



Understanding Intimate Partner Violence in the Church: **A Call for Church Leaders to Engage in Dialogue**



Nathalie Lynn, Ed.M.
Lehigh University

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"Love God, Love People"

Mark 12 tells the story of when Jesus is asked by some *pesky* pharisees his opinion of which of the commandments was the most important. Jesus responded (using much more eloquent, yet similar words) "love God, love people".

The goal of this white paper is to initiate a dialogue about intimate partner violence (IPV) and the church by combining my love of scripture and scholarship. Throughout my research, some of the empirical findings broke my heart, while others restored my hope in the church. I found that across the nation, the church is filled with women who have experienced some form of abuse, not just from their partner, but from church leadership including the misuse of teachings that perpetuate an erroneous narrative. On the other hand, I also found that the church has taken on the responsibility of developing biblically-based interventions in order serve survivors of violence.

These findings bring me to the following questions: In what ways can church culture potentially perpetuate IPV? In what ways can it be an agent of change? How can the incoming generation of ordained ministers and church leaders begin to shift the church's cultural narratives that have been used to devalue women?

As someone who has served and lead in my local church for over 10 years, I hope that together we continue to learn how to better love people by first humbling ourselves to gain insight and a willingness to change. The content of this white paper may be difficult and convicting at times, but like a parent who corrects their child, the correction stems from love.

In solidarity,
Nathalie Lynn

Introduction

When entering pastoral ministries and servant-leadership positions, we are committing to humbly serve the needs of others (phil.2:3-4), be above reproach (1 Tim.3:2), seek justice and correct oppression (Isa.1:17), and pay careful attention to the needs of the church (Acts 20:28). If you are preparing to take that oath and live up to the commitment, then you are most certainly aware of who makes up the church. The Pew Research Center reported that 55% of the evangelical/protestant church members identified as women [1]. Historically, biblical teachings have been used to justify the silencing of women in the church, refusal to ordain women clergy, and even staying in a violent relationship to avoid the guilt of breaking a marital covenant.

Although many mainline denominations have directly addressed the church's intolerance of intimate partner violence (IPV), it is still being perpetuated covertly due to ingrained patriarchal beliefs and the use of scripture as a weapon towards women. Many Christian organizations have launched intervention programs and initiatives to provide aid for victims of IPV. To truly address this pervasive social issue, the church must begin to look for signs of abuse not in the bruises or aggression, but in our doctrines. As the future leaders and ministers of our congregations, we are in a unique position to not only implement church wide interventions but also promote cultural shifts. This white paper will aim to reframe the approach towards victims of IPV, as one that asks the hard questions about the role of spiritual abuse in IPV.



"..the church must begin to look for signs of abuse not in the bruises or aggression, but in our doctrines."

Intimate Partner Violence

“For it is not an enemy who taunts me— then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me— then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend.”
— David, Psalm 55

The words sung by the psalmist David may capture the sentiments of many of the victims of intimate partner violence (IPV), which is defined as “physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse” [2].



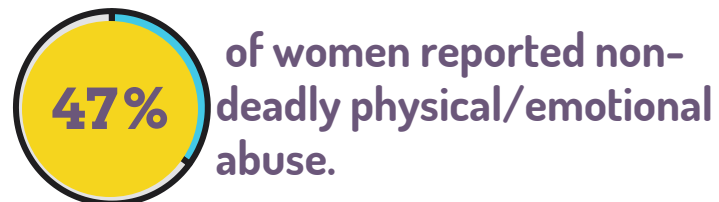
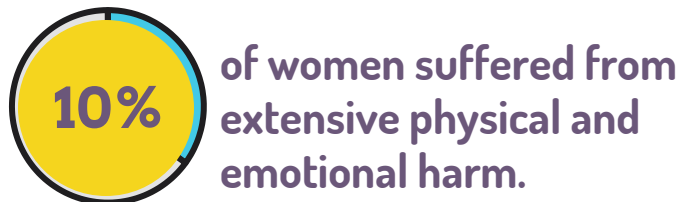
1 in 3
women

have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner [3].

Although men are also victims of IPV, it is most common against women. Women are also more likely to report to family, friends, and to their local church before formally reporting to authorities [3].

