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The Complexities of the Religious Response to Domestic Violence

Implications for Faith-Based Initiatives

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Drawing on data from a study conducted in Wyoming about the community response to domestic violence, this article focuses on an unanticipated finding: how religion is paradoxically both a source of assistance and a barrier to women surviving domestic violence. The results indicate that although religious institutions are a resource for emotional comfort and provide practical assistance, they may also perpetuate silence. The article concludes that many religious communities are not adequately equipped to respond to the problem of domestic violence in a way that is safe for women. Implications for social work, particularly for recent faith-based initiatives, are discussed.

Keywords: *charitable choice; domestic violence; faith-based initiatives; religion*

The White House Office of Faith Based Action is clearly a cultural initiative that aims to restore conservative social relations. The interest of the faith-based crowd in "repairing" the family means restoring the male head, crafting legal obstacles to divorce, and deepening the stigma attached to female-headed households. What happens, many are asking, when a federally funded social service arm of an evangelical church that preaches female subordination and obedience meets its first battered wife? (Solinger, 2001, p. 13)

This provocative statement is indicative of the complexities and polarizations involved in the debate surrounding faith-based initiatives in the United States. This policy emerged in 1996 in several pieces of legislation, including welfare reform legislation under the statutory innovation called "charitable choice," which "invited states to delegate welfare programs to religious groups" (Mink, 2001, p. 5). The provision of social services by religious organizations is, of course, not a new phenomenon and dates back to the earliest days of the provision of social services in this country. And although federal support for the work of religious organizations is also not a new phenomenon, prior to 1996, religious groups had to create separate, secular agencies to receive federal money (e.g., Catholic Charities and Lutheran Social Services).

Under current charitable-choice provisions, federally funded groups are forbidden from proselytizing or compelling recipients of services to join their churches or converting to their religions. However, such groups have the right to "maintain and express their religious identities, symbols, and philosophies in programs supported by federal dollars . . . [and] they may hold voluntary prayers, impart religious principles in counseling and other services, and refuse to hire individuals of a different or no faith" (Mink, 2001, p. 6). In an effort to put religious organizations on an equal footing with traditional social service organizations in their ability to compete for federal funds, the administrative regulations of several federal agencies, such as the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Justice, and Department of Education, have been

loosened and clarified (White House, 2001). The Bush administration's establishment of the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives is a mission of what Bush called "armies of compassion" (Mink, 2001, p. 5).

One may argue that this emphasis on faith-based initiatives is a result of the growing emphasis on recognizing spirituality and religious diversity as a source of strength in the field of social work (Canda & Furman, 1999). However, it is more likely that faith-based initiatives stem not from an interest in religious diversity, but from an interest in specific religious and political agendas. Instead of focusing on changing and holding accountable the social structures that perpetuate social problems, the goal of faith-based initiatives seems to be, as President Bush is quoted as saying, to "change hearts" and "convince a person to turn their life over to Christ" (Solinger, 2001, p. 11).

The debate about faith-based initiatives is further complicated when one considers the realities of a social problem, such as domestic violence. Domestic violence affects approximately 2 million women in the United States every year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). It affects women's physical health, mental health, and ability to maintain employment (Sullivan & Bybee, 1999; Tolman & Raphael, 2000; Tolman & Rosen, 2001). Social service agencies and advocacy programs have been formally responding to the problem of domestic violence since the mid-1970s (Schechter, 1982). These services and advocacy efforts have evolved from crisis hotlines to shelters to advocacy with the law enforcement, court, health care, and welfare systems. Often, the emphasis of these services has been on "improving the service delivery system and developing policies and programs that address the social structural and sexist origins of the problem" (Davis, 1987, p. 306). The role of religious organizations in addressing the problem of domestic violence has been complex and controversial and has included a great deal of distrust between secular and religious organizations (Clark, 2001; Fortune, 2000).

Some Christian and Jewish denominations have drawn on various biblical references and other cultural sources to argue that wives have a duty to maintain their marriages at all costs (Clark, 2001; Nason-Clark, 2000). Survivors of domestic violence have reported being told by their ministers that they should stay in abusive relationships even though they are in severe physical and emotional danger (Fortune, 2000). On the other hand, spirituality and religious institutions have been effective sources of support for women of diverse faiths, including spiritual, emotional, and practical assistance from clergy and others in the spiritual community (Fraser, McNutt, Clark, Williams-Muhammed, & Lee, 2002; Nason-Clark, 2000).

