



# Intersections

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## Gender-based violence

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### A global phenomenon

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global phenomenon encompassing a variety of actions that result from and perpetuate inequality and disempowerment. While it is possible for GBV to occur toward men as well as women, women are overwhelmingly the targets for violence related to gender (Oosterhoof, Zwanikken, and Ketting, 2004). Gender-based violence takes on many forms, including emotional, sociological, economic, and psychological violence, as well as physical and sexual violence against women and girls. Violence perpetrated by an intimate partner is the most common form of GBV. However, violence against women and girls is also endemic in areas affected by war and political unrest. A key dimension to understanding GBV is to recognize that violence against women is most commonly an exertion of dominance and power on the part of the perpetrator. So, for example, in the case of the use of rape as a weapon of war, sexual violence functions as a means to disrupt and demoralize an entire community.

### Definitions

The acronyms used to classify the violence that women face worldwide are numerous: violence against women (VAW), violence against women and girls (VAWG), gender-based violence (GBV), and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) to name a few. The United Nations (U.N.) has defined GBV as any action “that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (U.N. General Assembly, 1993). These acts consist of a wide range of physical and emotional abuse by intimate partners as well as unrelated perpetrators, including: battery, sexual abuse, dowry-related violence, rape, female genital mutilation, sexual violence related to exploitation, and trafficking in women.

The Beijing Declaration (1995) expanded the definition of GBV to include sexual acts against women related to armed conflict, including: systematic rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, coerced or forced use of contraceptives, prenatal sex selection, and female infanticide. It further recognized the particular vulnerabilities of women belonging to minority and vulnerable groups, such as: the elderly,

refugees and internally displaced persons, indigenous peoples, migrant communities, women living in impoverished rural or remote areas, and women living in detention. For this issue of Intersections GBV will be used in a broad, encompassing fashion to refer to all forms of violence against women, including physical, sexual, psychological, and structural violence.

**Extent of the problem**

Though there are laws that address GBV in most countries, violence against women continues to be under-reported worldwide since estimations of incidence for the most part rely on self-reporting by survivors. This holds true on the international, national, and institutional levels. For example, the U.N. reported more than 15,000 rapes in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) each year in both 2008 and 2009. However, the nationally representative Demographic and Health Survey for the DRC from 2006 to 2007 determined a rate of rapes 26 times higher than the U.N. reports (Peterman, Palermo, and Bredenkamp, 2011).

**“ Women aren’t the problem but the solution. The plight of women and girls is no more a tragedy than an opportunity - Kristof and WuDunn, 2009**

Life phase	Type of violence specific to life-cycle stage
Prenatal	Female feticide (selective abortion based on gender)
Infancy	Female infanticide; differential access to food and medical care
Childhood	Female genital cutting; differential access to food, medical care, and education; incest; sexual molestation; child commercial sexual exploitation; violence and abuse in and around school; early marriage
Adolescence	Female genital mutilation; incest; commercial sexual exploitation; violence and abuse in and around school and the workplace; early marriage; economically coerced sex; courtship violence; rape as weapon of war; honor crimes
Adulthood	Abuse of women by intimate partners; marital rape; dowry abuse and murder; partner homicide; psychological abuse; sexual abuse in the workplace; sexual harassment; rape; honor crimes; abuse of women with disabilities; abuse of widows; elder abuse; battering during pregnancy; coerced pregnancy (rape during conflict); traumatic fistula (induced by particularly brutal sexual assault); socio-economic restrictions (e.g., barriers to or prohibitions on land ownership)

The consequences of GBV are not limited to the trauma faced by survivors. GBV also becomes a barrier to the eradication of poverty. The fear of violence places a constraint on the mobility of women and limits their access to resources. In India, for example, a survey revealed that women who experienced even a single incident of violence lost an average of seven working days. However, women who have economic opportunities experience less violence and have more options in the face of violence. Improving women’s economic status and financial security not only decreases poverty, it helps empower women to have more independence and more say in household and community decisions. Moreover, research has indicated that when women are able to access more resources, they put their money into making sure their children have better nutrition, education, and health care, strengthening families and communities over time (Morrison, Ellsberg, and Bott, 2007).

**Responding to GBV**

The factors surrounding GBV are as diverse and complex as the ways in which people mobilize to address it. A vigorous response to GBV requires the involvement of men and women, churches, schools, institutions, and governments. MCC and its partners, as well as many other organizations, undertake projects both domestically and abroad that tackle GBV. Through MCC-supported projects, churches and communities endeavor to respond creatively to many of the factors that contribute to GBV. The articles gathered here reflect on innovative approaches to addressing GBV and to fostering cultures of peace.

