

“Interfaith Brief on Gender-Based Violence

“We can no longer be silent as we are called to uphold human dignity for all creation”

Faith Communities Respond to Gender-Based Violence

1. INTRODUCTION

Our Southern Africa region is struggling with the epidemic of gender-based violence. It is perpetrated in our homes, institutions of learning, faith communities, workplaces and public places. Women and girls are violated, and increasingly men and boys too. Intimate relationships that we usually associate with love, care and security have become platforms for abuse and insecurity.¹ The consequences of gender-based violence to the health and well-being of survivors and their loved ones are profound. As people of faith, we are taking a stand to address gender-based violence.

We acknowledge the high incidence of gender-based violence in our region where 1 in 3 women has reportedly been affected by some form of violence in her lifetime. The lifetime experience of gender-based violence among women ranges from 86% in Lesotho to 24% in Mauritius,² we recognise the challenges posed by these figures, especially as these figures are the tip of the iceberg, since most cases are not reported. The UNPFA acknowledges that gender-based violence “is one of the most pervasive, under-reported and unaddressed human rights violations in the world.”³ Gender-based violence is also known as ‘the silent epidemic’, not only because of the under-reporting, but also because of our collective silence, and the silencing of survivors through socio-cultural and religious factors such as the abuse of sacred texts, stigma, discrimination and other social pressures. As communities of faith we have nurtured a culture of silence and secrecy in relation to gender-based violence.

We confess that we have not been as proactive in responding to this epidemic as we are called to be. We have tended to minimise women’s needs and suffering.⁴ By regarding any issue relating to sex and sexuality, including gender-based violence as taboo, we have entrenched the culture of silence. However, we are convinced that the resources found within our faith traditions position



us strategically to be on the frontline in the response to gender-based violence. As has been accurately observed, “Faith leaders influence the entire faith community, and as such can negatively influence an entire community with women, survivor- and gender equality-intolerant conservative attitudes.”⁵ Thus, we have neglected our duty to ‘do no harm’ and have, in the process, failed the people who put their trust in us.

We as faith leaders lament the fact that, while some of us have listened to the cries of gender-based violence survivors and have been providing counselling and support, some of us have not offered the safe spaces survivors need. We have also not been as visible in the frontlines as is demanded of us by our faith. We confess that by advising women to stay in abusive relationships, preaching messages that entrench gender-based violence, we have abdicated our positions as protectors in our communities. Painfully, we admit that some of our leaders and members have been implicated and convicted as perpetrators of gender-based violence. We are also guilty of overlooking oppressive social and cultural practices as supported by our faith texts. While we have spoken out against poverty, we do not fully grasp how women’s poverty increases their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. We resolve to act

with conviction to end gender-based violence in our ranks and institutions, and in our communities and society. We commit ourselves to becoming safe and healing spaces for survivors and ensuring that survivors of gender-based violence experience justice.

2. PUTTING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE INTO CONTEXT

Our response to gender-based violence can be enhanced if we invest in seeking to understand some of the key drivers of the epidemic. Our sacred texts are clear that we must seek knowledge (Baha'u'llah Kitab-i-Aqdas, pp 51-52; Hosea 4: 6 and the Quran 20: 114). Having a fuller understanding of the complexity of gender-based violence will enable us to develop and implement more effective responses. We can no longer remain silent, nor assume that gender-based violence is a 'private issue.' It is in many instances a matter of life and death; a matter of human security, dignity, faith, human rights and is key to the prosperity of entire nations.

Gender-based violence, as defined by SADC, refers to all acts perpetuated against women, men, boys and girls on the basis of their sex which causes or could cause them physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or economic harm, including the threat to take such acts, or to undertake the imposition of arbitrary restrictions on or deprivation of fundamental freedoms in private or public life in peace time and during situations of armed or other forms of conflict.⁶

Gender-based violence is caused by many factors. Although individual men are responsible for their individual actions, we recognise that there are structural and systemic factors that need to be taken into account. Thus, gender-based violence:

...is a consequence of gender inequality and discrimination and is shaped by the interaction of a wide range of social, cultural, economic and political factors. By intention or effect, violence against women serves to perpetuate male power and control and is sustained by a culture of silence and denial of the seriousness of the physical and psychological consequences of abuse.⁷

We are conscious that boys and men may also experience gender-based violence. We further recognise that the endemic violence in our African societies is part of the legacy of colonial violence that has stripped our people of their heritage and destroyed the social fabric of many communities, deliberately impoverishing large masses of people in the interests of profit and empire. It is in this context of loss of identity that violence becomes an option, and as it becomes habitual, it becomes normalised. It is also in this context that those disempowered by wider social systems unconsciously or consciously seek to affirm their own status and power by any means possible. Thus, we see that violence begets violence, and those who are scarred by violence reproduce the same violence that has marred their own humanity.