Drawing on data from a study conducted in Wyoming about the community response to domestic violence experienced by traditionally underserved and marginalized populations, this article focuses on an unexpected finding that emerged from a larger study: how the faith community is paradoxically both a source of assistance and a barrier to women survivors of domestic violence. Implications for social work practice and policy, including recent faith-based initiatives, are discussed.

Review of the Literature

Rural settings often pose unique barriers for women survivors of domestic violence. Rural cultural and religious attitudes, as well as practical and logistical issues, continue to be problems for women and their children. Isolation is often perceived as one of the major roadblocks to being safe from an abusive relationship (Adams & Engle-Rowbottom, 1991). The lack of transportation and the great distances between rural residences and small towns to sources of help are factors that contribute to such isolation (Websdale, 1998). Batterers'

intermittent unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, and access to weapons increase battered women's risks in rural communities (Wolff, Burleigh, Tripp, & Gadomski, 2001). The role of churches can be particularly critical in rural areas, since a church may be the sole source of support for some women (Wolff et al., 2001). A study in a rural community, however, identified the lack of trained clergy on issues related to domestic violence as a barrier to a church being a supportive environment (Wolff et al. 2001).

Spirituality and Religion as Sources of Support

The Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence has conducted groundbreaking research with social service workers and clergy on issues that are related to religion and violence against women (Fortune, 2000). An important part of this work has been to emphasize the ways in which religion can be a source of spiritual support and healing for families who are experiencing violence. Researchers have stressed that the theology of the Judeo-Christian tradition actually supports the safety and empowerment of battered women. For example, one can point to the Jewish concept of maintaining *shalom bayit* (peace in the home) or Christ's model of nonviolence and love. The Quaker Church, for instance, with its emphasis on pacifism and its de-emphasis on the importance of a virginal birth of Christ, holds the position that women and men are equal.

Religious institutions and networks can also offer support in more practical ways. Nason-Clark (2000, p. 355) had this to say about informal networks between women's church groups and domestic violence shelter programs: "Whether it was comfort kits prepared for women residents, or the gifts accumulated by a 'shower for the shelter,' church women reached out to their sisters in tangible ways." Another study reported that two in every three evangelical women stated that they have sought the advice of another woman in the church for a family-related problem (Nason-Clark, 1996). According to Nason-Clark (1996, p. 521), "clearly and unequivocally, the most obvious sign of the sensitivity of faith communities to the needs of battered women and their children lies within the confines of a woman-only network of informal social support." Fraser et al. (2002) noted that churches can be particularly supportive resources for African American women who are surviving domestic violence.

Clergy can also offer support to women who are battered. In Nason-Clark's (1996) study of clergy in Canada, the ministers said that in pastoral counseling situations, their most common dealings were with women with husbands or partners who battered them and woman who were abused in childhood by a parent. These ministers also emphasized their need for more training on these issues. Furthermore, unlike previous studies, this study found little evidence that clergy tell battered women to return to an unchanged abusive environment or to suffer in silence. "What is more likely is that clergy cling to excessive optimism that (1) abusive men want to stop their violence; (2) abusive men can stop their violence with help; and (3) violent relationships can be transformed into healthy family living" (Nason-Clark, 1996, p. 523).

Religion as a Barrier to Women's Safety

Although religion and spirituality can be sources of support for women, they may also pose barriers to women who are living in abusive situations. For example, Nason-Clark (2000, p. 355) observed that "clergy . . . rarely had contact with shelter workers, seldom . . . [brought] an abused woman to the house, seldom . . . [invited] the staff to make a presentation in their church, and seldom . . . [volunteered] either themselves or church resources."

Fortune (1991) identified several reasons for what she called the clergy's "silence and neglect": lack of preparation, denial and minimization, solo ministry, and theological confusion.

