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Violence Against Women - In Churches Too

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Every year, millions of women and girls worldwide suffer violence. In some countries up to 70% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime from an intimate partner. Sadly this is happening in churches too. The Evangelical Alliance has discovered that domestic violence and physical abuse are common in UK churches. Restored has responded by providing research, training and resources for Christians and churches globally, enabling churches to respond appropriately and effectively to domestic abuse. Additionally Restored launched the only global Christian men's campaign, First Man Standing, to encourage good men to make a stand to end violence against women. We, as a global church, need to rise up and take action. This begins with looking at ourselves and putting our own house in order.

Facing Reality

Violence against women is a shocking reality that has pervaded most human cultures. Whether by 'turning a blind eye' or subliminal religious pressure to 'turn the other cheek' where Jesus would have confronted an evil, violence against women has been too often unchallenged by the churches.¹

Women aged 15-44 are more at risk from rape and domestic violence than from cancer, car accidents, war and malaria.²

Every year, millions of women and girls worldwide suffer violence and abuse from men in their lives whom they trust. Husbands, boyfriends, civil partners; men who are trusted with the most intimate aspects of the lives of the women with whom they have a relationship. Men with whom women have romanced, dined and danced, believing their powerful words of love and affection. Men in whom trust has been placed that they will love 'till death us do part'. Two women a week in the UK alone die, sometimes violently, at the hands of an intimate partner or former partner.

A global epidemic

With one in three women globally suffering abuse in her lifetime at the hands of an intimate partner³, there are many women who are suffering in silence, with the shame and stigma of that surrounds abuse. The Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka stated "All countries worry me because of the

universality of violence against women. The fact that 75 per cent of violence against women is domestic violence is the issue....The home is the unsafest place for a woman to be.”⁴ Baroness Patricia Scotland QC stated, “If there was another epidemic affecting one in three women globally, there would be an outcry.” We have to ask ourselves why that outcry is absent, and why we are so slow to engage with an issue that affects so many in our congregations. We need to be honest and recognise that many of us and many of our churches shy away from confronting the issue of domestic abuse.

Rt Revd Christopher Cocksworth states, “In the name of Christ, who repeatedly defended the dignity of women, every Christian is mandated to speak out against any form of aggression towards women and girls wherever it is found.” But do we speak out? Rt Revd Andrew Watson, Bishop of Guildford continues, “Faith leaders have the potential to be part of the problem or part of the solution.”⁵

As Christians we have a choice. We can choose to walk on the other side, ignore the issue or do nothing. Doing nothing is a choice. Or do we face the ugly reality that domestic abuse is in our churches too and begin to challenge and change the culture of acceptability of abuse inside our churches?

One thing is clear: violence against women is wholly and utterly preventable. In one sense it is simple; men need to stop abusing women. Jan Ransom of Flame International said, “It is the attitudes and actions of men that have to change if we are to see violence against women ended.”⁶

Violence can take many forms, such as domestic violence, rape, sexual violence, trafficking, female genital mutilation, child brides, bride kidnapping, widow inheritance, and dowry-related killing (this is not an exclusive list).⁷ In some countries up to 70% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime from an intimate partner.⁸

The scale of those statistics is shocking and overwhelming. It can lead to a paralysis in action, as we realize the depth and breadth of the issue of violence against women globally. Indeed, as we reflect that each statistic represents an individual made in the image of God, the reality is devastating.

Defining Violence and Abuse

The United Nations defines violence against women as “Violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”⁹

Sexual violence affects an estimated one in five women globally. The impact and consequences of an intimate violation of the body can result in extensive physical and psychological trauma, along with unwanted pregnancies. Sexual violence in conflict has been long recognised as a tactic of war. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) an average of 36 women and girls are raped everyday. It is estimated that 200,000 women have been raped in the DRC since the conflict began.¹⁰ During the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 it is estimated that between 250,000 and 500,000 women were raped. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) affects between 100 and 140 million girls worldwide with another three million girls estimated to be at risk of FGM¹¹.

As no respecter of age, culture, ethnicity, or wealth, violence against women has its foundations in gender inequality and discrimination against women. At its heart is the abuse of power and control over another individual. This was made evident in the UK when in 2013 a TV chef and author of many recipe books, Nigella Lawson, was photographed being abused in public by her then husband. Nigella Lawson described it as ‘intimate terrorism’. As a famous, wealthy and much-loved celebrity chef, it came as a surprise to many that she was being abused by her husband. It cut across the myth that wealth is a protector from violence. It is not.

