

SEXUALITY, SPIRITUALITY AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE: POLITICS OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS PROGRAMME (SRHR) IN THE CONTEXT OF HIV.

**PUBLIC LECTURE BY
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It is a great honour for me to be part of this auspicious event, a celebration of hope, in the midst of all the desperation and violence in the world. In the 10 years that we have nurtured the trees of hope, I sincerely hope there are women and men, whose rights have been violated, who feel supported by the faith community. When the trees were planted 10 years ago, I was younger and energetic. I went through phases of being extremely angry with the church. I was already openly living with HIV then and knew that most women who were living with HIV were either pressurized into sexual relationships or they were victims of sexual violence. I felt the church failed us in terms of emphasizing and empowering us to respond to real issues like rape. I am now older and wiser, I understand that we have a moral obligation to be educated on social justice issues. We also need to respond to these issues from a faith or spiritual perspective.

In this lecture, I am going to focus on charting the successes to be celebrated and identify the challenges that lie ahead of us. The critical drivers of the epidemic have to be demystified. I also advocate for the liberation of our bodies from the confines of religious and cultural stereotypes. I believe that acknowledging that we are spiritual and sexual beings certainly changes the politics of SRHR. HIV gives us opportunities to be more prophetic and articulate on "sacred" issues such as sexuality that have been portrayed as taboo.

For the purpose of this lecture, I have chosen to focus on spirituality instead of religion. Religion is a human-made belief system (I call it "human-made, but I think it was made by men!"). I believe spirituality is something we are born with and can be nurtured in different ways. Religion can be used to manipulate and violate, but I do not think spirituality can be used the same way. Therefore in our attempts to respond to the current challenges of sexual violence, we must remember that the use of sacred texts is an important avenue to be explored.

The Tamar Campaign is based on the story of a young woman in 2 Samuel 13: 1-22. Tamar was raped by her half brother, Amnon, in her own home. This story has been used to create safe spaces for both the survivor and perpetrators of sexual violence. Reality is most of the time the victims are either related or they know each other. With CBS, we have managed to conscientise the church and service providers on the reality of sexual violence and its consequences. Young women are still very vulnerable to violence and HIV. Culture and religion have been used to justify the oppression and violation of women's dignity.

This campaign was developed in 2002 in South Africa by the Ujamaa centre. It has now become a global resource used to respond to the prevalence of violence in our homes. Gender based violence is one of the critical drivers of the epidemic. We as the church cannot be silent when we know that our children have either become targets or perpetrators of sexual violence. Have we developed youth friendly curricula to

empower them with both information and skills that they need to survive in this very hostile environment? Are we winning the battle against all forms of gender based violence?

Gender Justice

The church has struggled with this issue for a long time. Feminists and womanists have developed lots of reflections and theologies that seek to promote gender equality. The Circle of Concerned African Women theologians has published a number of books and articles on the issue of justice. The main message in these publications is the fact that we, women and men, are created in the image of God. A lot has changed in the church. We now have women who are ordained and recognized as Church Leaders. However, we still have the glass ceiling that is much lower in the church than it is in the political and social arenas.

South Africans, Denise Ackerman and Tahira Joyner wrote the following about nature:

[The] chain of command from God to man, from animals to inanimate objects, is replicated in human relations, men over women, rich over poor, white over black, able bodied over disabled.[healthy over the sick],heterosexual over homosexual and so on. In such a hierarchical and dualistic world view, difference is not seen as a gift but as a threat.

We of course know how important hierarchy is in our churches? We are often reminded that hierarchy helps in terms of maintaining order in our churches. Isn't our determination to preserve hierarchies against our commitment to the realization of justice?

Women are told from a very young age that they are the flowers or pride of our nations. The irony is they are not treated as such. Boys and girls are socialized in different ways. We have children today who go to great extremes just to prove that they are real men. We as society are to blame for the way we bring them up. The church has succeeded in integrating practices that are not part of the gospel but strengthen the oppression of women. Walter Bruegemann has helped us to understand that the Bible has different trajectories, the Mosaic and Davidic trajectory, the oppressive and liberating trajectories and more. The oppressive trajectory is still the most popular in most churches. We, the theological experts and students, must make sure that all the work that we have done or are still doing, liberates the people who come to our churches every Sunday.

The more empowered girls and women have become, the higher the levels of insecurity that often lead to violence. If we as the church are part of the problem, shouldn't we be in the forefront in terms of promoting equity in order to achieve gender equality?

Comprehensive Sexuality Education

According to the latest statistics on HIV the prevalence rates are rising in the age group that is 15-24 years. According to the UNAIDS 2013 HIV and AIDS statistics, in 2012, there were 1.6million new infections , 33% of this number are young people. One of the interesting fact that we need to take seriously is the fact that the common mode of transmission is heterosexual sexual activity. Within most of our cultural contexts, the oral cultural discourse, included elaborate systems and activities that were used to promote sexuality education. The advent of western religions confused us and made us believe that these practices were pagan. The challenge is, these practices were not replaced by other more effective platforms to promote sexuality education.

The church has also struggled to find positive terminology to discuss sexuality and sex. The worst mistake that we made as the church was the promotion of spirituality education that totally negated the importance of sexuality. We were taught to control and suppress our sexuality as a symbol of spiritual growth. Richard Rohr, one of my favourite theologians, asserts that: "Sexuality is to the body the equivalent of spirituality to our souls." Both spirituality and sexuality are gifts from God. We need to develop more tools and language that can be used to nurture our sexuality, just like we have done for spirituality.

