

CONFRONTING MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

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An undercurrent of violence against women and girls (VAWG) exists in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Church professes commitment to support victims of sexual abuse and its declared policy of zero tolerance, which mirrors the position of numerous religious organizations. These sentiments, while suitable for formal declarations, websites, and public addresses, stand in contrast to the Church's actions, which are not aligned with its professed Christian tenets.¹ The church in actuality fails to encourage members to report abuse to legal

1. "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to child abusers. When abuse is suspected, the Church directs its members to first contact the legal authorities and then their local bishop for counseling and support. The Church cooperates fully with law enforcement in investigating incidents of child abuse and bringing perpetrators to justice." "Child Abuse," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://news-uk.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/child-abuse>. "Abuse is a matter the Church takes very seriously. When we learn of abuse, our first priority is to help the victim and stop the abuse. We train local Church leaders and provide resources to stop and prevent abuse and to keep individuals safe. We provide resources to help members know they are safe to come forward and get help if abuse has occurred." "How the Church Approaches Abuse," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/how-mormons-approach-abuse>:

authorities and does not train its leaders in appropriate response protocols.² This article urges the Church to address the existing dissonance and align its actions with the policies it has formally established and its Christian doctrines and practices.³ As bell hooks poignantly articulates, the impact of patriarchy—manifested as male domination over women and children—constitutes a considerable obstacle to the experience of love.”⁴ Patriarchy does not align with Christ’s construct of divine love.

Violence against women and girls stands as a pervasive violation of human rights on a global scale, unfolding relentlessly each day in myriad manifestations. Defined by the United Nations, VAWG is “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering of women, including threats of such act, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”⁵ The repercussions of such brutality are profound, casting shadows of short-term and enduring physical, financial, and emotional tolls upon women and girls. The enormity of its impact, in the lives of individuals, family units, and communities, defies quantification. In secular and religious contexts, women or girls seeking protection from such harms find themselves caught in a patriarchal vortex of androcentric laws and policies and male leaders.⁶

2. Michael Rezendes and Jason Dearen, “Court Cites Clergy-Penitent Privilege in Dismissing Child Sex Abuse Lawsuit Against Mormon Church,” *AP News*, Nov. 8, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mormon-sex-abuse-de446ad8212b6ca50ecbaaf222c35e7e>.

3. Ronaldo V. Miller, “Lawsuit Information Center,” Miller and Zois, LLC, accessed Aug. 11, 2024, <https://www.lawsuit-information-center.com/sex-abuse-lawsuits-against-lds-church.html>.

4. bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (William Morrow, 2000), xxiv.

5. UN General Assembly, Declaration of the Elimination of Violence against Women, A/RES/48/104, UN General Assembly, Dec. 20, 1993.

6. Diane Rosenfeld, *The Bonobo Sisterhood: Revolution Through Female Alliance* (Harper Collins, 2022), 84–108.

I employ the term “vortex” to describe the victim’s experience ensnared in a system that not only gaslights them but also subjects them to a violent, chaotic, and perilous environment. Within this tumultuous swirl, individuals find themselves disoriented and powerless, struggling to navigate a reality fraught with fear and unpredictability, where their capacity to influence their circumstances is profoundly limited. Victims who dare to speak the reality of their situation will be sucked into the vortex, equivalent to an act of suicide, or a cutting off of social and familial ties.⁷ Judith Herman, a leader in child sex abuse, asserts that the impact of the violence extends beyond the actions of perpetrators to bystanders and institutional enablers who perpetuate a social ecology of violence that is tolerated or rendered invisible.⁸

This article delineates three major areas for reform. First, it advocates for legal changes in clergy-penitent laws.⁹ Second, it advocates for women’s ministry, that female leaders minister to women and girls who experience VAWG, not male ecclesiastical leaders. Empowering women and girls through female-to-female alliances overcomes patriarchal vortexes and redresses power differentials, thereby facilitating

7. Jorunn E. Halvorsen, Ellen Tvedt Solberg, Signe Hjelen Stige, “‘To Say It Out Loud Is to Kill Your Own Childhood.’—An Exploration of the First Person Perspective of Barriers to Disclosing Child Sexual Abuse,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 113 (2020): 104999, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104999>.

8. Judith Herman, *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice* (Basic Books, 2023), 3.

9. “Rated by survivors the most ‘unhelpful and unsupportive in their responses to sexual assault survivors’ disclosures include police/legal personnel, physicians, and clergy.” Sarah E. Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault: Society’s Response to Survivors*, 2nd ed. (American Psychological Association, 2023), 87–88.

access to essential support mechanisms.¹⁰ Third, it underscores the imperative for comprehensive education and training initiatives on ministerial and community levels. Specialized training is required for ministers to effectively provide counseling to both survivors and perpetrators.¹¹ Training is also essential to identifying victim-perpetrator dynamics and behaviors.¹² Community-level educational initiatives must encompass discussions on credibility issues and consent as a fundamental human right in intimate relationships. These measures are crucial in the efforts to prevent VAWG.

Unveiling My Journey: A Personal Tale

My journey to initiate structural and policy changes within the Church commenced as a response to having been caught in the system. My life began in toxic circumstances, subjected to child sex abuse by both my father (former bishop, stake presidency counselor, high counselor, and current active member of the church) and my grandfather at a very young age. Struggling to stay afloat in the face of the relentless abuse,

10. "In summary, studies of informal support providers show that they are often recipients of sexual assault disclosures (at least in college samples which are most often studied) and are helpful to survivors of sexual assault, especially if they are female and friends as opposed to male and significant others, respectively. This is perhaps due to the greater identification of women with victims of sexual assault, which may lead them to be more supportive, whereas men may be more likely to respond negatively, perhaps because of their greater rape myth acceptance. Also, women say they know more about how to respond to victim disclosures than do men, which may make them better helpers." Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 88. See also Rosenfeld, *Bonobo Sisterhood*, 145–71.

11. Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 110.