One aspect of theological confusion concerns the issues of suffering and endurance. Some have considered the suffering of Christ to be something that Christians should emulate—that is, that battered women ought to endure suffering in the way that Christ did (Fortune, 1991). Scholars have debated the meaning of scripture when it comes to the marital relationship. Fortune (1991, 2000) argued that domestic violence cannot be legitimated by scripture. She also contended that the church has often communicated that a battered woman ought to stay in an abusive relationship, inappropriately citing passages from Ephesians, such as "Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord" (Fortune, 2000, p. 375). According to Fortune (2000): "The stated purpose in each of these traditions has been preservation of marriage and the family—at any cost. The real purpose has been the preservation of male control of women and children within patriarchy" (p. 377). Overall, the lack of recognition of the social and structural origins of domestic violence appears to be associated with the belief that the origin of violence is spiritual and that the cure must be spiritual as well (Nason-Clark, 1996).

Early church leaders, such as Martin Luther, described their own physical violence toward their wives without apology (Fortune, 2000). Contemporary conservative religious views, such as those of Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family organization or the Promise Keepers movement, emphasize that "God's design for family life is characterized by strong male leadership and submissive female nurturance" (Nason-Clark, 2000, p. 355). Dobson primarily holds the woman accountable for stopping the violence, emphasizing "tough love," and recommends seeking counseling from a religious leader with the goal of reconciliation (Nason-Clark, 2000).

This literature review has been limited to a focus on Christian and Jewish responses to domestic violence even though there is a literature that addresses the responses of Islamic, Native American, and other religious viewpoints. It should also be noted that there is a general lack of empirical studies about the role of faith and religious supports for battered women (Battaglia, 2001).

Methodology

Program directors of domestic violence agencies across the state were asked what kinds of questions and issues they wanted to see addressed in a needs assessment that they requested at a quarterly meeting of agency directors. I developed an interview guide that was based on the issues and questions set forth by the agencies. The interview guide for the focus groups and other interviews was open ended and centered on questions about the strengths and barriers to serving diverse victims of domestic violence. The agency directors then assisted me in recruiting and contacting participants for the study. I gained approval from my university's institutional review board to conduct the study.

Sample

I used a combination of convenience and purposive sampling techniques to recruit survivors of domestic violence in addition to professionals who encounter battered women. Qualitative interviews were conducted with focus groups—for members of the community, staff members of domestic violence agencies, survivors of domestic violence, and Latinas—plus individual interviews with survivors. The five community focus groups, consisting of

professionals (law enforcement personnel, social workers, district attorneys, and health professionals) who encounter the problems associated with domestic violence were conducted in five communities across the state; 55 individuals participated in these focus groups, an average of 11 participants in each group. In addition, one focus group was conducted with the staff of a local domestic violence program (8 participants), two focus groups were conducted with survivors of domestic violence in two communities (5 participants in total), one individual interview was conducted with a survivor, and two focus groups of Latinas were conducted in two communities (6 participants in total). Thus, a total of 75 individuals participated in the study. All the focus groups and interviews were tape-recorded for accuracy with informed consent.

Analysis

The data analysis included several steps, drawing on established qualitative techniques (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The tapes from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed by a professional transcriber. I coded the transcripts by hand, identifying minimal units of meaning. Themes were generated that were checked by a committee of individuals from local domestic violence agencies.

Results

The interviews revealed that for many women, churches are vital sources of support, both materially and emotionally, while other churches pose barriers. Three themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups.

Theme 1: Supportive Church-Based Initiatives

Several communities revealed that important work was being done in the communities on issues of social concern. This work includes individual and congregational support for women with low incomes and those who are surviving violence, formal social programs within the church, and communitywide initiatives involving multiple congregations.

A survivor of domestic violence talked about the way in which the church has been healing for her: "I would say that church has always been a place where I could go and I could pour out my sorrows. And I could take the focus off myself 'cause it's not just about me and my problems." Discussing the isolation that many non-English-speaking Latinas face and the role of the church in providing support, one church member stated:

> I do a lot of taking to doctors' offices and being part of . . . parent-teacher conferences, and I'm involved with their lives in a lot of ways. . . . A lot of people you can connect with them through the churches—they might not come to [the domestic violence shelter] or [social service agency], but they might go to the church first.

