Published in final edited form as:

Violence Against Women. 2016 April ; 22(5): 609–624. doi:10.1177/1077801215608702.

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF FAITH BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN ADDRESSING ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP ABUSE

Erica Li, MD [third year pediatric resident at Harbor UCLA],

She graduated from UC Davis School of Medicine and Stanford University.

Erik Fernandez y Garcia, M.D., M.P.H., F.A.A.P [Associate Professor of Clinical Pediatrics in the Division of General Pediatrics],

Department of Pediatrics, University of California Davis School of Medicine.

Lori Freedman, PhD, MA [Assistant Professor], and

University of California San Francisco Medical Center and Medical Sociologist in the Bixby Center for Global Reproductive Health.

Elizabeth Miller, MD, PhD [Chief]

Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine, Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC and Associate Professor of Pediatrics, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

Abstract

Adolescent relationship abuse (ARA) is prevalent with significant health and social consequences. Faith based organizations could play an important role in ARA prevention and intervention. Studies on the role of faith based organizations in interpersonal violence have focused on adult survivor perspectives rather than adolescents. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with faith based organization leaders, parents, and youth. Findings highlight that church leaders, parents and youth all expect that faith based organizations can play a role in educating teens about healthy relationships. Divergent perspectives about how faith based organizations should address adolescent sexuality and privacy need to be addressed.

Keywords

Faith Based Organizations; Adolescent; Relationship Abuse

Adolescent relationship abuse (ARA) -- physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in adolescent romantic relationships -- is a significant public health problem. About 10 percent of high school students report physical violence victimization in dating relationships, (Eaton et al., 2009) with even higher prevalence when accounting for sexual and emotional abuse victimization. (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, & Hannan, 2003; Davis, 2008; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001) Such victimization is associated with a myriad poor health outcomes, including substance use, poor weight control, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancy, social withdrawal, and poor academic achievement. (Ackard et al., 2003; Chiodo et al., 2011; Howard & Wang, 2003; Silverman et al., 2001; West, Swahn, & McCarty, 2010) Given the multiple factors that contribute to increased risk for ARA, prevention efforts should include a range of

stakeholders in the community – parents, schools, youth agencies as well as faith-based organizations.

Literature in sociology and public health has examined the interactions between survivors of intimate partner abuse and religious institutions, with a focus on married, adult women. Faith based organizations are often the first place where relationship abuse victims seek help, (Beaman-Hall & Nason-Clark, 1997) and reaching out to religious organizations can be both beneficial and detrimental. Women who reported greater participation in religious practices were more likely to stay within an abusive marriage (Horton, Wilkins, & Wright, 1988) and some religious leaders may ask victims to pray and “work things out” with their abusive partners rather than provide relationship resources.(Potter, 2007) Others report receiving support including assistance in leaving abusive relationships.(Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000) Women who consider their faith community to be welcoming and caring report feelings of hope and healing as they recover from abusive relationships. Without support from their clergy, women who are survivors of intimate partner violence may experience significant spiritual distress and suffering.(Copel, 2008) Religious involvement can thus promote psychological well-being for relationship abuse survivors, including greater quality of life and decreased depression.(Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006)

Little research exists about how faith groups specifically address ARA. The differences in adolescent relationships and those between adults suggest that the existing literature on how religious organizations interact with married women who are survivors of intimate partner violence may not apply well to adolescents. Young people ages 16-24 experience the highest prevalence of intimate partner violence primarily in relationships occurring outside of marriage.(Black et al., 2011) Adolescent relationships may be more public and visible than married adults, due to social networking and related electronic media.(Fredland et al., 2005; Ybarra, Boyd, Korchmaros, & Oppenheim, 2012) Thus, when abuse occurs among adolescents there may be greater opportunity for a peer or adult to intervene as a positive bystander, which includes teachers, coaches, and other community members such as church leaders (Noonan & Charles, 2009). This would be true especially if church leaders recognize their role in addressing ARA among youth in their congregations. On the other hand, faith based organizations may also convey specific religious values to adolescents about abstinence and not dating before marriage, limiting opportunity for conversations about adolescent relationships and sexuality.

A growing body of literature on the salience of spirituality and religion for adolescent development, including their sense of belonging, meaning, and competence,(Lytch, 2004) suggests that faith based organizations have opportunities to connect positively with youth and may represent an important community stakeholder in efforts to prevent ARA and promote healthy relationships. This qualitative study explored the assets and barriers for addressing ARA among a sample of Christian churches from the perspectives of church leaders, parents, and youth.