12. Samantha J. Dodson, Rachael D. Goodwin, Jesse Graham, and Kristina A. Diekmann, "Moral Foundations, Himpathy, and Punishment Following Organizational Sexual Misconduct Allegations," *Organization Science* 34, no. 5 (2023): 1938–64, <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2022.1652>.

and enduring deep physical and emotional wounds, I observed daily others gliding by seemingly untouched by my turmoil.

After college and a mission, a friend of my father, nine years older than myself, was introduced and we married. We had three children, and when my parents moved a good distance away and I began to feel safe, the unconscious buried rubble surfaced. Child sex abuse amnesia, a common symptom, eventually fades away, only to be relived again until the toxic waste is integrated. As symptoms surfaced, and love and support were needed, my husband's behaviors turned abusive, and a darker side revealed itself. The cycle of abuse continued. Amid the ensuing chaos, one of the children jumped ship, leading to the ultimate fracture of our family. I faced the daunting task of keeping my other two children afloat all the while my then-husband continued to abuse.

In these circumstances, I was understandably desperate. I was joined in my fight to find a way out over a decade ago by my newly ordained stake president, David F. Holland. Many words of encouragement and blessings were offered, serving as beacons of hope amid the turmoil in my dire circumstances. Regrettably, President Holland's hands were tied at times, bound by protocol that constrained his ability to intervene due to the system and policies in the Church. Amid the bustling activities and responsibilities that demand attention for those living in comfort, Church leaders often remain mere bystanders. The institution becomes an enabler.

Despite Holland's urgent pleas for my then-husband to cease his violence, he was indifferent to his entreaties. The realization sank in that no external intervention would come to my rescue. Overwhelmed by the physical and emotional toll of the ordeal, I wanted to just let go. My will to persevere waned in the wake of nursing deep wounds, trying to care for my children, and the continued abuse. Both body and spirit were shattered. The weight of the suffering was unbearable, overshadowed by a sense of hopelessness and helplessness.

When I initially made my disclosure to my priesthood leaders, I was met with disbelief because my abusers were respected men in the Church community. I was stigmatized and labeled mentally ill by my community and by both of my perpetrators, who painted a very different picture by manipulating and controlling the narrative. According to Sarah Ullman, victims experience harmful reactions from both social networks and formal support sources in patriarchal societies.¹³ Due to all of this, I found it imperative to distance myself from my ward community to safeguard both my mental well-being and my spiritual convictions. It was only when another courageous victim disclosed that my experiences were acknowledged with the gravity they deserved. Holland took charge and assumed a proactive stance. He engaged a seasoned professional to conduct training for leaders, enlightening on the task of ministering to both victims and perpetrators and addressing the lacunae present in the Church instructional materials.

In order to be taken seriously, I had to achieve incredible levels of credibility. It was not until my acceptance to Harvard and studying VAWG in a religious context; my involvement with the United Nations; and my audience with Pope Francis for the inaugural and subsequent events for the World Day for the Prevention of and Healing from Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Violence that my assertions were finally given serious consideration within my community. The fact that these credentials had made me more powerful, thus credible, speaks directly to the nature of the social dynamics and credibility issues. These prominent external affirmations served to dispel the unfounded notions of my supposed false allegations and “mental craziness,” instead illuminating the authenticity of my testimony regarding the harrowing reality of what had been done to me. Female voices are simply not believed when it comes to VAWG.¹⁴ Any woman or girl who comes

13. Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 10–11.

14. Deborah Tuerkheimer, *Credible: Why We Doubt Accusers and Protect Abusers* (Harper Collins, 2021); Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 102–103.

forward about VAWG puts their own life and reputation at risk, not the perpetrators.

Throughout these advocacy endeavors and openness about my past, I have had many conversations with survivors of abuse and have come to more fully understand that the struggle for validation, and the desire to have their injuries ministered to, is a shared experience among women and girls who have endured similar trauma in our Church communities. Yet trauma is not only inflicted by the actual perpetrators, but also by ecclesiastical leaders, institutional enablers, and their respective Church communities, due to no educational training on VAWG.¹⁵ Amos Guiora, an Israeli American professor of law specializing in institutional complicity, enabling culture, and sexual assault, refers to this phenomenon as the “armies of enablers.”¹⁶ Jeffrey C. Alexander, a sociology scholar at Yale University, asserts that traumas are socially constructed through interactions, cultural norms, and beliefs.¹⁷ This points to the fact that trauma extends beyond the individual experience and is deeply intertwined with the broader social environment.

My experience reflected broader truths. Institutional religious organizations function in dual roles in relation to VAWG. They possess the capacity to serve as both a shield against and a conduit for

15. Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 4; UN Women, “When It Comes to Consent, There Are No Blurred Lines,” United Nations, Nov. 18, 2019, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/11/feature-consent-no-blurred-lines>; United Nations Population Fund, “Five Things You Need to Know About Consent,” United Nations, Sept. 1, 2023, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/five-things-you-need-know-about-consent>; Amos N. Guiora, “Sexual Assault Enablers, Institutional Complicity, and the Crime of Omission,” Utah Law Faculty Scholarship, Sept. 2021, 302, <https://dc.law.utah.edu/scholarship/302>.

16. Amos N. Guiora, *Armies of Enablers: Survivor Stories of Complicity and Betrayal in Sexual Assaults* (ABA Publishing, 2020), 6–17.

17. Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Polity, 2012), 13.

the perpetuation of harm.¹⁸ Religious convictions have the potential to foster psychological resilience and facilitate healing and have the capacity to promote programs and structures that combat VAWG. Conversely, patriarchal structures with power imbalances, sexism, androcentric ideologies, and theoretical constructs within religious institutions perpetuate VAWG.¹⁹ While the beneficial aspects of religious affiliations are widely recognized, I aim to illuminate the less favorable realities inherent in the Church's centralized, patriarchal, and hierarchical organizational structure and policies. In this sphere, the imperative emerges regarding the role the Church, its leaders, and its community have in addressing VAWG.

