Cultural and spiritual abuse - Key Literature

Australia

Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services (QLD), ‘Domestic and Family Violence and Its Relationship to Child Protection’ (Practice Paper, October 2012).

This report defines spiritual or cultural abuse in the context of domestic and family violence in the following way:

‘Spiritual or cultural abuse is when power and control is used to deny a partner or family member their human, cultural or spiritual rights and needs. It can also include using religion or culture as an excuse to commit particular abuses to justify the behaviour. Examples include:

- denying access to cultural land, sites or family
- denying access to cultural or spiritual ceremonies or rites
- preventing religious observances or practices
- forcing religious ways and practices against a person’s own beliefs
- undermining the person’s cultural background, particularly for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- threatening deportation, or to withdraw support for applications made through Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
- denying a person their cultural heritage.’

International

Aune, Kristin, and Rebecca Barnes, ‘In Churches Too: Church Responses to Domestic Abuse – A Case Study of Cumbria’ (March 2018).

This report provides detailed analysis of experiences of, and church responses to, domestic abuse. Particularly, it provides information regarding spiritual abuse, where the perpetrator forces certain beliefs or practices on the victim, prevents the victim from practising their religion, or uses the victim’s faith against them (p 28). Overall, the results of the study indicate that women were far more likely than men to report experiences of all forms of abuse, including spiritual abuse (p 33). While substantially less common than other forms of abuse (p 57), spiritual abuse was still reported by a significant number of participants, with 21.8 percent of female participants, 11.1 percent of male participants, and 18.8 percent of all participants reporting at least one experience of spiritual abuse (p 33).

This article reports the outcomes of three focus groups in three diverse communities of faith in the African American community. The participants identified forms of spiritual abuse including (p288):

- the abuser telling the victim that God has forgotten her because of her sins,
- abusers who denied a woman’s ability to attend church,
- abusers who emphasised the need for the woman to forgive, despite abuse.


This article considers how a perpetrator of domestic and family violence may exploit the victim’s faith or subculture and, alternatively, how the victim’s faith or subculture may be a source of strength and support for the victim. The researchers analysed case files from a Jewish domestic violence services agency. The study found that partners of abused Jewish women often perverted the laws and traditions of Judaism to control their partners. It also found that being part of an integrated cultural and religious community offered support for some victims.


This article aims to conceptualize spiritual abuse as an additional dimension to physical, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse. Based on a small research study involving a group of eight abused women, spiritual abuse is defined by the researchers as any attempt to impair the woman’s spiritual life, spiritual self, or spiritual well-being, with three levels of intensity:

- belittling her spiritual worth, beliefs, or deeds;
- preventing her from performing spiritual acts; and
- causing her to transgress spiritual obligations or prohibitions.

The concept and its typology are illustrated by means of examples from the women’s abusive experiences.

This research reports on a small qualitative interview study involving 10 Christian-identified women from diverse denominations and racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds who had experienced intimate partner violence. The participants reported forms of spiritual abuse including abusive partners:

- using religious teachings, especially about male leadership and female submission within marriage, manipulatively as a means of exerting total control in the relationship;
- using religious teachings about the sanctity of marriage and God’s disapproval of divorce as a means of maintaining control over the relationship;
- enforcing conformity through the invocation of religious standards along with threats of violence (pp102-104).