

How Can Studying the Bible Be a Part of Making Change for Abused Women?

Most faith communities make knowing their inherited stories a central part of building their identity. How they read and understand the tenets of their faith directs their beliefs, practices and actions. Episcopal Relief & Development helps faith leaders make essential connections between a community's faith story and its intellectual, environmental and spiritual wellness.

Faith communities and leaders resist prioritizing biblical mandates to care for outcasts, widows, orphans and the poor and to avoid engaging in war, debt, violence and vengeance.

Introducing a Bible study relative to the civil rights of women and girls in the context of relationships is an important step in introducing this issue to your community. It can, at first, feel a bit redundant. This is not because everyone knows what the Bible says about the fair treatment of women and girls but rather because many communities in the Western world have at least made the intellectual ascension to beliefs in women's rights and empowerment and how we treat one another. We like to believe that everything is just fine and people mostly choose what is right for them. Universal and generally agreed-upon laws in communities around things that are forbidden, such as murder, stealing, cheating and lying, work hard to hold everyone accountable. We have faith in people behaving civilly to one another, especially in our own communities of faith.

Applying Scriptural references emboldens adherence to these agreed-upon rules. Scripture encourages us to practice humility, service, caring for others, second chances and grace. Even so, faith communities and leaders resist prioritizing biblical mandates to care for outcasts, widows, orphans and the poor. This may be due to a community's reluctance to engage in difficult topics of war, debt, violence and vengeance.

Statistically, women and girls in our pews are living in situations with violence and coercive control that are abusive, but they are explained away as behavioral flaws or consequences everyone should just accept because of the people's private and individual choices. Because the vast majority of victims do not consider their relationships abusive until things become unbearable or someone else suggests it might be, they are often reluctant to report abuse because they don't believe they're in an abusive relationship. Intimate partner violence does not always involve the use of physical force and many victims who have not been beaten don't consider the intimidation and threats they live with as abusive.

This is why education is important.

For many women of faith, the breaking of a family or a marriage can feel like a profoundly personal and intimate failure. It can feel like a failure of one's faith. Why didn't God or the faithful community of God protect them? Even if women separate themselves from abuse, that same sense of duty, obligation or guilt prevents them from seeking justice against their abuser. They also often still love and feel empathy toward their oppressors and make excuses for their behaviors.

Learning the stories of the mothers and fathers, daughters and sons of our faith tradition, reminds us that abuse is never okay. God longs for freedom from violence and abuse for everyone.