The role of Christian Communities in taking action against GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

The Hidden Pandemic

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM 2021

Addressing Gender Based Violence, Why should Christian Communities Care about Awareness, Action and Advocacy?

<u>16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence</u> is an annual international campaign that kicks off on November 25. It is used as an organizing strategy by individuals, organizations and governments around the world to call for the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls.

As part of CRCNA, World Renew and Safe Church campaign this year, we have prepared this Sixteen Day devotions and advocacy guide, we invite you to travel with us across the world and to listen to sixteen experiences of Gender based Violence, but also the powerful Calls for Action, we are being asked to take.

As people of faith the call to stand against violence and oppression is a familiar one. It's a story that echoes throughout scripture; God sees and hears the cries of people who are suffering and sends prophets equipped with an urgent call for change.

As people of faith we also live with an expectation, grounded in the words and life of Jesus, that an end to all suffering and violence is possible. We believe that ultimately this story will end in peace. But between now and then we can't always see that ending because, in the middle of the story, there are turning points where God's prophets give up, parts where leaders retaliate in anger and refuse to change, parts where hurting people begin to wonder if having hope is still worth it. Thankfully, in the middle of the story we also read turning points where people who were victims boldly rise up and take instrumental actions to bring healing to broken structures. We've read all of these stories in scripture. We've watched versions of all of them unfold in 2021.

As you meditate on these devotions in which part of the story will you find yourself? Where have you seen these stories in real life? Will you need to soften your heart? Will you need to be brave? Will you need to find people who will stand with you? In what ways will your actions contribute to a turning point towards peace?

Every entry in this series of devotions is for you to use in whatever way best suits you. They can be used as personal daily meditations. They can be read and discussed as a group or as a family. You could start a group text, or a learning circle with friends or communities were you work—read on your own time every day, and then share texts of encouragement with each other based on whatever you are discovering. You could also use them as inspiration to write congregational prayers or you could build off the daily themes to create sixteen of your own days of social media posts to draw people in and multiply the movement against gender based violence.

If you want to learn more about organizing for prevention and an end to violence against women and girls we hope that you'll find these pages useful and join us for our online events as well.

As you read these devotions, may God's Holy Spirit speak and inspire you.

*Some of the stories in these devotions might elicit sad and painful memories as we have been personally survivors of GBV or know others who are. We applaud you for the courage to join this journey, but also feel free to stop at any point if it's harmful for you. This 16 Days resource page includes links to GBV support services in The US and Canada. We encourage you to skim through this guide before taking any GBV response related action to ensure you can safely and discreetly refer potential survivors in a manner that does not expose them to more harm.

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DAY 1, 25th November: INVISIBLE PAIN (USA)



¹⁴ Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Matthew 19:14

Several months ago a pastor friend of mine asked me about the prevalence of gender-based violence, and human trafficking in my local Grand Rapids area. I must confess that at the time, I had no awareness of the presence of this atrocity. I naïvely assumed that in

Grand Rapids, where there are many churches, and in particular, there exists a Reformed Christian ethos – being a major hub of both the Reformed Church in America and Christian Reformed Church in North America – these facts would mitigate against the presence of such heinous acts. I was wrong.

He sent me a copy of a <u>video</u> created by Wedgwood Christian Services in West Michigan, describing what they called the *Manasseh project*. The video describes stories of children subjected to human trafficking in West Michigan – the image below is a representation of actual children trafficked at any given time in West Michigan alone.

We know this is not the way it's supposed to be. Jesus frequently used the metaphor of little children to describe his desires for us in the kingdom of heaven.

³ And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 18:3

It is beyond ironic, extremely sad and deeply sinful for us to have to confess that we have a perverted understanding of God's will, and have not, are not, taking care of the most vulnerable among us – our children chief among them.

Sometimes, the reality of this perversion and the lack of societal care



for the least among us can be seen in open display in our national news. The popular singer R Kelly was just convicted of sex trafficking in a story that was slowly evolving for more than a decade – yet, there are many that continue to stand in his corner, and to lament his conviction.

So what are we to do?

It is beyond ironic, extremely sad and deeply sinful for us to have to confess that we have a perverted understanding of God's will, and have not, are not, taking care of the most vulnerable among us – our children chief among them.

Colin P. Watson, Sr

with the love with which he loves us. But he also calls us to see each other for who we are, to understand each other, to engage with each other, and in this engagement, to recognize and empathize with our mutual needs so that we know – not only how to pray for each other – but how to intervene in one another's lives for mutual benefit.

God calls us to love each other

Last Sunday, at the start of the worship service, I paused briefly to speak to someone whom I had not seen for a while due to the pandemic. I asked her how she was doing – she said fine. But then I asked – no, how are you really? I know that we have all had issues in our lives over the

past two years. She then shared with me some of her concerns, but then also said "there is someone here who came with me today who has been abused in her life and needs prayer". So, we went over to her friend, and after exchanging our concerns, we paused and prayed. The incident reminded me of how often I have missed the opportunity for deep engagement with others by being self-absorbed or by focusing only on the things that are on my agenda for that day.

Calls to action:

- Remember God's will for us, that we are to consider others more important than ourselves. God gives us so much – and also gives us numerous anecdotes with which we must remember this truth.
- Be like the good Samaritan and be vigilant, prayerfully keeping our eyes wide open to look for opportunities to confront the evil of abuse and other gender-based violence.
- Support women and girls so that they can be all that God has intended for them to be.

⁹ Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. Galatians 6:9-10

Prayer:

Our father and Lord, I pray that you will open our eyes to the suffering of others. Make what is currently invisible visible to us, and give us a heart of care, concern and love for each other – a care, concern and love that drives us to action on behalf of those who silently suffer – Amen!

Colin P. Watson, Sr.

Executive Director of the CRCNA

DAY 2, 26th November: RELENTLESS: DOMESTIC ABUSE (UGANDA)



It is a memory that will be etched forever in my mind. My best friend, Joy and I, were walking through her home village in Uganda when we came across a woman with three small children less than five years old. To protect her identity, I will call her Monica. She was busy grinding maize (corn) that would be cooked for their dinner. As we conversed, the layers of pain in her life unfolded. Her husband was abusive verbally and beat her often, especially when he was drunk. He did not care that she was told by a

doctor not to have any more children because of the risks to her health (prolapsed uterus). Now pregnant again, she wondered what would happen to her children if she died during childbirth. Even though her parents were still living, they would not accept to take her back home because her husband had paid a dowry of cows and goats which they already consumed. Thus, she was stuck in a relentless cycle of poverty, abuse and violence.

Monica's life hangs by a thread as she faces the risk of death daily. Her story is one that is far too prevalent around the world, especially in the global south where poverty levels and scarcity of food have increased even more during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Even with all my years of community development work, I find Monica's story one of the most challenging to change. It would take an entire church or community to stand alongside her to hold her husband to account for his behaviour and provide her an alternative place to live for her protection. An African proverb "many spiders can tie down an elephant" provides a resilient spirit in the midst of scarce resources where change might seem otherwise impossible.



