In the course of CBE’s work, we have heard from countless women who shared their stories of abuse and marginalization in the church, of pain and disillusionment as a result of their treatment by those who claim to love them. Whether the abuse was from an intimate partner, family member, coworker, or spiritual leader, their stories made it painfully clear that there was a connection between the church’s stated and implied views on women and their abuse and marginalization. This book was born out of the desire to explore the correlation between deeply held views about women’s worth and the consequences of their devaluation, while also proposing solutions that can create a safe space where all members can flourish. The contributors, each highly qualified in their respective areas, tackle topics related to abuse, exposing the myths and dangers and proposing remedies.
Over the years, I have discovered two things about blind spots. The first is that I have them. The second is I cannot see them. Some of these are of small consequence (I cannot see the cowlick sticking up on the back of my head). However, others, if unattended, can have deep and enduring impact on those my life touches. For these, I need to be alerted (even disrupted) so I learn to see, confess, and change.

Blind spots also exist within our broader culture. Tragically, the evidence makes clear we are in such a place as regards the assault on the safety and dignity of women and girls around the world. We are yet blind to the depth and breadth of the assault on the imago Dei of over half the population of the world—women and girls who were created to thrive. Exploitation, diminishment, and abuse militate against the work of the Spirit of God both in and through these image bearers and must be confronted with hard facts, brutal honesty, and unwavering resolve.

Having worked for many years in business, pastoral ministry, and now as president of World Relief, I have been shocked to observe how widespread, debilitating, and complex abuse (in all its forms) remains. We have seen that the vitality of entire communities is directly linked to the flourishing of women. This is why in many places warring factions intentionally abuse women and girls, as they know that to destroy the soul of the woman is to destroy the soul of the community. But “warfare” sadly also takes place in bedrooms, boardrooms, and yes, congregations around the world.

Faith communities have a critical role to play in awakening our culture to the reality that nothing limits a person more than to be attacked at the very core of their identity (and especially when abuse comes at the hands of those they have trusted). Sadly, faith communities can often contribute to the problem by failing to hear and believe the cries of women, failing to confront abusers, and failing to establish the culture, systems, and accountabilities that will break this cycle. And as men are disproportionately those who abuse and those who hold the power, lasting change will come only when men become fierce allies in this cause.

For all of these reasons I am deeply encouraged that this book is now in your hands. In it you will find insight born of sound research and lived experience. You will also find wisdom and grace expressed in compelling ways. You will grieve deeply but will also be reminded of hope. And I trust your newfound insights, grief, and hope will collide in such a way as to forge a deep resolve to participate with the Spirit of God to celebrate, protect, and elevate the beauty and fullness of the imago Dei found in all women.

Scott Arbeiter
President, World Relief
Words Make Worlds: How We Speak About Abuse

NATALIE COLLINS

Words make worlds. This wisdom of the Jewish tradition asserts that our words and the way we use them are part of forming the world. In the Genesis creation narrative, God’s words speak the world into being, “Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3, NRSV). John’s gospel describes Jesus as the Word, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). We find ourselves within a Christian tradition in which words have power. Proverbs warns us that, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 18:21). James asserts, “And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell” (Jas. 3:6).

A partner’s verbal abuse can be devastating, and includes their language, tone of voice, and the wider context. Someone may call their partner awful names. Using hurtful words to describe their partner communicates to their partner that no one else would ever want them. Tone of voice and body language can turn seemingly innocuous comments into threats. Explicit threats constitute verbal violence.

For years, I ran groups with women whose partners were abusive. On one occasion I was running a group, and Anthea sat with me. She said she was confused, “This morning something weird happened. My partner lay in bed with me. He started stroking my neck. He laughed and said, ‘If you ever tried to leave me, I’d have to slit your throat, wouldn’t I?’ And then he laughed some more. Is that weird?” Her partner’s tone and general manner left her feeling confused rather than utterly terrified at the death threat she had received.

Verbal abuse is one element of the harm that words can do. Another aspect is how we speak about abuse. As we seek to raise awareness, educate others, or speak about abuse in day-to-day conversations, every word that we use in our speech or writing has the potential to either reinforce problematic beliefs and attitudes about abuse or to challenge them.

