Christian Leadership Tackles Gender Inequality to Prevent Violence Against Women

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Over the past three decades violence against women has been recognised as a global issue. It is on the agenda of local and international organisations, faith institutions, donors and governments in a way that is unprecedented. Violence takes many forms: physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, psychological, financial, spiritual and more. The impact of violence on the lives of Australian women and their children are far-reaching and cut across lines of age, ethnicity, ability and class. For some women that impact is lethal. Intimate partner homicides account for 20 per cent of all homicides, and four out of five of these involve a man killing his female partner (Davies & Mouzos 2007). According to the Australian Personal Safety Survey one in three women (33 per cent) report experiencing at least one incident of physical violence since the age of 15, while approximately one in six adult women (16 per cent) report experiencing physical or sexual violence from a partner since the age of 15. Nearly one in five women have also indicated that they have experienced sexual assault since the age of 15, again, most commonly at the hands of a known man such as a boyfriend, acquaintance or family member (ABS 2007; 2006).

Secondary and tertiary responses to violence against women, such as legal penalties for perpetrators and support services for victims, continue to play a crucial role in the communities overall response to violence against women. However, in the context of continuing rates of victimisation and low reporting of violence to police, such responses are not in of themselves enough to stop violence against women continuing to occur. As such, there has been a significant focus internationally (World Health Organisation 2002; 2004; 2006) and within Australia on the role of primary prevention to address violence against
Internationally, there is growing awareness that faith communities are well placed for reducing the likelihood of violence against women. Their focus on spiritual well-being and pastoral care creates a natural link to the goals of health promotion and preventing violence before it occurs (also known as primary prevention).

In 2012, the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne piloted a violence prevention program with a specific reach into Anglican Parishes. Anglicans Promoting Equal and Respectful Relationships, developed by the Diocese and VicHealth, with inputs from faith leaders, is a unique education program that puts clergy and laity at the heart of prevention efforts. Our prevention work includes education for Anglican leaders and congregations and engages them at various levels in this work. These levels range from awareness-raising, to understanding the attitudes and behaviors that drive violence, building healthy relationship skills and, developing Church policy and legislation to make the changes stick. Our program tackles these levels while also addressing the known causes and promoting the values and activities that can influence those factors to change. At its core, violence against women, and the threat of it, is most often used to exert power and control over others. It is one of the many visible and experienced realities of gender inequality. The long term goal of the program is to build a culture within Anglican organisations that foster equal and respectful relationships between women and men so as to prevent violence.

Nudging Anglican leaders to promote gender equality as a key strategy to prevent violence against women continues to be an enormous challenge. From observations of, and discussions with, Anglican leaders over several years, this reluctance, in part, arises from their doubts about the Biblical support for gender equality. The Bible is inflected with social norms and behaviour related to male authority and female submission. For example, St. Paul writes: ‘As in all churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Corinthians 14: 34-35, NRSVP). On the other hand, St. Paul departs from an ontological inequality. In the Letter of St. Paul to the Galatians he says: ‘for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized
into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise’ (Galatians 3:26-29, NRSVP).

This tension between these two passages raises concerns about how to read the Bible; do we forget about patriarchal understandings of relationships and fall into the assumption that Biblical authors speaking against oppression had in mind women as well as other oppressed groups? Or do we accept the values of patriarchy which tell us that women aren’t meant to be equal to men and that we will be much happier if we accept our lot in life.

For some people, the affirmation of women's inherent inferiority is so integral to the dominant teachings of Christianity, that it appears irreconcilable with all attempts to reach gender equality in the Church. Yet any understanding of Christianity’s role in the lives of women is incomplete if our sacred texts are understood only as oppressive. Working alongside women of faith, who have survived domestic violence and now actively work to prevent violence from occurring in the first place, it is important to note that they are not passive victims. On the contrary, they have discovered for themselves, liberative Biblical texts and spiritual practices that affirm their equal worth before God and that is why they continue to be active members of their local parish.

Their personal response to stopping violence is supported by an ever expanding range of violence prevention strategies used by faith communities to respond to, and prevent violence against women. Such strategies include, for example, using the Bible as an alternate ideological context to subvert oppressive, hierarchical teaching (Nash 2006; Potter 2007; Nash & Hesterberg 2009); reinterpreting religious beliefs, (Knickmeyer et al., 2010), the use of prayer (Sharp 2010), drawing on specific scriptural references or characters (Nash & Heterberg, 2009), validating and empowering women (Homiak & Singletary, 2007); seeking partners who have similar religious and spiritual values (Higginbotham et als., 2007); religious leaders using the language of their faith to condemn violence against women and/or challenging gender discriminatory practices (Kroeger et al., 2008 Skiff et als., 2008). As well, attending to the difficulties that female leadership have in ministering in a context which justifies the superiority of men (Bouclin 2006; Ternier-Gommers, 2007).
Violence in our homes and work places is virulent. It reaches even into vicarages and rectories and, is exercised in some quarters, as part of a daily Christian ethic. The Bible is however, one of the best sources for drawing forth living water for a world free of violence. The key task for Anglican leaders is to raise the consciousness of their congregations by showing how religious beliefs, texts, and teachings can serve both as roadblocks and as resources for victims, perpetrators and practitioner’s working to prevent violence.

Alongside this violence prevention activity, it is important to build anew the relationship between the sexes. This involves examining the way we structure male and female relationships, such as, encouraging men to reflect deeply on what it means to be men and, where necessary, to making significant changes to long held attitudes and patterns of behaviour. As well, identifying promising ways to build a just society where gender difference doesn't allow any fundamental discrimination. These actions have the potential to transform the face of the Church so that respect and gender equality becomes intrinsic and visible in all aspects of Church life, doctrine, practice and leadership.

Finally, it is important to note that preventing violence against women is not just women's work alone. It is men's wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends whose lives are limited by violence and abuse. It's a men's issue because, as community leaders and decision-makers, men can play a key role in helping stop violence against women. It's a men's issue because men can speak out and step in when male friends and relatives insult or attack women. And it's a men's issue because a minority of men treat women and girls with contempt and violence, and it is up to the majority of men to help create a culture in which this is unacceptable.

Violence prevention work is a common endeavour of men and women, joining efforts and continually calling upon the human and gospel authenticity of our being people of faith because what is at stake is not a ‘particular reality’, a ‘social movement’ or a ‘political theology’ but humankind called to be the image and likeness of God and made manifest in the declaration of St. Paul: ‘there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:26-29, NRSVP).
References