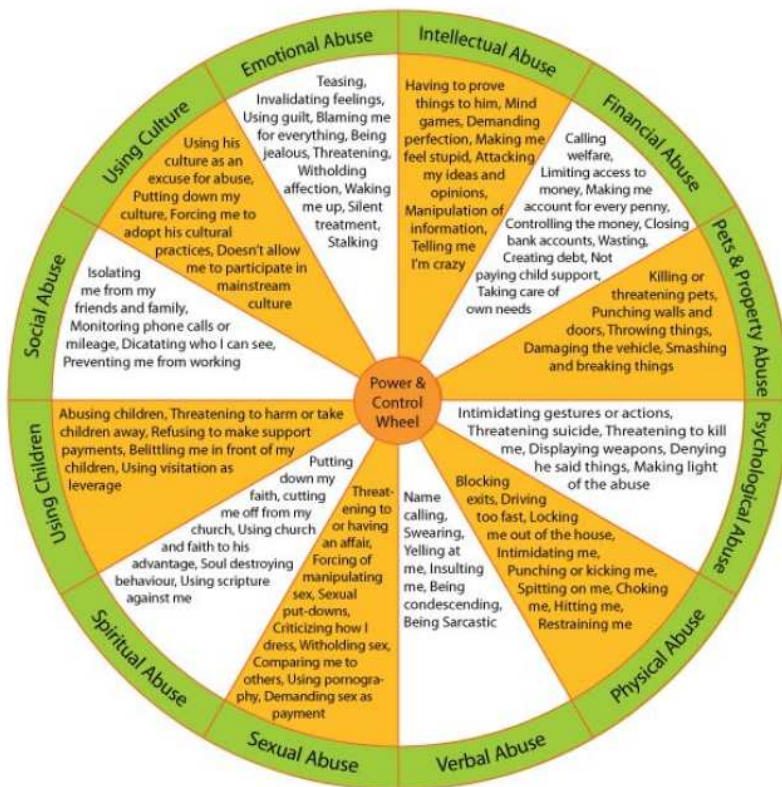
IPV in the Church

A study conducted with a large conservative church sample (N=1431) found that [4]:



Spiritual Abuse

Spiritual abuse refers to using religion, biblical texts, and/or doctrinal teachings to control, manipulate, and/or shame an individual [6,7]. Spiritual abuse may be difficult to identify, yet it is just as difficult to endure as any other type of abuse. Moreover, many perpetrators may use religious beliefs as a way to minimize or rationalize other abusive behavior such as physical, financial, emotional, and marital rape [7].



The Power and Control Wheel Developed by Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs

We often believe that only a spouse can perpetuate IPV, which considerably limits our perceptions of who plays a role in perpetuating IPV. The perpetrator is defined as the individual(s) that is **systemically** abusing another person to **gain power or control** [5].

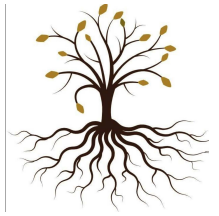
In order to effectively address IPV in the church, we first need to actively recognize spiritual abuse and how it may be perpetuated not just in intimate relationships, but within the church community.

Methods used by a romantic partner within marriages include: Asking women to forgive the abuse, remain in the abusive relationship, denying the women from attending church, blaming the women for their “sin” of disobeying their husband [6].

Methods of spiritual abuse used by the clergy and church leaders include: Unable to recognize abuse due to own biases on gender roles, asking women to contribute in serving the church but not giving them decision making power, placing the responsibility on the victim to “keep the family together” [6].

Faith leaders may inflict spiritual abuse on the congregation and contribute to a cycle of abuse in the home by creating a toxic culture that devalues women and limits their contribution to traditional gender roles, therefore using their power to continue legitimizing the control the male partner has in the relationship [5].

Getting to the Root of the Problem



The Church as a solution to IPV

The alarming statistics do not take away from the positive impact that the church can make as pillars of their communities. My research led me to find initiatives that the church has wholeheartedly implemented to serve survivors, and live out biblical teachings faithfully. The following are current examples of how the church has and may continue to address IPV and provide a safe haven for survivors:

Prevention Efforts

Church communities and leaders have developed prevention programs and trainings for recognizing signs of IPV and fostering healthy relationships. Efforts include: hosting educational workshops, newsletters and luncheons [7].

