

ISKCON Statement on Domestic Abuse

Adopted by the North American Governing Body Commission
International Society for Krishna Consciousness
January 2019

Resolution: Domestic abuse is illegal, indefensible and never acceptable within the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Any interpretation of Vaishnava religious or social teachings that condones, endorses, or justifies domestic abuse is rejected by the North American Governing Body Commission (GBC).

Understanding, Preventing and Responding to Domestic Abuse:

The Problem of Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse (sometimes referred to as domestic violence) is a serious global problem within society-at-large.

Domestic abuse is the leading cause of injury to women in many countries, including the United States, where it currently exceeds injuries from car accidents, muggings, and rapes combined.

Contrary to popular belief, domestic abuse is not limited to a particular ethnic, racial, or religious group, nor is it limited to people of a particular economic status. It is a problem that plagues all sectors of society.

The costs of domestic abuse to society are immense. Recent figures reveal that the economic costs of domestic abuse alone amount to more than \$37 billion a year in law enforcement involvement, legal work, medical and mental health treatment, and lost productivity at work. The costs of emotional and psychological scars are immeasurable.

Most domestic abuse (about 85%) is perpetrated by men against women, in the role of a husband or intimate partner. In America, 1 in 4 women will be victims of domestic abuse in their lives.

Vaishnava Response to Domestic Abuse

As a Vaishnava spiritual community, we are mandated by our scriptures and tradition to protect the vulnerable and those placed in our love and care. This includes, per the Srimad Bhagavatam, “the brāhmaṇas, the cows, the women, the children and the old men” [Purport 1.8.5]. Marriage partners in particular, wherein husbands and wives are bound by vows of love and service to each other and the

Supreme Lord, are called to care and protect one another, and never do each other any harm.

Domestic abuse is a severe violation of the essential practices of Krishna consciousness and Vaishnava culture. Vaishnava culture includes cultivating the qualities of mercy, austerity (or self-discipline), truthfulness, and cleanliness. These are sometimes referred to as the pillars of religion. Domestic abuse undermines and destroys these qualities.

Abuse of one's spouse or intimate partner is never acceptable behavior for one hoping to make spiritual advancement and please the Supreme Lord Sri Krishna. Domestic abuse blocks spiritual advancement because it violates the teaching of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, and violates the principle of compassion. It is a serious offense to one's partner, who should be seen first and foremost as an eternal daughter, or son, of God.

Any interpretation of Vaishnava religious or social teachings that condones or justifies domestic abuse is rejected by the North American Governing Body Commission (GBC). Domestic abuse is never acceptable within the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and is rejected and condemned as non-Vaishnava behavior by ISKCON.

While our temple communities and spiritual practices can offer some solace in the case of domestic abuse, both the victim and abuser are advised to seek professional help. For victims, this includes seeking specialist counseling, education, and victim advocacy as appropriate from a local domestic abuse response agency. Professional education and rehabilitation programs are also available for perpetrators of abuse.

Leaders are Obligated to Help

Despite this clear condemnation of domestic abuse, it still exists within congregations and among initiated members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

To help address this problem we direct that ISKCON leaders in North America should teach and minister to their communities so as to:

- Support members to identify domestic abuse when it exists
- Promote understanding of the consequences of domestic abuse
- Promote the sacred duty of partners in marriage to honor and protect each other, and to not allow violence or abuse to enter their relationship, against either wife or husband
- Promote marriage courses, counselors, sastra classes, etc., and the understanding that domestic abuse is displeasing to the Lord, Srila Prabhupada, and the Vaishnava community

- Understand that any person causing domestic abuse is in violation of sastra and Vaishnava values, and should be required to seek professional help
- Be watchful for members exhibiting the symptoms of abuse
- Take action and advise persons to seek professional help in cases of abuse
- Appoint a community representative who is knowledgeable about local domestic violence prevention programs and who can provide appropriate resources for victims in the community
- Consider the severity and frequency of any abuse and determine appropriate consequences for the abuser; which may include steps to ban perpetrators of serious or repeated acts of domestic abuse from participating in temple services

Domestic abuse will not be tolerated on temple property, either between couples or within families living on the property, or those visiting our communities.

(More specific advice for leaders is contained in Appendix H)

How Communities Can Help

Victims of domestic abuse are to be treated with the utmost respect and care. Devotees must avoid the incorrect tendency to blame a victim. We should instead help a victim consider all possible remedies to the crisis. This may include seeking professional counseling, notifying the police, seeking victim advocacy, temporarily relocating to a women’s shelter, leaving his/her partner temporarily or indefinitely, etc. Specialists can help a victim identify when it is no longer safe to be with someone and help plan appropriate next steps to ensure continued safety.