Methods

Churches in urban Northern California were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy aimed at achieving a diverse representation of Protestant Christian religious denominations and income status to capture heterogeneous perspectives among the greater Protestant population (the largest religious affiliation in the U.S.). The lead author contacted twelve sites by phone to introduce the study and to ask for assistance in reaching parents and youth in their organizations. Three reported they did not have a sufficient number of teens for participation and two declined research at their site. Two large churches originally agreed to participate, but then later declined due to the pastors' busy schedules. Thus, five Protestant faith based organizations participated in the study.

One site (A) is a large church with mostly upper-middle income Caucasian members, which welcomes gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals, supports interfaith efforts, and uses a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum. Two sites (C and D) are medium-large evangelical churches with primarily Caucasian members of upper-middle income level and emphasize abstinence-until-marriage. Their leadership and congregation place strong emphasis of Christianity being the exclusive path to God and that the Bible is literally factual. The remaining two sites are church-affiliated youth social-service programs. One program (B) has a long history of working with female survivors of abuse, with a structured youth program that attracts mostly teens of Chinese descent with varied degrees of church attendance. The programming does not focus on specific beliefs about God. The other church-affiliated social-service program (E) provides care for disadvantaged adolescent and young adult mothers, most of whom have extensive histories of relationship violence. This program provides parenting classes and support. While they sometimes say prayers with the teens, they do not espouse any particular doctrine or descriptions about God.

The study consisted of two focus groups (FGs) with parents of adolescents and young adults (n=11, from program B and church D only as these sites were willing to reach out to parents), four focus groups with female adolescents and young adults (n=27, programs B and E, churches C and D), three focus groups with male adolescents (n= 12, program B and churches C and D), one focus group of three church leaders from church D, five one-on-one interviews with church leaders, and one parent interview, for a total of 59 participants. Church leaders included ordained clergy, paid leadership staff such as youth ministers, and lay volunteer church leaders who organized youth groups. Ordained clergy were interviewed at organizations A, C, and D. Organizations B and E, which were not churches, involved interviews with staff. Adolescent and young adult ages ranged from 13 to 24 years. Organization E had the most young adults with four participants ages 22 to 24. None of the adolescent and young adult participants were married.

Church A was not able to assist with arranging a youth focus group. Youth were divided by gender to provide a more comfortable environment for discussion. A short demographic survey was completed voluntarily at the time of the focus group or interview. Drawing on previous literature on youth spirituality and religious practice, the survey included questions about church attendance, participation in activities like prayer, whether one believes that the

Bible is literally factual, whether the religion of choice is the exclusive path to God, and whether dating outside of the religion is acceptable.

An informational letter, parental consent and youth assent forms, and an advertisement flyer describing the purpose and goals of the study were distributed to the youth pastor who in turn assisted with recruiting. The consent process with parents and assent process with the youth underscored the limits of confidentiality. Youth were instructed not to share any personal information during the focus groups and instead to speak in general terms about their opinions and concerns. All focus groups were moderated by the lead author with a domestic violence prevention advocate helping with note-taking at all youth focus groups. The domestic violence prevention advocate was available to provide skilled intervention with any youth who had specific personal questions. Each participant received cash (\$20 for teens and \$10 for adults) for their participation in the one-hour focus group. The youth program director from each site was interviewed. The interviews focused on the role of the faith based organization in addressing youth relationships.

The discussions with the youth leaders' and parents' groups were free flowing, prompted by the following guiding questions: What do you think are some pressing issues facing teenagers who are in romantic relationships? What does your faith have to say about gender and relationship dynamics? What strengths and challenges do you see in your church's current effort to encourage healthy teen relationships? Given there is no right or wrong answer: what is your own definition for relationship abuse among teens? How do you guide teens in dealing with specific passages in the Bible, such as Ephesian 5 ("Wives, submit to your husbands") that may seem to justify gender inequality?

The focus group discussions with youth were guided by the following questions, focusing on social norms around healthy and unhealthy relationships and the perceived role of their youth program and church in addressing relationship abuse: In general, what behaviors do you see in healthy and unhealthy relationships? Given there is no right or wrong answer: what is your definition for relationship abuse among teens? What are consequences of relationship abuse? What is a good way to approach conflicts in a relationship?

All focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded. Audio files were transcribed and stripped of identifying information. Transcribed data were analyzed using a content analysis approach with Atlas.ti v.5 software.(Atlas.ti Qualitative Data Analysis, 2001; G. Ryan & Weisner, 1998; Weitzman, 1999) Content analysis is a qualitative data analytic strategy that involves generating and applying codes to "chunks" of text, and then reviewing the text by code categories to detect themes. An initial codebook was created after a preliminary read-through of the data, related to key themes of interest such as gender roles in romantic relationships, role of the church community in supporting teen relationships, communication challenges between parents and teens, types of social pressures for teen couples, and roles of peer and adult mentors. Coding of all transcripts was reviewed by a second member of the investigative team, and any discrepancies in coding resolved through a consensus coding approach. Themes were then generated based on frequency and patterns of comments, using the method of thematic analysis described by Ryan and Bernard.(GW Ryan & Bernard, 2000) Quantitative data collected through the survey administered at the end of focus groups

and interviews were analyzed descriptively to help characterize the sample and complement qualitative findings.

Results

Sample characteristics of adolescents

Table 1 demonstrates a broad diversity across the adolescent groups in terms of self-reported race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (based on parental education), with over half reporting being non-White and about half having a parent without a college education. The religious views and practices of the youth ranged from more fundamental views, frequent attendance at worship services and participation in faith-based activities to those who reported significantly less church attendance and disagreed with literal interpretations of the Bible.

Defining adolescent relationship abuse— divergent perspectives

Leaders' definitions—When asked for general thoughts about what constitutes adolescent relationship abuse, leaders who work with different populations of youth conveyed differing perspectives, and the line between what constitutes relationship abuse and simply disrespectful and poor behavior was not often clear. For example, in both organizations C and D, leaders included in their definition manipulative behaviors where one partner uses another to achieve a selfish goal (“If you love me you will...,”) or using a partner to boost their own social status or self-esteem as forms of abuse. They also mentioned possessive and pestering behaviors. In organization E, introduction of or pressure to use substances was highlighted as a form of abuse as well as threats of violence toward a partner as a strategy to gain some sense of control over their own stressors.

Parents' definitions—Parents also defined abuse broadly. Those in organization B included behaviors such as cutting off communication, threats of abandonment, controlling behaviors, and expression of anger that elicits fear in the partner. Parents from organization D included one partner's refusal to be public about a relationship despite request from the other partner as a form of abuse, because, as they explained it, this impresses upon the hidden partner that the hider is embarrassed to be in this relationship. The behavior consequently lowers the self-esteem of the hidden partner. Teens in organization E, who had experienced the most violent and significant forms of abuse in the study, did not have involved parents, thus there were no parent data available from this group to provide an additional perspective.

Teens' definitions—Teens in the study, like the parents, also defined relationship abuse in varied ways. In organization B, which had younger teens with limited experience, relationship abuse definitions included verbal and emotional abuse such as “put downs or curses to the opposite gender or the partner,” “anything that lowers the other [person's] self-esteem,” and dominating or controlling behaviors. They also noted cutting off communication, “neglect,” “ignoring somebody,” and excluding the partner from social circles as poor behaviors that could be considered abusive. Teens in organization D had a debate among themselves regarding whether abuse begins with intention to harm (“it's

actually a thought in your head that you want to hurt them”), with selfishness (“you put your needs in front first”), or with apathy (“you know you should be caring, but you’re not”). Teens in organization E, in contrast, told stories of surviving horrific incidents of violence, including attempted strangulations, threats by firearms, and sustaining physical injuries.

Strengths of faith based organizations in addressing healthy and unhealthy teen dating relationships

Leaders’ perspectives—According to each of the leaders interviewed, youth groups provide teens with leaders and mentors who 1) are an alternative and confidential source of support apart from parents and schools, 2) teach relationship values and interpret biblical teachings to be relevant for youth today, and 3) convey supportive messages to teens grounded in their faith in being loved by God and community and, therefore, teens should not need to seek love in unhealthy relationships.

Leaders in organizations B, C and D said they encourage communication between teens and parents, and are sometimes physically present to facilitate such communication. Organization E works with teens that don’t have strong parental figures, and the staff take on some parent-like roles, such as setting limits and providing structure. Leaders also described serving as mentors who respect teens’ confidentiality (with exceptions in cases of mandated reporting), with the hope that teens feel comfortable asking for help regarding problems in dating relationships from a non-parental, non-school-affiliated adult. Leaders offer an alternative source of support and provide an environment of social acceptance which can be scarce for adolescents. One leader summarized:

I think one of the neat things that we can do at [Organization B] is that we’re not their parents. Kids will have whatever kind of relationship with their parents; be it healthy, be it not healthy. Some kids want to not communicate with their parents at all. But I think for the young adult and adult mentors that are here, we might have an easier time... to ask them “What are the challenges you face socially?” I think part of the challenge is creating a culture here where they feel they are accepted, they’re fine the way they are. (B, leader)

Church leaders also noted they consider values education to be one of the most important missions of youth group leadership. Included in those values are how to treat each other with respect in the community and applying the same values with a romantic partner.

