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Faiths Take New Approach to Domestic Abuse: Jewish, Muslim, Christian Writers Produce Handbook to Give Religious Leaders Tools to Help Victims of Violence

By Rebecca Rosen Lum, Contra Costa Times

Gloria Sandoval sought the help of her pastor when she was a young mother and her then-husband frequently slapped, kicked and punched her.

“I was given the response that I should go home and be a better wife,” she recalled on Friday. The beatings didn’t stop, and Sandoval finally left for good.

Her experience mirrors that of many domestic abuse victims.

A benchmark study in 2001 showed battered women in a majority of cases turn first to their clergy for help.

One in three received assistance from religious leaders, and one in 10 batterers received counseling, according to a study reported in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. The spiritual counselors’ efforts were perceived as ineffective, the journal reported.

For their part, clergy said they felt inadequately trained for the mission.

STAND! Against Domestic Violence, based in Concord, has been sowing the seeds of change in the religious community during the past eight years, and has just published a handbook, “God Is Not Abusive.”

It gives the faithful tools for recognizing and interrupting domestic violence, and guides both victims and perpetrators to faith-based and other agencies that can help.

Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders teamed up to produce the handbook, which discusses how isolated portions of sacred texts have been taken out of context to justify domestic violence in the past.

Abusers don't see women as their equals – which the Islamic Quran does not support, said co-author Farid Younos. He founded and heads Afghan Domestic Violence Prevention, part of the Afghan Coalition of Fremont. Younos hosts a talk show on satellite television that draws calls from Muslims living in the United States, Europe and the Middle East.

“There is not one single atom of difference between men and women; they are created in equality by almighty God,” said Younos, the author of “Gender Equality in Islam,” written when the invading Taliban imposed a harsh Sharia law on his homeland.

In fact, all three faiths support gentleness and mutual respect between partners, the authors say.

A woman who attended a support group for Jewish women said the spiritual component brought solace and companionship.

“By going to one's faith, you find the full heart of who you are,” said Kali Santos of Pinole. “You find a sense of self, a sense of home that is familiar and nurturing.

“Getting together with other women was very healing,” she said. “And I really did like the candle-lighting. As in all faiths, it brings a sense of enlightenment. It helps you get through it with a vision.”

Spiritual leaders once handled abuse victims differently, said the Rev. Paul Taylor, senior pastor of Antioch Christian Center in Pittsburg and one of the handbook's authors.

“It was more or less up to the individual pastor,” he said. “But I think more often than not, pastors with good intentions would send wives home, subjecting them to further abuse. In the past five to 10 years, I've seen a difference. Pastors are being trained differently.”

That means fewer clerics are likely to respond, as they once did, that domestic violence “doesn't happen here.”

“It's shame,” he said. “When you talk about being a Christian, for instance, there's such a great mandate from Scripture how to create a good relationship.”

The booklet writers wanted to say “it's a hurting thing, it's an embarrassing thing, but we can work on it together,” he said.

One in four women and eight percent of American men will suffer physical or sexual abuse by a partner at some point in their lives, according to the National Violence Against Women Survey of 2000.

Given the numbers, it is unlikely any congregation is without abuse, said Sharon Turner, regional director of STAND! Against Domestic Violence.

When STAND! began reaching out to clergy, “There was some suspicion whether we were trying to break up families,” she said. But on the whole, “People felt it was time to break the silence.”

Sandoval, now the executive director of STAND!, said, “It’s important for women to know that God, however they perceive him, does not want them to be hurt in this way, and that help is available.”

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RESOURCES

- To receive “God Is Not Abusive,” call 925-603-0197
- To get help, call the domestic violence crisis line 888-215-5555
- Stand! Against Domestic Violence www.standagainstdv.org
- Shalom Bayit: Bay Area Jewish Women Working to End Domestic Violence: www.shalom-bayit.org
- Faith Trust Institute: www.faithtrustinstitute.org
- Peace and Safety in the Christian Home: www.peaceandsafety.com

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