GBC Statement Against Domestic Abuse

Adopted by the Governing Body Commission International Society for Krishna Consciousness
February 2020

Resolution: Domestic abuse is indefensible, illegal in many countries, 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 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 most countries and from many reports 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. The costs of emotional and psychological scars on women, men, and children are also immeasurable.

Most domestic abuse is perpetrated by men against women, in the role of a husband or intimate partner. Despite the enormous costs involved, domestic abuse is accepted as a cultural norm in some parts of the world. However, it is not to be accepted anywhere within the global ISKCON society.

In brief, domestic abuse is defined as an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, committed by a spouse or domestic partner. Domestic abuse can include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Coercive control (a pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual violence)
- Psychological and/or emotional abuse
- Physical or sexual abuse
- Verbal abuse
- Spiritual abuse (using scripture to put down a spouse/partner)
- Financial or economic abuse
- Harassment and stalking
- Online or digital abuse

Domestic abuse is often used by one partner to maintain undue power and control over another partner within an intimate relationship.

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" [Srila Prabhupada's 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.

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 when this is possible or available.

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 in many areas. Where services are not available devotee mentors can be helpful to guide and counsel couples dealing with domestic abuse.

Leaders are Obliged to Help

Despite ISKCON's condemnation of domestic abuse, we are aware that it 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 should teach and minister to their communities so as to:

- 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
- Promote understanding of the negative consequences of domestic abuse
- 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
- Support members to identify domestic abuse when it exists
- Take action and advise persons to seek professional help in cases of abuse
- Whenever possible, 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 should not be tolerated on temple property, either between couples or within families living on temple property, or by those visiting our communities.

(More specific advice for leaders is contained in the Appendices Section 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 or other safe place, 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. Leaders in various communities should research the local resources and provide this information to those who need help and intervention.

Victims should not be made to feel responsible for their abuse, as abuse is never warranted or deserved. Rather the problem, and the offence, 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 what the social or spiritual status of that person may be) 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.

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 in many countries have 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 often 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 of abuse.

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. 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. Abuse of one's partner is unlawful in almost all countries, never justified, and professional help should be sought.