

# The impact of childhood abuse and conservative church culture on the re-victimisation of women

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## **Abstract**

The impact of domestic violence on Australian society is widespread. Research has told us that women who have been abused in childhood are three times more likely to experience domestic violence or sexual assault in their adult life. The research presented in this article involves a focus group of Christian women who have experienced some form of domestic violence, either in childhood or as an adult. The study reveals that conservative church culture has the potential to render Christian women more vulnerable to abusive relationships and domestic violence. This is particularly true of women who have experienced childhood abuse. When there is particular emphasis on certain doctrines, such as male headship, submission and forgiveness, abuse victims may be further disempowered and lack the ability to recognise and respond appropriately to abusive relationships. The findings of this research highlight the need for change within certain church communities in order to protect women and children against family violence.

## **Keywords**

Domestic violence, conservative church, abuse, submit, re-victimisation

## Introduction and Background

A study done by Hana Al-Modallal in 2016 found that those who have been traumatised by childhood abuse are more likely to be victims of sexual assault or domestic violence in adulthood (Al-Modallal, 2016). This is termed re-victimisation.

The Shark Cage is a metaphorical concept and an approach to domestic violence developed by Ursula Benstead, a Melbourne based psychologist. The metaphor “offers a conceptual and practical tool for understanding and reducing re-victimisation in abused women within a counselling context” (Benstead, *The Shark Cage*, 2011, p. 70) by providing a safe container (the cage) from further abuse (by the shark).

I have chosen to research this topic as many of the clients of my counselling practice are women who have experienced re-victimisation. Over the past twenty years, my clientele has increasingly been women or teenage girls who have experienced some form of sexual abuse or domestic violence. Many of these clients struggle with shame and self-blame. In my desire to help Christian women appropriate the freedom and identity that is their inheritance in Christ, I have found it important to help women overcome the impact of early childhood abuse. If the Shark Cage Group Program delivers on its claims, it has the potential to help many of these women heal from their abuse and protect themselves from further abuses.

This study will examine the effect of the conservative church culture and teaching on women who have experienced childhood abuse as it relates to domestic violence. In my work as a Christian Counsellor, a large proportion of my clients are women who state that they desire to live a life that is pleasing to God. In working with these women, I have noted that their beliefs about the behaviour that God is pleased with is largely shaped by the culture and teachings of the church that they attend or have attended. Imbalanced or incorrect theology has the potential to render women and children more vulnerable to abuse. For many Christian women, the belief that God is asking them to stay in their abusive marriage will be behind their resistance to leave. (Collins, 2019)

While change is happening, many conservative church cultures still foster attitudes which promote gender inequality, which is a leading factor in domestic violence. (Nason-Clark, 2009) The term “conservative” is being used in this research to describe Protestant churches which hold common theological positions regarding the bible and

basic doctrines which are fundamentalist in nature. (Schmeichen, 1980). Culture is the beliefs, ideas and practices that are widely shared by a particular group (Prinze, 2020). Culture is largely created by what is celebrated and what is disapproved of by the leaders of a particular group (Cloud, 2013).

There is mounting evidence that the power imbalance between men and women is a key factor in domestic violence. (Day, 2010) The aim of this research is to evaluate the Shark Cage Group Program as a means of reducing domestic violence within the Christian community by addressing certain theological teachings which disempower Christian women. An over-emphasis on the doctrines of submission, forgiveness and the laying down of rights renders survivors of childhood abuse less likely to protect themselves and their children from domestic violence.

### **Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is a major issue affecting communities not only in Australia but across the globe (Day, 2010, p. 1). It refers to an abuse of power within an intimate relationship whereby one partner is living in fear and is being intimidated due to the control exerted by the other partner (Day, 2010, p. 1). The term “domestic violence” may refer to such things as emotional and psychological abuse, financial abuse as well as physical and sexual violence. Domestic violence affects children along with the adult victim making the impact on our community even greater. (Day, 2010, pp. 1-2).

International surveys have suggested that around one-third of all adult women will, at some point in their lifetime, experience abuse perpetrated by an intimate male partner. Domestic violence is considered to be one of the major risk factors affecting women’s health in Australia and there is a need for the community to respond in ways that reduce the likelihood of further violence occurring (Day, 2010, p. 1).

