

The Rapha Project

A study on domestic violence and the Church in Quebec

**Part 2 : Presentation of qualitative interviews
Listening to the voices of survivors**

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DIRECTION CHRÉTIENNE



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This report is dedicated to the thirteen women who gifted their stories to us:

*Camille, Déborah, Esther, Florence, Hermine, Jeanne, Lili, Marie,
Marie-Josée, Mary, Melanie, Sarah-Joanna, Virginie.*

“You yourselves are our letter, one that is written on our hearts, so that it may be known and read by all. And you make it clear that you are a letter from Christ entrusted to our care, a letter written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, and written not on tablets of stone but on tablets of the human heart.”

2 Corinthians 3:2-3

The content of this report contains descriptions of domestic violence, acts of physical and sexual aggression, incest and suicidal ideations. It may be disturbing for certain readers and is not suitable for readers under the age of 18.

Out of concern for the exactitude of the words of participants, quotes are left in their original language (French or English).

Survivor Interviews

“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”
- Psalm 147:3

*“Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth,
O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted
his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.”*
- Isaiah 49:13

1. Introduction

In part one of the Rapha Study, findings from a survey to churchgoing Québécois were presented and analyzed. The 503 respondents’ perceptions, attitudes and beliefs towards the issue of domestic violence were studied as well as their opinions and desires as to what role the Church in Quebec should take in terms of education and prevention of domestic violence. Of equal interest was the data from the survey on self-declaration and experiences the 503 respondents had of violence within an intimate partner relationship. This second part of the Rapha Study focuses on the experiences of survivors of domestic abuse who were in some way connected to the Christian church in Québec during the time in which they experienced abuse. We sought to explore how their relationship with God was impacted by their experience of domestic abuse. In order to do this we held qualitative interviews with thirteen survivors.

We also explored the role of the church and its teachings on those experiencing abuse, and their relationship with their partner. This was with a view to identifying where the church may be failing survivors of domestic abuse, and determining how the church can be a supportive and healing place for those exiting abusive relationships.

While there is limited research on the interplay of faith and domestic abuse, the literature that exists has much to say about the realities of women of faith who are experiencing abuse from their intimate partners. Academic literature indicates that “the faith community is paradoxically both a source of assistance and a barrier to women survivors of domestic violence¹.”

1.1 Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

While there are several different methods of qualitative interviewing, we decided that semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate model for our interviews with survivors. A semi-structured interview possesses a flexibility, which allows for “themes to be covered, as well as prepared questions. At the same time there is openness to changes of sequence and question forms in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the interviewees².” The semi-structured model in this way allows for the person being interviewed to participate in the direction of the interview. In particular, we chose to adopt Rubin and Rubin’s³ *responsive interviewing* approach, because of its emphasis on the expertise and agency of the respondent. For Rubin and Rubin, “[t]he term *responsive interviewing* is intended to communicate that qualitative interviewing is a dynamic and iterative process, not a set of tools to be applied mechanically⁴.” This means that while the researcher may approach an interview with a certain set of themes and questions, it is the information received from the respondent that will mold how the research continues to unfold. According to Rubin and Rubin, “Qualitative research is not simply learning about a topic, but also learning what is important to those being studied⁵”, which means that “Responsive interviewers begin a project with a topic in mind but recognize that they will modify their questions to match the

¹ Pyles, Loretta. "The complexities of the religious response to domestic violence: Implications for faith-based initiatives." *Affilia* 22, no. 3 (2007), p.282.

² Kvale, Steiner. *Doing Interviews*. Sage publications ltd (2007), p.65.

³ Rubin, Herbert J., and Irene S. Rubin. *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Sage, 2011.

⁴ Rubin and Rubin, p.15.

⁵ Ibid.

knowledge and interests of the interviewees⁶.” A responsive interview is a conversation between equal parties which respects the unique knowledge that the respondent has acquired through lived experience.

Developing the Interview Protocol⁷

When developing interview questions, Rubin and Rubin suggest that the interview protocol will contain the main questions being asked, and should cover the major concepts that the researcher is interested in. However it is only meant to function as a guide – in responsive interviewing the interviewee is allowed to direct the process and the interviewer will follow any threads that they bring up by using secondary questions and probes. As interviews are performed, the research question will shift, and that may cause the interviewer or the researcher to change their interview guide for the next interview. Thus, it is an iterative process.

The interview protocol used for the Rapha study was developed in coordination with the Rapha Advisory Committee, which functions as the Community Advisory Board of the project. As is the case with Community-based participatory research, the advisory committee is composed of field workers, practitioners and lived-experience experts including nurses, therapists, coordinators of women’s shelters, pastoral workers and a sociologist. All members of the Rapha advisory committee are also churchgoing Christians living in Quebec.

First, the members of the advisory committee were consulted to determine the themes and concepts, as well as the questions, that they wanted to see covered in the interviews. These concepts and questions were then used by the lead researcher to create a first draft of the interview guide.⁸ These questions were also informed by the academic literature and general research on domestic abuse done by the lead researcher, including an online MITx

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Appendix for the Interview Protocol

⁸ The process of writing this first interview guide was informed by Rubin and Rubin (2011), Kvale (2007), and MITx.

course⁹ on conversational interviewing¹⁰. The first draft of the questions was then sent to the advisory committee for their feedback and approval. After all edits were made and final approval granted by the committee, the interview guide was submitted to the Community Research Ethics Office (CREO) and was approved on April 5th 2023, covering the project's interview period until December 2023.

Participant Recruitment

The participants were selected through convenience sampling – some volunteering to participate when we were promoting the first phase of the project, the rest responding to our Call for Applicants.¹¹ The Call for Applicants specified that the research team was looking to interview adult survivors of domestic abuse who experienced abuse at the hands of their romantic partner, who were no longer in the abusive relationship and who were living in Quebec and connected to the Christian faith or a Christian community while they experienced this abuse. The call specified that applicants need not be current churchgoers or to currently identify as Christian.

Ethics and Confidentiality¹²

The ethics and safety protocol was overseen by CREO. Upon CREO's approval, there were a series of safeguards and protocols in place in this phase of the project, to ensure the safety and confidentiality of participants. Those who responded to the Call for Applicants were screened to determine their eligibility for the project, which included questions to ensure that they had been out of the abusive relationship for at least one year and had at least one person in their life supporting them emotionally. These restrictions were

⁹ MITx, Qualitative Research Methods: Conversational Interviewing, <https://mitxonline.mit.edu/courses/course-v1:MITxT+21A.819.1x/#about-this-class>.

¹⁰ Methods used in conversational interviewing included open-ended questions, inviting the interviewee to lead and talk about events or details she wished to discuss, using probes to introduce themes or topics, and using questions such as “tell me more about that?”, or “would you like to speak more about this item?”

¹¹ See Appendix

¹² For further information on the Community Research Ethics Office, and their oversight process of the Rapha Project, please consult our Part One Report.

applied in order to ensure minimal risk of retraumatization or harm to participants. Applicants who met the criteria and were selected were then contacted to schedule an interview. Applicants who did not meet the criteria were asked to consider joining our survivor network¹³ instead.

In order to ensure confidentiality several measures were taken. First, participant names were only used on the informed consent forms¹⁴ which were accessible only to the interviewers themselves. The participants were given pseudonyms which were used in the interview transcripts and data analysis. During the process of transcription all identifying information was also removed, and participants were given the option to edit and approve the final transcript of their interview. Three months after the study results are published, all audio recordings, transcriptions, and consent forms will be destroyed.

Interviews were conducted from May 2023 through September 2023 at the Christian Direction office or at a location of the participant's choosing, and were held in the language (French or English) of the participant's choosing. The interviews were conducted by two different interviewers, using the same interview protocol,¹⁵ in order to prevent interviewer bias: Emily Simunic and Jenna Smith. Coding and analysis of interviews were done by three different members of the Rapha team: Heather Purdie, Sabrina Umurerwa and Jenna Smith. No more than three people read any single transcript in its entirety, thus protecting the anonymity of participants. Participants were offered a 50\$ gift card to UberEats or a similar service so they could consider buying rather than preparing a meal on the day of the interview. Those with childcare needs were offered 50\$ cash, and compensation was provided for transportation costs.

In order to respond to any possible negative psychological effects which participants may have experienced prior to, during, or following the interview

¹³ Our survivor network was a group of individuals who were survivors of domestic violence, and were not on the list of interviewees. We consulted them in confidential settings, and asked for input at various stages of the project, on items such as approaches, the name of the project, the content on our webpage and communications, language and concepts.

¹⁴ See Appendix

¹⁵ See Appendix

they were referred to Saryka Pierre, a counselor specialized in domestic abuse who agreed to accompany this stage of the study. Any participant who felt triggered during the interview was invited to pause, reschedule, or cancel the interview entirely, and all participants were permitted to withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussions. No participant withdrew from the process or paused the interview. The interviewer followed up with participants one week after their interview to check in on their wellbeing and provide resources or a referral to Ms. Pierre if any negative psychological effects had appeared since the interview.

Interview Transcription

All recordings of interviews were transcribed by a member of the research team: the study manager, lead researcher, or our research assistant. The interviews were transcribed using pseudonyms and with any identifying information redacted – they were then saved under the pseudonym. When a transcript was completed, the participant was contacted and offered the opportunity to meet in person to read and edit their transcript, if they so desired.

Interview Analysis (Grounded Theory)

The anonymized interview transcriptions were coded thematically and analyzed using grounded theory¹⁶. Two assessors (HP and JS) coded the first transcript together, and thereafter coded the remaining transcripts independently. The third assessor (SU) was trained by Jenna Smith. The coding of the comments was verified by the other assessors. Seven domains were developed and agreed upon by the research team prior to the start of the analysis. These domains, which were based on the structure of the interview questions, were: 1) faith education, traditions, home upbringing and

¹⁶ Grounded theory (GT) is a research method concerned with the generation of theory, which is 'grounded' in data that has been systematically collected and analysed. It is used to uncover such things as social relationships and behaviours of groups, known as social processes. In the case of the Rapha study, our data was the transcripts of interviews, which we then coded according to key words and themes, allowing us to analyze common behaviours, trends, messaging and events in the testimonies of Christian Québécois female survivors of domestic violence.

foundational beliefs; 2) experience and consequences of abuse; 3) church and faith teachings, scripture interpretation and practices; 4) response of church leaders or members to disclosure; 5) spiritual journey following the abuse; 6) recommendations of participants; and 7) response of participants to abuse. Some of the above domains were further subdivided into 'helpful' or 'harmful' (e.g., teachings and beliefs, response of church leaders or members to disclosure). Comments were extracted from each transcript and then coded into the relevant domain in an Excel spreadsheet. Each comment was then linked to specific sub-themes, and thereafter specific sub-themes were classified into overarching themes. The final overarching themes were discussed and agreed upon by the research team who analyzed both the thematic content of the comments, as well as the number of comments which emerged per theme.

2. Results

2.1. Background factors

a. Demographic factors

Thirteen women were interviewed for this phase of the Rapha Study. They chose or were given pseudonyms : Camille, Déborah, Esther, Florence, Hermine, Jeanne, Lili, Marie, Marie-Josée, Mary, Melanie, Sarah-Joanna, Virginie. The participants lived or still do live in various regions in the province of Quebec (at the time of the abuse, 5 were in urban areas, 5 in periurban and 3 lived in rural areas). Of the thirteen, 7 participants were francophone and 6 were anglophone. At least two were born outside of Canada (the majority were all born and raised in Quebec) and two participants were part of a visible minority group. Six participants were aged 30-49 years, four were aged 50-64 years and three were over the age of 65 years. All of the women interviewed were divorced from their abusive partners (six had been separated or divorced for at least ten years, four had been divorced in between five and ten years, and three had been divorced for less than five years.)

b. Family background

A common theme that emerged in the interviews was that of family abuse, and dysfunctional dynamics or roles in their childhood homes. At least 8 participants spoke of violence in the household.

“Chez nous, je me réveillais le matin, mes parents étaient violents...pour moi la violence c'était normale, à quelque part..”

“Mon père il sacrait beaucoup, alors mon père il était fâché, euh je pense que il était abusé par un prêtre lorsqu'il était plus jeune, donc il il sacrait beaucoup, il parlait contre le gouvernement, contre les frères, contre tout.”

At least three participants also described their father's alcoholism, which exacerbated an environment of tension and violence.

“Mon père était violent, très violent et alcoolique, donc uhh j'avais déjà ce schéma là dans moi, de calmer l'autre, de prendre soin de l'autre, d'être au devant de l'autre. Donc j'en éteignais beaucoup, facilement des situations qui auraient pu être percutantes de par ce que j'étais.”

As well as witnessing violence between their parents, at least two participants were directly abused by their family members or by their parents. The abuse took various forms.

“Ça fait que moi, vu que j'ai été abusée sexuellement, je me trouvais rien, vu que j'avais des parents absents, je trouvais que j'avais aucune valeur, vu que j'étais la 11^e, je savais même pas que j'existais, alors j'avais pas d'estime.”

“I was hit every day in the face for the way I looked at my mom or being disrespectful. It was just like anger off of a leash, and I was homeschooled, so I never got away from it.”

Even if the words “abuse” or “violence” were not used in certain descriptions, many participants spoke of dysfunctional dynamics, or broken relationships with their parents or in the general family environment. Many drew connections between their broken family environment and their dating relationships.

“...I was rejected by my dad at 16. Like I came to meet him and he rejected me at 16. And then I, I just shortly after ended up with my ex-husband. And I guess I felt so abandoned and the need to be loved and wanted. Um, I turned to him because my mom wasn't emotionally available...She hated my father, hence no emotional love towards me. She took care of me. There was that. But no emotional, no emotional connection. So and then when my dad just wanted to see if I looked like him because he didn't believe I was his. Another abandonment issue. So then I just wanted to be loved. So, yeah, I went with a guy who was 11 and half years older than me. I was 16 and he was 28.”

“Tu sais, je sortais justement d'un milieu très dysfonctionnel. Et puis d'un coup, il y avait un homme qui me voyait, qui m'aimait, qui même me mettait sur un piédestal. Donc je me devais d'être bonne avec lui. C'est de comprendre, de passer des colères, de passer des choses comme ça. Il ne m'a jamais, il n'y a jamais eu de violence physique. Mais après analyse un petit peu, je pense qu'il y avait une forme de manipulation psychologique.”

