



Survivor Input on Faith Community Responses to Domestic & Sexual Violence

Survivor Input on Faith Community Responses

Though we didn't specifically ask about faith communities, a number of survivors shared how religious beliefs and faith communities were unsupportive, and how that impacted their experiences.

- 7 people interviewed said they are a part of a faith community; 3 people interviewed said they went to a faith community for help; and 1 person interviewed named their faith community as helpful.
- 10% of the survivors interviewed named religious/faith communities as a system that was part of allowing the harm to happen to them.

“My family, my parents, said ‘You need to work it out.’ They ascribed to the Christian faith, they believe you should stay with your spouse...”

“I was raised pretty fundamentalist Christian. And that whole community (my mom had a book called ‘womanhood’) teaches that sex is really for men and that women don’t really like it. And it’s for men and you’re supposed to do that for them. So then it was hard to parse out what I was supposed to do if I didn’t want to do anything...”

“The church was aware of what was going on and didn’t want to intervene. They were there to counsel but didn’t help as they could have.”

“I was part of an evangelical faith community and they said things like you weren’t supposed to have premarital sex or it would lead to bad outcomes, or that you can’t repair your purity, so a lot of the general narratives like that I heard in church were a part of the same that I had in my head.”

“The church – they sent help to my ex-husband but not to me. They didn’t care how I felt.”

Survivor Input on Helpfulness of Community Support

Respondents were asked: **If other people knew about your situation, how did they react? Do you feel like they supported you, or supported the person who harmed you?**

- 47% said that people were supportive of the offender (often by shielding them from accountability)

“I reported his suicidal text to the counselor. She told me not to break up with him right away even though he had assaulted me. They put him first.”

- 42% said people were supportive in a way that met the survivor’s needs

“When my mom found out she supported me. It was kind of the breaking point for me to make him leave.”

- 28% said that people tried to be supportive but it wasn’t helpful or it was harmful

“...Some friends/neighbor confronted my abusive husband without asking me first. That was well-intentioned but set me up for more abuse in reaction – it really escalated the situation.”

- 17% said people tried to stay neutral or uninvolved

“There were a lot of times when I was in his apartment...and he had two roommates who would witness what he did to me, or would witness me leaving his room super upset, and it was like they didn’t see anything ever.”

- 11% said no support was available

“I didn’t have support.”

What was helpful in support for you?

- 61% said validation (including being present and engaged)

“The first healing thing that happened was just having someone validate for me that it was a negative experience and that it wasn’t my fault.”

- 39% said tangible and logistical support (money, time, effort)

“They got me beds and clothing to replace the things he destroyed after I left him.”

- 29% said healing through therapy or counseling

“I’ve had lots of therapy. I worked on it really hard in my twenties. The process of healing for me is...being able to talk about it. To have your feelings affirmed.”

- 26% said advocacy and information

“They supported me throughout the entire process. They made such a difference, came to court with me for the protection order. I couldn’t have done it without them.”

- 21% said connection with other survivors

“Really just friends who continuously give me support and who have had similar experiences that should not have happened.”

- 13% said autonomy and agency

“I wanted to have autonomy in how I wanted other people to respond, in how they related to them. It helped me when people asked me how I wanted them to move forward.”

- 11% said connection to services

“...they helped me get to the next step in my journey.”

What was harmful in support for you?

- 51% said invalidation, disbelief, and minimizing/dismissing the survivor’s reactions or experiences

“The police...didn’t help me, they minimized the incident...just offered me a pamphlet and said if I’m not hurt, they can’t help me.”

- 44% said barriers to services and support (services or structural support were not provided, hard to access, or non-existent; and/or the survivor was discouraged from seeking help)

“The guardian ad litem told me that if I tried to get help from DVSA or went to a shelter, they would give custody of my son to his dad.”

- 34% said receiving responses from people who didn’t know how to support a survivor

“People and the systems tell you, ‘Sorry, so sorry’ but they don’t help you. The last thing you want to hear is ‘sorry,’ you need help.”

- 22% said a focus on minimizing the consequences for the abuser (eg protecting the abuser’s reputation)

“...it’s been interesting the amount of people who with this story respond to this by being concerned about him, and what would happen to his reputation. It’s interesting to have me share what happened that was hurtful, and they focus on the hypothetical hurt that this other person might experience.”

- 20% said facing stigma for what happened to them (such as being told not to talk about it)

“I did tell my parents and they were also unsupportive. My dad called it part of my ‘liberal agenda.’”

- 17% said being blamed for what happened to them

“My friends...insinuated that I kind of should have expected it because I got in the bed – they compared me getting into his bed with getting into a car with a drunk driver.”

- 17% said they faced additional forms of discrimination

“It was so hard to understand the system because of my language and culture and being a woman alone in a house taking care of the family, because I have no social security card.”

- 12% said not being given enough time (being told to get over it, not having time off of work, not having enough time for therapy)

“My old coworker, who was one of my closest friends, I told her the day after. I asked her for the day off and she just didn’t have enough empathy for me to not make me go to work.”

- 10% said facing additional violence

“Mostly people supported him, all his friends, the friends we both had, his family. They slashed my tires because he went to jail. I still get hate messages from them.”

- 10% said having consequences to the survivor for their self-protection or retaliation

“I also ended up going to jail because I retaliated to get away from her. I had a DV charge and wasn’t able to get a job because of it...I can get it expunged but it would cost me...”

Background

In the summer and fall of 2022, the S/DV Commission sought feedback from survivors of domestic and sexual violence. We did semi-structured interviews and surveys with more than 40 survivors, after which we conducted thematic analysis of the responses and developed this survivor input report. This feedback was gathered and analyzed in conjunction with and under the guidance of Dr. Christina Byrne, a researcher and psychology professor at Western Washington University.

In the interviews and surveys, survivors shared their experiences, what justice and healing could look like for them, and their feedback about restorative justice processes.

Survivors described experiences that included:

- One-time violence and persistent, on-going violence
- Lethal physical violence and severe emotional abuse
- Abuse that lasted for months, years, and decades
- Sexual violence experiences across the lifespan
- Sexual violence committed by trusted adults, friends, partners, neighbors, and dates
- Manipulation and coercion as a part of domestic violence (30%) and sexual assault (16%)

- Abusers using children to manipulate and abuse the survivor (19%)
- Retaliation from the abuser and from the broader community
- Systems responses that helped (17%), systems responses that compounded harm (17%), and systems that were absent or inaccessible
- Co-occurring substance abuse and mental illness
- Repeated victimization experiences, by the same abuser (77%) and by different abusers (30%)
- Positive community responses (19%) and negative community responses (19%)

“As this was happening to my body, I had a thought that I joined the many generations of women that I come from, in this culture.”

Read the full report [on our website](#).