

# Gender-Based Violence and the Impact on Family Life

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Gender-based violence, which impairs or invalidates the enjoyment by women of their human rights and freedoms under international law or under human rights conventions, is still crippling the healthy development of many families in The Bahamas and the Caribbean.

Here is a quote from United Nations Women: "Gender-based violence, already a global crisis before the pandemic, has intensified since the outbreak of COVID-19. Lockdowns and other mobility restrictions have left many women trapped with their abusers, isolated from social contact and support networks." In other words, GBV has gotten worse during the past two years. Although life seems back to normal since the pandemic started, gender-based violence is not abating.

One of the beliefs and practices that is at the heart of why too many of our women are still being wounded both emotionally and physically, is the patriarchal ideology being taught by far too many religious leaders. What is patriarchy? Here are simple definitions. It is the belief and practice that a male has authority and power over a female. It also means that a female has less value and purpose than a man. The reason for the female's existence is to serve and obey a male authority figure.

It is the patriarchal system that has caused pain and misery to millions of women since Bible times to now. Is it then fair to say that the church is obstructing the doorway to freedom and emotional and physical safety of many women, girls, and boys?

Here is a quotation by one of my favorite authors, Dr. John Bristo about Aristotle in his book, "What the Bible says about love Marriage and Family". It helps us to understand where this all started.

"Aristotle explained that this difference between husband and wife is like that of man's soul and his body. The man is to his wife as a soul is to the physical body, meant to command and guide arms and legs with wisdom and intelligence. (Aristotle used this same analogy to defend the practice of slavery and define the relationship of master and slave.) Just as one's body, with its impulses and desires, should not rule his soul, so a wife should not rule her husband. And, he added, as a stern warning, the "equality of the two or rule of the inferior is always hurtful."

This belief has saturated the minds and heart of many in our land and it shows by the way we treat our women, girls, and even boys.

Everyone in the family is impacted by gender-based violence. Let's look at the children. Children who live in a home where a woman is abused or is a victim of physical or emotional violence may think that it is normal and justified. We also know that experiencing or observing violence can impact the development of a child. For example:

Between the ages of 3 to 6 there can be:

1. Development Delay, Especially in Language Development. The child may be afraid to speak, afraid of becoming the target of anger. This is due in part to not being spoken to by adults or experiencing meaningful discussion with adults.
2. Low Frustration Tolerance. The child cries easily and often. Her world is so chaotic she cannot handle ordinary stress. He usually has not witnessed appropriate ways of dealing with stress.
3. Acting Out Aggressively Toward Peers and Adults. She models the aggressive behavior observed in the home.

Between the ages of 7 to 11 there can be:

1. Scholastic Delay or Poor School Performance. The child finds studying and learning difficult when he cannot keep from worrying about what happened at home last night or who is going to get hurt, or maybe killed later tonight.
2. Behavior Problems with Peers and Adults. Because of the lack of observable appropriate interpersonal relationships, the child has not learned appropriate ways to interact with others. The child may be crying out for help, the only way he can still keep the "family secret."
3. Aggressive Acting Out Becomes More Severe and Purposeful. The child models the violent behavior witnessed in the home.

Between the ages of 12 to 17 there can be

1. Depression. There is a loss of hope and joy. The adolescent is full of sadness.
2. Signs of Physical Injuries, Maiming, Crippling, Scarring. Too often abuse leaves long-term or permanent scars on the adolescent.
3. Aggressive/Delinquency/Running Away. The adolescent realizes no one will take care of his needs, except himself. Adolescents will use the only coping skills they have learned: violence and self-destruction.
4. Poor School Adjustment. The adolescent is academically and socially unable to perform.
5. Early Sexual Activity/Marriage. It is common for adolescents who experience or witness abuse to engage in early sex or marriage as a means of escape or act out.