18. Mandy Truong and Nafiseh Ghafournia, *Understanding Spiritual and Religious Abuse in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence*, March 2024 policy paper (Australian Institute of Family Studies), 4–6, <https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/CFCA-Spiritual-Abuse-Paper-Jun24.pdf>; Nancy Nason-Clark, Barbara Fisher-Townsend, Catherine Holtmann, and Stephen McMullin, *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence: Understanding the Challenges and Proposing Solutions* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 2; Florin Dolcos, Kelly Hohl, Yifan Hu, and Sanda Dolcos, “Religiosity and Resilience: Cognitive Reappraisal and Coping Self-Efficacy Mediate the Link between Religious Coping and Well-Being,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 60, no. 4 (2021): 2892–2905, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01160-y>; “The Role of Faith/Spirituality in Healing from Abuse,” VAWNET: An Online Resource Library on Gender-Based Violence, accessed July 23, 2024, <https://vawnet.org/sc/how-faithreligion-can-best-meet-needs-abuse-survivors-those-who-cause-harm/role>; Sandy Bauer and Caroline Campbell, “Christian Faith and Resilience: Implications for Social Work Practice,” *Social Work and Christianity* 48, no. 1 (2021): 28–51.

19. Truong and Ghafournia, *Understanding Spiritual and Religious Abuse*, 4–6; Nason-Clark et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence*, 14; Janet Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment* (Prometheus, 2011), 24, 34–35, 59; Sandra Pertek, Karen Block, Lisa Goodson, Pakinam Hassan, Jeanine Hourani, and Jenny Phillimore, “Gender-Based Violence, Religion and Forced Displacement: Protective and Risk Factors,” *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* 5 (2023): 1058822, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2023.1058822>.

Eventually, I made it out with my children. Now, here I am, advocating as a survivor, standing in solidarity with other survivors of domestic and child sex abuse, and with male allies, to initiate much-needed change.²⁰ My belief is that Christ supports women and girls. He has supported me, and He wants change.

Faith Under Fire: Confronting VAWG in Religious Communities

These problems are not unique to Latter-day Saints but reflect a global issue. According to the United Nations, sexual and gender violence is a global problem and a “preventable pandemic.”²¹ In a study encompassing 161 countries, UN Women found that “45% of women reported that they or a woman they know has experienced VAWG. Seven in ten women said that they think that verbal and physical abuse by partners has become more common. And six in ten felt that sexual harassment in public spaces has worsened.”²² Additionally, UN Women found that “less than 40% of women who experience violence seek help of any kind. . . . [A]mong women who do seek help, most look to family and friends and very few look to formal institutes, such as police and health

20. “Advancing the view that survivor-led initiatives are both more transformative than and best realised in tandem with survivor-centred approaches, the report develops a continuum reflecting levels of engagement with survivors in which survivor-led interventions are ideal.” Brenda K. Kombo, “From Survivor Centered to Survivor Led: Lessons from Promising Survivor-Led Gender-Based Violence Accountability Initiatives,” Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence, Nov. 25, 2024, <https://www.gbv.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ICGBV-Survivor-Led-Accountability-Paper-1.pdf>.

21. UN Academic Impact, “The Preventable Pandemic: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence,” United Nations, Feb. 25, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/preventable-pandemic-sexual-and-gender-based-violence>.

22. UN Women, “Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women During COVID-19,” United Nations, Nov. 24, 2021, <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/vaw-rga>.

services. Fewer than 10% of those seeking help report to the police.”²³ According to the World Health Organization, one in three women have been subjected to some form of violence by an intimate partner or non-partner or both.”²⁴

Most crucially, these forms of violence most commonly occur in the home. The World Health Organization has stated that women are at greater risk of harm in intimate relationships than elsewhere, “challenging the notion that home is a safe haven.”²⁵ Also, according to Childlight, a Global Child Safety Institute at the University of Edinburgh, “11% of men in the US, 7% of men in the UK and 7.5% of men in Australia report that they have engaged in online behaviors at some point in their lifetime that could be classed as online child sexual abuse offending.”²⁶ The culture of VAWG is a global pandemic.

There are several challenges that we face when seeking to understand the extent of the problem as it affects Latter-day Saints. There are no actual statistics, task forces, or training about sex, consent, and gender-based violence within the Church.²⁷ What we find instead is a system constructed to protect the interests of the Church at the expense of victims due to existing policies, closed-door access, and lack

23. UN Statistics Division, “The World’s Women 2015: Trends and Statistics,” United Nations, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/worldswomen2015.html>.

24. World Health Organization, *Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018—Executive Summary* (WHO, 2021), <https://www.who.int/publications/item/9789240022256>.

25. World Health Organization, *WHO Multi-Country Study on Women’s Health and Domestic Violence Against Women: Initial Results on Prevalence, Health Outcomes, and Women’s Responses* (WHO, 2005), <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/43309>.

26. University of Edinburgh and the Human Dignity Foundation, *Searchlight 2023: Childlight Annual Flagship Report*, https://www.childlight.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Childlight-Flagship-Report-2023_1.pdf.

27. Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will*, 42–43.

of accountability mechanisms. The fact that we do not know how extensive VAWG actually is within the Church points directly to its doctrine, culture, and patriarchy. In other words, without proper oversight, there is no opportunity to shine light into these places and to expose root causality.

To be clear, this is a structural and doctrinal problem, framed in patriarchy maintained by Church theological tenets, embedded in teachings, practices and rituals, which actively produce and negotiate inequitable power relations among men and women. According to Catherine Bell, "Systems such as ritual both realize and regulate the structure of social relations. Like forms of speech, forms of ritual are 'transmitters of culture, which are generated in social relations and which, by their selections and emphasis, exercise a constraining effect on social behavior.'"²⁸ Rituals should not be understood solely as mechanisms of social control: rather, they represent one of many strategies employed to reproduce and manipulate the foundational cultural structures of a community. These structures are not merely abstract concepts but are experienced, embodied, and perpetuated by individuals within the society. Theological tenets embedded in LDS Church rituals cultivate a distinctive dynamic in social relations, particularly in the inculcation of beliefs. According to Bell, such practices are intrinsic to the very production and negotiation of power relations within a society.²⁹ The androcentric, rather than Christocentric, positionality of the Church, coupled with its misogynistic policing of women, cultivates an unhealthy ecosystem for all members of the Church community—men, women, and children alike.