Anyone who has worked on domestic abuse issues for more than two minutes will be familiar with the questions asked by the general public: “Why doesn’t she just leave?” “What about the men?” “Abuse is a private matter, why should we get involved?” “Just because he’s a bad husband, doesn’t make him a bad father does it?” These questions betray the deeper attitudes and beliefs about abuse that underpin societal ambivalence toward abuse, leaving many abusers free to harm with impunity.

Media reporting of men who kill their female partners or children is littered with justifications and minimizations. Men who kill are referred to variously as “jilted,” “broken-hearted,” and “pained by ... separation.” The women they kill are often blamed. She left him, had an affair, denied him access to the children, or found a new partner. In everyday conversation this reporting could sound like, “Oh how awful for him, his wife left him, so he killed her. He’s such a nice man! How hard it must have been for him.”

Philosopher Kate Manne coined the term himpathy to describe “the excessive or inappropriate sympathy extended to a male agent or wrongdoer over his female victim.” As the #MeToo movement has risen across the Western world, so have levels of himpathy. Many lines of print and personal conversations are focused on how hard it is for men to live in a context where they might be accused of rape. Outrage for men whose flirting might be interfered with seems to outweigh the horror of a world in which no woman or girl can guarantee that a man will not rape them.

Within this context, the concept of words making worlds is an important one. Every verbalization of victim blaming, celebration of harmful masculinity, and minimization or justification of abuse contributes to a society in which domestic abuse is perpetrated and those

who are harmed are at least as likely to be shamed as they are to be supported by many people in their lives and communities. Within churches, it is sadly the case that shame and ignorance are even more prevalent. Christian leaders and others who are preaching and offering pastoral support do not always need to be experts in understanding abuse, but they do need to consider how they use language. This chapter will look at some of the language and underlying myths about abuse that Christians (and the wider society) hold and offer a few basic principles that can increase the potential for effectively responding to abuse and challenging abusive behavior.

Language and Myths

**Women are just as likely to be abusive as men.**

Throughout this chapter I have referred to abusers as male and those they abuse as female. This is because the data evidences this to be the case. In the US, 86.1 percent of offenders in spousal abuse were male (82.4 percent of dating violence offenders were male). In the UK, 92.1 percent of defendants were male, 7.9 percent were female; 83.3 percent of victims were female and 16.7 percent were male. Often it is argued that men are less likely to report abuse than women. However, UK research found that women were three times more likely than men to get arrested for domestic violence, regardless of who called the police. There are groups of women who are less likely to report abuse, including disabled women and those within Muslim communities. Yet, we know that rates of male violence toward women are high in both communities. UK murder rates also echo men as the minority of victims; six percent of men murdered are killed by a partner, whereas 44 percent of women murdered are killed by a partner.

In recent years there are those who would assert that men are almost as likely to be victims of abuse as women, with women almost as likely to be perpetrators of abuse as men. Research that has sought to assert this has not engaged with the wider aspects of coercive control and doesn’t take into account women acting in self-defense. Men are generally the perpetrators and women are generally the victims. This does not invalidate men who are subjected to abuse any more than breast cancer campaigns that focus on women seek to invalidate male breast cancer sufferers or that women’s experiences of suicide are invalidated in suicide campaigns that focus on men. This is about proportionality according to the facts. Abuse is never acceptable and always harmful, whoever is perpetrating it and whoever is subjected to it, but we must always be mindful that domestic abuse is a gendered issue.

**Real abuse is bad, but these days nearly anything counts as abuse.**

The public conversation about abuse has escalated dramatically in the wake of the #MeToo movement. While many people view this as a profound and important moment in history, some people are concerned that it diminishes “real abuse,” with others sure that the issue is being blown out of all proportion. This is not the first time such arguments have been put forward.

In 1896, Freud published *The Aetiology of Hysteria* arguing that women’s mental health issues were generally a result of men sexually abusing them. He subsequently withdrew his analysis in disbelief that men were sexually abusing girls and women on such a massive scale. Instead, he concluded women had subconscious sexual desire for their fathers. Reports about Jimmy Saville and other famous men abusing children were ignored because it was too extraordinary to believe.

