

The Process of Forgiveness: Reconciliation between Female Domestic Abuse Survivors and their
Perpetrators through the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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“Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Rom. 12:17-21).¹

Forgiveness is an integral component of Christian doctrine. Nonetheless, women persistently face a challenge when it comes to pardoning those who commit ills such as domestic abuse against them. Due to biblical passages like the one above, women who are domestically abused believe they are required to forgive even when they are not ready to do so. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian, states that forgiveness should be extended, although he acknowledges that genuinely forgiving one’s offenses is no small task. Romans 12:17-21 limits how forgiveness should be offered by declaring that abused women should forgive as Christ has forgiven. To forgive like Christ holds the woman up to a standard of perfection that she will not be able to attain. Not only would looking at forgiveness in a different way benefit abused women, but it would also benefit the Church, which sympathizes with the opinions of the patriarchy rather than hearing the female voice. Men who side with patriarchal ways of the Church would benefit from looking at forgiveness differently by seeing the other side of the argument—the cry of women who undergo domestic abuse. Although Bonhoeffer’s later works focus more on justice towards the oppressed, his earlier sermons do not handle forgiveness with consideration to women who experience domestic violence.² Christians should

¹ This verse comes from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Romans 12:12-21 is referenced in Bonhoeffer’s sermon, “Christ’s Love and Our Enemies.”

² Bonhoeffer’s earlier sermons date from 1930-1938, whereas his later works date from 1939-1945.

examine Bonhoeffer's works to understand why extending forgiveness remains problematic for women who endure domestic violence.

Bonhoeffer experiences doubt when faced with the terrors of Germany under Hitler's rule, yet still preaches in his earlier sermons to extend forgiveness to those who seem least likely to deserve it. Bonhoeffer's view of offering mercy to the least deserving illustrates his belief in the context of domestic abuse. Based on his opinion of forgiveness in his earlier sermons, domestic assault victims should forgive their oppressors because Christ has forgiven us. C.S. Lewis states that "to be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."³ Lewis's statement expresses Bonhoeffer's view that all people should be forgiven regardless of how horrific their deeds are. Bonhoeffer expands on his view of forgiveness in his sermon, "Forgiveness."

Bonhoeffer's sermon, "Forgiveness," uses Matthew 18:21-35 to support his claim that forgiveness should be offered to anyone who wrongs us.⁴ He claims that we believe that thinking justly of someone means we have forgiven them, but such is not the case. Bonhoeffer believes that it is our duty as Christians to forgive those who persecute us. While this may be so, he realizes that those who attempt to forgive the wrongs of others find it to be challenging. True forgiveness is pardoning the harms performed against us and treating the person as if the wrong never happened. True forgiveness is not an easy task, Bonhoeffer notes. However, Jesus intended the news of forgiving one another to be good news to Peter—that way he can experience God's forgiveness.⁵

³ C.S. Lewis, "On Forgiveness," *C.S. Lewis: Readings for Meditation and Reflection*, (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), p. 63.

⁴ Matthew 18:21-35 tells of Peter's question to Jesus of how often he should forgive when someone wrongs him. Jesus tells him to forgive "not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, if Peter does not forgive those who wrong him, neither will God forgive him for his sins. Bonhoeffer, "Forgiveness," p. 178.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

While Jesus's statement to Peter should positively affect how we understand forgiveness, it is not always followed the way Jesus intended. According to Bonhoeffer, although we receive the help from Jesus, we do not always hold up our end of the bargain.⁶ Instead, we complain about how challenging it is to forgive those who severely hurt us. By saying this, Bonhoeffer notes, we deny that Jesus assisted in any way.⁷ He concludes by stating that those who have felt the merciful compassion of God know how it feels to be liberated; to be washed clean of all transgressions.⁸ Once we experience God's redemptive grace, we can share it with others.⁹

In "Forgiveness," Bonhoeffer references "The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant" in Matthew 12:21-35. The parable recounts the story of a servant who was not able to repay the king his debt of ten thousand talents.¹⁰ He begged for mercy, and the king was compassionate and presented it to him. But when a servant of the newly-forgiven servant could not repay his debt and begged for mercy, the forgiven servant ordered the guards to put his servant in prison. The king heard about his servant's cruelty and allowed him to be tortured until he could pay back his debt. The parable states that forgiveness should be given when the repentance is genuine.