Understanding the driving forces behind domestic violence and the culture in which it thrives helps us to develop the most effective community interventions and approaches. The *Our Watch* handbook reveals that there are specific factors that drive violence against women, including adherence to gender stereotypes and roles, and the limitation on women’s independence through their partner’s control of decision

making within the relationship. All these drivers are produced in the broader context of gender inequality.” (Our Watch, 2017, p. 10).

### **Revictimisation**

I have heard many survivors of abuse and assault ask the question “Why does this keep happening to me? Is there something wrong with me?”. They have observed that many of their friends and relatives have had no experience of this type, and yet they have had repeated incidents throughout their lives. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Study 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017) confirms my experience as a counsellor. The majority of my clients who have experienced domestic violence as an adult have a childhood history of abuse. This research supports their view that these things happen more often to some women than to others. Revictimisation is a very real issue.

Compared to their counterparts, risk of severe physical partner violence was three-fold greater in women who experienced childhood physical violence and five-fold greater among those who witnessed mother-to-father violence. Victims of childhood maltreatment may encounter social and personal problems that increase their vulnerability to violence in adulthood (Al-Modallal, 2016).

One of the ways that childhood trauma impacts a person is the inability to connect with and regulate their emotions. Dissociation is a term used to describe the disconnection from emotions that often accompanies trauma (Strathopoulos, 2014). Dissociation makes it more difficult for women to feel the emotional and physical internal signals that a person or situation is not safe. (Benstead, 2011)

Another factor which increases a woman’s vulnerability to domestic violence, which emerged during the project, is if she has been immersed in a conservative church culture. I will explore this in greater detail in the following section.

## **Women of Faith More Vulnerable to Abuse**

While many Christian women speak of the strength and hope that their faith in God brings to their lives, there is a dynamic at play which can be detrimental to their wellbeing (Baird, 2018).

While the nature and depth of domestic abuse can often remain hidden, an Australian study of Anglican, Uniting and Catholic church communities within the Brisbane area revealed that '22% of the perpetrators attended church regularly and a further 14% were involved in church leadership' (JCDVPP, 2002, p. 24). This indicates that a total of 36% of perpetrators were seemingly active within their particular denomination. (Baker, 2010, pp. 8,9)

Christian faith adds a degree of complexity when dealing with the issue of domestic violence. Recent studies have revealed that within many Christian churches in Australia is a culture which increases gender inequality and hence the imbalance of power between husbands and wives (Baird, 2018). This is largely due to an over-emphasis on Scriptures which call for a wife to "submit" to her husband.

In 2015 the Victorian Government established the Royal Commission into Family Violence. The commission received 968 public submissions and tabled its report in March 2016, which made 227 recommendations. This commission, too, noted a "challenge" to faith leaders who were "predominantly or exclusively men". For many women who sought help from a faith leader, the commission reported,

The response was inadequate ... some faith leaders were uninformed and ill-equipped to respond to such disclosures, 'often the advice given wasn't helpful because the faith leader didn't know what kind of advice to give'.(Baird & Gleeson, 2018)

According to Baker, Christian women who are experiencing domestic violence, particularly those who belong to a church community, experience a conflict between their core values and the need to keep themselves and their children safe (Baker, 2010).

We spoke to more than 250 people, including counsellors, church workers, psychologists, clergy, theologians, sociologists, and survivors to try and fathom what

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the cultural issues were: an emphasis on forgiveness and submission at all costs, a dearth of female leadership, stigma surrounding divorce even as a consequence of abuse, lack of understanding of what domestic abuse was and how to respond, reluctance to believe the stories of women, and an unwillingness to respond with any urgency. (Baird, 2018)

The failure to delineate between forgiveness, which is a biblical command, and trust and safety which are earned in the context of relationship, often results in a woman remaining in an abusive marriage. Each of the women involved in this study expressed that they had experienced leaders responding to their disclosure of abuse with an encouragement to forgive. As Baker comments,

In some settings, the victim may be instructed by members of the clergy to provide ongoing forgiveness in a perpetual, unlimited and unconditional manner, regardless of the deed or activity of the perpetrator. Such an expectation can be extremely damaging to the individual who sincerely wishes to practise her faith, but is torn between her own survival and confusion regarding the needless pressure to extend forgiveness to a possibly unrepentant perpetrator. (Baker, 2010, p. 89)

There are many stories surfacing of dedicated Christian women who reported domestic violence to their pastors or church leaders only to be told that to please God they should stay and submit to the mistreatment (Baird, 2018, Baker, 2010). Pastors and leaders clearly place a high value on keeping the family unit together, hence the message sometimes sent to women suffering abuse is that forgiveness and hoping for change is the best way forward (Nason-Clark, 2009).