“Growing up the relationship between my mom and dad was not positive in many ways, um, it... was really dysfunctional in a lot of senses and, um, and, nowhere close to what my marriage has been, but for sure abusive and toxic. Um, so there were, you know, early exposures to a lot of, um, you know, situations that I think desensitized me to a certain degree. Um, and I remember deeply desiring my mom to leave my dad in early high school like, just actually hating him, and having a lot of resentment and and, you know, blaming my dad for a lot.”

“I, probably would qualify my relationship as, I had a broken smoke detector from the beginning. Like from childhood I was in a very abusive home, like there was severe, all kinds of abuse, so my relationship was a refuge in contrast to what I had – so I like, I think that kids probably who have had some good examples would pick up on a lot of the things I didn't pick up on, whereas for me it was easy to overlook that because everything was still more stable and healthy and better than what I had grown up with. So I feel like, I went into that with a broken smoke detector and, and those 20 years of marriage was me – again, it felt lighter than it should have because I was so used to carrying much heavier weights than that.”

Several participants spoke of the impact that their mothers had in their life, for better or for worse. Common themes included their mother's personal experience of violence, the model she transmitted to her children in dealing (or not) with violence, or the general influence she had over their lives.

“She (my mother) grew up in a time where everything was stuck under the rug, people weren't offered counseling, they were typically revictimized or it was like

well you just had to pretend that this didn't happen to you at all cause it's shameful, kind of thing. So she never really dealt with her stuff."

"À 16 ans, ma mère avait quitté mon père parce que il était vraiment en train de se détruire par l'alcool pis elle était vraiment plus capable...elle-même était dans un centre de, pour les femmes battu, euh, ca ma fait vivre toute sortes de choses."

"Pis j'avais pas personne de ma, si ma mère elle aurait été vivante, je suis sûre que ma vie aurait été différente. Mais j'avais pas personne autour de moi qui voyait assez claire pis, je pense que les femmes sont brillantes, mais des fois on a de besoin quelqu'un pour t'aider là."

c. Faith background: helpful foundations (31 comments)

Every participant interviewed described faith and religious life as important factors in their identity and in their upbringing. Ten out of thirteen participants were raised in Christian practicing households, but all had an affiliation to a Christian tradition (7 were raised in Catholic households, 2 in mainline Protestant traditions, 4 were raised Evangelical, and five converted to Evangelicalism as teenagers or young adults). Common themes included conversionism, an intentional engagement or fascination with religion and faith, and the centrality of faith in their development into adulthood.

"I was not raised in a Christian home, so to speak, I mean, denominationally yes, like I'm protestant and I'm baptized, but not a practicing home. My grandmother was a churchgoer so my e-early, I always used to go to church with my grandmother so that was something that I experienced that really wasn't a part of my lived experience at home...but um, in fact I was like praying a lot in my journals, like using my journal as a source of like speaking to God, basically my whole life, like from the time I, yeah my whole life, I started writing when I was about thirteen and I was talking to God then, so I, I do think that going to church with my grandmother gave me a sense of like of what that was all about. Plus when I was little, this was a long time ago, we used to actually sing hymns at

school in the morning and I used to love that so I always felt like, it was like Jesus was like this cool homeboy in my life but I really didn't understand, you know, how that was something that I could actually formally participate in."

"Je te dirais que j'avais toujours, c'était personnel, j'avais un émerveillement, pour la bible, je lisais la bible pour enfants, pis même à un point je voulais être religieuse. Pis, mais vraiment là, j'avais une fascination pour le Seigneur."

"I believe at that meeting where that man spoke to me about salvation too, and his own experience with the Lord, helping him with a speech impediment. And I go, he's like, you know, different than my sister. My sister is in trouble all the time. He's not. But yet he had something like a speech impediment that the Lord helped him with. That's all I remember. And I accepted the Lord as my Savior."

"À 21 ans, j'ai accepté le Seigneur Jésus euh... comme mon Seigneur et mon Sauveur. Et j'ai vraiment fait profession de foi et j'ai vraiment été saisi par l'Esprit-Saint. Et c'est à ce moment-là que j'ai commencé à fréquenter le milieu évangélique protestant. Donc, j'avais 21 ans."

"I heard the Holy Spirit, and so I was being protected. So, yeah, I came to know Jesus at a hard time in my life, like at the bottom..."

Just as the participants spoke of their mother's influence over their view of relationships and in how they dealt with violence, many also spoke of their mother's role in transmitting faith to their children.

"Elle avait pas le vocabulaire évangélique, mais j'ai été élevée avec cette sorte de foi là... Ahh, ma mère elle, mais elle allait pas à l'église, elle était pas légaliste sur les mots uhh, les habillements pour aller à l'église... et je pense que ma mère avait été tellement malade qu'elle avait une foi réelle. C'était pas juste – sa foi – c'était pas le, le rituel catholique, sa foi était profonde."

“Ma mère avait la foi chrétienne, elle était pratiquante, croyante, mon père pas du tout mais ma mère m’a transmis sa foi donc c’est elle qui m’a amené à l’église presque tous les dimanches.”

“Ma mère, elle enseignait la catéchèse, la première communion.”

Many women spoke about faith as an anchor in their lives. Christian practices, such as prayer, and Christian teachings from their religious education or Bible studies or even mystical experiences from their childhood became a source of strength and encouragement when facing struggles as an adult.

“Mon frère genre, mon frère était il était servant de Messe et donc il se pratiquait à la maison. On lui avait installé dans une chambre avec une table et un livret...je proclamais la messe donc y’a comme eu tout le temps cette présence là, j’ai une belle enfance, j’ai une vie spirituelle, j’ai une vie mystique...ben tout le monde est à l’Eucharistie, mais c’est la relation avec l’Esprit Saint que j’avais...”

“Mais c’est que j’ai accepté le Seigneur depuis l’âge de 18 ans. J’ai accepté le Seigneur depuis lors, j’ai jamais comme mettre ça de côté ou bien jamais arrêté du tout du tout. Dieu pour moi c’est, c’est, c’est très important. Malgré n’importe quelle difficulté, je compte sur Dieu et Jésus. Je crois en Dieu, en Jésus et Saint-Esprit. Je crois dans la Parole de Dieu qui est la Bible aussi. Donc, la foi chrétienne, oui, c’est quelque chose qui est très, très, très importante pour moi. Ça fait partie de ma vie.”

“My personal faith in God became something of an anchor point for me throughout my childhood”

d. Faith background: harmful foundations (73 comments)

There were a number of Christian practices, community behaviours, organizational structures and belief systems from their Christian upbringing

that the participants identified as unhelpful or harmful, especially when it came to navigating a context of domestic violence in their future relationships.

A major theme that emerged from the participant's faith upbringing was the topic of divorce. In many of the messages they received in their home or church upbringings, divorce was explicitly forbidden or frowned upon. One participant was taught that if she divorced, regardless of the reason, she would "never be able to remarry." Regardless of church tradition, the feeling that divorce was forbidden was a common thread in many testimonials.

"There was a lot of shame around the-their separation and they eventually, my mom did get back together with my dad but, I mean, their concern wasn't first for my mom's wellbeing, I don't think there was any sitting down with my mom or trying to see if this was a healthy relationship, it was more like, 'kids need both their parents' and like, you know 'you need to fix things with your wife' and 'separation's bad' and, and so, that was my first experience with my first church as a child."

"Pour ma mère, je pense que dans sa tête elle se mariait, et c'était jusqu'à la mort. Parce qu'avec mon père, il a fait des....c'était pas facile là, avec son alcoolisme, puis il y avait des occasions où ma mère aurait pu se divorcer, mais elle a pas voulu. Peut-être qu'elle pensait qu'elle ne pouvait...fait que moi j'pense que elle dans sa tête, c'est un peu ça. Mais j'suis pas sûr, parce que ma mère, elle aime bien paraître, t'sais. Fait que peut-être c'était à cause de ses valeurs, mais peut-être c'était de l'orgueil!"

"C'était compliqué pour ma mère, hein, la notion de divorce, même malgré un homme violent et avec des, avec des choses qui n'allaient pas. Euh je pense que c'était culturel et aussi par rapport à la foi, mais aussi cette notion de "je vais attendre que mes enfants soient grands pour divorcer."

Marriage and social pressure from Christians to marry quickly was another theme. Many of the interviewees mentioned short engagement or dating periods, precipitated by church culture or social messaging around the

need to marry quickly. The participants, regardless of generational or denominational differences discussed this with a certain degree of similarity.

Participante: *Bien, premièrement, la majorité des jeunes 20, 21, ils étaient tous jeunes quand ils parlaient de la famille parce qu'il y avait des grosses familles, puis ils voulaient, ben ça existait pas des appartements! Fait qu'ils parlaient. Ils se mariaient parce qu'ils voulaient partir de chez eux. Fait que ça fait la majorité, puis peut-être qu'à cause de la religion, les mariages durent, à cause des croyances.*

Enquêtrice: *Oui, c'est ça.*

Participante: *Puis ce qui était un gros, gros, un gros, une grosse préoccupation, c'est qu'il fallait pas que la fille tombe enceinte avant de se marier.*

Enquêtrice: *Ça, c'était la grosse affaire?*

Participante: *Ça, c'était la grosse affaire. Là, tu passais dans la rue puis te crachait dessus.*

“And he sat with me and he said you know it actually made him feel disgusted to say that “no, we’re not (not engaged yet).” And then like from there we just had this huge conversation like about like, you know, is this what we’re supposed to do and blah blah blah and then months later we ended up getting married.”

Several participants discussed unhelpful childhood teachings or messaging around gender roles and how the principle of the submission of women was negatively enforced. Many recalled that in their households boys were treated differently, often in ways that positioned males as superior or favoured, compared to the girls. A lack of agency for women in marriage or in the household was expressed, often tied closely to belief systems or church affiliation.

“Mes parents ont été, y’ont pas été divorcés, y’ont été séparés pendant un an et demi, quand j’avais 9 ans. Parce que, mon père t’sais euh, il voulait absolument un garçon. Mes parents ont décidé d’adopter un garçon. Et quand le fils est arrivé, là les filles on a eu la vie dure”.

“My Italian pentecostal church that I was raised in for the first ten years was very patriarchal, men were in charge, um, the cultural influence was big too, it wasn’t just church...so, the men were in charge. Um, divorce was just seen as bad...my biological dad was abusive with my mom um, and, the church culture encouraged him to take authority over his wife, so it encouraged him to get violent, um, and, you know, once that caused trouble for him they were like, well, you know, we didn’t mean it like that, like take charge, but like, then they also were just trying to encourage that relationship to come back together.”

“Les femmes avaient peu de pouvoir euh, pour euh... pour prendre des décisions comme de laisser la famille, pas la famille, mais le conjoint donc...Donc la foi dans ma famille, c’était ça le mariage, bien c’était l’idée que c’est quasiment indissoluble...”

“The way we were raised was that we were our father’s daughters to be given to the right person, kind of like, almost like, an arranged marriage....And then if I wanted to choose my own partner, that was rebellious. Um, they actually like were heavily influenced by... like all of that like Umbrella of Protection like, Jesus, man, females, children, kind of thing? Um, so it was very much – I felt like I wasn’t supposed to have agency. In choosing my partner, in choosing to leave.”

Many participants expressed a feeling of being ill-prepared for the struggles in their marriage and relationships and felt that certain topics such as conflict, sex, consent, violence and mental health were inadequately addressed, if at all. About half the participants received no premarital counseling, and a few expressed frustrations around the fact that they received little or no marital support or teaching from their communities after they were married.

Interviewer: *Did you receive, like, premarital counseling?*

Participant: *No. I heard more the verse about ‘you being submissive’. Sure, that was it. Yeah. And he was on the same page. So from what he knew in Bible school and like I said, the discussions were only about having children and things like that.*

“(Le divorce) on en parlait pas tout simplement.”

Finally, many participants felt that Christian education around sexuality was either unhelpful or inadequate. Certain teachings stemming from what theologians call “purity culture” led to feelings of guilt or shame around female sexuality, undue feelings of responsibility and pressure for both not tempting men but also satisfying husband’s needs, and a general feeling of being ill-equipped to enter into marriage or address sexual violence.

“Mais un des discours de certains pasteurs, c’est bien au niveau des relations sexuelles, c’est “mais est-ce que, est-ce que tu, tu satisfaisais ton conjoint?” Ils ne peuvent pas entendre que l’inverse n’existe pas, que c’est possible. Ça, c’est compliqué. C’est là où tu te rends compte que quand même c’est très patriarcal encore au niveau de la façon de voir le mariage...”

“I always felt like, it was always like, you know, if something happens the guilt was like—like even going to um, [Quebec Christian summer camp] when we were separated and they did like a talk on uh modesty and that kind of thing for like teen camps and that kind of thing – I don’t know what they told the guys but they were all like addressing how the girls dressed and ‘make sure you don’t cause your brother to stumble’ and all that thing and the underlying message was ‘if something goes wrong it’s more the female’s fault than the male’s fault.’ Like, I don’t know if they were telling them that they need to control their thoughts or whatever but even in like mixed scenarios with youth it was all, like I didn’t hear nearly as much about that as about like the girls dressing modestly. Um, so there’s just a whole lot of like, victim blaming sometimes, but not like directly”.

One person described her feelings of shame after being raped by a stranger before her marriage.

“...being raised with like um purity culture and the heavy emphasis on how important it was to be virginal and emphasis on modesty for females, like, not

causing the males to stumble, that kind of thing, um, I had the additional baggage of feeling like I was damaged goods and no one else would want me”.

e. Faith and religion within marriages

During the period that the abuse occurred, all participants were active to varying degrees within a community of faith. Two women continued a faithful practice within Catholic parishes or organizations. There is a common thread of conversionism within the participants’ journeys; ten participants were attending an evangelical church where they had been affiliated before marriage or where they had been baptized as adults. One participant remained active in a mainline Protestant church.

Every participant, save one, had a partner who said he was a Christian, and eight of the partners had a ministry role at their church (staff or volunteer) or within the larger Christian community. At least three participants observed their partners had diminished his interest or involvement in church life or Christianity over the course of their marriage. Their reading of that situation varied: hypocrisy, a decline in his general well-being, a lack of genuine faith, or his frustration at being held accountable. At least one participant wondered whether her partner’s conversion and attendance at church had more to do with him wanting to control her social life:

“So four months after me and the children, he started coming. But I didn't realize why he was coming to church. He was coming to church to the..to separate me. Yeah. He came to church to literally pull me away from my friends.”