Threaded throughout the articles in this issue one discerns several common themes to these GBV responses. First, several authors highlight the importance of providing survivors of GBV opportunities and safe spaces to tell their stories and actively participate in the healing and rebuilding of their lives. Another common thread linking the articles is the need for the church to take the lead in responding to the issue of GBV. Churches can and must respond to GBV in several ways, including: initiating discussions about GBV’s presence within their congregations, equipping pastors and lay leaders to address GBV in a healthy manner, and advocating for needed policy changes. Finally, multiple articles underscore the necessity of involving men of all ages in preventing GBV as well as in providing tools for men caught in the cycle of violence to find healing and growth. These cases studies challenge dominant constructions of violent and oppressive gender identities. Responding to GBV involves developing methods of prevention, providing support for persons who have survived GBV, and advocating for justice for survivors. May the creative responses described and analyzed here inspire still more initiatives to confront the scourge of GBV within churches and in society at large.

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United Nations General Assembly. *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*. Proceedings of the 85th Plenary Meeting. Geneva, 1993.

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## End Abuse: working with men

For nearly two decades MCC British Columbia (MCC BC) has sought to reduce and eliminate domestic abuse as an all-too-prevalent form of GBV. After a brief description of how MCC BC's End Abuse program has operated for the past twenty years, my focus will turn to a new End Abuse initiative that underscores the importance of working with men to stop GBV.

The End Abuse program works with those affected by abusive relationships while simultaneously striving to prevent abuse. Through the program, women who have undergone abuse receive support individually and in groups. Through engagement with community agencies, MCC BC ensures coordination of support services for women and provides a mutual referral base.

Educational opportunities for pastoral leaders, community groups, and seminary, college, and university students constitute a significant part of the program. MCC BC has supported and helped to organize several major conferences, including the International Peace and Safety in the Christian Home conference, *Out of the Shadows*, held in May 2011, attracting attendees and speakers from all over the world. The End Abuse program also organizes and hosts annual 12-hour training events for counselors, pastors, other church leaders, and community workers on how to respond to domestic violence and sexual abuse.

MCC BC recently expanded the End Abuse program to offer faith-based support to men. In our region, men who have been charged with domestic violence have access to group work through the courts. However, few resources exist for men who have behaved abusively and who voluntarily want to participate in group work to learn healthy, non-abusive ways of being in relationship. In January 2013, in partnership with a Fellowship Baptist agency, the End Abuse program initiated *Home Improvement: Men in Relationship*. Many of the men participating in the program are partners or ex-partners of women who have been, or are currently, in the women's support groups.

One of the participants in the men's group testifies to the importance of men speaking with other men about abuse:

As a minister in the community, as a husband who acted in ways that made my spouse feel unsafe and desperate, as a friend who has walked through issues of domestic violence with other men, I have walked through my own journey with a skilled counselor and that was a tremendous help to understanding the issues. Participating in the *Home Improvement* group . . . has been an amazing experience and such a helpful addition to formal counseling. Seeing the growth in each participant is so rewarding. Somehow hearing the journey and struggle of other men turns lights on around these issues that otherwise were not coming on. This particular group showed the incredible effectiveness of the program. Anger and confusion dissipated as understanding increased.

*Home Improvement* has core values of compassion and respect for all and equality of value, deservedness, capacity, and worth. All persons, women and men alike, have the original blessing of being created in the Image of God. *Home Improvement* calls men back to their original created nature. In *Home Improvement* groups participants do not focus on blaming or

shaming one another, but to be eligible to participate men must be willing to take full responsibility for their abusive behavior and be willing to work toward change.

Healing and restoration of individuals and families is the hope and goal of the End Abuse program. Jesus' words of liberation in Luke 4 provide guidance to the work we do: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the captive, to bring sight to the blind, and to set the oppressed free." As disciples of Jesus, this is our mandate: in the End Abuse program we work in the name of Christ through initiatives with women and men to promote healthy, non-abusive family life.

*Elsie Goerzen is the End Abuse program coordinator for MCC British Columbia.*

## Building relationships and opportunities among former sex workers

MCC Bangladesh has a long history of creating jobs for vulnerable women. Over many years, we have seen how employment can be a significant factor in empowering women and helping them on the path to self-sufficiency. In 2007, MCC Bangladesh identified street-based sex workers as a group of women who were desperate to change their lives but at a loss to know how to do so. A group of MCC workers met together, conceived, and founded a social enterprise called "Sacred Mark" in the city of Mymensingh. This social business employing former sex workers originally focused on soap making, but has since expanded its product line and offers group-based support to former sex workers. The combination of employment and group-solidarity is key to empowering women to exiting the sex trade.

Sacred Mark soon developed into a training program called Pobrita (meaning "holiness, sanctity, the fresh cleanness of a newborn" in Bangla), in which former sex workers cultivate various trade and life skills: to date 70 women have successfully completed the program and graduated. Not all are working at Sacred Mark. Others have joined Basha, a social business also committed to empowering sexually exploited women, while still others are working with other MCC-supported fair trade enterprises or have found other jobs in the community.

