

BOR #3427: Eradicating Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

All of creation is sacred in God's sight. Because many women and children, along with others, are ignored, abused, and violated, we urge renewed commitment to prohibiting violence against women and children in all its forms.

Violence takes different forms and in many cases, it is about power and control. Violence is a tool used by the strong to dominate the weak and the powerful to dominate the vulnerable. Often the mere threat of violence is enough to achieve the goal of dominance and control. Human beings are especially vulnerable with respect to gender and sexuality, and therefore sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is particularly devastating.

Exploitation, abuse, and violence take many forms: child marriage, female genital mutilation, child soldiers, displacement of persons, family violence, polygamy, human trafficking, and rape as an act of war.

Child Marriage

In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed that marriage must be based on consent. Yet, in practice, one third of girls in the developing world are married before the age of 18 and 1 in 9 are married before the age of 15: usually without their consent and often to men they do not know (Child Marriage Facts and Figures, International Center for Research on Women, <<http://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures>>). As recently as 2010, 67 million women aged 20-24 around the world had been married before the age of 18 (Child Marriage Facts and Figures, International Center for Research on Women, <http://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures>). Child marriage itself is an expression of power and control, and can lead to further experiences of violence.

Female Genital Mutilation

According to the World Health Organization, “female genital mutilation (FGM) comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for nonmedical reasons. FGM is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women” (Female Genital Mutilation Fact Sheet, World Health Organization <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/>). FGM is nearly always carried out on minors to keep girls and women from experiencing pleasure during sexual intercourse, rationalized that this will keep girls from straying outside of marriage. FGM “has no medical benefits” and can cause harmful medical complications including “severe pain, shock, bleeding, recurrent bladder and urinary tract infections, infertility and an increased risk of childbirth complications and newborn deaths” (Female Genital Mutilation Fact Sheet, World Health Organization, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/>).

Child Soldiers

UNICEF estimates that “300,000 children—boys and girls under the age of 18—are involved in more than 30 conflicts worldwide. Children are used as combatants, messengers, porters, cooks, and for forced sexual services. Some are abducted or forcibly recruited, others are driven to join by poverty, abuse, and discrimination, or to seek revenge for violence enacted against them or their families” (Fact Sheet: Child Soldiers, UNICEF, <http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/childsoldiers.pdf>). Sexual violence is increasingly common in conflict situations and is perpetrated against both girls and boys.

Displaced Persons

Displaced children, women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons, and persons with disabilities are particularly at risk of sexual and gender-based violence (UN High Commissioner on Refugees). During conflict and disaster, children are easily separated from their families. Limited in their ability to protect themselves, they are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, abuse, trafficking, forced or early marriage, female genital mutilation, or other harmful traditional practices. With less access to employment than men, women and girls are often compelled to engage in sex for survival. In the developing world, they are in danger of rape, assault, and even death as they search for water, firewood, and food for the household. Added to these social and physical atrocities are the possibilities of unwanted pregnancy, HIV infection, and the transmission of the virus from the mother to her unborn child.

Family Violence

Violence and abuse exist around the world and in families in virtually every congregation; tragically, no church or community is exempt. Abuse among family members—child abuse, spouse/partner abuse, elder abuse—takes many forms: emotional, physical, verbal, sexual, and economic. It is manifested through violence, abusive language, controlling behavior, intimidation, and exploitation.

Polygamy

Some traditions observe polygamy: multiple wives of one husband. Polygamy typically places women in a subordinate role subject to the power and control of the husband, and with no legal rights to family property.

Labor and Sex Trafficking

Modern-day slavery has become the fastest-growing transnational criminal enterprise earning an estimated \$150 billion (US) in illegal profits annually while enslaving 21 million people around the world (Human Trafficking, UN Office on Drugs and Crime, <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html>). The United Nations underscores the role of violence in trafficking, defining it as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

“Exploitation includes . . . sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude” (Human Trafficking, U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html>).

Rape as a Weapon of War

For centuries, women have been raped as an act of violence and a demonstration of power—especially in times of conflict and war. Rape has been and is sanctioned by some military organizations for the gratification of soldiers during war. For example, during World War II “comfort women” were forced to have intercourse with soldiers. The motivation for abuse of women is also a deliberate strategy to terrorize opposing forces and the civilians in their territory. For example, in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, rape of women by warring parties has been confirmed as “a war in the war.” Many women are raped by armed groups including the regular forces of the country. Impregnating women and forcing them to bear children who will continue to remind them of their violation is used as a way to destabilize opposi-

tion ethnic groups. Unfortunately, government responses tend to focus on violence against individual women rather than violence used as a strategic weapon. Thus, women and girls are discouraged from reporting the crime because of the stigma associated with being a victim.