Something that might relate to dating, that kind of comes out of general biblical teaching is the command to love other people and to serve other people. There’s the idea of: “are you serving the person you’re dating? Are you respecting them? Are you building them up? Or is it about what they can do for you?” (C, leader)

Leaders from each of the sites commented that they advocate for gender equality, but described doing so in divergent ways. Leaders from organization E, for example, noted encouraging young women to learn skills to be independent in life and to be effective parents to their infants and toddlers as an example of their efforts to achieve gender equality. Leaders from sites B and D described providing positive role models among both adults and older teens in their organizations who are women. In contrast, leaders from site C said they

teach that a healthy relationship has a core of mutual service and mutual submission, and both partners should emulate the selfless, sacrificial love of God in their relationship with each other. When asked specifically to comment on a passage in Ephesians 5 (a book by St. Paul in the New Testament of the Bible), which begins with “Wives, submit to your husband,” an evangelical youth leader from C explained:

That passage is actually about mutual respect. Mutual service and sacrifice. There is a call for both husband and wife in their own way to lay down their lives for each other.... This is what Jesus did, so this is what you do for each other. It's a very powerful image of loving the other person selflessly... It's not about domination so that was the kind of message that we communicate [to congregants] repeatedly when those conversations come up... [We are] helping [teens] understand historical context... (C, leader)

This pastor interpreted the Bible passage for youth as having implications for both men and women's mutual respect in a relationship. Importantly, all organization leaders in this study highlighted spontaneously that they have female leadership who serve as models for young women and that they emphasize to youth that women are independent from and not inferior to men.

Leaders also endorsed the empowerment of women as an important goal in the prevention of relationship abuse. While organization E focuses significantly more on empowerment through skills building, self-sufficiency, and independence due to the relative lack of parental guidance in this vulnerable population, all the leaders interviewed from these organizations highlighted their goal to build young women's self-esteem and their ability to rely on alternative sources of support apart from dating partners.

Parents' perspectives—According to parents in each of the group discussions, youth groups support teens and help prevent relationship abuse by 1) allowing them to practice serving people in the community, 2) emphasizing friendships among members of the opposite sex, and 3) developing emotional independence apart from a romantic partner. Many parents said that the service-oriented mindset may help teens understand what it means to engage with other people selflessly and to be in mutual service of each other in a dating relationship.

When these kids think about Halloween, they're not thinking about toilet-papering neighborhoods. There are thinking two weeks before, we flyer, we collect for Harvest Homes. It's part of their tradition. They're knocking on doors and raising money for Harvest Home--food for our social service department... [The youth group] teaches you how to have fun with very little money and be in the community, be dating, be supported. (B, parent)

In many youth groups, non-romantic friendships and collaboration among young people of the opposite sex are emphasized. Some parents in the study remarked that such a culture helps teens see members of the opposite sex as colleagues and friends who deserve to be treated with respect. Opposite-sex friendship-building also helps teens in relationships see that it's possible for opposite-sex people to just be friends, so that they feel more trust and less jealousy when their partner is speaking to another member of the opposite-sex.

While some parents definitely favored abstinence, none of the parents interviewed prohibited dating and did not discuss any specific rules they have for their children around dating.

Parent 1: [The teens] have four good role models in the last five years. Active couples over the years that are involved with the program...They see that non-possessiveness, that inclusiveness.

Parent 2: in the respect for their partner.

Parent 3: not just that, but they see the trust in them because they work with opposite-sex partners [as youth group co-leaders]. They see the interaction, that it's okay, that there's trust there. (B, parents)

Parents also echoed the leaders' message that "God loves you," with the intention of teaching girls they don't have to have a boyfriend to have worth or be loved.

Parent 1: I think number one is the simple premise: God loves you. You're loved by somebody. [A romantic partner] tells you: they love you. That's the most important thing to you. That ends up being the biggest disappointment to you too. But I do believe that God loves each and every child. That's a very important distinction. So the kids don't think that they need to put all their [emotional] eggs in one basket [in the romantic partner]. I think it's very easy to do as adolescents. They put all their eggs in one basket: this is the one person who loves me, who understands me. And then that person says I don't like you anymore. You're crushed.

Parent 2: What's nice about that too, is that someone tells you you're nothing. You say: no. God loves me. (B, parents)

Parents shared that they hoped such messages about worth and being loved would help teen girls feel good about being single until they find a boyfriend who treats them well.