As these social businesses have grown, MCC has learned two key lessons about what makes for a successful program with former sex workers: first, women leaving the sex trade require a system of support from other women as they build and (re)gain feelings of self-worth; and second, livelihoods training is essential to help these women obtain a firm financial footing as they leave sex work in their past.

Recently a group of 30 people gathered in a meeting room in Mymensingh. Among them were 20 new Pobrita trainees between the ages of 15 and 35. As each woman told her story, the tears and pain were palpable. All had been street-based sex workers, working to provide for themselves and their families. Many spoke of being raped and beaten and of the shame they felt about where their lives had taken them. While some women's

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Learn more

[www.abuse.mcc.org](http://www.abuse.mcc.org)

[www.mccbc.ca/abuse](http://www.mccbc.ca/abuse)

Block, Isaac. *Assault on God's Image: Domestic Abuse*. Winnipeg: Windflower Communications, 1991.

Holderread-Heggen, Carolyn. *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006.



families had full knowledge of the lives they were living, others had to hide it. Some had been coerced into sex work or had been driven into it by dire economic and social circumstances, such as being abandoned by parents while also left to take care of younger siblings. Other women had been trafficked within Bangladesh and still others raped, resulting in ruined reputations.

One of the experiences that the Pobrita trainees participate in is called New Life Celebration. This event provides an opportunity for each woman to share her story and light a candle as she makes a promise to herself to leave the old life behind her and to start to build her future from this point onward. We have found that this approach is very helpful to the trainees, as the exercise reinforces their role in determining their future.

Women often come to the Pobrita training program after years of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, with their self-esteem at rock bottom. They have been told by spouses, partners, relatives, and neighbors that they are useless and have come to believe that they are. These women also struggle to trust people. Women from poor communities are rarely the decision makers in Bangladeshi society, so many of them have become accustomed to being under the control of men. They have developed coping strategies that are very fatalistic and have often stopped believing in the possibility of a better future.

After women have settled into the program, Pobrita trainers sit with each woman to help her develop a life plan, asking such questions as: What does she want to do next? What is her plan? How can Pobrita best help her? and What might be the obstacles to success she will face? The main challenge these women face is that Bangladeshi society can at times be an unkind, and even cruel and unforgiving, place for people who have a background as a sex worker. Pobrita staff members talk to the women about this social stigma and how they might overcome it.

For Pobrita staff, the temptation is to “take care” of and even mother the women. We hear their stories and often want to provide everything for them and shelter them from life. Culturally, that is also something we often do with women in Bangladesh. However, we have seen the healing that comes through involving the women in taking responsibility for their own lives. The women tell us that they have never been asked what they want to do with their lives or what their ideas are: they have always been told. It is a new idea for them to be asked what they like, what they think, and what their ideas are. When each woman recognizes that she has something to contribute, she begins to feel like a person of worth. Through Pobrita MCC Bangladesh is seeking to reduce the dependency and vulnerability of women by giving them an active role in shaping the Pobrita program. We use many strategies, but we have found this to be very simple and effective in healing and overcoming the trauma Pobrita participants have experienced.

Bangladeshi society remains intolerant of women outside the protection of family structures, particularly outside the protection of a man. Pobrita graduates, however, set examples of women who have managed to find gainful employment outside of the sex trade, even while lacking extended family supports. These graduates have broken away from the abusive families they were born into and from the men who abused them and who are now setting up strong family units themselves. The number of successful graduates is not large, but they are significant and they are

growing. Unfortunately, there are also women who return to abusive relationships, so we need to paint a true picture of the difficulty of these situations. While women seeking to leave sex work face an uphill battle, trainees nevertheless have reason for hope. As initiatives like Pobrita and Basha expand, we trust that will see more women leaving behind the violence and abuse of prostitution to create new lives for themselves and their children.

*Sultana Jahan, Project Coordinator of the MCC Bangladesh Pobrita Project, and Gill Bedford, MCC Bangladesh Assistant Country Representative.*

## Rape as a weapon of war: African churches respond

My first involvement in trauma healing took place in Nairobi in 2002. A group of 23 pastors from ten war-torn communities in six African countries had gathered to test-pilot the initial draft of a manual to assist churches in responding to GBV. When we got to the topic of rape, we asked the pastors if it was an issue in their communities. We encountered strong resistance. “No,” they said. “Not an issue. It’s just the young girls who want favors from the soldiers,” they said. This went on for some 45 minutes. Then one participant brought out a news report from Congo-Brazzaville that described 8,000 women being raped after communities that had fled into the forest from the blood bath in Brazzaville had been promised a safe passage. The hard facts of this news report brought a new level of reality to the discussions. Yes, rape was widespread. Yes, it was a problem. Yes, church leaders needed to dare to talk about it. Stories began to flow of the twisted ways rape was being used as a weapon of war.

