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***Hope Is as Strong as a Woman's Arm:
Mobilizing amidst Violence against Women and Girls in Africa
and Its Diaspora – Reflections of a Ghanaian Muslim Woman***

**Rabiatu Ammah
*The University of Ghana***

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Gender-based violence is ubiquitous and a concern to all humanity, for violence in any form against anybody, especially women and the girl child, is a pain and unacceptable. Against this background of pain and anguish and the need to mitigate it, women in Africa and its Diaspora in Religion and Theology organized a conference to build community to collaborate on this area of grave concern. This paper is a reflection on the proceedings from a Ghanaian Muslim woman's perspective. It shows that Ghanaian Muslim women can identify with the issues and are also strategizing through activism and leadership to deal with the challenges of violence rooted in religion and culture in the Ghanaian Muslim community. Muslim women pray and hope that Allah will heed the call of all women.

A conference organized by African and African Diasporic Women in Religion and Theology took place in Accra, Ghana, from July 8-14, 2012. It afforded some fifty women from Africa and its Diaspora time to meet and strategize to face the challenges of violence against women and girls. The theme of the meeting, “Hope Is as Strong as a Woman’s Arm: Mobilizing amidst Violence against Women and Girls in Africa and Its Diaspora,” was appropriately chosen in view of the ubiquitous nature of gender-based violence. This theme was not surprising as the historical and colonial experiences of Africans in the Diaspora is intricately linked to power, economics and violence, a phenomenon that affects women particularly and negatively. The paper attempts a reflection on the proceedings of the conference in my capacity as a Ghanaian Muslim woman. Primarily, I will present an overview of the consultation by discussing the methodology adopted, the papers read and the responses they elicited. Then I shall deal with the major recommendations available for dealing with the issues identified by the participants.

Holding on Fast to Enjoin Good and Forbid Evil

The Qur’an exhorts Muslims to hold on tight to the rope of Allah and not be divided;¹ it also commands them to call unto the way of Allah with wisdom.² The call for responsible agency with the view to establish social justice in the *ummah*/community is yet another principle that undergirds the transformational Qur’anic message to humankind. Given primordial instructions

¹ Qur’an, 3: 103.

² Qur’an, 16:125.

by God, human beings have gained access to all truths existing in the world that has been made subservient to them. As a result “this constitutes a second great responsibility for man. So it is man, who must fashion his destiny with his own hands.”³ Women by virtue of their elevated status as *khalifa*⁴ must necessarily take their destinies into their own hands by taking up this challenge encapsulated in the Qur’anic doctrine of “commanding what is good and forbidding evil.”⁵ Islam is a universal religion, with the Prophet being sent as a mercy to humankind and all creatures.⁶ Muslims and non–Muslims working together in the spirit of cooperation to champion a common course for the benefit of humanity, provided this is not inconsistent with the fundamentals of Islam, is acceptable.

Against this Qur’anic foundation, I find the vision of the conference appropriate and commendable. The Qur’anic acknowledgment of women as *khalifas* has serious implications: “human beings are the only creatures of God who are responsible for their own destiny and must also fulfill a divinely entrusted mission in God’s world.”⁷ This makes it imperative for women to “enjoin what is good and forbid evil” to build a better community. If women’s contributions to the development of humanity are mandated by God, women’s wisdom in its various forms is

³ Mir Mohammed Ibrahim, *Sociology of Religions: Perspectives of Ali Shariati* (New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India, 2008), 153. Man in this sense is generic and has to be understood as humankind.

⁴ Qur’an, 2; 30-39. The word *khalifa* is translated as representative. As human beings, women are representatives of Allah on earth and expected to play a critical role in the development of the universe in order to incur the pleasure of Allah in the life hereafter.

⁵ Qur’an, 3:105.

⁶ Qur’an, 21:107, 34:28.

⁷ Ibrahim, 153.

required to revolutionize their present condition “for Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change themselves.”⁸

Methodology and Challenges

As indicated, the conference gathered African and Disaporan women to interrogate the issue of gender-based violence and strategize against its perpetuation. This objective was met with the participation of some 50 women including ten Muslim women of various backgrounds and one man. The inclusion of Muslim women actually gave it an inter-faith flavor.⁹ But the presence of a Ghanaian queen mother, Nana Amba Eyiaba of the Oguaa Traditional Area in the Central Region, was very significant; it brought the cultural dimension of gender-based violence in Africa to the fore. Nana’s presence was desirable as she corrected misconceptions about African Indigenous Religion. Her interactions with African Diasporan women perhaps enriched the latter’s understanding of Ghanaian culture.¹⁰ However, rather than being truly representative of African women, the meeting consisted mainly of women from Nigeria, Liberia, and Ghana. This created the semblance of a West African affair, and marred the objective of the meeting, community building to find the way forward. Women from the Eastern and Southern African Regions who also have experiences to share as evident in the several scholarly works in the publications of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians were not represented at all.

