actions (Henslin & Fowler, 2014). In-depth literature analyses are unable to pinpoint interventions that are effective in the prevention of recidivism due to the variability in approach and application (Cordier et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2013). The analyses suggested evaluation of other approaches that may be promising such as restorative justice programs, treating psychopathology, mind-body bridging, moral reconation therapy, interactive journaling, and faith-based treatment programs specifically design for domestic violence (Miller et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2013). Research comparing prisoners who were engaged in faith-based practices during incarceration versus prisoners who were not was unable to produce a significant correlation to a decline in recidivism or rearrest (Johnson, 2006). Within the first few years after release, the researchers did notice a trend ($p = 0.055$) whereby prisoners who were engaged were less likely to be rearrested; however, this trend diminished in the following years.

There is a paucity of available data on individual and integrated components of coordinated community response efforts (Shorey et al., 2014). Coordinated community responses are developed to help prevent recidivism and re-abuse of domestic violence victims and can include police and judicial services, social services, health care, and educational advocacy. It was noted that immigrant victims were more likely to seek out community or religious support but are often directed towards submission and maintaining the marriage. Victims of abuse, particularly women, are more likely to seek support from informal networks unless they have been isolated from them by their abuser (Goodman & Smyth, 2011). These networks, which are commonly made up of family, friends, and community members, offer emotional and spiritual support. To protect against the danger of further abuse, shelters often remove victims from their neighborhoods, which may include removing them from the ability to access their informal networks and the accompanying support, which includes religious community.

Domestic Violence and Trauma-Informed Education

The value of informal networks as well as formal support from judicial, social, health, and religious services has been repeatedly presented in literature (Liang et al., 2005). Considering the evidence that religious and spiritual institutions fluctuate between being a safe, supportive healing source or an influence that ignores, silences, and justifies the violence, it has been suggested that these institutions invest in trauma-informed and domestic violence training (Keefe-Perry & Moon, 2018; McMullin et al., 2015). Institutional change, however, had been met with ideological and structural challenges that needed to be overcome. Over the past couple of decades, religious organizations in North America have begun to offer domestic violence programs and secular institutions have begun to recognize the importance of spiritual components. The Religion and Violence e-Learning (RAVE) project began in 2006 and provided online training models as well as community connections for religious institutions (McMullin et al., 2015). Programs such as RAVE have begun to promote the acceptance of religious institutions to acknowledge domestic violence as an issue and the awareness of their role in prevention, healing, and resolution.

Child Abuse

Domestic violence can also involve adults harming children within the domestic environment. Like intimate partner violence, religion can broadly factor into the perpetration and remediation of child abuse. Examples of religion-motivated child abuse can include, but are not limited to physical, emotional, or sexual harm, infanticide, as well as neglect such as withholding medical care – with the abusive acts sometimes

being at least partly motivated by religious teachings or scripture surrounding child punishment, attempts to rid a child of evil, religious practice or ritual, or other religiocultural factors. For example, Bottoms et al. (1995) identified North American cases where psychological, physical, and sexual abuse were perpetrated as attempts to "rid a child of evil," with a small portion of evil-ridding attempts involving child murder. Some research suggests that relative to nonreligious experience of physical abuse, child experience of religion-motivated physical abuse is more harmful to victims' mental health (Bottoms et al., 2004). One striking modern example of religious links to child abuse involves child marriages in India. Millions of children in India are married prior to age 10, and most of these children are Hindu (and a small proportion of Muslim) girls; this practice historically served "to ensure that childbearing took place within the confines of one's own caste and religion" (National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), 2017, p.3). Empirical research has shown that religion can have indirect effects (e.g., via maternal education) on child marriage (Binu et al., 2017). In a Western context, case studies demonstrate sexual abuse of children is also tied to religion. For example, Tishelman and Fontes (2017) noted that one victim of paternal abuse had been told, "Do not betray the head of the household because bad things will happen to you because it's in the Bible. . . .revenge comes to people who betray." (p. 123). They also reported cases with religious leaders encouraging prayer and forgiveness to the exclusion of reporting and investigation through secular channels. Still others reported religious leaders and communities as a source of healing. This has led some to advocate for spiritual care as a potentially useful source for improving mental health of victims of child abuse, such as through coordination with the medical community (e.g., Vieth, 2018).

Conclusion

Domestic violence is a substantial global issue that primarily affects women but is not limited to one

gender (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). The impact on a victim's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health is not benign and can create long-lasting, costly consequences to their families, children, and communities. The financial cost to society, as a stand-alone argument, is significant enough to warrant serious deliberation over prevention and resolution. Religion and spirituality are common and important components to many victims and abusers alike, rendering these institutions pivotal in support as they commonly offer mental, emotional, and spiritual services outside of domestic violence. Multiple religious institutions have long-standing patriarchal hierarchies and intrenched value on marriage, however, which can be problematic to a victim seeking safety and guidance. Some institutions provide safety, discretion, and counselling services to both the victim and the abuser, but others re-traumatize, justify, and isolate victims. Through education and advocacy, these institutions can provide key community responses to the victim, abuser, and to the community.

Cross-References

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