

DISCUSSION PAPER FOR CHURCHES
AND FBO
**REFLECTIONS ON PSEAH IN
THE BIBLE**

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Reflections on PSEAH in the Bible

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Introduction

This paper aims to show what biblical texts express about sexual violence against women, but also children and men, and how biblical traditions can contribute to a more sensitive and gender-equitable approach to the **Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH)**: What is the biblical point of view regarding sexual violence? Which contribution can biblical texts make to reduce sexual violence? This paper is intended to help initiate discussions on this important topic in churches and other Christian Faith-Based Organisations (FBO).

Sexual violence against women has many faces. There are both: explicit forms of violence such as femicide, sexual exploitation, physical aggression, rape, threats and insults, and more subtle forms of sexual harassment such as discrimination, ignorance, contempt, devaluation, blame, control and sexually charged language and jokes.

Many Christian churches all over the world do so much good — nourishing the soul, comforting the sick, providing services, counseling congregants, teaching Jesus's example etc. But in many communities of faith, there is also sin: Sexual violence against women and children is often revealed and it is much more common than many want to believe. It has often led to failures by Christians to report sexual violence against women and children, respond appropriately to victims and change the institutional cultures that enabled the violence in the first place. Churches should be engaged at all levels – communities, leaders, policy level etc. – to promote a zero-tolerance in relation to sexual violence in all its forms.

Gender-based violence and culture

Gender-based violence and violence against children - especially sexual violence - is often silenced, ignored and denied by communities of faith. And it is often forgotten that violence against women and children is not just an individual problem, but a socio-cultural one that influences dealing with the topic in churches and faith communities. In many cultures, men are considered as superior to women and children. This applies as well to the North as to the South. Many traditions worldwide, especially patriarchal ones, have created an image of women and children as being inferior to men.

Regarding the interaction with women, there are many cultural myths and misbeliefs in many different regions: "When women say 'no', they mean 'yes'." "It is the fault of the women if they dress so provocatively." "Men mistreat women because they cannot express their feelings in a different manner." "Women who are being abused seem to want that, otherwise they would leave." "Domestic violence is a private matter, nobody should interfere." "Violence exist only in problem families." "I should have kept silent, then he would not have beaten me!"

From a Christian point of view, these myths and misbeliefs are not justifiable even though the Bible contains examples where women are suffering the consequences of patriarchalism which has been predominant through the history of mankind. Patriarchal structures consider women as an object and property of men. As a consequence, violence against women is tolerated and not seen as a problem and priority to overcome.

Violence against women in the Bible

In the the Bible, several stories of extreme sexual violence, abuse and rape can be found. Scenes of violence in the Bible show us that violence has existed before and unfortunately still exists today. They teach us that it is necessary to find ways to combat this violence. In the following difficult to bear example, different themes and consequences of SEAH can be found.

2 Sam 13:1-22¹:

While faking his illness and after wishing to be cared for by his stepsister, Amnon said to Tamar: *10 "Bring the food into the chamber that I may eat from your hand." And Tamar took the cakes she had made and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. 11 But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister. 12 She answered him, "No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this outrageous thing. 13 As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the outrageous fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you." 14 But he would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her. 15 Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, "Get up! Go!" So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. [...] 19 And Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe that she wore. And she laid her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went. 20 And her brother Absalom said to her, "Has Amnon your brother been with you? Now hold your peace, my sister. He is your brother; do not take this to heart." So Tamar lived, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house.*

This is a good example to show the situation of the victims of sexual abuse and the behavioural patterns of the environment. Even in those ancient days, the offenders are protected and the victim was told to remain silent, to keep the abuse a secret and to forget the violence experience, to play it down or to suppress it. This behavior has become a socio-cultural pattern in the course of human history. It tolerates violence against women and does not stand up against injustice.

A patriarchal point of view is not only expressed in the Old Testament, but also in some parts of the New Testament. As a man of his time, Paul reproduces the predominant patriarchal structures in the century of the first Christian communities. This is expressed by the position of women in the communities and family described in his letters. Women do not have the same rights as men but should remain silent in the church (1 Cor 14:34-35). They are subordinated to the man in the family (Eph: 5:23). Unfortunately, this subordination is still visible in so many church spaces, for example not ordaining women as pastors.

Both the example of extreme violence against women in the Old Testament and the subtler forms of the position of women in church and family contradict various central biblical passages and principles, which underline the equality of women and condemn gender-based violence.

It is therefore important to discuss these negative examples of violence while pointing out the arguments against sexual and gender-based violence which are found in the Bible.

