

Domestic Violence - End It Now

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Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan described domestic violence as “The most universal and unpunished crime.” Domestic violence takes place when one person in an intimate relationship with another uses violent or intimidating behaviour to control, (often systematically) causing physical, emotional or spiritual harm. It varies in its form whether it is physical battering, sexual assault, emotional abuse, violence against property, and spiritual abuse.

Domestic violence is no ‘respector of persons’. It occurs between people who are dating, married, separated, and divorced. Victims cross all socio-economic, religious, racial, ethnic, age groups. In the UK, women represent 85% of adult victims with men representing 15% of victims, a statistic which often elicits amusement, but is a source of agony for the victims. According to Women’s Aid, between 1 and 4 million women are abused every year with the lifetime risk for women at about 20% probability of becoming a victim.

Children become victims of domestic violence when are physically present during violence or conflict whether they see or overhear it. This also applies to witness the outcome of violence (e.g. crying, bruises etc.). They are often used by the perpetrator to intimidate/blackmail the victim (e.g. use of threats towards children etc.). It is not uncommon, particularly in younger children, for them to conclude that they have somehow triggered the violence and blame themselves. Children experience trauma when they become aware of physical and emotional effects on their parent. They are most obviously victim when they themselves are physically, emotionally or sexually abused or neglected.

The long-term adverse effects of domestic violence on children cannot be overstated in terms of physical, emotional, behavioural and social problems. These may include sadness; isolation; depression; anger; aggression; lack of assertiveness; low self-esteem; guilt; shame and social stigma. The experience of domestic violence on children often has adverse effects on their ability to form healthy relationships in adulthood. Paradoxically, it is often the case that those who come out of abusive homes form relationships in adulthood which repeat the cycle of abuse.

As with victims, perpetrators come in all shapes and sizes, but often exhibit characteristics which include a sense of entitlement, a lack of emotional control; a lack of empathy and compassion; contemptuous of others; self-justification. Perpetrators often operate under a veneer of charm and respectability in public, but drop the pretence in private. Their selfish manipulation, irrational jealousy and controlling behaviour are indicative of emotional insecurity and a fear of abandonment rooted in a fundamental dislike of themselves.

Christian abusers will often twist biblical passages regarding submission and headship in order to justify their abuse and to control their spouse. Such distorted understandings of these passages have also led to church leaders becoming complicit in domestic abuse. When leaders urge emotionally fragile individuals to

remain in potentially life-threatening or soul destroying situations under the premise of being faithful to the marriage vow, they compound the abuse and cause added trauma to the victim.

In addressing domestic violence, it is vital that victims, perpetrators and church leaders appreciate that there are no excuses for abuse. Intimate violence is NOT caused by illness; genetics or gender; alcohol or other drugs; anger; stress; the victim's behaviour or relationship problems. It is always a choice.

There are certain factors which empower abusers to carry out their attacks. Isolating the victims is a key ploy for the perpetuation of the violence. Abusers do all in their power to prevent their victims from having access to people and resources that may provide escape from the violence. Denial on the part of a church community that refuses to accept the possibility of such behaviour also helps to keep the violence secret.

Probably the greatest factor is the fear of reprisals on the part of the victim. The question is frequently asked of victims, "Why don't they just leave?" The very question betrays a lack of understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence. When victims try to resist the abuse, the violence tends to continue and often becomes more frequent and severe. Statistics indicate that 73% of battered women seek emergency medical services after separation (Stark, 1981). Women are most likely to be killed when attempting to report abuse or leave the abuser (Sonkin, 1985). Approximately one-half of males who kill their wives, do so after separation (Hart, 1992).

One of the most successful tools that perpetrators use to maintain control is the systematic dismantling of the victim's sense of personhood and value through emotional abuse. Many survivors of domestic violence will readily admit that while the violence caused great physical harm, the emotional abuse caused more damage to their image of self.

In spite of all the obstacles in their way, survivors of domestic violence can and do successfully escape the abuse. However, leaving is a process that must navigate safety issues, the false shame of admitting the problem, exercising the courage to leave and the implementation of a survival strategy.

As a church, our support for victims begins when we acknowledge and identify the problem. We must provide a safe environment in which survivors can receive the spiritual, emotional and material support to rebuild their sense of personhood. It is our responsibility to, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; for the rights of all who are destitute" (Proverbs 31:8 NIV).