Why sexual violence? The social reality of an absent church
Paper delivered at the NetACT Gender Equality Workshop, 1-3 August 2011

Sylvia is a 25-year-old women from Liberia. During the war she was abducted by a group of men and raped by each of them in turn. One of them took her home and she was forced to stay with him as wife for 2 years, after which his parents chased her away. Now, after the war, she has not found any of her family and survives by doing small jobs for food. She has never had any medical treatment and has never received any emotional support for the trauma that she experienced. “My only comfort is the word of God, which I hear at church. But I have never told anyone at church what has happened to me. The church does not do anything for SV survivors, so there is no reason to tell them anything.”

Linda, a young Liberian girl, was 12 years old when she was drugged 2 years ago by three 16/17-year-old boys from her community on New Year’s Eve. They took turns in raping her. Her father found her. The police was called in and forensic evidence obtained proving that she was raped. Yet the pressure from the community and the police department was such that the family was forced to abandon the case. Her family is still furious with her for shaming them in such a way. She has never disclosed what happened to anyone at her church, as she is too ashamed. Furthermore, her church does nothing for SV survivors in any case, so there is no reason to disclose.

A year ago, Siku (Rwanda) was raped by a 28-year-old male member of the family that she was fostered by after the genocide. He was arrested and spent a few months in prison, but is now back living in her community. “Everyone knows what happened to me. They stigmatise me and wherever I go they say ‘there she goes’. The same happens at church. The church members talk and gossip about me and they give me no support.”

These stories and quotes are from field research I conducted last year in the DRC, Rwanda and Liberia, and continued in Burundi in the beginning of this year. Working as consultant for Tearfund, I did research on the role of the church in dealing with sexual violence (SV) in areas affected by armed conflict. This is also the topic of my PhD studies which I am currently pursuing, which I base on this fieldwork.

While my focus will be on the African context, please do remember that SV is not only an African, or a developing world, problem. The United States has the highest rape stats of any country that publishes such statistics, with a rape happening every 2-and-a-half minutes (Crisis Intervention Centre, 2011). According to a BBC report, in 2007 in the UK 230 women were raped every day, while during 2006 one out of every 200 women in the UK was raped (Rape Survivor Journey, 2011). Thus please remember, SV is not only an African problem, but I will be focusing on the issue within the African context.

In my paper today I am going to use my fieldwork to illustrate the absence of the church in response to SV, both in a preventative sense and in after-care, focusing on the need for sensitisation training of a particular nature for pastors. My field research has shown that congregations are actively creating a context in which SV survivors are stigmatised and discriminated against, and in which sexually violent practices are condoned.

Pastors are products of a culture and community – just like any other person – and as such have the same cultural perceptions regarding sex, sexuality, gender and sexual violence that are allowing SV to

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1 The full reports can be downloaded at http://tliz.tearfund.org/Topics/HIV+and+AIDS/Silent+No+More+Report+and+Event.htm.
continue in so many communities. As such a radical programme of training will be needed for 
pastors to critically engage with negative perceptions of sex, sexuality and SV, in order to be able to 
lead their congregations and communities on the same process. This is, I argue, why training on SV 
at seminary level is needed.

Before going any further, I wish to make clear the pronouns that I will be using during this 
presentation. I will be referring to those who are victims of SV by using the pronouns “she” and 
“her”. At no time does this mean that men cannot and are not victims of SV as well. When 
unpacking the definition of SV this issue will be explored in further detail. My use of female 
pronouns, and examples from a predominantly feminine context, is because this is the context in 
which SV is perpetrated most often, and I wish to avoid the repetitive “he/she”.

Secondly, while my research was done in countries that are or were involved in armed conflict, my 
paper today is not focused on SV in an armed conflict context. I will look at SV as a general 
phenomenon in society; this is reflected in the quotes given at the beginning, where two of the 
situations occurred during peace. SV is not a problem only in countries that are experiencing or have 
experienced armed conflict. South Africa is an example of this: it has no recent history of armed 
conflict, yet South African women are estimated as having a better chance at being raped than 
learning to read, and SA has one of the highest incidences of child and baby rape in the world (Rape 
survivor Journey, 2011).