There may be some sources that indicate the extent of the problems as they affect Latter-day Saints. They reveal significant risks to Latter-day Saint women and girls. In Utah, 61 percent of the population

28. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 178.

29. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 186–95.

identify as members of the Church.³⁰ Utah statistics are rough estimates used to illuminate VAWG among Latter-day Saints, but they do not explicitly provide an inside view of what is actually happening in the LDS Church. That being acknowledged, the data provide a mere glimpse of the situation at hand. In Utah, sexual violence is being committed by male perpetrators whom the victim knows, and more horrifically, “many victims of sexual assault and sexual violence in Utah are children, and they are victimized by a family member.”³¹ Statistics show that rape occurs in Utah at a rate higher than the national average.³² In 2022, the reported rape rate in Utah was 59.5 per 100,000; the national average is 40.³³ Rape is the only violent crime for which Utah’s rate is higher than the national average, and this has been the case for the past twenty-five years.³⁴ For all other types of violent crimes, Utah’s rates are lower. Yet according to the Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice, only 11.8 percent of women actually report crimes

30. “Mormon Population by State 2025,” World Population Review, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/mormon-population-by-state>.

31. Susan R. Madsen, Tiffany Turley, and Robbyn T. Scribner, “Sexual Assault Among Utah Women,” Utah Women Stats Research Snapshot, Utah Women and Leadership Project, Nov. 7, 2016, <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/snapshot/15.pdf>.

32. “Table 4: Crime in the United States, by Region, Geographic Division, and State, 2013–2014,” FBI Uniform Crime Reporting, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2014/crime-in-the-u.s.-2014/tables/table-4>.

33. “Reported Forcible Rape Rate in the United States from 1990 to 2023, Statista, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/191226/reported-forcible-rape-rate-in-the-us-since-1990/>; “Health Indicator Report of Sexual Violence,” Utah Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Indicator Based Information Systems, July 10, 2024, <https://ibis.utah.gov/ibisph-view/indicator/view/Rape.Cnty.html>.

34. Madsen et al., “Sexual Assault Among Utah Women.”

of sexual violence to law enforcement in Utah.³⁵ This means 88.2 percent are not being reported compared to the national average of 63 percent.³⁶ These findings indicated that acts of sexual violence are substantially underreported and that the investigation and prosecution of these crimes are not being pursued.

While the Church contributes to the lack of clear information about the frequency of VAWG by not collecting or reporting data, there are other barriers as well. Part of the reason that women and girls do not often report their abuse is that they generally must report it to men. Female credibility issues are embedded in patriarchal ideologies and misogynistic policing. Male-to-male alliances appear to be at the heart of this underreporting, under-investigating, and under-prosecuting.³⁷ Moreover, ministers who lack training in the nuances of consent frequently misinterpret reports of sexual violence disclosed by women. They may mistakenly perceive these reports as violations of Church doctrine, leading to an inappropriate focus on punitive measures rather than understanding the situation's complexities. Women and girls in the Church appear to be in graver danger due to a deeply ingrained and embedded sexist culture positioned within the patriarchal Church structures, culture, and doctrines.

One of the structural issues that contributes to the perpetuation of VAWG is the process by which victims seek help from the Church. Male ecclesiastical leaders currently are first responders for women and girls

35. Madsen et al., "Sexual Assault Among Utah Women."

36. Callie Marie Rennison, "Rape and Sexual Assault: Reporting to Police and Medical Attention, 1992–2000," Bureau of Justice Statistics Selected Findings, August 2002, available at US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, accessed May 5, 2025, <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/rsarp00.pdf>.

37. Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 55–75; Tuerkheimer, *Credible*.

seeking to report and receive help in most religious institutions.³⁸ This is in line with standard Church procedures. Current guidelines specify that women or girls in abusive situations are directed to seek assistance from their bishop or stake president.³⁹ In many instances, the male ecclesiastical leader, as such, is in a position to act however he best sees fit. This usually is done through Church guidelines, inspiration, and the lens of his personal worldview.⁴⁰ In the current regulations, the male ecclesiastical leader is also instructed to call the Church's helpline (established to guide and protect ecclesiastical leaders and the institution) to facilitate how the leader should proceed.⁴¹ Furthermore, the Church's call center primarily serves the institution itself as its primary

38. Nason-Clark et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence*, 30; Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will*, 303–4; Ally Kern, “The Role of Pastors: The Vital Link in Stopping Domestic Violence,” *Reflections: Yale Divinity School*, fall 2018, https://reflections.yale.edu/sites/default/files/reflections_fall_2018_02.pdf

39. “Responsibilities: The Relief Society president has the following responsibilities. Her counselors assist her. Under the bishop’s guidance, counsel with adult members of the ward (see 31.1 and 31.3). Only the bishop counsels ward members about matters of worthiness, abuse, and approval to use fast-offering funds. See Counseling Resources. For information about abuse, see 38.6.2.” “Relief Society,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, General Handbook, sec. 9.3.2.2, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/9-relief-society?lang=eng#title_number15.

40. “Why Is Sexual Abuse Common in the Mormon Church?,” *California Business Journal*, Mar. 28, 2023.