In many cultures, rape is a taboo topic. Since it is off limits, it cannot be addressed and rape survivors suffer in silence and isolation. This response is of course deeply harmful to rape survivors, but when rape only occurs occasionally, communities function with the illusion that all is well. When rape becomes frequent and widespread, however, as when rape is used as a weapon of war, community mechanisms for denying or isolating rape break down. As rape has become a frequent weapon of war in different parts of Africa, churches have begun to recognize that silence is not an option and have begun looking for creative ways to work with survivors of rape and other forms of GBV.

Cultures are not static. They are always changing in response to the environment. Traditional ways of dealing with certain issues may no longer be adequate and new responses need to be developed. Widespread trauma changes cultures. In the case of widespread rape, the topic needs to be addressed openly—whether doing so has been traditionally acceptable or not. As community leaders begin talking more openly about rape and other forms of gender-based violence, they often discover that younger generations are already primed to have more open conversations about such previously taboo matters.

Trauma can originate from a variety of sources, but whatever the source, the basic response is similar. People need to make sense of traumatic experiences like GBV. They need to be able to respond to questions like, “Where was God when I was being raped?” One young woman in Goma

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in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was raped and thought she must have sinned badly to deserve such severe punishment. She could not make sense of the rape, however, because she could not think of what she had done to deserve such trauma, so she distanced herself from God and the church. She stopped singing in the choir. After interacting with the American Bible Society's trauma healing program, she realized that suffering is not always due to our sin but can be due to the sins of others. She was able to make sense of her experience, found her smile again, and went back to singing in the church choir.

People also need to be able to get their pain out in safe spaces: through tears, through words, through laments, through drawing. They need a place where they feel they are safe, where they know they will be heard without being judged, preached at, ridiculed, or punished, as such responses only inflict further pain and deepen the original trauma. The deeper the wound, the longer it will take to extricate the deepest roots of the pain.

Three basic questions can equip church leaders to listen in culturally appropriate ways to people express their pain following traumatic events such as GBV:

1. What happened? Telling the story of the traumatic event, sometimes over and over, is helpful as a means of getting facts straight and of constructing a coherent narrative of the event.
2. How did you feel? This question can help people think, sometimes for the first time, about how they felt during the traumatic event and put it into words. Trauma happens at the level of emotions, so this question moves into the trauma itself. Putting emotions into words gives some control over them. It puts boundaries around feelings that may have been vague and pervasive.
3. What was the hardest part for you? Everyone is different and there is no way to predict what the hardest part of an experience was for someone. Church workers engaging survivors of GBV just have to ask! This question helps people sort through their feelings and identify the part that causes the most pain. Then one can focus on that response. We have all endured people who have tried to guess what our pain is by imagining what would have been hard for them in a similar situation. They try to help by addressing their would-be pain, all the while being completely irrelevant (inadvertently so) to our experience.

Rape is a community issue. In many cultures in Africa, raped women are considered defiled and a common response is for husbands (Christian and non-Christian) to put them out of the home. The government may have laws that would prosecute rapists, but often the police and the courts do not enforce them. Given this context, it is imperative for churches to build up communities of support and accountability.

In our trauma healing sessions, we work with small groups as these are a more natural structure than one-on-one counseling sessions. We often ask the men to discuss what they want to say to the women about rape, and vice-versa. This may be the first time the men have been able to discuss the topic in public and often they have a lot to say about it. At one session in Goma, the women pleaded with the men not to put them out of their homes as this makes them destitute in the midst of an already painful situation: they did not ask to be raped. The men in turn apologized

for running for safety when villages are attacked without protecting the women and children. They asked for forgiveness for putting raped women out of their homes and promised to work to prosecute rapists.

In numerous contexts across Africa women and men are recovering from the trauma of GBV. Be it in Africa or in the United States and Canada, the church cannot afford to remain silent in the face of GBV. May God give the church the courage to bring the good news of Christ's healing to persons scarred by GBV and to work to build societies free from violent gender identities and acts.

*Harriet S. Hill is Program Director for the Trauma Healing Institute at the American Bible Society. She has been involved in trauma healing since 2001 and is one of the authors of Healing the Wounds of Trauma.*

## Gender equality from a Maya worldview

Latin America is considered the cradle of machismo. Images abound of the gun-toting cowboy sleeping with a different woman every night while the mother of his children unrelentingly toils at the myriad of household labors of cooking, cleaning, and raising a horde of malnourished children. Though that image undoubtedly contains a kernel of truth, it is, as with all stereotypes, deeply misleading.