YES, it is for women like Monica that World Renew is called to respond and advocate for change. If we reflect on 2 Corinthians 1:3-5, it is clear that the compassion of Christ compels us and gives us the energy to do this difficult work. God is the source of all comfort who comforts us in our troubles so that we can also comfort others. When we stand by women like Monica when

they are suffering, we are really sharing in Christ's suffering and His comfort can abound in and through us. Her distress becomes our distress, thus we support her in ways that point her to overcome because we want her hope to be in Christ just as our hope has been in Him. After all, 1 Corinthians 12:26 notes that when one part is hurt, all other parts are in pain and when one part is honoured, all the rest will share in the joy.

Calls to Action:

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Ida Kaastra-Mutoigo

As you think about Monica's story, I hope you will join me and stand in solidarity with the marginalized. You can do this in a number of ways:

- When you become aware of cases of gender-based violence, report these to appropriate authorities for action.
- Donate to support World Renew programs with communities and churches to change the systems of injustice, to educate families on healthy relationships, to seek out those who are experiencing gender-based violence and to provide safe shelter for those who need it.
- Advocate to your government representatives to increase funding for addressing gender-based violence.

Even in the context of relentless pain and suffering, we can be the agents of relentless mercy and justice. Will you join us in this journey?

Prayer:

Thank you Lord for standing with us in the midst of suffering. Open our eyes to see those who are experiencing violence and oppression today. We lament that there are millions who still live in fear because of the abuse by those close to them that should have been there to protect and love them. Inspire our churches and communities to respond, to intervene and protect those who are highest at risk both locally and globally. Shower us with your relentless love so it abounds in ways that liberate and overcome. For it is in your powerful name and Spirit of compassion that we pray. Amen!

Ida Kaastra-Mutoigo Director, World Renew Canada

DAY 3, 27th November GOD'S PRESENCE THROUGH A YOUNG GIRL (BANGLADESH)

Re

Read II Kings 5:1-14

- Consider the power of Naaman
- Read the passage again.
- Consider the lack of power of the girl.

I've read and heard the story many times: the story of a powerful, doubting, then faithful man being miraculously healed. The significant details almost take on a fairytale quality. The focus is often on the powerful, wealthy man, yet God's presence and revelation actually comes from a girl bold enough to speak truth to power.

Growing up, I would often merge fairy tales and Bible stories. I always knew that fairy tales were fiction and that Bible stories were real, but I often treated Bible story characters, especially Old Testament ones, with fairytale weight. We read accounts of the lives of many people in the Bible, and they are almost formulaic: introduction to them, their challenges, their betrayals or

greed, their grief and then usually their redemption and transformation. Time and time again, we see how God shows up and punctuates the ending of their story with truth, love, and mercy. If we are not careful, it can seem like a fairy tale story.

As I have become a mother and grandmother, I have become less a fan of the fairy tale. It is often not helpful to minimize the pain and suffering that people go through, even if the ending is happy. I have realized that the "happily



ever after" ending is never the case in real life and I am reluctant to cast that expectation onto the daughters and granddaughters in my life.

As I have served as the Director of World Renew, I have seen glimpses into the worlds of children who are in dangerous, exploitative situations and who are going through life-changing

transformation. Young girls are breaking through the cycles of human trafficking and child marriages, with the support of community-based programs. These girls, who a few years ago may have been denied an opportunity to go to school and been forced to marry at a young age, are now dreaming of careers and a future full of promise. Even so, these stories are far from fairy tales.

The young servant girl in II Kings 5 is an enslaved, trafficked person. We don't know a lot of the details of her personal trauma, but we do know that she was taken, as a child, from her home and most likely from her family. This happened after the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had split. King Jehoram brought violence to people, even trying to kill Elisha, and allowed raiders to terrorize and capture people and goods. This child was likely taken in one of these raids and we do not know the terrors she experienced as she lived a life without safety and protection. Yet,

The young girl of Israel spoke truth to power to save another. The young girl in Bangladesh spoke truth to power to save her dignity. Both girls were created in the image of God and filled with potential and purpose. Both girls lived fully into their situation and held onto their faith to overcome incredible challenges. This is not a fairy tale, this is the powerful story of God, unfolding throughout the world.

Carol Bremer-Bennett

she stays true to the faith of her parents and even at great risk to herself, she tells of a truth and a power even greater than those of her captors.

Girls around the world are speaking these same truths into impossible situations, often at great risk. The work that World Renew is doing with girls is picking up momentum, but it almost came to a screeching halt when the pandemic hit. As the economies of the world adjusted to the global pandemic, girls became some of the first victims. With schools closed and incomes in families cut off, parents who had recently begun to support their daughters' dreams pivoted back to former ways of thinking. Many

deemed it necessary to have their daughters get married to help their families' overall financial situation and others even allowed their daughters to be trafficked to put food on the table.

Except Ekadashi. Ekadashi, like the bold girl in the story of Naaman, spoke truth to the powers around her. Before COVID-19, her community in Bangladesh had worked to mobilize girls and parents to say 'no' to child marriage, even though their country had the highest rates in the

world. Hotlines, events, art competitions and other engaging activities were established to change the ways things had always been done. Then the pandemic hit and everything stopped. For Ekadashi's family things didn't only stop though, they got worse. When her father became bedridden and other options were exhausted, her family decided the commitment to wait until legal age for marriage was no longer something they could afford to keep. Ekadashi, with the support of the peacebuilding committee, stood her ground and believed that her dreams were worth fighting for. Together, they all found a way to protect Ekadashi and keep her in school and unmarried.

The young girl of Israel spoke truth to power to save another. The young girl in Bangladesh spoke truth to power to save her dignity. Both girls were created in the image of God and filled with potential and purpose. Both girls lived fully into their situation and held onto their faith to overcome incredible challenges. This is not a fairy tale, this is the powerful story of God, unfolding throughout the world.

Calls to action:

- Strengthen your awareness and understanding of trafficking in your own community.
- Support women and girls' shelters in your community.
- Support World Renew's community development programs that fight trafficking.

Prayer:

Lord, give strength and resources to the families torn by poverty. Surround vulnerable women and girls with powerful communities, supporting the people you have made. May I be part of the solution.

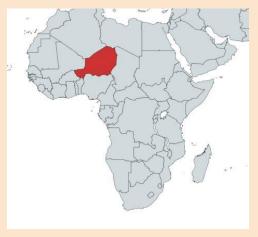
Carol Bremer-Bennett

Director, World Renew USA

DAY 4, 28th November: IT'S HARD BEING A

WOMAN IN NIGER

(PART 1)



Niger's population is estimated at about 25 million, half of whom are under 19 years old. The youth of the population can be largely explained by the birth rate of 7.6 children per woman. Five out of six people live in rural areas where there is little access to schools. In January of 2020, even before the start of the pandemic over 2.6 million children in Niger were already out of school. Only 18% of women and 40% of men in Niger can read.

Early marriage is the norm among ethnic groups in Niger, with three out of four girls married before they

reach the age of 18.

Gender based violence in Niger manifests itself in many different forms including: rape, incest and other sexual abuse and harassment, forced marriage, sexual exploitation, prostitution, domestic violence, emotional abuse, genital mutilation, virginity testing, restriction of movement and travel, and control of finances.

According to a Gender-Based Violence report, in cases of rape or other abuse, it's the women who are incriminated and accused of having provoked the perpetrator. It's not unusual to hear men say something like: "A woman doesn't talk to *me* like that," or "That kind of behavior must be the fault of a woman," or "Women receive everything for free."