41. “Preventing and Responding to Abuse” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/abuse-how-to-help/preventing-and-responding-to-abuse?lang=eng>. See also General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 38.6.2.1, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/38-church-policies-and-guidelines?lang=eng#title_number2; and “Abuse Helpline,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Safety and Health, Feb. 25, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/callings/church-safety-and-health/abuse-help-line?lang=eng>.

client, rather than prioritizing the needs of victims.⁴² If the call center were truly oriented toward the victims, individuals in need would have the ability to reach out directly for the assistance and legal counsel they require. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

This realm of personal discretion for men leads to wide discrepancies. Church leaders may or may not communicate victims' rights within the Church and legal or civil realm to the abused. How the leader shares knowledge received from the helpline with the victim is entirely at his discretion. Church leaders often do not communicate with the victims about Church sanctions against the abuser or their legal rights. Victims seeking care are then often placed in precarious situations, wherein their well-being is jeopardized.⁴³

These current conditions are not necessarily surprising. Even though men see and hear injustices done against women, many avoid getting involved and confronting injustice. As James Newton Poling has observed, "silence shares complicity in acts of sexual violence."⁴⁴ These acts of collusion are devastating to women and girl victims. Also, in discussions had with females seeking assistance, ecclesiastical leaders often protect one another by referring to "inspired counsel" or saying "I am sure the ecclesiastical leader did not mean that" or "the counsel was positioned on revelation received." The female's sanity, her own

42. Peggy Fletcher Stack and Tamarra Kemsley, "Does the LDS Church's Sex Abuse Helpline Protect the Faith or the Victims? Debates Continues," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Aug. 15, 2022, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2022/08/15/whom-does-sex-abuse-help-line/>; "Why the Mormon Church Abuse Hotline Hasn't Helped Victims," Hurley McKenna & Mertz, P.C. Trial Lawyers, Mar. 23, 2021, <https://www.hurley-law.com/chicago-injury-lawyers/why-the-mormon-church-abuse-hotline-hasnt-helped-victims/>.

43. "When she went to her bishop for counseling after she had been raped by her (Mormon) cousin, he told her it was her own fault." Emily Benedek, *Hometown Betrayal* (Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2024), 71.

44. James Newton Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Abingdon Press, 1991), 157.

intuitions, her own received revelation is often questioned, juxtaposed against a prominent leader's counsel. This institutional gaslighting further entrenches the victims in psychological darkness.⁴⁵

There are no easy solutions to these problems, but there are some helpful directions available. Ullman's recent book *Talking About Sexual Assault: Society's Response to Survivors* emphasizes the significance of transforming societal attitudes through sexual assault education. Ullman asserts that while altering perceptions and attitudes is pivotal in the fight against VAWG, a more fundamental shift involves reforming the structures and conditions that foster the prevailing culture. It is imperative to not only educate but also challenge the social norms that perpetuate sexual violence against women and girls and unfairly assign blame to victims. Combating the entrenched culture of VAWG through structural reform and education in providing support to the victimized in everyday situations are essential components of this multifaceted approach.⁴⁶

Solution 1: Legal Changes

An April 2022 general conference talk given by Elder Patrick Kearon addressed the Church and sexual abuse: "We must deploy everything we can to help those who have been mistreated in the most dreadful ways, heal."⁴⁷ While the Church has not lived up to this promise, there are areas where it may improve. The first major area for reform that we might seek would address the way that clergy-penitent laws have contributed to VAWG by not involving secular legal authorities. The

45. Truong, and Ghafournia, *Understanding Spiritual & Religious Abuse*, 4–6.

46. Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 10–11.

47. Patrick Kearon, "He Is Risen with Healing in His Wings: We Can Be More Than Conquerors," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Apr. 24, 2022, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2022/04/24kearon?lang=eng>.

record books show that male ecclesiastical leaders and the Church have refrained from acting in the best interest of abuse victims.⁴⁸ One of the main reasons is that clergy-penitent law and other legal liabilities cause complications for the institution and those ministering in ordained leadership positions, and clergy-penitent privilege has the unintended consequence of enabling harm in cases of child sex abuse.⁴⁹

Recent cases have revealed the significant problems that these laws have created. In the highly publicized August 2022 *Associated Press* report by Michael Rezendes, a bishop in the LDS Church did not report child sex abuse to secular authorities. He did this on the counsel of the Church's hotline as advised by the Kirton McConkie law firm—the largest law firm in Utah, which has long served as the LDS Church's external legal counsel. The sexual abuse continued for over seven years while Church leaders were fully aware that it was ongoing and no protections were put in place for the victim. All parties involved—the bishop, the Church helpline, and the Kirton McConkie law firm—enabled the perpetrator.⁵⁰

48. Associated Press, “Nearly 2.3B Awarded in Sex Abuse Lawsuit that Had Named the LDS Church,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Apr. 27, 2023, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2023/04/27/nearly-23b-awarded-sex-abuse/>; Jason Dearen and Michael Rezendes, “Former Mormon Bishop Highlighted in AP Investigation Arrested on Felony Child Sex Abuse,” *AP News*, Mar. 13, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/mormon-church-investigation-child-sex-abuse-aedc8cfc9175ebadb18420ec25a5f99c>.

49. Amos N. Guiora, Diana Pogosyan, and Matylda Blaszcak, “Sacred Secrets Enabling Child Sex Abuse,” March 2, 2024, University of Utah College of Law Research Paper no. 589, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4746169>; Tad Walch, “Should Clergy Report Sex Abuse of the Penitent? A Look Inside Priest-Penitent Privilege,” *Deseret News*, Aug. 19, 2022, <https://www.deseret.com/faith/2022/8/19/23297074/should-clergy-be-required-to-report-sex-abuse-cases>.

50. Michael Rezendes, “Seven Years of Sex Abuse: How Mormon Officials Let It Happen,” *AP News*, Aug. 4, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/Mormon-church-sexual-abuse-investigation-e0e39cf9aa4fbe0d8c1442033b894660>.