A critical assessment of machismo requires an assessment of the colonial legacy in Latin America. Latin-American feminist scholars Myrna Méndez and Mayrelis Estrada contend that machismo "is an ideology that was not born into (Latin America), but came about as a product of the colonial sword . . . and also deprived us of the good life of the indigenous peoples who first lived here." In the highlands of northern Guatemala, the Mayan-Ixil people who have only come into significant contact with the western world within the last 120 years (and lamentably at a great expense to their people and traditional way of life) still conserve a rooted cultural legacy that contains traces of the original "good life" upended with the advent of European colonialism.

From an outsider perspective, however, this rural "good life" may very well seem tainted with aspects of patriarchal machismo. Ixil women spend the majority of their days immersed in the recurrent household tasks of cooking corn, making tortillas, cleaning the house, tending the chickens and small garden, and raising children. Their husbands, on the other hand, spend much of the time away from the home toiling in the corn and bean fields that give sustenance to their families.

Western visitors often revile this rural, family-centered life of the Ixil as inextricably marked by gender oppression. The cultural baggage of these western visitors, however, has its share of responsibility in the formulation of this speculative accusation. Modern industrial society, following the dictates of capitalist theory, exalts the individual over the communal. This individualism in turn informs the western critique of Ixil life. Under this understanding, human rights, including the rights of women (to equality and to a life free from violence, for example) are only attainable on an individual basis. The Ixil woman who is enslaved to the supposed drudgery of household work can only liberate herself and attain her rights by leaving the household, finding wage-work for herself, and thus

“ A critical assessment of machismo requires an assessment of the colonial legacy in Latin America.

Learn more

See [www.traumahealinginstitute.org](http://www.traumahealinginstitute.org) for more information on the American Bible Society's resources for responding to GBV.

Hill, Harriet, et al. *Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2004.

becoming less dependent on her husband and the household. It is clear that this type of “freedom” and “liberation” also inevitably leads to a separation from her community and traditional way of life. For many development and humanitarian organizations working amongst the rural communities of the Mayan people in Guatemala, this fight for gender equality can only be successful when rural women learn to assert their own individuality, follow their personal desires, and are free to escape from the bondage of the household and rural communities viewed as backwards and inescapably oppressive.

“ The Ixil people have historically developed their own traditions and community mores to respond to the issues of gender equality, the right to live free of violence, and the participation of women in public spaces.

This western-biased approach to the struggle for gender equality takes no account of the fact that the Ixil people, as with the majority of the indigenous cultures around the world, prioritize the communal over the individual. This fundamental difference has profound ramifications for how “rights” are understood, implemented, and respected on a community level. Too many well-intentioned development groups seeking to better the lot of women in the indigenous communities of Guatemala utterly ignore the fact that the Ixil people have historically developed their own traditions and community mores to respond to the issues of gender equality, the right to live free of violence, and the participation of women in public spaces.

To be sure, the typical Ixil woman in contemporary society does not live a life free from violence. One local police station claims that it receives dozens of domestic abuse complaints on a daily basis, to name just one of the many forms of violence suffered by Ixil women. Much of this violence is caused in part by a break in the continuity with ancestral values and traditions that held together the cohesiveness of the Ixil community. This lack of connection between the past and the present has been caused by the violence of Conquest, the forced imposition of foreign and supposedly superior worldviews, and the arrogance of discrimination against indigenous peoples like the Ixil, all of which have in turn created a void of values and traditions to replace indigenous traditions that have been obscured.

The ancestral worldview and community way of life of the Ixil people, though not flawless, constitute the best opportunity for Ixil women collectively to assert their rights to gender equity and a life of free of violence in a contextually respectful and adequate manner to assure the “good life” for Ixil women. Mayan spirituality focuses on four core values: *duality*, *complementarity*, *equilibrium*, and *harmony*. These values traditionally guided community norms and interactions. In an interview earlier this year, Ana Laínez, spiritual guide of the Ixil people, explained the importance of these four values for gender relations this way:

As indigenous people we don’t accept individuality as the basis for our culture. The goal of gender equity is not to create two, separate, independent individuals who compete for their personal rights and freedoms. Rather, we recognize the differences and *duality* between night and day, rain and sun, and man and woman. We (man and woman) aren’t the same, but we need to be treated with equality and mutual respect in our differences so as to reciprocally *complement* one another in our strengths and our weaknesses.

The ultimate goal of this reciprocity and complementarity in differentiated roles is to create *equilibrium* between men and women that ultimately leads to a community living in harmony. The ultimate goal of the right

to gender equality (or any other right for that matter) is not individual freedom and autonomy but community equilibrium. Laínez describes this equilibrium as a community where “nobody is too strong or superior, nor too weak or inferior.”