Organizations such as UNESCO have done a lot of research on the vulnerability of children and adolescents. Most of them confessed that most of the knowledge they have on sex and sexuality comes from their peers. They also have access to the internet and media that feeds them with all kinds of

information that they are not ready to process. The more silent we are on this issue the more they experiment. The onus is on us to start giving our children accurate and age appropriate information on sexuality so that they can make informed choices. We need to start as early as possible to educate children on sex and sexuality. We as the church have to integrate sexuality education into our Sunday School curricula.

If sexuality is a gift from God, why are we so ashamed of it? The loud Silence especially from the church makes it difficult for our children to embrace their sexuality and celebrate it responsibly.

We also need to consciously review our HIV prevention strategies. For instead the ABC strategy has not worked. One of the reasons is the fact that ABC reduces HIV to a sexual morality issue and assumes that Key Populations have the power to make decisions. INERELA+ instead of ABC developed a more comprehensive methodology called SAVE. This methodology gives us space to address a range of issues including sexuality in a positive way.

Redefining family

We as the church have successfully promoted the importance of family when it comes to dealing with issues of procreation and the preservation of family norms and values. The ideal model of a family of two parents, a man and a woman, two and a half children and at least one dog and a cat has worked for a long time. The challenge is, we have not moved with the times. HIV and AIDS have forced us to accept the child headed families. We have to look at the reality though. Family is no longer what it was in the 60s.

We cannot continue frowning upon families where parents are not married due to a number of factors, including poverty. Single parenthood is also becoming our new norm. Are we going to continue ostracizing these families? Children who come from these families have the same needs as those who come from “normal” families. We need to embrace and bless new models of families.

I was surprised in March this year when I attended the CSW meeting in New York. Educated women from different parts of the world are still trying to preserve and promote the original model of family. They believe that the high levels of sexual immorality and immature adults are a product of the current dysfunctional families. I think this is not helpful. Instead, we should get together and make sure that these families feel accepted in the church and society. This helps them transcend the pain and stigma that makes their children more vulnerable to early pregnancies, intergenerational relationships etc.

We know the stories of religious leaders who have taken advantage of girls, boys and women sexually. Most of the women are subjected to the abuse because they looking for love and acceptance. When we become aware of these incidences, why do we keep quiet? Religious leaders are human, they also make mistakes, We need to hold each other accountable. We should not use our authority to take advantage of the vulnerable especially those who do not come from “stable” families.

The politics of Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights

I would like to start off by saying that the Human Rights discourse has not been well received by the faith community. Most faith based organizations such as INERELA+, EHAIA and many others have decided to use the Human Dignity approach, that often gets a more positive response.

All members of our communities should be educated on SRHR and they should also have access to all services.

One issue that we sometimes forget as the church, is the fact that sex is not just for procreation, it is also for recreation. Partners, this includes men, have the responsibility of caring for their bodies by using different kinds of barriers to prevent unwanted pregnancies, STDs and HIV.

Our language has to change completely. I tell my own children that sex is wonderful and something to look forward to, but they have to wait until they are ready to deal with the consequences of being sexually active. This encourages them to delay the sexual debut. Our girls and boys have to be exposed to information on the health, faith and medical aspects of SRHR.

Parents, our children nowadays become active very early. We have to start talking about sex as early as possible. Most primary school children are already experimenting. Therefore the “Talk” cannot wait until

they are teenagers. With the high levels of sexual violence of rape, both girls and boys need to know that they can talk to us without being judged.

Homophobia and transphobia are a challenge that we have to deal with in the church. We cannot continue pretending as if it is not a problem. We must just remember that we are all created in the image of God. When we criminalize people's identity, this makes them even more vulnerable to violence and prevents them from accessing the SRHR services.

There is this myth that claims that giving our children access to prevention strategies and tools like the condom promotes promiscuity. Research has shown us that this is not true. Children who have information make wiser and informed choices. The Eastern and Southern African countries signed a commitment in 2013 to promote CSE and SRHR information in schools. This commitment was signed by the Health and Education Ministers. We, as the faith community should be involved. Our voices still carry a lot of weight. I believe the process of consultations is already in motion in Kenya. Let us be proactive and offer to support these processes.

The main issues that make SRHR political is the belief that women and girls bodies belong to their fathers and later to their husbands.

Teenagers are often judged by health workers when they access SRHR services. PMTCT, which has been a successful programme in most countries, subjects women to abuse in health centres.

Men and boys find it difficult to adopt health seeking behaviours. That is why the number of men who are tested very late and default on their ARVs is on the rise. We can certainly win these battles if we do not wait until it is too late. Boys must be encouraged to go to doctors on a regular basis.

ON the development of a framework for collaboration between UNAIDS AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS, UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé, said, "The framework is not about how the UN system can help FBOs, but rather about how UNAIDS and the faith-based community can work together to achieve joint goals, build commitment and shared ownership; with a common resolve to achieve results in achieving universal access."

We have already spoken about Thursdays in Black that is an old campaign that has been resuscitated. We will continue wearing black on Thursdays until there is no more violence in the world.

As I close I would like to highlight a few issues that need our attention as the church.

Testing

Treatment for adults and children

Promote testing campaigns as part of the UNAIDS fast track agenda

Making our churches places of hope and life not discrimination and condemnation

Be involved in challenging pharmaceutical companies to decrease the prizes of ARV so that African countries can have a wider variety.

My personal challenge to you as an individual:

If you have not been tested, get tested

Young people, treatment is not the answer to HIV. It comes with a lot of challenges

Abuse is against the will of God.

Let us protect the Tamars in our homes, families and churches.

The HIV battle is not over. The HIV discourse has evolved. We must keep up to date on the new findings and developments until AIDS is history!!