The UK recently updated and expanded the definition of domestic violence, which now

includes a ‘pattern of incidents’ and coercive control. This reflects the lived reality of many victims of domestic abuse, noting that whilst physical violence may be the trigger in reporting the abuse, there is often a build-up and pattern of abuse beforehand. The inclusion of financial abuse also may challenge thinking about what constitutes abuse. For example, a woman may not have access or control over the household income, and may be coerced or forced into sex by her husband or partner simply to obtain the household food and basics.

As stated, wealth is no protector against violence and abuse. The levels of domestic abuse in the UK are significant. According to the UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) “30.0% of women and 16.3% of men had experienced any domestic abuse since the age of 16, equivalent to an estimated 4.9 million female victims of domestic abuse and 2.7 million male victims.”¹² Looking at the levels of sexual assault, the ONS states that “many more women than men experienced some form of sexual assault (including attempts) in the last year: 3% of women compared with 0.3% of men”.¹³ The statistics go on to dispel the myth of stranger rape by noting that “around 90% of victims of the most serious sexual offences in the previous year knew the perpetrator”.¹⁴

The impact and consequences of violence on victims and survivors can be devastating and lifelong. Along with the breach of trust of the person known to the woman in most cases, resulting in deep emotional scars, women may suffer the horrific consequences of abuse such as broken bones, lifelong health issues, diminished roles in public and private life, loss of economic earning power, loss of relationships with friends and family, loss of self-confidence and psychological trauma. In the worst cases violence against women results in the loss of life itself. Women's Aid UK report that "on average two women a week are killed by a violent partner or ex-partner."¹⁵

In Churches Too

With one in three women globally suffering violence in her lifetime, this will mean women who have experienced domestic abuse will be in churches too. Many through shame, stigma or the lack of a safe place to disclose that abuse, will remain and suffer in silence in our churches.

Charlotte's story

Charlotte was a young Christian woman who spent six years in an abusive relationship with Craig.¹⁶ What started off as seemingly romantic gestures, such as the need to always be close to Charlotte, gradually escalated into manipulative and controlling behaviour. This included limiting the communication she was allowed with her family and friends, and insisting she had her phone on her at all times so that he could always contact her.

Craig's desire to control Charlotte and their relationship got worse until he was both emotionally and physically abusing her. During one moment of overwhelming anger, he hit her over the back of the head, then profusely apologised and promised it would never happen again. But in fact the physical abuse, including rape, became so frequent and extreme that when Charlotte finally summed up the courage and will to leave Craig, she had to undergo five months of intense physiotherapy to get her limbs working properly again, as well as several months of counselling for post-traumatic stress disorder.

Charlotte's case is by no means rare. However, there is a common view that domestic abuse only occurs in certain 'social groups' and to certain kinds of women, perhaps those who are poor and uneducated, and most definitely not to Christians! Recalling her experiences, Charlotte said, "There was no actual hostility at the church, but I just felt that it was too much to try to talk about the abuse, as I really felt that nobody would understand but would be wanting to know details or would think that I was exaggerating the severity."

Charlotte's story brings a challenge to churches about their role in advertising and providing safe space for victims and survivors of abuse to get the help and support needed. Not that churches are expected to be experts, but rather that churches need to be linked in locally to the professional services available, so that victims or survivors of abuse can access that professional support. If those professional services are not available locally, which will be the case in many places around the world, then the church has the duty to advocate for services and to gain specific professional training to be able to provide safe spaces. It is imperative that services provided meet national standards or international standards.

Latin America evangelical church research

Statistics for the levels of violence against women in our churches are difficult to find. Paz y Esperanza, Peru, and Comunidad y Cambio in Argentina, in conjunction with Restored, conducted baseline research on family violence in evangelical churches across four countries: Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and Argentina. The final report *Within Four Walls*¹⁷ highlighted the extent of violence taking place in evangelical church families. Four out of ten women in churches in Peru reported suffering violence from their partner at some point during their relationship. In Argentina the figure was two out of 10.¹⁸ In Ecuador 4 out of 10 women reported suffering sexual abuse as a child.¹⁹

Within Four Walls also found that there was a higher likelihood of psychological violence in evangelical churches than in the general population. Concerningly, four out of 10 (40%) of evangelical Christians interviewed in the Peru research, and two out of ten in Ecuador and Argentina, denied the existence of domestic abuse in Christian homes. There is a clearly a barrier to acknowledging the reality of violence inside church families. The research also found that the majority of victims sought help from their pastor or church leader. This highlights the essential need for training on identifying and responding domestic abuse for church leaders as well as the wider congregation.

