



What Religious and Traditional Peacemakers Should Know About Intimate Partner Violence and Covid-19

Taylor Owen Ramsey, PhD
Senior Specialist on Inclusive Peace

Summary

- Religious and traditional peacemakers should find ways to safely check on vulnerable members of their community
- Religious and traditional peacemakers can publicly speak out against intimate partner violence.
- Religious and traditional peacemakers should learn about IPV and refer to women's organizations with experience, resources, and established support-structures for survivors. Religious and traditional peacemakers also have an important role to play by partnering with relevant women's rights organisations and actors in amplifying their voices and demands.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is physical, sexual, and/or emotional/psychological abuse and other types of controlling behavior perpetrated by an intimate partner such as a spouse, former spouse or boyfriend/girlfriend.¹ The World Health Organization reports that IPV is the most widespread type of violence in the world with one out of every three women experiencing IPV during their lifetime.² While anyone can be a survivor³ of IPV, women and [LGBTQIA+](#) individuals experience it the most.

Crises tend to exasperate IPV and the global outbreak of Covid-19 is no different. The Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres, reported a “horrifying surge in domestic violence,” with the number of women calling support services doubling in some countries since the beginning of the outbreak.⁴ Those experiencing IPV often turn to religious and traditional leaders within their community for advice, guidance and support. Religious and traditional leaders have played positive roles combatting abuse in their communities and can continue to do so during the global pandemic. Here are some important considerations for religious and traditional peacemakers about IPV during the Covid-19 outbreak.

¹ Sometimes IPV can be called domestic violence or even referred to as family violence. However, domestic violence and family violence can encompass other forms of violence such as violence against children and abuse of elders and other people within a household.

² WHO (2018) “Violence Against Women: Strengthening the health response in times of crisis,” <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/violence-against-women>

³ There are many valid arguments for how best to refer to those who have experienced abuse and for those that perpetrate abuse. Some advocates use survivor while others use victim. Some people will use the terms abuser, perpetrator or people who use abuse.

⁴ Guterres, António, (2020) Twitter, <https://twitter.com/antonioguterres/status/1246973397759819776>

1. Crises in general increase rates of gender-based violence and IPV but the quarantine and social distancing measures of Covid-19 are especially challenging.

It isn't always the [safest decision](#) to leave an abusive partner and even if a person is ready to leave an abusive relationship, Covid-19 quarantine, lockdown and social distancing guidelines are making it more difficult or impossible. In France, the reported IPV rate increased by a third in one week while, in South Africa, there were almost 90,000 reports of violence against women in the first week of the mandated quarantines.⁵ Australia reported that google searches for IPV support have risen 75%, and in Turkey, femicide rose sharply after the stay at home order was issued.⁶

Perpetrators can use social isolation as a means of control over victims as people become more cut off from support networks and as social, health and legal systems shift resources more toward countering the spread of the virus. Those enduring abuse may also avoid escaping to family and friends' homes for fear of spreading or catching the virus and shelters for survivors of abuse may be overcrowded or closed to prevent the spread. The growing economic downturn is also making the resources to leave an abusive relationship even scarcer and perpetrators, facing a lack of control over their own lives, can falsely heighten their sense of control through abuse of a partner.

The United States' National Domestic Violence Hotline reports the following tactics that abusers may use during the Covid-19 outbreak:

- Abusive partners may withhold necessary items, such as hand sanitizer or disinfectants.
- Abusive partners may share misinformation about the pandemic to control or frighten survivors, or to prevent them from seeking appropriate medical attention if they have symptoms.
- Abusive partners may withhold insurance cards, threaten to cancel health insurance, or prevent survivors from seeking medical attention if they need it.
- Programs that serve survivors may be significantly impacted -- shelters may be full or may even stop intakes altogether. Survivors may also fear entering shelter because of being in close quarters with groups of people.
- Survivors who are older or have chronic heart or lung conditions may be at increased risk in public places where they would typically get support, like shelters, counseling centers, or courthouses.
- Travel restrictions may impact a survivor's escape or safety plan – it may not be safe for them to use public transportation or to fly.
- An abusive partner may feel more justified and escalate their isolation tactics.⁷

