

## The Mind Body Connection by The Caribbean Voice

# Gender Violence: Religious leaders must break their silence

On July 24, 2015 the **Baltimore Sun** carried a commentary, which stated, “**Gender violence** causes more death and disability among women aged 15 to 44 in the U.S. than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents or war.” Added the report, “Currently our military and universities are actively seeking solutions to prevent and respond to this violence within their respective institutions.”

For The Caribbean Voice, addressing gender based violence is critical not only because of its devastation on lives and families, but also because suicide is related to gender based violence in a huge way. Oftentimes, females are murdered by their partners, who then commit suicide. Also, females are far too often abused by their partners, and this often leads to an escalation of violence as well as suicide.

The authors of the **Baltimore Sun** commentary, Jim Wallis (president and founder of Sojourners); Amy Gopp (director of member relations and pastoral care at Church World Service); and Rick Santos (president and CEO of IMA World Health) referenced a then recently released report, *Broken Silence: A Call for Churches to Speak Out*, based on a LifeWay Research survey of 1,000 U.S. Protestant pastors.

The authors stated, “According to the report, U.S. faith leaders seriously underestimate the prevalence of sexual and domestic violence experienced by people within their congregations. They also lack the tools to

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address it in constructive and helpful ways....one could also add suicide in that context.

The good news is that more than eight in ten said they would take appropriate action to reduce sexual and domestic violence if they had the training and resources to do so. And such training would certainly help them to better address suicide.

So what can faith leaders do to reduce sexual and domestic violence and suicide? Here's what Baltimore Sun said: First, they need to get a firmer grip on reality. Faith leaders need to fully understand that domestic and sexual violence (and suicide might we add) occur in all communities worldwide, including their own congregations. Ignoring this does not make it go away; it gives silent consent.

Faith leaders need to build relationships with the resources in their local communities that protect and support victims and survivors. A faith leader's vocation is to nurture faith and support a victim's spiritual well being, but his or her physical or emotional well-being should be guided by professionals trained clinical counseling.

Faith leaders also need to get a grasp of the realities of abuse and suicide and to seek basic clinical training such as the gatekeepers' Training. Training is indeed critical because a little knowledge in this area can be more dangerous than no knowledge at all. Research has indicated that abused women who seek help from untrained clergy typically find themselves in a worse situation than before. Ditto for suicide. And often times some faith leaders are at a loss as to how to help while others fall back on literal biblical pronouncements that condemn victims and double victimize them.

The top priority in sexual and domestic violence (and suicide as well) should be to ensure the immediate safety of victims or potential victims. Though this is common knowledge among those in the health community, it may be countercultural for U.S. clergy — especially those who hold firmly to values that view family matters as private, place a high priority on family “stability,” strictly prohibit divorce, practice “male headship” and submission of women, or who see untrained counseling as part of their pastoral duty.

In keeping with these commonly held values, a large majority (62 %) of pastors in the survey said they had responded to sexual or domestic violence by providing couples with marriage counseling — which the health community widely acknowledges as a potentially dangerous or even lethal response for a victim.

With a firm base of knowledge beneath them, faith leaders must speak out on sexual and domestic violence. Nearly two-thirds of pastors surveyed preach or speak once a year or less about the issue. Ten percent never mention it at all. Stats for suicide would probably be similar.

The Caribbean Voice (TCV) has been advocating for clinical training to supplement whatever faith based training religious leaders may have had so that they can become the first line of response in dealing with the suicide, domestic abuse, child abuse, teenage pregnancy, relationship issues and alcoholism. And while we are aware that their training would prepare them for this role we'd like to suggest a few strategies that must be emphasized:

- ❖ Always start off by emphasizing that these pathologies are all preventable.
- ❖ Share a message of hope, for example of others overcoming these pathologies and moving on to successful and affirming lives.
- ❖ Explain how spirituality can increase resilience.
- ❖ Encourage members of your faith community to seek help for themselves and other persons when they become aware or suspect that such help is needed.
- ❖ Help reduce prejudice and discrimination towards those who may have a mental illness. Speak of mental illness like you would any other physical illness. As well it is critical for all to know that optimum health cannot exist without positive mental health.
- ❖ Educate your faith community about the importance of lending a helping hand or reaching out to those who have suffered in any one of these areas.
- ❖ Provide education on these other issues especially among youth who are generally the most affected and vulnerable group.
- ❖ Give a presentation and invite others to speak on these subjects.
- ❖ Sponsor a walk or related activity for those in the community.
- ❖ Develop a language that ensures sensitivity to the families, who suffer from these pathologies.
- ❖ Foster empathetic communication as a response tool, especially between parents and their children and between partners.
- ❖ Empower others to focus on self-acceptance and to develop self worth, self esteem and coping skills.

The Caribbean Voice is prepared to provide necessary training to religious leaders and institutions free of cost and ask only that the

costs, directly associated with the training, be covered by hosts. See our contact info below.

**PS:** Catch our Internet radio and FB live program **The Mind Body Connection** every Monday on Island Zone Radio from 8 to 10 PM with hosts Shanaz Hussain and Hiram Rampersaud. Log on to The Caribbean Voice Media page on FB for videos of all programs. Also The Caribbean Voice can help you access help for any and all mental health issues. Please email us at [caribvoice@aol.com](mailto:caribvoice@aol.com), call 646-461-0574 (Annan), 917-767-2248 (Hiram), 631805-6605 (Shanaz) or 516-286-8952 (Dr. Rodney). Also check out our website at [www.caribvoice.org](http://www.caribvoice.org) for more information.