

STOPPING FAMILY VIOLENCE

From her research into family violence MICHELLE EGAN-BITRAN has found that faith leaders and communities who are resourced with knowledge and skills can have an important role in finding solutions to violence in families.

Every person and family has the right to live in safe and nurturing environments free of violence. Yet intimate partner violence (IPV) and child abuse and neglect (CAN) are significant issues in New Zealand and they have adverse acute and long-term physical, mental and social consequences.

Violence By a Partner

The Ministry of Justice describes IPV as: “the violence by one person against another person in an intimate relationship. It is violence that is physical, sexual and psychological and includes property damage, intimidation and threats of violence. Intimate partners can be heterosexual, homosexual, transgender or bisexual or an ex-intimate partner. Violence can be by males against females, females against males or same sex violence.” The term also covers the systematic use of threats or coercion to instil fear and control partners, as well as intimidation, stalking and financial abuse.

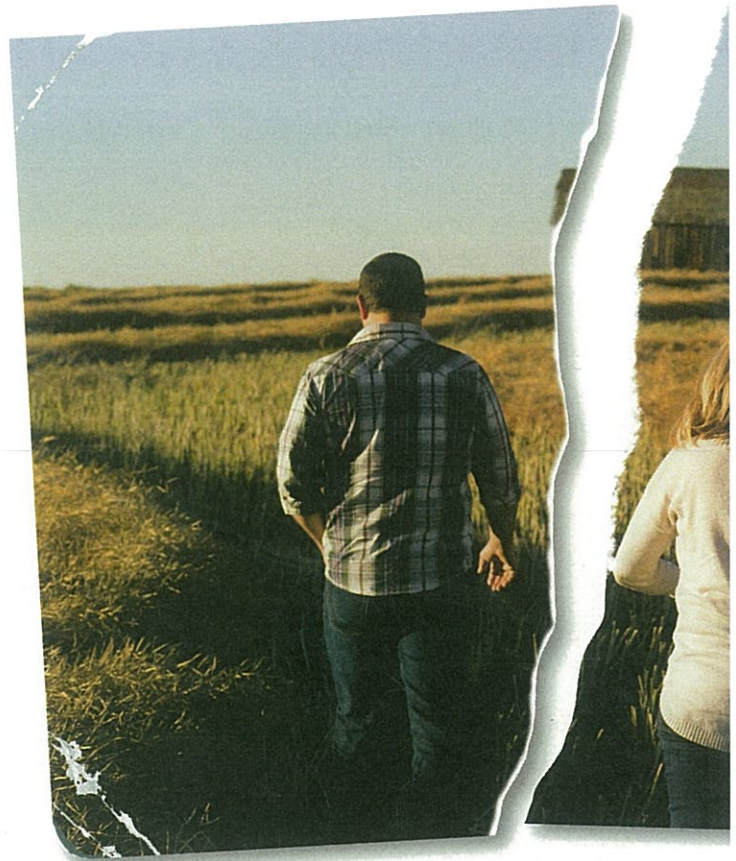
Child Abuse and Neglect

New Zealand legislation defines CAN as the: “harming (whether physically, emotionally or sexually), ill treatment, abuse, neglect, or deprivation of any child or young person.”

Violence Against Partners and Children Connected

IPV is a gendered issue, with women being disproportionately affected. Men are the predominant aggressors and the violence they use tends to be more frequent and severe.

IPV and CAN are interconnected and co-occurring forms of violence. The National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) showed that 34 per cent of the children who had witnessed IPV had also been subjected to direct maltreatment (including physical abuse, psychological abuse, neglect, custodial interference, and sexual abuse by a known adult) in the past year, compared to 9 per cent of children who had not witnessed IPV. Over their lifetimes, over half of the children who had witnessed IPV were also maltreated, compared to 11 per cent of those who had not witnessed IPV. Researchers state that: “witnessing partner violence may be a key component in creating conditions that lead to maltreatment”.



To help reduce the long-term effects and intergenerational transmission of IPV and CAN we need to respond to them together, rather than as separate issues.

Effective Help to Stop Cycle

IPV and CAN are complex issues and often overlap with other issues such as poverty or social exclusion; historical abuse and/or trauma; substance abuse, mental health issues and cultural and religious issues. The issues are complex, with some groups especially vulnerable and with particular obstacles to seeking help.