However, it is women and girls who are mostly subjected to violence in all its forms. This is due to the unequal power relations between men and women in society. Religion, culture and gender socialisation have combined to render women more vulnerable to gender-based violence.⁸ Ideologies supported by religion and culture have socialised many men to regard violence as a legitimate way of expressing themselves. Further, patriarchy licenses boys and men to prioritise their pleasure and interests ahead of the health and well-being of girls and women. Thus, the power imbalance between men and women in society largely accounts for gender-based violence.⁹

We admit that our sacred texts have often been used narrowly to bolster destructive social systems and abuses. But there is another trajectory running through all our sacred texts – of a God who stands with the poor and marginalised against those who are rich and powerful. Therefore, in the context of gender-based violence, we have to accept that the use of sacred texts to justify patriarchy and male dominance needs to be countered by recovering the other parts of our sacred texts that speak against violence and abuse of power and that speak in support of peace, justice and healing, and a world in which every human being is of equal value because we are all created in God's image.

Although our governments and civil society organisations have taken positive steps to address gender-based violence, more remains to be done. We continue to witness some men perpetrating gender-based violence with impunity. We continue to bury girls and women killed by such men. Sadly, we sometimes continue to hide cases of gender-based violence in our homes, religious institutions and communities.

We as faith leaders concede that we are key stakeholders in responding to health and social issues and that we can play an influential role in preventing and reducing gender-based violence and related vulnerability to HIV.

2.1. Inspired to Act: Examples of Faith-Based Responses to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Region

THURSDAYS IN BLACK: RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

The campaign is simple but profound. Wear Black on Thursdays. Wear a pin to declare you are part of the global movement resisting attitudes and practices that permit rape and violence. Show your respect for women who are resilient in the face of injustice and violence. Encourage others to join you. Often black has been used with negative racial connotations. In this campaign Black is used as a colour of resistance and resilience.¹⁰

Despite our historical challenges, we have not been completely absent from responding to gender-based violence. Some of us have sought to have our voices heard and to be visible on the frontlines. For example, some of our faith groups actively participate in the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence annually. We have sought to deepen awareness that gender-based violence is at the core of our faith and spirituality. Further, the interfaith Thursdays in Black Campaign against gender-based violence is gaining momentum in our region. This is a World Council of Churches campaign that seeks to mobilise the faith community to recognise the urgency of addressing gender-based violence. It challenges people of faith to prioritise the response to gender-based violence within their communities.

Across the region, interfaith collaborations on engaging boys and men in responding to gender-based violence are under way. These initiatives seek to mobilise boys and men to be actively involved in the response to gender-based violence. Non-governmental organisations that focus on men and masculinities are also recognising the importance of men in faith communities and have been collaborating in trainings. There is a commitment



towards ensuring that boys and men become resources in addressing gender-based violence. Thus:

In many places we can see that there are roles, behaviours and attributes that are considered appropriate for men and associated with maleness which emphasize relations of equality and respect between women and men and which regard femininities as different but equally valued. Focused on gender equality, these transformative masculinities challenge the legitimacy of patriarchal ideas and practices. Transformative masculinities should be positive for everyone, because they emphasize the values of equality, respect and dignity for people of all gender identities.

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We recognise our role as educators and purveyors of information that can help to prevent gender-based violence. Some of our seminaries and theological training institutions now ensure that students are introduced to the theme of gender-based violence during training. We

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA, DIOCESE OF NATAL ADDRESSES GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

The Anglican Diocese of Natal has for over six years attempted to address issues of gender and gender-based violence through submissions to Synod and setting up committee structures in the Diocese. During the same period, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, the head of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) was calling for the Church to stop sweeping gender-based violence under the carpet and respond pastorally to survivors instead of stigmatising them.