Since many faith communities place the intact family on a pedestal, religious women are especially prone to blame themselves for the abuse, believe they have promised God to stay married until death, and experience both the fear and reality of rejection at church when attempts to repair the relationship fail (Nason-Clark, 2009, p. 383).

Two leading Christian Counselling approaches, “Nouthetic”, developed by Jay Adams and “Christian Counselling” by Gary Collins, also promote the concept that marital

unfaithfulness is the only legitimate reason to end a marriage. Very little attention is given to how to help Christians with the issue of violence or abuse within the home. (Cooper-White, 2011)

Christian women are more likely to seek help from within the church than from secular community-based agencies and clergy in most cases do not refer women to these resources (Nason-Clark, 2009). Therefore the need to train and assist church leaders with how to respond to domestic violence within the church is imperative.

Natalie Collins, in her book *Out of Control*, explains that although many church leaders think that they are against tolerating abuse, in practice their theology on marriage, forgiveness, headship and submission tend to foster a culture that would rather minimise the abuse than promote the breakup of the family unit. (Collins, 2019)

I believe that If we are going to be successful in reducing domestic violence in Australia, we must develop programs that successfully overcome the risk factors created through childhood trauma and the conservative church culture. I will now move to analyse the effectiveness of the Shark Cage Group Program with the aim of evaluating its ability to achieve just this.

### **Ethnographic Research at the Shark Cage Program**

The research utilised an ethnographic approach for a group of Christian survivors of childhood abuse and domestic violence as they engaged in the 8-week Shark Cage program. It explored the effect that childhood abuse and conservative church culture has had on specific areas of belief and behaviour. The research also evaluated the ways in which the Shark Cage Program impacted these beliefs and behaviours.

For this research, I co-facilitated the eight-week Shark Cage Group Program. The group consisted of six Christian women aged between 30 and 63 years who had experienced abuse in childhood or domestic violence as an adult or in some cases, both. These women were interviewed prior to commencing the program and at the completion. Their names have been changed to protect their privacy. The research was approved through the Master of Community Counselling Program and the Human Research Ethics Committee of Eastern College Australia.

The research group consisted of:

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Sandy - Co-facilitator - pastor and Christian counsellor who has experienced domestic violence. (55yrs)

Rachel - a counselling student who experienced childhood abuse. (45yrs)

Anna - a maternal child health nurse who experienced childhood abuse. (38yrs)

Emily - an accountant who experienced domestic violence as a child. (30yrs)

Monique - a group facilitator for sexual abuse survivors who experienced various forms of abuse as a child (45yrs)

Bronwyn - a mother of three who experienced domestic violence in her marriage (45yrs)

Five of the six women invited to engage in this focus group have served in church leadership and have either been involved in ministries that work with abuse survivors or have expressed an intention to do so in the future. They have been selected to be a part of this focus group based on their maturity level and ability to relate to the aims of the course without the risk of becoming triggered or emotionally overwhelmed. They have all indicated that they have strong family support, have internal and external resources and are emotionally stable. They have been made aware that individual counselling and support is available to them if they become distressed or overwhelmed at any point during the program.

Self-evaluating survey forms were completed by participants at the commencement of the program and again on completion. These forms, as seen in Table 1, ask the participant to evaluate themselves in 12 specific areas. These areas are known contributing factors of re-victimisation.