Whereas the western worldview too often considers women’s rights to be an individual attainment and possession, for the Mayan people gender equity is intimately tied to community cohesiveness. The division of gender roles between household (woman) and farm (man) has begun to break down as many men leave the farm to migrate to the cities or to the North. Whereas the majority of women remain attached to the household, all-too-often the men are involved in livelihoods that take them far from their families, introduce them into the monetary economy (away from the subsistence economy), and instruct them in new worldviews that convince them that the traditional community they grew up in is outdated, backwards, and substandard. The infinite enticements of the consumer economy add to the growing dissatisfaction with traditional lifestyles, further disrupt the time-honored ways of living out gender equality, and increase the diverse forms of violence suffered by Ixil women today.

In responding to the issues of gender inequality and violence, the tendency is to promote women’s rights conceived in individualistic terms. This individualization of rights advanced by a western mentality is ultimately unfamiliar to rural, indigenous communities like the Ixil and their reality. The task of pressing for gender equality among indigenous peoples like the Ixil, then, is one of reclaiming and reconstructing traditional, indigenous understandings of relationships between men and women, while also recognizing that such traditional systems will need to be flexible in order to achieve more profound gender equality.

*Tobias and Yasmín Mendez Roberts are MCC Guatemala workers seconded to Fundamaya, with which they serve as community educators for youth development, gender equality, and HIV/AIDS prevention in the Ixil area of Guatemala.*

## The Violence Against Women Act and justice for survivors of GBV

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) is a U.S. law that provides funding for a variety of services, including responses to domestic violence, trafficking, and other forms of GBV. The act was originally signed into law in 1994, sponsored by then-Senator Joe Biden. The main provisions of the original act allotted funding for rape prevention centers and legal assistance centers for survivors of domestic violence and established the Office of Violence Against Women within the Department of Justice. At the time of its passage, rape and sexual assault were nearing an all-time high, peaking in 1995 with 5 out of every 1,000 women 12 years or older reporting that within the past year they had survived rape or sexual assault. In the decade after the passage of VAWA, instances of sexual assault and rape fell sharply: by 2005 the rate of women 12 years or older reporting that they had been raped or sexually assaulted during the past year had dropped to 1.8 out of every 1,000 women, a rate that has held steady up to the present, according to the Department of Justice. Since 1994 VAWA has been reauthorized three times with slight improvements

Learn more

Méndez, M. & Estrada, M., “Dime espejito mágico (Tell me mirror on the wall).” *Latin American Agenda*. 2013.



to the original and with large, sometimes unanimous, bipartisan Congressional support.

In 2012 the Violence against Women Act was due for reauthorization. As part of the reauthorization process some legislators proposed particular improvements to the bill, improvements that would help secure just treatment for survivors of GBV. Because of its work with immigrants in the U.S. and with Native communities, MCC focused on two of these revisions: prosecution of perpetrators of GBV on Tribal reserves and availability of services to persons not holding immigration documentation. An additional change to the bill sought to ensure that the sexual orientation and gender identity of a survivor or perpetrator did not prevent the survivor from receiving services from government agencies.

Perhaps the most significant change compared to previous versions of VAWA was in terms of crimes committed involving Native Americans. A loophole had existed within the law that prevented cases involving a Native American survivor and non-Native perpetrator from being prosecuted in either Tribal courts or in State or Federal courts. According to the Office of Violence Against Women, Native American women experience sexual violence at two-and-a-half times the rate of any other population, and the vast majority of perpetrators of gender-based violence against Native American women are non-Native. One in three Native American women reports being raped in her lifetime. Some House members raised concerns that attempts to rectify this situation by giving Tribal courts authority to prosecute non-Native citizens of the U.S. would deny the rights of the accused to be tried in State or Federal courts.

In the end, partisan politics and a technicality over a spending provision in the bill initially led to the bill dying in committee, and so 2012 came to a close without the reauthorization of VAWA. After the election, renewed interest in passing a bill emerged. A new bill to reauthorize VAWA passed both houses of Congress, with this new bill including improvements to Native American court authority. Tribal courts would now be able to bring non-Native perpetrators before them, but those found guilty would be eligible to appeal the decision in a federal court, thus ensuring the right to a fair trial and maintaining the authority of the U.S. court system over U.S. citizens. The immigration provisions were neither expanded nor reduced but instead left for the upcoming immigration reform debate. The bill passed and was signed into law by President Obama on March 7, 2013.

Throughout the legislative process, in partnership with other religious organizations, MCC supported the expansion of Tribal court authority and increased access to services to undocumented immigrants as concrete ways to remove legal barriers to justice for survivors of GBV. While the MCC Washington Office was a small voice in the conversation, we must continue to act to secure justice for all affected by GBV.

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## Gender-based violence, memorialization, and mobilizing men

“This pain I can forgive but not forget,” sings Selby Mesher in his recent ballad reflecting on the death of his sister who was shot by her husband in 1970 while in a Labrador hospital recovering from injuries resulting from domestic violence. Inevitably, gender-based violence (GBV) creates ongoing trauma not only in the lives of those who experience victimization, but often also for families, close friends and potentially even for those who perpetrated the violence in the form of what some call Participation Induced Trauma. From MCC’s experience in Labrador, efforts to end GBV can benefit from trauma awareness and from involving men in effecting change.

