

**The 6th International Women Consultation
of the
Evangelische Kirche von Kurhessen-Waldeck
and her Partner Churches
EMPOWERING WOMEN IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY**

"You are a God who sees me" (Gen. 16,13)



INTRODUCTION

The 6th consultation of the partner churches of the Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck was held at Tabitha Conference Center in Windhoek, Namibia, from 21st August until 31st August 2023. 15 delegates from India, Kyrgyzstan, Namibia, the Republic of South-Africa, Germany, Romania and Estonia participated in this consultation.

During these days, the delegates lived and discussed together, sharing their experiences of very different contexts. After a bible study about the story of Hagar (Gen. 16) and an introduction to the theme, the keynote speech on the theme by Anda Nkosi, Coordinator of the international women network and gender desk of EMS, South Africa, and the Namibian delegation, started with the presentation of the situation of women in church and society in the 2 countries. The other countries continued with their reports on the next day. After having heard all reports, the participants discussed main points and agreed on decisive questions to be tackled in the next days.

The conference made an exposure programme with excursions to the Sofima sewing project at the Headquarter of the church and to the Penduka women's project. On the following day, the excursion headed to Otjivero, the pilot project of the basic income grant (BIG). On Sunday, the delegates took part in the Sunday service at Paulus/Gowaseb parish in Okahandja Park, an informal settlement near Windhoek.

The days following Sunday were dedicated to internationally mixed working groups to identify visions, obstacles and strengths to overcome the obstacles in regard to three topics: Leadership of women, overcoming patriarchal mindsets, and fighting gender-based violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO OUR CHURCHES

Out of the presentations and discussions, the delegates identified the main challenges within their individual contexts and brought them together.



FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGICAL CONVICTIONS

The Bible says that we are all equal in Christ, there is no man nor woman (Gal 3:28). But we experience that in fact there is inequality between men and women all over the world.

We are convinced that this system can only be changed by changing our mindset and raising awareness about patriarchal thinking in all of us.

In Gen 16, Hagar, Sarah's servant, is the first woman in the bible to name God. She says: "You are a God who sees me." Hagar shows us what it means to be empowered: She feels acknowledged in her misery and she feels seen. That gives her back her dignity and her self-esteem. She feels her own power and capacity. She is reconnected with her ability to take responsibility for her life. This experience can empower women all over the world.

In Matthew 25, 14-30, God urges us to use our gifts and talents. Also churches need the full capacity and all the gift and talents of women in all parts of church. Therefore, they need to support the empowerment of women.

LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN

In discussing issues of the leadership of women in church and society, we developed the following **vision**:

Women and men are equally educated regarding leadership and continue to learn and share good leadership practices. This implies the willingness to share power. It also implies the willingness of women to support other women who are in leadership and not pull them down.

In our discussion, we identified the following **obstacles** for women in leadership:

1. Men's decision to block women from leadership and the law that allows it.
2. There is a lack of training and capacity building for leadership.
3. Women are fearful to speak up.
4. There is a lack of support by other women.
5. In some countries it is difficult for women who are willing to be leaders to find reliable support in childcare.

To overcome these obstacles, we found the following **strategies**:

- Concerning obstacle 1:
International support of church networks (e.g. Lutheran World Federation, World Council of Churches, partner churches) for women in leadership and for women's ordination and laws that enforce both will help to overcome these kind of decision making.
In some churches, quotas for women's participation in constitutions or policies will help to give women equal participation.
It will also help to integrate the issue of women's participation in leadership and women's empowerment into the strategy of the respective churches. Women's empowerment must be a regular element of church strategy.

- Concerning obstacles 2 and 3:
Compulsory training for male and female leaders is needed. Continuing education programs for women pastors on a regular basis will secure capacity building.
As a first step, creating a support and reflection group for leaders will help (interview groups).
- Concerning obstacle 4:
Create women's groups, associations, caucuses that allow closeness and give space to advice each other and to develop strategies together (raising consciousness)
- Concerning obstacle 5:
Create political pressure for good childcare, allow part time leadership, allow women on maternity leave to participate in continuing education. Using domestic help is, however, ambiguous because the working conditions for the domestic helpers are often insecure.

Based on this, the following **commitments** were reached:

- We want to improve the quality of women's leadership.
- We will include empowerment of women in the partnership contracts between churches and in the financial policies of partnerships.
- Women's empowerment must be a regular element of church strategy.