**Table 1. Shark Cage Evaluation Form**

	Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Mildly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mildly agree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
1. I know the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy relationship.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I am able to set boundaries with people in my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I am able to communicate assertively.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I have a good understanding of the impact of abuse.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I blame myself for the abuse that has happened to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I am able to be kind to myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I am connected to my feelings.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I believe that I am worthwhile as a person.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I feel connected to my body.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. I believe that I have rights as a person.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. I am confident that I can recognise a potentially abusive or exploitative person.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. I take time to do things that are important for my wellbeing.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Measuring the variance between the ingoing and outgoing participant forms is one means of evaluating the success of the program in reducing the risk of re-victimisation.

The course consisted of 8 two-hour group sessions which were co-facilitated by the researcher. Each session consisted of a mixture of psychoeducation, interactive exercises and group discussion. Every effort was made to create a sense of emotional safety and connection within the group to facilitate honest and vulnerable discussion. The Shark Cage Group Program was used and followed precisely. The group were encouraged to share how the program was affecting them and any relevant events that had taken place during the week.

## Discoveries

Data collection included a questionnaire, group discussion, survey forms and interviews. The questionnaire was completed by participants prior to commencing the Shark Cage Program and on completion to the program. The variance in scores was noted and is illustrated in Table 2.

### Table 2: Survey Results

This table shows the variance between the pre-course score and post course score.

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	Anna	Emily	Sandy	Rachel	Monique	Bronwyn	Totals
I know the difference between a healthy and unhealthy relationship	2	1	-	1	-	1	5
I am able to set boundaries with people in my life	3	1	-	2	-	1	7
I am able to communicate assertively	1	3	3	3	-	-	10
I have a good understanding of the impact of abuse	2	-	-	2	-	-	4
I blame myself for the abuse that has happened to me	5	3	1	1	-	2	12
I am able to be kind to myself	1	3	-	1	4	1	10
I am connected to my feelings	4	-	3	1	1	-	9
I believe that I am worthwhile as a person	4	-	-	-	1	-	5
I feel connected to my body	3	4	1	1	-	-	9
I believe that I have rights as a person	4	1	-	-	2	-	7
I am confident that I can recognise a potentially abusive or exploitative person	4	1	-	1	1	-	7
I take time to do things that are important for my wellbeing	1	2	3	1	2	1	10
Totals	34	19	11	14	11	6	95

As the above table indicates, all the participants experienced a positive change from the program. The results reveal that the program has the greatest impact in the areas of:

1. Reducing Self-Blame
2. Growing in Assertive Communication
3. Increasing the level of Self-care

Certain themes emerged as the program progressed. I will now move to focus on the five key themes of re-victimisation, self-blame, knowledge of human rights, gender inequality within the church and self-care.

### **The Issue of Re-Victimisation**

One of the prominent themes which is addressed in the Shark Cage program is the issue of re-victimisation. The metaphor of the Shark Cage explains why those women who have experienced childhood abuse are more likely to experience sexual assault or domestic violence as an adult (Al-Modallal, 2016). The ability to put boundaries in place and to recognise a potentially abusive person have been hindered through the effects of childhood trauma leading to an increased vulnerability to abuse and assault in adulthood.

In one of the Shark Cage sessions, we focused on the skill of assertive communication. Following the teaching, we asked the participants to break into pairs and role play a real-life scenario they were dealing with that required assertive communication. Ensuring that the participants came up with a scenario that was not dangerous or triggering for them, we encouraged them to practice putting boundaries in place and handle the likely “shark” responses to that.

The group agreed that although this exercise was challenging for them, they benefited greatly from it. Participants found that being given practical communication tools helped them greatly with knowing how to put boundaries in place. It also reinforced the understanding that they have the right to say no to things and to not accept disrespectful behaviour toward them.

The group discussed likely responses from “sharks”. It was interesting to discover that many of the participants had believed that if they said and did everything just right,

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the other person would respond favourably. Therefore, our discussion turned to the fact that “sharks” want to get their own way and will often use guilt or intimidation tactics to achieve their goal. Through discussion and role plays, the participants were conditioned to expect a negative response initially when they begin to put boundaries in place. We reinforced the idea that a negative reaction does not mean that they did anything wrong, it is merely the way some people behave to retain control.

It was interesting to note that as stories of breakthrough and change were shared with the group, the sense of encouragement and empowerment was increasing in each participant, even the ones who were yet to put what they were learning into practice. This suggests that hearing and observing the growing assertiveness and positive change in other women has an empowering effect upon Christian women.

