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FORMS OF GENDER VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This article points out that gender violence is prevalent in present day Africa and manifest in various forms. Indeed there is an increasing number of assaults, harassment, domestic violence and sex-related violence. It proceeds to highlight some major forms of gender violence, which are both systemic and structural. Systemic violence in this article points to how various institutions, cultural beliefs and practices create a social climate where violence is not only tolerated but accepted as natural. For this reason we proceed in this paper to describe how forms of physical violence, cultural violence, economic violence, social violence, church institutional violence and psychological violence against women manifest themselves in our African context.

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INTRODUCTION

According to the general definition of violence, it is the exercise or an instance of physical force, usually affecting or intending to effect injuries, destruction etc. (Collins English Dictionary). In this regard, violence is then unjust, unwarranted or unlawful display of force. In the social context, violence becomes an illegal employment of the methods of physical coercion for personal or group ends. (Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, Vol. XV, 1935:264). There are indeed times when force or power can be justified if it has human ends, such as when government causes people to pay taxes. Violence must be distinguished from such force or power which is a purely physical concept having a direction and intensity towards human ends.

The violence referred to here is unwanted, unjust and unlawful use of any kind of force for personal or group gain. We maintain that the violence we address in this article often is meted out in an environment that unfortunately tolerates and takes violence as an accepted part of the human condition.

Gender

There is always a confusion in the use of sex and gender. Sex refers to the most basic psychological differences between men and women. We are born male or female (in normal circumstances). Sex is that which God created man and women to be. It is therefore, universal and unchangeable (Mwaura Lecture notes 1999). Gender on the other hand is the culturally specific patterns of behaviours which society attaches to the sexes.

A common notion in feminist theology is that gender refers to socially acquired roles and positions designated as fitting to either males or females at a given time in its history (Clifford, 2000:268). According to theologian Anne-Louise Eriksson, gender may be said to refer to a socially constructed, acquired identity (Eriksson, 1995:26). Thus, in general, gender can be defined as socially constructed roles, positions and identities that vary historically and cross-culturally. Yet, a development in gender scholarship has pointed out that gender too can be understood as a process and that this will have an effect on how we understand the workings of society at both the micro and macro level. According to sociologist Judith Lorber, if gender itself is understood as a dynamic process, some will refer to the same process as 'gendering' while others will use the notion 'doing gender'. This implies that both men and women are seen as embodying constructed roles and identities at all levels - the interactional, interpsychic, organisational, institutional and cultural practices of entire societies (Ferree, Lorber, Hess 1999:10-30).

Gender violence

Gender violence is the unwanted, unjust and unlawful use of any kind of power or authority against a person because of his/her sex which causes suffering, pain or reduces his/her ability to make choices about his/her life. This kind of violence is many faced - physical, psychological, cultural, social, religious and economical. Gender violence, according to Anyanga H. O (1996) manifests itself in many ways. Violence has been meted out against all sections of the population on account of their gender, be they men, women or children. It is not uncommon to read in the media about such violence and all genders are guilty of it. We hear of men being battered by their women, boys being sexually abused by housemaids and elderly women, mistreatment of children by parents and guardians, harassment of men by women bosses, etc. However, the greatest victims of violence is against the feminine population of the world. Women have been oppressed and discriminated against an account of their gender. Since this is the most pronounced and common form of gender violence, this paper will dwell

much in this area. It will try to highlight the various forms of violence against women on account of their gender and try to give solutions on how to end any gender related violence in our society. In Ursula King's words, "our society seems to be scarred by an epidemic of violence and much of it affects women." (Ursula King, 1993:66).

Various forms of gender violence against women

There are many types of injuries acts, oppression and discrimination which women are a target. We proceed to highlight these forms of violence against women in present day Africa. These forms of gender violence are both systemic and structural. Systemic violence points to how various institutions, cultural beliefs and practices create a social climate where violence is not only tolerated but accepted as natural.