Tearfund fieldwork: current church involvement on SV in four African countries

The 2010 and 2011 Tearfund research revealed a bleak picture of church involvement in dealing with 
sexual violence, both in a preventative sense and as a caring institution. In all the sites that formed 
part of the study, research participants told of a church that is not engaging with the issue; on the 
contrary, in many contexts the church was actively contributing to the stigma and discrimination 
which SV survivors were facing. Some churches are preaching and teaching in ways that support 
gender-discriminatory and sexually violent practices; others even openly advocate for it. Some 
churches see SV as not being a ‘spiritual’ topic, part of the big taboo of sex, and refuse to talk about it 
or address it in any way. Not only are SV survivors not finding support within the church; they are 
not even allowed space to talk about what happened to them. Thus, while some churches might not 
be actively supporting sexually violent practices, their lack of opposition supports such practices. 
All of the research sites emphasised that SV is a serious problem within their society, but that the 
churches in their communities (in general) fails to address it.

In an interview with a FBO leader in Goma, DRC, explained the dominant attitude of churches to SV. 
It is not that they are unaware of the issue; on the contrary. He explained to me: 
“Churches do know what is happening. But when it comes to doing something they are lethargic.”

Like the proverbial elephant in the room, the church knows what is going on in the community. But 
the community refuses to address the issue; cultural practices generally dictate that SV survivors are 
stigmatised and that perpetrators are rarely punished. SV is often not even recognised as SV. Due to 
the cultural and social convictions and principles dominant within the community, the church 
chooses not to address this issue.

This, I argue, is a because of the process of inculturation, with, to paraphrase Bosch (1992:455), the 
gospel becoming the prisoner of culture. Allow me to explain this in more detail.

Inculturation

“The Christian faith never exists except as ‘translated’ into a culture” (Bosch, 1992:447). This faith 
has been inculturated into many different forms and contexts. While with Constantine’s institution 
of the state church, with missionary movements, and with Western colonialism, the church has often 
been the bearer of culture (Bosch, 1992:448), instead of offering inculturised faith, I think it is safe to
say that there is currently acceptance and acknowledgement that Christianity should take on context and culturally-appropriate forms, inviting a plurality of theologies (Bosch, 1992:452).

Yet, in acknowledging and embracing the plurality of inculturated faith, this does not presuppose a seamless amalgamation of faith with culture. Bosch highlights the seemingly paradoxical binary present in inculturation. Inculturation should not be so successful that in hearing it one only hears the religious dimension of one’s own culture. “In a very real sense...the gospel is foreign to every culture. It will always be a sign of contradiction (Bosch, 1992:455).”

On the one hand there is the ‘indigenizing’ principle, which affirms that the gospel is at home in every culture and every culture is at home with the gospel. But then there the ‘pilgrim’ principle, which warns us that the gospel will put us out of step with society...

Authentic inculturation may indeed view the gospel as the liberator of culture; the gospel can, however, also become culture’s prisoner (Bosch, 1992:455).

In looking at the issue of sexual violence, and how this issue is addressed within the sites where I conducted my fieldwork, I argue that such a situation of ‘the gospel becoming culture’s prisoner’ has occurred. Cultural perceptions of sex, sexuality, sexual violence, and gender relations have become what the church preaches and enacts regarding sex, sexuality, sexual violence, and gender relations.

What I think is called for in this situation, is what Pedro Arrupe states is for inculturation to become “a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation’” (Arrupe, in Bosch, 1992:455). In such a process which is still mindful and respectful of culture, gospel becomes the liberator of culture.

I posit, though, that mobilising for and steering such a process of liberating inculturation, is a process that few people instinctively engage with. Most of us are products of our societies. We grow up within a certain culture, context and society; the beliefs, norms and standards of that society become ours. And these inherent, a priori beliefs and norms are the ones that we find most difficult to investigate or critique; on the contrary, they are held as truths that we are often blind to.

Positioning a church that engages in such a process of liberating inculturation, which can transform the sexually violent and gendered practices of a culture and society, needs a leader that is able to see ‘beyond’ the culturally scripted roles and practices of the community. I argue that pastors are in the perfect position to engage and drive such as process. They are leaders in their communities, with grassroots access and credibility. Yet, I would argue, they do not engage in such a process of liberating inculturation, as they are too firmly imbedded within their cultural and societal framework. The majority of people need guidance and support in order to be able to critically engage with such deeply-held beliefs such as gender roles, sexual relations, etc. Pastors are people too.