There will always be people who do not want to believe the world is a dangerous place for women. As psychiatrist and trauma specialist Judith Herman explains, “Women quickly learn that rape is a crime only in theory; in practice the standard for what constitutes rape is set

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not at the level of women’s violation but just above the level of coercion acceptable to men.” Rather than seeing #MeToo as an unfounded “moral panic” leaving women with a “victimhood mentality” perhaps it is time for us to accept (where Freud could not) that there is a society-wide issue with a significant proportion of men believing they are entitled to sexual access to female bodies.

It’s a private/family matter, we shouldn’t be getting involved.
The false dichotomy of public and private stems from the Enlightenment, during which women were relegated to the private sphere of the home and childrearing and excluded from the public sphere of politics, government, and civic life. As integrated human beings, what takes place in the home affects the marketplace and vice versa. Second wave feminism’s cry that “the personal is political” came about in recognition that the violence and oppression that men subjected women to was political. In 2008, it was estimated that domestic violence cost the UK economy £15.7 billion; in the US, that cost is estimated at $3.6 trillion. This cost is not private but public. Christian arguments viewing domestic abuse as a private matter ring rather hollow when those same Christians generally oppose abortion and pornography—both of which could be argued to be private matters.

But he’s such a nice man!
There is a presumption that if we haven’t experienced someone as abusive, then they couldn’t be abusive. Abusers are generally only abusive toward their partner (or an ex-partner) and their children. He needs to ensure that his partner will not be believed if she does speak out, and so he seeks to turn others into his allies.

There is a human tendency to make abusers into “monsters.” We all want to believe that we are safe from abuse. Presuming that abusers are easily identifiable is a strategy for maintaining that belief. It can seriously threaten someone’s sense of psychological safety if their character judgement does not enable them to recognize an abuser. However, in reality the only way to protect ourselves from abusers is to presume that they are likely to be people who are average, ordinary, and often very likeable.

She’s not that sort of woman, though.
Alongside the monstering of abusers, another strategy that operates in maintaining psychological safety is the stereotype of the “abused woman.” She is usually poor, uneducated, already struggling with low self-esteem, and lacking in confidence. It is presumed that only those with some form of moral or other deficit would begin or maintain a relationship with an abuser.

After the First World War, the traditionalist view was that “the soldier who developed a traumatic neurosis was at best a constitutionally inferior human being, at worst a malingerer and a coward.” Society now understands that war is inherently traumatic, but when it comes to domestic abuse, entrenched attitudes remain about those who “allow themselves to be abused.” This is utterly contradictory. The nature of abuse means the person is not allowing it, but they are being subjected to it. The only commonality among those who have been abused is the misfortune of meeting an abuser.

Why doesn’t she just leave?
Leading from the presumed flawed character of the person who is being abused is the question of why someone doesn’t simply leave an abuser. It is understandable that people cannot fathom why someone remains in a relationship with an abuser, but the question betrays numerous misunderstandings about abuse.

Nobody asks, “Why doesn’t he just stop?” The abuser is the one perpetrating the harm, committing illegal offenses, and destroying lives, yet the public focus is on what his partner should do. Male violence is presumed to be static; we cannot even begin to imagine an abuser changing, and so we focus solely on what his partner should (or should not) be doing. Yet, it is only in abusers stopping their abuse that we can truly effect change.

10. Judith Herman, Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror, 21.
The primary reason that someone does not leave an abusive partner is because the abuser’s behavior makes such action impossible. Through isolating her, devaluing her, degrading her, making her financially dependent on him, and convincing her that he will kill her/the children/her family/pets/friends if she leaves, she is forced to stay with him. It can feel like the safest option, particularly as an abuser is most likely to kill his partner within the first year of her separating from him.¹¹

Alongside the abuser’s behavior is his partner’s physiology. Both psychology and theology recognize that humans have a basic need to maintain attachment. In situations of trauma this is particularly pronounced. Where it is assumed that someone would automatically move away from a perpetrator, the victim’s physiological response is to maintain the attachment if the abuser is a primary object of attachment for the victim.¹² A domestic abuser will isolate his partner from other attachment objects (friends, family, colleagues, etc.), and upon traumatizing her, she will find that the only person left to attach to is the abuser. I describe this process as “traumatic attachment.”¹³ It is also known as trauma bonding, Stockholm syndrome, and the betrayal bond.