This case exposed significant weaknesses in the Church's approach to treating sexual violence in ways that extended beyond the individuals involved. The extensive investigative work conducted by Rezendes and Jason Dearen regarding the legal maneuvers reveal how the Church acted to stifle rather than support victims.⁵¹ In December 2023, audio recordings captured Church leaders protecting the Church against a child sex abuse claim and discussing payments to silence the victim. These audio recordings from meetings held over four months, obtained by the Associated Press, shed light on the conduct of Paul Rytting, the director of risk management at the LDS Church. Despite expressing concern over child sex abuse that had occurred, Rytting deployed a risk management strategy that has enabled the Church to maintain secrecy concerning cases of child sex abuse. This included Church legal counsel advising against the bishop providing testimony in the victim's case by invoking clergy-penitent laws. Consequently, in the absence of his testimony, prosecutors opted to dismiss the charges. More telling is that

51. Michael Rezendes and Jason Dearen, "Recordings Show How the Mormon Church Protects Itself From Child Sex Abuse Claims," *AP News*, Dec. 12, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mormon-church-investigation-child-sex-abuse-9c301f750725c0f06344f948690cafl6#>; Michael Rezendes and Jason Dearen, "Take Aways from the AP's Investigation into the Mormon Church's Handling of Sex Abuse Cases," *AP News*, Dec. 4, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mormon-church-investigation-child-sex-abuse-4db829616a5c5cfa351a2e95d778ae9e>; Michael Rezendes and Jason Dearen, "Former Bishop Highlighted in AP Investigation Arrested on Felony Child Sex Abuse Charges," *AP News*, Mar. 13, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/mormon-church-investigation-child-sex-abuse-aedc8cfc9175ebadb18420ec25a5f99c>; Michel Rezendes, "4 Takeaways from AP's Mormon Church Sex Abuse Investigation," *AP News*, Aug. 4, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/mormon-church-sexual-abuse-takeaways-f01fba7521dddf8a89622668b54ac10>; Deepa Bharath, "New Member of Mormon Church Leadership Says It Must Do Better to Help Sex Abuse Victims Heal," *AP News*, Jan. 23, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/church-jesus-christ-latter-day-saints-leader-patrick-kearon-088f1de01f91122070e1f95755dcd66e>.

Rytting verbally conveyed he was authorized to pay out up to \$300,000 to the victim and her mother for their silence, governed by a confidentiality agreement.⁵²

Silencing victims is institutional betrayal and further traumatizes victims.⁵³ Confidentiality agreements have the potential to inflict additional harm by impeding the public disclosure and broader societal recognition of victims' experiences, while also serving as a shield for wrongdoers. These protective measures create an environment conducive to perpetrators acting with impunity, secure in the knowledge that their actions will be safeguarded from scrutiny. By insulating wrongdoers from the repercussions of their actions, such agreements erode the efficacy of social mechanisms designed to enforce accountability and instigate behavioral change. By offering silencing agreements, religious organizations' actions mirror the behavior of perpetrators, in silencing and shaming victims, thus obstructing the path to healing.⁵⁴

While contemplating the unfathomable nature of these atrocities may be distressing, it is imperative to recognize that clergy-penitent privilege laws persist in jurisdictions worldwide. In a hopeful turn of events in February 2024, the legislative bodies of the Utah senate and house of representatives jointly approved a bill that bestows upon clergy members equivalent legal safeguards as other mandated reporters of child abuse. This legislation pertains specifically to situations where instances of abuse are disclosed during a religious confession by a

52. "Recordings Show How Mormon Church Kept Sex Abuse Claims Secret," *PBS News*, Dec. 4, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/recordings-show-how-mormon-church-kept-child-sex-abuse-claims-secret>; Rezendes and Dearen, "Recordings Show."

53. Carly Parnitzke Smith, Jennifer J. Freyd, and Norman B. Anderson, "Institutional Betrayal," *American Psychologist* 69, no. 6 (2014): 575–87, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037564>.

54. Herman, *Truth and Repair*, 82.

perpetrator. Additionally, the bill seeks to educate clergy by delineating the distinctions between adherence to church policies and legal obligations. Proponents assert that the bill serves an instructive purpose, clarifying to clergy that they can safely report abuse from a confessional.⁵⁵ While this proposal seems promising, Guiora suggests more extensive legislation. He advocates for the removal of child sex abuse from the confines of clergy privilege, proposing that any confession made must be reported in all instances, regardless of circumstances.⁵⁶ Passing this bill and supporting others that are more aggressive will help change the legal landscape for victims and end the ecclesiastical shield for perpetrators.

Solution 2: Women's Ministry

As noted above, the current procedure of the Church is that victims of violence speak to their male bishop or stake president. Church leaders play a vital role in this process. Ally Kern, a survivor of domestic abuse, stated in an article in *Reflections*, a Yale Divinity School journal, that “survivors most often reveal their experience of abuse first—and often only—to their pastor. This puts pastors in the place of first responders.”⁵⁷ Kern’s statement is affirmed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and religious scholars, such as Nancy Nason-Clark and Janet Heimlich.⁵⁸ Yet ministers, for the most part, are not trained to

55. US News, “Utah Legislature Expands Ability of Clergy Members to Report Child Abuse,” *Associated Press*, Feb. 29, 2024, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/utah/articles/2024-02-29/utah-legislature-expands-ability-of-clergy-members-to-report-child-abuse>.

56. Guiora et al., “Sacred Secrets.”

57. Kern, “Role of Pastors.”

58. Nason-Clark, et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence*, 30; Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will*.

understand how to shape their pastoral care to respond effectively to VAWG.⁵⁹

As men are more likely to be ministers, women reaching out to men for help and protection against other men is precarious and is known as the “male protection racket.” Women are promised protection from men though none is actually provided, as men are often predisposed to protect their peers. Women then find themselves entrenched in the patriarchal vortex and the cycles of subjugation and harm continue.⁶⁰ Compounding these problems is a culture of doubt about women’s claims of abuse.⁶¹ When the abused can vocalize the reality of an

59. Committee on Women & Security in the Church and The Committee on Marriage & Family in the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, “When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women,” Nov. 2002, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/when-i-call-help-pastoral-response-domestic-violence>; Samantha Kilpatrick, “4 Reasons Your Church Needs Domestic Violence Awareness Training,” Lifeway Research, Oct. 20, 2023, <https://research.lifeway.com/2023/10/20/4-reasons-your-church-needs-domestic-violence-awareness-training/>; Nason-Clark et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence*, 30; Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will*.