Physical violence

Physical violence is the illegal employment of physical force against another person. Women are often victims of physical assaults from the male society, be they their husbands or not. They suffer this because they are considered the weaker sex and because of their inability to offer enough physical resistance. Women are battered and sometimes actually murdered. Cases of this nature are almost everywhere in Africa. The media carry numerous reports of men being arrested after physically assaulting or killing their wives. (Wamue & Getui ed. 1996:13). Such media reports are but the tip of an iceberg. There are many other unreported incidents of physical violence against women. Another kind of physical violence is sexual assault. During the Women's Day Celebrations in South Africa last August, it was reported that in South Africa alone, a female is being raped on average every 25 seconds! (Sunday Nation, Nov., 7, 1999). The report continues that another 14,000 girls under 18 are raped often by men who believe having sex with a virgin will cure HIV infections. This includes rape or attempted rape. The reported cases are mainly extra familial - that is - cases in which men rape or attempt to rape women or girls who are not their own wives and daughters. (Kenya Times, 1996:20). This does not

mean that sexual violence does not take place within families. Occasionally, there have been reports of fathers raping their daughters. (Anyanga 1996). Where there is silence, however, is with regard to rape within the marriage context. This is because of the latent belief that rape is not possible between husband and wife. People seem to believe that a woman who say "no" to her husband's sexual demands is guilty of her marriage vows. The African belief is also that a man can and should have sexual intercourse with his wife whenever he feels like and whether the woman likes it or not. It is his right and her feelings don't count. (Anyanga 1996). Other forms of physical violence take the form of excessive workload at home. The woman especially in Africa is a beast of burden. She is the baby factory, the grinding machine, the tractor, the water tap, the transporter, the chief chef - the list go on. Even if both the man and the woman go to the garden in the morning, the woman has to come back and ensure the household eats, takes bath etc.

Cultural violence

Anyanga (1996:14) notes that violence against women, seems to have some deep rooted cause. To her, there appears to be some religio-cultural roots of violence against African Women. The place of women in traditional and to a large extent in modern African Societies is determined by cultural norms and attitudes. These norms and values have been preserved and propagated from generation to generation through stories, proverbs, songs, myths and rituals. These oral forms transmit a culture which was sexist. They depict women most times as weak and untrustworthy. They also seem to support and emphasize the view that women are subordinated. Moreover, according to Mbiti (1969), proverbs are common ways of expressing religious ideas and feelings. In some cases they reflect the experiences of society which is passed to posterity. Culturally women are viewed as possessive of males. The woman does not exist by her own right. She exists as her father's daughter, her husband's wife (Mrs. So and so), or upon his death, as the wife of the clan. The woman's existence is therefore characterized by the third person's possessive adjectives. The system of bride price perpetuates this thought that women are property of men.

Another form of cultural violence takes the form of polygamy. In Africa, polygamy is a cultural form of marriage which modernity has not been able to wipe out completely. It is still defended as having a positive role in society. This practice belittles women and negates the concept of love which is the basis of a marriage relationship. Some cultural practices are glaringly cruel to women. The practice like that of clitoridectomy is in actual fact genital mutilation. Science and reality have proved that it is harmful to the health and the reproductive system of the women. Even the instruction of girls at the time of "initiation" is geared towards pleasing the men folk. Some cultures have prohibitions that deny women of certain delicacies such as chicken, liver, eggs, pork etc. Even if the women are the ones to prepare the food, the men are left to enjoy the delicacy alone. Another area of cultural violence against women is childlessness. Childlessness in Africa cultures most times blamed on the woman. If they are widowed, they are inherited just like property.

Economic violence

In the economic realm, women experience violence. Shisanya (1996) note that particular structures relegate women to a inferior status. Women's value is mostly seen in relation to men, such as bride wealth which benefits their fathers and brothers. Right from the onset, the birth of a baby girl is not received with much joy among many African communities. The situation is even made worse if it is the second, third or fourth daughter. In most cases, the father and the tribe show their disapproval and lament that a girl cannot contribute to the lineage's growth. The father, however, gets consolation from the fact that the girl will fetch wealth once married. At the adolescence stage, many African girls drop out of school since many parents see their education as a luxury. The pressure exerted on the parents in paying school fees forces the majority of them to send their sons to school. The sons are viewed as sources of economic security for their families as well as perpetuation of the lineage's. George Eshiwani concurs with the observation that most parents favour the education of male children (Wamue and Getui eds 1996:61).