Support Groups

Women recovery support groups hosted across churches in the US, have provided spaces for women to:

- tell their story
- process trauma
- seek comfort in one another through prayer and fellowship
- continue to recognize their resiliency through it all

Providing Resources

Churches have reported using pastoral care to connect victims of IPV to community resources that may provide immediate assistance. Some churches have also provided financial support to aid victims if they are seeking to leave their current abusive relationship [7, 8]

The initiatives and intervention programs have shown to be efficacious in providing safe spaces for women to share their stories, become informed, and make connections to necessary resources. However, programming seems to shy away from recognizing and defining Spiritual abuse as a kind of violence, which is partly a consequence of misusing or neglecting context-based biblical teachings.

Proposed Solution

Interventions and prevention efforts play an essential role in aiding victims/survivors in the church, however, without a shift in the underlying cultural values that perpetuate IPV, these interventions are the bandaid on a bullet wound. Church leaders are in a unique position to normalize difficult conversations that center around gender norms and roles in the church. The proposed solution aims to reframe how we place value on traditional gender roles and begin to have a dialogue about the power dynamics at play.

Cultural shifts and ruptures of harmful schemas will only take place when pastors and church leaders dare to face the difficult conversations.

Spiritual Abuse: Call to Action

Scripture tells us that Faith without works is dead (James 2:17). Similarly, knowledge without action is in vain. The following are actionable steps the church can take to begin shifting culture.

Humbly Take Correction

"True humility is a rich, multifaceted construct that is characterized by an accurate assessment of one's characteristics, an ability to acknowledge limitations, and a 'forgetting of the self'"[10].

Before you can promote change, you first need to be open to change. We can increase humility by:

Analyzing our traditional views and biases

Where did I learn this? Are my attitudes and ideologies harmful?

Engaging in mindfulness practices

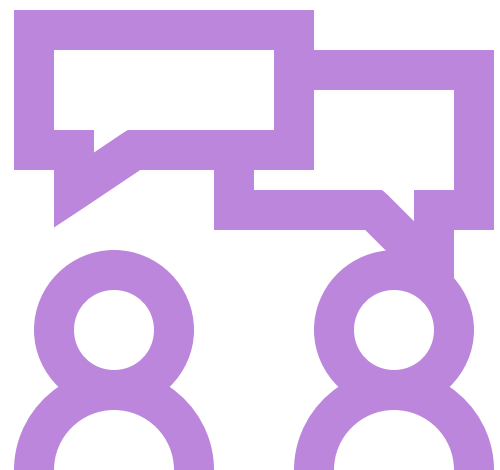
Mindfulness allows us to accept what *is* by engaging us in the *Here and Now*. useful tools to help us gain better self-awareness include: journaling, mindful walks, and reflective practices.



