

SOME THOUGHTS ON VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST FEMALES IN GHANA

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Abstract:

Introduction: Gender-based violence in various forms including rape, domestic violence, "honour" killings and trafficking in girls exacts a heavy toll on mental and physical health of the victims. Increasingly, gender-based violence is recognized as a major public health concern and a serious violation of basic human rights.

Methodology: This paper utilises secondary data to raise awareness and expand knowledge regarding the incidence of gender based violence and discrimination in the Ghanaian context.

Results: In Ghana, more than 2,500 women suffered various forms of abuse between January and September 2004 alone. Of this number, 837 were sexually assaulted, 130 were abducted, and 1,358 were battered. Also 28 percent of women have no education as opposed to 18 percent of men, implying that in general males have more education than females. The picture is even grimmer when higher levels of education are considered. Rural women can also be punished with banishment by traditional village authorities for teenage pregnancy or suspected witchcraft. The female genital mutilation, which is injurious to the health and development of young females, is still being practiced in some sections of the country.

Conclusion: Ghanaian women, especially in rural areas, remain subject to burdensome labour conditions and traditional male dominance. Education will certainly remain the most crucial and effective strategy and tool in handling violence and discrimination against females in Ghana.

Key Words: Ghana, girl, violence, women.

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INTRODUCTION:

A resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1994 states that Violence Against Women (VAW) is any form of gender based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life. The Beijing Platform of Action, which consists of commitments made by countries to deal with issues that violate the rights of women, also defines violence against women along these lines. In line with global concerns regarding VAW, November 25 of every year has been earmarked as the United Nations Day Against VAW.

Gender-based violence in various forms including rape, domestic violence, "honour" killings and trafficking in women exacts a heavy toll on mental and physical health of the victims. Increasingly, gender-based violence is recognized as a major public health concern and a serious violation of basic human rights (Campbell and Soeken, 1999; Women's Rights International, 1998; Human Rights Watch, 1992). Gender-based violence constitutes a life-long threat for hundreds of millions of girls and women around the world. At least one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some other way, usually by an intimate partner or family member, according to a report by the United Nations Population Fund (1999). In Africa, domestic violence, rape and other sexual abuse and female genital mutilation are of special concern.

Studies suggest that domestic violence is widespread in most societies and is a frequent cause of suicides among women (Davidson et al., 1996; Bergman and Brismar,

1991). Rape and other forms of sexual violence are increasing. It is unfortunate that many rapes go unreported because of the stigma and trauma associated with them and the lack of sympathetic treatment from legal systems.

It has been found that sexual abuse can lead to a wide variety of unhealthy consequences, including behavioral and psychological problems, sexual dysfunction, relationship problems, low self-esteem, depression, thoughts of suicide, alcohol and substance abuse, and sexual risk-taking (Cheasty et al., 1998; Saunders and Kindy, 1993; Burnam et al., 1988). Physical and sexual abuse also increases a woman's risk for a number of common gynaecological disorders, including chronic pelvic pain. Furthermore, women who are abused or afraid to raise the issue of family planning with their partners are at risk of repeated unwanted pregnancies. Women who are sexually abused in childhood also are at greater risk of being physically or sexually abused as adults (Fergusson et al., 1997; Boyer and Fine, 1992).

At least 130 million women have been forced to undergo female genital mutilation or cutting; another 2 million are at risk each year from this degrading and dangerous practice (United Nations Population Fund 1999).

Psychological violence, though difficult to detect and diagnose, includes denial of sex, false accusations, humiliation before others, refusal to talk to partners, isolation, husbands staying away from home, discrimination and favouritism between wives. Emotional and psychological violence is capable of killing, and causing psychiatric disorders to, women¹. Emotional violence also includes showing disrespect for one's partner, blackmail, verbal abuse and making people feel bad about themselves.

¹ Many women continue to live with it with no sympathies from medical personnel since they do not show any physical signs of abuse.

Threatening behaviour such as insults, threats of sacking the woman from the home, as well as threats to injure or kill a woman or child, threats to stop paying school fees of children, generate fear and a sense of insecurity. In fact, having others make decisions for them, supervise and monitor them and treating them in a manner similar to that of children erodes women's sense of worth, their visibility and their confidence.

The foregoing discussion represents the dismal picture violence and discrimination against women and girls paints in any society wherever it is found. In Ghana, more than 2,500 women suffered various forms of abuse between January and September 2004 alone (Donkor and Boateng, 2004). Of this number, 837 were sexually assaulted, 130 were abducted, and 1,358 were battered. The statistics are rather disturbing because the figures are likely to be higher since many cases of VAW go unreported. Violence against females is also a developmental issue because the well-being of females who form the majority of the country's population is at stake and impinges on developmental efforts². In what follows, a modest attempt is made at highlighting the incidence of violence and discrimination against females in the Ghanaian context. In particular, attention is focussed on education, witchcraft and female genital mutilation, rape/defilement/assault/murder.

