Religion, Culture and Gender Guides

The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and provide creative, informative and critically informed resources on this theme.
Domestic Abuse in the Jewish community: Britain.

Sara Bloch

Domestic Violence is defined by the UK government as “any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender of sexuality. The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to:

- psychological
- physical
- sexual
- financial
- emotional” (Home Office, 2013)

Fig.1. see the Jewish Chronicle, 10 March 2011.
Case study

Rebecca – a true story

My husband and I married each other because we shared an outlook on life and family. We had similar ambitions, and had 6 happy years together. My husband changed after his father died. He became very self obsessed, and controlling of me and our children.

He wouldn’t let me have contact with other men either socially or professionally. He tried to control what I wore, how I did my hair. I wasn’t allowed to wear any make up or nail varnish, or any clothing which he considered immodest. He forced me to be a housewife, cook, cleaner, mother and nothing more. When I heard his key in the front door, I would be terrified – we never knew what mood he would be in. I knew he wouldn’t grant me a divorce, so I kept a secret diary of all the incidents of his aggression.

A friend’s husband put me in touch with Jewish Women’s Aid. The first time I met my keyworker I felt so safe that I didn’t want to leave. She called, texted and emailed me constantly and offered loads of practical help.

I think that what got me through was the belief that I would survive. My keyworker helped me to believe that. I was a strong, confident woman, but he broke me and it’s taken two and a half years to put myself back together.

(Jewish Women’s Aid)

Rates of Abuse and Various Perspectives

Evidence suggests that there is a misconception among Jewish communities that domestic abuse is not as prevalent in Jewish communities than other communities in Britain. In a study conducted by
the Jewish Women’s Aid (JWA) in 2011, it was found that “Despite a third admitting that they thought abuse in the Jewish community would not be the same as the rest of society, the number of Jewish women abused is two per cent higher than the national average”. (Rosen, The Jewish Chronicle, 2011) According to research conducted by JWA, the reality is that one in four Jewish women are victims of domestic abuse in the UK.

Men are also victims of domestic abuse in Britain, though national data has consistently shown that male to female abuse is more prevalent. In a study conducted by Jewish Women’s Aid, “17 per cent of the 54 male respondents, had been abused.” (Rosen, The Jewish Chronicle, 2011)

Anglo-Jewry is made up of several different religious denominations. Most prominent factions include; Reform, Masorti, Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox (whom are also referred to as strictly Orthodox). There is also a large community of British Jews whom are not religiously affiliated though still maintain a secular Jewish identity. “Research showed that the numbers of abused people barely differed between religious affiliations but was marginally higher among the strictly Orthodox, where 29 per cent either experienced abuse or knew someone who had.” (Rosen, The Jewish Chronicle, 2011)

JWA provides psychological and practical advice to those suffering from domestic abuse. They work to support the specific needs of those in the Jewish community. They also offer education in schools, training for communal professionals, and speakers which aim to help raise awareness.

*Domestic Abuse in Religious Sources and Responses from Rabbonim*
Jewish law expressly forbids domestic violence, hence those who commit domestic abuse are breaking Jewish law. In the Jewish commentries it is written that “A man who strikes his wife commits a sin, just as if he were to strike anyone else.” (Rama, Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer 154:3)

Both previous and current Chief Rabbonim have publically condemned domestic abuse. Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks has spoken out saying that: “As a community we may not turn a blind eye or deaf ear to the problem of domestic violence. We must oppose those who practise it and offer practical help to those who suffer from it.” (Rosen, The Jewish Chronicle, 2011)

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis has drawn attention to the issue of domestic abuse in the Jewish community urging “UK Jewry to take responsibility in the campaign to combat domestic abuse within the community. He said ignorance and sensitivity around the issue made it difficult for charities like Jewish Women’s Aid to support victims of abuse in homes across the religious spectrum.” (Rashty, The Jewish Chronicle, 2013)

Despite Jewish communal leaders having made public statements against domestic abuse in the past, a study conducted by JWA showed that “62 per cent said that they were not aware of a rabbi in their community publically addressing the issue. Only 11 per cent of strictly Orthodox respondents said their rabbi has specifically addressed domestic abuse.” (Rosen, The Jewish Chronicle, 2011)

Specific Issues Concerning Jewish Victims of Domestic Abuse

The Role of Women in Judaism and its Effect on Domestic Abuse
The role of women in Judaism is central in understanding culturally specific issues that may apply to Jewish women and issues regarding domestic abuse. For many women, both religious and secular “the primary expectation is to marry, create a home, and raise their children in the faith.” (Brown, The Telegraph, 2011) Thus, traditionally, women have been relegated to the private sphere. Though this has changed and continues to evolve, many Jewish women internalize a pressure to provide in the domestic sphere. Emma Bell, the executive director of JWA said: “There are more people who feel the shame and stigma of domestic abuse in the Jewish community because there’s more emphasis on religion and family life.” (Rashty, The Jewish Chronicle, 2013) This may make domestic abuse particularly difficult for Jewish women to come to terms with as they could feel that they are failing in fulfilling their duties as a mother or wife. Thus it may take a long time for Jewish women suffering from domestic abuse to seek help due to a feeling of failure and shame.