Teens' perspectives—Teens across different groups noted that youth groups help prevent adolescent relationship abuse by 1) giving them a venue to socialize with their romantic partner in a group setting, 2) addressing problems in their lives such that the romantic partner is not seen as the solution to their personal problems, and 3) allowing them to share strategies for partner conflict resolution. They echoed comments from the adult groups -- that healthy relationships have a basis in friendship and mutual understanding, and that socializing with people other than the romantic partner is important to a healthy romantic relationship.

If you [and your partner] are together all the time, sometimes it can be unhealthy. Sometimes it gets to a point where you're completely relying on that person for your emotions and your stability. (D, male teen)

Some teens reported learning in youth group (groups B and D) that when addressing a problem or a "void" in life, such as not having available parents, not doing well at school, or not feeling attractive, one should "rely on God" and look for help from family and community instead of jumping into a romantic relationship and looking for a solution in a romantic partner.

We have been taught in church that people use not just sex, but relationships themselves, to fill voids that are created by other things-- absent father, or not feeling they're doing well enough in school-- as a distraction. That's something that has come up a lot in different groups I have attended. (D female teen)

Other teens reported learning from youth groups that a healthy relationship is not conflict-free, but involves willingness to communicate about problems and being unselfish. Among their peers, they talk about ways of addressing relationship problems. Sometimes they receive input from their leaders.

Interviewer: so suppose you want to have a discussion about [not spending enough time together with your girlfriend]. How would you approach it?

Teen: Bad way to approach it is to see yourself being in the right and she in the wrong... A good way to approach her would be like going to her and saying: "oh, I see that you hang out with her friends a lot." First maybe you talk about "hope your friends are good, hope you guys are doing well. How are your friends?" Kind of draw the conversation slowly back to you and her. You want to look at them first and see how they're doing. Obviously, you yourself are hurt, but in a relationship you need to look out for them first. (D male teen)

In group E, teens also reported learning about relationship conflict and abuse from didactic sessions, where guest speakers were invited to talk to them about the topic.

Occasionally, youth reported that teen couples may ask for mediation and the assistance of youth group leaders when trying to resolve a problem within a dating relationship.

In one relationship, I had a youth group leader who was moderator of two discussions I had with my significant other. They were physically there. Other than that, in my other relationships, I independently and personally go seek help from a mentor. I always encourage the person I'm in a relationship with to have someone to keep them accountable in all their ways. (C female teen)

Challenges for faith based organizations addressing adolescent relationship abuse prevention Leaders' perspectives

One challenge recognized by some church leaders was that congregants of all ages often feel pressured to project an image of near-perfection in morality, conduct, and judgment, perhaps even more so than in other organizations where religion and morality are not the explicit mission that unites the group. As a result, teens whose relationships are unhealthy may feel a sense of failure and shame in talking about the issue or be afraid to ask for help.

I would say a challenge for faith-based organizations is that because [abuse] kind of fits under the taboo category it's often hard for people to be honest with things like [relationship abuse] is happening. Even though you hope that the church is a place for the kids to go for help and support, encouragement, resources, often the hurdle to share those things is really big at a faith organization because of the religious overtones and stigma that makes it even harder to share. It's always hard to for somebody and the religious judgment, for lack of better word, can make it even harder. (C, leader)

Another challenge leaders recognized is the lack of collaboration with other community organizations such as schools, other churches, or youth community programs. One leader from site A noted that churches, like any structured organization, can be self-righteous, resistant to change, and unwilling to be integrated into the larger social world of their congregants. However, other leaders (from group C) noted that secular influences from school and peers are major challenges in abuse prevention and contribute to unhealthy relationships; they strongly advocated for abstinence as a response. Thus, some leaders wished to invite dialogue with the larger community around relationship abuse prevention, while other leaders raised concerns about bringing in outside perspectives that would not align with their congregation's perspectives on youth relationships.

Parents' perspectives—A number of parents said they worry that education about relationship abuse is inadequate, and that potential abusers in teen relationships don't have enough understanding of their own behavior. When the topic of relationship abuse comes up, there is more focus on preventing girls from becoming victims but not enough focus on boys in preventing them from being either victims or perpetrators.

I don't think the kids know that they're inflicting emotional abuse. The kids here have been taught about abuse. But I don't think they understand if they're being abusive. (*C, parent*)

In another group, parents talked about how the girls' youth group is encouraging girls "to be a person in their own right rather than having to have a [boyfriend]," "to be confident in who they are... they don't need to have a boyfriend or to be connected [romantically] to someone," and "they are worthy...without [a romantic partner]." However, they were critical of what they perceive to be a double standard, that the teen boys' youth group is "more focused on just the guys hanging out. Eating and playing poker, football," noting it is problematic that boys do not get enough teaching about respecting women and girls. (*D, parents*)

Parents from group C also described worrying about how television, movies, or social media can lead to unhealthy dating behaviors. Countering pervasive secular messages from outside the church was noted as a major challenge in getting teens to adhere to parents' and church leaders' messages.

