

Cover Story

National Jewish Abuse Meeting Here

Maayan Jaffe MARCH 23, 2007

It strikes everywhere. It can impact anyone. Domestic violence -- abuse at the hands of an intimate partner -- affects as many as 3 million women annually, according to a 1998 Commonwealth Fund study.

So from across the United States and six other countries, approximately 300 Jewish women and a peppering of men filled downtown Baltimore's Hyatt Regency Hotel earlier this week to attend Jewish Women International's three-day conference on domestic violence in the Jewish community titled "Beyond Awareness: Effecting Change."

"There is a lot of domestic violence tucked under the rug," said Pikesville resident Caela Kaplowitz, a volunteer at the March 18-20 gathering. "It is important information gets out, especially in the Jewish community."

Participants shared information, laughs and tears at the approximately 40 workshops and sessions, ranging in topics from engaging clergy and building coalitions to recognizing the warning signs of murder and suicide. It was the Washington-based organization's third conference for domestic violence awareness.

At last Sunday's "crash course," Michelle Lifton, coordinator of Seattle's Project DVORA: Domestic Violence Outreach Response and Advocacy, explained the complexities of domestic violence.

"It is patterns of assaultive and coercive behaviors used to gain and maintain control over an intimate partner," she said. "This includes psychological, physical, verbal and sexual assault. ... When we are talking about domestic violence, we are talking specifically about [violence] between intimate couples."

The tactics do not always include physical abuse, Ms. Lifton said. Emotional abuse, humiliation, degradation and isolation are also forms of domestic violence.



Sharon Simon of N.J. (left) and Hedda Matza-Haughton of N.Y. (right) dialogue about mother-daughter relationships with Rabbi Rachel Hertzman (center) during CHANA's Monday afternoon workshop. (Photo Rebecca Gardner)

"[Abusers] are seeking to control the thoughts, beliefs and conduct of their partner. And they do punish their partners for resisting control," she said. "Their violence could be directed at children or other family members with the intention always of controlling their intimate."

Ms. Lifton said surveys show that 31 percent of women in the U.S. report physical or sexual abuse by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives. She said statistics in the Jewish community are equally striking.

Depending on the study, said Ms. Lifton, between 15 and 25.4 percent of Jewish women across the denominational spectrum experience, or have experienced, domestic abuse.

"A lot of people in the different movements are pointing fingers at each other," she said. "The more liberal-oriented say it's because of patriarchal norms. The more traditional say if people just followed Torah, this stuff wouldn't happen. The reality is domestic violence goes across cultures, races and classes."

In the same session, Naomi Tucker, founder of Shalom Bayit, a domestic violence advocacy group in Oakland, Calif., said women are often reminded by abusive partners to maintain *shalom bayit*, a peaceful home, and warned against *lashon harah*, evil talk.

The abuser, she said, might alienate the victim from their congregation, criticize her for not being "Jewish enough," redefine Jewish law or practices to further oppress her. The ultimate form of control is not granting a *get*, or Jewish divorce, said Ms. Tucker.

Following a poignant showing of JWI's film about abuse titled "When The Vow Breaks," Baltimore resident Cynthia Ohana, who said she is a victim of domestic abuse and an *agunah*, a "chained woman," spoke about her experiences.

"Since I have come out ... I have received many phone calls with women asking for help, how to go about it within *Halachah* [Jewish law], and make sure they are doing things that will benefit them, get them the best results for their family," she said. "I didn't ask to be in this position, and neither did my children. We just pull together and go on. It is a tragedy, but I know my children need my support and my strength."

Speaking by video hook-up during Sunday's conference dinner, Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) said youngsters who grow up in homes with domestic violence are 76 times more likely to get into violence themselves. Esther Giller, president and director of Maryland's Sidran Institute, a leading organization in traumatic stress education and advocacy, said up to 80 percent of children in families with domestic violence are similarly abused.

Different groups are fighting back. Nationally, for example, the Chicago-based outfit Cut It Out is empowering beauty salon professionals to spot signs of domestic violence among their clients and safely refer them to the national hotline for help. It has trained more than 30,000 professionals.

"The salon environment is warm, comfortable, trusting and intimate," said co-founder Dianne Mooney. "This nurturing environment encourages the victim to disclose her dark secret. ... The salon becomes a safe haven, and sometimes a life-saving resource."

In Baltimore, CHANA: Counseling, Helpline and Aid Network for Abused Women provides support and empowers victims to create a safe environment for themselves and their families. CHANA offered a Monday afternoon mother-daughter workshop to teach teens to set boundaries and speak about domestic violence incidents.

"We are just hoping moms and daughters will start talking to each other," said Rabbi Rachel Hertzman, CHANA's youth educator.

Sessions on recruiting males to combat domestic violence drew a great deal of enthusiasm among participants. "I can't overstate the importance of having men involved as leaders on the issue," said JWI executive director Loribeth Weinstein.

Meanwhile, a lunch-and-learn session on Monday afternoon dealt with rabbis as sexual offenders. "People always ask, `How is it possible a rabbi could do A, B or C?'" said Rabbi Mark Dratch, founder of the West Hempstead, N.Y.-based JSafe: The Jewish Institute Supporting an Abuse-Free Environment. "When it comes to sexual matters, no one can be trusted 100 percent."

He said no rabbi who is a perpetrator of sexual abuse should be allowed to be a teacher, regardless of whether he is charismatic, brings hundreds of people into a congregation or back to Judaism.

"It's not just the teacher's brain capacity that matters," Rabbi Dratch said, "it's his moral character. If you separate the intellect from the moral, that is not Torah."

When taking the stage Sunday night, Marc B. Terrill, president of The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, noted that domestic violence awareness has greatly improved since the 1970s.

"But there is much more work to be done," he said. "If the worldwide Jewish community recognizes the need to expose and tackle this issue, we can do whatever we put our minds to."