

# AN INTERSECTIONAL EXPLORATION OF RELIGION AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: A CASE STUDY OF ACCRA IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

---

**George Ossom-Batsa**

## **1. Introduction**

The organisers of the Conference and Workshop project titled 'An Intersectional Exploration of Religion and Gender-Based Violence: A Case Study of Accra in Global Context', would like to acknowledge with gratitude our sponsors 'World University Network' (WUN), who funded the project from their 2017 round of the annual Research Development Fund. This collaborative research project was led by Rev. Dr. George Ossom-Batsa of the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana, with the co-investigators Prof. Johanna Stiebert (University of Leeds), Dr. Katie Edwards (University of Sheffield) and Dr. Caroline Blyth (University of Auckland). We highly appreciate the support we received from the WUN Coordinators and office staff of the various universities. Finally, we thank the University of Ghana, College of Humanities, for hosting the project, our Keynote speaker and all participants for contributing to the success of the programmes.

The purpose of the project was two-fold: First, to bring together academics with specialisation in religion and/or gender in order to investigate the intersections between religious authority and gender-based violence. Second, to gather in-depth knowledge and understanding about how religion and gender-based violence inter-relate.

The objectives of the project include:

1. to identify if and how authoritative religious texts and their interpretation facilitate gender-based violence;
2. to identify both local (Ghana -Accra) and globalized examples of inequalities that emerge in the encounter of religion and cultural practices in the daily life of people;
3. to develop strategies of consciousness-raising and resistance to such subtexts.

Consequently, an academic day-conference and a participatory workshop were organised, where academic and non-academic partners (from government bodies, educational and NGO sectors) worked together to identify strategies that raise consciousness and awareness.

Originally only a brief summary of the proceedings for the WUN secretariat was intended, but during the conference and at the evaluation, participants expressed high interest in the gender-based violence (GBV) discourse and were committed to be partners in the fight against abuses in the future. To nurture their interest, we decided to produce an elaborate report that may encourage future collaboration.

This report covers only the Conference and Workshop days. It is in three parts: the first highlights academic paper presentations on the conference day; the second presents narratives of practitioners, small group discussions and the plenary session; the third gives an overview and statistics of attendees at the events. The final part draws on the plenary session to strategize for the future – post event.

## **2. First Day: Conference – Presentation of Academic Papers**

The event began with a welcome address by Prof. Samuel Agyei-Mensah, Provost of the College of Humanities, University of Ghana. He underlined the importance of research in the Humanities, especially in the global trend of interdisciplinarity, and called for collaboration among scholars both locally and internationally.

Following this was a short speech by Dr. Ibrahim Bedi, who represented Prof. Andrew Anthony Adjei, UG Coordinator for WUN. He threw light on the WUN and its activities and the funding opportunities that are available for collaborative research, after which he formally opened the conference.

The keynote speaker was Prof. Akosua Adomako Ampofo who, until recently, was the Director of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon. She is also founder of the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy and winner of the Feminist Activism Award. A sociologist by training, Prof. Ampofo has a long and strong

record of challenging GBV abuses, through her advisory role in the process of passing the Domestic Violence Act in Ghana.

Four academic papers were presented. The first two examined the theme from biblical perspectives, whereas the third and fourth approached it from the viewpoints of Islam and African Indigenous Religions.

The first paper was a co-presentation by Prof. Johanna Stiebert (University of Leeds) and Dr. Katie Edwards (University of Sheffield), both biblical scholars in the Old Testament and New Testament respectively. Their paper focused on rape culture, with emphasis on the categories of gender, race and religion. Illustrations were drawn from the Hebrew Bible and from developments in feminist interpretation. It reviewed key Hebrew Bible rape texts (both legal and narrative) and summarised how feminist criticisms have responded to texts of gender-based violence. It further explored rape culture, race and religious imagery in the context of visual popular culture.