I reference to the Twilight movie. Bella latches on to vampire boy. Unhealthy. Doesn't matter what this guy has to say or do. There is no thought. It's all heart. It's all unhealthy latching on and clinging to this person. I think if abuse is when someone realizes they have power over somebody... I think abuse is when you know somebody is weak and you just feed off of it. I have seen it with church kids. There are a couple of kids that know that they're very persuasive. They have swag. They can get what they want. (Parent, group C)

Teens' perspectives—Teens in groups B, C, and D echoed their youth leaders' comments about fear of judgment if they were to share any perceived problem in their dating relationships. Others gave examples of seeing other individuals reprimanded by clergy that resulted in alienating the teen.

I think the youth group should be more and more thoughtful towards certain situations. An experience, I heard someone, they messed up in relationship. They had sex before they were married. The pastor of the church lashed out at them. That's not the way it should be. They should be more kind... A friend told me the story. It was him personally, he went through that. He was really mad at that church. It didn't help him at all. It was very hurtful. (C male teen)

In addition, even though the leaders said that confidentiality is maintained except in cases of mandated reporting, teens noted that confidentiality may not be maintained to the degree they are comfortable with.

Interviewer: How would you feel if the church creates a program that teaches teens... not just you but all your peers about relationship abuse and healthy relationship? Would that be a good idea?

Teen: Pretty much I don't think we would like our personal things to go out to our church community. It would be awkward. Even if it is confidential it's not as private as you would like it to be. (B female teen)

Discussion

This exploratory study highlights the strengths and challenges within a sample of Protestant Christian churches and church-affiliated organizations for addressing adolescent relationship abuse. The definitions given for relationship abuse were quite different across participants, leading to rich discussions within focus groups about how to identify abuse and when to intervene versus allowing teens to work things out themselves. All the church leaders who participated said they teach values about relationships in general, help teens translate those values into their romantic relationships, and help teens interpret Biblical teachings in ways that emphasize respect and equality in relationships – that is, that men do not dominate over women and women are not dependent on men. The parents said they encourage their children to serve the community through their youth groups, through which they learn to be friends with peers of the opposite sex and emulate examples of mutual respect. The teens generally agreed that the church youth groups allowed them have a broader social experience and gain support in developing conflict resolution skills. However, the youth leaders in this study acknowledged being challenged by the perception that people who have problems may be judged by the church community, which limits the conversations that emerge within the youth groups. Some also noted the need to more effectively engage and educate young men. The teens' discussions, while acknowledging the role that church youth groups can play in promoting healthy relationships, highlighted concerns about privacy and confidentiality as well as educational gaps not yet addressed by the church groups.

Among these churches located in the generally culturally diverse and socially liberal San Francisco Bay Area, all the church leaders, ordained clergy, and parents who participated in this study emphasized the importance of equipping teens with support to avoid or exit abusive relationships rather than pretending these relationships are not happening or encouraging young women to be subservient to their male partners. Even among congregations in the study where most study participants reported regarding the Bible as

literally factual on the demographic surveys, the vast majority of focus group participants discussed that passages in the Bible regarding men and women's distinctive traditional gender roles should be interpreted in ways that support gender equality, specifically mutual submission by both genders. These findings contrast with Copel's study on clergy attitudes towards domestic violence where married women found that clergy upheld a patriarchal structure and were dismissive towards women suffering from intimate partner violence. (Copel, 2008) Since addressing traditional gender roles is important to preventing violence against women and girls, such advocacy for mutual respect and equality within relationships espoused by congregants in these faith based organizations suggests an untapped opportunity to integrate these organizations into adolescent relationship abuse prevention efforts. (Noonan & Charles, 2009)

Findings may also provide additional insights for primary prevention of adolescent relationship abuse at the community level. Leaders, youth and their parents all noted that the benefits of church youth groups in teen relationship prevention derive from the youth groups' social function. Notably, all emphasized the social action, giving, and mutual respect fostered in youth groups as being important for relationship abuse prevention. Religious beliefs, doctrine, and reading of holy texts play a role to support these social functions, but were not highlighted in any of the focus groups or interviews as the core reason that youth groups help support teen romantic relationships and prevent relationship abuse. That is, throughout most of the discussions regarding relationship abuse, the role of Biblical texts and religious doctrine was underplayed by participants. Secular youth organizations can and likely do play many of the roles played by church youth groups identified by participants in this study. Future studies could include closer examination of similarities and differences across religious and non-religiously affiliated youth organizations regarding how messages about healthy and unhealthy relationships are conveyed by youth leaders and received by youth themselves.