EDUCATION:

Education is a fundamental human right and Ghana is signatory to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which stipulates that elementary education shall be free and compulsory, and that the higher levels will be equally

² Females constitute about 51 percent of Ghana's population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2002).

available to all on the basis of merit. The intrinsic human value of education is its ability to add meaning and value to all people's lives without discrimination. However, most recent available evidence suggests that in Ghana 28 percent of women have no education as opposed to 18 percent of men (Ghana Statistical Service, Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research, and ORC Macro, 2004), implying that in general males have more education than females. The picture is even grimmer when higher levels of education are considered. Also, school dropout rates in 1997 were about 20 percent for boys and 30 percent for girls at the primary level, and 15 percent for boys and 21 percent for girls at the junior secondary level (Ministry of Education, 1997).

There is little or no discrimination against female children in education in Ghana³, but girls and women frequently drop out of school due to societal or economic pressures. The Government actively campaigns for girls' education and in 1997 established a girls' education unit within the basic education division of the Ghana Educational Service. The low female enrolment is attributable to the fact that many girls marry early or become pregnant. Although the percentages of girls enrolled in school have been increasing steadily over the years, participation is still low; only about one quarter of university students are females⁴.

Women's rights groups are active in educational campaigns and in programs to provide vocational training, legal aid, and other support to women. The Government also is active in educational programs, and the President and First Lady, Mr. and Mrs J.A.

³The Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, disability, language, or social status. The courts are empowered specifically to order enforcement of these prohibitions, although enforcement by the authorities is generally inadequate, in part due to limited financial resources.

⁴ A 1997 country report by the Ghana National Commission on Children further substantiated the gap between enrolment of boys and girls, particularly at the high school level. In the eight districts examined, there were 22,418 boys and 14,318 girls enrolled at the high school level.

Kufuor, are among the most outspoken advocates of women's rights (Tamakloe, 2004). However, gender gap in educational attainments in favour of males is common knowledge.

WITCHCRAFT AND FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION:

Ghanaian women, especially in rural areas, remain subject to burdensome labour conditions and traditional male dominance. Traditional practices and social norms often deny women their statutory entitlements to inheritances and property, a legally registered marriage (and with it, certain legal rights), and the maintenance and custody of children.

Although the Constitution prohibits slavery, it exists on a limited scale. Trokosi, a traditional practice found among the Ewe ethnic group and in part of the Volta Region, is an especially severe abuse and a flagrant violation of children's and women's rights (Africa Recovery, 2004). It is a system in which a young girl, usually under the age of 10, is made a slave to a fetish shrine for offences allegedly committed by a member of the girl's family. In rare instances, boys are offered. The belief is that, if someone in that family has committed a crime, such as stealing, members of the family may begin to die in large numbers unless a young girl is given to the local fetish shrine to atone for the offense. The girl becomes the property of the fetish priest, must work on the priest's farm, and perform other labors for him. Because they are the sexual property of the priests, most Trokosi slaves have children by them. Although the girls' families must provide for their needs such as food, most are unable to do so. There are at least 2,510 girls and women bound to various shrines in the Trokosi system, a figure that does not include the slaves' children. Even if released, generally without skills or hope of marriage, a Trokosi

woman has continued obligations to the shrine for the duration of her life. When the fetish slave dies, the family is expected to replace her with another young girl for the fetish shrine.

In 1998 the Parliament passed a comprehensive legislation to protect women and children's rights, a legislation that amended the 1960 Criminal Code to provide additional protection for women and children. The legislation added new definitions of sexual offences and strengthened punishments for others. The provisions of the bill ban the practice of "customary servitude" (known as Trokosi), protect women accused of witchcraft, double the mandatory sentence for rape, raise the age of criminal responsibility from 7 years to 12, criminalize indecent assault and forced marriages, and raise punishments for defilement, incest, and prostitution involving children. Human rights activists believe that the goal of eradicating the Trokosi practice is achievable with the new law. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as International Needs, and government agencies, like the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), have been campaigning against Trokosi for several years and are familiar with the locations of the fetish shrines and the numbers of women and children enslaved. The CHRAJ and International Needs have had some success in approaching village authorities and fetish priests at over 116 of the major and minor shrines, winning the release of 2,190 Trokosi slaves to date and retraining them for new professions. The organizations continue to work for additional releases.