60. Diane Rosenfeld, “Sexual Coercion, Patriarchal Violence and the Law,” in *Sexual Coercion in Primates and Humans: An Evolutionary Perspective on Male Aggression Against Females*, Edited by Martin N. Muller and Richard W. Wrangham (Harvard University Press, 2009), 429–30. See also Benedek, *Hometown Betrayal*, highlighting how an entirely Latter-day Saint community in Northern Utah covered up rape and child sexual abuse for decades with law enforcement protecting each other.

61. Tuerkheimer, *Credible*; Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 3–4; Judy Woodruff, “Why We Don’t Often Believe Women Who Report Sexual Assault,” *PBS News Hour*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-we-often-dont-believe-women-who-report-sexual-assault>.

abusive situation, her testimony will often be incredulous because she is a female.⁶²

I propose shifting the responsibility to women Church leaders to overcome such barriers. Male-to-male alliances would no longer stand in the way as a barricade to credibility issues and to seeking needed assistance from men when being abused by a man. Granting women this authority should also improve a victim's access to much-needed help and resources, not only for herself but also any children involved.⁶³ Additionally, alliances forged among females may offer more protection and support to women, given that the majority of violence against women and girls is committed by men. This has been exemplified in the work of Diane Rosenfeld, the founding director of the Gender Violence Program and a lecturer on law at Harvard Law School. Without systemic change, the prevailing social environment and entrenched rape culture will persist unabated.⁶⁴

Solution 3: Training, Ministering, and Raising Awareness

Finally, comprehensive education and training initiatives on ministerial and community levels are vital. Specialized training is required for ministers to effectively provide counseling to both survivors and

62. Tuerkheimer, *Credible*; Heather Savigny, *Cultural Sexism: the Politics of Feminist Rage in the #MeToo Era* (Bristol University Press, 2022), 116; Jodie Murphy-Oikonen, Kareb McQueen, Ainsley Miller, Lori Chambers, and Alexa Hiebert, "Unfounded Sexual Assault: Women's Experiences of Not Being Believed by the Police," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 11–12 (2022): 8916–40.

63. Mercy Amba Adoyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections in An African Woman in Christianity in Africa* (Orbis Book, 2004), 99; Doreen Ajiambo, "Holy Cross Sisters Help Ugandan Women Resist Domestic Violence," *American: The Jesuit Review*, Jan. 11, 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/01/11/holy-cross-sisters-help-ugandan-women-resist-domestic-violence>; Rosenfeld, *Bonobo Sisterhood*.

64. Rosenfeld, *Bonobo Sisterhood*.

perpetrators. Training is also essential to identifying victim-perpetrator dynamics and behaviors. Community-level educational initiatives must encompass discussions on credibility issues, and consent as a fundamental human right in intimate relationships. These measures are crucial in the efforts to prevent VAWG.

Lack of educational training represents a broad cultural shortcoming. Formal training of ministers in addressing VAWG is notably absent, not only in higher education institutions such as divinity schools that offer formation programs for chaplains globally, but also within religious organizations. The LDS Church is no exception. It is imperative that training and education on this matter address victim-perpetrator dynamics, which are tied to credibility issues foremost. In many cultural contexts, disbelief and skepticism are deep-seated biases against female survivors who courageously share their stories with male ministers. Abusers exploit these biases. For example, a perpetrator will frequently seek to manipulate both private and public accusations against them by casting aspersions on the mental health of the woman or girl.⁶⁵ This is known as coercive control or DARVO. Jennifer Freyd, professor emeritus of psychology and founder and president of the Center for Institutional Courage, describes DARVO as “a reaction of perpetrators of wrongdoing, particularly sexual offenders, may display in response to being held accountable for their behavior. DARVO stands for “Deny, Attack, or Reverse Victim and Offender.” The perpetrator or offender may deny the behavior, attack the individual doing the confronting, and reverse the roles of victim and offender such that the perpetrator assumes the victim role and turns the true victim—or

65. Savigny, *Cultural Sexism*, 116; Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 102–3.

the whistle-blower—into an alleged offender.⁶⁶ An initial stride toward countering DARVO involves education. Merely acquiring knowledge about DARVO can serve to diminish its potency. In instances where perpetrators employ DARVO, individuals well versed in these tactics are inclined to lend credence to victims while harboring skepticism toward perpetrators. This knowledge also proves efficacious for victims themselves, being less prone to internalize self-doubt. The act of identifying and labeling DARVO can wield significant influence as a potent antidote.⁶⁷

There is also a great deal of inconsistency in the way that Church leaders may handle these cases. Seeking help from ecclesiastical leaders may be compared to purchasing a lottery ticket. An ecclesiastical leader usually provides counsel and will act based on the Church's position as well as his personal worldview.⁶⁸ Preconditioned perspectives are often positioned in lived experience, in which the leader will, in turn, position their prescribed counsel. Such counsel is often centered on androcentric perspectives and Church ideologies that are not easily broken free from and can often impede validation and credibility, the procurement of safety for the female, and the female's ability to acquire the information and knowledge regarding her rights, hindering her ability to make best judgments and decisions.

When sexual abuse is such a ubiquitous and ever-present problem and leaves not only physical and psychological injuries but deeply

66. Sarah J. Harsey and Jennifer J. Freyd. "Defamation and DARVO," *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 23, no. 5 (2022): 481–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2022.2111510>; Sarah J. Harsey, Eileen L. Zurbriggen, and Jennifer J. Freyd. "Perpetrator Responses to Victim Confrontation: DARVO and Victim Self-Blame," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma* 26, no. 6 (2017): 644–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2017.1320777>.

67. Eric Patterson and Heide Moawad, "DARVO: Deny, Attack, Reverse, Victim, and Offender," *Choosing Therapy*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/darvo/>.

