

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).

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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” [Sri 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 Obligated 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, Sri 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.

GBC Statement on Domestic Abuse Appendices

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Appendix A: Definition of Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse can be defined as a pattern of emotional, mental, or physical abuse that is used by one person in a relationship/marriage to control an intimate partner. The abuse can happen often or with long gaps between episodes, but it is never a one-time event.

There are several types of abuse:

Physical Abuse

- Hitting
- Biting
- Spitting
- Slapping
- Shoving
- Punching
- Pulling hair
- Burning
- Cutting
- Pinching
- Any type of violent behavior inflicted on the victim
- Denying medical treatment
- Forcing drugs/alcohol use

Sexual Abuse

- Rape
- Attacking sexual body parts
- Violence followed by forcing sex
- Sexually demeaning the victim

Emotional Abuse

- Name calling
- Constant criticism
- Put-downs (often used to convince a partner that they are isolated)
 - “You’re so fat! Who would like you now?”
 - “Your family doesn’t even care about you anymore!”
- Injuring the relationship between victim and his/her child

*Note, sometimes the results of emotional abuse can be as harmful if not more harmful than some types of physical abuse

Financial Abuse

- Abuser makes victim inordinately financially reliant
- Maintains total control over financial resources
- Withholds victim’s access to funds

- Prohibits victim from going to school or working

Psychological Abuse

- Isolate partner by preventing contact with family/friends
- Invoke fear through intimidation
- Threats of physical violence or death to victim, children, family, friends or property
- Abuser threatens to hurt/kill self
- Abuser does not let victim leave home
- Confiscation of documentation (passport, identification, etc.)

Appendix B: Effects on Children

Domestic abuse and child abuse are linked. Statistics show that sixty-five percent of adults who abuse their partner also physically or sexually abuse their children. The cycle also continues in children, as research shows that boys who witness domestic abuse are twice as likely to abuse their partners and children as adults. Children who witness abuse may also accept abuse in their adult relationships as the abuse has become normalized through childhood experiences.

Children who are raised in an environment of domestic abuse often grow up to be fearful and anxious. They are always on guard waiting for the next episode to occur. Not knowing what triggers the abuse leads them to never feel safe. They often feel worthless and powerless to prevent these violent acts from happening.

Children may appear fine externally, but they are carrying the weight of keeping the family abuse a secret. The children often blame themselves. They are isolated and vulnerable, and starved for attention, affection, and approval. With one parent struggling to survive while the other is consumed with control, the children become physically, emotionally, and psychologically abandoned.

Children may display the following behaviors:

- Guilt
- Shame
- Depression
- Anger
- Bedwetting
- Inability to concentrate

Appendix C: What Does Domestic Abuse Look Like?

The following illustrate ways that abuse can manifest, with some examples directly from ISKCON communities:

-A couple is married soon after meeting. The husband insists that the wife leave her job. When she wants to visit her friends or family, he forbids her or says that he has to come too. When her friends try to reach out, he answers the phone and reads her private email and phone messages.

-A wife puts on weight after childbirth. When they are alone and sometimes in public, the husband repeatedly criticizes his wife's appearance. He calls her fat and ugly. He tells her she is unlovable because of her appearance, leaving her feeling unworthy of love, demoralized, and full of self-doubt.

-After financial difficulties, a couple struggles to get along. Both call each other names and blame each other. Sometimes he slaps her. After each quarrel, he begs for forgiveness and promises it will never happen again. In the midst of another fight, he loses control and punches his wife, giving her a black eye; as she falls he breaks her wrist. He apologizes and takes her to the hospital.

-A devotee couple with a 1-year-old child was referred for counseling by their temple leadership due to claims of domestic abuse. Both claimed that the other was emotionally, physically, and financially abusive. After attending couples counseling, the husband was referred for a mental health assessment. He moved in with another devotee family to give the couple some time apart. After some time, the couple decided to remain separated and share custody of their child.