UK Church

A survey carried out by the Methodist Church in 2002 found that 17% of respondents had experienced domestic violence, 13% had experienced domestic violence several times, 54% had experienced domestic violence for five years or more, and that the main perpetrators of domestic violence were husbands and partners.²⁰ More recently the Evangelical Alliance in the UK stated in its *How's the Family* report in 2012 that 10% of women experienced physical abuse and 7% of men were perpetrators of physical abuse.²¹

Christian survivors of abuse give varied accounts of how churches have addressed the issue of domestic abuse when it has been disclosed. With the diverse and varied

cultures that operate in churches worldwide, the response has differed greatly from church to church, and from nation to nation. Some survivors reported that their church had been helpful and supportive. Yet many that Restored listened to, faced unhelpful responses: silence, being told to pray more, collusion with the perpetrator of the violence, and in some cases, scripture being used to coerce survivors to stay or return to abusive husbands and partners²².

Myths

Responses from churches often reflect some of the myths around abuse. The most common of these responses was “why doesn’t she just leave?”, as if leaving a relationship was simple. In fact a woman is most at risk at the point of leaving a relationship or just after leaving the relationship. It can be a very dangerous time as the perpetrator loses power and control over the victim. The question that should be asked is “why doesn’t he stop?”

We recognise that women are not the only victims of domestic violence, and that all violence and abuse in relationships must stop. In the UK, one in six men are abused. This statistic includes male-to-male violence in relationships.

A further myth is that a perpetrator abuses his partner due to anger issues or alcohol or job loss: that abuse happens because of something else, an external force, which the perpetrator has no control over. These may be contributing factors, but they are not the cause. In fact abuse is a choice. Blaming an external issue allows the perpetrator to deflect responsibility for their attitudes and actions. It also disables repentance, as the perpetrator is not recognising their choice to abuse, to sin.

Churches can add another dimension to the myths of abuse. The combination of the use, misuse and misunderstanding of scripture can provide a toxic environment for abuse to continue and a victim to stay longer when it is not safe to do so. This combination can look like “if I only pray more, submit more, God can transform anyone, my husband is my head and I should obey him, divorce is wrong.” This combination can lead to a woman hoping and praying for her husband to be transformed whilst he is continuing to abuse her and, in some cases, put her life at risk. In essence this can be ‘killer hope’. God rarely overrides a person’s will. A perpetrator of violence needs to recognize that they are choosing to abuse, that abuse is a choice, and acknowledge the damage it is causing to their victim as well as to themselves. Repentance is a key starting point in a journey of transformation which includes accountability, justice and restitution for the wrong done.

We are called to love one another. This is not a one-way love but a relationship of love. Love does not abuse. Love is not violent. In the way he treats women with

dignity and respect, offering choices and never forcing his will on women, Jesus is an example of how to operate in relationship with one another. Church leaders have an opportunity to dispel mixed-up theology and to speak truth and love into people's lives. God may hate divorce but God also hates a man covering himself with violence. (Malachi 2:16)

Sexual violence and rape carry powerful myths around sex, temptation and location: myths such as 'what did she expect wearing that?', 'what was she doing there at that time of night?' and 'he is a man and needs sex'. Rape is about power and abuse of power and control, and using sex as a tool of that power for the destruction of the woman. As the UK statistics show, most rape was committed by a person the woman knew, dispelling the myth that strangers are the danger.

There is a need for churches to be clear that violence against women happens in churches too, and that the church community needs to address the issue. When our church culture believes the myths, silences survivors, allows the misuse of scripture to go unchallenged; when our church culture is complicit, when our church culture can lead to death, then our church culture has to change. We need to break the silence and speak out about abuse.

The church needs to speak out that scripture cannot be used to justify violence, that the church has an answer and can be part of the solution, and that men and women can work together to end violence against women.

What can Churches do?

Theology

The first action churches can take, is to acknowledge the reality of the statistics and recognise that domestic abuse and violence against women happens in churches too. This can then lead into discussions and solutions offered by churches, depending on their own context and resources. Getting leaders and pastors to use theology and sermons to challenge abuse can make all the difference to a victim or a survivor, and can challenge perpetrators of abuse who may well be sitting in the congregation. Giving a clear and authoritative message that all violence against women is wrong and must stop, breaks the myth that abuse cannot happen in churches.