The findings from this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. Focus groups may have attracted teens and parents who were more likely to report feeling well-supported and more committed to church, and may have missed those who come to church less often. Additionally, perspectives of those who may have had uncomfortable or even hurtful experiences with clergy or their religious organization are less likely to be represented here. Also, groups were recruited from one geographic area, and the gender equality and women's empowerment advocated by the church leaders may not be representative of congregations in other parts of the country. The scope of this study was also limited to how youth groups conceptualize adolescent relationship abuse. Other interesting questions related to relationships and religious doctrine such as how individual teens at particular developmental stages read scripture, and how their concrete thinking may affect literal interpretation of certain Biblical passages describing violence against women, were beyond of the scope of this study. Finally, organizations that trust a researcher enough to allow focus groups and interviews to take place may be more open to such discussions in comparison to those who declined the initial requests to be a study site even though they had a substantial number of youth in their congregation.

Conclusions

This study offers a glimpse into the strengths and challenges that faith-based organizations such as Protestant Christian churches may face in addressing adolescent relationship abuse. All of the organization leaders, youth and parents were in agreement that the church and associated youth programs are important sources of support and information for youth, including relationship abuse prevention and promotion of healthy relationships. Community-based prevention and intervention efforts to address ARA could benefit from closer partnerships with faith-based organizations, especially with inclusion of youth group leaders in prevention education.

Biography

Erica Li She grew up with parents who really believed in girls and women's equality. In medical school she was active in Medical Students for Choice and The Interfaith student interest group, and she continues advocacy related to reducing child and adolescent exposure to violence.

Erik Fernandez y Garcia He is a general pediatrician who has completed fellowships in multicultural health and health care, primary care outcomes research, and clinical and translational science. He is currently optimizing a pediatric-based maternal depression screening and referral program under the auspices of a National Institute of Mental Health funded career award (1K23MH101157). He conducts research in intergenerational mental health services and in pediatric health care disparities.

Lori Freedman She conducts research on the ways in which reproductive health care is shaped by our social structure and medical culture.

Elizabeth Miller Trained in medical anthropology, Internal Medicine, and Pediatrics, she conducts research on prevention and intervention of gender-based violence in U.S. and international settings.

References

- Ackard D, Neumark-Sztainer D, Hannan P. Dating violence among a nationally representative sample of adolescent girls and boys: associations with behavioral and mental health. *J Gend Specif Med.* 2003; 6(3):39–48. [PubMed: 14513575]
- Atlas.ti Qualitative Data Analysis. Atlas.ti Qualitative Data Analysis (Version 5.0). 2001. Retrieved from <http://www.atlasti.com/index.html>
- Beaman-Hall L, Nason-Clark N. Partners or Protagonists? The Transition House Movement and Conservative Churches. *Affilia.* 1997; 12(2):176–186.
- Black, M.; Basile, K.; Breiding, M.; Smith, S.; Walters, M.; Merrick, M. The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Atlanta, GA: 2011.
- Chiodo D, Crooks C, Wolfe D, McIsaac C, Hughes R, Jaffe P. Longitudinal Prediction and Concurrent Functioning of Adolescent Girls Demonstrating Various Profiles of Dating Violence and Victimization. *Prev Sci.* 2011; 13(4):350–359. [PubMed: 21769657]
- Copel L. The lived experience of women in abusive relationships who sought spiritual guidance. *Issues Ment Health Nurs.* 2008; 29(2):115–130. [PubMed: 18293220]