The research team noted that very few of the participants still attend the community of faith, church or parish that they were a part of during their period of abuse.

2.2. Experience and consequences of abuse (178 comments)

In the following section, it should be noted that the number of comments shown provides an overall picture of the frequency with which the

topics were reported by participants, and does not reflect the severity or duration of the abuse. For example, while there were thirteen comments describing sexual abuse by 6 of the 13 participants, these included reports of rape, sexual assault and being forced into prostitution. Given the length of the interviews and the quantity of data, not all the comments of participants could be coded. However, the research team considers that the results shown below are representative of the experience and consequences of abuse reported by the participants. The table below summarizes the number of comments by type of abuse reported.

Type of abuse reported by participants	Number of comments
Emotional/Psychological/Verbal	76
Spiritual	45
Physical	25
Sexual	13
Financial	13
Social	6
TOTAL	178

From a total of 178 comments describing the participant’s experience of domestic abuse, emotional or psychological abuse was the most frequently mentioned form of abuse reported (76 comments), accounting for 43% of the total reported abuse. All of the participants reported having experienced multiple forms of emotional abuse including manipulation, intimidation, gaslighting, humiliation, threats by their partner to use a weapon or to commit suicide, name-calling, neglect, blaming, shutting out and silence, angry outbursts, false accusations, and harrassment. One survivor suffered two years of anonymous phone calls (repetitive ghost calls, hang-ups) designed to terrify her and engender a sense of paranoia. The police investigators finally confirmed that the calls were from her abusive husband, with whom she was

still living at the time. All of the above are forms of coercive control, designed to keep the survivor under the control of the abuser.

“Mais vu qu’il y avait beaucoup de menaces, j’avais peur. J’avais peur. Et pour moi et pour les enfants. Parce qu’il disait tout le temps que je vais perdre tout ce que j’aime, tout ça. Il y avait beaucoup de menaces”.

“C’était de la manipulation là. C’était tout le temps de la manipulation. T’sais, ‘je vais me suicider, je vais faire ci, je vais faire ça’. Si tu... La violence était beaucoup, ‘si tu me voles mon leadership’,...Fait que, t’sais c’était du contrôle. Toujours du contrôle, toujours du contrôle”.

“J’ai l’impression que finalement, c’était que dans ma tête que les problèmes il y avait, parce que pour lui il y en avait pas, c’est ça. Donc ça aussi ça a été violent parce que j’avais l’impression que mon vécu n’était pas réel, parce qu’il était toujours remis en question”.

“...he would monologue, he’d just go on like, a long rant for, like, an hour straight, I would leave, walk out of the room... He’d just keep following me around the house, rant...So, it was a lot of intimidation, a lot of um, yeah, a lot of attempts to control, a lot of harassment for not falling in line”.

Verbal abuse, which is a form of emotional abuse, was mentioned 8 times by 5 of the participants and included threatening language, intimidation, criticism, blaming, insulting, yelling, and controlling the conversation.

“Right from the beginning he would just say like: “I can’t wait until the kids are old enough like so I can divorce you, like I hate you”, whatever it might be”.

“Je pouvais être des heures à écouter, lui là. Je ne pouvais pas placer un mot là. C’était comme tourner en rond. Tourne en rond, tourne en rond, tourne en rond. Il prenait encore le contrôle de la conversation”.

“Mais c’était pas violence physique, c’était plus violence verbale... Avec des menaces c’est plus menaces. Beaucoup de psychologique, beaucoup de menaces”.

Spiritual abuse¹⁷ was the second most frequently reported form of abuse (45 comments). The experience of spiritual abuse was reported by all the participants, and accounted for 25% of the total reported abuse. Examples included controlling through spiritual gaslighting (questioning the survivor’s faith), using Scripture to force the survivor to submit to their demands, preventing them from using their spiritual gifts, threatening them with punishment from God if they chose to divorce, blaming them for problems in the marriage and the church, insulting their beliefs, trying to control or stop their involvement in church life, and forcing them not to disclose the abuse in order to protect the abuser’s ministry role.

“...basically jumping to the parts of the Bible like ‘oh you’re my wife you’re meant to submit to me’ but then whenever I would try to bring up anything about ‘husbands love your wives as Christ loves the church’ it was like ‘no, no, no we’re not talking about that. We’re talking about your submission to me’... so there was a lot of spiritual abuse.”

“Donc moi, je n’avais pas le droit de quitter. Je devrais tout accepter parce que sinon c’est comme si sinon il ne pourra pas exercer son ministère. Et on va dire c’est à cause, de c’est à cause de moi. Donc à ce moment-là, je devrais tout accepter pour que son ministère de pastorat puisse marcher. Donc je dois tout accepter”.

“Il me disait souvent, ‘Toi, la super spirituelle, c’est ça! Toi t’es la super spirituelle la pis moi je suis rien’. Parce que quand t’es enfant de Dieu, tu aides les autres, tu fais, l’Esprit te te pousse. Pis la minute que j’exerçais, mes dons...C’est c’est, pour lui c’était menaçant. Je pouvais pas, je pouvais pas m’investir. Parce que la minute qu’il avait pas toute mon attention, toute moi, qu’il sentait que je

¹⁷ For a full reflection and definition of spiritual abuse as a form of domestic violence, please consult the Discussion section of this report.

partageais moi avec une autre...même avec les enfants, y'était jaloux. T'sais c'est, c'est une forme toujours d'égoïsme."

Enquêtrice *"Est-ce qu'il utilisait les enseignements chrétiens contre toi?"*

Participant: *"Au tout début, mais pas après, parce qu'il ne venait pas à l'église. Il y aurait eu de l'air fou de l'utiliser, je l'aurais mis à sa place. Tu sais, au tout début, il a utilisé des affaires de 'femmes soyez soumises', et le rôle de la femme, mais uh pas vraiment, t'sais non. Puis il a dit à mes enfants 'si vous allez là (à l'Église), vous allez être sur le BS (bien-être social)!"*

Physical abuse was the third most frequently reported form of abuse (25 comments) and was mentioned by all the participants. They described violent behaviours such as assault with a weapon, abduction, punching, pushing, kicking, strangling, threats of murder, use of firearms, violence towards pets, and damaging of property. Six women graphically described situations where their lives were in danger and they thought that they were going to die. They described living with recurring memories of the trauma they had experienced.

"Il dit qu'il avait un couteau. C'est ce qu'il ferait. Donc à ce moment-là, j'ai dit: Je retournerai. Pas du tout, du tout. Mais j'avais beaucoup peur. Oui, beaucoup peur pour moi et les enfants. Donc jusqu'à présent, ça fait 23 ans, mais à chaque fois qu'il arrive quelque chose, je le vis. Je le revis tout."

"Il disait que c'est moi qui le mettait en colère. 'Laisse-moi, Laisse-moi me défouler.' Mais tu sais, ça durait 4 h, 4 h de gueulade. Puis là je m'en donnais dans ma chambre en petit bonhomme, puis je me mettais comme ça, (ses doigts dans ses oreilles, en position fœtus) mais il rentrait dans la chambre, perdait les pédales, il pétait la porte...puis là, il s'en donnait à côté de mon oreille, puis il me gueulait dans les oreilles. Ça fait que là, je partais en catastrophe, là, à nus pieds quasiment en pyjama. Puis là il me rattrapait dans dans l'entrée, puis il me disait 'Ma tabarnak, si tu ressorts une autre fois, je te tue.' C'est terrible, terrible, terrible. Il me prenait par le cou et je couchais par terre"

“Je suis enceinte de ma deuxième. Et là ouh, là à moment donné là, j’suis écoeurée de me faire uh engueuler là. Et là j’ai eu le malheur de lui dire: ‘T’es mal placé pour parler’. Il a sauté sur moi il m’a pris au collet il m’a levé, et il me dit ‘ferme ta gueule je vais mettre mon poignet dans ta face.’”

“J’étais dû appeler les policiers parce que y’est aller comme dans le cabanon, chercher des fusils, une carabine, pis il s’en venait vers la maison”.

“Il était quelqu’un qui pouvait jeter les affaires, détruire. Donc il pouvait jeter son cellulaire à terre et puis s’exploser. Il pouvait taper sur le volant, il pouvait dans son ancien boulot. D’ailleurs, les gens, ses collègues lui disaient mais t’es fou parce que! Il balançait même des outils à travers l’atelier. Donc, mais ça je l’ai toujours dit, “Tu sais que cette colère là, il va falloir que tu la gères. Et si tu dépasses un jour les limites, ça sera terminé entre nous. Parce que cette ligne là, tu ne devras pas la franchir.”

Financial abuse was mentioned 13 times by 8 of the 13 participants. Forms of financial abuse described included partners using the survivor’s credit card, bank fraud, forcing the survivor into prostitution, disposing of the survivor’s personal belongings, controlling the choice of work and income of the survivor, refusing to acknowledge or address financial problems, and the use of financial hardship and bankruptcy to manipulate or harm the survivor.

“Même si je n’étais plus avec mon conjoint, je vivais de la violence financière. Il a coupé, il a coupé toutes les sources. Il y avait plus à manger ici. J’étais tellement mince que y’a plus de vêtements qui me faisaient là.”

“And then finances, finances. Oh, my gosh. That was the worst. This is why pretty much jealousy, jealousies and security and finances is what caused our divorce...I was supporting the family. I paid all the bills, bought all the food, took literally paid everything. I don't even – I felt like he was my fourth child. He could never account properly for his money. Um. He didn't know where it was going.”

Sexual abuse was reported by six of the participants and included one report of the partner forcing the survivor into prostitution, along with reports of sexual addiction, pornography addiction, sexual assault, marital rape and non-consensual sex in order to force the survivor to become pregnant. Deliberately depriving their partner of sexual and relational intimacy was also described by two participants.

“He definitely raped me in marriage. If I needed sex to stop he would sometimes still force me to finish.”

“Et je te dirais aussi la violence, ça a été aussi dans la privation aussi. Donc moi j'ai été privée de relations sexuelles. Si, j'ai été privée de de de connexion tout court, privée de de discussion, parce que ça allait pas dans le dans le timing qu'il voulait ou dans la façon qu'il voulait. Donc j'ai aussi appris que la privation était une forme de silence. C'est une forme aussi de de violence”.

Two survivors dealt with incest (their partners towards their children) One survivor described how she uncovered a history of incest in her partner's family, and eventually found out he had attempted to sexually assault her daughter.

Participant: *“I had three girls by then and all of them have suffered trauma”.*

Interviewer: *“So this was...This was abuse on the girls?”*

Participant: *“Yeah, yeah, yeah”.*

Not all situations of abuse are completely one-sided and violence from an abusive partner inevitably stirs up emotions in the person being abused. One participant described how she slapped her physically violent partner on one occasion after being forced by him to have sex, and described her response as coming from ‘out of her own trauma’.

The social consequences of abuse were mentioned 6 times by participants and included survivors being deliberately isolated from family and friends, and having their movements outside the house restricted, controlled

and monitored by their partner. One participant described how being forbidden by her partner to discuss their problems with friends was a way for him to keep her isolated. Another described profound feelings of isolation and despair following her traumatic separation, which was then followed by years of living alone.

“J’étais complètement isolée. Je parlais plus à ma famille. J’étais complètement isolée de cette partie là de ma vie. J’étais vraiment seule avec moi-même, là”.

“J’ai même été interdite de dire que ça n’allait pas parce qu’il ne voulait pas que je parle de nos problèmes. Donc on a un mode de fonctionnement complètement différent. Donc moi, par respect, je disais rien ou très peu. Donc ce qui m’a encore plus isolée”.

“Puis c’est ça. Quand je me suis séparé, j’ai été plusieurs années seule, seule, seule, seule. J’suis encore seule...T’as pas idée. T’as pas idée. (pleurant)”.

The ongoing effects of the abuse on participants’ mental and physical health, even post-separation, was observed and documented by the interviewers (39 comments). Several participants described having suicidal ideation, episodes of depression, various physical ailments and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder during and in the years following their separation. Interestingly, some participants described how these moments of despair propelled them into taking agency over their situation.

“Je pense que, c’est le choc post-traumatique qui a sauvé ma vie parce que j’étais incapable de retourner dans sa présence [de son partenaire]. Donc ça m’a sauvé la vie. C’est Dieu m’a rentrée, Il m’a rendue complètement incapable. Incapable physiquement, psychologiquement. J’étais brisée.”

“...j’suis encore dans le choc post-traumatique. Puis j’avais commencé une thérapie en neurofeedback, à l’été 2021. Mais c’est pas t’sais, il aurait fallu que je continue encore plus longtemps.”

“J’étais super suicidaire à l’époque.”

“Ca fait très mal parce que uh, c’est comme si qu’il m’a volé ma vie de couple, il m’a volé ma vie de famille, il m’a comme volé ma vie finalement”.

Regarding the experience and consequences of abuse on family members, there were 29 comments from 8 of the participants. The primary emerging theme (21 comments) described the emotional abuse of children by partners including controlling behaviour, manipulation of children and other family members, harassment and threats to life. In one case, a participant described how the Direction de la Protection de la Jeunesse suspected sexual abuse of her daughter, but were never able to prove it. Participants described both the immediate trauma for children of living with domestic abuse, as well as the long-term consequences on their mental and physical health. Children experienced ongoing emotional, physical and sexual trauma, as well as spiritual trauma (e.g., being judged and shamed by church members), which continued in some cases for years following the separation.

“There were multiple times around that season where I literally left um with my kids in pajamas, like, with no shoes, whatever it might be, um, just because we just needed to get out, because it was not okay”.

“...he grabbed her and started shaking her and getting violent with her...then there was the threatening to throw her off the balcony – second floor of the balcony, because she was smoking outside, it was like, ‘if I see her smoking outside on the balcony I’m going to throw her off the balcony.’ Se-Second floor, she would have died”.

“Pis uh, ma fille elle allait se cacher en dessous de son lit, mon mari faisait des colères t’sais y se fâcher pour des riens. Pis t’sais c’ était, mes mes filles ont été très très abîmées par ça, à reproduire des relation toxiques elles aussi”.