One church congregant discussed a congregationally based social justice program, remarking: "We just started a social justice group at our church about six months ago, and they're looking to do social justice education in the church . . . and they're going to incorporate it into church teaching." This congregation is planning to start an outreach office for the large

population of Latina immigrants in the community. A police officer believed that there is a code of silence about domestic violence in a Latino neighborhood and offered this insight about how his church seeks to break down the barriers of isolation and denial:

> I'm a Catholic, and at the church we have a very strong Hispanic community, and we do everything we can whether Hispanic mass, you know, dinners, potlucks, everything to involve them in the community, and many of them do come from that area over to the church. . . . And I've seen some real inroads as far as getting 'em involved, and they are part of, you know, our community; they're part of the church. . . . I see some subtle breakdowns [of barriers] that occur there to try to assist them.

Theme 2: Church as a Barrier

A recurring theme in every community was the articulation of barriers that religious participation sometimes poses for women survivors of violence. One woman's remarks could serve as a summary of this perspective. After discussing the barriers faced by battered women with disabilities, she half-jokingly asked: "Is religion a disability?"

According to a staff member at a local domestic violence agency in a small rural community: "If the pastor is taking the scripture wrong and saying, you know, that the man is the head of the house and he's the ruler and all that kind of stuff, that could even give the men the lord-of-the-house feeling to where they are in control of their women." Another participant discussed an incident that occurred at a day care center, when a father physically assaulted his child. As it turned out, the father is a local minister. The participant remarked: "I'd like to ask him, would you do that to Jesus?"

In discussing the isolation experienced by many survivors of abuse, a social worker pointed out that "certain churches . . . are really isolated, and once we get into them (although the getting in is rare), the abuse is so extreme . . . because they have been so sequestered." The focus group continued to discuss the issue, describing such churches as "rigid," "extremist," and "fundamentalist."

A group of survivors of domestic violence discussed the religious culture in their small town. One of them summed up the discussion this way: "The Mormons believe that when you get married, you stay married, and if you get divorced, that's frowned upon. It's one of the biggest sins in the Mormon Church." Another woman in this group who was supporting a Mormon friend who was in an abusive marriage asked her friend, "Do you think God wants you to live miserable?" Similarly, a Latina who identified as Catholic and worked at a local domestic violence agency stated:

> Divorce is not a big option, you know, and even I think being abused is very minimized in a family because fathers are under stress; they're heads of the households, and if you were doing what you were supposed to be doing, you obviously wouldn't be getting beaten. . . . Religion is a big thing. And I think it's instilled in them that if they pray . . . to be more patient and . . . to live through this, then [they'll] . . . be a better Catholic and they're going to . . . , you know, go straight to Heaven and . . . have a seat at the right hand of the Father. I mean, that's what's told to us; you put up with it, and you'll become a saint.

One woman, who works as an advocate for battered women, discussed her experience in a sexually abusive relationship. After her divorce from the abuser, she came to be in a loving and supportive intimate relationship with a woman. She expressed her frustration

with discrimination against her and her female partner and the lack of acknowledgment of abusive sexual heterosexual relationships by the Catholic Church:

> Even with the Catholic Church, let's talk about what happened in my marriage. Let's talk about what happened in my Catholic marriage. You want to talk about sex lives. I'll tell you about people who degrade and humiliate and cause pain and injury to their spouses, and nobody says a word. There's no way I would have told anybody at my church what was going on . . . because you're already raised just to be a good wife. So if they want to talk about that, we'll get along to other stuff later on. But let's talk about the ways that people hurt each other sexually, first, before we question people who love each other and support each other.

Theme 3: Church Leaders in the Community Response

The participants in all communities firmly expressed the importance of community collaboration in addressing domestic violence. This community collaboration, many believe, should involve religious leaders. Several individuals believed that churches are an overlooked strength and should be at the forefront of community-based domestic violence collaboration. In the communities that had clergy on their community response teams, the participants believed that the clergy provided an important resource. In recommending what changes need to be made in communities, participants in several communities emphasized the importance of clergy and religious congregants playing a part in community collaborations and coalitions. One church congregant advocated for church leaders' involvement in the community assessment process and said that they should take part in presenting the findings of the assessment.