Added to this is the social context where a woman will be judged a failure for not working at her marriage or for leaving her children fatherless. Within the church this social context is particularly pronounced with Christian leaders bemoaning the “fatherless wastelands of social deprivation.”¹⁴ Certain teachings on divorce and forgiveness can leave women feeling like God wants them to endure the abuse.

Well, those women who are abused often end up with more than one abusive partner in their lifetime.

It’s obvious that they have a personality that attracts abusers.

There have been psychological theories put forward about women’s “learned helplessness,” or their sadomasochism, when a woman repeatedly has abusive partners. Such theories are incredibly damaging. In my experience working with women who have been subjected to abuse, only a minority of women have more than one abusive partner. For those who do have more than one abusive partner, each abuser looks different from the previous one. One abuser will demand his partner not work and remain at home with the children, another abuser will demand his partner work long hours and refuse her access to the children. These tactics appear very different but are in fact different ways of achieving a single goal—controlling a partner.

Women are socialized to be kind and caring, surrounded by messages that they are a failure without a partner. Disney, the Fifty Shades series, romantic films, and magazines all give women (and men) very distorted ideas about love and romance, which may leave women unable to identify an abuser, particularly if he is tall, dark, handsome, and rich. Building literacy about abuse and toxic cultural messages can help women and girls to recognize abusers before they have already invested themselves in a relationship with one.

Traumatic attachment is often experienced as a feeling of intense love. If a woman manages to leave an abuser successfully (without him murdering her), she will often discover that non-abusive partners do not provide that same feeling of intense love. Until women in this situation understand traumatic attachment, women who have pursued intense relationships that defy logic and sense can seem aligned with cultural understandings of love and romance.

It’s an abusive relationship.

The term abusive relationship has become very pervasive. However, it is not an abusive relationship that is the problem, but rather an abusive person who abuses his partner within the context of a relationship. By using the term abusive relationship, we suggest that it is a relationship issue, which could be responded to with relationship-based solutions. We also infer that if the relationship ends, then

the abuse will end. This is not the case. Many abusers continue to harm their partner and any children after the relationship ends. This may include stalking and harassment, using child contact to undermine his ex-partner’s parenting, denying financial support, threats, violence, and murder.

They both need to be working at the relationship. It can’t all be his fault.
Generally, when a couple has issues, both parties have responsibility for the issues (and for the solutions). This is not the case when one partner is abusive. The abuser holds the power and maintains control over his partner, and resources like marriage counseling, marriage enrichment courses, or books about resolving conflict will not be helpful. In most cases they will make the situation worse. The abuser will use couple’s counseling to manipulate the counselor into being his ally and will use relationship resources to further blame and berate his partner.

He didn’t mean to hurt her.
Disputing the abuser’s intention is a way of minimizing his behavior. Intention is not the same as impact, and so regardless of his intention, if he has hurt his partner, then her experience of the harm should be validated and taken seriously. The majority of abusers are entirely intentional in their behavior. Their violence and abuse serve to get them what they want—a partner who is controlled and serves the abuser’s needs, wants, and whims.

It was only a little push.
Abuser’s ubiquitously use minimization, denial, and blame to avoid responsibility for their choices and behavior. Others around them may tend to repeat these minimizations (including their partner). “Only” and “little” within this sentence are intended to minimize his behavior. In response, we could ask the abuser why he only pushed her, why he didn’t punch her in the face. The answer would likely be that punching is too severe. However, if an abuser can choose what level of violence to use, he is clearly able to choose not to use violence. Alongside pushing his partner, an abuser will likely have also called her names, thrown things, isolated her from family and friends, and controlled other aspects of her life. By focusing only on the act of physical violence, we are blinded to the wider elements of coercive control, which are used by an abuser to maintain power and control over his partner (and children).