Generally, there is an overall lack of consideration for women in Niger. This injustice finds its source within families. Where a married couple has a conflict, the husband is always considered to be right. What's more, the wife is told to ask her husband for forgiveness. "You are a woman; you can't talk like that!" The woman is always considered weak and lacking in common sense. We grow up with this power imbalance, where

women are considered inferior. And some use religion to justify the abuse of women.

There needs to be a shift in consciousness among women that violence is not normal. This is because there are women who are so marginalized that they believe the terrible treatment they receive is standard behavior.

As women, we have the power to change this trend. We can change the stereotype that women can do some activities and not others, or that boys are strong and girls are weak.

To follow God means we are called to serve others without harming or controlling them. Jesus said to his disciples, "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:26-28) Jesus asks us to love one another as he has loved us (John 13:34).



communities.

Call to Action:

• We are called to love others with a sacrificial spirit. Domestic violence grieves the heart of God. God is compassionate toward its victims and has not abandoned them.

Prayer:

Help us, God of women and men, boys and girls, to see all your people as you see them: your image-bearers, all equal in your eyes. Help us to be sacrificial. Help us to be compassionate, as you are compassionate. Help us to be thoughtful supports, surrounding victims with honest and welcoming

Marie Harouna

Gender Justice Program Manager World Renew West Africa

DAY 5, 29th November:

RESPONDING TO HURTFUL WORDS AND ATTITUDES

(PART 2)

Being a woman in West Africa is a difficult experience! Every day, women are told that they are inferior - even that they are the incarnation of evil and debauchery. There's an African proverb that says a woman has three learning spaces in life: with her father, then with her husband, then with her son. This infantilizes her right through to her senior years.

"Sara," age 37, is a working woman, a bookkeeper by profession. She shared with us some of the painful incidents she has experienced.



One day she was driving her car when a group of young men on motorcycles blocked the road so she had to stop. This scene unfolded in front of a police officer who did nothing. The young men refused to move and just honked their horns at Sara. She gathered her courage and began to drive slowly forward. At the sight of her determination, they finally began to disperse, yelling insults at Sara all the while. They shouted that she was a prostitute because she was driving a car. People assume that in order to have anything of value, women must be reliant on men; and that the only women who would be able to have a car are sex workers. Sara expressed to us her rage at being publicly shamed because of these negative assumptions, that no woman can study and gain dignity by her own efforts.

Another time, Sara went to a currency exchange and there was some small change owed to her. The agent dismissively said to

her, "You just leave me the change. We all know you women have easy access to money. You get everything for free!" Sara was so angry that she retorted: "You forget that women also go to school and sometimes are smarter than men! Give me my money. Contrary to what you think, I have suffered to be able to study." Sara explained to us that her daily reality is that she is angry much of the time. Every time she responds to injustice, she senses from those around her that they will never accept the equality of women.

When will all this stop? Sara hopes that her grandchildren's generation will one day see an end to this discrimination. But for now, she thinks that there has been some progress, since she has been able to go to school, to study, and even to work. In other female spaces, girls are not given these opportunities and live with even worse cruelty.

As mothers and wives, women can be like Sara, changing the world, beginning with our own families. Sara told us that her 11-year-old son already cooks and cleans at home, which shocks people. For her, change begins with her children. Imagine if one day home economics could be included in the courses taught at school in West Africa. This would be an opportunity for our children to learn respect, but also to have a different understanding of the role of women.

Sara is speaking on the behalf of many of the women of West African culture when she says that,

"Mothers have a double responsibility to change things. In West Africa, as women, we don't hope for equality, but rather for access to education, freedom to marry freely, respect for our human dignity, and the elimination of certain practices that are degrading for women and girls."

In West Africa, as women, we don't hope for equality, but rather for access to education, freedom to marry freely, respect for our human dignity, and the elimination of certain practices that are degrading for women and girls.

Sarah

Call to Action:

• Ephesians 5:1-2 tells us: Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children; and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Prayer:

Help us, God of women and men, boys and girls, to see all your people as you see them: your image-bearers, all equal in your eyes. Help us to be sacrificial. Help us to be compassionate, as you are compassionate. Help us to be thoughtful supports, surrounding

victims with honest and welcoming communities.



Gender Justice Program Manager World Renew West Africa

DAY 6, 30th November: WE CAN AND WE MUST BRING HOPE (A COUNTRY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA)



Thirteen-year-old Alinafe* lives with her aunt because her parents could not afford to pay for her education and basic needs. While living with her aunt and uncle, her uncle took advantage of her and started abusing her sexually. She was defiled and molested three times and was told not to disclose to her aunt or anyone about it. When she was brave enough to report the case to her mother, her mother did not believe her and accused her of trying to sabotage her aunt's marriage. Knowing that this was emotionally

draining and affecting her studies, she decided to tell a friend, who helped her to report the case to <u>Word Alive Ministries International Girls</u> mentorship program. It was there that she received counselling. However, the mentors failed to address the case further with her aunt and parents because they did not have capacity to handle domestic violence cases let alone violence against children cases. They also could not report the case to other service providers in fear that if the case was reported to social welfare, Alinafe could lose her biggest support

system. However, with guidance and support from the girls mentorship group Alinafe was able to move back to her parents' house and she is now still part of the mentorship program receiving psychosocial support.

Luke 10:25-37 tells the story of the Good Samaritan, which is Jesus' response to the question: "What must we do to inherit eternal life?" When we hear stories like Alinafe, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and not sure what we can personally "do" to be a good Samaritan. However, if our response is to just move on to the next life demand, is our response not the same



as the Priest or Levite? We have also passed by the wounded person and quickly moved to the other side of the road so that we can get on with our lives. We have purposely closed our ears and hearts to injustices because we feel overwhelmed and sad when we learn about them.

The Samaritan was empathetic because he knew what it was to be dismissed, discriminated against and overlooked by society. He knew what kind of care he would want in a situation like that.

How can we orient ourselves so that we can be more empathetic?

God calls us to be a good neighbor, but what does it mean to bandage and clean Alinafe's wound, and use our resources to take care of her since she is on the other side of the world? What does it mean to put time and money into addressing injustices so that perpetrators are brought to justice and we can correct the systems and beliefs that allow this to take place so that another child will not have to experience what Alinafe has gone through?

Will we be the priest or the good Samaritan?

The original question the expert of the law asked was what must he do to inherit eternal life. Jesus said that he should love God and love your neighbor. If we asked Jesus the question today, he would give us the same answer.

We can no longer be like the priest and the Levite and cross to the other side of the road. Between forty to fifty percent of women experience some form of Gender Based Violence (GBV) in their lifetime. Chances are we know someone that has experienced GBV.

Will we be the priest or the good Samaritan?

The original question the expert of the law asked was what must he do to inherit eternal life. Jesus said that he should love God and love your neighbor. If we asked Jesus the question today, he would give us the same answer. Jesus' definition of neighbor is not just those who are like us, but also those that are different, far and a stranger to us. Just as the Samaritan was

prepared with medicine and money to care for the wounded, we too must also be prepared to help those who experience GBV and take actions to address the systems that allow GBV to be so pervasive.

Calls to Action:

- Learn about the different forms of GBV.
- Learn what you can do to make your church, home and other environments safe so as to prevent GBV.
- Learn about organizations that support victims of GBV. Support World Renew's and their partner's work to work with and support families and communities.