The next co-presentation was by Dr. George Ossom-Batsa and Dr. Nicoletta Gatti, both biblical scholars in the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon. The paper started by acknowledging the phenomenon of ‘feminization of poverty: in every society, Ghana included, women and girls constitute the majority of the poor and often are ‘the poorest among the poor.’ Biblical books and theological reflections highlight this universal phenomenon, looking at the causes and offering solutions. Against this background, the paper examined the relationship between poverty and theology in the Ghanaian context, characterized by the popularization of prosperity gospel, which re-proposes the classical retributive theology. According to this position, poverty is a sin and the poor are cursed by God. However, retributive theology was contested from within the Bible, for example in the book of Job. Reading Job 24:1-17 alongside prosperity preaching, the paper demonstrated how retributive theology presents an erroneous image of God, supports the status quo, insensitive to the social basis of poverty and creates a culture of silence. The paper proposed a re-focus of pastoral activities of the Churches in favour of the poor, based on three interventions: ‘breaking silence’; social justice and gender equality advocacy.

The next two presentations moved away from biblical studies to Islam and African Indigenous Religions. Dr. Rabiatu D. Ammah of the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana explored the Qur'anic verse 4:34, sometimes described as 'the verse of abuse' or the verse that condones wife beating. Using narratives of selected imams in the Accra metropolis, she analysed the different ways the text has been interpreted and appropriated by them in their practice as teachers, preachers and mediators. Her conclusion was, however, that there is nonetheless no *prima facie* or Qur'an endorsed case for GBV in Islam.

The last presentation of the day was by Dr. Yaw Sakordie Agyemang of the Department of Religion and Human Values, University of Cape Coast. He explored GBV in the context of the indigenous beliefs of the Asante of Ghana. Empirical data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions, guided by two main questions: How do women and men experience violence? And, how does gender inequality affect violence? The paper contended that among the Asante there is gendered 'ritual violence'. The ambiguity is that while in one instance religion protects women because of its understanding of femininity, in certain instances it violently exploits them for varying purposes. In the same way masculinity is not spared exploitation. The paper concludes by suggesting that gender-based violence among the Asante be understood against what constitutes male and female and not the issue of inequality.

### **3. Second Day: Workshop – Narratives of Practitioners and Group Discussions**

Whereas the first day focused on academic presentations, the second day featured practitioners, before we all separated into groups to discuss practical strategies to confront, address and eliminate GBV.

#### **3.1 Narratives of Practitioners**

The first practitioner to present was *Dr. Angela Aboagye Dwamena*, Executive Director of The Ark Foundation and a lawyer by profession. She has for over 25 years defended the human rights of Ghanaian women and girls, and sometimes also boys, particularly about GBV.

Her Foundation focuses on advocacy, community-based education, law reform, policy drafting and services provision. For instance, the first shelter for battered women was opened in 1999, but 17 years later it had to be closed due to lack of funds. A campaign is in progress to reopen and keep open the Ark Shelter.

A representative from the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) was the next to share the experiences of the Commission. The Commission conducts research into social justice matters and offers protection on a range of human rights matters, including sexual orientation and gender identity. In Ghana, the law, which has remained unchanged since 1960, designates several sexual acts ‘unnatural carnal knowledge’. These acts include ‘sodomy’ and oral sex. She noted that GBV is one of the most significant human rights issues in Ghana and it is estimated that in 2015, about 28% women and 20% men suffered one type of domestic violence or another. Each year, 834,000 men are raped or physically assaulted by intimate partners. In relation to abuse of women, the CHRAJ’s 2017 Case Statistical Report shows that verbal or psychological abuses were most common. So also, controlled movement, speech, association, religious expression, denial of women over their own bodies, in respect of reproductive health, spousal maintenance, marital dispute and spousal battery are prevalent in the country. The paper also raised the issue of the growing trend of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) communities in Ghana and lamented the fact that they do not regularly receive justice. She called for a careful analysis of the situation and proposed religious tolerance as the way forward.

Three practitioners from the Muslim community presented next. The first to present was *Sheikh Yacoub Abban*, the General Secretary of Ahlu Sunna Wal-Jama, an organization that runs an Alternative Dispute Resolution Centre and conducts marriage guidance counselling alongside other dispute settling activities, such as inheritance. The organization has over 21 years of working experience. And according to the Sheikh, a growing number of GBV cases brought before the organization are by women. He provided impressive statistics to support the claims: Whereas in 2016 cases 96 men and 264 women were brought to the organization, by 2017 the numbers were 75 men and 384 women. Sheikh reported that cases men report normally concern

wives' 'recalcitrance' or wives who pressed for divorce in cases where the husbands do not want it. On the other hand, the cases brought by women are often very disturbing and distressing, involving various types of abuses. He provided anonymous examples of cases of severe emotional torture, physical maltreatment and of marital rape. While he did not deny the fact that some men also endure physical violence perpetrated by women, he observed that women are normally the victims.

