

Crimes Against Women - 1991

...a husband must honor his wife and not degrade her.
(Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg, Responsa Even haEzer, 718C)

Issue

The prevalence of gender-motivated crimes against women, including domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, and sexual harassment in the workplace.

Background

Judaism has long recognized the victimization of women. Biblical and post-Biblical law treat rape, including marital rape, as a crime. Early Responsa literature documents the existence of spousal abuse, although remedies did not always protect women. Sexual harassment of women in the workplace, a contemporary issue, violates the principle of the equal status of women. Today we understand that these crimes are linked by common threads: they are expressions of rage, anger and an assertion of power and they are motivated not by the behavior of the victim but by her gender.

According to testimony given in 1990 to the Senate Judiciary Committee pursuant to the Violence Against Women Act, crimes against women are on the rise in the United States. Battering is the single largest cause of injury to women, and more than half of all homeless women are fleeing domestic abuse. One in 5 adult women will be raped during her lifetime. One in 4 college women will be attacked by a rapist before graduation and one in 7 raped; less than 5% will report the rape to the police and 50% will tell no one. Although 4 out of 5 victims know their attackers, rape remains the most under-reported of all major crimes. Sexual harassment of women in the workplace (including all unwelcome acts, physical, visual and verbal, that create a hostile work environment), is another seriously under-reported crime. Law enforcement and judicial responses to these crimes are at best uneven.

We as Jews are not immune. According to articles in Reform Judaism, (1984 and 1988), studies indicate that domestic abuse exists in the same proportion in the Jewish community as in the community at large, but, tragically, acknowledgment has been slow in coming. The synagogue and Jewish communal agencies provide little help for our battered women, our batterers and their families. As part of the university population, our young women are numbered among college rape victims and, admittedly, our young men among the rapists. In the workplace, Jewish women are among the harassed and Jewish men are among the harassers.

The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, at its 1975 and 1983 Biennial Assemblies, acknowledged the existence of domestic abuse in the Jewish family and called for services to its victims and to rape victims. It also publishes *When Love is Not Enough: Spousal Abuse in Rabbinic and Contemporary Judaism* by Rabbi Julie Spitzer. The Congress of the United States is currently considering a Violence Against Women Act and a revised Civil Rights Act, both of which address and seek legislative remedies for these crimes against women.

Resolution

The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, in fulfillment of the Jewish mandate to seek justice and to protect the life, well-being and health, both physical and emotional, of all, and in affirmation of the innate right of all women to live free of violence and abuse, calls upon all Sisterhoods to:

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1. Educate themselves, their congregations and their communities as to the nature, prevalence and manifestations of domestic abuse, both physical and emotional, by spouse or by intimate partner; rape and sexual assault, by stranger or by acquaintance, including marital, companion and date rape; and sexual harassment in the workplace, including all unwelcome physical, visual and verbal acts that create a work environment hostile to women.
2. Urge vigorous enforcement of all existing laws that prohibit violence and other crimes against women.
3. Urge all legislators to enact stricter guidelines and procedures at the release or parole of convicted repeat sex offenders.
4. Advocate for the passage of legislation at the appropriate governmental levels to combat crimes against women, including provisions for:
 1. increased protection from violence in the home, on the streets and on campuses.
 2. programs to educate, train and sensitize law-enforcement personnel and the judiciary.
 3. recognition of the "battered woman syndrome" as a valid legal defense.
 4. establishment of rape and sexual assault awareness programs at secondary and post-secondary educational institutions.
 5. funding for shelters and services to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.
 6. adequate and appropriate legal remedies and redress for all victims.
5. Work with synagogue professionals and lay leaders to break the conspiracy of silence that masks the existence of both abused and abusers within the Jewish community so that congregational and communal caring, help and services can be extended to those in need.
6. Encourage the incorporation of units on domestic abuse and sexual assault within the curricula of both secular and religious schools and the establishment of rape and sexual assault awareness programs at colleges and universities.
7. Serve as part of a caring community, as volunteers and as advocates, in coalition with other concerned groups, to provide necessary services and goods to victims, including hot lines, crisis intervention help, shelters and safe houses, counseling and support groups, and legal assistance.

Further, we encourage joint programming between sisterhoods and temple youth groups on these issues of vital concern.

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