To protect vulnerable members of their communities, religious and traditional leaders can try to be more vigilant than usual in checking in with members of their congregations and communities digitally. Where internet access is uncommon,

⁵ Besheer, Margaret, Voice of America (2020), "UN Chief: Coronavirus Pressures Leading to Global Surge in Domestic Violence," <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/un-chief-coronavirus-pressures-leading-global-surge-domestic>

⁶ ibid

⁷ National Domestic Violence Hotline (2020), "Staying Safe During COVID-19," <https://www.thehotline.org/2020/03/13/staying-safe-during-covid-19/>

religious and traditional leaders can make use of phone lines and radio programming to broadcast resources and to offer support.

2. Misinterpretation of religious beliefs is often used to perpetrate abuse

Because creating power imbalance is at the heart of IPV, abusers often use scripture, religious beliefs and practices as a tactic to maintain control of their partners. Scripture, beliefs, or faith-based norms can be used to justify sexual violence, to keep a partner from leaving, or to create isolation through fear of community scapegoating.⁸ Because abusers can use faith to manipulate their partners, faith leaders may struggle in gaining trust of those reporting abuse and needing help. Religious and traditional peacemakers can counter these harmful practices within their communities by using scripture, faith and spiritual beliefs to speak out against violence and by supporting survivors when they report abuse.

3. Know the resources available in your community and seek training to use a trauma-informed approach

The best way to support survivors of IPV is to first and foremost believe them when they come to you and to be knowledgeable of existing resources in your community. IPV shelters, women's resource centers and organizations countering gender-based violence are often trained in counseling using a trauma-informed approach, which is the most effective way to support survivors of violence and abuse. However, everyone can become more knowledgeable about IPV and [trauma-informed care](#). Many organizations offer training and learning exchanges, even online (see below). Religious and traditional leaders who want to support survivors should take the time to learn about IPV and to make sure their institutions are welcoming and safe places for survivors to report abuse. They should also get to know the systems in place in their communities and countries to address abuse and hold perpetrators accountable. If those systems are weak or non-existent, religious and traditional peacemakers can become advocates for ending IPV through creating systems where there are none and partnering with existing organizations that work to end gender-based violence.

Resources:

New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, Governor's Office of Faith-Based Community Development Initiatives, (2016) *Domestic Violence and Faith Communities: Guidelines for Leaders*, <https://opdv.ny.gov/professionals/faith/guidelines.pdf>

World Health Organization (2009), *Changing cultural and social norms that support violence*, https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/44147/9789241598330_eng.pdf?sequence=1

Faith Trust Institute (2010), "A Commentary on Religion and Domestic Violence." <https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/articles/Commentary.pdf>

⁸ National Network to End Domestic Violence (2018), "Domestic Violence and Faith," https://nnev.org/latest_update/domestic-violence-faith/

Peaceful Families Project, <https://www.peacefulfamilies.org/>

JCADA, “Qur’anic Passages & Verses for Inspiration,” <https://jcada.org/training-education/clergy-resource-center/quranic-passages-verses/>

JCADA, “Christian Scripture: Verses for Inspiration,” <https://jcada.org/training-education/clergy-resource-center/christian-scripture-verses-for-inspiration/>

JCADA, “Parashah Pieces: Divrei Torah Samples and Inspiration,” <https://jcada.org/training-education/clergy-resource-center/parash-pieces/>

Madre (2020), “A Practical Approach to Prevent, Address and Document Domestic Violence under COVID-19,”

<https://www.madre.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/From%20Global%20Coordination%20to%20Local%20Strategies.pdf>

About the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers:

The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers was founded in 2013 as a concrete response to the increased awareness to include grassroots leaders and authorities to build sustainable peace. Since its inception, the Network has grown into a community of peacemakers ranging from grassroots religious and traditional actors to international NGOs, think tanks, and academic institutes, building bridges between grassroots peacemakers and global players in order to strengthen the work done for sustainable peace. The Network strengthens peacemaking through collaboratively supporting the positive role of religious and traditional actors in peace and peacebuilding processes.

<https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/>