

Violence against women and girls, role of religion considered at UN session

31 March 2016

By Esther R. Suter*

The 60th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) had “the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls” as its review theme.



Photo: Esther R. Suter

At the 57th session in 2013 it was the subject as one of the 12 critical areas of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). It was the most crucial subject and failed in 2003 to achieve agreed conclusions at the end of the session. The outcome of this year's document will soon be published. In the sessions and side events, no major forms of polarization in this subject came up. In the last two years, the “HeForShe Campaign” and the rising awareness of (male) faith leaders as well as the rising concern to work on the stereotypes of masculinity contributed to bring the issue of violence against women and girls out of taboo.

There are forms of violence hard to imagine. They were mentioned, often from places of conflict and war. It is hard to understand that rape is still not unanimously and everywhere considered as a weapon of war. How to bring a gender perspective into a conflict and war situation? The male vision of “war” is at stake and the meaning of “peace” has to be redefined. The new goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals mentions: peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, that provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Gender-justice, reflections show, should go beyond gaps and beyond seeing practices of violence. Women demand from women's organizations to be at the same table of negotiations and participate at peace talks and decisions, according to UN Resolution 1325.

Dr. Sahar Khamis, an expert on Arab and Muslim media who is an associate professor at the University of Maryland, spoke of women and their potential as bridge builders. Khamis, originally from Egypt, gave examples of women in the Arab-Israeli conflict who came together in a Jewish-Islam dialogue, building peace between Jewish-Muslims and Arabs-Israelis as Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom. Khamis explained the strong role of women in the Arab Spring as leaders, as journalists, public speakers, lawyers...although some of the Human Rights activists were raped, put into prison or were killed. This did not stop them in their social and political struggle for the rights of women for a full integration as citizens in their own society, for the right of education, job or a seat in the parliament. Women are victims in war zones and conflict areas, they are marginalized but they are, at the same time, movers and shakers for their own rights. Marginalized groups and women are seen as victims; at the same time they are the experts who know what the needs are at a grassroots level. Real advocacy is necessary in order to keep the rulers accountable.

The 2030 sustainable development agenda must redress the structural unequal distribution of power, resources and opportunities that perpetuate gender inequalities, poverty, violence, discrimination, exclusion, marginalization and vulnerability. A change for just, peaceful and sustainable societies has to be created, leaving no one behind. Faith-based groups and religious leaders have done enormous work in the areas of health and education, on ending violence against women, service delivery in conflict and crisis settings and elimination of harmful practices, on peace and conflict resolution and to promote gender equality. But achieving transformative change means that the discourse within faith must become a discourse about dismantling structures and practices that promote inequality. By interrogating the roots of patriarchy within faith constructs, discourses and practices, faith leadership can accelerate the achievements of substantive gains in gender equality.

During the 60th session of CSW, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, executive director of UN Women, started to collaborate with faith-based institutions such as World YWCA, the World Council of Churches, Act Alliance and faith institutions and organizations in order to share knowledge and experience among feminist faith activists. The Ecumenical Women at the UN, a coalition of 18 Christian faith organizations, have also played a critical role in providing a platform for engagement by faith and especially ecumenical networks.

The World YWCA and UN Women convened a side event on "Leaving No One

Behind” which explored the issues of faith and feminism and supported the nascent effort to create a coalition that will engage globally on issues of gender equality to advance the sustainable development agenda.

Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, general secretary of the World YWCA and moderator of this event, considers that feminist theology in the Christian traditions has started to redefine the place of women, recognizing that while the text is holy, its interpretation has been through the prism of men and patriarchy. Religions have also been abused to perpetuate patriarchal attitude, which place women in the hierarchy of subordination and male dominance. There we find practices like child, early and forced marriage, she explained, which is essentially child sexual abuse being rationalized and normalized in the name of either faith or culture. “We have also witnessed how religion is evoked to retrogress on commitments to human rights of women within the UN negotiations. Yet faith and religions stand for equality and dignity for all, for we are all created in the image of God.”

WCC activities for a just community of women and men

**Esther R. Suter is a theologian, pastor and freelance journalist from Basel, Switzerland, with extensive experience in covering stories about global, regional and local ecumenism.*