According to United Nations Women, one in three women and girls are impacted by physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes. Violence has immediate and residual consequences:

Psychological Trauma

Sexual and gender-based violence inflicts deep emotional and physical wounds that can carry lifelong scars. Child brides often show signs symptomatic of sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress, and are therefore extremely vulnerable to domestic violence, abuse, and abandonment (Facts and Figures, International Center for Research on Women, <http://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures>). One woman who was raped as a tactic of war stated: “[A]fter the rape, I was in pain all the time and lost all sexual desire. Because of my chronic fatigue I could no longer work. My husband eventually abandoned me and the children” (Child Marriage Sexual and Gender-based Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, World Health Organization, http://www.who.int/hac/crises/cod/sgbv/sgbv_brochure.pdf). The World Health Organization reports: “Many survivors of sexual and gender-based violence suffer from psychological trauma expressed through symptoms such as chronic fatigue, anxiety, insomnia, depression, etc. Some have even resorted to suicide. And trauma that boys and men face as witnesses or perpetrators of sexual violence is underestimated” (Sexual and Gender-based Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, World Health Organization, http://www.who.int/hac/crises/cod/sgbv/sgbv_brochure.pdf).

Physical Injury

Underage girls experience higher mortality during pregnancy and childbirth. Girls younger than 15 years old are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s, making pregnancy among the leading causes of death for girls ages 15 to 19 globally (Facts and Figures, International Center for Research on Women, <http://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures>). One million girls worldwide suffer from an obstetric fistula, a hole between the vagina and rectum or bladder that is caused by prolonged obstructed labor, leaving a woman incontinent of urine or feces or both. This commonly occurs among girls who are anatomically immature. As a result of the incontinence and resulting foul smell, the girl or woman is often rejected by her husband and community (What is Fistula? Fistula Foundation, <https://www.fistulafoundation.org/what-is-fistula/fast-facts-faq/>). Child brides, often unable to effectively negotiate safer sex, are vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, along with early pregnancy. Nearly 2,500 adolescents are infected with HIV daily (Opportunity in Crisis, UNICEF, http://www.unicef.org/lac/Opportunity_in_Crisis-Report_EN_052711.pdf). Other practices such as FGM can result in pain and the spread of infection (Child Marriage Female Genital Mutilation Fact Sheet, World Health Organization <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/e>).

Economic Hardship

The United Nations Development Program reports that in many places women lack access to paid work or the ability to get a loan. Thus women, who make up 50 percent of the world's population, own only 1 percent of the world's wealth (Gender and Poverty Reduction, U.N. Development Program, http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/povertyreduction/focus_areas/focus_gender_and_poverty.html). People

living in poverty, and particularly women and children, are disproportionately affected by violence. Abusive interpersonal relationships and unfair treatment, cultural practices and norms, institutional policies, and business practices at every level of society, including between some nations, continue to deny women's and girls' sacred worth and perpetuate gender inequality. Sexual and gender-based violence is not only a gross human-rights violation, but fractures families and communities, and hampers development, also costing billions of dollars annually on health-care costs and lost productivity (Estimating the Costs of Violence Against Women in Viet Nam, United Nations Women, <http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2013/2/costing-study-viet-nam%20pdf.pdf>). Child marriage limits young girls' skills, resources, knowledge, social support, mobility, and autonomy. Young married girls have little power in relation to their husbands and in-laws. Perceived as a way to provide for a daughter's future, married young she will be subjected to physical and sexual violence without education or skills to create economic opportunity for her or her children (Child Marriage Facts and Figures, International Center for Research on Women, <http://www.icrw.org/child-marriage-facts-and-figures>).

Stigmatizing the Victim

Many victims of sexual violence are stigmatized in society or rejected by their families. Misguided religious morality often reinforces stigma and blame regarding rape, domestic violence, gender identity, disability, and sexually transmitted infections like HIV. A significant consequence of sexual and gender-based violence is the breaking of sacred trust within society, including the Christian community, where vulnerable members are violated. When brokenness is reinforced, it can lead to new social manifestations of violence. For example, a woman's inability to bear a child, a teenager's odor from a fistula formed in prolonged

labor, or her positive HIV status are grounds for divorce. At the same time, traditional beliefs such as child marriage and FGM are reinforced by traditional leadership and mandatory cultural practice.