⁸ Qur’an, 13:11.

⁹ On the first day of the Conference there was a more substantial representation of Muslim women.

¹⁰ Most people including women have negative perceptions about African culture and exhibit violence toward it. It is very usual to hear both Muslims and Christians, when unable to come to terms with their own scripture simply say it is culture. Nana explained that as much as there are obnoxious practices which must be fought, as culture is dynamic, there are also so many positive aspects which must be revisited.

This preponderance of West African women created an imbalance in the participants, an assessment shared by Rosetta Ross, one of the conveners, thus: “Absence of representatives from Southern and Eastern Africa, South America, Asia, Europe, Australia-Oceania, and Antarctica challenged the meeting’s full identity as ‘African’ and ‘African Diasporan.’”¹¹

The other issue is the striking absence of Muslim women from the Diaspora and what accounts for it. This raises a serious and curious question in my mind as to whether there are no African Diasporan Muslim women in Religion and Theology. Was there any conscious effort done to involve them in the consultation? To what extent is this exclusion a pointer to the stereotypes Americans have of Muslims, especially since the September 11 attack, or was it simply an oversight? The particular comment should be seen against the backdrop of the rituals performed, before the formal opening of the conference to remember the ancestors. For as part of the rituals, I had to read already-chosen Qur’anic texts, presumably as the Muslim input. What consultation went into the choice of text is unknown, but I imagine a Muslim gave such input.

One of the processes that brought out the Africanness of the consultation was, first, the remembrance not only of “our ancestors,” but especially Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz whose contribution to the emancipation of women through scholar-activism is immeasurable. To affirm Ada’s achievement, a tree was planted in her remembrance. The second process that brought out Africanness was the visit/pilgrimage to the Cape-Coast and Elmina castles in the Central Region that came with great lamentations and questions of identity, especially among African Diasporan

¹¹ Rosetta E. Ross, “An Historic Meeting: African and African Diaspora Women Convene in Ghana for First-Ever Religion Conference July 31, 2012,” Report, <http://www.religiondispatches.org/category/report>.

Women. The individual experiences set a somber tone and created a spiritual ambiance around the meeting. These lamentations notwithstanding, I believe it took very little away from the general character and success of the consultation. Without a doubt, violence against women is well publicized and known; what the conference probably missed were the different strategies women in various areas are adopting to mitigate gender-based violence.

The formal introduction of participants enabled women to appreciate the different backgrounds and to situate individual contributions within specific contexts. This arrangement was good as it helped in the building of relations for future networking such as mentoring and publication, as will be discussed later. The Liberian participants brought other dimensions to the discourse as they shared their personal experiences of the war situation and openly expressed their disgust at the consequences of war, usually instigated by men but which victimizes mostly women and children. Liberian women's expressions of what women could do, or had actually did, in such conflict situations were highly appreciated. Additionally, their physical presence was an attestation of the *adinkra* symbol, *Nyame Biribi Wo Soro*, interpreted as "God, there is something in the heavens," used as the conference logo. For me, these women were living examples of hope, inspiration and strength.

But as a Muslim, hearing some of the horrendous stories of African Diasporan women, though shocking, was anticipated. My first reaction to these was: "But why then do you Americans disturb us with your feminism, claiming that Muslim women are oppressed and must be liberated? In any case, you also suffer violence in America. So, how then can this American Western culture, branded everywhere as democratic and the upholder of human rights, be used to

judge my African and Islamic culture as inferior?” It raised the question of whether there is a universal category of womanhood. So while on one hand I was shocked, on the other, I felt relieved that even the Americans had similar challenges. It urged me to move on with my scholar-activism and remain optimistic that we Ghanaian Muslims are not alone in our quest for justice and our striving to fight gender-based violence.