Church leaders have a responsibility to teach theology well and clearly address mixed up or wrongly applied theology. This is particularly relevant, and possibly life saving, when addressing domestic abuse. Pastors need to be aware of a toxic combination of misinterpreted theology of submission, forgiveness and divorce that can leave a woman feeling powerless, unable to keep herself and the children safe,

in a relationship where her husband is choosing to abuse her. Subconsciously or inadvertently the church can place the institution of marriage above life itself by saying a wife must stay with her abusive husband thus placing her at risk of further harm, and at worse, death. This may feel extreme and lead us to thinking ‘surely not in my church’ and ‘that wouldn’t happen here’ but the reality tells us a different story.²³

Education and awareness

Church leaders, and particularly people involved in pastoral care, may find it useful to attend basic awareness training on domestic abuse, what it is and how to address it. Each church can have procedures safeguarding against domestic abuse, and a domestic violence telephone referral line can be added, so that women who are abused know who they can contact in church and know that they will be listened to in safety. Restored offers a free pack for churches on ending domestic abuse,²⁴ alongside basic awareness training. Paz Y Esperanza, Peru have developed an online e-learning course for pastors on domestic abuse, available in Spanish.²⁵

Policy and procedure

A charter for churches is another action that can be taken, with the charter prominently displayed or distributed in the church.²⁶ This signifies that the church is aware of the issue of domestic abuse and is prepared to take action. For victims and survivors coming into the church, it signals that the church is a safe place, and for perpetrators that there is zero tolerance of domestic violence. This charter needs to come out from a formally-adopted church policy and procedure on domestic abuse, so that everyone knows what to do and who to contact when a person discloses abuse.

Link to local professional services

It is important that churches, where possible and feasible, link into available local professional services. Supporting local Safe Houses within a set of agreed boundaries and guidelines, can be a real support to survivors of abuse who could be otherwise isolated and alone. Some churches have provided practical items for safe houses, noting that women have often left home with very little clothing or essentials.

Model healthy relationships

Congregations and church leaders can model positive, healthy relationships that break cultural stereotypes and treat women with dignity and respect, as made in the image of God. They can commit not to shy away from standing against a culture that diminishes and denigrates women, and to challenge others when women are treated as less than made in God’s image.

An example from Burkina Faso

Modelling healthy relationships can be a powerful witness to the local community as a church in Vipalgo village, Burkina Faso discovered. They taught a marriage course and invited couples from the church to take part. The marriage course ran over several weeks with couples putting into practice what they had learnt each week. Neighbours started to notice changes happening in the households. One couple said that their neighbours began to visit on a regular basis and chat and observe how the couple were interacting with one another. The biggest change came when, completely against the local culture, the husband moved into the same house as his wife and children. In that particular culture the husbands usually had a separate home in order that they could sleep well and not be bothered by the children in the night. The subtle changes, and this big change, saw neighbours, friends and others in the village come to the local church and ask the pastor if they could join the course. They had witnessed the positive improvements in the relationships of the couples attending the marriage course and wanted it for themselves.²⁷

Engaging men

Thankfully there are many men who choose not to abuse, many men who are good fathers, husbands, and partners. Sometimes, though, these men do not speak up to challenge violence and abuse when it is seen or heard. Edmund Burke has often been quoted as saying, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

Several campaigns have recently come to the fore, highlighting the importance of engaging good men in the response to violence against women. Originating from the White Ribbon Campaign in Canada, First Man Standing encourages Christian men to respect all women, challenge other men’s attitudes and actions towards women, and join in the cause with women to end violence against women.²⁸ The UN recently re-launched ‘He for She,’²⁹ a solidarity movement for gender equality, which includes ending violence against women. Others include A Call to Men and Men Engage.

Men talking with other men can be incredibly powerful and enable change to happen. It is important that men do not collude with the abuse and violence. There is a need to ensure positive action as a result of joining the campaigns, that men do not use them as an opportunity or a cover to take up power over women in a new or different sphere. It is important that the campaigns have a reference group of women that can contribute and advise on courses of action, remembering that at the heart

of violence is the abuse of power and control. It is important that women and men work together to bring violence against women to an end.

Summary

Violence against women is pervasive in all societies and cultures, and churches are not excluded from the problem. It is vital that churches rise to the challenge and take their place in responding well to survivors, offering space and also providing accountability and support to perpetrators of abuse as they take responsibility for their attitudes and actions. Churches should not do this alone, but actively seek out the advice and professional services where they are available and accessible. It is important that bridges are built with professional services, to improve mutual understanding and establish a referral process for situations of abuse when these arise.

May the church rise up to take action. No longer silent; no longer justifying violence against women with our thoughts or scriptures; no longer thinking it's not in this church. May the global church and Christians rise up and make a stand and say "This is our business, this is our church". All violence against women is wrong and must stop.