Rural women can also be punished with banishment by traditional village authorities for teenage pregnancy or suspected witchcraft. Women accused of witchcraft have been sent to penal villages in the Northern Region by traditional authorities, such as

a shaman. Although the women face no formal legal sanction if they leave, most fear that they would be beaten to death if caught outside the penal villages. Forced labour also occurs at the camps for women accused of witchcraft. However, the Trokosi practice is yet to be eradicated in Ghana. The challenge lies not only in persuading custodians of the witches' homes to abolish the practice, but also in educating the community so the women will be allowed to return safely to their homes.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) refers to the removal of all or part of the clitoris and other genitalia. Those who perform the more extreme form, infibulation, remove the clitoris and both labia and sew together both sides of the vulva. This leaves only a small opening to allow passage of urine and menstrual blood⁵. This terrible violation of girls' and young women's human rights is based on prevailing beliefs that female sexuality must be controlled, and the virginity of young girls preserved until marriage. Men in some cultures will not marry uncircumcised girls because they view them as "unclean" or sexually permissive.

Genital mutilation is nearly always carried out in unsanitary conditions without anaesthetic. It is also extremely painful and may result in severe infection, shock or even death. If the girl survives, she may experience painful sexual intercourse, degrading the quality of her life.

There are several traditional discriminatory practices that are injurious to the health and development of young females in the country. In particular, the FGM, which is widely condemned by international health experts as damaging to both physical and psychological health, is a serious problem, and about 15 percent of women may have

⁵Infibulation accounts for an estimated 15 per cent of all cases of FGM, and 80-90 per cent of cases in Djibouti, Somalia and the Sudan.

undergone this procedure. A Ministry of Health survey conducted between 1995 and 1998 found that FGM is practiced among nearly all the northern sector ethnic groups⁶. Officials at all levels have spoken out against the practice, and local NGOs are making some inroads through their educational campaigns to encourage abandonment of FGM and to retrain practitioners. Members of the legal community advocate legislation to close loopholes in the FGM law, including extending culpability to family members and others who aid in carrying out FGM and to Ghanaians who commit the crime outside the country's borders. They contend that any person who conceals information about an instance of FGM would be liable, while FGM would be banned no matter how medically safe the procedure is made--dispelling a belief by some that FGM is acceptable as long as the girls' health is protected. These efforts are laudable. But FGM is still practiced, albeit clandestinely, in some parts of Ghana, particularly in the north.

RAPE/DEFILEMENT/ASSAULT/MURDER

After he was elected for his first four-year term in December 2000, Ghanaian President J.A. Kufuor appointed two women to oversee two new ministries created specifically to act on behalf of the country's women and girls: the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs and the Ministry of Education's Girl-Child Education Unit. President Kufuor also established the Women's Endowment Fund to assist women entrepreneurs and affirmed the need for the Women and Juvenile Unit of the country's police service, which was created in 1998 to address an increase in cases of abuse against women and children.

⁶ The northern sector ethnic groups are those ethnic groups predominant in the Northern, Upper East, and Upper West Regions of Ghana. They include Guan, Mole-Dagbani, Grussi, Gruma, Hausa, and Dagarti.

However, both print and electronic media suggest that violence against women is increasing (Donkor and Boateng, 2004)). More than 30 women have been murdered over the last five years by what authorities describe as a serial killer or gang, and no one has been convicted in connection with the slayings⁷. At least seven women were killed in the course of 2002 by their husbands or companions over alleged infidelities⁸. It is on record that the Women and Children's Affairs Minister, Mrs. Gladys Asmah, condemned the killings, describing a dangerous, emerging culture in the country in which men lash out violently against women, not over alleged transgressions, but to control women's sexuality and sexual behavior. Galvanized by Asmah's remarks, hundreds of women took to the streets in the capital of Accra on April 6 2003 to protest the killings.

It is common knowledge that particularly in low-income, high-density sections of Greater Accra Region, the nation's capital, about one in two women has been assaulted in recent years. A total of 95 percent of the victims of domestic violence are women, according to data gathered by the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA, 2003). These abuses usually go unreported and seldom come before the courts. However, 1998 legislation doubled the mandatory sentence for rape. In late 1998, the police administration established a "women and juvenile unit" to handle cases involving domestic violence, child abuse, and juvenile offences. In the first quarter of the year, this unit recorded 199 cases, including 30 assaults on women and 9 rapes. Located in Accra, the unit works closely with the Department of Social Welfare, FIDA, and the Legal Aid Board. The media increasingly report cases of assault and rape (Tamakloe, 2004). In late 1998, a series of "mysterious murders of women began to occur in the Mateheko area of

⁷However, the trial of 36-year-old Charles Quansah, accused of the serial murders, has begun.