“He was with us (after he insisted on moving back in) for a year and um, and I’m, like, dealing with the carnage that’s been left over from that point forward with my kids because it—it was, like, just, really horrible”.

“...mes enfants sont brisés, tu sais”.

The emotional distress of participants seeing their children suffer was observed and documented by the research team, and their comments highlight the serious nature of the short- and long-term consequences of domestic abuse on family members.

2.3. Role of Church teachings and practices

The description of the role and impact of church teachings and practices on the pre-existing beliefs and the experience of survivors both during the abuse and following disclosure elicited the largest number of comments of any section of the interviews (250). Below we present a summary of the emerging themes on teachings and practices participants found helpful (63 comments, about 25% of total comments in this section), and teachings and practices that were unhelpful (187 comments, about 75% of total comments in this section).

a. Helpful teachings and practices by church leadership during or after disclosure (63 comments)

Participants’ descriptions of the helpful teachings and practices of church leaders emphasized the non-judgmental support of survivors, along with teachings during sermons, conversations, or bible studies that abuse is wrong. Also helpful were teachings that reconciliation is not always possible, and that divorce is permitted in cases of abuse. Giving participants the permission to leave was mentioned as helpful by several participants.

“Yeah. The eldest pastor, well, the head pastor was trying to, was trying to give him (my husband) good advice and was trying to help us save our marriage. But then the, the old, the eldest pastor was saying, “you have to say when it's enough.”

You get to say when you, you know, you've tolerated it enough". Right. He gave me that power. »

One participant described how the honesty of her pastor about his own struggles gave her a sense of consolation and reassured her that the pastor understood her situation.

“Le pasteur a parlé de comment il avait une addiction à la prostitution là...euh, ça m'a comme donné un grand soulagement, qu'il était capable de dire ça, comme une confession là...pis j'étais comme, ok, ça c'est une église qui est vraiment terre à terre. Ça m'a accroché...Ça m'a donné une sensibilité, ça m'a comme donné un “Gros Hug”, comme si le Seigneur m'a envoyé quelqu'un pour m'aider”.

She went on to describe how regular check-ins given by the pastor and his wife influenced her spiritual and emotional recovery.

Other participants described the importance of church leaders believing them when they disclosed the abuse and showing non-judgmental care and compassion in practical ways (e.g., providing meals or financial aid), thereby providing an environment where survivors felt welcomed and safe.

“I remember going to a pastor's wife's home and uh, and, and really she's a friend as well, and just, sharing everything really. Like, and both of us just weeping and crying together and um, um, yeah... so... and then the pastor was made aware as well, um, and there was a conversation that was had.”

One participant who undertook the process of annulling her marriage, recounted how the priest who heard her case showed empathy when she described her situation to him.

“Je répondais à ses questions, j'ai pas pleuré une fois. C'est juste quand j'ai expliqué quand il m'avait poussé que whoop. J'ai pleuré. Puis lui aussi, il est venu les yeux pleins d'eau, juste pour te montrer comment c'est des gens humains”.

b. Helpful practices by church members or communities during or after disclosure (19 comments.)

As with their comments on the helpful practices of church leaders, survivors highlighted the importance of being believed when they disclosed their stories, as well as the non-judgmental support and compassion shown by church members, services of care, hospitality and provision during and after separation. Creation of safe spaces by fellow Christians were also important.

“I did feel loved and cared for within my church settings in sharing these things, overall. That there was deep compassion and like genuine empathy and, and pain felt alongside me and with my kids... I felt seen and, and encouraged and validated by my faith families that they knew that I was really committed to my marriage and I was not being treated as though I was, you know, just throwing in the towel, or whatever it was”.

“C’est c’est mon amie, que je j’ai connu en église pis qui a étudié en pastorale pis tout ça, on se connaît depuis uhh, 28 ans, qui m’a hébergé chez elle, pendant 4 mois.”

“There was a really supportive Christian community for me, where, you know, I came out to those people and told them my story, and people held space and gave me grace and prayer and I was very grateful for that community. I realize that church is one level of Christian community that’s not always the best but then there’s other types of Christian community that can, you know, find solace in and comfort and real human beings who actually really love you, so, there was that. That was, that’s probably what helped me a lot. »

“Ils m’ont encadré là-bas avec les enfants....Il y a les gens qui m’ont aidé à déménager. Ils étaient vraiment là pour moi...Il y a eu, il y a même le pasteur m’avait conseillé, vu que mon garçon, de l’inscrire au soccer pour qu’il soit en contact avec d’autres garçons. Et puis les gens de l’église ont vraiment, m’ont

vraiment encadré. Il y a des hommes qui vraiment prenaient les enfants comme, comme s'ils étaient leurs propres enfants”.

c. Helpful practices by Christian therapists and therapeutic resources during or after disclosure.

Participants described how working with their therapist had helped them to recognize the abuse, acknowledge their emotions including feelings of anger, and recognize the difference between forgiveness and trust following abuse (19 comments). One participant described how their therapist had intervened by calling the Direction de la Protection de la Jeunesse in a situation of violence, since one of the children was under 18 years of age. Another said her Christian psychologist, ‘gave her permission to be angry’. At least two participants recalled their therapists asking specific questions about their safety which served as an alarm bell in their lives. Several experiences with professional Christian therapists were reported as positive.

« Lui (mon thérapeute) m'a aidé à me séparer. Lui je l'ai consulté un an avant de me séparer, pis lui et m'a fait lire les livres pour que je comprenne que j'étais précieuse aux yeux de Dieu, des choses comme ça. »

There were several Christian resources listed by participants that they found very helpful during or after their abusive relationship. They also felt encouraged when helpful materials or resources were recommended by a fellow Christian, a Christian therapist or a friend from church. Resources included online videos by Christian counselors or pastors, books, talks or sermons touching on the topics of abuse, divorce or emotional well-being. Oftentimes, such resources helped survivors feel understood, brought them out of their feelings of isolation, gave them language and terms to help them understand what was going on in their marriages.

« Mon thérapeute m'a fait lire des livres aussi sur le pardon. Il m'a dit, 'pour une réconciliation, il dit oui t'as pardonné ton mari. Mais si lui il ne s'est pas repenti, il ne peut pas y avoir de réconciliation'.

« J'ai une amie à moi qui est très croyante aussi, qui m'envoie une vidéo d'un père en France, qui explique que malgré la religion, malgré la foi tout ça, il faut quitter ces relations-là. Ça m'a tellement confirmé dans ma décision pis m'a réconforté aussi. »

The findings on what survivors found helpful within teachings, practices and responses to disclosure have helped the Rapha team construct a list of recommendations, which can be found in the last section of this report.

d. Unhelpful teachings and practices before, during or after disclosure (187 comments)

When asked to describe unhelpful teachings by church leaders or general theological principles that were unhelpful, the primary theme that emerged related to teachings on the submission and subordination of women, and the imposition of hierarchical gender roles in church and home life (26 comments).

Enquêtrice: *“Plus des rôles traditionnels qui étaient poussés?”*

Participante: *“Oh oui. Bye-bye la carrière. Pis ensuite, tu restes mariée peu importe. Pis le divorce c'est inacceptable. C'est pas mal ça qu'on m'a enseigné. Même qu'un pasteur à un moment donné m'avait suggéré que...parce que j'avais beaucoup d'ambition...il avait dit que peut-être que Dieu voulait que j'arrête de travailler et que je reste à la maison. Pis j'étais comme...ben non, pas vraiment là...je pense pas que c'est vers ça que je suis appelée là ! (rires) Ça a fait un froid dans l'église”.*

“On entendait tout le temps des, des prêches sur la soumission...on ne parlait jamais de la violence, on ne parlait jamais du rôle de l'homme, comment exercer

son leadership dans l'amour et non dans la contrainte et dans la prise de pouvoir et dans la colère. Donc c'est beaucoup le rôle que l'Église m'a donné”.

The second major theme that emerged when discussing unhelpful teachings was on the prohibition of divorce (16 comments). When recounting their experiences of disclosure at church, participants qualified as negative such teachings on divorce or a theology of marriage that promoted its preservation at all costs. They reckoned this theology led to counseling survivors to remain in or return to abusive marriages and unsafe homes. For instance, one participant whose physically violent partner was the lead pastor described how a group of other pastors threatened her by telling her that she would be under the punishment or curse of God if she divorced, adding that in their view, a divorced woman was ‘worse than a prostitute’.

Another participant recalled an episode following a threat against her life involving a firearm. Her pastor called her to request that she return to her partner, on the very same day that the police filed charges against him.

Enquêtrice: *Et ils ont pas pris en compte ta sécurité?*

Participante: *“Ils l'ont pas pris en compte, oh non. Non. Il (le pasteur) l'a pas traité sérieusement parce que, quand que la journée que j'ai été porter plainte, au poste de police trois mois plus tard...cette journée, le pasteur m'appelait pour dire, 'ben là ça fait longtemps que vous êtes séparés, faudrait qu'on pense à ce que vous retourniez ensemble'. La journée même! J'ai dit 'Pardon, parce que je sors du poste de police. Je les ai entrées, il va être arrêté là'. J'ai dit qu' ils s'en vont l'arrêter, l'enquêteur s'en va l'arrêter. J'ai porté plainte, et la plainte est recevable (...) Mais le pasteur était prêt à ce que je retourne.”*

A third emerging theme is related to unhelpful teachings on abuse and a theology of suffering. Examples they gave included:

- ‘God allows abuse to happen’,
- ‘Jesus suffered so we should suffer too’,

- ‘Just pray and it will get better’, ‘
- You have to forgive him and take him back’,
- ‘Scripture condones physical violence’
- ‘Submission means forgiveness’.

One participant questioned the theological idea that love equals sacrifice, along with the belief that in the same way that Jesus suffered, survivors should endure suffering and abuse as a form of spiritual discipline.

“The whole pillar of Jesus’ sacrificial love on the cross can unintentionally be embedded in scaffolding for abusive relationships when we’re taught from childhood that love equals martyrdom. It’s reinforced as noble to sacrifice ourselves for the benefit of others so much that it can groom us to be abused and call it love”.

Finally, several participants highlighted a lack of teaching on abuse in church or in premarital counseling courses, along with a lack of teaching on safety, consent, sexual assault and rape (18 comments). Questions as to the lack of training for leaders were raised (e.g., leaders not knowing how to advise survivors, and inadequate premarital counseling).

“I never heard anything, you know, talking about safety of women ever in church I had never heard anything about leaving if women were in, in jeopardy, like I never heard – heck even with David and Bathsheba, like, never, consent was never brought up, rape was never a topic, absolutely not, like, it was adultery, not rape, which, to me now, just like, that’s so ridiculous, like it’s so ridiculous that we can’t even call things for what they are when women are violently raped...And that played into how I watched the culture go down when women were raped”.

e. Unhelpful postures or attitudes by church leaders (55 comments) and members (43 comments) following disclosure.

Responses from church leaders or members at larger that were considered unhelpful or harmful following disclosure included:

- Being advised not to seek professional help from outside the church following the abuse.
- Being told to simply pray, fast or have faith that God would eventually change the behaviour of their partner, which thereby prolonged the abuse.
- Being told that women are responsible for moderating the behaviour of men (e.g., the belief that a good Christian wife will change the behaviour of their husband).

Two primary emerging themes related to postures or responses following disclosure were minimizing abuse or minimizing the need for safety (23 comments). While discussing this theme, many participants wondered whether their churches properly understood certain forms of violence, such as emotional abuse. Violence that was not physical (i.e., didn't leave a scar) was therefore minimized. Most participants said their communities of faith were simply (even if it was unintentionally) not ready to deal with a crisis of abuse:

“There was certainly no action plan or insight.”

“They never asked if I was safe”.

Enquêtrice: *Est-ce que l'Église a pris en considération ta sécurité?*

Participante: *Pas du tout. Pas du tout.*

Situations where church leaders or members knowingly told survivors of abuse and their children to remain with or return to their abuser, knowingly choosing not to act following disclosure of the abuse (e.g., refusal to provide support to the survivor or contact appropriate authorities, and covering up of abuse), knowingly allowing the abusive partner to continue to hold a leadership or ministry role or who knowingly chose to do nothing following a disclosure,

were singled out as being particularly distressing and re-victimizing for survivors.

« Il (mon pasteur) a fini par me dire que ce ne 'serait pas impossible malgré le divorce que ton mari et toi, vous finissiez par avoir une résolution de conflit?' ...J'ai compris que je n'étais pas compris. J'ai pas compris qu'est-ce qu'il a compris de moi, je ne comprends pas. Ça a annulé tout le reste. Qu'est-ce qui? Mon mari, il a été accusé au criminel. Il y a eu une enquête criminelle. J'ai été victime d'actes criminels. C'est quoi le problème?!? C'est quoi que l'église veut? Il y a plein de gens qui ont analysé, qui ont, qui avaient l'autorité, les connaissances, qui ont dit 'C'est criminel'. Pis là, on parle de résolution de conflit?!? (pleurant) Quand quelqu'un veut ta mort! »

“If the church had been, if the church had called my husband to task properly, if patriarchal reinforcement hadn't affected the way my family responded to it ... my life would be radically different...I think their lack of action in certain ways was just as bad as any direct action, um, and it did more harm than good”.

“(the people in my community) were just telling me that like, it was like, my wellbeing as a human was being sacrificed on the altar of keeping a marriage together.”

“But they (my pastors) didn't want to deal. He said, “ just be submissive.” That's all he said. That's ridiculous. How could a pastor not get that? This guy's dangerous. What did I have to do as a woman to tell? Here is your friend. And he's spinning out of control. Nobody wants to deal with it. They just leave you. Yeah, that's what I'm finding our society is like. And so the Christians just go with society, too.”

The findings at this stage in the report raise several questions as to institutional betrayal or harms committed by religious authorities and organization bodies. This will be explored in our “Discussion” section of this report.

2.4. Descriptions of long-term consequences of abuse on survivors and children (114 comments)

“Je ne suis pas morte, mais je suis morte.” (pleurs) C'est tout ce que je peux dire”.

a. Long-term trauma and healing stories

Participants provided detailed descriptions (114 comments) of the effects of the abuse and trauma on themselves and their children. They described their feelings of fear, anger, shock, and betrayal towards their partner. They also mentioned feelings of self-doubt, regret for not leaving sooner, finding it difficult to ask for help, ambiguity towards their partner (love/hate), and conflicting emotions about whether to stay or leave. They described how they minimized the extent of the abuse to themselves and to others as a coping strategy. From their personal journeys, they highlighted how the healing process for survivors and their children has been long and complicated.