Victims should be encouraged to seek professional help through such outlets as the National Domestic Violence Hotline 800-799-SAFE and the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (see Appendix A for more information). Victims should not be made to feel responsible for their abuse, as abuse is never warranted or deserved. Rather the problem, and the offense, lies in the hands of the abuser.

Where domestic abuse becomes known, communities and leaders must be careful to not side with the abuser (no matter who he or she is) or assume that it is up to the victim to simply change his or her behavior in order to avoid the abuse. Victims must be empowered to make decisions that are best for them and their families, and know that the community and its leadership will support them.

For more information on how you can help as a friend:

<https://www.thehotline.org/2018/06/28/helpers-want-stage-intervention/>

Advice for Victims of Domestic Abuse

Abuse is never justified. To disclose that you are in an abusive situation to someone you trust like a close friend, spiritual guide, or a professional, is not acknowledging a personal failure or shortcoming but is a positive step towards healing.

Devotees and friends of ISKCON who are victims of domestic abuse are encouraged to take the brave step in seeking out professional help (see resources in Appendix A). Domestic violence agencies have expert staff, resources, and connections to give the best support and advice at a difficult and vulnerable time. While spiritual counseling can provide solace and healing, professional support is critical for addressing the core problem of abuse.

Leaders and friends in temple communities are sincere well-wishers who may try to guide someone in an abusive situation. Please remember that the final decision about what to do should remain exclusively with the victim. Such decisions are best made after exploring various options with a trained domestic abuse specialist and discussion with family and loved ones. The decision whether to leave an abusive situation should not be taken lightly and requires extensive planning and advice from professionals, after which it is ultimately the decision of the victim.

When a devotee finds him or herself a victim of abuse, it is possible to feel abandoned and without shelter. Krishna is the best friend of all living beings, and even in our darkest hours, He is there to comfort and guide us. Victims should never feel alone in their struggle and we hope that friends and leaders in the Vaishnava community are always there to offer solace and support when a devotee needs it the most.

If You're Struggling with Abusive Tendencies

The first step for someone who is either physically, verbally, and/or emotionally abusing their spouse is to recognize that he or she is responsible for perpetuating the abuse, and it is a problem which needs to be resolved. Abuse of one's partner is unlawful, never justified, and help should be sought. Domestic abuse is not a rational response to a domestic conflict. It is about an unhealthy need for control, a need that requires help for the person experiencing it.

There are programs available to help you control and change abusive behaviors in a nonjudgmental environment. But first you need to honestly acknowledge the problem and ask yourself if you are wanting and willing to change. One avenue for abusive partners who want to change their behavior is a program designed specifically to address abusive tendencies. These programs are often referred to as Battering Intervention and Prevention Programs (BIPPs), although what they are called can vary from state to state. BIPPs focus on teaching accountability and non-violent responses. These programs can be effective, but only if an abusive partner is committed to change, as it may be a difficult process that can take many months.

For more information visit:

<http://www.thehotline.org/2014/07/03/intervention-programs-for-abusive-behavior/>

Resources for Domestic Abuse Victims

Emergency Situation: Call 911 or Your Local Law Enforcement Agency

You should **call 911** if you are in immediate danger. Violence is a criminal act. Contact the local police to report violence and be protected by the law. Do not be afraid to report violence to the police. The police will file a report, which is the start of a legal process to get help and protection under the law.

Non-Emergency: National Domestic Violence Hotline (US)

If you are in an abusive relationship and not in immediate danger, you can call the **National Domestic Violence Hotline** at any time of day or night to speak to someone trained to help you. The hotline operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. All calls are confidential and anonymous, and interpreter services are available for more than 170 languages. The hotline provides crisis intervention and referrals to in-state or out-of-state resources, such as women's shelters or crisis centers. You can also visit their website: **www.thehotline.org**

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

1-800-787-3224 (TTY)

Non-Emergency: Disabled Women's Network of Canada (by province)

For helplines and services available in English and French for each Canadian province, visit **<https://www.dawncanada.net/enjeux/crisis-hotlines/>**

US State-by-State Resources: WomensLaw.org

WomensLaw.org provides free legal information and an overview of protections available for victims of abuse.

Resources are organized by state to help you find a local women's shelter and advocates in your area, legal representation, and local law enforcement agencies who can serve protection orders on your behalf.

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) **Ncadv.org/resources** provides resources and hotline numbers for specific abuse situations including those that involve children, teens, the elderly, and victims of various ethnicities and races.