OVERCOMING PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES

Discussing issues of overcoming patriarchal structure we developed the following **vision**:
All are equal – *"There are no man or women"* (Gal. 3, 28),

In our discussion, we identified the following **obstacles**:

1. Deeply rooted patriarchal systems exist as long as humankind exists. This has been basically purported by the harmful gender roles dictated by culture, beliefs & practices. It has been – further aligned with the definition of masculinity and the acquired position of delegated power.
2. Culture-mindset as stated above lies in the construct of Culture. It dictates how men and women should behave themselves. The mindset is passed on to young males who externalize it in displaying their dominance in whatever setting to show their manhood as superior.
3. Financial dependence: Gender roles play a vital role regarding to who get to provide for the family, men are seen playing the role of such. Through this they have better access to financial resources. Even if it is not like that in all households, it makes man feel superior and in control of all situations in the home. Women become powerless and thus subservient to their partners/husbands.
4. Women are not willing to share or take power: The following picture has been seen to be trending highly in the women space: Some women with power/knowledge are not willing to share or empower those in need. Those in the powerless space would also not be keen to accept empowerment or just encouragement, whilst others simply lack support in any call for women empowerment.

5. Lack of support from the social media.

To overcome these obstacles, we found the following **strategies**:

- Education through good examples; encouragement; trainings; social media, supporting each other and self-development.
 - * Good examples: values should be strengthened from home / society and gender roles be demonstrated according to likes / talent and capability regardless of men or women.
 - * Encouragement: To be aware of what one is good at without competing (Strength & Weakness) and to be willing to accept assistance.
 - * Social media used positively to enhance growth in areas that need empowerment.
- Emotional intelligence/maturity.
- Networking into the society: This is a powerful tool to learn from those that have been in the game with appropriate resources.

As a result, the following **action plan** was developed:

- Detailed reports to be shared in the Diocesan Executive committee & flowing to the bigger Diocesan Council.
- Road shows at all circuits in their circuit council's sittings.
- Printing pamphlets on the subject matter & distributing them among congregations & all available Fellowship.
- Reporting to the synod.
- Review/Revise & strengthen the Organogram for tangible outcomes.
- Introducing the theme of changing the mindset of deeply rooted patriarchal structures into the regular Pastor's and other Church Workers' Programmes, including implementation in ALL wings of the Church.
- Aligning the outcome into the available Strategic Planning's Key Performance Areas.
- Make use of available media (print, online and social media) to spread the issues broadly.
- Forge a networking relationship with all organizations who are addressing Women Empowerment Programmes.
- Encourage reading of the bible with a gender-neutral lense.

In some churches, we find very strict sitting arrangements of women and men sitting separately. We encourage churches to challenge that and allow people to sit together however they want to.

FIGHTING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

Discussing issues of fighting gender-based violence (GBV), we developed the following **vision**: To provide advocacy and lobbying in legislation to improve the Penal Code introducing legal punishment for offenders. Gender balance is present in the ways and styles of communication.

In our discussion, we identified the following **obstacles**:

1. Mindset considering violence as normal.
2. Toxic competition among women and self-sacrificing of women thinking they would save the family.
3. Culture of shame and honor.
4. Gender balance is seen as equivalent of LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexual, asexual) and not taken seriously.

To overcome these obstacles, we found the following **strategies**:

- Align with the existing structures and groups to raise awareness by:
- Informing, supporting, create safe spaces (consulting, bureaucracy, etc.).
- Supporting healing process.
- Education and awareness with existing groups: youth, women, men, elderly women, and men.
- Start with education, talk about sexuality, health, and body.

The following **action plan** was developed:

- Informal and formal workshops addressing women and perhaps their families with legal consultants, female lawyers, medical doctors, female politicians.
- Campaigning by using media, television, radio, social media, and the press. Get support from celebrities and influencers. Addressing it on all levels of churches from bishops to kindergarten groups.
- In every church circuit, a committee (with men and women) should be set up so that victims of GBV can go there and report.
- Create safe spaces in cooperation with existing GBV support groups.

There is an inherited mindset in all of us, referring to the role of women and men in society. The Church has to address gender-based violence instead of remaining silent. The Church must be a strong mediator and advocate against violence, discrimination and injustice.

CONCLUSIONS:

- We commit ourselves to report about the consultation and the suggestions in our churches, church councils and women fellowship groups.
- We commit ourselves as sisters and partner churches to evaluate and report to each other every second year about the outcomes of our plans and commitments regarding this consultation.
- We commit ourselves to support and empower each other and all women. We commit ourselves to encourage and pray for women in leadership who are engaged in women's issues.



WE ENCOURAGE OUR CHURCHES TO MAKE THE FOLLOWING COMMITMENTS:

Churches commit themselves to

- *support women in leadership according to the suggestions above (leadership training, encouragement of women as leaders).*
- *implement education in all levels of their churches to make people aware of disempowering women and of patriarchal mindsets.*
- *be strong advocates for overcoming gender-based violence.*
- *include empowerment of women in the partnership contracts between churches and in the financial policies of partnerships.*
- *include women`s empowerment as a regular element of church strategy.*

The consultation has been an enriching experience of learning and sharing for every delegate, inspiring to take new initiatives and have faith in God even in challenging situations of change.



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