¹ Restored Press Release 'Leaders from Britain's biggest religions speak out on violence against women' 15th July 2015 <http://www.restoredrelationships.org/news/2015/07/13/restoreds-press-release/>

² United Nations, 2013 <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/endviol/>

³ The term 'intimate partner' is used throughout the article to refer to the person with whom there is a relationship. This could be husband, boyfriend, civil partnership husband, or a less formalised relationship.

⁴ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/phumzile-mlambongcuka-home-can-be-the-unsafest-place-for-women-10204379.html>

⁶ Jan Ransom, Flame International, spoken in a personal meeting with Restored in 2013.

⁷ <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/endviol/>

⁸ UN Women 2013, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

⁹ UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993); reaffirmed in UN CSW 57 Agreed Conclusions 2013. http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_agreed_conclusions_advance_unedited_version_18_March_2013.pdf

¹⁰ Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Briefing paper, UN 2013 <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/endviol/>

¹¹ UNICEF report, 2013 http://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_69881.html

¹² <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/crime-stats/crime-statistics/focus-on-violent-crime-and-sexual-offences--2012-13/rpt---chapter-4---intimate-personal-violence-and-partner-abuse.html>

¹³ 'Focus on: Violent Crime and Sexual Offences 2012/13' ONS 2014 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/crime-stats/crime-statistics/focus-on-violent-crime/stb-focus-on-violent-crime-and-sexual-offences-2011-12.html#tab-Types-of-violence---domestic-violence--sexual-offences-and-intimate-violence>

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- ¹⁴ ‘Overview of violence crime and sexual offences 2012/2013’ ONS February 2014 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/crime-stats/crime-statistics/focus-on-violent-crime-and-sexual-offences--2012-13/rpt-chapter-1---overview-of-violent-crime-and-sexual-offences.html#tab-Summary-of-Homicides--Weapons-and-Intimate-Personal-Violence--IPV--Analysis>
- ¹⁵ Women’s Aid website accessed Oct 2014 <http://www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic-violence-articles.asp?section=00010001002200410001&itemid=1280&itemTitle=Statistics%3A+how+common+is+domestic+violence>
- ¹⁶ Names have been changed to protect the identities of the people in this true story.
- ¹⁷ Within Four Walls, Paz Y Esperanza, 2014 <http://www.restoredrelationships.org/resources/info/83/>
- ¹⁸ Infographia Argentina, Comunidad Y Cambio & Paz Y Esperanza 2014 file:///C:/Users/Mandy.Mandy-PC/Downloads/Infografia_Argentina_y527Ydh.pdf
- ¹⁹ Infographia Ecuador, Paz Y Esperanza, 2014 <http://www.restoredrelationships.org/resources/info/2/>
- ²⁰ ‘Domestic Violence and the Methodist Church – the way forward’ Conference Report 2002 <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-domestic-violence-the-way-forward-2002.pdf>
- ²¹ ‘How’s the Family’ Evangelical Alliance report 2012 <http://www.eauk.org/church/resources/snapshot/hows-the-family.cfm>
- ²² An example can be found in the Archbishop of Canterbury’s blog ‘Survivors of abuse are never the ones to blame’ 1st Oct 2014 <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/blog.php/21/survivors-of-abuse-are-never-the-ones-to-blame>
- ²³ For a fuller expansion on theology in the context of violence against women please see Restored’s paper for Micah Global on ‘Reflections on Theology regarding Violence Against Women’ 2015 www.restoredrelationships.org/resources/ or Restored’s Church Pack on Ending Domestic Abuse. <http://www.restoredrelationships.org/resources/info/51/>
- ²⁴ <http://institutopaz.net/diplomado-prevencion-y-atencion-integral-vf>
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Gender, HIV and the Church was a Tearfund funded project in Zimbabwe and Burkina Faso working alongside Christian AIDS Taskforce (CAT) in Zimbabwe and Vigilance in Burkina Faso. An overview of the results was published In Oxfam’s Gender and Development Journal <http://tilz.tearfund.org/~media/Files/TILZ/Topics/Gender/GHAC%20Oxfam%20Mandy%20-%20Tearfund%20HIV%20project%20final.pdf>
A case study of the work can be found here: <http://tilz.tearfund.org/~media/Files/TILZ/Topics/Gender/Gender%20HIV%20and%20Church%20:0web.pdf>
- ²⁷ First Man Standing, Restored <http://www.restoredrelationships.org/firstmanstanding/pledge/>
- ²⁸ He For She, UN 2014 <http://www.heforshe.org/>