- Davis, A. Interpersonal and Physical Dating Violence among Teens: The National Council on Crime and Delinquency Focus. 2008. Retrieved from http://www.nccdglobal.org/sites/default/files/publication_pdf/focus-dating-violence.pdf
- Eaton, D.; Kann, L.; Kinchen, S.; Shanklin, S.; Ross, J.; Hawkins, J. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. Vol. 59. Center for Disease Control and Prevention; 2009. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance - United States, 2009..
- Fredland N, Ricardo I, Campbell J, Sharps P, Kub J, Yonas M. The meaning of dating violence in the lives of middle school adolescents: A report of a focus group study. *Journal of School Violence*. 2005; 4(2):95–114.
- Giesbrecht N, Sevcik I. The process of recovery and rebuilding among abused women in the conservative evangelical subculture. *Journal of Family Violence*. 2000; 15(3):229–248.
- Gillum T, Sullivan C, Bybee D. The importance of spirituality in the lives of domestic violence survivors. *Violence Against Women*. 2006; 12(3):240–250. [PubMed: 16456150]
- Horton, A.; Wilkins, M.; Wright, W. Women who ended abuse: What religious leaders and religion did for these victims.. In: Horton, AL.; Williamson, JA., editors. *Abuse and religion: When praying isn't enough*. Lexington, Mass: 1988. p. 235-246.
- Howard D, Wang M. Risk profiles of adolescent girls who were victims of dating violence. *Adolescence*. 2003; 38(149):1–14. [PubMed: 12803450]
- Lytch, C. *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*. Louisville, KY: 2004. p. 9
- Noonan R, Charles D. Developing teen dating violence prevention strategies: formative research with middle school youth. *Violence Against Women*. 2009; 15(9):1087–1105. [PubMed: 19675364]
- Potter H. Battered black women's use of religious services and spirituality for assistance in leaving abusive relationships. *Violence Against Women*. 2007; 13(3):262–284. [PubMed: 17322271]
- Ryan, G.; Weisner, T. A content analysis of words in brief descriptions: How do fathers and mothers describe their children? Using Methods in the Field.. In: de Munck, VC.; Sobó, ME., editors. *A Practical Introduction and Casebook*. Altamira Press; Walnut Creek: 1998. p. 57-68.
- Ryan, G.; Bernard, H. Data management and analysis methods.. In: Denzin, NK.; Lincoln YS, YS., editors. *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications; Thousand Oaks: 2000. p. 769-802.
- Silverman J, Raj A, Mucci L, Hathaway J. Dating violence against adolescent girls and associated substance use, unhealthy weight control, sexual risk behavior, pregnancy, and suicidality. *JAMA*. 2001; 286(5):572–579. [PubMed: 11476659]
- Weitzman E. Analyzing qualitative data with computer software. *Health Serv Res*. 1999; 34(5):1241–1263. [PubMed: 10591282]
- West B, Swahn M, McCarty F. Children at Risk for Suicide Attempt and Attempt-related Injuries: Findings from the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey. *West J Emerg Med*. 2010; 11(3):257–263. [PubMed: 20882146]
- Ybarra M, Boyd D, Korchmaros J, Oppenheim J. Defining and measuring cyberbullying within the larger context of bullying victimization. *J Adolesc Health*. 2012; 51(1):53–58. [PubMed: 22727077]

Table 1

Adolescent sample characteristics *

	Evangelical church 1 (D) N = 11 5 females, 6 males	Evangelical church 2 (C) N = 6 2 females, 4 males **	Social work program affiliated with a mainline congregation (B) N = 11 7 females , 4 males	Social work program affiliated with community churches (E) 13 adolescent mothers
Self-reported race/ethnicity	10/11 Caucasian 1/11 Spanish Filipino	2/3 Caucasian 1/3 half Asian, half Caucasian	11/11 Asian	9/13 Hispanic 1/13 African American 2/13 "mixed" 1/13 Hispanic-African American
Have you had a romantic relationship?	5/11 yes	2/3 yes	1/11 yes	11/13 yes
I will only date other Christians and will not date non-Christians.	5/11 strongly agree/agree 4/11 agree	1/3 agree	1/11 agree 6/11 strongly disagree	3/13 strongly agree/agree 10/13 disagree/strongly disagree
My mother has a college education	8/11 yes	3/3 yes	9/11 yes	2/13 yes
My father has a college education	7/11 yes	3/3 yes	10/13 yes	0/13 yes
Christianity is exclusive path to God.	8/11 strongly agree/agree	3/3 strongly agree/agree	8/11 strongly agree/agree	2/13 strongly agree
The Bible should be taken literally and events in the Bible are factual.	9/11 strongly agree/agree	2/3 strongly agree	5/11 strongly agree/agree	5/13 strongly agree/agree
My parents believe that the Bible should be taken literally	9/11 strongly agree/agree	2/3 strongly agree	4/11 strongly agree/agree	5/13 strongly agree / agree
Attend church worship services 3-4 times a month	10/11 attend	2/3 attend	8/11 attend	5/13 attend
Hours/week in faith activities outside of Sunday worship	Average 8.4 hours/teen	Average 4 hrs/teen	Between 0 to 4 hours	Between 0 to 4 hours

* could not recruit teen focus group from church A (did interview parents and leaders)

** only 3 of 6 participants completed survey