-Two devotees were engaged. The man began to physically abuse his fiancé (hitting and slapping) after she refused to have sex before marriage. She went to a temple leader to get help. He later admitted to the abuse. He was removed from pujari services and told to leave the temple ashram. They decided not to marry. She chose to move to another temple and is doing well. After one year of counseling he was allowed to return to the ashram.

-A young couple with two children came in contact with devotees and began to seek initiation. The husband was unfavorable towards her spiritual practice and felt threatened that another man (her potential guru) was more important to her. He became frustrated and resorted to physical violence against her. The police were involved and he was sent to anger management counseling. She was referred to a devotee mentor, and they both attended professional counseling. After a few years of counseling, the couple became more understanding of each other's needs. They are now living peacefully together.

Appendix D: Protection Is a Sastric Imperative

As a Vaishnava spiritual community, we are mandated by our scriptures and tradition to protect others. The Srimad Bhagavatam states that: "In the glorious days, or before the advent of the Age of Kali, the brāhmaṇas, the cows, the women, the children and the old men were properly given protection... the protection of women maintains the chastity of society, by which we can get a good generation for peace, tranquility and progress of life." [Purport 1.8.5]

We also know that it is the duty of men in Vaishnava culture to protect women, not abuse them. There are multiple sastric references in this regard:

"The child must be taken care of. That is good. Similarly, woman also. And an old man like myself—I am always taken care of ... That is civilization." [Spoken to Visakha Devi by Srila Prabhupada, *Back to Godhead* article 1999]

"One who strictly follows religious principles must not neglect to provide all facilities for the complete protection of his wife. There may be some suffering because of this, but one must nevertheless endure it. That is the duty of a faithful husband. By His personal example, Lord Ramacandra demonstrated this duty." [Srimad-Bhagavatam, 5.19.5, Purport]

“In the spiritual platform there is no such distinction—man, woman, or black, white, or big or small. No. Everyone is spirit soul. Panditah sama-darshinah. Vidya-vinaya-sampanne brahmane gavi hastini shuni caiva shva-pake ca panditah. One who is actually learned is sama-darshinah. He does not make any distinction. There are so many Western women, girls, in our society. They are chanting, dancing, taking to Krishna consciousness. Of course, because superficially, bodily, there is some distinction, we keep women separate from men, that’s all. Otherwise, the rights are the same.” [Srila Prabhupada, Conversation with a reporter, June 18, 1976, Toronto]

“Our Krishna is a great family personality. Krishna is never a mendicant, and our ambition is to enter into Krishna’s family and to associate with Him personally. So to marry and to become an exemplary householder is the ideal life of Krishna consciousness.” [Srila Prabhupada, Letter to James Doody, July 10, 1969]

“Marrying and giving in marriage do not give rise to any rights of a master either to the husband or to the wife. Men and women are joined in wedlock for the purpose of serving each other in the performance of the joint service of Krishna. The wife is not an object of enjoyment of the husband, nor vice versa... They marry for pleasing the Lord, not for pleasing themselves...None of them can force their partners to serve them.” [“Relations between the Sexes,” Harmonist, by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Goswami Maharaja]

Appendix E: Why Women Sometimes Endure Abusive Situations

Staying in a marriage relationship, wherein sacred vows were taken, should always be a priority. At the same time, sometimes for one’s own safety or the safety of one’s children, it is best to separate from a situation where domestic abuse occurs. There are examples of Srila Prabhupada separating his married disciples for an extended period of time when the wife was not properly cared for:

Even when abuse exists and a wife feels she needs to be separated, there are conditions that may prompt her staying.

Unsupportive Community

- Friends and family do not urge the victim to leave a violent relationship
- Religious mentors/counselors encourage the victim to save the relationship at all costs

Fear

- Victims believe that the abuser will follow through with threats of violence or murder if they leave, not only to them, but also to their friends, family, children, pets, etc.
- Victim is afraid to lose custody of children
- Abuser threatens to harm self or commit suicide if the victim leaves
- The fear of being alone or isolated is greater to them than the fear of the abuse they receive

Low Self-Esteem

- After enduring abuse, they often lose their sense of self-worth and begin believing that their abuser is right. They believe no one else will care about them
- They believe they cannot be financially successful on their own

Commonly asked questions of domestic abuse survivors include:

- Why didn’t you speak up sooner?

