

FAITH-BASED RESPONSES TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

By Chanté Lasco

President Bush's establishment of a White House Office on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives has galvanized public debate about faith-based responses to social problems. In the victim service community, this policy direction raises questions about faith-based services for victims of crime, prompting special concerns about how faith-based organizations will respond to victims of domestic violence.

Historically, leaders of many religious institutions have had difficulty addressing domestic violence, at times denying abuse or endangering abused women. In the last few years, however, many faith-based organizations have taken bold steps toward protecting battered women and their children. Following the deaths of women in their communities, a growing number of faith-based organizations have begun to train clergy on domestic violence and to marshal support for domestic violence victims.

As service providers, we are in a unique position to teach clergy and religious communities about domestic violence issues. Partnering with churches, synagogues, and mosques will increase the chances that victims in these communities will get the help they need. It will also give us a chance to learn from spiritual leaders who are often the first people victims turn to and who represent the faith on which victims in crisis may rely. Working within the context of victims' value systems can help build the trust necessary to more effectively address family violence.

Certain traditions and scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have created obstacles to abused women in need of help. Scripturally prescribed roles for women and

the sanctity of marriage have at times taken precedence over domestic violence victims' safety. These three faith traditions each have their own histories and specific barriers to addressing domestic violence, but fortunately, progress has been made. Rejecting interpretations and traditions that endanger women, organizations rooted in these faiths are committing themselves to assisting abused women in a faith-based context.

Judaism

Jewish Women International (JWI) is devoted to the cause of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. In existence since 1897, it refocused its mission to address family violence after the 1988 murder of one of their members by her ex-husband. JWI has developed information and resources for Jewish women and a resource guide for rabbis on domestic violence. Their materials address cultural barriers Jewish domestic violence victims face and offer scriptural support for intolerance of abuse including the Talmudic verse, "To save even one life is to save the whole world. To destroy even one life is to destroy the whole world."¹

In an effort to break the cycle of violence, the group provides residential treatment in Israel for children who are seriously emotionally disturbed, almost all of whom have been exposed to violence in the home. JWI also sponsors an annual national public awareness campaign; partners with battered women's shelters and organizations to create programs that help empower women economically; and has taken the lead in a project to address domestic violence in the former Soviet Union.²

Individual rabbis often wield the most power in victims' lives and can have a highly