68. "Why Is Sexual Abuse Common in the Mormon Church?"

spiritual and moral wounds, why then, we must ask, are ecclesiastical ministers not being trained in how to minister to victims and perpetrators? How can untrained ministers act effectively without perpetuating additional harm when dealing with such difficult complex issues?⁶⁹

Abuse survivors are confronted with the spiritual and psychological issues of dealing with their relationships with Christ and God, as both are males, and the two faces of the Church. For example, perpetrators are often upheld in callings and leadership positions despite testimonials provided against them. Perpetrators freely move from one ward to another and across stake boundaries without their histories being passed on, and women and girls are often left wondering how God's Church allows such injustices. This is a systemic institutional problem that facilitates moral injuries. Moral injury is the damage done to one's conscience when experiencing an act that transgresses one's moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct.⁷⁰

Other churches have begun to address these issues by recognizing the problems. In 2023, the University of Notre Dame's McGrath Institute produced a white paper initiating a formation program in pastoral ministering to victim-survivors of sexual abuse: "Today as a Church we are called to minister to a world in which sexual trauma of one sort or another is commonplace. Formation programs must reflect this reality."⁷¹ In other words, this is a call for a sea change. Might we consider strongly gleaning from those who have walked through the fire?

69. Kern, "Role of Pastors."

70. "What Is Moral Injury?," Syracuse University Moral Injury Project, accessed Apr. 4, 2024, <https://moralinjuryproject.syr.edu/about-moral-injury/>.

71. Margaret Scroope, "Fully Equipped for Every Good Work: A Proposal of Twelve Competencies in Ministering to Survivors of Sexual Abuse for Seminary Formation Programs," University of Notre Dame, McGrath Institute for Church Life, Nov. 9, 2023, <https://mcgrath.nd.edu/news/fully-equipped-for-every-good-work-a-proposal-of-twelve-core-competencies-in-ministering-to-survivors-of-sexual-abuse-for-seminary-formation-programs/>.

As imperative as it is for the institutional Church to train ecclesiastical leaders in how to minister to moral injuries and identify victim-perpetrator behaviors in VAWG, drastic changes are also needed to bring conscious awareness at the community level as well. The lack of institutional involvement to enable more conscious social awareness on these issues perpetuates stigmatization and biases and keeps the reality of our collective and individual lived experiences in darkness.⁷² Both victims and those encircling them in shared *communitas* must embrace our lived realities of harm being done in our very own homes by the men in our own Church communities as the initial step toward preventing the further demise of women and girls.

Listening to the stories of abuse can itself have a transformative effect. Conscious awareness raising can expedite healing and reorient flawed worldviews of stigmatization. In the words of Howard Zehr, an American criminologist and pioneer of the modern concept of restorative justice:

In addition to restitution and answers, victims need opportunities to express and validate their emotions: their anger, their fear, their pain. Even though such feelings may be hard for us to hear and may not square with what we would wish them to feel, these feelings are natural human responses to a violation of crime. Anger, in fact, needs to be recognized as a common stage of suffering, and one that cannot simply be short-circuited. The suffering and pain are part of the offense and need to be expressed and to be heard. They need to have their “truth” heard and validated by others.⁷³

Here Zehr speaks clearly to both parties bearing the pain of the sexual crime committed, both parties in a posture of vulnerability. Conscious awareness can only be rendered in the open daylight, not behind closed doors. According to A. W. Sipes, a psychotherapist and expert

72. Dodson et al., “Moral Foundations.”

73. Howard Zehr, *Changing the Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Herald Press, 1990), 45.

in clerical sexual abuse, “Power depends on keeping certain realities private. The thrust of spirituality propels itself in exactly the opposite direction—toward exposure of truth and complete self-revelation and total accountability.”⁷⁴ Consciousness is pivotal to healing. If we as survivors are heroic to share, why is it, then, that others are not heroic enough to bear the burdens of the crimes forced upon us by the very institution and men whom women and girls have supported? How long will our own families, communities, and society allow, foster, enable, and promote such acts of sexual violence?

Additionally, consent in any intimate partner relationship is both a human right and not fully understood. Just because one may be married does not mean they have the right to demand or coerce sex from their partner. Human rights treaties such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women include the guarantee of freedom from sexual violence, coercion, and discrimination as well as control over one's own body and over the involvement in sexual interactions with an intimate partner.⁷⁵ Education on consent is essential in the Church's patriarchal context.

I close on a hopeful note. In working with Teddy Hickman-Maynard, associate dean of ministry studies at Harvard Divinity School, he has committed to integrating mandatory education on sexual abuse into the curriculum beginning in fall 2024, and to pursue curriculum development for a course focused solely on this pressing issue. Dean Teddy is leading out, working to reimagine a formation curriculum that will include VAWG training. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints needs to do the same.

74. Zehr, *Changing the Lenses*, 89–90.

75. Dana Sophia Valentiner, “The Human Right to Sexual Autonomy,” *German Law Journal* 22, no. SI5 (2021): 703–17, <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2021.35>

Conclusion

VAWG is a plague that is actively alive, harming our own women and girls, families, and communities. There exists a patriarchal vortex that facilitates VAWG both structurally in the institution and in Church ideologies, enabling pernicious harms to perpetuate. Religion plays a two-fold role in both facilitating healing and perpetuating harm. Legal issues (clergy-penitent laws), credibility issues, and male-to-male alliances are key components of the patriarchal vortex in which abused women and girls find themselves trapped. Shifting the role of ministering to women and girls who experience VAWG to women leaders is one means of addressing such hurdles. Additionally, ministers and communities are uneducated and untrained in VAWG. This must change. Conscious awareness bringing to light the reality of VAWG in our higher education institutions, religious organizations, and our own communities must be openly addressed. It is essential to adopt a multi-faceted approach that encompasses not only the provision of education but also the reformation of the systems and policies that perpetuate VAWG within the patriarchal vortex.

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