- Why didn't you just leave?
- Why didn't you tell anyone?

Shame (among other factors) often makes victims feel like they are trapped, that they are silenced, and that there is no way out. Shame is what keeps many victims from coming forward. If you are dealing with shame, here are some things to remember:

Not recognizing that the abuser is the responsible party. Abusive partners (and sometimes family, friends or society) can convince their partners that they are the reason the partner is abusive. This is not true. Each partner has control over their actions. No one should ever harm another.

Falsely thinking one deserves to be abused, because of karma or some other reason. In fact, no one in ISKCON deserves to be abused. You don't deserve to be put down or called names, told who you can or can't be friends with, or to be controlled or hurt. In a healthy relationship each partner should be able to communicate their feelings without resorting to violence or abuse.

Appendix F: Self-Help

Building a support system after experiencing abuse is important. Dealing with a traumatic experience can be overwhelming, and having someone to talk to about it could be helpful. This might include friends and family members, but also remember that professional counseling and therapy can be extremely valuable in the healing process. It's important to remember that you have the right to choose how you want to handle your experience.

After experiencing something traumatic, such as domestic abuse, self-care can be a big part of healing. That can look different for everyone, but devotees often choose additional devotional practices like prayer, reading, or chanting; as well as journaling; yoga, spending more time with friends, or just getting sufficient rest. The important thing is to relieve stress and take care of yourself physically and mentally.

Appendix G: Deciding Whether to Leave a Relationship

If you're trying to decide whether to stay or leave an abusive relationship you may be feeling confused, uncertain, frightened, and torn. One moment, you may desperately want to get away, and the next, you may want to hang on to the relationship. You might blame yourself for the abuse or feel weak and embarrassed because you've stayed in the relationship in spite of it. Don't be trapped by confusion, guilt, or self-blame. The only thing that matters is your safety.

If you are being abused, remember:

- You are not to blame for being battered or mistreated
- You deserve to be treated with respect
- You deserve a safe and happy life
- Your children deserve a safe and happy life
- You are not alone. There are people waiting to help

As you face the decision to either end the abusive relationship or try to save it, keep the following things in mind:

If you're hoping your abusive partner will change... Research demonstrates that the abuse you are experiencing will probably happen again. Abusers often have deep emotional and psychological problems. And, they sometimes are culturally programmed to think that abuse is normal. Sometimes they fail to understand the Vaishnava values of care and service sufficiently to stop their abusive behavior.

While change is not impossible, it isn't quick or easy. Change can only happen once your abuser takes full responsibility for his/her behavior, seeks treatment, and stops blaming you, his/her unhappy childhood, stress, work, temper, or even drug or alcohol use. Be aware that it is extremely rare for abusers (primarily men) to seek professional help unless it is court mandated or a spouse threatens to leave.

If you believe you can help your abuser... It's only natural that you want to help your partner. You may think you're the only one who understands him/her or that it's your responsibility to fix his/her problems. But the truth is that by staying and accepting repeated abuse, you may be reinforcing and enabling the abusive behavior. Instead of helping your abuser, you may be perpetuating the problem.

Tolerating abuse does not align with our devotional principles of tolerance and compassion. By allowing a spouse/partner to abuse you, you are enabling them to continue committing Vaishnava *aparadha* via their mistreatment of you. Abuse is harmful to the spiritual and material well-being of both the victim and the abuser.

If your partner has promised to stop the abuse... When facing consequences, abusers often plead for another chance, beg for forgiveness, and promise to change. They may even mean what they say in the moment, but their true goal is often to stay in control and keep you from leaving. Most of the time, they return to their abusive behavior once they've been forgiven and they're no longer worried that you'll leave.