“Ça ma magané la santé , en dedans...psychologique, j'suis encore dans le choc poste traumatique”.

“...so it's nuanced, and it's gray, and I think that's what makes it complicated, you know, you don't have the black and white where it's just, this like horrible, evil, mean person all the time where it's, like, always dangerous and always not okay ... there's like, this chart or this cycle of abuse where there's this like explosion of of whatever it may look like and then there's apology, and remorse and everything, and trying to make it up until it continues to build again and then it goes back..”

“And, and... you know... as a Christian woman committed to marriage like, what does that look like? ... in looking back, for sure when I had my children, when things were not okay I – this makes me emotional, I should have left. I should have...and, I didn't”. (the participant begins to cry)

“You always start thinking that you're nuts. That no one believes you, that you must be just nuts”

Participants named residual feelings of intense anger, disappointment and hurt due to the failure of church leaders or fellow Christians to believe them, or to act when they knew that they or their children were being abused or in danger. Some participants described feeling torn after being given conflicting advice from different pastors within the same church. Participants said they felt they had to hide the abuse because of fear of judgment, feelings of shame, pressure to remain married, and pressure to protect their partner if the partner (or they themselves) were in a leadership position in church.

“I clearly feel very angry at the constructs of faith that encourage women to stay in situations that are harmful to them, whatever that looks like, whatever that broad term looks like. So, I think I’m just very angry. I’m angry at all that. And I’m angry at all that rhetoric and I just think it’s dangerous and it needs to be taken down...I’m angrier now than ever because now I have all this lived experience”.

“Je suis certaine qu’en église présentement y’a beaucoup de gens qui font du tort aux victimes de violence conjugale parce qu’ils ne sont pas du tout uh, informés. Ils sont pleins de jugement, ils sont dans un ancien pattern. Donc ça... ça vient ajouter..(pleurant) à la blessure. Il faut être très fort pour passer à travers de ça...Juste d’être une femme pour certaines personnes en église t’sais c’est, on est rien là, t’sais. Encore aujourd’hui, je trouve ça épouvantable...”

“How is it that we have friends that won't because they're terrified of what the guy can do? I was alone, terrified of what the guy could do. My own husband. He had a gun from his grandfather, and he was threatening to use it. And I didn't know if he was going to use it on us. But I go, why leave a woman alone with this? Because you're afraid? ... I don't know how to address that, but that, to me, is the worst thing, is to just leave and not do anything to protect your best friend and her three daughters”.

The marginalization of single and divorced people when they were not allowed to participate in certain church events, was named by some participants as an issue of ongoing stigmatization. Especially harmful was the perception that the church community had sided with their abusive partner.

“Finalement, le sentiment que j'avais avec mon ex-conjoint de ne pas être une bonne personne, d'être un peu folle, de ne pas comprendre comment je fonctionnais. Ça s'est reproduit là, parce que finalement, mon ex-conjoint est mis dans une situation (à l'église) où il se développe, où on le voit se développer avec un certain leadership qu'on honore. Donc j'ai l'impression d'être comme le vilain petit canard finalement.”

Being perceived as a potential temptation to married men was described by one participant as particularly hurtful.

“Il te garde toujours célibataire avec les célibataires ... fais'que là tu te ramasses que les femmes mariées t'invitent pas parce que t'es une menace pour leur mari. Tu te ramasses avec juste des célibataires”.

b. Faith journeys post-separation

Descriptions of the participants' journeys of faith (62 comments) provided numerous examples of personal and spiritual growth, and hope. Several participants described how their faith had grown and evolved, and how it had been an important element in their healing journey. Some described how they felt that being connected to a supportive church had been helpful for them, and how over time, they had themselves become advocates for change. Several described having undertaken deep theological reflections, either through readings, discussion or even formal education, and their research, lived experiences and critical reflections created an evolution in their belief systems.

“I feel like, um, I've been allowed, like, deeper empathy and compassion and understanding and faith and hope and longsuffering and, and so many things and, you know, God is good, you know, even in the midst of suffering and pain. And I, I don't just believe it, I know it, like, I've lived it”.

“J’ai ouvert mes horizons, vis à vis les confessions mettons. Si la personne croit en Dieu et à la base de la Bible, j’suis comme, ok. On peut faire quelque chose de bon. J’suis moins fermée d’esprit par rapport aux autres dénominations.”

“I started questioning women and the church, watching all of this stuff going down and I was like hmmm this is really problematic. This whole patriarchal structure is really, really like causing a lot of damage to a lot of women... it’s a lot of men who take charge who don’t believe women, who don’t have a lot of empathy for women, who think women make stuff up, lie, um... charmed by men”.

“Disons que pendant mes études en théologie, ça m’a juste un peu plus assise sur c’était quoi, comment Dieu voyait le mariage. Hum hum. Donc c’était plutôt un constat. Triste de me dire que finalement mon mariage n’en était pas un. Tu sais, on a discuté un peu plus au début, oui. Très honnêtement, ça m’a beaucoup, beaucoup questionnée.”

“So I’ve not been a conventional Christian but I feel like, i-in many ways, like, my journey’s taught me a lot about the heart of God, in very unconventional contexts”.

“Pis je continue en église, t’sais j’aurais pu quitter l’église, être découragée... mais je travaille déjà en église, je travaille vraiment pour l’église, mon travail... Donc, je ne quitterais pas l’église, c’est ma vie.”

“It’s been a desert road, but I feel like it’s been, in some ways maybe the road I was supposed to travel, um that I’m, if I had just stayed in a, you know, a marriage and not been launched through pain out on this journey, I would have discovered so much less about who God really is in the context of like the bigger picture. So it’s been used to like, grow me in some crazy ways”.

“...And I feel like I never lost faith in God. I lost faith in the church. So I feel like I lost, um, I lost faith in the church at that point. And losing faith in the church caused me to lose faith in my marriage, if that makes any sense.”

Participants also described feeling spiritually adrift, questioning their beliefs about the goodness or the existence of God in the light of the abuse and the response of the church, and finding attending church to be unhelpful. One participant said that while she still attended a church, she now considered herself to be an atheist. Sentiments included feelings of mistrust towards authority, instability, disillusionment.

“Disons que encore une fois, moi je ne suis pas née de la dernière pluie...je comprends l'enjeu dans l'église, mais ça n'empêche que j'ai encore beaucoup, beaucoup, beaucoup d'incompréhensions. J'ai encore beaucoup de souffrance liées à ça...Aujourd'hui, je suis personne. Je fais plus partie du corridor de la vision de ces gens-là (les gens à l'église). Donc j'en souffre aujourd'hui. Donc je suis encore en train de guérir, d'essayer de pas nourrir mon cœur de rancœur, même si c'est difficile.”

“we pray and we seek solace in God and we pray to God for relief from harm, and it's like, you know that, that was just such a time of, like a lot of prayer and a lot of like confusion and just being, feeling very adrift.”

“Bien moi j'ai quitté l'église un peu choqué là, tu sais.”

“I have a particularly kind of frustrated relationship with the church, probably because ... at this particular juncture of my spiritual and faith journey I don't even have time for Sunday morning worship because it doesn't really actually provide me with the tools of like life and connection and community that I'm actually seeking ... it was very helpful for many many years like, I loved it, but for now it doesn't, it doesn't do it for me any more like I'm seeking something else”

2.5. Recommendations of survivors (98 comments)

Participants made 98 comments to the research team when asked what they would have found helpful during their experiences of abuse. Three themes emerged from this section: the need for safeguarding and support for survivors, more consistent teaching for youth and adults on healthy and abusive relationships and consent, and the importance of church teaching and practices that foster gender equality and protect women.

a. Recommendations for safeguarding and support for survivors

When asked what they would have found helpful, over half of the recommendations from participants highlighted the need for churches to be safe places for survivors (53 comments). Safety in church was by far the biggest preoccupation of participants. Understanding the needs of survivors for support and healing, providing safe spaces such as support groups, and giving them the time and space they need to rebuild their lives without judgment was a recurring theme.

Participants mentioned the importance of church leaders acknowledging publicly that domestic violence is happening in church communities.

“I want people to be real. This is what's happening in marriages”.

“Mais de savoir que la violence existe dans les foyers, c'est pas comme nouveau, ça existe”.

Participants described the need for leadership to recognize that spiritual, emotional and verbal abuse are forms of domestic abuse. They wanted church leaders to respond proactively and appropriately when a disclosure is made. The need for creating and implementing an action plan and a safeguarding procedure was repeatedly mentioned, along with the need for churches to be connected to local professional resources, and communicate that information to their members.

“I think if the church had had better tools. Then, maybe I wouldn't have walked away when I did... if I had felt safer, maybe I could have advocated for myself better if I felt safer within the church, if I felt heard within the church, I could

have been more confident in explaining things differently...I think the outcome would have still come. Divorce would have still come. But I think if the church had a better understanding of my situation and if I had the emotional support of my pastor, then I wouldn't, I would have probably not walked away from the church and I could have gone through my divorce without feeling alone”.

“Je demande pas à l’église d’être féministe, je demande à l’église de comprendre, de connaître, t’sais et d’intervenir adéquatement. Pas de détruire encore plus quelqu’un qui est déjà détruite”.

“I think, also, you know, once in a while t-to share just, you know maybe as a, as a grouping, but like to share that this is a safe space for people to share their authentic stories and experiences and that it’s okay if it gray and it’s messy, and it’s okay if – not even just that it’s okay but that-that... there’s a willingness to journey in that gray and that mess, whatever that looks like, that you’re not burdening”.

“I think it’s that, you know, if there are partnerships between churches and, um, you know, organizations, supports, resources that are there and available to do that hard work, then I think that could be really powerful”.

As a safety practice, participants felt it was important that churches recognize the limits of what they can do for survivors, rather than assuming that the church should have the answer for everything. Referring to the appropriate resources at the right time was also recommended by participants.

“Déjà qu’ils comprennent leurs propres limites parce que souvent, il y a une forme de vouloir tout faire "parce qu'on a la réponse à tout". Donc si tu ne comprends pas ta propre limite, tu ne peux pas avoir un être, un lieu de guérison. Parce que la guérison, ça peut être aussi ça, "c'est ma limite”.

One participant highlighted the need for church culture to preserve confidentiality when a disclosure is made, since gossip within small but

well-connected evangelical communities in Québec can be a barrier to disclosure.

“La confidentialité, faut qu'elle soit gardée. Parce que personne va aller le dire, si ça fait le tour de l'église. Pis comme on sait que c'est des petites églises évangéliques là euh. Que tout ceci pis ça te rebondi uhh, tu vas te taire pour le reste de tes jours là”.

One participant described how Christian survivors often wrestle with questions about how to understand their faith in the context of domestic violence. She suggested that churches may have an opportunity to provide non-judgmental spiritual and pastoral support and resources to survivors, in addition to the help offered by social services or health care professionals.

“I think it's just, it's very complicated because, like, I'm right now working with um, a bunch of different government organizations and though the support and care can be really good, and excellent at times, there's a dynamic and a dimension that's not represented in there, and that's the spiritual side, and that's fine because sometimes, you know, you need a resource that's like very practical, but sometimes it's much more than that and to unpack the complexities of how faith and marriage and church and, you know, all of that intertwined, like, that's hard to tease apart. And, you know, you might go and have services with – I don't know, I just, I feel like, you know, being a—a Christian it's very multi-faceted and you're not hitting all of the facets if you're going with someone or, or a professional service or something like that or a body or organization that doesn't have that, there”.

“So I think there needs to be more support within the church for people who've decided to go through divorce, without the shame, with understanding and compassion and empathy”.

b. Teaching youth and young adults about healthy relationships

Another principle recommendation (29 comments) was for churches to teach both youth and adults in church about the difference between abusive

and healthy relationships, as well as related topics such as addressing mental health, recognizing trauma, healthy sexuality, consent and respect for women. Participants recommended women be taught about how to maintain healthy boundaries and safety in relationships, and that young people and adults should be taught that anger and violence should not be used to resolve problems in relationships. Several participants described the need for better marriage preparation that includes discussion of how to identify domestic violence, as well as guidance on where to find resources to help youth and adults in relationships or those considering marriage.

“I think there’s a lot of work that can be done. Like, what is it to have a healthy relationship, you know, how can you be a safe person, what happens when your emotions are out of check, what does mental health look like, na na na, all that stuff...so I think that just giving a picture and idea of what you, what it could look like, you know, how to be a safe human being”.

“je pense que c’est comme de l’ordre de l’accompagnement. Juste pas, euh, un cours de préparation (de mariage) , mais c’est d’accompagner deux personnes, pis séparément et en couple. Pour voir si c’est vraiment un projet...un projet de chacun, qu’ils pourront vraiment vivre.”

“we need to just start by looking very closely at our own relationships and figuring out what does violent–violence look like and sometimes it’s, yeah just to stop normalizing anger as way of – yeah that’s just, that’s just boy’s anger or rage, these are things that can be very dangerous and are killing people so. It’s like a hard no, and, again, it’s so complicated cause I think our relationship to anger and male anger and all that, like I think it needs to be, it just, we need to really, really stop the presses and just be willing to have some good, hard conversations about that.”

“Toute la sexualité, comment vivre une sexualité saine, pis en préservant l’autre personne avec le consentement pis le respect.”

c. Theological teachings that promote respect and health between men and women

The third area of recommendations that emerged concerned church and theological teachings and practices (16 comments). Participants wanted to see how church teachings and practices that reflect the equality of women and men in the church and at home could actually help model healthier, less controlling relationships.

“What I want to see them do now is have their hearts and eyes open to being more egalitarian and like actively, like, not just paying lip service to it”.

“C'est pas un sermon du dimanche matin là, les maris, aimez votre femme! Pis là, les femmes soyez soumises. Soumission, 'sous la mission de'...ouf c'est tellement niaiseux là! Je les trouve tellement...Ça ne veut rien dire. 'Votre mari a besoin d'être votre héro. Il a besoin d'être respecté'. Tout le monde a ce besoin là là! C'est quoi là? C'est quoi là?”