The value of teaching women that they are never responsible for the reactions and behaviours of others became evident through the program. The core belief that if they did things correctly they would be treated respectfully needs to be exposed and challenged.

The issue of self-blame was also prominent theme that emerged throughout the program.

### **Dealing with Self-Blame**

Through the discussions, we learned that many of the participants were still carrying a sense of responsibility regarding the abuse they had received. This issue scored highest in the variance table, indicating that of the 12 areas that the program aims to bring adjustment to, it was most successful in reducing self-blame. The group discussions and participant interviews revealed that the perpetrator script that they were the cause of their abuse had been largely accepted. Children who are told by parents or adults that they are being mistreated because they are “bad” or deserving of it do not have the mental capacity to dispel the belief. Core beliefs are formed that they are the ones who are responsible for mistreatment by others. This carries into adulthood and makes it difficult for them to recognise domestic violence or abusive relationships.

One participant, Emily, said:

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I felt like I was an evil person. I always believed that people treated me badly because I was a bad person. I felt that I was responsible for their abusive behaviour because something in me made them treat me that way. I believed that I was the cause of all the negative things that would happen to me and around me.

The group agreed that the program was helping them clearly see that the abuse was not caused by their behaviour. The teaching and discussions helped them to identify the difference between selfish behaviour, selfless behaviour and self-care; lines which had previously been blurred. This delineation challenged the notion that they were selfish when they didn't do as their partner desired. The program defines selfishness as attending to your own rights while disrespecting the *rights* of others. Selfless behaviour was defined as caring for the rights of others while disrespecting your own rights. Several of the women had been taught that any form of self-care was selfish, and they were often behaving in selfless ways which was detrimental to their wellbeing.

When perpetrators of abuse use guilt as a means of control in their relationships, the victim comes to see themselves as the problem (Baker, 2010). They are repeatedly told that if they did things just right they would not be mistreated and this self-blame hides the fact that their partners' behaviour is abusive. The victim's sense of self-worth and confidence are severely undermined in this process.

The lack of understanding of basic human rights is another contributing factor to self-blame and re-victimisation.

### **Impaired Knowledge of Human Rights**

One of the central components of the Shark Cage program is the teaching on basic human rights. Each participant was given a list of their rights in six key areas: physical, emotional, social, financial, sexual & spiritual which were taken from the United Nations Bill of Rights (United Nations, 1948). The participants were asked to read through their rights and identify which ones were not yet solidly in their belief system. Although these participants are Christian women who have been involved in church leadership, the impact of identifying their rights was staggering.

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Seeing their rights written in black and white had a great impact. They felt it drew a line in the sand, so to speak, and they could now see that any behaviour that violated their rights was not respectful behaviour. They said it also helped them clarify that it was not wrong for them to put boundaries in place to protect their rights.

As the discussion on rights took place, the conversation moved to the way the conservative church culture had affected their beliefs on having rights. One participant, Rachel, commented: *"I didn't know I had any rights."* Although Rachel indicated that learning about her rights had been the most impacting part of the program for her, she also conceded at the conclusion of the course *"I am still wrestling with the concept of having rights."*

Several participants spoke of how they were taught in their church that they were to submit as wives and that as children they were to obey. They were never taught in church that they had rights or that it was acceptable to not allow people to treat them in ways which were disrespectful or abusive. Monique, who began attending church at age 13, while being raised in a domestically violent home, said:

In church, I was always taught that I had to submit; to respect and honour your parents. You have to lay your rights down. As a 42 year-old I shared in home group that the only right I believed I had was the right to forgive. I was a doormat. All the biblical teaching I received was that even if people hurt you, you have to love them and take it. I was 30 years old before I said no to my father, and I expected to be slapped when I did.

The prominent theme coming through from the participants was that the culture within their church had taught them that God is pleased with you when you tolerate being mistreated. It is viewed as spiritual maturity to love people who are abusive and disrespectful and therefore encouraged by the church leadership and Christian community.

As was previously mentioned, it is common for churches to celebrate those who endure suffering and to frown upon or shun women who leave an abusive marriage. This creates a culture where it is difficult for women who are being abused to feel good about making decisions to protect themselves and their children.