An important piece in trauma resilience is the need to assist survivors in commemoration and retelling the story of traumatic events. Whether through ritual, art, story, or song, memorializing may be very private or openly public. Healthy memorializing grows out of mourning and grieving and helps individuals and families acknowledge and find significance in what happened. It counteracts feelings of isolation, fear, silence, and shame, and allows courage and resilience to be named and celebrated. Mesher’s ballad about his sister represents one form of memorialization. He also worked with his family to create a wooden silhouette as part of a nation-wide Silent Witness Project to remember and honor women murdered by a spouse or intimate partner. As silent witnesses, these silhouettes create awareness of the effects of domestic violence and encourage community and government action. [See <http://www.silentwitness.net>]

While memorializing is important, supporters and advocates must take care about how stories of GBV are told and retold in order to avoid inappropriately usurping the suffering of the survivors or dehumanizing perpetrators. Retelling stories in a truly healing way leads survivors to transform those neural pathways in the brain that can become transfixed in the victimhood role. While empathy for the survivors’ struggle is important in bringing about change, the suffering still belongs to these individuals, not to us as advocates and allies, not to the media, and not to the public at large. So in our public memorials, we need to celebrate survivors’ true journeys and be cautious not to reinforce unhelpful victimhood roles. Furthermore, to memorialize GBV publicly in a way that ignores or simplifies the complex life experience of those who offend neither changes the social realities that bring individuals to perpetrate violence and abuse nor alleviates the vulnerability of those already on the margins. And it may even inhibit survivors’ abilities to move forward.

Too often gender-based violence has been seen as a women’s issue for women to deal with, even though men are much more likely to be the perpetrators of GBV than women (83% of the survivors of heterosexual spousal violence in Canada, for example, are female). Working with men is thus a paramount concern, particularly men working with men. Yet mobilizing men to take sustained action against GBV is challenging because male privilege allows us to ignore and effectively keep silent the astounding rates of abuse, assault, and homicide experienced by women in North America, especially Indigenous women and other minorities. Developing a Men’s Action Network can help men counteract this silence by organizing events such as the White Ribbon Campaign (see Kaufman)

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or advocating for policy changes. Remembering that men tend to relate better with other men through mutual activity, coupling education and awareness with recreational activities or hands-on constructive projects may create opportunities for dialogue and mobilization.

Men can also counteract GBV by volunteering with programs like Circles of Support and Accountability, programs that create supportive networks around those who have committed high-risk sexual offenses. Studies have demonstrated that such initiatives reduce sexual re-offending considerably. Not only are these circles a major step in the goal of no more victims, they also remind the community that engaging is more effective than exorcizing those who have offended. The very reason it is so important that public memorializing not dehumanize the perpetrator is because it only exacerbates the public ostracizing and isolation that traumatized men who have offended already feel, thus making it more likely they will re-offend. James Gilligan suggests that context factors like sexism do not cause acts of violence, they only set the stage. Rather, most violence is enacted out of a need to escape an intolerable intensity of shame, humiliation, or perceived powerlessness.

So for us, this means resisting pressure from some partnerships to join the cry for public shaming and black lists. And while our current justice system is unquestionably biased against taking significant action in favor of survivors of GBV, longer prison terms for offenders without graduated release are probably not the best indicators of real progress. At the very least, these individuals need support to reintegrate, especially since one quickly discovers that most have themselves been victims of significant to severe traumas. Richard Rohr states that “Pain that is not transformed is transferred.” Trauma that is unhealed is reenacted, either inwardly on oneself or outwardly onto others, creating repetitious cycles of violence and victimhood (Yoder).

Working with adult men can make a difference, but breaking these cycles of gender violence means also being willing to engage our youth. Teen boys may not listen well to their parents, but they do innately crave sincere male role models and are receptive to feedback from respected men. Speaking to a group of adolescent boys in school or church settings can leave a big impact, but one-on-one mentorship is also invaluable. With violent and hyper-masculinized media, pornography, and sexting affecting increasingly younger kids, attending even to grade school attitudes about gender is crucial. We have found that including new fathers in the conversation is also fruitful, since it may be a time of greater receptivity as they discern how best to parent their sons, especially avoiding dominating parenting patterns. Michael Kaufman reminds us that men who are physically and emotionally healthy are able to see themselves as “nurturing”—of others and themselves. If we work to ensure boys are treated with kindness and feel valued, we will build up and nurture men who have the tools to transcend trauma or humiliation and choose respect instead of violence.