“Oui ben oui, parce que t'sais, ils ont tellement enseigné que la femme doit être soumise c'est qu'ils ont oublié. Ça veut pas dire que t'es pas égal, ça veut pas dire que tu n'as pas de droits, ça veut pas dire que t'as le droit de te plier dessus. Tu comprends? Fait que là, les hommes, ils prennent cette petite affaire là où ils font ce qu'ils veulent avec des affaires qui n'ont pas d'allure. Mais moi j'aurais aimé qu'on m'enseigne. L'homme et la femme sont égaux. Même si le rôle est différent. Pis que même si moi je pense que devant Dieu, le mari a une plus grande responsabilité que la femme, mais ça veut pas dire que ça lui donne le droit de piler dessus là”.

“C'est le respect des femmes. C'est pas parce qu'on est femme, puis on est moins que rien. Et puis oui, on est de l'aide pour les hommes quand on est marié, c'est une aide. C'est pas comme, “c'est la femme qui fait tout.” T'es pas esclave de tout, c'est le respect entre les deux dans le respect mutuel. Et puis Dieu nous voit comme unique. Et puis on a chacun notre valeur. Devant Dieu pareil, on n'est pas une personne qui vaut plus que l'autre”.

Certain participants wondered how having women in positions of church leadership would have fostered an environment where women felt safer and more valued.

“I wish they had fostered... like, I crave strong female leadership...I wish they had fostered and groomed me for leadership as much as the men, and the women around me. Um... yeah, I just saw males consistently groomed for leadership and women were groomed for submission..I think if I had strong female role models and if I had been fostered as much as strong male role models I wouldn't have felt like I didn't belong or like church wasn't for me or I wasn't the right fit for it”.

“...if they want to deal with abuse, like, domestic abuse in all the different ways...physical, spiritual, all, emotional...I think consent is the start to me of all of the teachings because, you know, if you don't want to be abusive or controlling then that's mutuality that's needed in order to not have that. And I, I think where you don't have mutuality in leadership, in teaching, in any of the authority structures in your organization I think it's very hard to, to teach mutuality because your, your structure doesn't, doesn't showcase that.... Um, so I don't really think just talking is enough, I think it needs to be applied in order to help men. This idea that women are equals has to be displayed. Consent, equality, all of that, are the things I wish they were taught and displayed in a church environment...there's just that inequality in how women are valued and seen in those environments and...I wish, for, for domestic violence I wish boys grew up watching men and women treated exactly the same, in terms of equality. And in terms of respect and in terms of authority, and um, that there's... there'd be no hierarchy”.

“(I wish) more women in leadership and the men who are in leadership would take more of a posture of listening. So more listening, less preaching. This ah really preachy dynamic is, is um, can be, you know, I'm not sure, not everybody feels safe being preached to and at, it's kind of condescending.”

Participants recommended that church leaders should teach clearly that abuse is a legitimate reason for divorce.

“The whole concept of like, no you should come into your marriage knowing that if you mistreat your spouse consistently, unrepentantly, your spouse absolutely should leave you and that that is love. It’s not loving to enable an abusive relationship by staying....sometimes I feel like, in a broken world where abuse happens, the most loving thing you can do for an abuser is to leave them and that that should be taught in the church....I think if people come to the table knowing that they can lose their partner if they mistreat them, they’re less likely to mistreat them, less likely to take each other for granted. And it would just be healthier for relationships”.

The importance for women to remain strong, to resist violence and promote solidarity was described in the following way:

“Fait que c'est de là que les femmes. Il faut s'affirmer! Oui, c'est là que fait que c'est là qu'il faut s'affirmer.....Mais sais tu qui va faire la réforme? C'est nous autres les femmes, c'est nous autres, mais les vrais. Les vraies femmes intelligentes, sincères, mais il y en a beaucoup. Et c'est pas parce que je veux me prendre pour un autre, mais c'est parce que j'ai trop souffert”.

3. Discussion

Five overarching themes emerged from the interview data: 1) the scope and consequences of domestic abuse; 2) beliefs and church practices that were facilitators or barriers to disclosure, and the support and safety of participants; 3) the additional and specific impact of spiritual abuse for survivors from faith communities; 4) the reporting of secondary spiritual abuse by church leaders; and 5) the differing spiritual journeys of participants both during and after the abuse.

3.1 The scope and consequences of domestic violence

The accounts of abuse candidly given by the thirteen participants were disturbing and in many cases, graphic. While the research team anticipated hearing about situations of violence, they were nonetheless surprised by the extreme nature of the violence that was reported. Participants described multiple forms of abuse, often experienced simultaneously, and talked of feelings of fear, powerlessness, shame and confusion. They described being subjected to multiple forms of coercive control such as (but not limited to) intimidation, gaslighting, humiliation, threats, neglect, false accusations, manipulation and harassment. There was one case of kidnapping. Others had their choice of work and income controlled, or their partners used financial hardship to manipulate or deliberately harm them.

The reports of spiritual abuse by partners given by all of the participants were almost twice as frequent as physical abuse. They are discussed in more detail in section 3 below.

The extent of the physical abuse within this small sample of only 13 women was staggering. They reported enduring assault with a weapon, abduction, punching, pushing, kicking, strangling, threats of murder, violence towards pets, and damaging of property. Two cases involved firearms. All participants described experiencing some form of physical abuse, and almost half recounted being afraid that they were going to die at the hands of their partner.

Some participants described harrowing accounts of sexual abuse including sexual assault and marital rape. One participant was forced into prostitution by her partner (this was arguably a case of proxenetism). In another case, a participant's partner was found to have attempted to sexually abuse their children. The survivor discovered some years later that the church leaders knew that the abuse was happening, but never told her. This same church leader told her, "to just submit" to her husband when she came seeking counsel, despite knowing the facts of the abuse. The experience of betrayal for this participant was particularly devastating.

The consequences of domestic abuse on the children of survivors need to be highlighted. Participants described both the short-term and long-term

trauma for children living with domestic abuse, the effects of which often continued into adulthood.

3.2 Beliefs and practices that were facilitators or barriers to disclosure, and the support and safety of participants

One of the research questions of the Rapha Project was, “Do victims choose to disclose (or not disclose) their experiences to their communities of faith?”, and in consequence, why would a person make the choice to not disclose their experiences to someone at their church or parish. The survey results from Phase 1 revealed that 49% of people who identified as victims (or who had experienced violence by an intimate partner) chose to disclose their experiences within their faith community. We also found, from the research, that this was lower than the rates of disclosure in the United Kingdom¹⁸ and in France¹⁹. Gathering our findings from the survey and from the interviews, the data suggests that some of the **reasons why a person would decide to remain silent within their church or community of faith** are as follows.

a. Fear of judgment fuelled by a culture of gossip and shame

Many participants spoke of their feelings of being judged harshly for either complaining about their situations, questioning the response of the leadership, or for their decision to leave their marriage. Amongst the recommendations from survivors, creating a judgment-free environment (or similar sentiments) was very high on their list of priorities. Many participants named gossip as a behaviour that deterred them from sharing their experiences. Several participants said that if they did share what was happening

¹⁸ In the Turn the Tide study, 86% of respondents chose to disclose their experiences of domestic violence to someone at their church. Turn the Tide : Developing understanding and effective responses to domestic abuse in Christian faith communities.

[<https://www1.chester.ac.uk/news/research-highlights-need-church-leaders-support-domestic-abuse-survivors>] (consulté le 10 octobre 2023)

¹⁹ In Murielle Selon’s work, 66% of respondents confided in someone at their church. Selon, Murielle, « La violence conjugale dans les églises évangéliques en France : la comprendre pour agir », Paris : L’Harmattan, 2022.

and the response was judgmental, they felt pushed to leave their church. Interestingly, most participants in the study are no longer in the same community of faith today that they were in during the period of abuse.

“When I left that marriage well it was very hard for my relationship with the church, uh, because people would judge, I felt people would judge me, and um people and it was very, you know, it was very abrupt, confusing behaviour because people also saw us as a couple, we would go, he would go to church with me sometimes, so people knew him at the church and... and I know people were, you know, it’s very gossipy and people were probably like what’s going on?”

“On a peur d’en parler, justement, d’être jugé parce qu’il n’y a pas d’écoute, il y a juste le jugement qui nous attend.”

“We need that, that understanding that we’re not going to go to hell. And because, you know, its shame, they put a lot of shame behind divorce.”

b. A culture of taboo topics

A lack of open dialogue around certain topics: sexuality, mental health, violence, consent and conflict was named as a motivator for maintaining silence among survivors. In the survey results from Phase 1 of the project, the findings clearly demonstrated that domestic violence is not widely taught or discussed in churches in Québec, either from the lectern or in organic small groups. When such topics are so under-discussed, a certain taboo seems to develop around them. Others felt that there is an unspoken expectation that marriage as a Christian couple needs to maintain a good appearance and harmony, so there is very little opportunity to talk about conflict or difficulty within relationships.

“I disclosed mostly with, um, people in this church, a small church that I started going to but not much. I just basically didn't talk much about it because nobody knew more than I did. It's basically been that way and nobody really wants to talk about it either. They want to be, you know, you're supposed to be doing your jobs as whatever God has given you to do.”

“...the bulk response was just to not want to talk or deal or reach out, like, was just to kind of ignore the whole thing.”

“Tu sais même les enjeux dans le couple, on va dire basique, pas très grave, ça ne se parle pas. Il ne faut pas qu'on dise que ça aille mal dans un couple”.

c. Previous responses from family members, church and social services

Several participants recounted receiving excellent services and support from shelters, social workers, therapists, churches or Christian groups, police officers and community resources. However, when family members, church leaders or social and health services in the community respond inadequately to a situation of domestic violence, this usually pushes a survivor further into a state of silence. Many experts state that the process of disclosing one's experience of intimate partner violence is fraught with self-doubt, emotional labour and hesitation. Therefore, if a person discloses the abuse and asks for assistance, there is a small window of opportunity to build trust with them.

Enquêtrice: *À qui est-ce que vous avez divulgué la violence? Vers qui est-ce que vous êtes tourné pour du soutien?*

Participante: *À personne. À personne! Parce que bien, une fois que j'appelle la police, parce qu'il passa proche de me tuer. Puis c'était la journée de notre anniversaire de mariage. Hum.*

Enquêtrice: *Est ce que la police a été aidante?*

Participante: *Pantoute. Ça a été pire. Il y en avait deux. Il y en a un ...Qui a dit, «retirez votre plainte, votre plainte », puis là ils disaient à mon mari 'laissez la tranquille'. Mais après, quand je suis revenu à la maison, là, il fallait que j'affronte l'autre, là. Oui, c'est ça.*

“Donc moi j'ai appelé le CLSC. Ils me disaient que personne ne pouvait m'aider parce qu'ils ne vont pas t'aider tant qu'il n'y arrive pas quelque chose. C'est pour ça, ça fait ça fait comme genre 23 ans jusqu'à présent, quand j'entends soit un

mari qui tue la femme, moi je revis tout ça encore parce que je sais qu'il n'y a pas d'aide, il n'y a aucune aide. Même si tu vas frapper aux portes de la police, CLSC, c'est n'importe qui. Ils disent ils peuvent rien faire sans que la personne ne fait pas quelque chose. Mais quand il fait quelque chose, mais c'est trop tard."

A harmful, denigrating or neglectful response from an entity or institution (family, the police, social services) will likely fray a person's trust in other institutions. The Rapha team observed this in the participants' testimonials. Some were determined to seek out support from alternative networks or groups, Christian or other, when an initial group was incredulous or unhelpful upon disclosure. One participant, for instance, saw a leader in her parish take the side of her abusive partner. She therefore turned towards a prayer community who welcomed her and believed her:

"Elle a accueilli mon conjoint à bras grands ouverts comme une victime. Il était laissé par sa femme...oh pour moi c' était une trahison, vraiment j'ai, j'étais très blessée, j'étais trahie, j'étais incomprise...(Ensuite je me suis rendue au groupe des Soeurs de la Miséricorde) C'est toute des femmes, c'est le comité de prière je crois. Et là je leur raconte ce que je viens de vivre. Je devais comme, moi le Seigneur m'a donné des grâces de force là, des grâces qui fait là que j'y aille pour vivre ça parce que j'ai eu une force incroyable. Pour partir de chez moi, pour tout vivre ça y'avait une force intérieure...Et c'est des soeurs qui ont, qui ont été au début sage-femmes qui ont, toujours aidé des femmes monoparentales tout ça...C'est des femmes, qui accueillent dans le non-jugement".

Other participants, however, were discouraged or fearful following an unhelpful response and therefore did not continue to disclose their situation to anyone, including leaders or members of their church.

d. Church teachings and practices as barriers to disclosure, support and safety

Nearly 75% of the comments with respect to the response of churches to disclosure of abuse referred to unhelpful teachings and practices that the

participants had experienced. Church teachings that did not permit a woman to divorce her husband (in all cases, even in the case of abuse) were described by all the participants as being especially dangerous, forcing women and children to remain in abusive situations. They reported that teachings on the submission of women had discouraged them from asserting their rights to self-preservation and the protection of their children after the abuse started. Teachings on enduring abuse as a form of suffering endorsed by Scripture were described as unhelpful, as were teachings on the necessity to forgive and be reconciled, regardless of the circumstances. Put simply, many participants naturally felt, from the general teachings in their church, that they had no option but to remain in their abusive marriages.

A person's decision to share or disclose their experience is very personal and is driven by numerous factors: timing, a desire for change, fear for their safety and that of their children, a need for comfort or prayer, or to find a safe space where they can safely express their feelings. Multiple resources are available to help friends, family and members of the community to be systems of support in such cases. The Rapha data from Phase 1 and the testimonials from Phase 2 help shed some light on the reasons why a person would or would not disclose their experiences at church. Christian women in Québec seem especially hesitant to disclose their stories of domestic violence.

In this report, we have many excellent examples of how a person can be well-received, believed and supported when she discloses her experiences of abuse. Church teachings, practices and organizational structure can all be factors that can help a survivor navigate her relationship, her exit to safety and begin her journey of healing. To foster an environment that is open and encourages people to disclose their trauma of any kind, we need only look to the testimonies in this report as to how the larger Body of Christ responded in love, mercy and compassion.

3.3 Spiritual abuse as a form of domestic violence – the need for deeper study

Of all the forms of domestic violence, it is possible that spiritual abuse is the least known. It does not receive as much attention (e.g. in the form of study,

research, education or awareness) as other forms of violence. Websites and women's shelters frequently neglect to list this form of violence on their information pages, or it is given but the most general and vague description.