As was stated earlier, it is frighteningly common to hear of women who report domestic violence to church leaders being advised to “forgive and submit.” While forgiveness is a central teaching of the bible, there is a vast difference between forgiving and loving an abuser and tolerating abusive behaviour. It is possible to love and forgive someone from a safe distance, while still putting consequences in place that demand a change of behaviour before the relationship can be restored. (Silk, 2013). As Silk argues,

Being exploited is not pretty. We all have had different experiences with being taken advantage of by consumers. But what really matters is how we respond to these experiences. Will we forgive the offense and become powerful people who can protect and share our resources more effectively? Or will we agree with the disrespect that was shown us, take on a victim mentality and allow people to continue to devalue our lives until we are fully exploited? (Silk, 2013, p. 249)

Natalie Collins, herself a Christian survivor of domestic violence, writes:

My belief about forgiveness was that I should forgive and forget, but I learned that forgiveness does not mean nullifying the consequences. (Collins, 2019, p. 251)

When there is an assumption made that all members of the congregation have a knowledge of their basic human rights and the ability to enforce them, biblical teachers will often focus on doctrines that foster the laying down of those rights and submission to authority. These doctrines further disempower survivors of abuse.

Individuals first need to recognise that they have basic human rights and that God gives them a free will. From this place of strength, they can then make the choice to lay down their rights in love and faith.

### **Gender Inequality and Church Culture**

Gender inequality is a significant factor contributing to domestic violence. The course participants all agreed that the church culture they were a part of, which was different for each participant, increased the power imbalance between men and women.

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There was plenty of open discussion on the way that specific scriptures were emphasised in a way that led to a belief that husbands had all the power in the name of “headship”. The group agreed that scriptures regarding women submitting and the need for forgiveness shaped a belief system that regardless of what the husband or father did, the role of the child or spouse was to submit and forgive.

Emily spoke of the response of the church when her mother and she sought help for their situation which involved physical, emotional, financial and verbal abuse. As a daughter, Emily was told by leaders and members of the church that she should submit to her step-father. When her mother disclosed the abuse that she was enduring, she was encouraged to forgive him and be submissive so as not to provoke him to anger. When Emily’s mother finally worked up the courage to leave her abusive marriage, she was shunned by the church community and there was no support offered. Even when Emily and her mother were homeless, the members of their church did not offer help.

Emily went on to say “The husband was the head of the home, and no matter what he did, it was never his fault. The woman or child were always the cause of the abusive behaviour”.

Sandy was raised in the church and has gone on to become a pastor herself. In her family of origin, her father was very authoritarian and there was no doubt that he was the head of the home. As children, they were not allowed to have a say in any matters and had to obey. As a female pastor, Sandy found that she was treated differently from the male pastors. At functions and meetings, she was excluded from conversations and felt very much on the outer.

A few of the participants talked in the group about the emerging realisation that many of the things they had been taught in church had a negative impact on their wellbeing. Two participants expressed feeling angry about the detrimental impact that the religious culture had on their lives and the way it exacerbated their feelings of powerlessness and unworthiness.

New Testament scriptures are often used to teach the need for wives to submit to their husbands and emphasise male headship in the home. (New King James Version, 1991, Eph. 5:22-24). Danny Silk, in his book *Powerful & Free* (Silk D. , 2012) explains that



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even without direct teaching on male headship, he picked it up through the prevailing culture.

No one in the church actually had had to teach me that men were more important, valuable or powerful than women. I just picked it up by osmosis. It seemed to be the default position of Christian culture. (Silk D. , 2012, p. 22)

He goes on to explain the impact of this on his marriage:

The male-female hierarchy we'd picked up in the church effectively made me the only powerful person in our relationship, which hurt both of us. (Silk D. , 2012, p. 25)

Whenever certain scriptures are taken on their own and overly emphasised it no longer reflects biblical truth. All truth is held in tension, the bible must be read as a whole, and doctrine formed through a correct exegesis of the text (Zuck, 1991).