Abuse is always about physical violence.
Control rather than physical violence is the primary element of abuse. In maintaining control, the threat of violence can often be more effective than the physical assault itself. Some abusers do regularly use violence, but many use it either occasionally or not at all. One act of physical violence by an abuser can be enough to keep someone controlled for twenty years, while another abuser’s efforts to degrade, demean, or devalue their partner can be as effective as violence in maintaining control.

Abuse is nearly always the fault of drugs and alcohol. If we deal with those dependencies, abuse will stop.
As anti-abuse specialist Lundy Bancroft explains, “Alcohol cannot create an abuser, and sobriety cannot cure one.” He explains that substances do not alter a person’s value system and although substances may lower an abuser’s inhibitions and might increase the severity of violence, they will not cause a non-abusive person to become violent. An abuser’s other controlling and coercive behaviors will remain present even when he is not under the influence of substances. And addiction recovery can be used by an abuser to further control his partner. A threatened relapse may leave the abuser’s partner feeling she has to do what he wants, “If you don’t give me sex when I want it, I’ll turn back to drink.”

Hurt people hurt people. Abusers are hurting, and we need to help them heal.
The majority of abusers have not been abused themselves; with research suggesting that “men who are violent toward other men are often victims of child abuse—but the connection is much less clear for men who assault women.” Most abusers are male, but most of those who are abused are female, which suggests that the issue is not that “hurt people hurt people,” but rather “some hurt men, hurt people (mostly women).” While trauma can affect people in lots of different ways, it is hugely problematic to attribute abusive behavior to trauma. An abuser makes choices to behave abusively, and his behavior stems from beliefs of ownership and entitlement

(“I own my partner and am therefore entitled to get what I want”). Addressing abusive behavior requires abusers to identify and overcome these beliefs. Counseling and other therapeutic interventions will not only be unhelpful for the abuser, they may put the abuser’s partner at greater risk of harm, as the abuser feels supported and is potentially given more justifications for his behavior from well-meaning supporters.

**Abusers just need a chance to be listened to and heard. It’s mainly about a struggle to express their emotions.**

When a female politician expresses emotion, she is seen to be unfit for leadership, when a male politician does the same, he is described as passionate. Appealing to emotional literacy for abusers infantilizes the abuser and misunderstands the skills he has, generally. Most abusers are very able to manage their emotions, including hiding their behavior from others and targeting their partner and children. Abusers are not emotionally unskilled; they just choose to use their emotional skill to abuse their partner rather than to build a healthy, respectful relationship. In choosing to make space to listen to and hear people, our primary focus should be on listening to those who have been subjected to abuse, and their experiences should shape all of our listening to an abuser.

**I’ve heard that pregnancy is a high-risk factor for an abuser; that’s because his partner’s pregnancy hormones make her less agreeable, and she won’t be giving him enough sex.**

An abuser’s behavior may escalate during pregnancy, with one English survey finding that 17 percent of pregnant women are subjected to abuse.17 The increase in abuse is never rooted in his partner’s behavior. Many abusers engage in reproductive coercion, manipulating or forcing their partner into pregnancy by pricking holes in condoms, hiding her contraceptive pills, or secretly removing the condom during sex. By impregnating his partner, the abuser increases the potential for control and reduces the likelihood that his partner will leave him. However, paradoxically, the abuser’s beliefs of ownership and entitlement may be threatened when his partner acts to protect her unborn child. This paradox means she is both less likely to leave (women generally do not want to leave their baby’s father), but more likely to resist the abuser’s control. And the abuser’s behavior escalates.

**Our church is starting an anger management course to help abusers.**

It is more palatable to see abusers as out of control, but their choices and behaviors are a result of their need to be in control. Anger management, like couple’s counseling, can do more harm than good and collude with the idea that an abuser is not responsible or in control of his actions. The most appropriate intervention for abusers is an accredited perpetrator program. Within the UK, a church could work with the national perpetrator accreditation body, called Respect, to develop a program for working with men who use abusive behavior.