But what if the oppressor does not repent? Should domestic abuse victims choose to forgive them? Bonhoeffer claims that dismissing forgiveness rejects "the very heart of the Christian gospel."¹¹ Therefore, if domestic abuse victims do not forgive their wrongdoers, they are abandoning one of the essential components of Christian doctrine. Although Bonhoeffer believes that victims abandon the essence of Christianity by withholding forgiveness, the oppressor abandons it as well by inflicting abuse upon the victim. While this is the case, there is

⁶ Ibid., 181.

⁷ Ibid., 181.

⁸ Ibid., 181.

⁹ Ibid., 181.

¹⁰ All summary of Matthew 18:21-35 comes from the NRSV.

¹¹ Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, p. 26. Bonhoeffer preaches his sermon, "Forgiveness," in 1935.

not a simple way to enforce Bonhoeffer's idea of forgiveness at all costs. It is much easier to tell women to forgive, but it is more demanding for them to perform it. Bonhoeffer's claim is sensible, but it is not sympathetic to the case of the domestically-violated woman.

Bonhoeffer presents his complicated relationship with forgiveness through his involvement in a plot to kill Adolf Hitler. In December of 1942, Bonhoeffer conversed with Oskar Hammelsbeck, a colleague of his.¹² In his conversation with Hammelsbeck, he declares that he is not only a part of the "German resistance against Hitler," but that he is willing to "accept guilt and freedom" by participating in the resistance.¹³ Bonhoeffer decides here that he will do what he feels is right, which is assassinating Hitler, even if it costs him his life. Although Bonhoeffer preached a sermon on forgiveness in 1935, it seems that the atrocities of Hitler's dictatorship influence his viewpoint of forgiveness. He resolves that it is better to live in freedom rather than in fear because the Christians who live in fear are the ones that he strives to distinguish himself from.¹⁴

It is significant that Bonhoeffer defends forgiving the wrongs of others through the emergence of Hitler and Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Bonhoeffer experienced the struggle of forgiveness, as he was not sure how to overcome the darkness of Hitler's reign, as well as the struggle of forgiving himself for his association with Hitler's assassination plot.¹⁵ Although he experienced hardships in his life, he still recognized in his earlier sermons that humans should be forgiven to receive God's forgiveness.¹⁶

¹² Eric Metaxas, "Killing Adolf Hitler," in *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2010), p. 424.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 424.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 424.

¹⁵ Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, pp. 26-28.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer's reference comes from Matthew 6:15 (NRSV), "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Identifying the Struggle: An Abused Woman's Bitterness towards her Oppressor

While Bonhoeffer's life is a prime example of one who experiences adversities but persists, millions of women do not encounter the same fate. The National Institutes of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control report that around 1.5 million women are domestically and sexually abused by a spouse or partner in the United States.¹⁷ Maria Mayo, communications coordinator for the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, begins her argument by telling the story of one of the 1.5 million women, Joy M. K. Bussert. Bussert lived contentedly with her husband and children, aside from her fear of abuse. She describes her story in her work "Letter from a Battered Wife," where she discloses the horrors she experienced from her abusive husband. She was "kicked in the abdomen when [she] was visibly pregnant, whipped, kicked and thrown, picked up again and thrown down again," as well as "punched and kicked in the head, chest, face, and abdomen more times than [she] can count."¹⁸ Bussert states that she sought help through a minister, who deemed her husband harmless and told her to "forgive him the beatings just as Christ had forgiven from the cross."¹⁹ Bussert's bitterness towards her husband is understandable given her situation. She experiences shame and is blamed for her husband's abuse. Through the indifference she receives from her friends and ministers, she gets the notion that she deserves the violence inflicted upon her, and that she should forgive her husband regardless of her mental and physical wounds.

¹⁷ P. Tjaden and N. Thoennes, *Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey*, Publication No. NCJ 181867 (Washington DC: Department of Justice, 2000), quoted in Maria Mayo, "Passionate Prayer, or Pastoral Pressure? Forgiveness in Luke 23:34a and the Pastoral Care of Victims of Domestic Abuse" (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), p. 160.

¹⁸ Joy M. K. Bussert, "Letter from a Battered Wife" (New York: Division for Mission in North America, LCA, 1986), quoted in Maria Mayo, "Passionate Prayer, or Pastoral Pressure? Forgiveness in Luke 23:34a and the Pastoral Care of Victims of Domestic Abuse" (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), p. 159.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

The indifference she receives brings up questions of whether her extension of forgiveness means that she deserved the abuse. Bonhoeffer addresses affliction in his sermon, “The Secret of Suffering,” as a way to persevere and to carry the burden without collapsing.²⁰ Bonhoeffer’s definition of suffering sounds like the battered woman should accept abuse and endure her beatings because tolerating the abuse will strengthen her. Bonhoeffer defends his claim further by stating, “For remaining steadfast, remaining strong is meant here too; not weak acquiescence or surrender, not masochism, but growing stronger under the load, as under God’s grace, imperturbably preserving the peace of God.”²¹ While Bonhoeffer makes an excellent point, his claim appears insensitive when applied to the horrors domestic abuse victims face. It is difficult to imagine how a woman can continue to have strength when she continuously endures beatings by her spouse, as illustrated in Bussert’s story. Although Bonhoeffer’s claims are justified in minor circumstances such as failing an exam, they are difficult for women who experience domestic abuse to apply.

