GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE CHURCH

A reality

A CASE STUDY

Gender Based Violence in the Church and measures to mitigate it
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gender Based Violence (GBV) is the inability of the society to recognize the roles and contributions made by men and Women and their failure to create an environment that reflects an understanding of these realities. However, since violence against women is more persistent and a universal problem occurring in every culture, Gender Based Violence is more perceived as violence against women. Gender Based Violence is still a pronounce issue around the world, because of the diverse cultural, religious and societal views or understanding on Gender.

Gender-based violence can also be defined as collection of violent deeds that are committed against a person’s will, such as discrimination against women and girls, denial of: access to resources, control over resources, decision making, exploitation, sexual violence, forced and early marriages, harmful traditional practices, undesirable submission and subjection to decisions made by cultural leaders, family members or religious leaders, physical and psychological torture, rejection, to mention but a few.

Such violence takes place in almost all families, homes, Organizations, institutions, including churches and close relations, irrespective of their culture and religion. This justifies the fact that Gender Based Violence against women exists even in Christian families, but in most cases they go un noticed or unpunished because of many reasons such as, fear of victimization, attitudes such as the faith, Christian beliefs and values, unfair judgment on women’s case, shame, guilt, lack of support from family members and the society.

Cultural perspective on Gender Based Violence

Culturally, Gender Based Violence, especially in most African cultures is viewed positively. Traditionally, it is believed that the man has all the rights to discipline his family including his wife in any way he feels right. For example when a man butters his wife, the family members will consider it to be domestic affairs. The assumption would be that, her failure to subject to the husband’s demand earned her the beating. In this case such matters are supposed to be kept secret and any woman, who dares to speak out, will be considered to be disrespectful.

Culturally, a woman is not supposed to question a man’s decision neither is he supposed to be accountable to his wife for any misconduct. Instead he can be accountable to the leaders or his parents. These are some of the areas which expose the woman to vulnerability of Gender Based Violence. For example;

Biti, a young brilliant graduate from the University, got engaged to a young man, in a marital relationship. Biti was a very determined and self motivated woman who landed on very good jobs with high pay. She soon got herself acquiring many assets including a beautiful residential house. Her husband, on the other hand chose to live irresponsibly, even though God blessed them with two children, he would not contribute any support towards their wellbeing. Biti’s Economic empowerment earned her Domestic Violence. Her husband started by abusing her psychologically and eventually to physical violence under influence of alcohol and extra marital affairs.
When the violence became intolerable for Biti, she decided to walk out of the relationship and went back to her parents, but, her mother, a re-known powerful educationist, well placed in a high position in education department, could not approve of her daughter’s freedom from Domestic Violence and the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Instead she encouraged her to live, because even their ancestors suffered the same experience. “My daughter, do not separate from your husband, it will be a shame for you to live with different men. You already have two children with that man and there is no way you can separate from him. We all went through that, be tolerant and persevere, one time he will change. I don’t want you to be a laughing stock and bring shame to the family. Please go back and live on.” That was the advice from Biti’s mother. Just like any other submissive girl would, Biti followed her mother’s wish and continued to live in this abusive relationship.

A woman faced with Gender Based Violence, has no refuge in African society. She either succumbs to the abuse or speaks out and suffers the consequences such as rejection and being given a sullen glare.

**Church Perspective on Gender Based Violence**

Just like in the cultural perspective, most Churches today provide a hidden haven for Gender Based Violence and condone it by misunderstanding the Bible. With reference, to 1 Peter 3:1-7, a woman is supposed to submit to her husband and the husband should love his wife, however, the church today uses this verse as a single phase point to suppress women and to destine their position in the society. In actual sense, submissiveness in the Bible encourages a woman to be obedient, humble, willing, loyal, respectful, and loving and have compassion for her husband. In the same way the husband should love, respect and take care of his wife. What does this mean? It means, that for this to happen both the wife and the husband should understand their roles and duties and be able to apply and abide by them with due respect for each other. Otherwise failure of one party to recognize his or her responsibility would create a barrier, the barrier conceives conflict, conflict gives birth to Domestic Violence then Domestic Violence graduates to Gender Based Violence. The center points of this verse are for both the man and woman to love, respect, and care for and appreciate each other. Submissiveness in this case does not mean that a woman should tolerate ill treatment against her will.

Just like in most National and Global political systems in the world, Leadership positions and roles in most churches are dominated by men. Female church leaders who may portray strong personalities, who confront situations head on, are usually considered to be noisy, disrespectful, arrogant and uncontrollable. Such strong and capable women are in most cases kept, either off or behind the line. In Anglican Church, a woman is not supposed to be ordained as Bishop (I stand to be corrected if this policy has been changed). Reasons why it should be so are not clear or justifiable.

While most churches condemn sex outside marriage, sex is still a major source of conflict in most marriages, yet few church leaders talk about it willingly. Majority of church leaders have a reservation when it comes to counseling couples in such matters and will always find reasons to suppress it, either in the name of “ what God has put together no one should put asunder or submissiveness”, because women are in most cases the first victims.
A Case Study

A friend of mine got married in a church wedding. But her husband was an adulterous man. He had extra marital affairs and eventually moved away from his marital home to live with an elderly woman as a wife. His wife took the matter to the family members, majority of whom were believers and some were church leaders too. Instead of condemning this man’s adulterous acts, they were protective and justified his adulterous actions against his wife, saying that, his wife is not submissive, that’s why her husband moved away from home to live with another woman. Unfortunately, even though they were Christians, they decided to turn a blind eye to the Biblical scripture in 1 Corinthians 6:12 -20 which forbids adultery.