Make Space for Dialogue and Addressing Power Dynamics

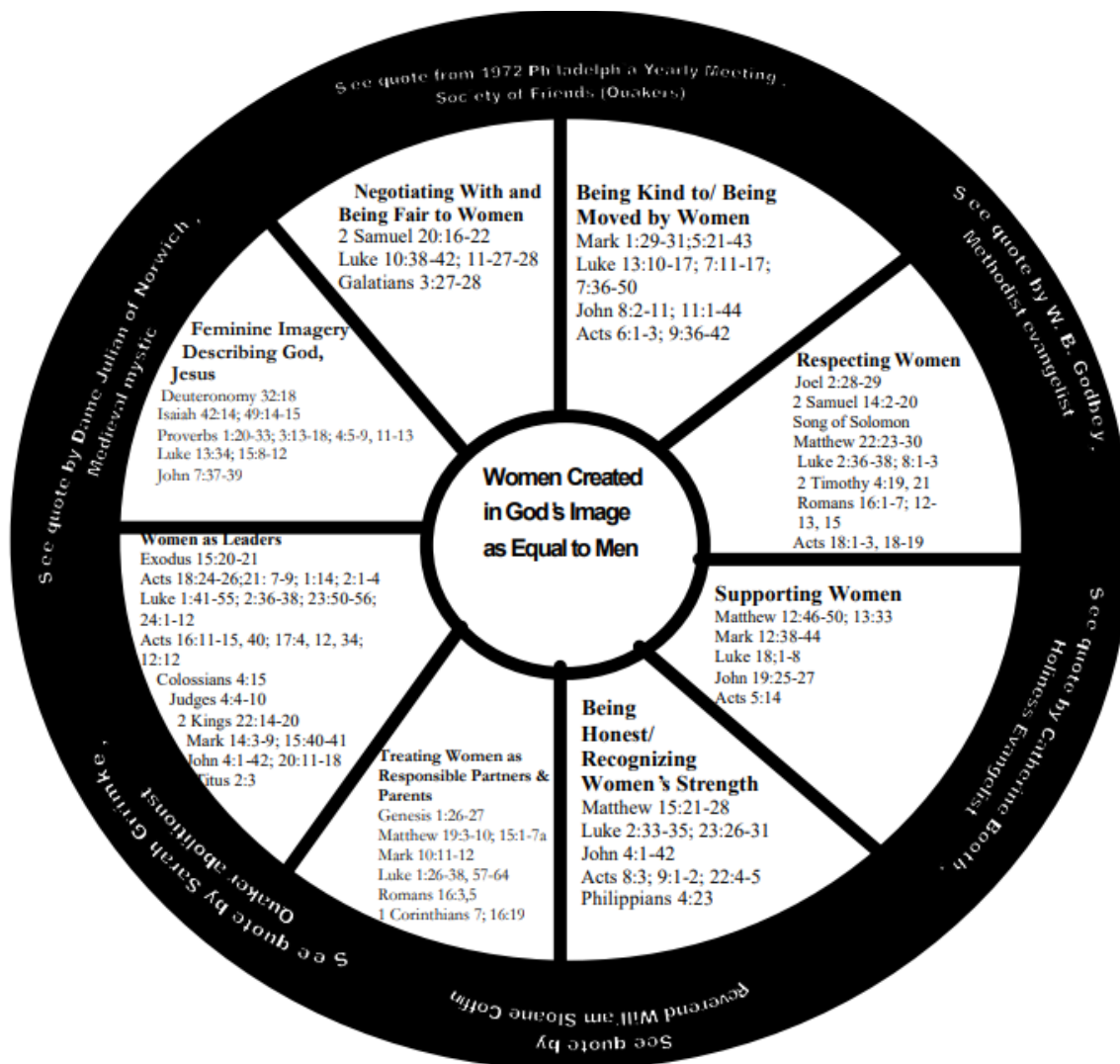
A prevalent component of spiritual abuse is silencing women in church. Studies have found that men are three times more likely to interrupt women than they are other men [9]. Women therefore are at a disadvantage when it comes to being able to speak up about their experiences, ideas, and/or opinions. This may potentially be addressed by:

- **increasing representation of women in leadership**
- **being intentional about validating the experiences of women in the church (the good and the bad)**
- **creating safe spaces where women are encourage to partake in the decision making process for church policy, finances, and programming**



Consistently, people misuse scripture as a way to minimize the role that women have in the church. However, scripture talks about respecting women, women in leadership, women's strengths and even how God uses traditional feminine characteristics to describe himself (e.g. counselor, helpmeet)[11]. Thus, emerging ministers need to be intentional about preaching and teaching on these scriptures to the entire church, not just in women only spaces (i.e. small groups, women's conferences). When male preachers/teachers talk about how God worked through the lives of women found in the bible, this begins increasing awareness of God's heart for women. Moreover, when the stories of women are preached in a way that is inspirational and practical, everyone begins to identify with the character, thus increasing empathy. For example, the story of Ruth teaches us about the universal theme of faithfulness, similar to a theme found in the story of Daniel. However, Daniel is frequently talked about in larger congregational gatherings while the story of Ruth is often reserved for women only spaces (or mother's day). Look for ways to frequently teach about women to EVERYONE in the church! All biblical stories were purposely included to benefit the entire church and were not meant to be used exclusively for sub-populations and/or occasions.

[11] Equity Wheel Developed by Jeri Gray-Reneberg, M.Div



Conclusion

This white paper aimed to demonstrate how the church may unintentionally perpetuate IPV against women by failing to engage in dialogue around the use of scripture as a weapon to silence women and guilt them into staying in abusive partnerships. It is also important to acknowledge the strides taken by the church and their role in addressing IPV through initiatives that promote awareness, interventions, access to resources for victims/survivors, and even providing biblical counseling services. These initiatives do not always address spiritual abuse and the role church culture may play in perpetuating IPV. The church can have a healing role for many victims of IPV, however there are deeply rooted beliefs that perpetuate spiritual abuse which may justify male privilege and dominance in the home. My hope for writing this white paper is to provide information and inspiration for emerging church leaders to engage in dialogue around spiritual abuse as it pertains to IPV.



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