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GENDER BASED VIOLENCE STATEMENT

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

In the past two weeks more 21 women and children have been killed, no they are not limping (I shudder to think of that number). These are the ones who have died, mostly at the hands of the ones they loved and trusted; who were supposed to protect them and keep them safe, from Covid-19 and anything else; the ones who at one time promised to love them to the moon and back.

They were killed in the most horrific of ways, even garbage getting better disposal. Their fates read like horror stories, only they are fact: they have variously been pregnant, found with severe stab wounds, hanging from a tree, hidden under a floor, the stench drawing attention, a throat slit, suffocated, drowned in a bath by dad, killed with rat poison, raped and their intestines pulled out. The body of a Mothers' Union member was found in the bushes in Natal, reportedly after she committed suicide on account of the level of domestic violence she experienced in the Rectory! ¹

It reads like a horror story, yet it is bitter truth; despicable, venomous acts. And yes, beyond the killing of women and children at the hands of family or close friends are those killed in gang violence, including children caught in the firing line. The home, the arms of a lover, have become the place and weapon of danger.

Our President, His Excellency Cyril Ramaphosa refers to it as: "Another pandemic that is raging our country: war waged against women and children in our country." He continues: "Violence is being unleashed on women and children with a brutality that defies any form of comprehension..."² (National Address: 17 June 2020)

+Gender is more than biology – male and female. It is also a social construct – what we consider to be feminine and masculine, and which behaviours are acceptable for males and females. In my opinion, an attack on a person who does not conform to masculine norms, would qualify as gender-based violence.

+A worrying new trend is the rise in women as perpetrators. The mother of a six-year-old was arrested for her murder. A 14-year-old girl was arrested for allegedly stabbing Kirvan Fortuin, the dancer, on his way to do his Master's Degree in Dance. This raises serious questions about how broken our society is and how the brokenness is manifesting itself. It also calls on us as church and society to change the conversation about who and what the danger is.

¹ <https://www.isolezwe.co.za/> Isolezwe News, June 12, 2020; journalist, Zanele Mthethwa

² His Excellency, President Cyril Ramaphosa: National Address: 17 June 2020

Our Biology teacher sensitized us to the fact that you can measure the brokenness of a community by the number of limping dogs. How so, sir, we asked. He said: At work the boss belittles the dad. He gets home and beats the wife who in turn beats the kids. The kids kick the dogs or stone the horses if you lived near the stable. Daardie kind word op sy beurt weer die pa, wat die ma slaan... That was the Seventies – in a moment I will allude to Bonita Bennett's warning in 1985.

Later our sociology lecturer brought it across in academic language, but it was never as striking as the way the Biology teacher put it.

I do not know how many limping dogs we have today, but this we all know: the violence against women and children is as big a threat as the Covid-19 pandemic. Surely even bigger, because once a vaccine is fully developed that will be the end of Covid-19. And of GBV?

This was how we started 2019. How can we forget? This was how we ended 2018! There are also reports that domestic violence as a specific sub-category of GBV has increased dramatically during lockdown. Homes are not safe spaces for a lot of people, mostly women and children.

A theologian of the eighties, Bonita Bennett, in her contribution in the book, *The Unquestionable Right To Be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, (p 171) puts in perspective the oppression of women in the home and family in particular. She aptly locates the woman in the context of a capitalist society: triply exploited in terms of their gender, their class and their race. Already then she warns: ***The Structure of the Family with its superior positions of authority, reinforces aggressive individualism, authoritarianism, and a hierarchical view of social relations.***

Bennett argues that this type of dysfunction reflected "...values which are fundamental for the perpetuation of capitalism"³ Capitalism thrives on dysfunctional homes: it is a breeding ground for exploitation and cheap labour... but that is another paper. This is where it all starts: hierarchy, the perception of ownership over women and children, is bred in the home. It is no wonder the home has become one of the most dangerous of places for women and children.

The President alludes to the National Strategic Plan that was launched to counter GBV; the hotline, shelters sensitization of police etc. Yet in essence we find that civil society and police are ill-prepared to deal with the volumes. Safe houses for victims cannot cope with the demand.