The combined effect of these many consequences of sexual and gender-based violence is decreased ability to create solutions and respond to local concerns. All of the manifestations of violence identified above limit the educational and employment opportunities for women. Girls who marry young are less likely to discuss family planning—healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies—with their husbands, increasing the chances of infant mortality and maternal death. Rather than spending time developing ideas that would generate income, enhancing the emotional and physical health of families and communities, women and children plagued by sexual and gender-based violence often focus precious resources on survival.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Is Not New

One thousand years before Christ, Tamar was raped by her brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13). An earlier account tells of the gang-rape of a concubine (Judges 19), and an even earlier account the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34). These are stories not only of the violence done to women, but the failure of those in power to support the victims. In Tamar's case, her father, King David, was silent, doing nothing for Tamar, the victim, but rather protecting Amnon, the perpetrator, and thus his own dynasty.

The history of our faith is the history of attempts to recover the insight of Genesis 1 that all creation is sacred in God's sight, and all human beings are creatures of sacred worth. Jesus was an advocate for the sacred worth of all. In the account of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11), we see Jesus actively oppose violence against women. Jesus saw beyond the stigma and blame

that her accusers imposed on her. Unlike King David, Jesus did not employ his power to cover the injustice, but instead recognized her dignity, interrupted the proposed violence, and sought to restore her to community. Jesus' response expresses his commitment to abundant life (John 10:10), and his call to help create the circumstances in which abundant life can thrive. Jesus' gracious response reaches for the redemption of both victim and perpetrator and stops the cycle of violence.

United Methodists have worked to eradicate the many forms of violence that destroy the integrity of individuals, families, communities, and nations. People of faith must work to change attitudes, beliefs, policies, and practices at all levels of society that dehumanize and promote the exploitation and abuse of women and girls. Women with equal rights are better educated, healthier, and have greater access to land, jobs, and financial resources.

Because women and children, along with others, are ignored, abused, and violated, we urge renewed commitment to eradicating violence against women and children in all its forms.

We call on all United Methodists, local churches, campus ministries, colleges, universities, seminaries, annual conferences, general agencies and commissions, and the Council of Bishops to:

1. Teach, preach, and model healthy masculinity and respectful relationships that reflect the sacred worth of women and girls (Principles of Healthy Masculinity, <http://www.maleallies.org/principles-of-healthy-masculinity>);
2. Engage men and boys as allies in the promotion of gender equality;
3. Assess resources used in local ministry settings to ensure the promotion of sacred worth of women and girls and healthy masculinity;
4. Develop theological, educational, and advocacy tools to raise public awareness of sexual and gender-based violence, and to

promote a culture of nonviolence;

5. Develop and implement culturally relevant and culturally competent training focused on violence against women;
6. Advocate for an end to harmful traditional practices, such as child marriage, polygamy, and female genital mutilation;
7. Advocate for training in local contexts for people on the front lines of disaster and conflict to recognize women's and girls' increased vulnerability to opportunistic rape, sexual exploitation, and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence;
8. Advocate for full and legal access to medically safe reproductive health-care services. Violence against women undermines sexual and reproductive health, contributing to unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, fistulas, sexually transmitted infections, and HIV, and their recurrence;
9. Ensure that adolescent sexual and reproductive health services address gender-based violence, including access to prompt quality care in cases of rape, emergency contraception and Post Exposure Prophylaxis to prevent HIV infection, and additional referrals (e.g., legal, specialized counseling, and support groups);
10. Provide comprehensive sexuality education so that girls and women in abusive relationships have increased understanding of their bodies and tools to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases and/or unwanted pregnancies;
11. Advocate for girls to have access to higher levels of education to decrease the rates of child marriage and poverty;
12. Ensure that all children have access to registration and documentation, including birth registration, to increase access to basic services. and,
13. Advocate for the reduction of war and conflict in the world to reduce conditions that increase the risk of aggression toward women and girls.

The Church must reexamine the theological messages it communicates in light of the experiences of victims of sexual and gender-based violence. We must treat with extreme care the

important, but often-misused, concepts of suffering, forgiveness, and the nature of marriage and the family. Part of our call, as individuals and as a Church, is seeking to address the root causes of violence, working to eradicate it in its multiple forms, and being God's instruments for the wholeness of affected women and children. As people of faith we must become aware of how violence affects our communities, how we can end our participation in it, and what interventions will end its ongoing cycles.

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See Social Principles, ¶ 162C, F.