Discussion

Just as the literature seems to indicate, the findings of this study revealed that supportive church-based networks can be of practical use to battered women. In addition, attending church can be spiritually healing for some women. However, for many women, the church is not necessarily a safe or supportive place and is not considered to be an effective resource for addressing domestic violence. Church environments may be contributing to further isolation and may be sending covert messages to women that they should stay in abusive relationships (Gnanadason, 1993).

Proactive collaboration and communication between religious institutions and social service providers and advocates seem to be lacking in the communities that were studied. While churches are sometimes important places of support and collaboration is taking place among congregations, coordination between social workers and religious institutions is insufficient. The lack of collaboration and partnership between secular and religious service providers has been identified in the literature (Battaglia, 2001; Nason-Clark, 1996).

According to the findings, the highest awareness of the problems of the church seems to come from either advocates or staff of local domestic violence agencies or from survivors who have received services from domestic violence agencies. This awareness is likely due to the fact that the domestic violence movement has often proactively raised awareness about the cultural and patriarchal factors that contribute to violence against women and has viewed the Judeo-Christian tradition, in particular, as part of the patriarchal system (Fortune, 2000; Schechter, 1982).

Limitations

Because this study was concerned primarily with the broader issues of the community response to domestic violence in underserved communities, information about the role of religion and spirituality was minimal and basic. The study did not adequately incorporate the voices of clergy. In addition, the survey narrowly defined religion and the faith community as churches, and although there is a minimal amount of religious diversity in the state that was studied, other sources of spiritual support were likely omitted, including indigenous religious responses and 12-step or other alternative spiritual approaches, such as new-age meditation, that may be available in these communities. It is also important to remember that the findings were based only on individual perceptions, not on "objective" observation of the community or outcomes of programs.

Implications for Social Work

On the basis of the results of this study, it seems that religious institutions are not necessarily prepared to deal with the complexities of a social problem like domestic violence. This does not mean that addressing the problem through religious institutions is out of the realm of possibility, but intensive education and training of clergy and sectarian social service agencies would be essential. Fortune (2000, p. 383) echoed the belief in the possibilities offered by religious supports: "Our religious institutions have the potential to reframe the conversation and help to shift the community norms to respect women's bodily integrity and right to live free from fear in the home." In this section, I discuss three areas for which the findings of this study have implications for social work: coordination, training of clergy, and charitable-choice policies.

Coordination

Advocates and social workers may consider attempting to include both clergy and lay members of faith-based organizations on their community-coordinated response teams and councils. One of the first steps for social workers is to do some self-reflection and consciousness-raising about why social work and religious institutions have become so isolated from one another and have failed to collaborate. Certainly, barriers exist on both sides. However, social workers may come to realize that in its efforts to providing secular, scientifically based services, the social work profession has overlooked religious leaders and institutions as the vital resources that they are. These consciousness-raising groups could be held among social workers and advocates in their communities, as well as at national conferences.

As a result of such discussions, educational and training materials could be produced that would provide tools for social workers and advocates to learn to connect, communicate, and collaborate with religious institutions. Once religious organizations have been invited to join community-response teams, cross-training between secular and religious helpers can begin to take place. Such training and coordination could be co-facilitated by social workers and religious leaders and be funded by one of the many grants that are available to faith-based organizations. Localized protocols could be developed that would identify steps to take when a woman or family in a congregation identifies domestic violence. This protocol may include contacting a local domestic violence program.

In addition, a protocol could be developed at the local domestic violence program to conduct a spiritual assessment and make appropriate referrals to trained clergy and nonclergy in local congregations.

Training of Clergy

Once the secular and religious helpers express interest in being a part of the community response to domestic violence, social workers and advocates for battered women can take leadership roles in educating the faith community about the social and cultural causes of domestic violence. This training should emphasize the patriarchal origins of violence against women and attend to the various ways in which domestic violence affects women of color, particularly immigrant Latinas.