It is abundantly clear, based on our interviews, that this is indeed a tangible, damaging and very present form of domestic violence, and it likely manifests itself in family-based violence and other gender-based violences in general. Spiritual abuse was the second most frequently reported form of abuse in this study, and was mentioned by all the participants (45 comments).

Participants reported experiencing spiritual abuse *almost twice as* frequently as physical abuse. This included behaviours such as spiritual gaslighting (questioning the survivor's faith), using Scripture to dominate a partner, threatening them with punishment from God if they chose to divorce, and forcing them not to disclose the abuse in order to protect the abuser's ministry role. Correspondingly, several survivors listed denigrating comments made towards their beliefs, efforts to minimize their involvement at church or in a community of faith, and partners joining a religious activity in an effort to shadow or control them as instances of spiritual abuse in the relationship.

Based on our research, and on what participants described to us from their experiences, we developed the following working definition of spiritual abuse as a form of domestic violence:

Spiritual abuse within an intimate partner relationship occurs when one partner employs spiritual or religious teachings, practices or experiences, or models patriarchal organizational structures to dominate or control the other partner. Abusive behaviours can include forcing or prohibiting the partner to participate in religious or spiritual gatherings, using religious texts or teachings to control or coerce a partner to one's will, denigrating one's beliefs or convictions, forcing a partner to do something that goes against one's moral or religious convictions, codes or beliefs, using mystical or supernatural experiences (through vision, prayer, dreams or messages from the divine) to convince or coerce a partner to do something against their will, or discouraging, denigrating or blocking one's dreams and self-determination.

Spiritual abuse is especially pernicious because it touches the innermost workings of a person's soul, their worldview, sense of self, faith, and understanding of how they are viewed by God, and is detrimental to their sense of belonging within their spiritual community. Such abuse often results in a deep sense of shame, loss of faith, guilt, inability to ground oneself in one's own beliefs, loss of hope or a sense of a hopeful future. Equally harmful is the involvement of religious communities, organizations or authorities in the cycle of abuse, if these entities serve to reinforce the abuser's behaviours and words.

Given the extent of the problem as reported in this study, further study of spiritual abuse is needed to better understand the impact on survivors of domestic abuse within churches, and how best to address it.

3.4 Secondary spiritual abuse – when the Church exercises institutional betrayal

Over the course of the last twenty years, psychologist Jennifer Freyd has done extensive research into what she calls, “Institutional betrayal”. She defines institutional betrayal as “the actions or inactions of an institution that contribute to (a person's) traumatic experience.²⁰” Freyd adds, “Understanding the scope and impact of institutional involvement in traumatic events requires a similar willingness to examine the ways in which trusted institutions may foster abuse.²¹” The terms “secondary victimization”, “professional perpetrators”, “institutional abuse” or “systemic violence” have also been used since 2002 to describe this phenomenon. In French, sources often refer to this as “*violence institutionnelle*”.

Freyd's work reflects the experiences described by the Rapha participants. Some reported experiencing secondary verbal abuse and intimidation from church leaders following the disclosure. Shaming or scolding, threats of exclusion from the community, authorities using religious

²⁰ Carly Parnitzke Smith and Jennifer J. Freyd, “Institutional Betrayal”, *American Psychologist*, September 2014, Vol.69, n.6, p.575

²¹ Ibid

teachings or organizational mechanisms to silence victims or keep them in their marriages and knowingly maintaining an abuser in a ministry role were included in the descriptions by participants as to what they endured in their communities of faith. Sometimes, it was leaders simply refusing to get involved in a domestic violence crisis when a woman would ask them to intervene.

“Lire ma bible, mettre ça dans les mains du Seigneur, pis si t’es plus proche du Seigneur, ça va aller mieux, faut être proche du Seigneur. Fait que tu te sens coupable, tu penses que t’es pas assez proche du Seigneur, c’est pour ça que ça va mal chez vous. C’est tout un cercle vicieux, de maintien, je dirai même...honnêtement je dirai que l’église m’a maintenu dans ça. Non seulement ils n’ont pas été une aide mais ils m’ont maintenu.”

Smith and Freyd’s article lists the following measures²² when assessing institutional betrayal in any organization (school, military, church, government office to give a few examples):

- 1) Failure to prevent abuse
- 2) Normalizing abusive contexts
- 3) Difficult reporting procedures and inadequate responses
- 4) Supporting cover-ups and misinformation
- 5) Punishing victims and whistleblowers

These measures were reflected at least once, if not several times, within various participant’s testimonies. It is important to note that institutional betrayal goes beyond one individual’s treatment of another. It comprises representatives or, more importantly, leaders, of an organization employing the systems or practices or authority of their organization in a way that will further a person’s experience of harm or trauma. Sadly, this is sometimes done completely unintentionally. For example, one participant described her elders obliging her, as was customary in their church, to give her testimony in front of

²² Smith and Freyd, p.582

her congregation in order to become a member of the church. They did this knowing that she would need to explain the reasons for her divorce, and knowing her history as a survivor of abuse. However, they likely did not consider the turmoil this would create for her.

Participant: *Il a fallu que je donne mon témoignage en avant pour devenir membre...J'ai dit vous aurez pas les détails croustillants, je donne pas de détails j'ai j'ai...vécue une situation, j'ai pas dit le mot violence, mais 'inacceptable'..Mais le pasteur a dit que même si je donnais pas les détails que lui et les anciens avaient entendu et approuvé euh...mon membership. Donc l'église le, les gens étaient libres d'approuver ou pas.*

Enquêtrice: *Est ce que là, je ne sais pas si je pousse là, mais est-ce que t'as vécu cette expérience là de témoignages pis approbations de membership, est-ce que c'était comme une autre expérience de violence?*

Participant: *Vraiment! Beaucoup d'abus! (pleurs) Je pense qu'y a personne qui comprenne.*

Another example occurred with a participant who was employed, as was her partner, at their church. Her church leadership required that she meet with multiple people in the leadership of her church, disclosing her experience each time, receiving counsel and feedback that was not always coherent from one pastor to another. She concluded that they made her do this in order to discourage her from leaving her marriage.

Participant: *L'Église en elle-même. Je te dis, elle a, elle a joué un rôle dans l'attaque parce que c'est moi qui suis allée chercher de l'aide. Mais quand même, ça persiste cet enjeu de la place de la femme dans le mariage, dans le couple. Qu'est-ce qu'elle a fait ou pas fait? Euh. Et finalement, c'est comme si j'avais été mise sur une île, comme si j'étais une femme très exigeante. J'en ai vu un après une thérapeute, un autre thérapeute. J'ai vu pasteur, pasteur, pasteur. Pasteur principal.*

Enquêtrice: *Sept personnes en leadership de l'Église?!?*

Participant: *Oui.*

Enquêtrice: *C'est incroyable.*

Participante: *Donc à un moment donné, ton envie de dire “ouais mais c'est quoi que à quoi on joue?” Donc là, franchement, la période, la dernière période a été très angoissante pour moi, parce qu'en fait on j'avais l'impression qu'on me mettait la pression, on me disait “ On comprend, mais donne lui une chance, on te demande de faire le mile.” De plus, on demande de faire le mile de plus, mais c'est à moi qu'on me le demandait alors qu'on voyait des dysfonctionnements chez l'autre personne.*

This particular participant finally consulted a licensed psychologist who gave her two diagnoses: first, as a victim of domestic violence, and second, as a victim of institutional betrayal (the exact term used was “*violence institutionnelle*”).

The actions or inactions exercised by churches towards survivors and victims of domestic violence can have dire effects on their well-being. Smith and Freyd note that a victim of violence or trauma who also suffers institutional betrayal will suffer much worse emotional or physical repercussions: “Institutional betrayal is associated with complex outcomes similar to those associated with interpersonal betrayal. When measured directly, the exacerbative effects of institutional betrayal on psychological well-being are clear and consistent with betrayal trauma theory: higher rates of dissociation, anxiety, sexual dysfunction, and other trauma-related outcomes.”²³

3.5 What we can learn from survivor’s journeys of faith

a. The role of faith as a vehicle to self-determination

The accounts of the faith journeys of the participants were striking. Some participants described feelings of being spiritually adrift, and of feeling disillusioned and angry in the light of the response of the church to their situation. Their experiences of abuse and betrayal firstly at the hands of their partner and then by their Christian communities made it difficult for them to trust in the goodness of God, or to maintain confidence in the church. Some

²³ Smith and Freyd, p.578

felt able to remain part of a church community, but others did not. Feeling triggered by church practices, structures or language that may be a reminder of hurtful teachings or practices is frequently reported by Christian survivors of abuse.

Others described an evolving faith journey, where they recounted how they felt they had discovered more about God and about themselves. Several participants explained how their beliefs about the roles of women had changed as a consequence of their experience of abuse, and how they now saw themselves as advocates for women. In several instances, their stories described a deepening faith in God, often drawing on prayer as a particular source of comfort, and a recognition of the importance of the role of their faith in a loving God to their healing journey.

Whether participants still had an active faith and church involvement or not, their relationship to religion, spirituality and the church was an expression of their ongoing sense of self-determination, autonomy and agency. The ability for some to choose a new church (changing denominations for a tradition that reflects their evolving beliefs, rooting themselves in a small group or faith community away from their abusive partners) were all expressed as a necessary chapter in their exit stories or ongoing growth. For others, the ability and freedom now allotted to question core teachings from their childhood or background constituted a major part of their healing.

“Le regard de Dieu t’sais, moi en tout cas, je sais que Dieu m’aime. Je sais qu’Il m’a soutenu à travers ça. Il m’en veut pas parce que j’ai détruit un mariage en quittant, t’sais c’est comme, non, Il me soutient là dans mon processus de cheminement.”

For most, spirituality and religion were still major factors in their lives, and most expressed a very positive view of their personal journeys of faith. While some may wonder why, after such drastic experiences with the Christian church, a survivor would still be so devoted to her faith, it is important to remember that for many of the participants, their faith and relationship with God was a primary anchor and comfort during their entire experience.

“Ben, Dieu est amour. De un. De ce qui est de la violence, Dieu n'est vraiment pas là.”

One participant reflected at length on her ability to differentiate God from the structure of the Church,

“Même mon psychologue me dit « ta relation avec Dieu? » j'en ai pas tenu rigueur à Dieu parce que j'ai bien vu l'enjeu de nos propres choix dans tout ça. C'est pas Lui, c'est nous qui faisons ou ne faisons pas, c'est nous qui acceptons, nous acceptons ou pas...heureusement que j'étais quand même ferme dans ma foi parce que je pense que j'aurais pu complètement lâcher par dégoût de l'Eglise, de Dieu et de l'Eglise. Oui, donc je pense que j'étais gardée de faire cette association là et je remercie Dieu..”

b. The role of religious experiences in survivor's stories

Many participants described religious or even mystical experiences in their interviews, including visions, dreams or actions that can be called divine intervention. One participant remembered knocking on a random person's door while being chased by her husband who had a knife in his hand. The person who answered the door was a female police officer and was able to provide immediate assistance. The survivor described this episode as miraculous.

The Rapha team observed and documented a desire, amongst certain participants, to read their story through the lens of spiritual or religious experiences and the divine. One participant described, for instance, how God gave her a dedicated verse through her daily devotional booklet, and that the words convinced her she needed to leave her abusive home:

“J'étais en grosse, grosse dépression situationnelle. Puis, avec la Parole que j'avais eue là, c'était comme une conversion. Parce que là, tout le temps que j'avais dit au Bon Dieu, 'si tu veux que je comprenne les petits pains, tu me les feras comprendre.' Et la parole qu'Il m'a donnée quand je lui ai demandé si c'était Lui qui m'avait fait partir de là. Oui, en fait, Il m'a dit ‘Tu comprends celle-là.’”

This is a relatively common occurrence in the research field on the role of religion and violence. Elisabet Le Roux, in her book *On the significance of religion in violence against women and girls* writes:

“For survivors, prayer can also be a transformational religious experience, helping them deal with the violence they experienced...They experience prayer, through God, as bringing this change in their thinking and emotional struggles. Through prayer, a survivor can also experience connection with God, which helps and supports them in a way that human interaction often does not²⁴.”

For one participant, her prayer life gave her the strength to leave her abusive partner. She recounted going on a spiritual retreat, alone, during which she felt convicted to finally leave. She described the presence of the sacramental bread in the chapel where she was praying as being the element of strength she needed.

Participant: *J'ai une chapelle. J'ai la présence eucharistique. Donc, j'étais assise à côté du tabernacle avec la présence eucharistique. Mon portable devant moi en zoom. Là, il nous voyait tous les deux dans son écran. Et là, je lui annonce que je ne reviendrai pas à la maison, c'est fini.*

Enquêtrice: *T'avais la conviction, c'était toi et la présence eucharistique qui faisaient cette annonce ensemble?*

Participant: *Bien c'était avec Lui, pis c'était en Lui, pis par Lui.*

The role of spiritual or mystical experiences, even when difficult to define, cannot be underestimated in a survivor's journey. They are often the episodes that give strength, permission, validation and comfort to a survivor where other responses failed. The belief that many participants had that there was a higher Being, in the person of God, who was accompanying them and providing protection for them and their children was the very thing that

²⁴ Elisabet Le Roux and Sandra Iman Pertek, *On the significance of religion in violence against women and girls*, Routledge, 2022, p.111.

propelled their final departure from abuse and onto the road of safety, self-determination and agency.

Conclusion

The analysis of the interviews revealed that survivors of domestic abuse in Quebec who were connected to the Christian faith or a Christian community during the time of the abuse experienced multiple and at times extreme forms of abuse, which had profound and lasting consequences at all levels for both them and for other family members. All of the participants reported having experienced emotional, spiritual and physical abuse. The compassionate and non-judgmental responses of church leaders and members were named as practices that helped participants feel safe and supported when disclosing the abuse. Equally helpful were actions of care and provision including financial aid, temporary housing, emotional support and referrals to professional counselors.

However, teachings and practices that perpetuated beliefs in the submission of women, which did not permit divorce in cases of abuse, and the failure by church leaders to address known cases of abuse perpetrated by other church leaders or members were reported as being especially harmful to survivors. The results revealed the extent of the impact of spiritual abuse on survivors, and highlighted the detrimental effects of secondary spiritual abuse by church leaders. The differing spiritual journeys of participants both during and after the abuse highlighted that most of the participants found hope and comfort in spiritual experiences and in their evolving faith.

