

PATRIARCHAL STATUS QUO TO BLAME

Church guilt in sexual violence against women

Elisabet le Roux

IN MANY African countries where armed conflict is the order of the day, sexual violence against women is often used as a powerful weapon and strategy of war. Left at the mercy of their captors, women are subjected to torturous treatment and have to fend for themselves without any protection from their governments.

Given the perilous situation of these women, one would think that churches, in particular, would jump to their defence. After all, churches in Africa have been quite successful in fulfilling roles and tasks normally associated with the state, such as development, service delivery, peace-building and promoting democracy. Surely they can be effective agents in opposing sexual violence and addressing its consequences in countries affected by armed conflict?

This applies especially to such countries as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Liberia. In all three territories, people who participated in my research strongly believe in the ability of churches to address the causes and consequences of sexual violence against women.

For example, in Goma, the capital of Northern Kivu in eastern DRC, where sexual violence has taken on horrific extremes, local NGOs are working closely with the church to address sexual violence and to assist survivors. John-Luke*, a central figure in a local NGO, explained that by involving the pastor in the fight against all kinds of sexual violence, the community's views on this issue might also be changed.

However, my study has shown that collaborations like these are rare because churches remain unwilling to deal with sexual violence. Sadly, the practices and beliefs of most churches actually contribute to creating the context in which sexual violence can become a destructive weapon of war. Churches avoid talking about sex-related matters, and stigmatise and discriminate against survivors.

The experiences of Sylvia*, 25, and Siku*, 28, illustrate this. During the Liberian civil war, Sylvia was abducted, gang-raped by a group of men, then taken by a rebel as "wife" for two years. Siku, a Rwandan woman, has been marginalised since she was raped by a neighbour.

Both women said they did not receive any support from their respective churches, and instead became objects of ridicule and gossip. The experience of these women and many others show that the ability of churches to have a profound impact on the society is not always used to good effect. Two examples spring to mind: churches in Rwanda that supported the genocide and provided religious validation for the



ACTIVISM: Actress Angelina Jolie (left) greets Neema Namadamu, of the Democratic Republic of Congo, at the End Sexual Violence in Conflict summit in London last year. Namadamu formed an organisation that uses digital media to empower women demanding peace in the DRC. She formed it after her daughter was attacked. The writer says churches can play a greater role by addressing the causes of sexual violence against women.

genocidal project; and the Dutch Reformed Church in SA that condoned apartheid.

If we take for granted that churches can order and transform society through enabling and promoting certain behaviour, by creating social cohesion, by enabling believers to overcome challenging circumstances and by providing stability, why have they not done so more effectively? To find out, one has to look at the link between patriarchy and the church. In my view, patriarchy is the main reason why sexual violence against women exists.

It is undeniable that churches are patriarchal institutions and depend on patriarchy for their survival. They are therefore not motivated to change a system that – though being the main cause of horrific acts – lies at the heart of their structures.

Patriarchy denigrates women and allows men to dominate, oppress and exploit them. It objectifies women by positioning them as the sexual property of men. This creates the context in which sexual violence becomes a powerful weapon of war. Sexual violence against

women is an effective way of attacking and humiliating an enemy male and community because a sexually violated woman is devalued male property. Located in specific cultural and societal contexts, churches have unfortunately adopted the same patriarchal views of the roles of men, women and sexuality that are so conducive to sexual violence. Many, if not most, churches are promoting sexual violence through their teachings, practices and response to sexual violence survivors, for example, by admonishing those who disclose violations and ordering them to keep it secret.

Unfortunately, those churches that choose non-involvement actually also contribute to the continuation of sexual violence. By not condemning it they are implicitly condoning the beliefs, perceptions and activities that facilitate sexual violence. What makes sexual violence particularly bad is that it does not only impact the victim, but often destroys the intricate network of family and community that surrounds her. With one inhumane act, an entire community can be crushed.

This means that to address sexual violence, we would have to challenge patriarchy and change how women are seen in relation to men, and how sexual violence survivors are treated. Truly engaging with sexual violence would mean that the patriarchal structure of society, culture and church would have to be dismantled, and this would mean a loss of power for men. With most church leaders being men and the current system benefiting men in general, it is obvious why there is an avoidance of the issue.

Thus, while churches have a fairly good track record of addressing some human rights violations, this is not the case with sexual violence. Perhaps churches' ability to address issues like sexual violence is limited when the causes are practices and beliefs that uphold the status quo.

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