Rebecca describes in her testimonial how her husband would ‘force her to be a housewife’. This element of her abuse can be analysed in light of Susan Starr Sered’s theory: Women as agents and Woman as symbols. Sered theorises the difference between “women – actual people who have varying degrees of agency within specific social situations” and “Woman – a symbolic construction conflating gender, sex, and sexuality, and comprised of allegaory, ideology, metaphor, fantasy, and (at least in male dominated religions) men’s psychological projections.” (Sered, 1999 p.194) Sered argues that “Because of the precariousness of the link between women and Woman (that is the threat that women will shake off Women), religious ideologies typically include a fallback position for when symbolism of the “good” Woman doesn’t take-for situations in which women do not sufficiently internalize Woman.” (Sered, 1999, p.195) Rebecca’s husband would force her to adhere to the symbol of a ‘Woman’ leaving her unable to act as a free agent. Hence domestic abuse can occur in Jewish communities when women do not sufficiently adhere to the symbol of a “good Woman” in traditional Judaism.
In Rebecca’s testimonial she describes how she knew that her husband wouldn’t grant her a divorce. This is in reference to the get; a divorce document which must be given to the wife from the husband to effect their divorce. Many Jews are bound by this religious law whether they are religiously observant or not. In some cases, the husband may refuse to give his wife a get, making the wife an agunah: “chained” to her marriage. In this state the woman cannot marry another person under Jewish law. Thus, halakha can pose a problem to women wanting to divorce their husbands due to being domestically abused, if the husband denies their partner a get.

Special Needs and Issues of Orthodox Women

The tradition of the shidduch has impact on the way that cases of domestic abuse may be dealt within the Ultra-Orthodox community. Protecting the family name is key in having good marriage prospects. Being involved in a domestic abuse case has the potential to ruin the family name, effecting future shidduch prospects. Thus “Unhappy marriages may stay together” (Baker, 1993, p.106) and cases of domestic abuse may go unreported so as not to bring shame to the family name or to the community at large. The “close knit, insular and private” (Mick Brown, The Telegraph, 2011) nature of Ultra-Orthodox communities contributes to the taboo and stigma that is prevalent in attitudes towards domestic abuse within the Orthodox Jewish community.

Ultra-Orthodox communities can be particularly “wary of its association with outsiders” (Mick Brown, The Telegraph, 2011) and prefer to deal with problems themselves rather than involve the police. This lack of trust of outside organizations could be connected with their wanting to be separate from secular society. This could also be part of “a legacy of history” (Brown, The Telegraph, 2011); part of a post-holocaust mentality in which there is a negative association with outside security forces as inherently ant-Semitic. Adrienne Baker explains that “It is a complex situation: the leaders of the Ultra-
Orthodox sects fear giving ‘ammunition’ to the outside world, anti-Semitism being the implied reason. At the same time, powerful communal pressure rarely permits a family to speak outside the community of things going wrong. To be labelled a *moisser* (informer), as one mother was during 1991, is tantamount to being banished.” (Baker, 1993, p.106-107) Hence, the rejection of external security forces fueled by the notion of the outside world is inherently anti-Semitic, and fear of being exiled from the community may result in cases of domestic abuse going unnoticed and unreported in Ultra-Orthodox communities.

Harry Brod’s theory of the “double bind” assists in making sense of gender identity dynamics and resistance with regard to women’s domestic abuse in the Jewish community. Brod’s model explains how a Jewish male’s internalization of fear of anti-semitism from the hegemonic culture can lead to patriarchal sexism and the subjugation of Jewish women, from which men benefit. He theorises that “It functions within Jewish culture as a mechanism of resistance by the culture as a whole against foreign gender norms imposed by the hegemonic culture but at the same time also as a means for perpetuating specifically Jewish patriarchal norms within a culture which valorizes intellectual over physical prowess. This sort of “double bind” is precisely the characteristic of gender norms in non-hegemonic cultures” (Brod, 1994, p.91) Hence, the male internalization of pressures from the hegemonic culture can perpetuate Jewish patriarchy thus affecting the way that Jewish women are treated by their husbands.

