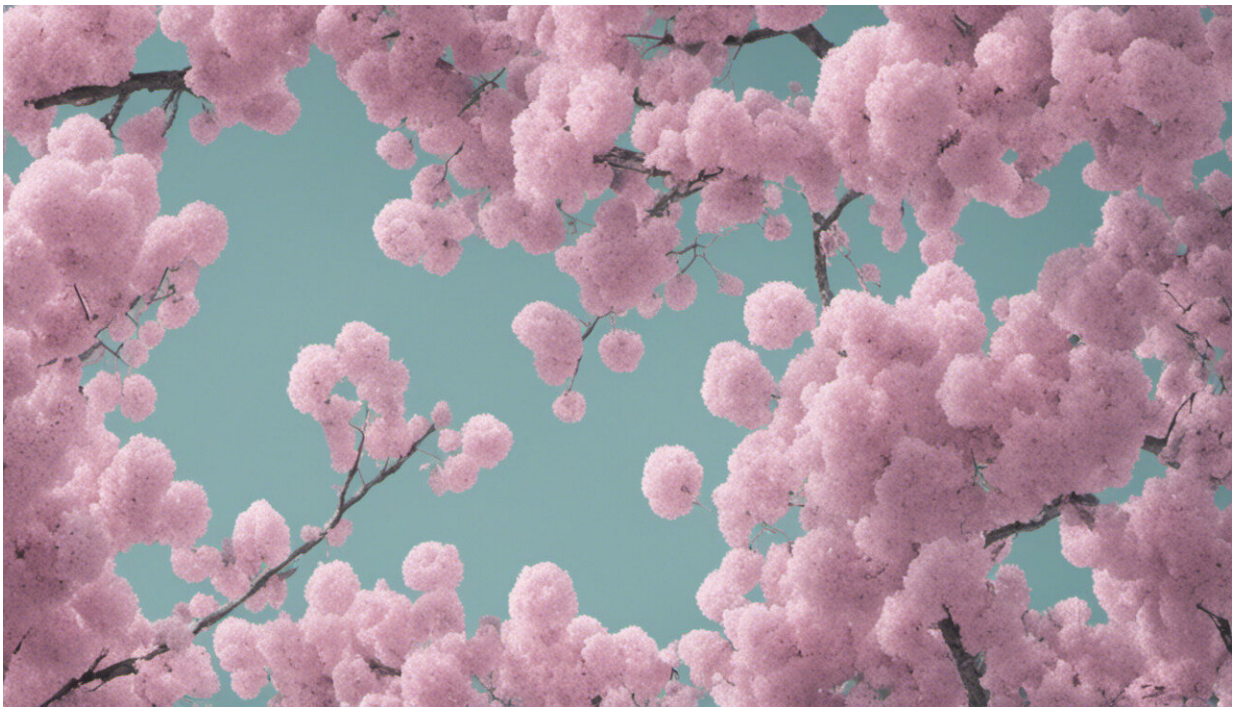


# New study finds family violence is often poorly understood in faith communities

April 18 2019, by Mandy Truong, Bianca Calabria, Mienah Zulfacar Sharif And Naomi Priest

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We learned this month that Prime Minister Scott Morrison has [pledged](#) A\$10 million in the federal budget for couples counselling and mediation for families impacted by domestic violence.

But the proposed policy runs counter to expert advice and evidence, which indicates that encouraging women to stay in relationships with an abuser exposes them to higher risk of [harm](#). The announcement was swiftly [condemned](#) by family and [domestic violence](#) (FDV) advocates.

Commentators have [noted](#) that an emphasis on mediation and the maintenance of relationships, even if they are abusive, is common within many religious and faith communities. Faith and religion are well recognised as having a powerful influence on attitudes, beliefs and social norms related to FDV, but empirical academic research on the subject remains scarce.

We recently conducted a study with leaders and community members from various faiths to better understand the capacity of faith communities to address and prevent FDV. Our initial findings indicate that while FDV is a common problem in faith communities, it remains poorly understood.

Women experiencing FDV can face barriers to seeking appropriate help. This is often due to attitudes and practices that deny or minimise experiences of FDV, and encourage women to stay in relationships with their abusers.

## **Family and domestic violence is a taboo topic**

We conducted interviews and [focus groups](#) with Anglican, Evangelical and Christian (including Catholic), Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish leaders and community members. We also spoke with key people who had experience working in FDV with faith leaders and faith communities.

In our interviews, participants often described FDV as being a taboo topic. It was also considered a private, family issue – we found it was

rarely spoken about openly in faith and [religious communities](#). Participants thought this contributed to a generally low awareness of FDV, and led to a limited understanding of the issue.

According to participants, faith communities' understanding of FDV was generally limited to acts of physical violence. However, FDV can include other forms of abuse, such as emotional, social, financial and spiritual. Participants also said that conversations about FDV are sometimes met with denial and defensiveness among faith communities. This was true across different faiths.

Many participants emphasised that faith and religion does not condone [violence](#). They suggested FDV resulted from a misinterpretation of religious beliefs, or was related to cultural norms. The idea that some religious beliefs and practices can promote victim-blaming attitudes and overemphasise forgiveness, acceptance and endurance was a dominant theme.

In particular, [religious beliefs](#) about hierarchical [gender roles](#) and male authority that consider men and women to be "equal but different" were seen by some participants as a strong influence on attitudes to FDV within faith communities.

Religious teachings about gender roles, where wives are expected to submit to their husbands, were also seen as contributing to denial and minimisation of FDV. These teachings also contributed to victim-blaming attitudes and failure to believe women disclosing FDV experiences.

Participants across many faiths saw a focus on keeping couples and marriages together as being of primary importance in their communities. But there was an awareness that this often prevented those experiencing FDV from seeking help due to the strong stigma and shame of divorce

and relationship separation.

## **How faith leaders respond to the problem**

Participants thought the capacity of faith leaders' and faith communities' to address and prevent FDV was limited and highly variable. Some communities said their leaders were helpful, while others failed to act.

Some participants did report feeling that progress was being made – albeit slowly – as leaders and communities became increasingly aware of FDV. There are grassroots groups and informal leaders across faith communities doing important work in this area. Some [community members](#) expressed that their faith gave them support in difficult times – including when experiencing FDV.

Several faith leaders observed that some other leaders didn't share the same level of skills, awareness and responsibility in responding to FDV. For example, some leaders failed to respond to FDV disclosures appropriately, such as with a referral to specialist services.

One leader suggested that others not only failed to access expert support, but used religious texts in ways that further perpetrated trauma and harm. Some faith leaders were viewed as falsely confident and lacking insight into their own limitations – a problem perpetuated by their positions of power within their community.

## **What can be done?**

Participants in our study provided a number of recommendations for effectively reducing FDV. These include:

- more information about what constitutes FDV and the harm FDV

can have on individuals and their families to increase awareness and understanding of the issue

- more resources to support and train faith leaders, community leaders, and grassroots faith groups in FDV work
- more evidence of the prevalence of FDV in faith communities should be gathered to motivate and engage those that deny or minimise the existence of FDV in their community
- marriage preparation, and counselling and religious sermons should include information about respectful and healthy relationships and FDV
- organisations in the FDV sector need to work together in partnership with faith leaders and communities to achieve change in FDV work. This involves collaborating in a respectful way using approaches that suit each distinct community.

Further investment in FDV is welcome, but it needs to be directed towards evidence-based best practice, and guided by experts on the ground who work directly with those experiencing FDV.

More broadly, to prevent and stop FDV and the harm it causes, we need greater reflection on the attitudes and beliefs that drive FDV across all sections of the community, including within [faith](#) communities.

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