**An abuser’s behavior will stop if he is supported by his church to repent.**

Knowing abuse is rooted in beliefs of ownership and entitlement enables us to understand that the work of deconstructing abusive behavior is slow and gradual. God can do miraculous transformation in people’s lives, but an over reliance on immediate transformation through repentance is dangerous for women and children and is open to be taken advantage of by abusers. Churches should always prioritize the safety and wellbeing of women and children by directing abusers to specialist services that will help them take responsibility for their behavior. If an abuser is authentic in his repentance, he will not object to measures that will make his family safer or to attending a program that will help ascertain that he has changed.

**When an abuser repents, his partner must forgive him and reestablish the relationship.**

Abusive behavior has long-term consequences. Very often it is only once an abuser begins to change that his partner feels safe enough to leave him. While forgiveness and reconciliation are part of the Christian tradition, neither of these nullify the consequences of someone’s behavior. The prodigal son in Jesus’s parable did not inherit further money; it all went to the older brother who remained faithful to the father (Luke 15:31). If either the abuser’s expectation or the community’s expectation requires the abuser’s partner to remain in the relationship, he remains in control of the situation. She must have free choice to leave him. If he has repented and fully recognized the impact of his behavior, he will be supportive of her flourishing, even if it means she ends the relationship.

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What’s happened is bad, but we can’t be seen to be supporting divorce.
Many Christians are reluctant to address abuse because it appears to offer acceptance of divorce; however, as Bible scholar David Instone-Brewer has found, Jesus’s teaching on divorce came within a context where a husband’s abuse of his wife was grounds for divorce under Levitical law. Divorce is the public breaking of a covenant just as a marriage ceremony is the public making of a covenant. The abuser will have repeatedly broken the marriage covenant privately through his abusive behavior, and her filing for divorce is making public his abuse and covenant breaking. It is not a moral failure on her part. The Bible explains that, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (Jas. 1:27). If we do not prioritize the needs of women and children who have been abused, we cannot call our religion pure and undefiled.

Women who leave a husband who has been abusive clearly do not take their marriage vows seriously.
To get to the stage of acknowledging that a partner is abusive is extremely difficult for most women and taking steps to leave—particularly for women of faith—is not done lightly or without needing to process a great deal of extreme loss. One of the fears that keeps religious women in a relationship with an abuser is fear that she will be judged not to have cared about her marriage. If we want to build communities of faith that are safe for women and children, we must trust that women who leave their husbands do so as a last resort. Sadly, it is often an extremely radical approach to presume that we can trust women.

He’s a wonderful father; he just isn’t a good husband.
A core element of being a wonderful father is being a good co-parent. Raising children cannot be separated from the co-parent relationship. A father must be supportive and caring towards his children’s mother if he is to care for his children effectively. In a household with children, a domestic abuser always abuses the children as well as his partner. No matter how many ways their mother seeks to protect them, the children will be harmed by the tension, violence, destruction of property, irate behavior at mealtimes, controlling attitudes, and the abuser’s general demeanor of entitlement. Both during the relationship and if the relationship ends, the children become a weapon to abuse, rather than human beings with needs, feelings, hopes, and dreams.

Children need their father in their lives, or it will cause them untold damage.
The impact of domestic abusers on children is well documented. UNICEF explains, “Personality and behavioral problems among children exposed to violence in the home can take the forms of psychosomatic illnesses, depression, suicidal tendencies, and bed-wetting...Some studies suggest social development is also damaged.” Many abusers engage in maternal alienation—turning the children against their mother—either during the relationship or after it has ended. While having an absent father may lead to identity issues, and the value of positive fathering cannot be overstated, the tangible and lasting damage of having an abusive father must also be recognized. Children need protecting from harm by informed adults, rather than the amorphous concept of fatherlessness being used as a weapon to prevent women and children from accessing safety away from abusive men.

Christian culture regularly bemoans fatherlessness. In his book A Better Story, psychiatrist Glynn Harrison explains, “Marriage creates a culture that binds men to their responsibilities for the children they bring into the world.” Divorce does not cause motherlessness. Mothers stick around in their children’s lives even after divorce. Perhaps we could consider fatherhood itself as not properly focused on children if a relationship breakdown with the children’s mother is enough to make men absent from their children’s lives.