Even in today's economic system women's tasks are now conceived of as subsidiary to the tasks of men, not as complimentary or crucial to survival and development. As a result, Tadia H.M (1987) notes that women's roles are today often performed under stifling circumstances and women are frequently left open to the possibility of further exploitation and oppression. In his research carried out in Uganda (1983 - 1984), he shows that women continue to make critically important socio-economic and political contributions in Uganda even though they are not rewarded reasonably in either ideological and material terms. (Wiebe and Dodge, eds. 1987). In rural household economy, women produce the bulk of food. They are the ones responsible for planning and preparing meals. It is considered an indication of negligence for a woman to serve her husband a meal without sauce (*emer enume*) or not to provide a meal to the family, even if her inability to do so is because of a man's inability to provide. So the poor women have to stretch to great lengths to ensure that the family has something to eat. Failure to do so can lead to battering or even divorce. Despite this great contribution to the subsistence economy, they are not valued as contributors to the economy. Their male counterparts who major in the cash sector are highly regarded even if they cannot feed their families. (Tadia 1987).

Even where women grow cash crops, all the economic returns are paid to the males who are the owners of the land. In case a woman is employed, her salary goes to meet her family obligations while the man's is spent on conspicuous consumption of personal consumer goods such as watches, radios, TVs, alcohol, etc. (INSTRAW, 1987). These conditions leave women in a very weak economic status. Mwaura notes that in the rural areas where over 80% of the Kenyan women live, their agricultural participation approaches 100% for those between ages 15 - 64 years. (National Policy Gender and Development, 1992). Despite this they have limited access to and control of the means of production. Women control about 5% of the land even though land tenure legislation allows them ownership of land. They have limited access to capital resources and entrepreneurial skills. At the demise of their spouses, many women lose their property in the name of inheritance.

Windows are subjected to immense economic violence especially by their brother-in-law. The community's funeral rites demand that the deceased's property be distributed to close relatives. The windows are left in an awkward impoverished situation with no one to lean on for material and economic support. Sometimes, the window herself is inherited by a man who may already be married and has children. All these injustices leave a woman in a very unfair economic status.

Social violence

People hold a model or ideology of gender in which gender differences, and the bases and justification for differences between sexes are explicated. In the final analysis it is clear that this ideology reflects certain realities about men's and women's lives, while at the same time reinforcing and maintaining the status quo in terms of economic and social relations. (Wiebe and Dodge, eds. 1987:85). In the social sphere, there are distinctions between men and women. It is articulated in proverbs, jokes and myths and in formal and informal discussions. In Uganda, for example, the essence of local gender ideology is contained in the expression "*Ezenkanankana nekisiski, tezaaka*" (Two equal pieces of wood do not start a fire). Whenever one asks why in the social sphere men not women are decision makers, this is normally the typical response. People often say that men and women are distinct entities with different perceptions, tasks, responsibilities, privileges and attributes. They also argue that the differences are natural and God given. To be masculine means to provide for and control women. To be feminine means to be pleasing and acceptable to men.

In our daily interactions, it is uncommon to hear people portraying women in society negatively. They are branded trouble-makers, quarrelsome, irrational, unmanageable, tempestuous, hypersensitive, emotional, untrustworthy, immature and unstable. This implies that they cannot be trusted. They have been weighed in the cultural balances and found wanting. The Kipsigis for example have a saying "*Mokiborschin kwony ng'olyon nabo ungat*", that is "Do not tell a woman secrets". The

related Kikuyu saying is "*aka matiri cia ndiro na cia nyiniko*", meaning, "women have upright words, but only crooked ones". (Bara, 1961). This is violence against the integrity of women. The judgement appears to be against womanhood and includes all women by the very fact of their being women. In the social sphere also, women are sometimes discriminated against because of their natural occurrences, such as menstrual period. There are various taboos and other prohibitions that have been formulated for the protection of men. In many cultures, sexual relations are deemed dangerous for a man on an important mission. The general attitude is that women have defiling effects. Sportsmen for example are told to *keep-off* women before going in for competition. Women are not trusted in public social life. An outspoken woman in the public sphere is called all sorts of names. In fact, if she is unmarried, she may not get married at all. Besides, she is not taken seriously. Many outspoken women in today's society have had a very tough time with the men folk. In Uganda, for example, two outspoken women activists who are also members of parliament, Miria Matembe and Winnie Byanyima are often referred to by the press as "sharp tongued".