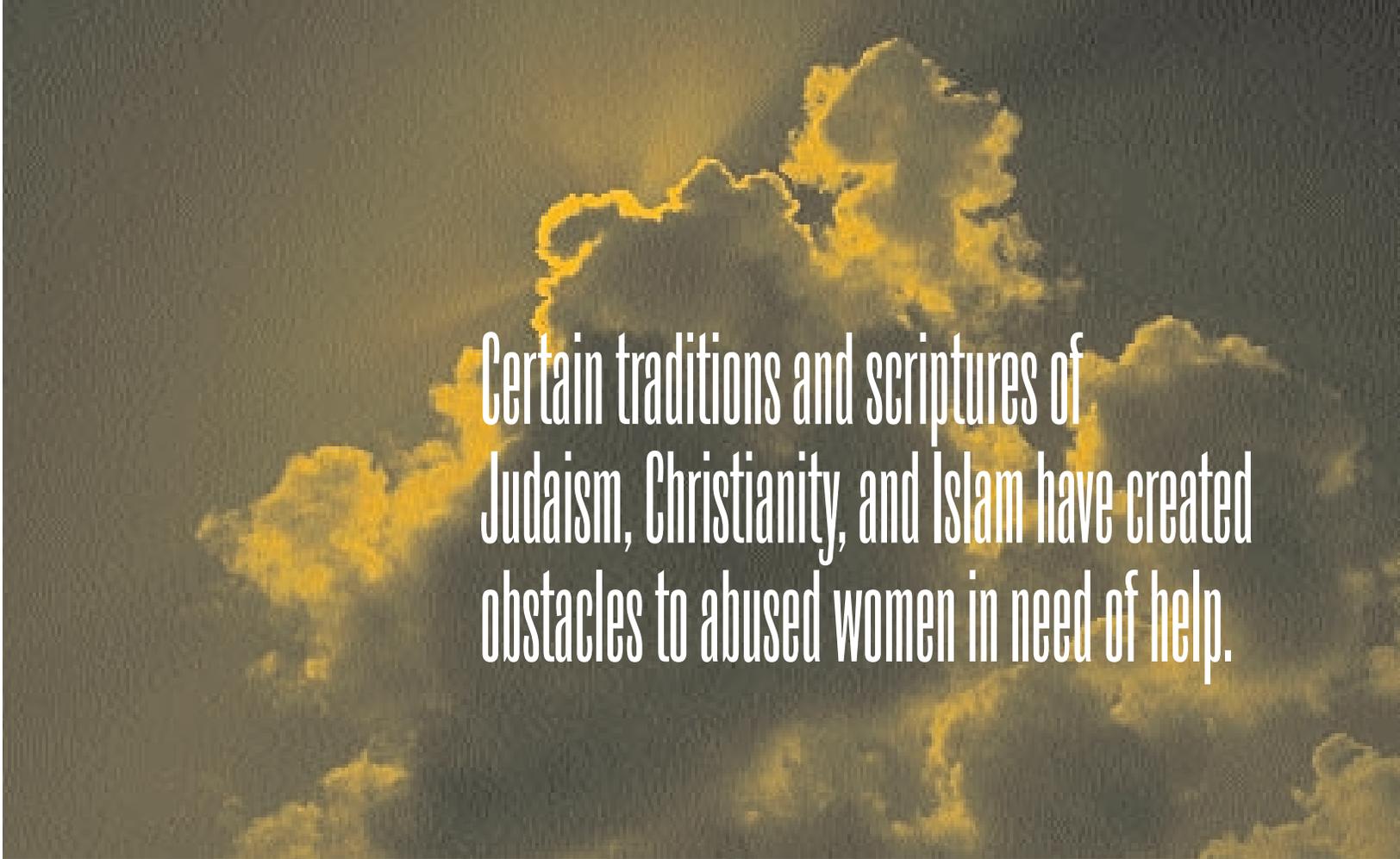
positive or negative impact on volatile situations. Diane Gardsbane, JWI's director of programs, tells the story of a rabbi who intervened on behalf of a victim of domestic violence seeking a Jewish divorce from her husband, who refused to grant one. The rabbi confronted the husband, who owned a kosher restaurant in their small Jewish community. The rabbi warned, "If you do not grant your wife a divorce, your restaurant shall no longer be kosher." The husband complied.

Christianity

Christians Addressing Family Abuse (CAFA) is a mental health agency in Eugene, Oregon that specializes in counseling battered women, children, and batterers from a Christian perspective. CAFA is motivated by the 1996 murder of Ruth Taylor, who was shot and killed by her husband. The couple was undergoing pastoral counseling at their church in Eugene, Oregon when the murder occurred, underscoring the need for clergy and community training on domestic violence.

CAFA has distributed safety-plan pamphlets in women's bathrooms in churches throughout the Eugene area, and provides training and information for Christian communities interested in addressing domestic violence. Their materials discuss family violence within a scriptural context and offer ways to restore a victim's emotional and spiritual well-being, and they also include practical information on how to get a restraining order and increase its effectiveness.

Christian domestic violence victims have reported being told by victim service providers that their patriarchal religion was partly to blame for the abuse. In contrast, CAFA has worked hard to help women maintain their spiritual beliefs while also keeping



Certain traditions and scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have created obstacles to abused women in need of help.

them safe. By speaking the same spiritual language as their clients, organizations like CAFA tries to reach women on a deeper level, dispel the religious justifications for abuse others have perpetrated, and build on women's faith to protect them from further harm.