Thus I argue for the urgent and very real need for training on sexual violence for pastors at seminary level. You might be surprised to know that – even in the most rural of areas, where the community has been devastated by decades of war and whole generations have missed out on formal education – research participants have explained to me that the problem is that their pastor has the same cultural thinking and mentality as the community and that he needs to be educated (i.e. trained) to see that the church should engage with SV and that he should be talking and preaching about it. One cannot unreservedly blame pastors for the lack of involvement of churches. My research did not do an in-depth investigation of the causes of church disengagement. However, this is definitely a point to consider and an issue that needs further research. What can be argued without reserve is that people need guidance to investigate and evaluate their cultural perceptions regarding gender and sexual relationships and behaviour. Pastors can offer such guidance, but first they will also need such guidance! Arguably this can only be done at seminary level where they can be challenged and guided in such a process.
**Some loaded issues: sexually violent cultural practices**

I have proposed that SV is continuing unopposed by churches in many communities because inculcated forms of the Christian faith have embraced cultural views of gender, sex and sexual violence, and has not critically engaged with culture on these issues. I argue that some cultural beliefs and practices are inherently related to power and gender powered and gendered, creating a situation in which SV is condoned as culturally acceptable. I will use the research done in Burundi in the beginning of this year to illustrate this point a little better.

Different types of research participants were interviewed in Burundi. But, whether asked or not asked, the common theme that all of them acknowledged was the existence of unequal power relations between men and women. Even the men that were interviewed acknowledged this. They also easily drew a connection between this inequality and the SV that was rife within their communities. They gave countless examples of how the power of the males was translated into sexual abuse of women, with the community condoning this behaviour. The link between how the Burundian culture upholds and enforces this gendered power imbalance was also easily recognised and identified.

In Burundi the same research methodology was used as in the 2010 research project. But in interviews with community leaders an important question was added, asking specifically whether they thought there are any cultural traditions that they think play a role in SV occurring. The answer was a resounding “yes”. Only one leader said that it did not play a role.

Culturally ordained practices that are conducive to SV that were mentioned were polygamy, the practice that obliges young girls to share the room with a male guest, the custom of widows having to marry the brother of their dead husband, wives that run away from their abusive husbands being forced by their own families to return to their husbands, the rapist of your daughter being considered as your son-in-law, etc. More indirect practices that are also contributing to SV are the fact that it is taboo to talk about sex or sexual matters or sexual violence, also in church. Cultural idioms were given as illustration of the ingrained nature of the abusive, unequal sexual relationships between men and women within Burundian culture:

- “A women is a mat for guests”
- “No one can set a limit to the bull”
- “A true man is one who eats his food and that of others”

The research participants, also the leaders, were mostly not educated people. Yet they could easily make this connection between their culture and its beliefs and practices, and the occurrence of SV. Even though they could clearly see this connection between cultural and societal attitudes about sex and gender, and the occurrence of SV, it seems that the church and the pastors have not done the same. Or at least, the church and pastors might have, but they were not doing anything about it. The research participants described their churches as being hesitant to engage with the subject of SV, mainly limiting it to preaching against adultery. Many churches totally avoid the subject. There seems to be no attempt to deal with SV or its causes.

I use the case of Burundi to show that church members are connecting the dots; they are recognising the cultural and social practices that are conducive to SV, and they are recognising a church and a pastor that cannot, or will not, deal with the situation.

Looking more broadly at the DRC, Rwanda and Liberia and the issue of pastors’ involvement, research participants in these three countries referred to pastors who use certain scriptural passages, interpreted in a certain way, to support sexually violent practices, or at least power imbalances between the genders. Thus the church’s – and pastors’ - role in SV has not just been that of no action, but in some cases also active promotion of the status quo. I would go so far as to say that there have possibly, maybe probably, been more malevolent, more driven purposes behind this
as well. With most cultural constructs of male/female relationships putting the male in the position of power, and most pastors being male, there is vested interest in supporting and continuing these unequal power relationships. In Goma quite a few male FBO leaders told me that this is one of the main reasons why churches are not engaging with the issue of SV. Doing a group session with a women’s rights organisation in Goma, DRC, the women were quite vocal in condemning the church and its role in SV. The have had numerous experiences where the church had directly or indirectly opposed their work. As one of the members explained to me: “Religious institutions are undermining women. They do not see women as important and they do not see a role for them.”

Unpacking SV and culture
The previous section argued for the need for training on SV for pastors, as a way of ensuring that pastors move beyond their cultural perceptions of gender, sex and sexuality, and SV, and are able to guide their congregations and communities in the same process. As the first step to exploring the content of such SV education/training, it is necessary to look at sexual violence, and unpack the contexts in which SV happens, in more detail.

Defining sexual violence
I define sexual violence as any kind of violence enacted through sexual means or targeting the sexuality of another, regardless of age. This includes penetration of the vagina or anus with any foreign object, forced vaginal, anal or oral sex, the cutting or mutilation of sexual parts, forced marriage/cohabitation, forced impregnation, forced abortion, forced sterilization, sexual humiliation, medical experimentation on a person’s sexual and reproductive organs, forced prostitution, coercive sex, trafficking in men/women, and pornography (this definition is adapted from that of Gardam & Jarvis, 2000: 12-13, so that it is includes both genders).