28 So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. (Eph. 5:28) (New King James Version, 1991).

To love "as Jesus does the church" means to love sacrificially. Jesus surrendered his own life, suffered physically and took on shame that was not His to carry out of love for the church. This scripture reveals God's desire for how a husband is to treat his wife; to love her equally as himself, and to nourish and cherish her. The headship that Jesus modelled and taught was for the purpose of empowering and protecting. Nowhere in any of the Gospels do we see Jesus disempowering, belittling, or using his authority and headship in a way that was restrictive or controlling. His desire was to enable His followers to go beyond the works that He did. (John 14:12, Matt.20:25-28 NKJV)

According to recent research and the experience of these participants, the above scriptures which emphasise the responsibilities of a man in the marriage relationship are rarely brought into play when domestic violence issues are raised in the church. They do not appear to form a strong part of the church culture in the same way that the submission doctrine does.

From the findings of this research, it appears that it is time to challenge some of these long-held beliefs and bring a change to church cultures which don't truly reflect the teaching of Jesus.

### **Diminished Capacity for Self-Care**

The theme of self-care was very prominent throughout the program. Participants were taught that when we practice self-care activities it helps us to believe that we are worthy and that we do have rights. There was a self-care assessment which participants completed where they acknowledged the things they do regularly as acts of self-care and the ones they will commit to doing more often. There was agreement in the group that putting their needs ahead of the needs of others, even when it was to their detriment, made them feel that they were selfish. It was interesting to note that the more we discussed the distinction between selfishness, self-care and selflessness, the more the ladies realised they had a responsibility to look after their own wellbeing.

The conservative church culture had also blurred the lines for the participants in this area. Biblical teaching such as "laying down your life" for others, and the emphasis on serving in the church has created a belief in the participants that it is selfish and indulgent to care for yourself. The group discussed some scriptures which brought a balance to those teachings. For example,

The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>[b]</sup> There is no commandment greater than these. (Mk 12:31 NKJV)

The implication in this text is that it is expected that Christians will love themselves. The more the group shared and talked, the more the new concept that it was good and important to take time to care for themselves was cemented. For the duration of the program "self-care" became an often-used phrase as the participants began to practice it and see the benefits to their emotional, physical, social and spiritual wellbeing.

Rachel, who described her parents as very religious and strict, said:

The Christian culture taught me that I had to be a sacrifice in order to please God. I had to give up everything for Him. I learned that

my body was not important and that I am not important. As a female, you have even less value.

Again, when childhood abuse has taught women that the needs of others are more important than their own wellbeing, an emphasis on the doctrine of self-sacrifice leaves women feeling guilty and selfish for “loving themselves” by caring for their needs. The women in this study found basic things, such as taking the time to care for their emotional and physical wellbeing, very difficult to do. These women agreed that there was a belief that God is only pleased with them when they are giving to others and putting themselves and their needs last.

### **Conclusion**

It is timely to be looking into the most effective programs for protecting women against domestic violence and re-victimisation. Domestic violence is an increasingly important topic in Australia and with the increase in media coverage and ensuing public outcry, it has now become a focus for the government (Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016, Our Watch, 2017.)

In this paper, I examined the effectiveness of the Shark Cage Program in reducing the risk factors leading to re-victimisation and we identified the impact of certain church cultures on women’s vulnerability to domestic violence. Specifically, the increase of gender inequality due to the doctrine of women submitting to their husbands, and doctrines supporting self-sacrifice were identified as contributing factors. The results of my ethnographic research highlight the need for churches to address the imbalance in their teaching which is contributing to disempowerment in women and increasing their vulnerability to domestic violence.

It is recommended that going forward, a program designed specifically for Christian women who are impacted by childhood trauma or domestic violence be developed and conducted within churches. This should address the scriptural teachings that impact negatively on Christian women’s ability to protect themselves and their children from family violence. Training programs on domestic violence are needed for church leaders, with a view to increase awareness and address the cultural factors which are impacting women in the church. Pastors and leaders should be encouraged to create trauma-informed churches where there is an understanding of the impact of childhood

abuse and neglect and the ability to bring a balanced culture that fosters empowerment for Christian women and protection against abusive relationships.

I am personally in the process of developing such programs. Specific training for Christian counsellors on how to help Christian women navigate their faith and values while protecting themselves and their children is also recommended.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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