Most victims and perpetrators of IPV and CAN do not reach out to services — instead seek help from friends, families and communities who may or may not have the skills and knowledge to respond in effective ways.

Coordination and Collaboration Needed

It is important that we develop responses to IPV and CAN that address the full range of needs of the people concerned, and that we develop multiple avenues for people to get the help they need.

To address IPV and CAN adequately, we need coordination and collaboration across and within agencies and sectors and local people need to be part of generating, implementing and owning the solutions.

The Coordinated Community Action model (Ministry of Social Development) demonstrates what a whole-of-community response to family violence might look like with different sectors of the community working collaboratively to take actions that promote safety, support those affected by violence, and contribute to stopping violence from happening in the first place.

Confronting Spiritual Abuse

People of faith often have to deal with additional faith and cultural dimensions to IPV and CAN. This includes spiritual



abuse which researcher Duncan-Hewitt defines as: "Using faith, religious beliefs, *mana* etc. to justify the abuse. Misusing sacred writings, objects or sayings to hurt or control the person. Destroying/desecrating sacred items. Cursing. Controlling prayers. Making victims think God is against them."

Faith leaders are in a powerful position in a community and have a great deal of trust invested in them. Behind the protected walls of faith communities, community members can often feel safe and comfortable enough to disclose that IPV and CAN are occurring in their homes. Victims and survivors may turn to their faith leaders for spiritual guidance and support before, or instead of, other services (such as mental health, social service, medical care providers or family violence services) believing faith leaders can help in their often overwhelming experience.

Similarly, perpetrators may also turn to faith leaders, perhaps either as a means of legitimising the abuse by, for example, trying to use religious scriptures to justify violence, or they may seek guidance and support in understanding and changing their behaviours.

Faith Leaders' Responses Critical

The responses faith leaders offer are critically important. Compassionate, informed and effective responses can help victims and their children attain safety, promote critical healing and recovery and help break the cycle of violence, abuse and neglect.

However, New Zealand and international studies show that many faith leaders struggle to respond effectively when faced with disclosures of violence.

Some may have felt that they did not have the knowledge, comfort level, or theological footing to respond appropriately.

Others have tried to ignore or minimise the problem as something as a "one-off" and that it can be resolved through prayer and service to their spouse. These inadequate responses are partly due to deeply entrenched values of male dominance

and privilege over women, along with the perceived religious duty of the wife to maintain her wedding vows.

Leaders Need Compassion and Up-To-Date Skills

Migrant and refugee women and children may face additional hurdles such as financial dependence, fears of the withdrawal of their immigration sponsorship, fears of being sent back to their country of origin, isolation in a new country, a lack of social networks, shaming in the community and forced underage marriage.

These lesser known spiritual and cultural dimensions are central to both victim and perpetrator's understandings of and responses to IPV and CAN. However, many specialist stopping-violence services lack the knowledge required to address these cultural and spiritual dimensions adequately. These complexities highlight how important it is for faith leaders to be equipped to understand, and have the skills to address the cultural and religious dimensions of IPV and CAN, particularly in cultural and ethnic communities where faith is central to self, family and community life.

Faith Communities Can Lead

Faith communities can have an important role in finding solutions to IPV and CAN. They are in a unique position of being able to offer healing and reparative work to individuals and families suffering the effects of violence.

Faith communities care about their members and often already have diverse skills and support systems in place to meet the complex needs of families.

Further, faith communities can set standards for appropriate social responses to violence, and can challenge inappropriate social responses.

They also have the potential to influence positive change in perpetrators of abuse.

Practical Safety and Support

Faith communities can contribute to stopping violence and provide safety and support to members affected by IPV and CAN in a number of ways:

- Speak out against intimate partner violence and child abuse and neglect from the pulpit.
- Routinely assess for intimate partner violence in premarital and pastoral counselling.
- Link in with the local family violence prevention networks.
- Refer to family violence agencies and child protection agencies.
- Create violence-free environments and display information about where to go for help.
- Oppose the use of sacred texts or theological justifications for using violence and abuse.
- Reject patriarchal dominance as a preferred social pattern. 🕊



Michelle Egan-Bitran has worked for the Children's Commissioner and is now researching New Zealand faith leaders' responses to IPV and CAN. Co-authors: Janet Fanslow and Michael O'Brien.