The recommendations of this report include inviting church leaders in Québec to acknowledge publicly that domestic abuse happens in churches, prioritizing safety through training, education and safeguarding, fostering communities that elevate women's voices and agency, and affirming that violence against women and girls is contrary to the teaching of Jesus.

Overall Recommendations from Phase I and Phase II

The following recommendations have been compiled based on the results of the survey and the interviews (Phase I and Phase II), and are a reflection of the combined views of the survey respondents, the interview participants, as well as the overall observations of the research team. They are intended to be a starting point for the next phase of the project.

1. Affirm God's desire for our spiritual, physical and emotional wellbeing in teaching and practice.

- Domestic abuse and any form of violence is wrong, and is incompatible with the teaching of Jesus.
- Domestic abuse is a legitimate reason for separation and divorce.
- Domestic abuse is not a form of spiritual suffering to be endured as coming from God, and survivors should not be required to remain in an abusive relationship.
- Spiritual and psychological healing is a long road. God cares about traumatic memory and pastoral care should be anchored in longevity.

2. Prioritize safety

- Acknowledge publicly that domestic abuse has happened and is happening in churches.
- Train leaders, seminary students and ministry teams to recognize and respond to abuse: be connected to local social services and professional resources, know how to refer, when to report abuse, and share information with members.
- Implement a domestic abuse action plan in churches to ensure best practices on safeguarding, confidentiality and accountability for youth and adults, so that churches are safe spaces for everyone.
- Be aware of the cycle of violence and the continuous attempts it takes for victims to leave a violent relationship.
- Identify or develop teachers who can offer formation on healthy relationships with youth and adults (including consent, sexual assault and

rape; teaching on abuse and divorce in premarital and marriage counseling).

- Safety should always be prioritized over efforts at reconciliation.

3. Create spaces where everyone can flourish

- Foster church life that demonstrates mutually healthy relationships, that women and men are of equal value in the eyes of God, and which elevate the voice, the agency, and the worth of women.
- Foster welcoming church communities which do not discriminate based on relationship status.
- Foster caring and compassionate church communities which do not tolerate the shaming, judging and exclusion of survivors of domestic abuse.
- Foster church cultures that do not condone gossiping, and model behaviours that value confidentiality.

4. Support survivors in their healing journey

- Listen to and believe survivors of domestic abuse when they disclose.
- Recommend individual counseling, rather than couples counseling, as the recommended intervention in cases of abuse and violence.
- Build awareness that the post-separation period is when a woman is most at risk of violence.
- Offer or direct survivors to confidential support groups.
- Encourage initiatives within church communities of care and provision to survivors and their children.
- Recognize that healing is a long process and survivors need time, space, compassion and understanding.
- Recognize that some topics, language or practices used in church can be triggering for some survivors, and learn to respond with sensitivity.

Note on the scope of the project

The Rapha Project (Phases I and II) did not address the question of how to support and help abusive partners within church communities. While the research team recognizes that addressing this question is essential if violence against women and girls is to end, the scope of this study was limited to documenting the experience of women survivors in Québec. This is an area which requires additional research, and would be an important topic to address in any future study.

These phases of the Rapha Project did not address the issue of male victims of domestic violence. As was discussed in the report from phase 1 (a survey to church going Christians in Québec), studies on domestic violence committed against men are very sparse in the province of Québec, and there is a need for public health and government agencies to lead the research before community-based participatory research projects such as this one can venture into this field.

Leaders and clergy's voices will also be heard in the Rapha Project. Following a consultation period with church leaders (focus groups), other concerned parties including church leaders, training institutions and seminaries, community partners, and survivors will be invited to contribute to a round-table discussion on how to implement the recommendations within the context of Québec, as well as more widely in Canada.

Acknowledgements

The authors of this report would like to thank the committee members, interviewers, research assistants and editorial team who reviewed the interview questions, conducted and transcribed the interviews, coded and analyzed the data, and helped in the preparation, editing, and translation of the final report.

Above all, we would like to honour and thank the 13 remarkable women whose traumatic but courageous stories have made this part of the research project possible. You have each shared deeply from your heart, and we hold your gift to us with profound gratitude and respect. We hope that through the writing of this report, we have been able to reflect some of the depth and

breadth of your journey, and that you will know that your voice is heard. May your stories of courage and faith bring freedom, healing and hope to many others.

ANNEX

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Ensure that the participant is comfortable with recording - it is important to capture their consent to recording the interview.

Begin recording

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today to share your experience.

The second phase of the Rapha Québec project, in which you are graciously participating, aims to document the stories of domestic violence survivors who either are or were connected to the Christian church in Québec. Our goal is to better understand the lived experiences of Christian women in Québec who have been in an abusive relationship.

The recording, or notes from this interview will not be associated with your name in any way; only the interviewer will know who said what and we are keeping this information confidential. No one else will be able to connect what we say in the report with you or anyone else and all quotes will be anonymized. Your exact words may be taken and used as a quote in our final report and summary materials. All such quotes that have any identifiable information will be removed or changed and you will be referred to by a pseudonym of your choice.

Please note that you may revoke your consent and participation in the project at any time, as is indicated on the consent form.

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Phase One: Faith & Upbringing

1. Can you tell me about your relationship with the Christian faith?
2. Tell me about your family growing up. What spiritual tradition did you grow up with?
3. How did your family talk about singleness, marriage, and divorce?

Phase Two: Relationship

4. How have you experienced domestic violence in a romantic relationship?
5. What role did the church & its teachings play in your relationship with your partner?
 - a. How was the Christian faith or Christian theology used by your abusive partner? (ask only if they indicate that their partner was Christian)
6. How did your partner justify their actions? What language did they use?
7. How did you come to exit the relationship?
8. To whom did you disclose the abuse and where did you turn for support?

Phase Three: The Church

9. Why did you choose to disclose the abuse to someone at church?
Alternately, why did you choose not to?
10. How did the church respond to your disclosure of domestic abuse?
 - a. To what extent do you feel that the church was equipped to respond to this issue?
 - b. To what degree did the church consider your safety in their response?
 - c. What in the response of the church was helpful, or harmful?
 - d. What resources (ex. books, couples therapy, prayer, physical assistance) were offered?
11. **How was your faith or relationship with God impacted by your experience of domestic abuse and the response of the church?**
12. How did leaving the abusive relationship impact your relationship with the church? (The church you were attending and the Church at large)
 - a. Are you still a member of the same church which you were attending while experiencing domestic violence?
 - b. If you left your church, what were the factors that went into making that decision?

Prompt: If not mentioned in previous answers, ask the participant how the church addressed/responded to their partner

Phase Four: Church Teachings & Culture

I would like to spend some time talking about the impact of church teachings and church culture on individuals and particularly with regard to abusive relationships.

13. What are some church teachings on relationships, marriage, and gender that impacted your relationship?
14. How did your church talk about singleness, marriage, gender roles, and divorce?
15. In what ways did your church address domestic violence (ex. Mentioned in sermons, women's bible studies, premarital counseling, posters, etc.)?
16. What messages about marriage, gender roles or divorce were communicated to you at church through social interactions, behaviours, trends, or conversations? Can you think of examples or anecdotes?
17. What was the response of other members of your faith community to your experience?
18. How has your understanding of the bible's teaching on marriage, submission, equality or violence changed?
19. What do you wish the church had taught you or said to you when you were younger?
20. What do you believe the church should teach boys and teenagers about domestic abuse? (Specifically youth in general, then male youth)
21. How can the church be a supportive and healing place for survivors?

Closing

22. What else would you like me to know/understand about your experience?
23. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Thank you very much for your time and your insight.

Turn off recording

If it is appropriate, ask the participant if you can pray for them. Thank them again and provide them with the compensation as stated in the informed consent letter. Let them know that you will be following up with them if you have any follow-up questions, and you will contact them regarding their interview transcript for their edits and approval in-person at the Christian Direction office.

**French Version
Interview Protocol - Winter 2023**

Protocole d'entrevue

Introduction

Assurez-vous que la participante est à l'aise d'être enregistrée – c'est important d'obtenir son consentement avant d'enregistrer l'entrevue.

Commencez l'enregistrement

Je vous remercie d'avoir accepté de me rencontrer aujourd'hui pour me communiquer votre expérience.

La deuxième phase du projet Rapha Québec, auquel vous avez gentiment accepté de participer, vise à documenter les histoires des survivantes de violence conjugale qui sont ou ont été en relation avec l'Église chrétienne au Québec. Notre objectif est de mieux comprendre le vécu des femmes chrétiennes au Québec qui se sont trouvées dans une relation abusive.

L'enregistrement ou les notes de l'entrevue ne seront pas associés à votre nom de quelques façons que ce soit ; uniquement la personne qui effectue l'entrevue saura ce que chaque personne aura dit, et l'information recueillie demeurera confidentielle. Personne d'autre ne sera en mesure de faire correspondre ce que nous incluons dans le rapport à vous ou à n'importe qui d'autre. Les citations seront dépersonnalisées. Vos paroles exactes peuvent être utilisées dans une citation dans notre rapport final et notre matériel de synthèse. Toute citation qui contient de l'information d'identification sera retirée ou changée, et lorsque nous parlerons de vous, nous le ferons en utilisant un pseudonyme de votre choix.

Veillez noter que vous pouvez révoquer votre consentement et votre participation au projet en tout temps, comme le formulaire de consentement l'indique.

Ai-je votre permission d'enregistrer cette entrevue ?

Première phase : la foi et l'éducation

1. Pouvez-vous me raconter votre relation avec la foi chrétienne ?

2. Parlez-moi de votre famille au moment où vous grandissiez. Dans quelle tradition religieuse avez-vous grandi ?
3. De quelle façon votre famille parle-t-elle de célibat, de mariage et du divorce ?

Deuxième phase : la relation

4. De quelle façon avez-vous vécu la violence conjugale dans une relation amoureuse ?
5. Quel rôle l'Église et ses enseignements ont-ils joué dans votre relation avec votre partenaire ?
 - a. De quelle façon votre partenaire abusif a-t-il utilisé la foi chrétienne ou la théologie chrétienne ? (Posez la question seulement si la personne indique que leur partenaire était un chrétien.)
6. De quelle façon votre partenaire justifie-t-il ses actions ? Quel langage a-t-il utilisé ?
7. De quelle façon avez-vous rompu cette relation ?
8. À quelle personne avez-vous divulgué la violence que vous avez subie et vers qui vous êtes-vous tournée pour obtenir du soutien ?

Troisième phase : l'Église

9. Pourquoi avez-vous choisi de divulguer la violence subie à une personne de votre Église ? Ou, pourquoi avez-vous choisi de ne pas le faire ?
10. De quelle façon l'Église a-t-elle réagi à votre divulgation de violence conjugale ?
 - a. Dans quelle mesure pensez-vous que l'Église était outillée pour aborder cette question ?
 - b. À quel point l'Église a-t-elle pris en considération votre sécurité dans sa réponse ?
 - c. Qu'est-ce qui vous a été utile, ou nuisible, dans la réponse de l'Église ?
 - d. Quelles ressources vous ont été offertes ? (P. ex.: les livres, la thérapie de couples, la prière, l'assistance physique.)

11. De quelle façon votre foi, ou votre relation avec Dieu, a-t-elle été touchée par votre expérience de violence conjugale et la réponse de l'Église ?
12. Quel a été l'impact sur votre relation avec l'Église d'avoir quitté la relation abusive ? (L'Église que vous fréquentiez et l'Église élargie)
 - a. Êtes-vous toujours membre de l'Église à laquelle vous alliez lorsque vous étiez victime de violence conjugale ?
 - b. Si vous avez quitté votre Église, quels ont été les facteurs qui ont contribué à cette décision ?
 - i. Guide: si les réponses précédentes ne le mentionnent pas, demandez à la participante de vous parler de la façon dont l'Église s'est adressée à son partenaire ou lui a répondu.

Quatrième phase : la culture et les enseignements de l'Église

J'aimerais passer un peu de temps à parler de l'impact des enseignements et de la culture de l'Église sur les individus, surtout en ce qui concerne les relations abusives.

13. Quels seraient certains enseignements de l'Église sur les relations, le mariage et le genre qui ont eu un impact sur votre relation ?
14. De quelle façon votre Église abordait-elle le célibat, le mariage, les rôles de genre et le divorce ?
15. De quelles façons votre Église a-t-elle abordé la violence conjugale ? (P. ex.: elle est mentionnée dans les prédications, l'étude biblique pour femmes, les cours de préparation au mariage, les affiches, dépliants, etc.)
16. Quels messages sur le mariage, les rôles de genre ou le divorce vous a-t-on communiqués à l'église par des interactions sociales, des comportements, des tendances ou des conversations ? Pouvez-vous penser à des exemples ou à des anecdotes ?
17. Quelles ont été la réaction et la réponse d'autres membres de votre communauté de foi par rapport à votre expérience ?
18. De quelle façon votre compréhension de l'enseignement de la Bible sur le mariage, la soumission, l'égalité ou la violence a-t-elle changé ?

19. Que souhaiteriez-vous que l'Église vous ait enseigné ou communiqué lorsque vous étiez plus jeune ?
20. Qu'est-ce que vous croyez que l'Église devrait enseigner aux garçons et aux adolescents sur la violence conjugale ? (Précisément, les jeunes en général, puis les jeunes hommes)
21. De quelle façon l'Église peut-elle être un milieu favorable et propice à la guérison pour les victimes ?

En conclusion

22. Y a-t-il autre chose que vous aimeriez que je sache/comprenne sur votre expérience ?
23. Y a-t-il autre chose que vous aimeriez ajouter ?

Je vous remercie beaucoup de votre temps et de vos commentaires.

Arrêtez l'enregistrement

Si vous jugez que cela est approprié, demandez à la participante si vous pouvez prier pour elle. Remerciez-la de nouveau et donnez-lui la compensation décrite dans la lettre de consentement éclairé. Informez-la que vous ferez un suivi avec elle si vous avez des questions de suivi à faire et que vous communiquerez avec elle concernant la transcription de son entrevue pour obtenir ses modifications et son approbation en personne au bureau de Direction Chrétienne.