*Spiritual Abuse and its Relevance to Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community*

Nicole Dehan and Zipi Levi highlight the importance of spiritual abuse in understanding domestic abuse among *Haredi* women. This theory can be utilised in understanding difference among Jewish women and is useful in considering the culturally specific issues that arise in cases of domestic abuse.
in Jewish communities. Dehan and Levi argue that “spiritual abuse is a dimension of wife abuse in its own right.” (Dehan and Levi, 2009, p.1305) Dehan and Levi define spiritual abuse as “damaging the women’s spiritual life, spiritual self, our spiritual well-being, by means of purposely and repetitively criticizing, limiting, or forcing her to compromise or go against her spiritual conscience, resulting in a lowered spiritual self-image, guilt feelings, and/disruption of transcendental connectedness.” (Dehan and Levi, 2009, p.1303) There are three levels of intensity: “(a) belittling the women’s spiritual worth, beliefs, or deeds; (b) preventing the woman from performing spiritual acts; and (c) causing the women to transgress spiritual obligations or prohibitions. (Dehan and Levi, 2009, p. 1300)

The utilization of Dehan and Levi’s work can help to improve the quality of help that is provided for Jewish women by understanding their contexts and the centrality of religion in every aspect of their lives. It can also help in “enlarging the existing body of theory on abuse” (Dehan and Levi, 2009, P.1305) and contribute to a growth in awareness of culturally diverse issues concerning minority groups in Britain. For example, Jewish Women’s Aid caters to Orthodox people who are victims of domestic abuse with shelters that have kosher food, neccessary facilities to observe Shabbat, and the option to talk to a Rabbi/Rebbetzin.

Glossary

Agunah

A woman bound or ‘chained’ either to a missing husband or to one who refuses to divorce her.

Get

The bill of divorce given by the husband to the wife in order to dissolve the marriage. The get, is required to be given before the marriage can be dissolved.
Halakha
Jewish law and jurisprudence, based on the Talmud.

Haredi
A member of any of various Orthodox Jewish sects characterized by strict adherence to the traditional form of Jewish law and rejection of modern secular culture.

Masorti Judaism
A religious movement aimed for a middle path between Reform and Orthodoxy.

Orthodox Judaism
Traditionalist form of Judaism.

Rabbi
Person qualified through study of the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud to be the chief religious leader of a Jewish congregation and the person responsible for education and spiritual guidance.

Rabbonim
Plural of rabbi.

Rebbetzin
The wife of a rabbi or a female religious teacher.

Reform Judaism
Modern progressive movement.

**Shabbat**

The seventh day of the week, on which Jews abstain from work.

**Shidduch**

A Jewish arranged marriage.

**Annotated bibliography**


This book, written by a Jewish woman, helped to me understand the nature of the Ultra-Orthodox from an insiders perspective.


I got all the information about the theory of the “double bind” from this book. The author is very readable and insightful.


Brown’s account of the ultra-Orthodox community in Stamford Hill helped me to understand the specific needs of the ultra-Orthodox community and the problems that living in an insular community
can bring to victims of domestic abuse. It was particulary helpful in understanding the reasons as to why this community prefers to deal with issues that arise internally rather than utilise external forces. The article was written from the perspective of an outsider of the community which poses limitations to this source.


This relatively recent article gave me a perspective of the specific issue of spiritual abuse that affect Haredi women. I found that the article gave me a heightened awareness of the difference in help that different women suffering from domestic abuse require.


This website was useful in obtaining a UK definition of domestic abuse and to see how this definition was inclusive of Jewish minorities. It was useful as a point of comparison in understanding specifically Jewish issues.

Jewish Women's Aid (2011), "You know a Jewish woman suffering from domestic abuse": Domestic Abuse and the British Jewish Community. Dr. Sarah Abramson & Cora Peterson.

This research report gave me facts and figures of rates of abuse and details of perspectives of domestic abuse within the Jewish community and society at large. I was aware of potential bias in this report as is was created for the Jewish Women's Aid and aims to promote its services. Despite this, I found that the information was easily accessible and useful in learning about the scope of misconception about domestic abuse in the Jewish community.

<www.jwa.com>
The Jewish Women's Aid website provided me with a wide range of information on the issues of domestic abuse in the Jewish community and information on the help and support that it provides. Although the website did not greatly differentiate different religious groups from each other, it provided good material for the case study and was a helpful starting point.


This article helped me to understand some of the myth regarding class and religion that obstructs perspectives on domestic abuse in the Jewish community. I was able to gain an understanding of the stigma and taboo that is attached to the topic of domestic abuse in the Jewish community.


The article helped me to gather information about responses to domestic abuse from Jewish communal leaders. It was particularly helpful in obtaining an up to date stance from the current Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis. A limitation of this source is that the Jewish Chronicle may report in a biased manner toward the Chief Rabbi.


This article was useful in understanding the scope of the problem of domestic abuse in the Jewish community and how this varies in different Jewish religious groups. The reliability of the article is...
questionable as it emphasised the need for a heightened awareness of issue and promoted the work of Jewish Womens Aid.


I got all the information about Sarr Sered's theory from this book. It helped me to understand how the role of women in Judaism is relevant to the topic of domestic abuse in the Jewish community.