This broad definition I think is very important, to ensure that all SV survivors get the support they need, but also so that all sexually violent practices are addressed for what it is, namely sexual violence.

As I explained earlier, I have made a conscious choice to talk about SV, not SVAW. Yet my use of feminine pronouns and female-centered examples are meant to reflect the fact that SV does to an overwhelming extent happen to females. In teaching on SV I would caution against focusing only on SVAW, lest this further entrench gender divides positioning men as strong/aggressors, women as weak/victims; but also simply because the reality is that males also fall victim to SV. As a male respondent in DRC explained to me, telling me about the lack of funding available for medical care for male survivors of SV²:

“There seems to be little room for suffering men.”

Yet the reality must be acknowledged for what it is – in the overwhelming majority of cases men are perpetrators of SV and women are victims. This tension between the two sides of the coin will thus be a challenge to those teaching on the subject.

But why does SV happen? POWER
There have been numerous attempts to explain the nature and motivation behind sexual violence. Susan Brownmiller (1976:15), for example, in her seminal feminist text on rape contextualized male genitalia as a weapon and the rape of women by men as a “conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear”. In doing so, she ascribed a sociobiological basis to rape, suggesting that men innately use their sexual power to dominate women (Milililo, 2006:198). Yet, other feminist theorists maintain that such explanations are inadequate and that rape is not

² The sexual violation of men is an issue that is fairly consistently being ignored, on a social and academic level, and needs further in-depth research. See, for example, the article of Storr on the rape of men in Uganda, at http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/jul/17/the-rape-of-men.
purely an act of sexual aggression, but rather an act that carries out the desire to prove and maintain the aggressor’s power and control. In other words, satisfaction does not come from the sexual act, but from the power enacted and the abasement of the victim (Milillo, 2006; Seifert, 1996, 1994).

There seems to be relative consensus on the fact that rape is an aggressive, rather than a sexual act. Consciously taking a step away from a focus on SVAW, and taking this further into SV in general, this power-component of the sexual act I think is always present. Yet I think in certain contexts there might be a different dynamic to the power relationship, for example when a husband forces his wife into sexual practices she does not want to commit. While there is power present in this sexually violent act – for he is able to force her to do it because of his empowered role as male and husband – this power is what allows the act to happen and not necessarily what provides sexual pleasure in the act. Thus, while power is always a component of SV, I would argue that it is not necessarily always an act of aggression rather than a sexual act, as is the case with rape.

When exploring power dynamics, the issue of masculinity and masculinities come up. While I do not have the time to go into a discussion of the loaded concept ‘masculinity’, suffice it to say that it is a gendered concept with specific cultural meaning (Connell, 1995:31), a fluid concept of what it means to be ‘a man’. It is important to realise the issue of multiple masculinities – there are different ways of being a man. But, to quote Connell (1995:38): “To recognise more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step. We need to examine the relations between them.” Thus the idea of hegemonic masculinity is introduced, a concept which I think is important in the context of SV. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as the composition of gender practices that justify patriarchy within a society. Within this context certain types of masculinity is expected and at times enforced on all men, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.

The idea of hegemonic masculinity serves to explain why some men at times engage in practices that seem contrary to their natures. Within the context of this concept and explanation of Connell, a man would thus periodically have to engage in certain practices – not even necessarily sexually violent practices – that enforce male dominance. Thus, while his ‘normal’ masculinity is not patriarchal, periodically such acts are expected of him, as a way of ensuring that all men keep their position of power over all women.

Of course, the perpetration of SV can form part of this enactment of such a hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, group identity is often built and performed through the execution of SV, where it becomes a group custom which supports the national or group identity (Milillo, 2006:201). Thus through SV a cohesive, hegemonic, masculine identity for men can constantly be created and reinforced. This identity is built on the premise of a power differential between men and women.

Exploring why men also fall victim to SV, Skjelsbæk (2001:225) explains this by arguing that the key element of masculinity is power, whereas females and femininity is associated with weakness and victimization. Looking at SV within the context of conflict, she explains that

...(T)he victim of sexual violence in the war-zone is victimized by feminizing both the sex and the ethnic/religious/political identity to which the victim belongs, likewise the perpetrator’s sex and ethnic/religious/political identity is empowered by becoming masculinised” (Skjelsbæk, 2001:225).

This view explains why men too are at times the targets of SV. Through the sexually violent act they become feminized and per definition weak and disempowered, and the perpetrator is masculinised.

