

Faith Based Responses to Domestic Violence: Avenues for Ramping up Existing Efforts and Resources

By Grove Harris

In the wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic, a dramatic increase in domestic violence is rearing up across the globe. How are religions responding? What resources exist? What can be done differently moving forward?

Religions for Peace has had a comprehensive [toolkit](#) towards ending violence against women online since 2013. Recognizing a global pandemic then, the toolkit offers education and action steps, including educational radio programming, prevention via outreach to men, collaboration with diverse religious leaders, and additional forms of advocacy. Campaigns, retreats, addressing justice and ending impunity, suggestions for partnering with media, interfaith pledging, and more are all part of the Restoring Dignity Campaign.

“Religious leaders and communities of faith have the moral authority and the responsibility to work together, in a spirit of multi-faith collaboration, to promote and protect the inviolable dignity of women and girls. People of faith have a unique and unparalleled potential, as moral and spiritual leaders, to be powerful agents of prevention, education and advocacy to end violence against women.”

Many faith traditions and interfaith groups are offering resources online, and many are providing direct services. There is a range of service providers, from large long established organizations providing extensive services such as the Salvation Army to much smaller local faith based shelters for women. And there is a growing set of men’s organizations (which obviously will include men of faith), some of which are establishing national efforts around the globe, and others are taking responsibility and action in selected neighborhoods. These men are stepping up, taking responsibility and owning the problem and working for the solution. [Please review the annotated appendix to see the resources and organizations.](#)

The good news is that, in addition to the existing service provision, there are many resources by and for faith-based actors and great potential in partnering with governments, secular organizations and other actors towards real change. The bad news is this potential is not new, and the needs are growing dramatically.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres [calls](#) for a response to the “horrificing global surge in domestic violence”, including an “appeal for peace in homes around the world.” He offers the following UN domestic violence reduction recommendations:

- Increase investment in online services and civil society organizations,
- Make sure judicial systems continue to prosecute abusers,
- Set up emergency warning systems in pharmacies and groceries,
- Declare shelters as essential services,
- Create safe ways for women to seek support, without alerting their abusers,
- Avoid releasing prisoners convicted of violence against women in any form,
- Scale up public awareness campaigns, particularly those targeted at men and boys.

In their [article](#), “African women face two pandemics,” authors Rosebell Kagumire and Vivian Ouya state that the pandemic of violence against women is not at all new, and governments must consider it a national emergency. They write:

“To address violence against women and girls, African governments must first acknowledge its historic existence and tackle it as a matter of national emergency. What the present crisis highlights across the African continent is the ineffectiveness of past measures.”

Now is the time to understand the nature and degree of the current problem differently.

Religious leadership must strengthen and increase their calls for ending domestic violence, and support calls for national emergencies, and for concrete reduction recommendations, using the multinational status of religions as a unifying factor across the diverse national settings.

Religious actors, and institutions, can lead, particularly in public awareness, moral voice, prophetic vision, and accessing resources that already exist for training clergy in effective alliance with those suffering from the isolation, controlling behavior and violence of domestic abuse.

While economic and social stresses increase domestic violence, stress is neither the sole cause nor an acceptable excuse. Clergy must be careful in their language not to normalize abusive behavior. Not all partners abuse. Not all partners seek excessive control, and use isolation as an opportunity. Not all partners are violent. It is degrading to men to assume violence is normal under stress, and complicit with perpetrators. (Note that while men are the large majority of the abusers, women can also be abusive.)

Faith communities can:

- *Engage in self-reflection and education.* People of faith are sometimes abusers. Clergy are sometimes abusers. We need unflinching understanding of the degree of the problem.
- *Engage men.* Many men abhor violence against women and can encouraged to be more outspoken about their understanding of right action, the expression of strength and an understanding of manhood that respects, protects and defends the dignity and human rights

of others, especially women. Some of the men's organizations are organized to serve men who want to change their behavior.

- *Engage youth.* There are many ways to engage youth. One pilot project in Africa was effective in reducing rates of rape. Their strategy? Self-defense training for girls, and self-esteem training for boys. Self-defense training teaches the right to bodily autonomy, and encourages self-protection and self-esteem. Self-esteem training builds the ability to stand up for what is right. These different pathways converge in helping youth mature in wholeness and personal power.
- *Engage women in leadership.* Increase women's participation in decision-making and make strides towards gender equality. Power must be shifted to a more egalitarian base, for the good of the whole.
- *Engage with feminist secular organizations fighting for women's human rights.* While there may be strong ideological differences on some issues, a new pathway would look at common ground, and agree to disagree on other areas.
- *Expand existing initiatives dramatically and innovatively.* The World Council of Church's Thursdays in Black movement, for example, might be expanded through the use of branded black facemasks. This idea was recently suggested on Rev Dionne Boissiere's Facebook page. Investment could lead to Increased visibility and dramatically amplify their message.

The internet, which can be a tool for spreading efforts towards domestic peace, also spreads hatred of women virulently. Researcher Laura Bates has [investigated](#) massive online organizations promoting hatred and applauding violence against women. She writes:

“The thing that really came out very clearly in my research was that we were looking at hundreds of thousands of people, millions of views, so many different websites, forums. We're talking about a massive network...”

And interviewer Zoe Williams concludes:

“There is a live community of violent extremists, operating online without censure, generating concrete terrorist attacks in which the perpetrators are very open about their guiding ideology of misogyny, and radicalizing young boys in a way that would be considered dangerously unacceptable conducted in the name of any other worldview.”

Make no mistake about it: there are organized groups aiming at hurting women, violating their human rights, and sometimes taking women's lives. The struggle for gender equality and domestic peace is critical and timely.

Kagumire and Ouya [call for solutions](#) that shift the root problems in power structures:

“We must stop interventions that entrench performative male support of gender equality with no shift in how power is held and exercised. Any responses to sexual violence in this pandemic must be mindful of the ways in which societies were already failing women. Therefore, an understanding of systemic inequalities is essential in creating alternatives.”

The UN Secretary General also locates the solutions in a power analysis- women need full inclusion in decision-making bodies, access to education and income, and more: women need full human rights. Religious prophetic voices can support this need for systemic change, through modeling it and promoting it, prophetically and internationally. Four core questions can serve to guide these efforts towards increasing women’s human rights (adapted from the [NGO Mining Working Group’s Water guide](#)):

- **Are the conditions for women’s human rights being supported, rather than undermined?**
- **Is women’s enjoyment of human rights being advanced?**
- **How is women’s effective participation in decision making being fostered?**
- **What are the long-term impacts, and plans to improve over time?**

Fulfilling women’s human rights contributes to human rights for everyone, benefiting the whole community, the whole nation and the whole world. Gender equality is required for peace in the home, and for peace in the world. For religiously minded people, there is a rule above power: that of love. In the interfaith arena, the golden rule of ‘do unto others as you’d have done unto you’ is often cited as a common ground among diverse religions. The platinum rule, ‘do unto others as they’d have you do unto them’ requires even better boundaries and communication. In the current moment, what is called for is an even higher law, that of love. We are called to do as love requires. To stay in this together, aspiring and acting towards much more love in how we treat each other. Another world is possible.

[Further Resources](#)