As well as the implied notion from friends and ministers that she deserves the abuse she receives, the question of whether women should stay silent and endure the abuse or speak out and escape it still lingers. Bonhoeffer speaks of rejoicing when perpetrators receive vengeance in his sermon, “Vengeance and Deliverance.” He states, “The righteous will rejoice when they see such vengeance; they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.”²² He recognizes that Christians might wince upon hearing this Psalm, so he answers this claim with “Whoever recoils from this expression of joy at God’s revenge and the blood of the godless still doesn’t know what

²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Secret of Suffering,” in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers). This sermon was preached in 1938.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 291.

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Vengeance and Deliverance,” in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers), p. 281. This quote comes from Psalm 58:10. Bonhoeffer preached this sermon in 1937.

happened on the cross of Christ.”²³ In this proclamation, Bonhoeffer appears to defend the cause of the oppressed, and when put in context with the argument, the cause of the domestically-abused woman. The woman (the victim) may be interpreted as the righteous one, and the spouse (the perpetrator) may be interpreted as the wicked one.

However, if one interprets the verse in the way of the woman representing the righteous, the issue of a woman regarded as an equivalent to Christ arises. If a woman is called righteous, she seems to be held to the same standard of innocence as Christ, but this is not necessarily the case. Women are not compared to Christ in Psalm 58:10. A woman is considered to possess both moral and evil traits since she is human. Nevertheless, she is deemed to be upright party in the case of domestic abuse. Since she is the one who receives the mistreatment, she resembles the righteous mentioned in Psalm 58:10. This interpretation of Psalm 58:10 proves not only that the abused woman should reject her maltreatment, but she should also be joyful when her perpetrator receives vengeance because the vengeance is not hers, but God’s.²⁴

While the abused woman should find joy in the fact that God delivers her from her abuser, it is important to note that God does not hate the oppressor. Bonhoeffer declares the opposite in his sermon, “Christ’s Love and Our Enemies.” He affirms that “God loves our enemies—the cross tells us that,” and “God suffers on their account, feels anguish and sorrow because of them.”²⁵ He further demands for Christians to “never be conceited.”²⁶ Bonhoeffer builds on his call for humility by asserting, “With respect to our attitude toward our enemies, this means first, remember that you were God’s enemy and that, without having earned it or being

²³ Ibid., 281.

²⁴ Ibid., 282.

²⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Christ’s Love and Our Enemies,” in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers), p. 285. Bonhoeffer preaches this sermon in 1938.

²⁶ Ibid., 285.

worthy of it, you were met with mercy.”²⁷ Bonhoeffer’s declaration applies to women who endure domestic abuse. Although the women may participate in the jubilation of God’s revenge, they must remain humble because they are imperfect as well as the oppressors are, even though the women do not commit the same crimes. Both men and women are broken people, so women should approach God’s victory with humility because it is not her victory, but God’s alone.²⁸

Although women should be allowed to escape their abuse and rejoice in God’s victory, many women such as Joy M. K. Bussert receive criticism from those who should support the decision to leave the abusive relationship, such as pastors, friends, and family members. Whereas Bussert’s loved ones trivialized her abuse, Mayo defends occurrences like Bussert’s abuse by rejecting Luke 23:34a’s implication of unconditional forgiveness in her work, “Passionate Prayer, or Pastoral Pressure? Forgiveness in Luke 23:34a and the Pastoral Care of Victims of Domestic Abuse.”²⁹ She claims that since Jesus cries out to God to forgive his perpetrators, the burden of forgiveness must have been an unbearable weight for Him to bear.³⁰ She illustrates the brutality Jesus faces while on the cross and parallels this to make the case that abused women might not be capable of forgiving wrongs committed against them.³¹ Therefore, Jesus’s dying words replace the victim’s words of absolution, and God is the sole source of forgiveness to the oppressor.³²

Bonhoeffer interprets Luke 23:34a as a way to forgive in all circumstances in his sermon, “Vengeance and Deliverance.” He states that Christ calls out to God on behalf of all people even

²⁷ Ibid., 285.