3 While theorists such as Seifert and Milillo argue that there is consensus that sexual violence is an aggressive act (rather than a sexual act), others, such as Skjelsbæk (2001), argue that no such consensus exists.
and empowered. Skjelsbæk’s (2001:226) argument is that SV functions as an identity transaction between perpetrator and victim.

The sexually violent act is thus a power transaction, which is the reason why both men and women can be aggressors and victims in this exchange.

**Contextualising SV within the broader framework of teaching gender**

These brief remarks about the nature of SV I have made to give some kind of indication how it fits into the broader framework of teaching gender. I think it would be impossible to teach on SV without teaching on gender; I think the two go hand in hand. As you can see from my brief remarks on the nature of SV, many of the topics and issues discussed in gender studies are also problematized under SV: masculinity, power, gender relations, culture, etc.

Allow me a few further remarks on what I think is important to address in a curriculum on SV. Once again these remarks are grounded on what was learnt from research participants in four different African countries.

Firstly, the issue of Biblical gender roles and the use of Biblical texts to support certain gendered practices. Other speakers will go into this issue in much detail. But as I briefly referred to earlier, participants identified scriptures that were used and interpreted in certain ways to condone certain sexually violent practices, or to condone the power imbalances between men and women. This is a very relevant and difficult issue, which will require careful handling by any teacher. It will also require teachers to carefully investigate their own motivations for their own Biblical interpretations.

A second important issue is the fact that SV takes on different forms in different contexts. In the DRC SV targeted all women of any tribe, and it was extremely widespread. In Rwanda, on the other hand, participants focused to a much larger extent on the SV occurring between spouses, although culturally this is not seen as SV. In Liberia, young girls and boys as targets of SV, due to their impoverished situation, was one of the main concerns.

So it is important to realise that SV and sexually violent practices takes on different forms in different communities. The consequences are also different. For example, in the DRC all SV survivors are heavily stigmatised and rejected; while in Rwanda, post-genocide SV survivors generally receive support, while genocide SV survivors are heavily stigmatised and discriminated against. Pastors have to be prepared for the different forms that SV might take within the community that they serve, and equipped with the tools to firstly identify the different practices and consequences, and secondly develop appropriate responses to them.

Thirdly, this discussion runs the risk of implying that all African cultures are inherently sexually violent. I would just like to briefly discuss this, with reference to two of my research sites. In the DRC, it was interesting that the majority of the research participants said that prior to the war, SV did not occur. One cannot know how true that is, but that is another matter. Now, with war and very extreme SV being part of the DRC context for so long, they explained that the Congolese culture has changed, and that is has become a sexually violent culture. It is no longer only combatants that do SV, but also civilians. In Burundi, on the other hand, where participants were generally much more direct in assessing the causes of SV, and they were also directly asked about cultural links to SV, the majority pointed to polygamy, a cultural tradition that predates the conflict, as being a particularly active causative factor in SV.

Thus the research sites that I did fieldwork in had ambiguous opinions regarding the causes for cultural perceptions regarding SV. Yet I would posit that, because of the extremely patriarchal nature of most African cultures\(^\text{4}\), there is inherently a cultural risk of SV. In situations where

\(^{4}\) See Castells (2004:192-302) for an insightful discussion of patriarchalism as founding structure of all contemporary societies, and the challenges and crises facing this model.
culturally men and women are empowered and valued so differently, the possibility of SV occurring – and of the church as a inculturised product of that society condoning it – is inherently present.

**Conclusion**

The 2010 Tearfund report in its final recommendations emphasised the need for seminary students to be trained at seminary level. I quote:

_Seminaries are one of the most fertile grounds for connecting with future pastors and training them to be truly active in addressing SV. The seminary environment is a meeting place for African and Western thought and culture, which creates space within students for new thoughts and ideas. SV should be part of the standard curriculum and students should be taught how to preach, train and counsel on it_ (Le Roux, 2010:67).

Allow me to emphasise in closing what I found especially poignant, but also somewhat disturbing, in doing this research. The research participants did not need me, with my academic degrees and consultant status, to make the connections for them. They could clearly tell me what I am telling you today. While they could envision the church playing a key role in dealing with SV – for they believe that it has the ability to do so – it most decidedly is not doing so at the moment, for the leadership of the church, and the church as a community, is either choosing to ignore, or actively promote, a societal status quo that is conducive to SV.

Allow me to end of on an activist note, rather than an academic one. We need to send pastors into the field that can cope with this situation. At the moment – at best - they do not have the tools to deal with it and respond to it. At worst they are condoning and promoting it. We need to train our students on this issue.

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