Fortune (1991) stressed that when educating about the nature and dynamics of domestic violence, it is important to discuss the power and control dynamics that occur in abusive relationships in the context of a patriarchal society. This training can draw from some of the ideas of feminist consciousness-raising that emerged from the early domestic violence movement (Schechter, 1982). In other words, clergy would be asked to reflect on their personal experiences with domestic violence or the experiences of their mothers, sisters, and friends as a way to gain deeper insight into the problem.

Wolff et al. (2001) presented some specific goals of a clergy training curriculum: (1) to understand the nature and dynamics of domestic violence; (2) to develop assessment skills in identifying victims; (3) to discuss potential overt and covert messages that contribute to domestic violence; (4) to discuss collaboration with health care and mental health workers and advocates for victims of domestic violence; (5) to become acquainted with available community resources; and (6) to describe how the faith community can bring healing to victims of domestic violence and their families.

Charitable-Choice Policies

Because faith-based social services are a timely and influential phenomenon, this section discusses the implications that the findings have for charitable-choice policies. Efforts to shift social services out of the hands of the government and into the hands of religious organizations date back to the 1980s when President Ronald Reagan told the biblical story of the good Samaritan, citing it as an allegory for the provision of social services. Reagan believed that one should respond to human suffering with a compassionate heart and act in the moment, rather than wait for the bureaucracy of governmental social services to respond to human needs (Cnaan & Boddie, 2002). This belief is philosophically akin to President George Bush, Sr.'s, identification of this kind of helping and community volunteerism as a Thousand Points of Light. In a similar vein, the conservative writer Olasky (1992) argued that government-provided welfare services were ineffective and that the only way to help people is through religious transformation that changes lives and instills responsibility, discipline, and work ethics.

Weiss (2001, p. 43) responded to these conservative perspectives this way:

With its emphasis on bootstrap mobility and individual responsibility in a social structure of immense inequality, faith-based social service obscures the broader structures of racial and economic domination, depoliticizes social inequality, and replaces confrontation with accommodation.

Both the governmental and faith-based social service programs tend to individualize social problems and maintain rigid ideas about "self-reliance, gay rights, abortion, school vouchers, school prayer, [and] sex education" (Weiss, 2001, p. 43). These perspectives on social problems are particularly problematic for women who are surviving domestic violence, since they need non-victim-blaming advocacy services that emphasize community accountability.

Recently, the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives was transferred to the Department of Homeland Security (White House, 2006). This shift represents a possible weakening of the department's strength and may exacerbate the problem of a lack of accountability in the administration of faith-based programs. Thus, given the current federal policy context of faith-based initiatives and the findings of this study, the following additional recommendations are offered. First, any federal policies and funding that offer provisions for faith-based initiatives or charitable choice that could affect battered women ought to be amended to require training on domestic violence for all recipients of grants and providers of services. Second, social workers and advocates ought to assist faith-based organizations in learning about macrolevel approaches to addressing domestic violence, such as community organizing projects. The Pacific Institute for Community Organizing is an example of the successes that faith-based organizations can achieve when they work together on community social problems (Wood, 2002). Third, the federal government should approach faith-based initiatives as experimental and intensively monitor their outcomes, as well as ensure the sanctity of the nonproselytizing clause. Fourth, any policy that addresses faith-based initiatives should provide federal funding to evaluate faith-based efforts' support of battered women's attempts to achieve safety, including comparing faith-based efforts to secular efforts.

Conclusion

The faith community's response to domestic violence is a complex issue. The spiritual diversity movement (Canda & Furman, 1999), which has sought to understand the biopsycho-spiritual-social person and emphasize the innate human capacity for healing, has been a radical and powerful transformation in the social work profession. In the profession's efforts to be tolerant and attuned to spiritual and religious diversity, it is important that professionals are not putting women and children in harm's way. Advocates for battered women and social workers must hold religious organizations accountable for providing for women's safety and abusers' accountability in the same way that they would any other system, such as law enforcement or child protective services. It is critical that the social and patriarchal origins of violence against women as a social problem not be lost in the shuffle of faith-based initiatives and that domestic violence not be construed as a spiritual problem that can be solved easily with prayer, endurance, and a belief in the sanctity of the family. Without an adequate understanding and recognition of the societal origins of violence against women, effective interventions will remain elusive.

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