Why is GBV often hidden? The perpetrators live in our homes, they are our sons, brothers, uncles, they are our fathers, boyfriends, besties, even our priests and pastors! The president reminds us that we must face the consequences of our silence, we do indeed have some difficult questions to answer. Alcohol abuse is one of those questions. This speaks to those who are silent because he buys the beer and gives us a lovely time, then he goes home and is abusive – but men will be men, we say, and we look away.

And what about our idiom, our DNA? **It is in our idiom:** Keep up the pretence. You have made your bed. No use complaining, who wants to hear? Or, we told you so. The idiom needs to change. How do we change the idiom, the mindset, the system? How do we change hierarchy, the system, the jokes in the speeches at weddings – the MC said, as ek haar onderkry en onderhou. I do not even want to start with: This is my cross!

³ Bennett B in Mosala and Tlhale: *The Unquestionable Right To Be Free*

Listen to what is not being said! In literary studies it is called the white between the lines. Read it!

In our idiom, in our DNA, like Mother's Milk we drink in GBV. Thus we do not talk about it. We have been de-sensitized by years and years of violent oppression, years of attack on sacred and stable family life, of being dehumanized: we have been captured: violence begets violence, the chickens have come home to roost.

Pro-active instead of being Reactive

I want to suggest that we deploy our studies of Ethics. We must put our Ethics into practice. Let us uphold:

- The Sanctity of Life as reflected in the OT Scriptures, created in the Imago Dei, honouring life. This is the first area of learning for all, starting already at ECD;
- Love as propagated and lived out by Jesus Christ Our Lord;
- The ethics of love and care that regard all lives as sacred, but in particular those of women and children versus hierarchy, culture, abusive traditions etc;
- "Jesus breaks with traditional practice..." We can study that extensively if we have not yet done so!

Bennett (p173) observes: "Jesus' sensitivity and openness to women is striking... He gave the women he came into contact with a new self-understanding, a new self-worth"⁴ This is what we need to follow, to teach and to uphold, I believe throughout our Education systems, a new hegemony.

God is disturbing us to get up and do something. How do we help to create the future? I offer you the six-point plan that I shared in the Diocese of False Bay during our last 16 Days of Activism campaign:

1) I will immerse myself in a complex world.

We are somehow connected to everyone else. We commit ourselves to our team, making sure that each team player knows what is required of them. Your team includes your family, your faith group, your classmates, your workmates, your friends and the unemployed. We commit to remain in touch with the reality on the ground, to walk with our eyes open to the sufferings and everyday struggles that unfold around us. We cannot protect ourselves by saying: "I did not know" in cases where we should have known. We are accountable.

2) I will step back for daily reflection.

Set aside sacred space every day to remind ourselves that we are 'people with a purpose', people with values and beliefs. Be mindful and focused regarding what I will do, so as not to waste any moment to combat GBV.

In our churches and various organisations, we can encourage story-telling; men and boy conversations; mentorship; platforms to listen to women. A senior clergy person invited us to revisit cultural practices and consider whether they are still relevant in today's climate of GBV.

⁴ Bennett B:

At a recent Provincial Synod of ACSA, the members were led in a brief liturgy of repentance by the male members present. It was acknowledged that patriarchy signals to society that men are more valuable than women. Patriarchy perpetuates inequality. The patriarchal attitude will have to change if we are going to see an end to GBV. There is a need to create safe spaces for encouraging men to talk, addressing past wounds, unlearning patriarchal beliefs, understanding masculinity. Men also need to be able to run to the church and in so doing stop violence before it happens. Even in lockdown, we can organise prayer vigils and fasting.

3) I will be a champion of Justice and Peace

We need to become familiar with the scenarios in our context: Gang violence. Domestic violence; the Unemployed and unemployable; Bullying ; Social media; Xenophobia; Human trafficking; #BlackLivesMatter; Racism; Substance abuse; Overcrowding and inadequate housing; Outside toilets. Being caught up in poverty makes people vulnerable and even though it is less prevalent, being caught up in wealth also makes people vulnerable.

We commit to work together to eradicate any mentality, norms or language that portray women and girls in negative stereotypes and do not accord them identity as persons, life bearers and children of God.

There is a need for us to work with Police Forums, NGOs and other structures which guarantee women and girls justice when they are abused, violated, raped and murdered. The religious sector is called upon to provide victim-centred, survivor-focused, accessible, quality care. We don't need to reinvent the wheel. Let us work collaboratively and in partnership to share resources. We need to develop appropriate materials, training manuals, pamphlets, liturgies, sermon outlines etc for a focus on GBV. Our clergy and laity need to be trained in basic counselling skills.