What about marriage itself and home management. As implied in my quote about Aristotle, first, there is still a belief that there is a hierarchy in marriage. The husband is the head of the wife. The husband is in charge of the home. The husband has the last say. These beliefs and practices and others like them have caused great damage to the health of the family in many homes. For example, here are a few scenarios:

1. A husband who makes it known who the boss is. He sits, as all lions do, waiting to be served. When he roars, everyone must move. His children respect him as head, but they are really afraid of him. His wife nervously honors his wishes so as not to cause him to become angry. Other words that can aptly describe this type of head are "domineering" and "military commander" head. This husband sets the stage for his sons to be domineering and his daughters to be abused.
2. A husband is making \$70,000 annually and his wife is making \$110,000. Both incomes are very adequate to run a lovely modest middle-class home with all the amenities they want. But his ego and belief system are driving him to get another job

to make more than his wife so he can feel in charge. This power struggle causes friction in the relationship

3. A wife makes \$120,000 annually and her husband makes \$45,000. She is raised to believe that it is her husband's duty to financially provide all the needs of the home, therefore she feels justified in spending her money as she wishes since the husband is to be the provider and be in charge. They are struggling financially and have regular arguments about money.
4. A father demands that his twelve-year-old daughter washes the dishes. He tells her that as long as she is in the house it is her duty to wash the dishes because she is a girl. It is not his duty to wash dishes because he is the man of the house. Research tells us that happier couples and families are those where roles are determined by talent and not gender.
5. A mother of one daughter and four sons has trained the daughter to be the servant to her brothers. Her duties include washing their clothes and taking their plates from the table after they have completed a meal. The sons will grow up to demean women and the daughter can be a victim of abuse.
6. A 29-year-old young woman has been engaged to her boyfriend for 8 years. Why is she still in the relationship? Because she has been trained that he must take the lead (the patriarchal system again), even when deciding to get married. She hangs around waiting, getting burnt out and frustrated. Sometimes this frustration includes pregnancy and being overly dependent and then trapped with no way to turn.

Finally, perhaps two of the most painful topics under gender-based violence is that of rape and abortion and their impact on relationships and the family. They are ripping families apart, not just because of the acts themselves, but because the victims have little or no voice in the court of law. It is so sad, that a seemingly progressive nation is taking so long to make laws that a spouse can be raped in marriage by his or her spouse. The longer we take to pass this law the more women are re-victimized. Our political leaders are complicit in violating the human rights of women because of political expediency.

Also, while we all might believe that all life is sacred, whose life is more sacred than that of a little child who is raped and becomes pregnant? She is at a higher risk of dying during birth, developing severe psychological disorders, and becoming a dysfunctional teen and depressed wife. If the pregnancy is due to incest there are even more complex issues. Here is a quote from the Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Foundation article on incest: "Children of incest are in danger of premature birth and being underweight and undersized. Viable babies of incestuous couples are also likely to have physical deformities."

A myriad of challenges exist in dealing with these topics. Here are just three of them:

1. In some families there is a lack of social intelligence and emotional sensitivity which makes the family members vulnerable to accepting abnormal behavior as normal. When this is combined with a poor view of the value of women/females the pain is greater.
2. The victim of rape is often blamed, even the little girls. "She was too free." "She turned him on." Hence, she may develop low self-esteem, be prone to depression, and if she has children, she might become abusive to them.

3. The victim of rape, especially if it is a minor, is not believed and is instead brutally punished for making such accusations. A nine-year-old girl was brutally beaten for one hour by her grandmother after telling her mother that she was raped by her boyfriend. Because of the attitude of the guardians, the little victim is afraid to tell anyone.

Without proper treatment, these victims grow up as wounded individuals and may seek refuge in relationships that also lead to more abuse. And the cycle of gender-based violence continues and the family heads towards the precipice of severe dysfunction.

Ladies and gentlemen, let's unite, and stand up to end gender-based violence. Stop believing the lie that men are de-facto "heads of the home and the church" because they are better suited for leadership. We must speak against gender-based violence and remember that "Gender equality means that under God and the law both male and female have equal voice, vote, authority, access, opportunity and protection." Also remember when we reduce gender-based violence, we are also protecting and developing healthier families.

Thank you for listening.