

Domestic Violence Against Women

[from the U. S. Catholic bishops' pastoral statement on domestic violence, *When I Call for Help*, www.usccb.org/laity/help.htm]

Violence against women, inside or outside the home, is *never* justified. Violence in any form—physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal—is sinful; often, it is a crime as well.

The Catholic Church teaches that violence against another person in any form fails to treat that person as someone worthy of love. Instead, it treats the person as an object to be used. When violence occurs within a sacramental marriage, the abused spouse may question, “How do these violent acts relate to my promise to take my spouse for better or for worse?” The person being assaulted needs to know that acting to end the abuse does not violate the marriage promises. While violence can be directed towards men, it tends to harm women and children more.

85 percent of the victims of reported cases of non-lethal domestic violence are women. Women’s greatest risk of violence comes from intimate partners—a current or former husband or boyfriend.

Violence against women in the home has serious repercussions for children. Over 50 percent of men who abuse their wives also beat their children. Children who grow up in violent homes are more likely to develop alcohol and drug addictions and to become abusers themselves. The stage is set for a cycle of violence that may continue from generation to generation.

The Church can help break this cycle. Many abused women seek help first from the Church because they see it as a safe place.

Domestic violence is any kind of behavior that a person uses to control an intimate partner through fear and intimidation. It includes physical, sexual, psychological, verbal, and

economic abuse. Some examples of domestic abuse include battering, name-calling and insults, threats to kill or harm one’s partner or children, destruction of property, marital rape, and forced sterilization or abortion.

While abuse cuts across all ethnic and economic backgrounds, some women face particular obstacles. Women of color may not view the criminal justice system as a source of help. Additionally, in some cultures women feel pressured to keep problems within the home and to keep the family together at all costs. Some fear that they will lose face in the community if they leave. Immigrant women often lack familiarity with the language and legal systems of this country. Their abusers may threaten them with deportation.

Women in rural communities may find themselves with fewer resources. The isolation imposed by distance and lack of transportation can aggravate their situation. Isolation can also be a factor for women who do not work outside the home. They may have less access to financial resources and to information about domestic violence. Women with disabilities and elderly women are also particularly vulnerable to violence.

Domestic violence is often shrouded in silence. People outside the family hesitate to interfere, even when they suspect abuse is occurring. Many times even extended family denies that abuse exists, out of loyalty to the abuser and in order to protect the image of the family. Some people still argue—mistakenly—that intervention by outside sources endangers the sanctity of the home. Yet abuse and assault are no less serious when they occur within a family. Even when domestic violence is reported, sometimes there are failures to protect victims adequately or to punish perpetrators.

Domestic violence is learned behavior. Men who batter learn to abuse through observation, experience, and reinforcement. They believe that they have a right to use violence; they are also rewarded, that is, their behavior gives them power and control over their partner.

Abusive men come from all economic classes, races, religions, and occupations. He may be a “good provider” and a respected member of his church and community. While there is no one type, men who abuse share some common characteristics. They tend to be extremely jealous, possessive, and easily angered. A man may fly into a rage because his spouse called her mother too often or because she didn’t take the car in for servicing. Many try to isolate their partners by limiting their contact with family and friends.

Typically, abusive men deny that the abuse is happening, or they minimize it. They often blame their abusive behavior on someone or something other than themselves. They tell their partner, “You made me do this.”

Many abusive men hold a view of women as inferior. Their conversation and language reveal their attitude towards a woman’s place in society. Many believe that men are meant to dominate and control women.

Alcohol and drugs are often associated with domestic violence, but they do not cause it. An abusive man who drinks or uses drugs has two distinct problems: substance abuse and violence. Both must be treated.

Women stay with men who abuse them primarily out of fear. Some fear that they will lose their children. Many believe that they cannot support themselves, much less their children.

When the first violent act occurs, the woman is likely to be incredulous. She believes her abuser when he apologizes and promises that it will never happen again. When it does—repeatedly—many women believe that if they just act differently they can stop the abuse. They may be ashamed to admit that the man they love is terrorizing them. Some cannot admit or realize that they are battered women. Others have endured trauma and suffer from battered woman syndrome.

Religion can be either a resource or a roadblock for battered women. As a resource, it encourages women to resist mistreatment. As a roadblock, its misinterpretation can contribute to the victim’s self-blame and suffering and to the abuser’s rationalizations.

A correct reading of Scripture leads people to an understanding of the equal dignity of men and women and to relationships based on mutuality and love.

No person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage.

Intervention by church ministers has three goals, in the following order:

- safety for the victim and children;
- accountability for the abuser; and
- restoration of the relationship (if possible), or mourning over the loss of the relationship.

Church ministers should see themselves as “first responders” who

- listen to and believe the victim’s story,
- help her to assess the danger to herself and her children, and
- refer her to counseling and other specialized services.

Church ministers should become familiar with and follow the reporting requirements of their state. Many professionals who deal with vulnerable people are required to report suspected crimes, which may include domestic abuse.