²⁸ Ibid., 282.

²⁹ Maria Mayo, “Passionate Prayer, or Pastoral Pressure? Forgiveness in Luke 23:34a and the Pastoral Care of Victims of Domestic Abuse,” p. 162. Luke 23:34a recounts Jesus’s last words, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

³⁰ Ibid., 162.

³¹ Ibid., 162.

³² Ibid., 162.

while He is weighed down with our iniquities. Christ alone is qualified to ask God to forgive our sins since He was the one who “bore the vengeance.”³³ In this interpretation of Luke 23:34a, Bonhoeffer asserts that when we look to Christ’s crucifixion, we see God’s livid wrath at his people as well as the merciful deliverance He extends to us.³⁴ Because God pardoned all of humanity for the horrendous death Christ suffered, Bonhoeffer expects victims to be able to forgive the wrongs of their offenders. While Bonhoeffer’s argument is reasonable, it does not make it easier for women who are victims of domestic assault to forgive their abusers. Bonhoeffer’s assertion instead assumes that women should be like Christ and forgive their abusers no matter how harsh their abuse was. Women are not perfect like Christ. Therefore, while they may strive to attain the goal of unconditional forgiveness, it might not be possible for them to achieve.

Not only do women experience oppression through domestic abuse, but also where most would think least likely: The Church. The Church should be a place where women are viewed as equals, but it is typically not such a place. In churches associated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), women are taught to be submissive to their husbands as they are to God.³⁵ According to Susan Rakoczy, a professor of theology at St. Joseph’s Theological Institute, verses such as Ephesians 5:22 promote domestic abuse against women, and when the women object, they are “told by their husbands that ‘the Bible tells you to obey me.’”³⁶ This view is held by churches in the SBC and used to force women into submission.

³³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Vengeance and Deliverance,” p. 282.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 282.

³⁵ This reference comes from Ephesians 5:22 (NRSV).

³⁶ Susan Rakoczy, “Religion and Violence: The Suffering of Women.” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 61 (2004), p. 33. Ephesians 5:22 states that wives should submit to their husbands as they do to God. The summary of Ephesians 5:22 comes from the NRSV.

Although the SBC attempts to silence women, Renate Bethge, the wife of one of Bonhoeffer's students, Eberhard Bethge, states that "in 1936 Bonhoeffer ordained a woman by order of the Brethren Council of the Saxony Province of the Confessing Church, when women were not yet officially ordained."³⁷ It is significant that Bonhoeffer permits a woman to preach because women were not formally allowed to preach in the Confessing Church at this point.³⁸ Although Bonhoeffer did not think about "fight[ing] for the general ordination of women or for the right of women to take over a parish of their own," he recognizes that women are capable of serving in pastoral roles and are not merely subjects for their spouses to dominate.³⁹ By observing Bonhoeffer's works, one can obtain a clearer idea of why forgiveness continues to be challenging for women who undergo domestic abuse.

Pursuing the Truth: Bonhoeffer in Context with Forgiving Abusers

Bonhoeffer explicitly demands unconditional forgiveness in "Christ's Love and Our Enemies" by using Romans 12:17-21 to defend his claim.⁴⁰ He declares, "No Christian is harmed by suffering injustice. But perpetuating injustice does harm."⁴¹ In this statement, Bonhoeffer asserts that Christians only experience injustice when injustice is placed upon another. While Bonhoeffer's proclamation appears selfless, it is destructive to think that women who undergo trauma such as domestic assault and victims of the Holocaust have been justified. Once more,

³⁷ Renate Bethge, "Bonhoeffer and the Role of Women," *Church & Society*, (United States, Social Justice and Peacemaking Unit of the Presbyterian Church (USA), 1995), p. 42.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 42. This concept is worth considering even though his sermons around this time support unconditional forgiveness because Bonhoeffer is not preaching his sermons in the context of domestic abuse. In this essay, I am applying his different viewpoints of forgiveness to domestic abuse victims and their oppressors.

⁴⁰ Romans 12:17-21 states that one should not repay evil for evil, but to repay evil with good. Vengeance should not be enacted by the victim, but by God. The summary in this footnote comes from the NRSV.

⁴¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Christ's Love and Our Enemies," p. 286.

when applied to abusive relationships such as Bussert's abusive relationship, it is insensitive to assume that violated women do not suffer from abuse and that it will be simple to forgive their wrongdoers. Bonhoeffer's claim works well in theory but is difficult to follow with domestic abuse victims.