Prayer:

God, give me insight and understanding of GBV and the role I can play to prevent it and care for people who have experienced it. I ask that the victims of GBV, young and older, can escape the violence and find safety. Help me to help them.

*Name changed for privacy

Anonymous

DAY 7, 1st DECEMBER: Gender Based Violence: The Cost of Silence and Inaction (KENYA)



It is in the early 1990's. I am about four years old. The setting is a small village in Eastern Kenya. My father leaves for work early in the morning. All my older siblings go to school at a nearby missionary- run Catholic school. I am still too young for school, so I stay home with my mom.

On most days, my Aunt comes to our home. On this particular morning, Auntie comes to our home and I notice her face was puffed up and has bruises. She is very fair-skinned. You can see the bruises on her face. It looks painful and sore. She is crying. My mother nods with empathy. She whispers: "how

long am I going to go through this? For how long am I going to suffer at the hands of this man?"

The man accused of hurting Auntie is our very charismatic Uncle. He is the life of the party, great at mobilizing events, in fact he is the chairman of our Christian prayer group and serves on the men's council at the Parish.

Auntie married very early and had very limited education. She dropped out of school to marry a rich young man. However, unknown to most people, the husband physically abused my dear Auntie behind closed doors!

She does not have a job or source of income for herself. In contrast, her brothers are educated and have jobs at the local district offices. Why educate a girl when she will get married and benefit another home anyways? (Sadly these beliefs still hold in many communities).

Due to the limited economic opportunities in the village, Uncle goes to the city over 700 Kilometers away, for about 4 months every so often to trade. He returns to see his family, often leaving his wife pregnant with their next child. As the cycle of



violence continues, their family grows to include 5 children.

As I progressed through elementary school, Auntie became very unwell. Eventually, she passes on, rumored to have died of HIV/Aids. Soon Uncle remarries because he needs a woman to take care of the children, because, what does a man know about caring for children? Because of the patriarchal nature of most communities, taking care of children is a woman's job. Again, he chose a young girl straight out of elementary school. Two more children are born into the family. Uncle becomes ill and dies. His second wife eventually also becomes ill and dies. By the time I had completed high school, six of their seven children had died from HIV/Aids-related complications.

I write this experience in the first voice because despite this happening decades ago, the sadness and trauma to my young self remains. This painful story of physical, sexual, and economic abuse has a devastating ending, wiping out an entire family. Due to her economic vulnerability, Auntie was not able to remove herself from an abusive relationship. She had no education, she had no income and she did not know where to ask for help! Due to the economic situation in the community, Uncle sought work far away from home, staying away for extended periods of time, falling for the temptation of sex, getting infected by HIV, and consequently infecting his wives and children.

All of this death and suffering would have been prevented, also limited health services and information led to my auntie transmitting HIV to her children.

Why educate a girl when she will get married and benefit another home anyways?

Calls to Action

My Auntie represents millions of women and girls across the globe, *Globally, Six women are killed every hour by men in their own family or their partners.*Countless more lose their lives indirectly to violence-related incidents related to physical abuse, deliberate infection with HIV/Aids, suicide due to psychological abuse amongst other challenges. These numbers have been heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic While we acknowledge men too are victims of GBV,

the numbers are not staggering and reporting remains limited, further, although GBV happens everywhere in the world, is highest in poorer economies and amongst the most vulnerable including young girls, persons with disabilities, and those with limited economic options.

What can you do About it?

- Speak Out whenever you spot GBV.
- Eliminate the shame and stigma associated with GBV.
- Offer support to a survivor, An act as simple as contact or referral to a shelter, legal aid, hospital or counselling can save a life.
- Support organizations such as World Renew are working amongst these isolated and stigmatised communities.
- Above all, pray that the culture of perpetuating and condoning violence and abuse will be eroded, so we can all live in harmony, just as God intended.

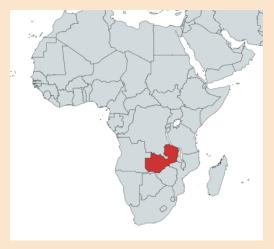
Prayer:

Father God, we seek the restoration of relationships, in our homes, communities and societies. May you enable us as individuals and as organizations to cloth those in need amongst us with material and emotional support. Heighten our voices, that we will speak out and take action against abuse.

Julian Muturia

Gender Specialist, World Renew

DAY 8, 2rd December: PROTECTION FOR VULNERABLE WOMEN AND GIRLS (ZAMBIA)



We live in a world of brokenness; broken people, broken systems.

It is our privilege in this world to serve and help overcome the injustice that especially affects women in the world.

Frank and I are International Relief Managers for World Renew, which is a non-government organization that provides relief to disaster areas around the world.

We've had opportunities to serve in countries that experience severe poverty as a result of this

brokenness.

We have gone to remote villages to talk with the women relying on the food assistance support World Renew provides to communities affected by drought and they would share their stories. When one young woman in Zambia spoke to us, she said that she felt like she had nothing to do now that she had finished her schooling and was pregnant. The father of the child lived in another village and although he had a job, he was unable to support her because he was the oldest of his family and needed to take care of them.

World Renew actively works towards protecting such vulnerable women and girls. During our food assistance programs, such as the one in Zambia, we consult with women and girls to understand their lived experience during the crisis so that our programming can include measures to mitigate the risk of Gender-based Violence. We select the time of day and site locations that women and girls identify as safe and accessible for food distributions. Women and youth are empowered through training to take an active part in decision-making and to voice their concerns in their homes and communities. Vulnerable people such as homes headed by women, pregnant women, families and orphans are prioritized for food assistance.

Complaints and feedback mechanisms are set up based on the suggestions provided by women and girls. As part of World Renew's protocol to safeguard children and vulnerable adults, staff

and partners' behavioral expectations are also communicated to the selected recipients of food assistance.

While we did not witness outright abuse, neglect of responsibilities is also a form of abuse. According to Campaign for Female Education in Zambia, poverty, child marriage and early pregnancy are factors that keep girls in rural areas from attending school or in this case, a future of independence for this young woman.

In order to protect young women from this cycle of putting them at risk for being in these vulnerable situations, such as violence, and abusive relationships, World Renew partners with the United Church of Zambia in an effort to support orphans and vulnerable children through the path of education. There we met Memory, a woman who was seeking further education. Memory was supported through her years of university to become a teacher. She has recently graduated and although she has not yet found a teaching position, the doors have opened up for her. Our hope and prayer is that she can be an example to other women on how to overcome this cycle of poverty and vulnerability.

So what does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6: 8

So what does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.
Micah 6: 8

Calls to Action

- We are all called to act justly, to see all people as created in the image of God. There is no male or female that is not greater or lesser than another in the eyes of God, nor should they be in our eyes.
- We are called to demonstrate a spirit of love and mercy to all those that God puts in our path regardless of gender, color or status in this world.
- We do all this with a spirit of humility, not drawing attention to ourselves or putting others down, but rather showing a gentleness and patience that draws others closer to Jesus.

Prayer:

Today, let us pray for all the single, female and child headed households, and for all persons with special needs, whose vulnerabilities increase many fold especially in times of crisis. Father God, may we see them, may we hear their voices, may our work impact these ones especially.