It was from early 2017, when a new bishop was elected, that we began to make real headway in the Diocese of Natal. For the first time we had a bishop for whom addressing gender inequality and gender-based violence was a priority. So much so, that he appointed a Lay Canon for Gender and gender-based violence. A Gender Ministry team was established comprising ten people of diverse gifting. Bishop Dino declared upfront that he had had no experience of addressing gender issues but he was prepared to learn, because he knew that God was calling him to lead the Diocese to address gender-based violence. The new vision for the Diocese was simply "Loving Communities", and the slogan for the Gender Committee's work was "Becoming Loving Communities".

The first strategy of the Canon was to invite the Secretary-General and Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Church in Southern Africa to a high-level meeting to share about their own

programme to address gender-based violence. This helped the Bishop and his deputies (Suffragans) to understand the importance and power of using their position to spearhead this work.

A conscientisation processes was initiated through four Clergy Forums over two years called by the Bishop to address various aspects of gender and gender-based violence. There were pockets of resistance, but overall the response was positive, as it was recognised that gender-based violence was increasingly a pastoral concern. The workshops led to plans to open these conversations at local, regional and parish level, and clergy began making plans for regional work in the 11 Districts (Archdeaconries) across the Diocese.

However, the Lay Canon expressed some unease to the Bishop about continuing an education programme while maintaining the silence and taboos around gender-based violence in the church. This was in the context of church teachings and practices that enabled a climate in which gender-based violence was condoned or even rumoured to be perpetrated by some church leaders. He agreed and committed to a process of publicly declaring that the Diocese had a zero-tolerance policy towards sexual harassment and that any complaints of sexual misconduct amongst clergy or lay leaders would be firmly dealt with.

Moreover, Bishop Dino shocked faith leaders present at a conference of the We Will Speak Out SA coalition that the core of the problem of gender-based violence is the uncritical teaching of the notion of 'male headship' and 'female submission'.

This encouraged some survivors to bring cases to the Bishop, and investigations were held based on the Pastoral Code of Conduct and the legal Canons of the Diocese dealing with sexual misconduct, which were investigated taken up. These processes exposed certain flaws in the legal systems and process guidelines, which have been rectified. Another factor that frustrates cases is the fear that sometimes surrounds them, which can prevent people from testifying, and can lead to divisions in a parish and serious intimidation of complainants and witnesses.

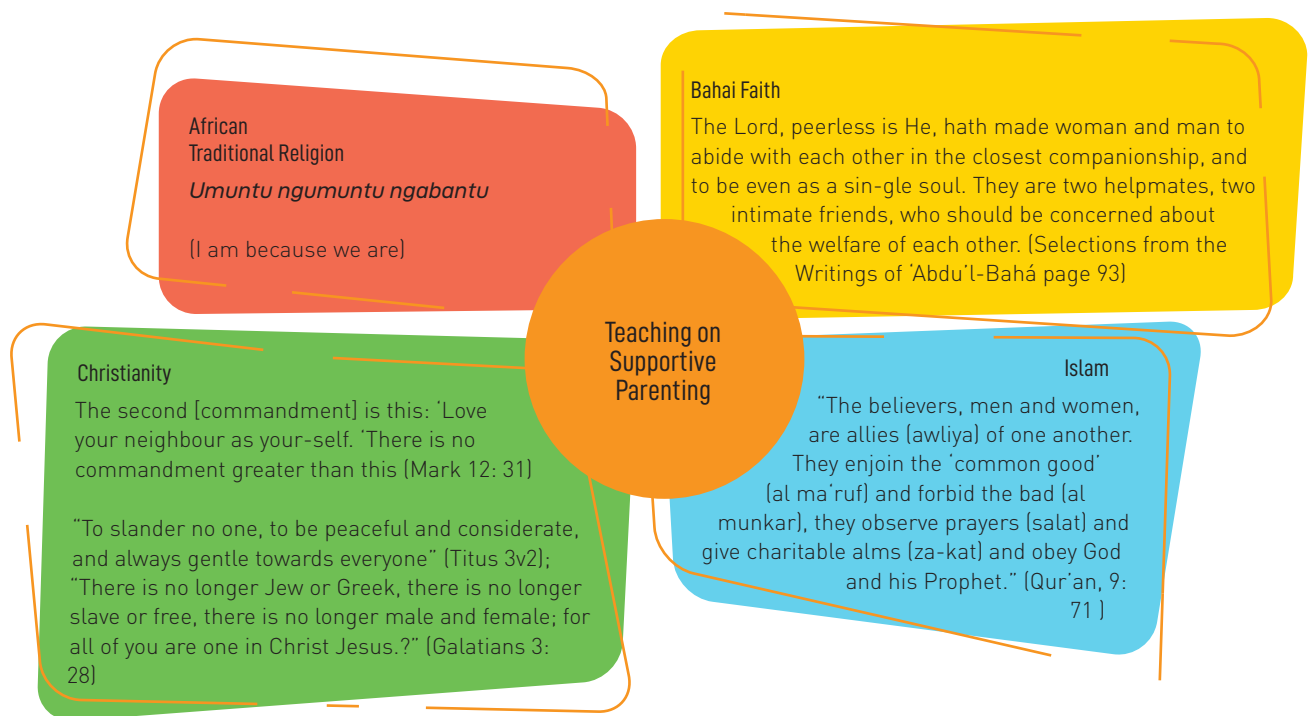
Over the past year or so, the Archbishop's Office has also been dealing with other cases, with varying outcomes. The Archbishop has established a Safe Church Commission, which has been working on developing a Safe Churches Charter. Using the lessons learnt from these experiences, this Commission and its advisory body developed core documents and legal provisions, which have just been approved by Provincial Synod, the ACSA's highest decision-making body.