The area of education has long been plagued by a pedagogy of differences that stresses the differences between boys and girls, between men and women, rather than similarities. Such a pedagogy of differences starts at home and in the community. Girls are educated differently from boys because parents and the community perceive girls to be radically different from boys. They think that boys are more capable, more responsible and more important than girls. This is gender bias which amounts to violence.

Psychological violence

This kind of violence is more incipient and is engaged in probably without much thought. There is a systematic form of violence that is against and is experienced by every woman by the fact of her gender in various and different ways especially in the domestic arena. Right from childhood there is a type of gender stereotyping which is patriarchal. Women are expected to submit to patriarchal authority and this is reflected in the way children

are treated at home. The girl takes the role of serving while the boy is normally served. This is even reflected in the way the parents relate. Psychologically the boy builds a patriarchal ego while the girl knows her position as that of service. Even in society, the situation is no better. The contribution of oral literature to violence against women is already outlined. Anything to do with shyness, weakness, emotionality, cowardice and those negative attributes is associated with women. The opposite refers to men. This socialization process promotes inequality and lack of respect for human dignity. Women are often abused in society, segregated and used only as sex objects. In Church circles, all the other kind of gender violence affects the psychological balance of a person. This leads into the diminishing on the person's self image and so cannot fully participate in communal affairs.

The church in africa and gender violence

Most Church authorities strongly maintain that both man and woman are full members of the Church. However, women are denied performance of certain duties and roles. The common duties performed by women in the Church especially historical Churches are quite secondary, like teaching Sunday School, cleaning the Church, ushering people, arranging flowers, singing, cooking during feasts, etc. (Muthei, 1998:109). A critical assessment of these duties reveals that women work at the background of the Church even if they are the majority. The issue of including women in the theological education as well as their ordination remains a debate in many Churches today. The Catholic Church, for example, offers seminary education to men with a view of having them ordained to Holy orders. Some Churches do ordain women. By virtue of this, they get theological education. However, a look at their numbers, coupled with their experience and later participation in the ministry leaves a lot to be desired (Muthei, 1996:70ff). It is an indisputable fact that in many mainline Churches, the men folk dominate the top most administrative posts, both at higher level and in local committees. They are the decision makers. Hence, women who compromise the majority and thus the sustaining force in most congregations, have very little power within the

structures of the Church. They are even excluded from decision making positions in issues that directly affect them. (Ibid.,) Oduyoye (1991) notes that biblical texts that support the marginalization of women in Church affairs are often used by the Church and the men to successfully exclude women from bearing authority in Churches e.g. 1Tim. 2:12a that says: *I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men*". There are other Church practices that are oppressive to women. An example is a polygamous man who wants to participate fully in the Church. He is asked to divorce all other women and remain with only one. What comes of those other women is not the Church's concern. Sometimes they are advised to leave like "brother and sister". Another instance is that of a couple whose one partner may be infected with HIV. The Catholic Church, for example, does not permit the use of condoms. Another issue is that of contraceptives. The list can go on.

Conclusion

Gender violence is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, peace and development. It violates the enjoyment by people of their human rights and fundamental freedoms. It is unfortunate that gender violence in most cases is against women and children. The paper has tried to highlight violence against women. Of course it does not mean that men are not also sometimes victims of gender violence. We are just saying that women suffer most. This violence is many faceted. It can be physical, sexual, cultural, economic, social or religious. In all these cases it subordinates the position of women in society and hinders their full development. It is clearly a very unjust situation which the whole of society worth its name ought to be ashamed of. It is then suggested that all people engage themselves in the elimination of gender violence in our society which claims enlightenment. Institutions, groups and

individuals have to get working. Any socialization process of any culture must promote this equality and partnership between men and women and respect for human dignity. All this is possible if individuals have a change of heart, a metanoia. It begins with you the reader of this paper and me. Then together we can have a concerted action to overthrow such sinful practices of gender violence.

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