Brenda and Frank Folkema

World Renew International Relief Managers

DAY 9, 3th December: FROM VIOLENCE TO RESPECT (ZAMBIA)



"But if you refuse to serve the Lord, then choose today whom you will serve. [...] But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord." Joshua 24:15

At the time and place that Joshua made this declaration, men had a role of leadership in their homes. Today, most of us would probably agree that adults in a household should make decisions and share leadership roles equitably. But in many homes around the world, men continue to dominate.

Lundazi is quite a remote district in Zambia, near the border with Malawi. Similar to most rural districts, it is very heavily agricultural, so a lot of the income and livelihoods would be centered around crops or livestock. David* and Diana* are a couple living in this region.

Before World Renew's programs, David would shout at Diana to do things in the home; she had to obey. During planting season, she would have to do all the work only for her husband to take the money after the harvest and spend it on other women until it ran out. He treated her like a slave, she later told us. Gender-based violence (GBV) in Zambia can include this kind of unequal work. Almost half of ever-married women have experienced



physical, sexual, or emotional violence by their current or most recent husband or partner, yet more than half of women neither seek help, nor talk to anyone about the violence they had experienced.

Gender roles in Zambia have clear divisions tending to place undue power with men and undue burden with women and even children: men control the finances, women prepare fields for planting; men do the planting (because they have access to the seeds and the resources), all the weeding and work in the fields is done by women; AND food preparation (preparation includes tasks like pounding all the maize, collecting firewood, and gathering water) is also women's work.

"But if you refuse to serve the Lord, then choose today whom you will serve. [...] But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord." Joshua 24:15 Childcare is another woman's role. But because of all the field work the women must do, the children are left at home, often in the care of older children. The girls grow up looking after the family, which makes the whole family more vulnerable to risks around the home.

David and Diana began attending local group meetings on gender-based violence through their church. The program spends time discussing Biblical standards for gender roles through sessions with men and women separately. After several weeks, they are brought all together.

They've gone through this process of looking at gender roles within the household but also within the community. This prepares them to put what they discovered in front of the other group, and then have a big discussion about it. This is where the change comes! Lightbulbs come on in people's heads about what's been happening in the past. Women don't often have a voice within community meetings so this process empowers them to be able to challenge the status quo. Through these groups, they are able to honestly discuss GBV within the community, when previously, most women would suffer in silence.

In the Joshua passage above, we saw Joshua taking responsibility for the power he had in his household and using it for good. The gender programs in Lundazi challenged David to do the same. His eyes were opened to the injustice of the situation and he made some changes. Thanks to all this, David and Diana now have a happy marriage based on mutual respect. David stays home to assist with chores and make sensible decisions together with Diana. David is so committed to using his power for positive change that he is now chairman of the gender-based violence group. He has become a champion for change and uses his voice to inspire other people to change as well.

Calls to action:

- What power do you have, and what have you learned that has made you want to do things differently?
- How can your experience help others like you?
- How can you use your influence to serve the Lord, and encourage others to do the same?

Prayer:

Father God, just like you opened the eyes of David in Zambia to see his wife as his companion and equal partner, and not an object to be abused, may you open the eyes of all households and communities where Gender inequalities have been normalized. May all people thrive economically, socially and even in public places, Amen!

Oliver Wakelin

Country Director, Zambia

^{*}Names changed for privacy

DAY 10, 4Th December: Our Source of Hope (A COUNTRY IN ASIA)



With her two little girls huddled near her, Tina* wept as she told about another beating from her husband. This time she was especially distraught because she was pregnant and feared she might lose the baby. She was finding it hard to hope that things could ever change. We hesitated to dare offer hope that her situation could change, but prayed that God would protect her and her children and somehow bring peace to their home.

However, even as we prayed it was difficult to believe that her methamphetamine addicted husband would ever change.

Nevertheless, God did indeed see her and hear our prayers. Three couples in the village who were also addicted decided to follow Jesus and through intense prayer, encouragement and time in a rehab program operated by believers, they were set free from addiction to methamphetamine. One of these men also detoxed from opium which he had used regularly for over 20 years. Within the first week of their return to the village, relatives and neighbors visited to hear what had happened. By the second week those people who had returned, had seven couples detoxing in their home as they prayed, fed, sang and encouraged them through the process. Tina's husband was part of the next wave and experienced dramatic transformation as he encountered God's grace and mercy in his life. He later repented in tears as he shared his profound sorrow at how he had treated his wife and children. He now tells people what a treasure his wife is.



Now he helps energetically with the field work for his family as well as that of his widowed mother-in-law. The family is now building their lives on Ps. 119: 49: ".....for you have given me hope".

Even through times of trial, when their newborn son died at 6 months old, they have continued to trust in Jesus. This brought to mind the grief of the Shunamite woman who said to Elisha "Did I ask you for a son, my lord? ... Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes'?" after Elisha had prophesied that within a year she would have a son. However, the Lord did restore her son to her and he does restore hope and bring change even in the darkest situations. God's peace reigns now in Tina's household.

Lamentations 3:24-26 "I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him. The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."

Calls to Action: The challenge may seem insurmountable; there are actions you and your communities can do:

- Advocate in your area and globally adequate shelters for women and children needing emergency housing/care;
- Follow and support World Renew in their work in trauma healing and working to replace hopelessness with hope.

The family is now building their lives on:

Ps. 119: 49: ".....for you have given me hope".

Lamentations 3:24-26 "I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him. The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."

Prayers:

In regards to this place in Asia:

Father God, I ask that women and children may have a temporary safe place to be until some intervention can happen. I ask that respected elders in the community and other family members will be involved in speaking on behalf of the women/girls. May more men become advocates for women in their communities and models for dealing with conflict or anger without resorting to violence. May the influence of drugs and alcohol, which are involved in a majority of abuse cases, be addressed. May there may be rapid and sensitive responses by people in authority when they become aware of situations of concern, locally and globally. May all this bring praise to you, our living hope!

*Names changed for privacy

Anonymous

for

DAY 11, 5th December: Made New from Darkness (LAOS)



Laos, also known as the Land of a Million Elephants, is a nation of bountiful grace and tropical beauty. Sadly, we are not exempt from sin. The darkness of evil lurks amongst the vulnerable. Women, children, and the differently abled are constantly at risk due to poverty and lack of access to social services.

During a recent initial visit by World Renew staff to a remote community, we learned of Boun's brutal death (this name is given to protect her identity).

Boun, in the Lao language means "merit, to give blessings".

Boun, a 28 year old ethnic minority mom of six children experienced an ectopic pregnancy. Though she was fortunate to have an operation, she developed an infection which is common. Despite her body not being healed and enduring infections, the husband could not control himself and raped her. With a broken body and spirit, Boun passed, leaving behind six children. A husband is now without a wife; a family is without a mother; a community is shattered; all will be impacted for generations.

With unspeakable heaviness, we mourn the loss of Boun and any human life who has endured and survived sexual violence. This kind of evil is abhorrent to our loving and merciful God. When

will the evil of sexual assault and violence end? When will the acts of violence be called out and stopped in our communities and a shift be made from considering this as "normal"?

THIS. This is the work of World Renew. We have the opportunity to make things new, to be a part of changing the story or changing the narrative. For the old to pass and the new to come. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5.17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away;



behold, all things have become new." (NKJV). We long for that new creation in Jesus.