This is therefore a story of change but also a story of how risky it is for survivors and even senior faith leaders to take a stand. And it is a call to those of us in the rank-and-file of our faith institutions to remember the importance of standing firm together in solidarity with each other and with those of our leaders who are prepared to take the risk to respond to God's call to root out all those hidden secrets that undermine the integrity of our witness and the credibility of our ministry as places of worship and healing.

acknowledge that we are called to provide places of safety for the survivors of gender-based violence, as well as to ensure that we speak a truth that does not trivialise their struggles to reaffirm life or that further endangers their lives. We realise that through our sacred texts, traditions, teachings and doctrine our faith communities can convey values that honour human dignity, nurture positive attitudes and provide guidance and teaching on sexuality that is life-affirming.

Among us, we now have faith groups with policies that address gender-based violence, at the workplace and

within the community of faith. Working with inspired individuals within our communities and building synergies with other people of goodwill, we have demonstrated that we can address issues of justice with passion and compassion. We are gradually but decisively taking up our rightful place in the struggle for gender justice. Through collaboration, the sharing of resources and having courageous conversations, we can begin to dare to imagine a new world in our region where there is no space for gender-based violence and every human being is able to flourish.



3. STRENGTHENING OUR RESPONSE TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Although we have begun to contribute towards responding to gender-based violence, we acknowledge that there is still much scope for improvement. The following strategies can enhance our overall response to the epidemic.

3.1. Deepen and Popularise the Concept that All Human Beings are Created Equal

Our sacred texts are clear that all humans are created equal with the right to enjoy abundant lives.

3.2. Resist Domination and Power with Creativity and Courage

"He who is carried on another's back does not appreciate how far off the town is"

(African proverb)

Often, gender ideologies that give rise to gender-based violence are supported or justified by the abuse of our sacred texts and traditions. Religious teachings and affiliation provide a significant context and lens through which members process their experience of gender-based violence. These can serve either as a resource or a roadblock.

