

The Desperate Cry of Africa's Women

It

is time for the church in Africa—and throughout the world—to address abuse and injustice against women and girls.

After spending last week in the city of Masindi, Uganda, I traveled to Uganda's capital, Kampala, to address a women's conference. After my first session a woman named Florence grabbed me and began to tell her painful story.

She had given birth to five girls during her marriage. But when her girls were small, her husband decided to leave Florence because she had not produced a son. He blamed her (I guess he didn't know a man's sperm determines the gender of a child) and he said she had shamed him by having only girls. He sold the family house, evicted his wife and daughters and gave them no money for food or school fees. Then he married again and started a new family. He got two boys and another daughter out of the deal.

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Florence was not depressed when she shared her sad history. She wore a colorful African dress and had a bright smile on her face as she told me how Jesus had been faithful to care for her after she was abandoned. "I had to learn to pray," she told me. "But today my girls are blessed and my oldest just finished her university education."

Florence is fortunate. Not all Ugandan women have fared well after being abused, beaten, mutilated or abandoned. Up to 70 percent of women in Uganda have been sexually or physically abused, and the statistics are even higher in other African countries.

During our conference in Kampala, my host, Constance Birungi, asked the women to gather in small groups to discuss why Ugandan women struggle so much with fear. Here are some of the responses they shared with us:

- "We are beaten by our husbands, and then we are told never to report the abuse to authorities"
- "We are denied education—boys are schooled but girls are told to stay home and cook"
- "We are expected to be quiet and obedient, and we must kneel in the presence of men"
- "Many of our husbands live in adultery, or they marry second, third, or fourth wives and bring all the children into our homes"

- “We are expected to produce many children, but we do not have the money to take care of them—and sometimes our husbands abandon us”
- “We have been raped and sexually abused, so we feel inferior”
- “Boys are favored over girls, so we have low self-esteem”
- “When we see only male leaders in the church, we wonder if there is a place for us there”
- “Some men manipulate the Word of God to tell us that we must submit to abuse and adultery.”

Christianity is growing in Africa today, but the question remains how effectively the gospel is impacting the culture. The week I visited Kampala, more than 50,000 people were expected to jam the city’s main sports stadium for a gospel concert sponsored by the country’s largest Pentecostal church. It is easy to get a crowd here, and the preaching is passionate, but some church leaders I know told me privately that they are concerned that faith is often a mile wide and an inch deep. Shallow faith, they say, cannot transform society.

There are many social problems that are staring the African church in the face—poverty and corruption are the most obvious—but the

shameful treatment of women is often ignored. In fact, it was only in 2010 that President Yoweri Museveni signed a law criminalizing domestic violence. And human rights organizations say it is not enforced.

The gospel is the answer to the problem of gender-based violence and oppression. Jesus Christ defied the cruel male domination of His day when he healed women, forgave them publicly, defended them from their chauvinistic accusers and called them to be the first witnesses of His resurrection.

But the gospel's full power to transform culture cannot be unleashed unless we bravely apply it to society's problems. In Africa—and in many other parts of the world—church leaders have been unwilling to challenge the status quo, even though countless women are suffering black eyes, bruised ribs, HIV infection, acid burns and broken hearts.

Matthew 9:36 says that when Jesus looked at the multitude, "He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd" (NASB). Another word for *distressed* is *harassed* or *abused*. Jesus has always felt deep compassion for the abuse of women, but the church has sadly been out of touch with His concerns. We have other priorities.

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the world—will stop playing in the shallow waters of feel-good,
me-centered Christianity and decide to apply the gospel of Christ to
the injustices of the world.

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