Disabled women are less likely to be abused because men who remain in relationships with them are obviously very committed to them.
Some abusers will deliberately target vulnerable women (although, many abusers do not). If a woman is more likely to become dependent on their partner, this enables the abuser to quickly increase his control. Women with disabilities are 40 percent more likely to be abused.

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to be abused by a partner,\textsuperscript{21} and sadly their disability will often leave them being disbelieved and not trusted. Their partner will often be celebrated for “taking on” someone with additional needs and women’s capacity to seek help is then diminished further.

**Principles in Addressing How We Speak About Abuse**

1. **The situation may not present as domestic abuse.**
   
   Often when someone is being subjected to abuse, denial is a survival strategy. Someone may seek help from the church for marital issues, parenting advice, mental health struggles, or general support, but underlying these support needs may be an abusive partner. Taking the time to ask questions and reserving judgement is helpful. Until you are certain, presume that the situation could involve an abuser, regardless of whether the woman’s partner is a church leader, businessman, police officer, or respected in any other way.

2. **Name the abuser.**
   
   When we talk about abuse, we will often ignore the agent of the abuse. If we are discussing a situation where the perpetrator’s name is known, his name should be used throughout the conversation. If his name is not known, ensure that we are including considerations about him and that our language places the responsibility onto him.

3. **Avoid minimization, denial, and blame-shifting.**
   
   Minimization includes using qualifiers, like “just” or “only,” and in suggestions that it could have been worse. Someone can deny either the abuse itself (“I can’t believe that he would do that”) or deny the intention of the abuser (“I’m sure he didn’t mean it”). Blame-shifting involves redirecting responsibility for the abuse elsewhere; “had he been drinking?”, “what did you do to let things get this bad?”, “he has been under a lot of stress at work hasn’t he?”. Avoiding these will help us ensure we place the responsibility on the abuser.

4. **Do not engage in himpathy.**
   
   Himpathy is “the excessive or inappropriate sympathy extended to a male agent or wrongdoer over his female victim.”\textsuperscript{22} When thinking about, discussing, or supporting someone through abuse, be aware of the tendency to himpathize. In both your language and thought processes reflect on whether you are more understanding of the abuser or his partner. Do you find yourself more shocked about his violence or about her staying with him?

5. **Trust women.**
   
   The blaming of Eve across Christian tradition evidences how distrust of women spans the centuries. Patriarchal culture conditions both men and women to disbelieve and distrust women. Legal expert Helena Kennedy’s books, *Eve Was Framed* and *Eve was Shamed*, provide stark evidence of the distrust of women that remains deeply entrenched across society; while Riet Bons Storm’s book, *The Incredible Woman*, documents the ways Christian pastoral care views women as not credible. In understanding and speaking about abuse, we may question whether women are exaggerating, being alarmist, or maintain a “victim mentality,” or we can choose to communicate that we trust women and their experiences.


Conclusion

The myths and language that have been identified in this chapter are relevant to us all. We all have believed many of these myths at one time, and many people still do. Taking the time to identify this enables us to begin deconstructing and rejecting the myths and problematic usage of language. We need to consider how we can build church communities and cultures in which these myths are dismantled by developing a vocabulary that challenges, rather than colludes, with abusers. The five principles listed are a good start, but there is much more to be done. We must all grapple with the ways we are part of the problem in order that we become part of the solution.

About the Author

Natalie Collins is a Gender Justice Specialist. She is the author of Out of Control: Couples, Conflict and the Capacity for Change and the Interim CEO of The Women’s Liberation Collective. She set up Spark (https://www.sparkequip.org/) and works to enable individuals and organizations to prevent and respond to male violence against women. She is the Creator and Director of the DAY Programme, an innovative youth domestic abuse and exploitation education programme and of the Own My Life course, for women who have been subjected to abuse. She organizes Project 3:28 (www.project328.info), co-founded the UK Christian Feminist Network (www.christianfeministnetwork.com), and has written a short book on Gender Aware Youth Work. She speaks and writes on understanding and ending gender injustice nationally and internationally.

Natalie is a contributing writer to Created to Thrive and CBE’s blog + magazine, Mutuality, and served as a keynote speaker at “Men, Women, and God: Theology and Its Impact,” CBE’s 2021 online conference.