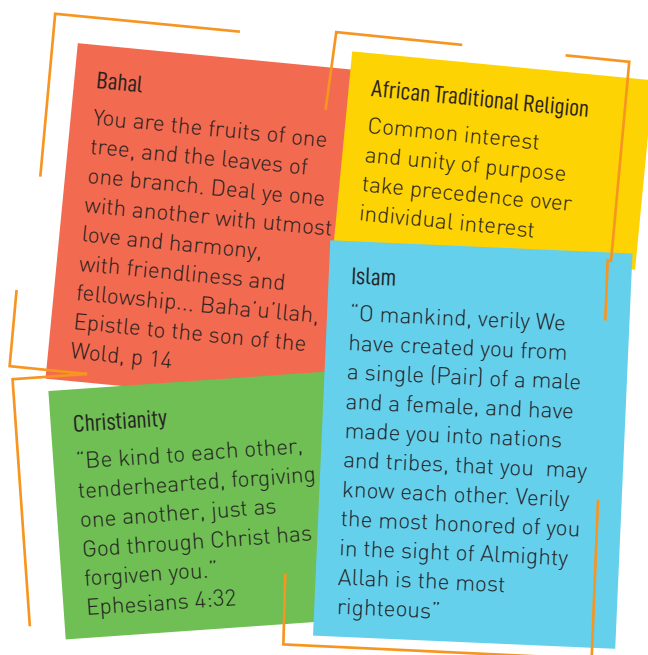
We need to have the courage to revisit narrow interpretations of our Holy Scriptures and allow other texts to challenge us not to misuse our Scriptures. For example, teachings that normalise male domination without recognising the need for mutual respect, love and submission to God's image in each human being, may easily lead to the abuse of power and can be used to justify gender-based violence. We as faith leaders are also guilty of abusing our power and acknowledge the culture of silence and impunity in our faith communities that enables and entrenches gender-based violence. We commit to rooting out any such incidences if they are perpetrated by our own officers, and to putting in place proactive measures to prevent such abominations of God's justice from occurring.

We will actively promote gender justice in our communities in order to address gender-based violence. Our religious texts speak to us about peace, love and living together in harmonious relationships and honouring one another.¹²

3.3. Promote Mutual Learning

The sharing of good practice and mutual learning among ourselves as faith communities through the exchange of information and regular meetings across faith groups will assist in keeping our interventions relevant. We as faith leaders want to utilise our positions as community leaders to help shape the discussion of issues concerning gender-based violence.

Examples of networks and coalitions specifically designed to open such spaces of mutual learning exist in many faith traditions and across faith traditions.¹³



Our faith traditions are informed by the ethics of care and justice. This is confirmed by our sacred writings as highlighted below.

3.4. Promote Interaction with Organisations Addressing Gender-based Violence

Although there are emerging signs of collaboration with organisations and individuals addressing gender-based violence beyond the faith community, these need to be

intensified. There are resources and experiences that can be utilised more to benefit us within the faith community. Therefore, we will seek to actively promote interaction with state and civil society actors as we endeavour to be of service to all human beings.

3.5. Support Research and Documentation of Faith-based Responses to Gender-based Violence

As our training institutions are becoming more involved in the response to gender-based violence, we challenge them to invest in research and documentation. This will ensure that our interventions become more effective as they will be informed by findings from research. Furthermore, we will endeavour to document our responses to gender-based violence. Documentation has been one of our major challenges. As has been rightly noted, we have tended to spend more energy on 'doing' rather than recording our work and experiences.¹⁴ We undertake to address this challenge by documenting our responses to gender-based violence more effectively, and to deliberately reflect on our experiences so as to improve our practice and increase our impact in transforming ourselves, our faith institutions, our communities and places of worship, and ultimately the lives of each person.

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Conclusion

We, as faith leaders and people of hope, commit to addressing gender-based violence effectively. We believe in the sanctity of life and that the human body is sacred. Therefore, it should be protected and not harmed. Our voice as the faith community is critical to effective and holistic responses to gender-based violence. Silence and 'cautious' responses to issues of gender-based violence are no longer an option. It is our duty to invest in our vision of a transformed, productive and vibrant region, free of gender-based violence, by using all platforms at our disposal to speak and encourage action against this scourge. As the custodians of our sacred texts, we commit to deepening our examination of religious texts and teachings and to explore new, liberative interpretations that will promote the health and well-being of all, including those affected by gender-based violence.

We will also strive to implement, with accountability, the policies that we already have; update those that need updating; and draft new ones where necessary. We stand together as faith leaders, as allies of survivors, advocates against impunity and survivor discrimination and stigmatisation. Together, we will challenge oppressive religious and cultural gender norms and address any related injustice issues, and we will be open to being called to account.

We go forth with a vision of hope and a call to action.

THIS BRIEF WAS DEVELOPED BY THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS:



ACT UBUMBANO



The Methodist Church of Southern Africa
A Christ healed Africa for the healing of nations

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