Across Asia, the lotus and the water lily flower is a sacred symbolism of new life, generated from a dark place. Though the condition under the surface of the water is dark and dirty, the lotus rises above with immaculate beauty. I know that Boun's spirit is made new from darkness, just as the lotus symbolizes. She is no longer in pain and suffers no more. I pray for resilience also in this life, for women who are suffering the most indescribable pain.

Thereafter, a male team member took ownership, "We need to be better. We need to teach boys and men to respect girls and women." YES LORD, say that! May Boun's life and passing not be in vain. May communities be made new with courage to be better.

Chiraphone Khamphouvong

As our project team debriefed and discussed Boun's tragic account, many of the men were unaltered. The women? We were flabbergasted and furious. Perhaps Boun's story, to some extent, is too familiar for the Lao women in the room. With great courage, the women raised their voices against the violence and threat of any safety and security. The challenge to make things new, upholding Micah 6.8 "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly" was shared in a safe and authentic space. Hearts were softened. Thereafter, a male team member took ownership, "We need to be better. We need to teach boys and men to respect girls and women." YES LORD, say that! May Boun's life and passing not be in vain. May communities

be made new with courage to be better.

Calls to Action:

To honor Boun and the many affected by acts of sexual violence, will you join me to be made new today and inspire others to battle against any form of injustice?

- Teach everyone, including young girls and boys, about safe and respectful healthy boundaries as we honor others, as we are all made in the image of God, the Imago Dei.
- Listen and support those who may be experiencing acts of violence of any kind, be more vigilant with the silenced or unspoken trauma, and assist with appropriate services.

Prayer:

Abba...You give and take away. With heavy hearts, we can still BELIEVE and TRUST that You work in and through the suffering. Even so, with Boun's life and passing, help us to be sensitive

to the pain. May we be convicted and committed to battle against any form of evil and acts of sexual violence. Give us the strength, wisdom, and courage as we partner with You in making things new from darkness. We pray all of this in the most powerful name, Pra' Yesu. AMEN.

Chiraphone Khamphouvong Program Advisor, World Renew Laos

DAY 12, 6th December: THE STORY OF CLARE AND BOB (CANADA)



Everyone loved Clare and Bob! According to church leaders, they were a model to others, "an example to us all!" We would see them walking closely together through the community, always holding hands, shopping together, cooking in the church kitchen, sharing everything, and conversations were frequently accompanied by lots of laughter. Sometimes Clare would sit sweetly beside Bob while he did all the work in the kitchen. Bob would laugh good naturedly at her "laziness" and say it's a good thing he loved cooking! During Bible

studies, Clare sat by Bob's side and looked adoringly at him as he answered the questions. It wasn't until she and I met separately and alone that a true picture of their relationship began to form.

"I'm not allowed to look at anyone but him," she told me solemnly. "If he catches me even glancing at another man, I get in trouble". "Can you tell me more about what "trouble" looks like?" I asked. "Well, sometimes he will pull my hair and drag me around our house, he will call me terrible names. Now and then he deliberately hurts my hands, which is why I can't always

help with the cooking. My hands can't hold the utensils." "Why don't you call for help?" I asked. "He blocks the door and controls the phone. I'm only allowed to use it in his presence."

For her safety, we kept this quiet, and later through small quiet side conversations, came up with a safety plan to help her find a way out that wouldn't escalate the situation.



Bob and Clare moved away a few months later and we lost touch. I kept her in my prayers trusting that God could help her find a way out of this situation.

I heard that Clare was experiencing homelessness a year later just as a weather forecast predicted a severe dip in temperature. A community call-out asking for donations of warm

clothing came as mothers and aunties prepared to check in on their loved ones living on the streets. We gathered a few extra coats to send along. Upon pick-up, a friend quietly mentioned, "Clare's living out there now." Surprised and shocked by the news, I went to my closet to find a favourite cozy warm sweater to send along specifically for her. It was humbling that that was all I could offer at the time.

It was a few years again until I saw Clare at a community event and it took me a minute to recognize her. She had a new short haircut and her cheeks were rounded out. She looked so healthy. "I'm with someone else now," she told me. What a relief she had gotten out alive! Clare went on to tell me that when she and Bob ended their relationship—or rather when Bob left Clare for *another* relationship—Clare felt she had nowhere to go. She had been cut off from her friends and family because of Bob's controlling and isolating tactics. Homeless, Clare secured a bed in a local women's shelter. After the allotted maximum 45 days was up, she had no choice but to live on the streets of a nearby city.

While this story of Clare and Bob is fictional, every one of these events is true. For years I worked with marginalized women, many of whom were Indigenous and therefore invisible to much of Canadian society's eyes. I heard their stories. Though gender-based violence is experienced in all demographics of society, for those who experience racism and discrimination in addition to such violence, it is like having salt poured on wounds.

Indigenous women face significant barriers to every known avenue of care: discrimination during a police reporting, finding a compassionate doctor, navigating lateral community violence, finding access

Matt. 25:40
"What you did for one of the least of these... sisters, you did for me."

to meaningful employment that pays a living wage, and having a steady address from which to access the most basic levels of support. The challenges are very real, complex, and difficult to overcome alone.

With the past 18+ months of Covid-19 restrictions, abuse victims have been more isolated than ever. The already grim statistics of missing and murdered indigenous women have gotten worse. Indigenous women have reported almost double the amount of violence since May 2020. Access to supports and homeless initiatives have diminished due to Covid-19 protocols. Hospitals and social systems are overwhelmed. As lower wage jobs have been impacted significantly, there is speculation that this may add to already volatile situations that often leads to increased violence. *

Calls to Action:

- **Notice** what thoughts pop up for you when seeing women experiencing homelessness. What might their story be about why they are there? Could it be something else?
- **Listen** to people's stories. Recognize that you are only hearing a small part of their whole life experience. Reserve judgement.
- **Believe** that their story carries truth. Be a trustworthy person.
- Care and acknowledge that it takes great courage to share life stories. Be honoured.
- **Educate** yourself by reading one article a week from a trusted source, like domestic shelters.org, or attend a workshop on this topic
- Advocate by influencing your networks and communities. Ask questions of people holding power in your community. Where do women with limited resources and vulnerabilities end up with nowhere to go? How is affordable housing accessed in your community?

Matt. 25:40 "What you did for one of the least of these... sisters, you did for me"

Prayer:- Father God, today we remember the abused woman, sitting on the pew, with half a smile while holding her tears back, struggling to hide her physical and psychological scars, may you give her the courage to walk out of abuse and may we not judge instead lets receive her in a warm embrace

Help us oh lord not to condone abuse, even if it's by our fellow brethren.

Jessica Boy

Resonate Global Mission

DAY 13, 7th December: PLEASE GOD, HELP ME TO SET THEM FREE (CANADA)



This is a story about my friend, a young boy, living in relentless family violence. I met him when I worked in his program as an art therapist. He had been chosen to be part of an intentionally supported group of students, because in a regular classroom setting he displayed immense outbursts of anger - often.

So, one of his teachers recommended him for a full, wrap-around program in school, which supported him and others having social and emotional needs.