4) I commit to know myself deeply

What is my role in combating GBV? I know it is wrong but I go along with others. At times I use language that is sexist and suggestive. I have a broken self-image and therefore ride the wave of GBV to inflict pain on others. Peer pressure for young people and among adults is real.

Seriously use Christian education platforms: Baptism, Confirmation, Sunday School, Marriage Preparation classes to get everybody talking, saying that men, women, boys and girls are equal in God's sight.

5) I commit to promote the dignity of women

We begin by making every effort to strengthen our own family life and values. We reach out to support others who are looking for help with overcoming particular problems in their families and are in need of healing and reconciliation.

We need to revive the #ThursdaysInBlack movement toward a world without rape and women abuse. Clergy need to preach from the pulpit and write regular pastoral letters against GBV.. Our young people can make videos and banners. Support groups need to be formed for spouses. Why not start with clergy spouses in Archdeaconries?

Consultations are underway to look at Gender, Environment and Poverty in a more integrated way in ACSA.

6) I commit to lead with Courage, Compassion and Conviction

I condemn Gender Based Violence in the strongest possible way. I urge each of us to pledge and start a campaign to lead with courage, compassion and conviction to open new possibilities, new horizons and new realities to end abuse, humiliation and violence against women and girls. Let us express intolerance of GBV in every corner everywhere with posters stating a “zero tolerance” of GBV. We can even have online pickets or social distancing pickets outside of our churches with gatherings of less than fifty.

GBV is surely an evil which must be combatted on every possible level and platform. No stone should be left unturned in this battle. While stakeholders came together in 2014 to devise a National Strategic Plan to combat GBV we still have a long way to go in our battle against GBV. Pillars on which to build a safe society were identified and work is in progress. In the meantime our women and children continue to suffer the wrath of those who are supposed to protect them.

Let us go back to what should be basic in education on all levels. We cannot expect to begin teaching about self-worth somewhere in the middle of a child’s education. Therefore the need is for it to be basic, from the beginning, the purpose of which is to give people an understanding of what it means to be Imago Dei; of the meaning of the sanctity of life and an ethical approach to life and living. Unless we give girls from the youngest possible age the self-understanding and a self-worth as experienced through the eyes of the Creator, we will continue to light candles. Unless we give boys this same self-worth, we will continue to light candles, march and protest. I believe we should start with ethical perspectives on humanity from Educare. Of course we must find terminology and express it in ideas comprehensible for the very young.

We must purposefully create the kind of man we need in our society from scratch, we must purposefully raise the girl child with the necessary instincts. We need to search for ways to break with traditional practice; a clean break is our only hope, not to mend and patch, but a clean break. If we understand that the barriers we need to break include amongst others:

- hundreds of years of slavery and slave mentality,
- the hegemony of baasskap,
- years of oppression and violent subjugation of both men and women,
- stereotyping on all levels,
- destructive culture, traditions and even models of family,
- the politics of the limping dog, and
- the effects of substance abuse,

then we will understand the scope of the work we have to do.

We have to first undo, then to build. We need to capture the hearts, souls and minds of the people, **this must become the dominant thought, the hegemony of our day**: the safe-keeping of women and children. It can never be an issue amidst other issues.

Of course then we must commit to all the other aspects of fighting this war waged against our women and children, as expressed by UN Women responding to GBV, the GBV-NDP, by various campaigns and all the resolutions taken by various stakeholders. Let us stand firm in our resolve and look not to our own popularity but to the good of all.

There is a service in ACSA provided by lawyers and counsellors to any Anglican who wishes to report abuse of a physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual or psychological nature. The contact details are: safechurches@anglicanchurchsa.org.za

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Margaret". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

THE RT REVD MARGARET B. VERTUE

Bishop of False Bay Diocese and Liaison Bishop of ACSA and HopeAfrica for GBV

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cheryl". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

THE REVD CANON CHERYL UREN

Canon of False Bay Diocese and Warden of Post Ordination Training

References:

Bennett B in Mosala I and Tlhagale B (1986) The Unquestionable Right to be Free, Skotaville Publishers Isoleswe News