⁸ Four men are currently standing trial for killing their wives.

Accra (BBC News, 2003). Three of the 20 murders reportedly involved husbands' suspicion of their wives' infidelity. The men subsequently were arrested but not convicted. On several occasions, women of Accra demonstrated in a concerted effort to attract attention to violence against women. The White Ribbon Campaign is used to commemorate the serial killing of close to 40 women between 1998 and 2000 in Ghana⁹. The campaign is used to encourage men and boys to publicly take a stand against gender based violence by wearing a white ribbon on the shirt during the 16 days of advocacy and sensitisation. These laudable efforts seem to be a tip of the iceberg as they reach only a small fraction of the relevant population subgroup.

Partly because of superiority complex among their male counterparts, the abuse of women in Ghana continues unabated. They think women cannot think on their own. Some Ghanaian men even think women are part of their property and so men should decide what women should do¹⁰.

While more women are reporting domestic violence to the Women and Juvenile Unit of the police force, many of them continue to take the abuse, intimidated by the stigma and embarrassment heaped on victims and the long delay between reporting and the resolution of a case in the courts.

Unfortunately, many people do not even know that an agency exists with the police specifically set up for addressing women and juvenile issues. The Women and Juvenile Unit has only seven branches in six of Ghana's 10 regions, and one outpost per region is not enough to address the crimes reported to officials. In Accra alone in 2003,

⁹ The Whit Ribbon Campaign is an international campaign initiated by some Canadian men when 14 female students were massacred in Montreal, Canada in 1986.

¹⁰ For example, the Presidential Candidate of the Convention People's Party for the December 2004 presidential and parliamentary elections, Mr. George Aggudey, said in a live debate that "women are objects of comfort" (*Daily Graphic* Newspaper, 2004).

the agency received as many as 204 cases of defilement¹¹, 262 cases of assault, 58 cases of rape and 16 cases of indecent assault, or forcibly touching the buttocks, breasts or other parts of a woman.

Women may not know what options are available to them when they are abused. In addition, there is so much societal pressure on these victims that they refuse to bring the perpetrators to the sanction table. Most Ghanaian women prefer not for their husbands and family members to be jailed, but rather an order to stop them from abusing them.

CULTURE AND TRADITION AS CONSTRAINTS:

Justification for violence stems from gender norms - distorted views about the roles and responsibilities of men and women in relationships. Worldwide, studies have shown a consistent pattern of events that trigger violent responses. These include: not obeying the husband, talking back, refusing sex, not having food ready on time, failing to care for the children or home, questioning the man about money or girlfriends or going somewhere without his permission (Kyei-Boateng, 2004; Campbell and Soeken, 1999; Bawah et al., 1999; Bergman and Brismar, 1991). The power of tradition also prevents local officials from enforcing reforms.

Many cultures condone or at least tolerate a certain amount of violence against women. The right of a husband to beat or physically intimidate his wife is a deeply held conviction in many societies¹². Even women often view a certain amount of physical abuse as justified under certain conditions. In a study in Ghana, 51 percent of women and 43 percent of men agreed that a husband is justified in beating his wife when she uses a

¹¹ Defilement is defined as sex with a girl younger than 12 years old.

¹² This is the situation in parts of Africa, South Asia and Western Asia, for instance, where men are seen as having a right to discipline their wives as they see fit (UNFPA, 1999).

family planning method without his knowledge (Bawah et al., 1999). When asked what happens if a woman practices family planning without her husband's consent, men interviewed in Ghana gave such replies as, "It is fitting enough to beat her for not consulting you earlier before going ahead to practice family planning," and "It is not good for you to keep such a woman since she did so without first consulting with you" (Ezeh, 1993: 165)¹³.

Although the economy of Ghana is predominantly depending on the export of agricultural product, some more modern sectors have also developed in urban areas. Life, however, still remains basically rural. In rural areas women remain subject to burdensome labour conditions and traditional male dominance, which represent a violation of their constitutional rights.

In many traditional African settings, the society gives a go ahead and absolute control to everything in the matrimonial home to the man. The women then recoil and concentrate on their duties as women. The case is even much worse in the rural areas where many of these women assist their husbands on the farm. Apart from the tremendous output such as cooking on the farm, collecting firewood and foodstuffs for dinner, there is the tendency to calculate the cooking on the farm as part of her usual duties of cooking in the house. She therefore earns little or nothing at all as compensation or recognition from her output on the farm. So many wives of male cocoa farmers do not own even a hectare of the cocoa plants as their own. By custom, the man is expected to give her money to buy what she needs. But this does not really happen most of the times?