In dealing with people who abuse, church ministers need to hold them accountable for their behavior. They can support the abusive person as he seeks specialized counseling to change his abusive behavior. Couple counseling is not appropriate and can endanger the victim’s safety.

Domestic Violence Against Women — What You Can Do to Help

[from *When I Call for Help*,
www.usccb.org/laity/help.htm]

For Abused Women

- Begin to believe that you are not alone and that help is available for you and your children.
- Talk in confidence to someone you trust: a relative, friend, parish priest, deacon, religious sister or brother, or lay minister.
- If you choose to stay in the situation, at least for now, set up a plan of action to ensure your safety. This includes hiding a car key, personal documents, and some money in a safe place and locating somewhere to go in an emergency.
- Find out about resources in your area that offer help to battered women and their children. The phone book lists numbers to call in your local area. Your diocesan Catholic Charities office or family life office can help.
- **The National Domestic Violence Hotline** provides crisis intervention and referrals to local service providers. Call **1-800-799-7233** or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY). E-mail assistance is available at ndvh@ndvh.org.

For Men Who Abuse

- Admit that the abuse is your problem, not your partner's, and have the manly courage to seek help. Begin to believe that you can change your behavior if you choose to do so.
- Be willing to reach out for help. Talk to someone you trust who can help you evaluate the situation. Contact church or community agencies for the name of a program for abusers.
- Keep in mind that the Church is available to help you. Part of the mission Jesus entrusted to us is to offer healing when it is needed. Contact your parish.
- Find alternative ways to act when you become frustrated or angry. Talk to other men who have overcome abusive behavior. Find out what they did and how they did it.

For Pastors and Pastoral Staff

Make your parish a safe place where abused women and abusive men can come for help.

- Include information about domestic violence and local resources in your parish bulletins and newsletters and on websites.
- Place information—including local telephone numbers for assistance—about domestic violence in the women's restroom(s).
- Keep an updated list of resources for abused women. This can be a project for the parish pastoral council, social justice committee, or women's group.
- Find a staff person or volunteer who is willing to receive in-depth training on domestic violence; ask this person to serve as a resource and help to educate others about abuse.
- Provide training on domestic violence to all church ministers, including priests, deacons and lay ministers. When possible, provide opportunities for them to hear directly from victims of violence.
- Join in the national observance of October as "Domestic Violence Awareness Month." Dedicate at least one weekend that month to inform parishioners about domestic abuse. During that month, make available educational and training programs in order to sensitize men and women, girls and boys to the personal and social effects of violence in the family. Help them to see how psychological abuse may escalate over time. Teach them how to communicate without violence.

Use liturgies to draw attention to violence and abuse.

- In homilies, include a reference to domestic violence when appropriate. Just mention of domestic violence lets abused women know that someone cares. Describe what abuse is so that women begin to recognize and name what is happening to them.
- In parish reconciliation services, identify violence against women as a sin.

- Include intercessions for victims of abuse, people who abuse, and those who work with them.
- If you suspect abuse, ask direct questions. Ask a woman if she is being hit or hurt at home. Carefully evaluate her response. Some women do not realize they are being abused, or they lie to protect their spouses. Be careful not to say anything that will bolster her belief that it is her fault and that she must change her behavior.
- Have an action plan in place to follow if an abused woman calls on you for help. This includes knowing how and where to refer her for help. This will be easier if you have already established contact with local shelters and domestic violence agencies.
- Include a discussion of domestic violence in marriage preparation sessions. If violence has already begun in the relationship, it will only escalate after marriage.
- In baptismal preparation programs, be alert that the arrival of a child and its attendant stress may increase the risk of domestic violence.

A Prayer

*Listen, God, to my prayer;
do not hide from my pleading;
hear me and give answer.*

*If an enemy had reviled me,
that I could bear;
If my foe had viewed me with contempt,
from that I could hide.*

*But it was you, my other self,
my comrade and friend,
You, whose company I enjoyed,
at whose side I walked
in procession in the house of God.*

*But I will call upon God,
and the LORD will save me.
At dusk, dawn, and noon
I will grieve and complain,
and my prayer will be heard.*

(Ps 55: 2-3, 13-15, 17-18)

Websites

- Center for the Prevention of Sexual & Domestic Violence:
www.faitrustinstitute.org
- National Domestic Violence Hotline:
www.ndvh.org
- National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: www.ncadv.org
- Family Violence Prevention Fund:
www.endabuse.org

It's a sign of abuse if her partner...

- Calls her names, insults her, constantly criticizes her, or humiliates her
- Isolates her from family and friends
- Monitors where she goes and how she spends her time
- Controls finances, refuses to share money, or gives her an allowance
- Threatens to have her deported or to report her to a welfare agency
- Threatens to take her children away
- Threatens to kill or hurt her, the children, other family members, or pets
- Threatens her with a weapon
- Destroys property, such as household furnishings
- Pushes, slaps, hits, bites, kicks, or chokes her
- Forces her to have sex or to perform sexual acts