This little boy was tall for his age, heavy set and loud. He commanded attention - especially when he was angry. Yet, there were two special behaviours that drew this community's attention that were likely telling a deeper story. He hid under his desk - often. And he would

never go anywhere without his teddy bear. Seeing him looming over another child in a playground or in the gym, holding tight to his teddy told us that there was another story than just what we saw.

As I got to know more about this boy, that story slowly unraveled. He was living in a house filled with family violence. His father was abusive. His mother did not have the resources to leave; he and his sister were so little. No one could escape



the violence. As the team got to know this little boy, they began to meet with his parents. There were times when I would sit by my friend, often colouring near him until he chose to come out from under the desk, clutching his teddy bear, to join me and calm down while he coloured. That's when the social worker would meet with his mom, share resources on how to leave this abusive situation, letting her know that she was supported by many, many people who cared deeply for her and her children.

The program ended and so did my time with him as art therapist. He returned to his previous school, knowing he'd been cared for, and knowing his mom was being cared for and getting help. With his departure from the program, my only course of action was to pray that God would continue what he had used us to start.

Many years later I ran into my friend unexpectedly at a church. I found out that his mom had found the strength and courage to leave. In fact, she stood up one evening in that church, at an event focused on supporting women in the church, and shared about her experience living in an abusive relationship and then offered her support to women on how to reach out to others for support. Her children are thriving, attending church weekly, and are constantly reminded that God cares for them. My friend has replaced his teddy bear with his phone, and is texting his

When we step into a space of action, working to support whole families struggling in the midst of domestic violence, we are demonstrating the love of Jesus to those that are in desperate need of His love and care.

Becky Jones

friends a lot - which is great - even if it is in the middle of church!

Witnessing the effects of abuse is heartbreaking. While the abuse and violence may be directed at one person, the ripple effect that the abuse has within a family can be pervasive. Mark 9:36-37 says - He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me." When we step into a space of action, working to

support whole families struggling in the midst of domestic violence, we are demonstrating the love of Jesus to those that are in desperate need of His love and care.

Calls to Action:

It can often feel overwhelming, not knowing how to help a family living in domestic violence.

- Consider supporting your local women's shelter through volunteering or financial support.
- Follow Safe Church Ministry to find out ways that you can walk alongside communities that are battling family violence.
- Pray intentionally for God to guide you towards ways to support specific families in need in your community.

Prayer:

God, may we remember, always, that we are a part of your community, that we all share in caring for your children. Please give us the courage and direction to support families in need of support.

Becky Jones

Disability Concerns/Safe Church Ministry

DAY 14, 8th December: CALLED TO COMMUNITY (CANADA)



Several years ago, I met Mary*, who had fled her home after enduring horrific and permanently disfiguring physical violence from her husband. After the threats from him and his well-connected family followed her even to her place of hiding in a nearby country, she was granted refugee protection and safely resettled in Canada.

When I met her, gathered around steaming cups of coffee just a few days after her arrival, she volunteered her story – not because I asked, but perhaps because she knew that I could see her physical scars and so she felt she had to explain. Or perhaps because she finally felt she had space to speak it.

I could hear the strength in her voice, and the hope in her sentences as she described her dreams for the future: continue learning English; finish school; work for the rights of women in her home country; fight for the rights of all people everywhere.

But I still wondered aloud to her: was it hard for her to tell her story?

"Not if people *really* listen," she answered.

I share this little of her story here with some trepidation, because I've come to understand the tendency of many of us, the Christian community included, to *fail* to truly listen



to stories like Mary's. To react with, "yes, it's just terrible how *they* treat women over *there*," as if the scourge of Gender-Based Violence is only present elsewhere, as if it does not exist within our own countries, our own communities, our own churches, as if our only response and responsibility is to say, "yes, isn't it good – aren't you *so glad* – that you are safely here now" and then move on.

But this failure to listen distances us both from survivors and from the issue of Gender-Based Violence itself in ways that not only prevent us from seeing those impacted by GBV in our own communities but also keeps us from learning with and from survivors and being an appropriate part of their healing.

This distancing makes it difficult to honour the full dignity of the survivors in our communities, and means we cannot see them in the fullness of their humanity as image bearers of our Creator. It also means we cannot truly "mourn with those who mourn" over the violence that people including Mary have endured, or "rejoice with those who rejoice," when people survive this same horror and invite us to be part of their resilience in building a new life.

And when we truly listen to survivors, when we are present with them, when we support them in building resilience, we participate in Christ's work in the world.

Dena Nicolai

Because we often applaud the resilience of survivors of GBV without understanding that this same resilience is not simply the result of a person's own personal inner strength, but is also formed and woven in-and- through community. When survivors are listened to, supported, and feel the restoration of their agency and their identity (apart from their abusers and apart from the abuse they've faced), this plays a part in the fostering of their resilience — a resilience that allows them to rebuild trust, to find new hope, to take time to heal, to imagine a new life.

The call to participate in this resilience is a

Gospel-shaped call too. For we follow a Christ whose life, death, resurrection, and promise of a New Creation are about restoration to wholeness, about the reconciliation of all things, about solidarity with all of those who suffer most from the evil and brokenness in the world. And when we truly listen to survivors, when we are present with them, when we support them in building resilience, we participate in Christ's work in the world.

Calls to action:

Mary is flourishing in Canada now. But her story and her voice remains an invitation to us to:

- listen, learn, support those fleeing and surviving Gender-Based Violence,
- work together in ways that promote the restoration and flourishing of all.

 pay attention in your own circles and spheres of influence: what voices need to be heard on the topic of Gender-Based Violence? What assumptions need to be changed? And how can you and your community join together in supporting the resilience of survivors of GBV?

Prayer:

Creator God, we know you desire flourishing and wholeness for each of your children, and for all of Creation, and we lament the ways that evil has left so many people missing and so many things broken. We pray for all of those enduring Gender-Based Violence and seeking refuge from it. We also pray for all of those who have escaped, and are trying to rebuild their lives. Give them your strength, courage, and restoration. Give them safe places to weep and mourn — places in which they will be comforted. May they know your presence with them always. We also pray that our churches and communities will have open ears to hear and open hearts to love, ready to learn with and stand alongside all those who suffer. Give us the wisdom and compassion of your Spirit, that we may participate with gratitude in the work you have set before us. Amen.

*name changed for privacy

Dena Nicolai

Refugee Program Associate

DAY 15, 9th December: SEEING WITH THE EYES OF GOD (USA)



I rejoice and celebrate in your faithful love because you saw my suffering — you were intimately acquainted with my deep distress. Ps 31:7

To be seen. Isn't that what we all want? To be noticed, appreciated, loved. Unfortunately, for girls and women who are in abusive relationships, being seen is threatening and dangerous. In Genesis 16, Hagar

was seen by Sarai, her mistress. Sarai and Abram saw that Hagar was young and healthy and could produce a child for them. And so they took her, and used her, and when Hagar saw that she was pregnant and began to swell with the prospect of becoming a mother, Sarai and Abram abused her to reassert their control and dominance. Not being seen or appreciated or valued has serious effects on one's self-esteem and self-confidence. But to be seen by one's abuser

instills fear and results in harm. For women who are involved in relationships characterized by abuse and violence, invisibility is a strategy for survival.