Islam

The Peaceful Families Project (PFP) was begun in 2000 as a nationwide independent training project within the American Muslim community. PFP offers training that focuses on three major components: peaceful family dynamics based on the Quran and practice of the Prophet Muhammad, violence awareness, and marriage contract training. The marriage contract training builds on the Muslim practice of creating a marriage contract that embodies the expectations and promises to which a husband and wife commit themselves. These are civil contracts and can be upheld in court. PFP has used this tradition as a tool to teach Muslim couples to incorpo-

rate expectations of a peaceful home into each contract.

Working within the Muslim community and with mainstream agencies to increase sensitivity to Muslim traditions, the Peaceful Families Project has developed protocols for the Muslim community and its leaders, as well as for courts, criminal justice systems, and law enforcement. The Project also offers guidance to both public and Muslim battered women's shelters. PFP suggests that domestic violence shelters provide holy books of several faiths, a clean space to be used solely for prayer, meals that respect religious prohibitions, utensils and cooking spaces that have not touched pork, and private showers because Muslims cannot be seen naked, even by members of the same sex. While these conditions may be difficult to create in shelters with small budgets and cramped quarters, they could make all the difference to a Muslim victim of domestic violence seeking shelter that doesn't violate her moral and religious values.³

Inter-religious Groups

Several groups provide resources that can help a wide range of faith-based communities address domestic violence.

The Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence (CPSDV), an international organization headquartered in Seattle, is an inter-religious resource that addresses sexual and domestic violence with a focus on prevention and education. CPSDV's goal is to engage religious leaders in ending abuse and to serve as a bridge between religious and secular communities. The organization offers training, seminars, educational videos, books, and manuals that address violence in Jewish, Christian, and multicultural homes.

The Spiritual Dimension in Victim Services is based in South Carolina. This group assists people of all faiths to respond to the pain of victimization; offers resources, services, and programs; explores with congregations avenues of ministry by which they can help alleviate the pain of abuse; and provides methods of increasing participation of the religious



In the last few years, however, many faith-based organizations have taken bold steps toward protecting battered women and their children.

community in victim services. Their materials specifically address violence in Jewish and Christian homes.

Manavi (meaning “primal woman” in Sanskrit) is a New Jersey-based organization that addresses violence against women from South Asian communities. While Manavi is non-religious, it operates a safehouse that provides services in a religion- and culture-friendly environment, taking special care to make women of various faiths and traditions feel comfortable. This safehouse (called Ashiana which means “nest” in Urdu) offers special considerations for Muslim, Hindu, or vegetarian women such as separate refrigerators for vegetarian and non-vegetarian items, providing halal (religiously approved food), cooking utensils that have never touched meat or other non-vegetarian items, and a space for prayer. While Manavi staff have come into conflict with religious leaders opposed to divorce and restraining orders, they continue to make a conscious effort to support women in their beliefs and to edu-

cate themselves on the scriptures relevant to those beliefs. They caution service providers against reacting to victims’ traditions in a surprised or negative way, treating dietary restrictions or religious prohibitions or ceremonies as barbaric, exotic, or bizarre. Such reactions make many women uncomfortable enough to return to their abusers. Instead, Manavi staff advocate learning about victims’ faiths and beliefs so that you can “deconstruct, then reconstruct” their value system in a way that supports women, encourages their independence, and ensures their safety.

A Role for Victim Service Providers

Many faith-based organizations have made significant strides in addressing domestic violence, but others have a long way to go. Victim advocates can help by meeting religious communities halfway. Investigate the resources available from the organizations described above. Research religious practices in your community. Meet with clergy of different faiths to discuss domestic violence,

how to recognize violent relationships, how to respond appropriately, and what services are available. You will stand a better chance of gaining trust and cooperation if you are familiar with some of their traditions. Find out if there is a local rabbinical school or seminary and offer to speak to a class about domestic violence. Much as we have had to educate judges, attorneys, law enforcement, and the public about domestic violence, we must reach out to religious institutions, make our services acceptable to women of different faiths, and realize the full potential such a collaboration could offer.

