

How to overcome Violence against Women: Criticism of Cultural Traditions by Human Rights

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Dear Brother Bishops,
dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

about one year ago we have been shaken up by a survey of the European Fundamental Rights Agency that has revealed the ongoing violence against women in Europe. About one third of all women have experienced physical attacks or sexual violence after their age of 15. This is one of many numbers in the survey that are alarming! It shows clearly, that while we take a focus on Africa in this conference, the spread of violence against women is by far not an African problem. It is a trait of our societies in Europe and Africa as well – and we all have to fight against.

Obviously violence against women is so deeply rooted in our societies that one can speak about a tradition of violence against women. As church we have not only to ask if we did enough to overcome this violence, but also to ask about our part in this.

Therefore let me highlight four different aspects:

- 1. Violence against women is a topic for the church
- 2. Empowerment for victims to speak out
- 3. Additional value a human rights perspective can offer
- 4. Need of prevention

1. The ambivalent role of the church

Of course there are many causes and roots of violence in society. There is no single explanation for such a multi-dimensional phenomenon. It has to be analysed carefully and a lot of studies have been published in recent years. But still: do we see our part in this as a church clearly?

In the first 1000 years of the church the Christian faith brought a significant valorisation of the role of women in the church and in the society regarding the Roman and the Germanic right. In the Christian tradition for example it was an infamy and a shame for a man to beat a woman.ⁱ There always have been women and men who referred to St Paul to support the equal dignity of men and women as Paul teaches: “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor

free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3, 26-28).

But the interpretation of the Bible took normally a male perspective for granted and neglected the female one. The understanding for centuries stamped our expectations about the role of women and men in society, with men being perceived as strong and active while women are and have to be weak and passive.

The majority of women internalized subordinate behaviour and often they had to suffer violence from their husbands. Especially dark is the history of sexual abuse of girls and women by men and even also by priests.

These are just a few remarks, by no way exhausting, about our share as a church in violence against women. Only if we see and name it clearly we are able to find the right remedy against structures of violence in the society and within the church.

2. Listening to the victims and speaking out about violence

Having spoken about our accountability for violence against women, I would like to mention, that the church has learnt how important the perspective of victims is to find remedies and to put an end to violence. Within the church the awareness rose, that healing the wounds does not come from forgetting and silencing the remembrance. In dealing with the past, be it the past of countries, of the personal history or of a single man and woman, we have to open spaces where the stories can be told safely. Within us the past is still alive – and we need to accept the presence of past experiences to be able to integrate them into our live, how harmful some experiences might have been.

Violence against women is not a taboo anymore – neither within our society nor within the church. In our church, especially in Germany, Women Associations and the pastoral care for women have a great part in breaking the taboo. In the 90es the oecumenical decade “solidarity with women” set important impulses for open debates.

The German commission of Justice and Peace dedicated the work of a project group on women and human rights during the years 1995-2005. During the period of about 10 years work the group committed a large part of its work to questions of violence against women. They spoke out openly about traditions within our culture that supported such violence and they tried to break the silence within our church on related questions. The subject of violence against women is still – and rightly so – present in the work of our bishops’ conference. The Sub-Commission for Women in the Church and Society brings it to our attention whenever it is necessary. They

produce useful booklets, texts and other publications that help us in addressing the problems in the right way.

It's possible to say that next to the tradition of violence this groups and activists connected their struggle with another tradition within and outside the church: to raise the respect for the equal dignity of each and every person. The conviction of equal dignity of all human beings is the basis for our engagement for human rights – and it belongs to the best parts of our tradition.

Space has thus been created to address this topic. But today we should be careful that we do delegate this fight and action against violence to specialists, like NGOs or some governmental institutions. We know that the phenomenon is still far too widespread. And because it is a strong violation of the human dignity of every person to fall victim to violence, it is our task to do everything we can to overcome violence against women and to address the necessary resources, be it personal capacity or be it an allocation of funds, to stigmatize violence.

Nevertheless we have to admit, that we still need a strong commitment to really change the society. We have to realize, that the problem of violence is not solved: it is sadly enough part of everyday life for many girls and women in Europe.

3. Human Rights supporting church's action against violence

Supporting respect for human dignity is an essential part of the church's teaching from the beginning through the centuries. During the years within the church rose the awareness that in the formulation of human rights the respect for human dignity finds its modern expression. Therefore Pope John XXIII could praise the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as “a solemn recognition of the personal dignity of every human being”.ⁱⁱ And Pope John Paul II reaffirmed this commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Declaration. He wrote: “As its fundamental premise, it [the UDHR] affirms that the recognition of the innate dignity of all members of the human family, as also the equality and inalienability of their rights, is the foundation of liberty, justice and peace in the world.” And the Pope understands the following articles in the declaration as an unfolding of the promises of its preamble.ⁱⁱⁱ

The equal dignity of all members of the human family is deeply rooted in the recognition of men and women as an image of god. Human dignity is hurt by acts of violence – not only in the victims but also in the perpetrators. The integrity of the human being is one of the most basic laws, be it domestic or international. The reference to Human Rights can help to support our

engagement to end violence against women and to support those traditions that are in line with this aim.

4. Need of prevention

As reaction to sexual abuse against children in the Church and the society in the last years the catholic dioceses of Germany have established a large system of prevention against sexual abuse of children. The state also has established rules for such a system. Within the church this signifies for example that every bishop, priest, deacon and pastoral worker who has to do with children has to make a 2-days-course in which he and she learns how to be sensitive to possible problems of children and how to discover possible sexual abuse. And also every lay people and volunteer who works in the church with children has to make a course - but only one evening.

Maybe that we cannot establish the same system regarding the violence against women in general. But would it not be possible to establish a system in which every bishop, priest, deacon, lay pastoral worker and volunteer in the church and every boy and man learns in the schools and in the different groups and associations how to respect the dignity of women and how to recognize if a girl or a women needs help because of experiences of violence?

Would it not be an important task for the churches and the states to establish such a system of prevention of violence against women? This task is not too difficult!

ⁱ Arnold Angenendt, Toleranz und Gewalt. Das Christentum zwischen Bibel und Schwert, Münster: Aschendorff ²2007, 159-165.

ⁱⁱ Vgl. 144, Pacem in Terris (1963).

ⁱⁱⁱ MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE WORLD DAY OF PEACE 1 JANUARY 1999: RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS: THE SECRET OF TRUE PEACE.