¹³ Also, 80 per cent of women surveyed in rural Egypt said that beatings were common and often justified, particularly if the woman refused to have sex with her partner (George, 1998), while in Cape Town, South Africa, young women described how their partners beat them and tore up their clinic contraceptive cards (Wood and Jewkes, 1997).

Who will not get angry if someone even if close keeps demanding help and money each day from her/him? So husbands who may face financial difficulty or emotional stress extend their bad feelings to their children and wives in particular.

THE WAY FORWARD:

The rural communities harbour many women who are purely farmers and who assist their husbands on the farm. These women lack education that will secure them employment in the competitive job market.

Some women's advocacy non-governmental organizations, such as the Women's Initiative for Self Empowerment (WISE) and the Ark Foundation, have been engaging in awareness campaigns and programmes regarding the negative impact of VAW on the physical, reproductive, emotional and social well-being of the victims in the country. All well-meaning Ghanaians should support these efforts.

Vigorous campaigns should be mounted by various agencies (including the Department of Social Welfare) to portray the positive dimension of men's role in the fight against gender-based violence by encouraging men, boys, and the general public to pledge their support never to commit, condone or remain silent about VAW.

The Domestic Violence Bill (DVB), which is a necessary measure for the protection of the human rights of females in particular and citizens in general of the country, should be passed into law without delay and subsequently enforced.

Government agencies and NGOs should as a matter of urgency begin an outreach project in schools and churches to educate people about how to prevent violence against women. Because there are no laws for such offences, judges sometimes dismiss domestic

violence cases since it is un-Ghanaian for a man to be sentenced to imprisonment because he slapped or pushed his wife.

Through the work of African NGOs, with the support of international organizations, FGM is being challenged and the practice outlawed, giving millions of girls and women hopes for a life with rights, health and security. The Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children, a network of affiliates in 26 African and 3 European countries, including Ghana, has led the increasingly successful fight against FGM through public awareness campaigns and training in schools, and communities with traditional and trained medical staff. Such efforts should be continued with undiminished intensity.

Gender counselling and education are effective tools in campaign against 'masculinity' syndrome of Ghana's socio-cultural system. Of course, in a typical cultural society like that of Ghana and other parts of Africa, counselling will be a tedious and controversial task to undertake in order to break into the mainstream and the canker of feminine violence. Nonetheless, as a strategy, it could always be effective if the right target is aimed at. For example, Church and traditional institutions are two of the most important doorsteps where counselling on violence should be encouraged. This is because Ghana being largely a Christian country (Ghana Statistical Service et al., 2004; Mba, 2002), a significant proportion of marriages is solemnized in the churches. Consequently, the potency of such institutions assisting in this way cannot be downplayed.

Education will certainly remain the most crucial and effective strategy and tool in handling VAW. No matter the law, cases could be reduced with mass education creating the most appreciable awareness in the Ghanaian society. Without effective education

VAW will go on, victims will suffer in various forms - physical and emotional torture. Some victims may be willing to endure VAW for the sake of families and its economic effects, while perpetrators will be punished to the highest degree. But that will not solve the problem since VAW will still go on if the right approach is not adopted.

It is clear that tackling VAW demands a multifaceted approach. One single strategy, like law, will not yield the most appreciable result. The approach should include a first step of re-examination of the forms of VAW in the Ghanaian society. Physical violence, which result in scratches, bruises and marks are often noticeable. However, emotional violence is extremely important and is as potent as physical violence. Emotional VAW does not need laws to punish victims; neither does it go out of mind in months or years. Violence ranges from psychological to permanent bruises that need counselling, education and encouragement to reduce its effect on victims and reduce its incidence to the barest minimum in the country.

In pursuing education and counselling as an effective tool, awareness programmes should target men and encourage men to accept the fact that wife battering and fighting is an archaic culture which should be renounced in all its forms. The awareness programme should be hammered home to the fact that it was in the Stone Age era that fighting was a way of showing manhood and should have no place in modern Ghana. Apart from targeting men in series of activities that will help raise awareness among them, development partners and NGOs should lobby government and its local/district units to accept and integrate mainstream gender ethics in work places and in all official endeavours.

Laws protecting women and girls would be better enforced if more women occupied decision-making roles in government. Of the 200 members in Parliament, only 17 are women. Of the 79 ministers of state, only six are women. Only 7 out of the 110 district chief executives in Ghana are women. And no woman has been appointed as a regional minister in Ghana's ten administrative regions.

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