As usual, the poor woman went to the Church leaders and reported the matter to them, but none of them dared to talk to her husband, because of his social status. She finally resorted to prayer and fasting and that was the point where God met her. Through her prayers, her husband returned home and went back to the church in repentance.

Similarly Mark 10:1-12 which states that “what God has put together no one should put a sander”, has become the foundation for a woman to tolerate domestic violence. These verses are commonly used by Church leaders and believers to counsel and help couples who are engaged in domestic violence. Unfortunately in most cases the counseling tends to perpetuate inequality, promote male authority and rigid roles that aggravate suppression of women and gender-based violence.

Failure of the church to teach, speak openly about sex and condemn Gender inequality and Violence undermines her ability to respond adequately to the HIV epidemic. Christian Based Institutions and Organizations, have the ability and greater potentials to mitigate Gender and Domestic Violence by reaching out to individuals and communities with information and provide services based on Biblical teachings and principles, without compromise. This is already being done by many churches and faith based Institutions but a lot more should still be done.

Most churches or Faith Based Institutions have taken into worldly measures and standards such as Financial Status, Social Status, Positions and Sex of people in the society to; determine their support and decisions on individuals. These decisions are in most cases decided in favor of men.

I witnessed many incidences where, women are denied justice in the church simply because their husbands are of a certain class or simply because they are women. An example of this is a where, a certain man of high social status, wedded in some church. I’m not sure if the church leaders knew that this man had already wedded and had a wife, or if they even took the trouble to find out details about this Gentleman’s background and commitment in the church or his Christian faith. He was a very rich man and held a very high position in public service. On his wedding day, security personnel were deployed around the church, in the name of “safeguarding Security”. Suddenly, as the wedding procession went on, the wife to this man came to the church with the intention of stopping her husband from wedding a second wife, because she was the legitimate wife. She carried along with her, her wedding photos, marriage certificate and a few relatives as a witness to the Church. Surprisingly a great scuffle arose between the security
personal and the poor woman as she tried to get into the church. She explained her position, and why she was there, but this landed on deaf ears. Instead, she was bundled and thrown out of the church, together with her relatives. This woman was mishandled and denied Justice in the Church! While her husband and the new wife ended their ceremony peacefully in the same Church. Surprisingly, the very church leaders and Christians who witnessed this marriage attended the wedding reception!

In this case of injustice, shall we still say that the Church leaders were not aware? Were the marital scripture “what God has put together nobody should put asunder” genuine before God? Was this marriage destined and approved by God? What role did the church play in this case to mitigate Gender based Violence? What message did the Church leaders send to the poor woman, who was denied justice in a place where she expected it? Where else should this woman have run to? Would she still trust the church or even worship God in this church? If the Church which is the foundation of Christ could deny her the justice she deserved, would the legal court accord her the justice? What message did the Church preach about marriage in this case, to the youth, believers and non believers? What example did they exhibit? This woman was subjected to humiliation by the Church!

While Ephesians 5:23-24 says that, man is the head of the house and women should obey their husbands, Church leaders and the believers are not supposed to use it as a justification to suppress women, neither should women accept to be suppressed. Ephesians 5:10-17 encourages believers to know and do what pleases God. It discourages believers from condoning evil, but to shun it by bringing it out in the light.

It’s high time; the Church realizes that Gender Based Violence, Domestic Violence and Discrimination have its roots in religious and traditional misguided beliefs and teachings. Ephesians 5:3 – 4: says since you are God’s people, it’s not right that any matter of sexual immorality or indecency or greed should be mentioned among you since you are Gods people, nor is it fitting for you to use language which is obscene, profane or vulgar, but rather give thanks to God. This verse does not mean that matters regarding sex should be kept secret. Most Christians and church leaders believe that prayer and trusting in God is the only solution to their problems. Yes, while this statement is true, it does not mean that a woman should be subjected to or accept to live under violence, with, a belief that God knows it all. Neither should they suppress their feelings on Gender and Domestic Violence, sexual matters with a thought that the Bible considers it Vulgar or obscene.

What the Church can do, to mitigate Gender inequalities and Violence:

**Stand in the gap and Speak louder, so that all may hear and understand**

The church should take the lead to make the world know that, all people have a right to a life without violence by preaching the true Gospel of love and transformation. A Gospel which shuns bad cultural practices, discrimination, immorality and social injustices.

The church should preach the Gospel that leads people to recognize and accept God’s value, irrespective of sex, religion and culture. If people can understand this value, then their actions will also value the lives of others.
The Church, as an Institution should participate at all levels to develop and ensure that national policies and programs are Gender responsive. This means that, the church should play a role in liaising with other actors to identify key Gender inequality concerns and recommend best interventions to address this concern.

The church should take lead in promoting social mobilization for the purpose of creating Gender awareness, and to foster positive attitude and behavior change based on Biblical teaching necessary for the maintenance of gender equity.

About the writer

Florence has worked extensively for European Union (EU), ECHO, Tear Fund and USAID Funded programs, that support Humanitarian, Emergency and Livelihood Interventions, for HIV/AIDS affected and infected households, armed conflict and crises affected communities, for fourteen (14) years, in Northern, Eastern and West Nile Regions of Uganda. She has a wide experience and expertise in programming, designing, implementing and monitoring programs which respond to the needs of Orphans and Vulnerable Children, Formerly Abducted Children, Victims of conflict, Victims of Domestic Violence, Women, Youth, Victims of Torture (VoT), extremely Vulnerable Individuals (EVIs) and Conflict mitigation using Alternative Dispute Resolution (ARD).

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