*Kerry Saner-Harvey is Co-Representative for Mennonite Central Committee, Newfoundland and Labrador*

## MCC confronting GBV around the world

As the articles by Elsie Goerzen, Jesse Epp-Fransen, and Kerry Saner above reflect, MCCs in Canada and the United States have worked programmatically and through advocacy efforts for many years to address GBV. MCC’s international programs, in contrast, have undertaken fewer initiatives to counter GBV. That said, over the past few years, MCC programs in several countries have begun supporting projects that adopt integrated strategies to address GBV. What follows are a few examples of these efforts.

The area of Bluefields has the highest rate of domestic violence and one of the highest levels of HIV infection in Nicaragua. Acción Médica Cristiana (AMC), an MCC partner located in Bluefields, works with over 3,000 school children, parents, and teachers to reduce violence, HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse, and the exploitation of children and adolescents through education, networking, and advocacy with social actors. This project has resulted in teachers and students expressing an increased ability to discuss issues of gender equality and respect and to promote dialogue in difficult situations.

During decades of war and political instability in Afghanistan, women have been the primary victims. The Women Activities and Social Services Association (WASSA) is the first independent women’s organization in Afghanistan’s Herat province, committed to seeking ways for women’s empowerment in Afghanistan. WASSA aims to promote women’s equal participation in the country’s socio-economic sectors. WASSA works directly with communities in order to bring about changes in social attitudes Afghan communities.

In northern Uganda, many of the students at St. Monica’s Girls Vocational Center have survived abduction and abuse by warring factions. This school focuses on upholding and protecting the rights of women and children by providing access to education, vocational training, child development and health services, and psychological care and support. The principles of human rights are embedded in St. Monica’s mission statement, “Promotion of the Vulnerable Woman through Affordable Education.” The school’s programmatic approach is empowering young women to live independent lives. The program seeks to promote cross-border peacebuilding by facilitating relationships and skill-sharing between Ugandan and Sudanese young women. Through the work of St. Monica’s, many young women and girls are becoming self-reliant and able to care for their families through the skills they have gained.

In 2007, Vietnam’s National Assembly passed the Law on Prevention and Control of Domestic Violence. However, despite this commitment, violence and other forms of discrimination against women persist. MCC is partnering with local Women’s Union groups in two provinces in Vietnam to reduce domestic violence in these geographical areas. The project focuses on both women and men by providing informational trainings about gender equity, domestic violence prevention, and legal issues related to GBV. These trainings have reached over 51,000 people so far. In addition, through the efforts of the Women’s Union groups 61 domestic violence prevention clubs are now in operation within the two provinces.

**“ Working with adult men can make a difference, but breaking these cycles of gender violence means also being willing to engage our youth.**

Learn more

Silent Witness, Men’s Action Network, and Circles of Support and Accountability are MCC-supported projects.

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Vallée, Brian. *The War on Women: Elly Armour, Jane Hurshman, and Criminal Violence in Canadian Homes*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2007.

Yoder, Carolyn. *The Little Book of Trauma Healing: When Violence Strikes and Community Security is Threatened*. Intercourse: Good Books, 2005.



## MCC resources for responding to GBV

MCC has published numerous resources for use by individuals, congregations, denominations, and other groups to respond to domestic abuse and other forms of GBV. The following materials can be ordered at [resources.mcc.org](http://resources.mcc.org):

*Abuse: Response and Prevention Booklet.* [Also available in Spanish as *Respondiendo y Previniendo el Abuso.*] Our churches and homes shouldn't be places that hurt. This booklet is a guide for church leaders to provide tools to help care for victims, survivors, and perpetrators of abuse both in and outside of the church. It includes basic information, biblical reflections, guidelines for response, and suggestions for prevention. Also available for download as a pdf document at: <http://abuse.mcc.org/system/files/page/2011/08/Abuse%20Response%20booklet%202010.pdf>

*Created Equal: Women and Men in the Image of God.* This 36-page booklet provides a biblical understanding of equality between women and men. It responds to frequently asked questions such as how to understand creation, the fall, and some of Paul's writings. It also includes questions for further reflection and discussion, and a list of additional resources.

*Understanding Sexual Abuse by a Church Leader or Caregiver.* This booklet provides a clear definition of what constitutes sexual abuse by a church leader or caregiver. It includes a composite story of actual experiences and gives tools to help individuals and groups understand some dynamics of sexual abuse. Of special note is a section on the issue of power and abuse of power. The booklet also helps provide insight into the victim, the caregiver who becomes the perpetrator, and the congregation where abuse has occurred. This resource assists in preparing Christians to respond appropriately when confronted with the grim reality of sexual abuse.

For information on an ecumenical campaign against GBV in the United States supported by MCC U.S., see the website of We Will Speak Out U.S.: [www.wewillsspeakout.us](http://www.wewillsspeakout.us). The site includes sermon guides ideal for use in congregations looking to address GBV in their midst.

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