Arguments against gender-based violence from a biblical point of view

1. Men and women as image of God

In Genesis 1:27 it is written that *God created man (= mankind) in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.* This verse emphasizes the equality of women and men. Both are an image of God, and both are under God's blessing and have the same responsibility (V 28). Therefore, it is impossible to consider women as inferior.

¹ Other examples: Gen 19:1-11; Gen 34:1-31; Judges 19:1-30

2. Through baptism we are part of the body of Christ

Through baptism we are integrated into the body of Christ:

1 Corinthians 12:13: *For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*

Galatians 3:27: *For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*

Violence against women and children is therefore a violation of the body of Christ and must be addressed in the churches.

3. Sexual violence in all its forms is a sin

Far from being a peripheral issue in the Bible, sexual assault is clearly depicted as sin against God, mentioned frequently throughout the Bible and referred to as a symbol of how badly sin has corrupted God's good creation. There are explicit passages calling sexual assault a sin - a violation of God's law. Deuteronomy 22:25-27 says about rape: *25 But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. 26 But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and murdering his neighbor, 27 because he met her in the open country, and though the betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her.* In verse 26 the same word is used for rape as for murder in the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus. Rape is murder - even if the victim physically survives.

But the Bible not only condemns extreme violence against women, but all forms of it. For example, Paul's letter to the Ephesians proves that sexual harassment, even in the form of lewd or suggestive "jokes", has no place in the life of a Christian: *But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.* (Ephesians 5:3-4). Paul goes on to write in verse 5 that those who practice such things cannot be part of God's Kingdom: *For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.* (Ephesians 5:5).

4. God's concern for all people, especially those who are most vulnerable

The Bible repeatedly emphasizes God's concern for all people, especially those who are most vulnerable: widows, orphans, strangers and the poor. Passages such as Psalms 40, 55 and 57, and Isaiah 43:1-7 provide comfort to those who suffer violence and injustice, as they speak of God's presence in the midst of pain, and God's desire to rescue people from harm.

This concern for the welfare of all is also clearly seen in Luke 4:18 where Jesus declared his mission to bring release to the captives, sight to the blind and freedom to those who are oppressed. This includes bringing freedom and healing to those victimized by others, giving sight to those blind to the destructiveness of their behaviour, and ending all types of oppression and violence within our families and communities.

5. Jesus' new understanding of the role of women

Jesus brought new perspectives to men, women and children. When the disciples tried to get rid of the children, Jesus said: *"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."* (Matthew 19:14).

Jesus also taught a new understanding of the role of women. An especially good example for this is the bible story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42. The role of women is very unusual in three ways: First, Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to him teaching his disciples. "Sitting at the feet of a rabbi" was probably a technical term for "being a disciple of the rabbi". Mary joins the circle of disciples of Jesus! Being a woman, that was very unusual two thousand years ago.

Secondly, Jesus teaches Mary. This was also very unusual: education was a privilege of men.

And finally, Martha takes care of the guests. This is equally unusual. Women were not allowed to serve a meal to male strangers during that time. All these examples illustrate that Jesus gives a completely new status to women in Palestine of the first century, an equality before God and an equality in religious matters.

Also, the drastic bible text in Matthew 5:28-30 (*But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.*) can be interpreted as an appeal to treat women in a different manner. The text does not aim at self-mutilation, but at men's effort not to degrade women to an object of own desire.

6. Living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and respectful and loving interaction with each other

In the first letter of Corinthians 6:19, Paul describes the human body as temple of the Holy Spirit. As such, it deserves dignity and respect. In other passages, Paul emphasizes the importance of love:

- Ephesians, 4:1-2: *I [...] urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.*
- Ephesians 5:2: *And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.*
- 1 Corinthians 13: *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

The fact is that sexual violence in all its forms would never take place if everyone treated everyone else with love. In First Corinthians 13, Paul describes love as kindness, honor and self-sacrifice and protection. Love rules out selfishness, boorishness and injustice and contributes to an environment free from sexual harassment. Where love is, violence has no place. So, central bible texts leave no room for sexual harassment of any kind. There is no way for a believer to justify it.

Specific tasks for church action

God longs for all to follow the way of Christ: to show love to everyone, work for justice, care for the suffering, empower the weak and hold accountable those who hurt others. As the Scriptures urge, *open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.* (Proverbs 31:8-9)

So, as Christians, we are called to name injustice, to condemn violence and to sensitize people for the topic of sexual abuse and harassment. **Churches must commit to promote a zero-tolerance policy with regard to this topic.** Churches and its members have a special responsibility to do this at all levels and in all areas of church work: in preaching and worship, in catechesis and Sunday school, in pastoral care and in organization and Church management.

Churches should be a safe space with no violence, a space, where victims of gender-based violence can experience God's unconditional protection, partisanship and consolation.