# Opinion: Social workers must know intersection of domestic violence and spiritual abuse

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Domestic violence (DV) and intimate partner violence (IPV) are both a pervasive and chronic pandemic that acts with impunity and defies race, ethnicity, age, sex/gender, ability, and religion. Therefore, being knowledgeable about community resources, such as the <u>National Domestic Violence Hotline</u>, learning verbiage which informs the phenomenon such as <u>knowing the difference between domestic violence</u> and intimate partner violence and building location-based competency (i.e. Identifying, understanding, and applying state-mandated reporting laws) are imperative skills to develop if one is to emerge into a competent social work

practitioner.

Emerging social workers must also understand that DV and IPV not only penetrates every genre of social work practice; they are also sustained by the very macro entities survivors depend upon to escape both phenomena.

For example, as it relates to survivors of DV / IPV, use of religion and/or spirituality are oftentimes integral to the journey of survivorship and healing. We also know that perpetrators of DV / IPV oftentimes use religion to diminish the spirituality of their spouses/partners/children/family members that they are wielding harm upon.

Studies, research, and practice experience allows us to know, as social workers, that perpetrators who use religion as a control mechanism generally incorporate aspects of religion into their tactics of harm in the following ways:

- Use religious texts, quotes, and values to justify abuse.
- It is not uncommon for perpetrators to belong to faiths that promote marriage; thus, they may use the "esteem" of religion as to convince the survivor(s) to actively participate in silence.
- Perpetrators may use religion and faith teachings to convince the survivor(s) that making decisions to leave the relationship or choosing to not stay in toxic submissive roles are directly against their beliefs and/or their higher power.
- In the event the perpetrator is a religious leader, they may use their power/privilege within the community to intimidate and/or psychologically force the survivor(s) into silence.

Because of this, as social workers, we must remain non-judgmental when survivors of DV / IPV have a negative visceral reaction towards doctrine, relics, and/or rituals related to religion, spirituality, and faith. In social work, our personal spirituality as well as the spirit of humanity - housed within the profession, are to be exhibited towards survivors through understanding, decency, and kindness and NOT through the forcing of beliefs and doctrine which may be the same tactics used by their abuser.



### interfaith partnership against domestic violence

because no one should have to choose between faith and safety

#### **Asserting Authority**

Using Scripture, traditions, or cultural norms to impose gender roles that are abusive or coercive, to assert authority, to reinforce male privilege, to encourage you to submit, to give commands, or to punish you.

Using Scripture, traditions, or cultural norms to force you to have sex or unprotected sex, to deny or force family planning, to participate in polygamous marriage or genital mutilation, to have sex or be married at a young age, to be in an arranged or forced marriage.

Controlling

Sexuality and

Reproduction

#### **Using Children**

Using Scripture, traditions, or cultural norms to arrange and force marriage for teens, to value male over female children, to use girls as commodities for bride prize or dowry, to sell young girls as commodities, to force you to raise children in another faith or no faith.

Access to or Use of Health Care Using Scripture, traditions or cultural norms to force you to forego regular check ups, family planning, medications,

emergency medical care, or to

neglect medical care for your

Restricting

children.

# **Prolonging Abusive** Relationships

Using Scripture, traditions, or cultural norms to encourage you to forgive, to keep the relationship together, to sacrifice yourself for Isolation Isolating you from the relationship, to excuse or minimize the abuse, your faith community by not allowing you to to remain silent, participate in services or events, or to accept by silencing you when you are there, suffering. by moving the family from congregation to congregation, or by forcing you to attend services in a different faith community.

# Spiritual **And Religious** Abuse

Using Scripture, Traditions, and Cultural Norms to Assert Power and Control

> Using Scripture, traditions, or cultural norms to blame you and justify abuse because you are female, sinful, and the weaker vessel, estranged from God, not created in God's image, created to be man's servant, unclean, polluted, defiled.

# **Using Community Coercion** Working through clergy or lay leader, or friends

or family from your faith community, to put

pressure on you to stay in the relationship or Blaming to put up with abuse. Coercion may take The Victim the form of letters or phone calls on the abuser's behalf, comments in social settings, etc.

Just as no one should have to choose between hurting and love (because love DOES NOT hurt), in the words of interfaithpartners.org (2014), "no one should have to choose between faith and safety." This is one small concept, of the many, that leads to professional humility and competent social work practice.

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