If your partner is in counseling or a program for batterers... Even if your partner is in counseling, there is no guarantee that he/she will change. Many abusers who go through counseling continue to be violent, abusive, and controlling. If your partner has stopped minimizing the problem or making excuses, that's a good sign. You still need to make your decision based on who he/she is now, not the person you hope he/she will become.

If you're worried about what will happen if you leave... You may be afraid of what your abusive partner will do, where you'll go, or how you'll support yourself or your children, but don't let fear of the unknown keep you in a dangerous, unhealthy situation. Seek out professional help and advice to make the best decision for yourself and your family.

Appendix H: Signs that Your Abuser is NOT Changing

If your abuser:

- Minimizes the abuse or denies how serious it really was
- Continues to blame others for his/her behavior
- Claims that you're the one who is abusive
- Pressures you to go to couples counseling (rather than accepting their responsibility for the abuse and accepting individual counselling)
- Tells you that you owe him/her another chance
- Has to be pushed to stay in treatment
- Says that he/she can't change unless you stay and support him/her
- Tries to get undue sympathy from you, your children, or your family/friends
- Expects something from you in exchange for getting help

Appendix I: Additional Advice for ISKCON Community Leaders

1. Make available and require premarital counseling prior to performing a wedding ceremony. Professionally trained, counselors are often able to discern and prevent destructive relationships and generational patterns before they fully develop. This may also prevent a tragic marital situation if patterns have already developed in courtship.
2. Educate your congregation about domestic abuse. Our tendency in temple communities is to focus on teaching scriptural truths and instructions for marriage, while not fully addressing the real challenges that many in the congregation are already living within their marriages.
3. Interact with local law enforcement and domestic abuse shelters. Learn from them, and partner with them in addressing abuse in your community.
4. Speak out against abuse, which includes the misapplication of scripture to guilt, manipulate, and ultimately control others. These topics can be brought up in public forums, such as Sunday Feast classes. By vocalizing these misconceptions, we dispel the validation abusers may seek by misuse of our philosophy. At the least, it brings the congregation's attention to an important issue. Education can be the greatest tool for prevention.
5. Be present with those who come forward as victims of domestic abuse. Listen. Believe that abuse could happen. Then, be patient. It may take time and significant planning for a victim to make a change.
6. Place boundaries on how you intervene. Refer couples to a professional counselor whenever possible. They will likely manage sessions with the individuals—not with both spouses--until it is assessed that it's safe enough to engage in joint counseling. Shared counseling should never be done with a couple until the abuse has ceased completely, because of the risk of violence resulting from disclosures during sessions.

Temple leaders should not get sidetracked by deeply held hopes for restoring relationships. Despite the sanctity of marriage vows, in cases of severe domestic and family violence, the first obligation of the temple leader must be to get victims to safety – not save the marriage. While we rightly embrace the sacredness and importance of marriage, when there is abuse and control asserted in the relationship, we must recognize that this ideal is already shattered.

Following expert professional (rather than just pastoral or devotee counseling wherever possible) intervention, the couple might be able to look at whether the marriage can be re-established. Alternatively, the victim might recognize that the relationship is simply not safe enough to be repaired. This decision must always be made by the victim, and temple communities must avoid pressuring them over this decision.

Appendix J: Additional Resources

Many countries have professional, not-for-profit resources to help. We list just a few here as samples.

USA

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV): ncadv.org
DomesticViolence.org

DomesticViolenceRoundtable.org

UK

Telephone: 0808 200 0247 (24 hours)

Email: helpline@womensaid.org.uk

Website: www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk

India

Society for Nutrition, Education
& Health Action (SNEHA), Mumbai
Behind Building No. 11, BMC Colony
Shastri Nagar, Santa Cruz West
Mumbai 400 054 India

Phone: (+91 22) 2661 4488 / 2660 6295 / 2661 4476
(During office hours 10 am - 7 pm)

For women and children facing violence: crisis@snehamumbai.org, +91 91675 35765