

“You change my crying into dancing”(Psalm 30:11)

International Women’s Consultation in South Africa in October 2016 on the subject “Women Exposed to Violence”

It is a sad reality that women are still exposed to violence in countries all over the world. Numerous women are discriminated, humiliated and mistreated either physically, emotionally, mentally and verbally.

In order to consider the causes for such violence, 14 female representatives of churches of six countries (India, South Africa, Namibia, Estonia, Kyrgyzstan and Germany) gathered for a meeting in South Africa from 3rd to 11th October, 2016. The Protestant Church of Kurhesse-Waldeck invited representatives of her partner churches in these countries to the women’s consultation. For the first time it was an inter-disciplinary consultation including women from eight different professions.

It was also for the first time that they were joined by representatives from the Protestant Church of Hesse and Nassau and her partner church in India.

The consultation began with an excursion to a church-run project in Pretoria which provides shelter for women who suffer from violence and encourages them to free themselves from the spiral of violence.

The members exchanged their knowledge and experience of the situation of women in their home countries and in their home churches in a Christian Retreat Centre near Pretoria. The subjects dealt with were the causes for violence on the one hand and, the way, politics and society deal with such violence on the other. Another important issue was the question how the churches react to violence and how it can be evaluated from a biblical and theological perspective. Therefore, the women shared bible texts, in which women are presented as victims of violent acts. In common prayer sessions and services, they encouraged each other to no longer suffer violence against women but rather search for ways to overcome it. The motto for the consultation from Psalm 30:11 “You turn my crying into dancing” was the guiding idea. A look at the latest history of South Africa, which became tangible at the occasion of an excursion to the Freedom Park in Pretoria and the Apartheid Museum, encouraged the participants to believe that non-violent ways out of injustice and oppression are possible.

The insights gathered from the consultation were as follows:

- Violence against women is a common problem all over the world- nearly 1/3 of women have experienced some form of violence one time or another in their lives. Most of it remains unreported, both in the society and the Church, with women left to suffer in silence.
- One of the main reasons for violence is poverty- thereby endangering women towards prostitution, human trafficking and child marriages. In some cases, families use their girl child for earning quick money ... more like an “ATM” card.
- Existing Laws of each country regarding violence against women and discrimination are not implemented effectively.
- Some cultural practices and deep rooted traditions also add to violence- Lobola, dowry, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, child marriages and bride kidnapping.
- In many countries women suffer discrimination and stereotypes like - the glass ceiling, difference in wages, double workload at home and work.
- The role of education is crucial in empowering women to be self reliant and be survivors instead of being victims.
- Prevention of violence against women is as important as providing shelter or crisis centers.
- Women have to stand up for each other whereby they can help her sisters succeed instead of following the “pulling her down” syndrome.
- Sexual harassment and rape in church is a shocking reality, yet kept under cover.

Based on the above mentioned facts on violence against women, the following recommendations were made by the participants to the Churches:

- Address the issue of violence against women and girls.
- Create and increase awareness of violence against women at all levels of the church. To reach this goal
 - the churches need to empower and educate women
 - Develop and organize special programs to educate members of the church at all levels(Sunday School, youth, confirmation, etc)
 - Invest more resources towards this end.
- Not to justify violence with theology or Bible interpretation, but to support non-violence theology(Sermon on the mount)
- Pastors need to openly address violence and harmful traditional practices, thus providing women a safe environment for them to share their stories without the fear, shame or condemnation.

- Gender balance in all positions, including leading positions in the churches is needed.
- To effectively address the problem, churches should cooperate with other churches ecumenically and with the society as a whole.

If the recommendations are followed, the women are on the right path of being self reliant and it is then that her crying can turn to dancing!

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