*Dr. Nas'iba Taahir*, Educational Consultant and Psychologist of the Montessori Foundation of Ghana, disclosed that she herself has been a victim of long-term marital GBV. In her capacity as a school psychologist, she encounters narratives of many married students who experience GBV but do not report because of protecting their honour and the fear of exclusion from her religious community or stigmatization.

The final presenter from the Muslim community was *Hajia Maliki*, a marriage guidance counsellor with over 15 years experience. She reported that marriages in the Muslim community of Ghana often deteriorate quickly and end in acrimonious divorce. According to her, lack of pre-marital and post-marital guidance counselling among Muslims may be one of key factors that contribute to divorce and sexual abuses among Muslims.

The final practitioner to present was *Superintendent Alice Awarikaro*, the Regional Coordinator for the Accra Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU). She is the officer for domestic violence and child abuse issues of the unit. She narrated and showed pictures of many violent crimes. She provided statistics of reported cases across the country and focused on Accra. In 2017, her unit dealt with 4,511 cases (about one third of total cases country-wide) besides the many unreported cases. She further noted that victims of violence, including sexual violence, were male, female, young and old'. However, violent crimes against women and girls far outnumber those perpetrated against men and boys. Also, perpetrators were far more likely to be males than females. She showed graphic images of terrible abuses and outlined efforts to address GBV, including sensitization programmes, capacity building, proactive and reactive measures. Some of the challenges she indicated include, delays in reporting cases because of obstructive roles religious leaders and religious

beliefs sometimes play in these issues. The fear of stigmatisation from society, family members and of divorce are also key factors. For this reason, she urged that counsellors should be trained professionals and advocated the following: creating safe spaces for those reporting GBV, not judging or condemning those who report GBV, and advocacy.

### **3.2 Group Discussions and a Plenary Session**

Following group discussions and then a plenary session that pooled together key points, we collectively determined that the Conference and Workshop had explained GBV and its effect on integral human development. We further determined that we would endeavour to continue the dialogue in various forms at different levels.

## **4. Conference and Workshop Participation**

The conference day has drawn participants from both public and private universities, as well as leaders of religious groups and NGOs. Out of the 57 Participants, 35 were females, representing 61.5%, and 22 were males, representing 38.8 %.

For the Workshop, there were 37 females, representing 60.6%, and 24 males, representing 39.3%. In attendance were also representatives of NGOs, Government Agencies, Religious Groups and Public and Private universities.

## **5. The Way Forward (Some Practical Steps)**

The following conclusions and recommendations that emerged from the Conference challenged participants to embark on advocacy.

- a) GBV is real in Ghana, with women and girls mostly being victims, but there is little awareness of its existence.
- b) Fight against GBV must be holistic, with religion playing a central role to eliminate it.
- c) Preparation and distribution of a flyer that provides information about existing support services for those affected by

or at risk from gender-based violence in Ghana. This has been done and distribution is on-going.

- d) Formation of Action Groups: It was suggested during the discussions that ‘action groups’ should be formed in schools to create an awareness among the youth on GBV abuses and how to eliminate them. Contact has already been made with some schools within the Accra metropolis and outside Accra.
- e) Collaboration with Religious Bodies and NGOs was suggested as one of the ways to extend the discourse on GBV and its devastating effects on society to the grass roots.
- f) Publication of Papers from Conference: This was one of the stated aims of the project. Two peer reviewed journal publications are envisaged: one in Ghana (*Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology*) and the other in Auckland (*Bible and Critical Theory*). It is hoped that sharing the findings of various papers in peer review journals will open a dialogue with scholars working on similar projects elsewhere.
- g) A Future conference and workshop: From the conference and workshop evaluation, continuing the dialogue emerged paramount. Thus, we hope to plan a future conference and workshop that will include a wider audience: experts in various humanistic fields, government agencies, parliamentarians and youth leaders and educationists.

*Prof. George Ossom-Batsa*

Principal Investigator  
Dept. for the Study of Religions  
University of Ghana, Legon