But what Hagar discovers is that the risk and danger of being seen is dependent upon who is doing the seeing. For when Hagar fled to the desert, Hagar was seen by someone else. God saw her and met her there. But what he saw when he looked at Hagar was quite different from what Abram and Sarai saw. God saw that Hagar was a person made in his image, a human being of dignity, value, and worth. God saw someone who was suffering, who had been used and abused by Sarai and Abram. God saw that Hagar was pregnant and needed reassurance and care. God saw that Hagar was scared and alone and in need of help. I suspect



that for Hagar, this was the first time in a long time that being seen did not bring harm but blessing, not more hell but hope. "You are El Roi," Hagar testifies, "the God who sees." The God who sees and whose seeing brings healing, and wholeness, and hope.

The church is not always very good at seeing those who are experiencing abuse. If we do acknowledge victims or survivors, we tend to question their story, downplay the seriousness of the danger and harm, give the abuser the benefit of the doubt, or ignore the reality of abuse altogether. At times, our seeing, like that of Abram and Sarai, results in more harm, more suffering, more trauma.

But what if the church took its cues not from Abram and Sarai, but from God and learned to look with the eyes of God?

Laura* worked closely with Stacey* (*names altered) in the children's education program at their church, and began to notice that Stacey seemed on edge. She often checked her phone for text messages and seemed jumpy when it rang. She never talked about her husband or her home life except that she needed to be home before him. One day, Stacey showed up with bruises on her wrist. She wore a long sleeve shirt but it was hard not to notice. Concerned for Stacey's well-being, Laura invited her to talk privately after one of their meetings. Summoning all her courage, Laura asked her where the bruises came

But what if the church took its cues not from Abram and Sarai, but from God and learned to look with the eyes of God?

Amanda W. Benckhuysen

from and whether things were okay at home. Stacey became quiet. A while later Laura shared her own experience of growing up in a home with violence; Stacey shared with Laura that her husband often seemed angry at her, and at times hit her and that she didn't know what she could do to make him happy. Laura listened compassionately and assured her that she believed her, that she was brave for sharing this with her, and that God grieved at the way Stacey was being treated. She encouraged her to get help, giving her information to a local domestic violence organization. And when Stacey decided to leave the home with her children, Laura

worked with the deacons to provide additional financial and logistical support. Laura saw Stacey with the eyes of God. And Stacey's life was radically changed because of it.

Calls to action:

- See in our communities the Hagars in all their humanity, with all their dignity, in all their suffering and affliction, with love and compassion.
- Enable the church to bring healing and hope to those who have felt the weight of the world's evil on their bodies and in their spirits.
- Help the least of these experience the redemptive power of the gospel in their lives?

Prayer:

O Lord God, you looked upon us in our distress and reached out with compassion and love in your son Jesus Christ. Now, give us eyes to see the most vulnerable in our world with that same compassion and love. May we, as your people, cast your light in the darkness and may our lives and our actions and our seeing be instruments of your goodness and grace. Amen.

Amanda W. Benckhuysen

Director, Safe Church Ministry

Galatians 6:1-2

DAY 16, 10th December: NO QUICK-FIX (USA)



Brothers and sisters, if a person is discovered in some sin, you who are spiritual restore such a person in a spirit of gentleness. Pay close attention to yourselves, so that you are not tempted too. Carry one another's burdens, and in

this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

When I was involved in planting a house church several years ago, while working bi-vocationally with Safe Church Ministry, I realized Gender-based Violence is closer to all of us than I previously thought. Several women shared their stories of abuse with me, all with high degrees of harm and pain and harm; one of which experienced devastatingly repeated childhood sexual abuse in her past, and the details of every story I hold in confidence and cannot share in this devotion.

Stories of abuse and violence are wide-ranging on a substantial spectrum, from more egregious harms of childhood sexual exploitation, to verbal, emotional and spiritual patterns of power and

control of others, often members of a family, especially children and women.

No matter how long the stories take to be told, or how unbelievable stories may be, it is of vital importance that they be heard and not simply treated as an issue to be fixed. So often in our society we use quick-fix methods and scour for easy ways to make things better. In The Body Keeps Score, Bessel A. van der Kolk, criticizes mainstream medicine for rarely considering



physiological inner equilibrium changes by means other than drug treatments. Then he goes on to name several fundamental truths, one of which is this: "we can change social conditions to create environments in which children and adults can feel safe and where they can thrive" (p.

38). Instead of hearing stories and feeling sorry - and trying to find a quick-fix - we must allow these stories to transform us and our communities.

We often unintentionally create obstacles in our communities for those of us that live with ongoing effects of trauma. In Galatians 6, Paul is calling the church to restore one another

gently and to bear one another's burdens. Hearing the many stories of gender-based violence will prompt so many layers of guilt and shame within all of us. As we process the ongoing global system of gender-based violence, and wonder at the generational cycle of harm and trauma, we must continue to find and create spaces in our communities where people with stories of trauma may experience dignity, justice, and restoration. Fortunately, we do not do this alone, Jesus continues to walk with us as we create systems and cultures that end cycles of violence, restore relationships, bear one another's burdens and become families that care deeply for one another

No matter how long the stories take to be told, or how unbelievable stories may be, it is of vital importance that they be heard and not simply treated as an issue to be fixed.

and give each other what we need to thrive as God brings his kingdom of grace, peace, justice and love.

Calls to Action:

The sin of gender-based violence is a pattern of power of control that traps those who are victimized, in addition to the one who is abusing.

- Practice gentleness and great care as these situations are some of the most dangerous for all involved, but most of all, it cannot be ignored.
- Strive to form communities full of relationships where the value of each person is honored; where people may grow free from abuse; and where abuse has occurred, the response is compassion and justice that foster healing.

Prayer:

Lord, may you continue to guide us in your spirit to help us form environments and cultures in which burdens may be shared and safety is experienced. May we put aside our own selfish

desires, but instead look to the interests of others in humility. Allow us to create spaces of refuge
where all people, especially those who have experienced gender-based violence, may be able to
thrive. Guide us in your grace, mercy, justice and peace.

Eric Kas

Ministry Consultant, Safe Church Ministry

CONCLUSION: HOW LONG, OH LORD?



So there it is. Everywhere. Next door. Around the world. A child, a daughter, a wife. Feigned happiness, silent scream, hopeless captivity.

The words of Habakkuk in ch. 1 are the words of victims: "How long, O LORD, must I call for help but You do not hear, or cry out to You, 'Violence!' but You do not

save? Why do You make me see iniquity? Why do You tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me. Strife is ongoing, and conflict abounds...."

The words of the Psalmist (13) are the words of the victims: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, 'I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.'

The stories: a damning litary of pain. Vulnerable people who have not chosen violence. Homes that are not homes. Children with their childhood ripped out. Men who see violence as natural, women who live in inhuman horrors.

The absolute need to get away from living in this dread, the virtual powerlessness of doing so. The steadfast support given by loving family, the vibrant strength of Christ and his people. Community Safe Places, the fear of getting caught again. Trust broken, trust thriving again.

What can I do? What can I and my community do? I can report and support. I can give my heart. I can be the love of God, as in the end of Ps. 13, so the Psalmist sang: "But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me."

What can I do?
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community do?
I can report and support.
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Peter Buthuis

Peter Bulthuis

Church and Community Engagement, World Renew						
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