Chanté Lasco is publications coordinator for the National Center for Victims of Crime. She will be attending American University's Washington College of Law and School of International Service this fall.

¹ Talmud, Sanhedrin, Chapter 4; Mishnah 5.

² “The Russia Project: Addressing Domestic Violence through Ethnic and Religious Communities in Russia.”

³ “Ending Domestic Violence: A Muslim Perspective,” presented by Sharifa Alkhateeb, director, The Peaceful Families Project, at National Coalition Against Domestic Violence Congressional Staff Briefing March 22, 2001, Washington, D.C.

⁴ Adapted from a sermon by Rev. Aubra Love entitled “If It Had Not Been for the Lord On Our Side,” available at <http://www.tjd.uua.org/serm-love-godside.html>

WHAT RELIGIOUS LEADERS CAN DO

Many members of the clergy will welcome information on domestic violence, an issue they often face in their communities but about which they may know little. As a victim service provider, you can give clergy a basic education about the realities of domestic violence and offer direct ways that they can address the problem. Reverend Aubra Love, director of the Black Church and Domestic Violence Institute in Atlanta, suggests that the leaders of communities of faith take the following steps:

- 1. Display family-violence brochures** in the entrance of all churches and all women's rest-rooms.
- 2. Educate the congregation** through monthly newsletters and weekly announcements in church bulletins and in marriage-preparation classes.
- 3. Speak out** against domestic violence from the pulpit. People's attitudes and beliefs would be profoundly and powerfully impacted by their faith leaders.
- 4. Lead by example.** All clergy should be serving on the board of directors of their local domestic violence agencies or receiving training to become acquainted with community resources.
- 5. Offer space for meetings** or weekly domestic violence support groups and serve as supervised visitation sites when parents need to visit safely with their children.
- 6. Do the theological and scriptural homework** necessary to understand and respond better to family violence, and receive training from domestic violence victim service professionals.
- 7. Intervene** whenever violence in a relationship is suspected. Speak to each member of the couple separately, and help the victim plan for safety. Couples counseling is unsafe for victims and can result in death from an abuser's retaliation for the victim's disclosure to any outsider.⁴

FAITH-BASED RESOURCES FOR VICTIM SERVICE PROVIDERS

Jewish Women International

1828 L St. NW, Suite 250
Washington, DC 20036
(800) 343-2823 e-mail: jwi@jwi.org
website: www.jewishwomen.org

Christians Addressing Family Abuse (CAFA)

921 Country Club Road, Suite 222
Eugene, OR 97401 541-686-6000

The Peaceful Families Project

(Project Director is Sharifa Alkhateeb)
P.O. Box 942, Great Falls, VA 22066
703-759-6378 e-mail: nacmw@aol.com

Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence (CSPDV)

2400 N. 45th St., Suite 10, Seattle, WA 98103
206-634-1903 e-mail: cpsdv@cpsdv.org
website: www.cpsdv.org

The Spiritual Dimension in Victim Services

P.O. Box 821, Charleston, SC 29402
843-722-0082 e-mail: SBeardPARC@aol.com

Manavi

P.O. Box 2131, Union, NJ 07083-2131
908-687-2662
e-mail: manavi@worldnet.att.net
website: www.manavi.org

Black Church and Domestic Violence Institute

(Executive Director is Rev. Aubra Love)
2740 Greenbriar Parkway, Suite 256
Atlanta, GA 30331
770-909-0715 e-mail: BCDVorg@aol.com

Neighbors Who Care

P.O. Box 16079, Washington, DC 20041
800-NWC-7770

BROWN BAG TOPIC



How can we partner
with faith-based
organizations and
religious institutions to
better serve victims of
domestic violence?

We want to hear from you.

We encourage you to share with us any ideas or suggestions your organizations has on working with faith-based organizations and religious institutions. Please write to us at

networks@ncvc.org