Although Bonhoeffer preaches forgiveness of wrongdoers in his earlier sermons, the focus of his later works shifts to defending the Jews and the oppression they faced under Hitler's regime. In his unfinished book *Ethics*, he expresses a viewpoint that more accurately coincides with reality. According to Bonhoeffer:

The responsible [hu]man is dependent on the [hu]man who is concretely his neighbor in his concrete possibility. His conduct is not established in advance, once and for all, that is to say, as a matter of principle, but it arises with the given situation.⁴²

In this quote, Bonhoeffer offers a message that drastically contrasts from his earlier message of "loving one's enemies."⁴³ He realizes that the way one responds to a situation depends on the case itself, whereas he earlier preaches of forgiveness in every circumstance. Bonhoeffer's quote applies to women who suffer domestic abuse because he realizes that there are certain instances where forgiveness will be challenging, if not impossible, to extend genuinely. It is not enough to go through the motions of forgiveness because if it is not sincere, it is not forgiveness, but merely a way to appease one's conscience.

Bonhoeffer's statement can be understood more clearly when put in historical context with his struggle against the darkness of Nazi Germany and Hitler's rule in the late 1930s and early to mid 1940s. Whereas he once preached forgiveness for every situation, he has now seen

⁴² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. E. Bethge, tr. N. H. Smith (New York, Macmillan, 1965), quoted in Lori Brandt Hale, "From Loving Enemies to Acting Responsibly: Forgiveness in the Life and Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" *Word & Word* (Saint Paul, Minn., Luther Seminary, 2007), 86.

⁴³ Lori Brandt Hale, "From Loving Enemies to Acting Responsibly: Forgiveness in the Life and Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" *Word & Word* (Saint Paul, Minn., Luther Seminary, 2007), 86.

the wickedness of the Third Reich, and he wrestles with the question, “How does one remain loyal both to the demand of the oppressed for justice and to the gift of forgiveness that the Crucified offered to the perpetrators?”⁴⁴ He does not claim that forgiving those who harm others will be easy because he wrestles with this question when he plans an attempt to assassinate Hitler. His plot to kill Hitler complicates his relationship with forgiveness since he has not forgiven Hitler for the atrocities of the Third Reich. He states that the “ultimate question remains open and must be kept open, for in either case man becomes guilty and in either case he can live only by the grace of God and by forgiveness.”⁴⁵ Here, Bonhoeffer recognizes that he will be to blame whether he speaks up against the injustices of the Jews or not. If he remains silent about the horrors the Jews experience, he commits a greater atrocity than if he speaks out against it, since he is guilty either way. Bonhoeffer determines that darkness is inevitable, and humans should turn to God to receive grace in a fallen world.⁴⁶ Christians should look to Bonhoeffer’s works to realize how difficult it is for abused women to forgive their perpetrators.

Reconciliation: What Forgiveness Looks Like

Although Bonhoeffer’s earliest sermons preach forgiveness in every instance, his later works demand one to “get his hands dirty in the real world in which God had placed him.”⁴⁷ When one assumes that reconciliation between the victim and the abuser is always possible, one trivializes the effect that the abuse has left on the victim. While reconciliation is possible through

⁴⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. E. Bethge, tr. N. H. Smith (New York, Macmillan, 1965), p. 30. Bonhoeffer began writing this work in the early 1940s.

⁴⁶ Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, p. 28.

⁴⁷ Eric Metaxas, “From Confession to Conspiracy,” in *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2010), p. 361.

forgiveness in some situations, it is not feasible to say that every abusive relationship can be reconciled. In the abstract, it seems effortless to extend forgiveness to wrongdoers. But in real life situations when forgiveness has to be applied, it is unreasonable to expect women to forgive their abusers unconditionally. If the violated woman feels equipped to forgive her abuser, she should feel free to do so because it is her choice. However, if she does not feel equipped to forgive she should not extend forgiveness. Not only would her forgiveness be insincere, but her forgiveness would only be offered because she is coerced to forgive when she does not believe that her abuser has repented. Bonhoeffer's process of forgiveness evolves from forgiving his enemies in every circumstance to defending the oppressed Jews against the terrors of Hitler's Third Reich. Although Bonhoeffer's earlier works suggest that, in the context of domestic violence, abused women should forgive their oppressors, he alters his viewpoint of forgiveness when he witnesses the injustices against the Jews. Bonhoeffer's dramatic change in his position on forgiveness serves as an example for us to pursue as Christians. We should follow Bonhoeffer's example and defend women who endure domestic violence.

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