Muslim women’s participation was significant at several levels. Their participation was not unique; it was a reflection of the inclusive nature of both the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, as African entities.¹² However, it brought out other vital areas of concern to me. No doubt, the diverse nature of the Muslim participants and their contributions created more awareness about Islam and Muslim women.¹³ It would appear (that was to be expected) that initially some Diasporan Women had preconceived ideas and perceptions about Muslim women. However, the active participation of the Muslim students, activists and lay, I believe, shattered the stereotypes in the minds of the African Diasporan non-Muslim counterparts. This impression was significant and one that, I believe, left a mark in the minds of some Diasporan women who then intimated the desire to work and collaborate more with Muslim women in the United States of America on return.

¹² The Circle is convocation of African women in religion and theology inaugurated in 1989 under the instrumentality of Prof. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a Ghanaian theologian and some other African Women theologians to highlight the presence of women in academic theology in Africa. The concerns and objectives of the Circle among other things are to: Provide African women the platform to discuss and share ideas on women’s issues in religion and culture, to encourage and empower the critical study of the practice of religion in Africa and to publish research on theological literature written by African women with a special focus on the study of religion and culture. See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, editor, *Transforming Power Women in the Household of God: Proceedings of the Pan African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* (Accra: Sam Woode, 1997). The Talitha Centre is the Ghanaian Chapter of The Circle situated at the Trinity Theological Seminary in Accra. It also provides women the forum to discuss and interrogate issues of religion and culture.

¹³ Many of the women were members of the Federation of Muslim Women’s Associations in Ghana which is a national umbrella organization for Muslim women in Ghana.

The background of the Muslim women, most of whom were not academics, is only an indication of the level of education of Muslim women in Ghana and a pointer to the hurdle Muslim women have to clear to move forward. Compared to the relatively academic high standing of non-Muslims in the conference, the Muslim women were relatively disadvantaged. It may account for the feeling of “intimidation” by the scholarly and articulate presentations with “big big English,” especially of Dianne Stewart. Though some Muslim participants could not understand the academic presentations, they felt at home with the panel discussions simply because they could identify with the practical issues involved. Notwithstanding challenges, these non-academic women still intimated their willingness to participate in such fora to learn. According to them “you should invite us more to these platforms so we too can learn.” For them it is in line with the Islamic spirit of seeking holistic knowledge, and imparting it from the cradle to the grave, and of cooperation, especially with adherents of the Abrahamic Traditions.

The choice of the Circle of Concerned African Women’s Theologians as the channel and conduit for the Conference was appropriate since “The Circle” has over the years become a recognized study circle with a good reputation for representing the African woman, both clergy and laity doing theology in a pluralistic context, to project African women, to the world through scholarship and publication.¹⁴ Additionally, the choice of the venue “Talitha Qumi Centre” (Institute of Women in Religion and Culture) at the Trinity Theological Seminary –

¹⁴ The Circle has several publications dedicated to raising consciousness about and reducing violence; see, for example, Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, editors, *When Silence Is No Longer an Option* (Accra: Sam Woode, 2002), and Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God* (Nairobi: Acton, 1996).

constructed by and under the directorship of Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye to interrogate religion and culture

within a multi-religious and cultural context was – also, not accidental.¹⁵ It was deliberately chosen; for she had made a mark in the eighties as a theologian of high standing not only internationally, but especially among Africans in the Diaspora who had common concerns and could identify with her theology and her practice of providing women the space to self-actualize and map out strategies for the way forward. It was, therefore, not surprising that almost all the African participants were members of the Circle.

Whilst the choice of the venue was significant, the methodology adopted to achieve the objective of the conference was adequate. It consisted of plenary, panel and small group discussions. The plenary sessions raised the critical issues of concern through the presentations of two key persons, Dr. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Dr. Dianne Stewart. The small group discussions enabled participants to respond to the issues raised in the papers and share experiences, best practices and make inputs for the way forward. It also allowed for full participation of all. A brief statement from a representative of the Trinity Theological Seminary that prefixed the keynote was important as the Seminary had been pushed by Dr. Oduyoye to better care for female students in the Trinity community. Since her protestation in the 1980s, some progress had been made, an indication of how the God above is heeding the call of women in ministry and pushing them to higher heights.

¹⁵ For some discussion on the work of the Circle on Gender-Based Violence, see Rose Mary Amenga-Etego, “Violence against Women in Contemporary Ghanaian Society” in *Theology & Sexuality*, 13(1): 23-46 (2006).

Our God Is Nearer to Us than Our Jugular Veins

The keynote address by Dr. Oduyoye tackled the theme of the conference “There Is Something in the Heavens: Mobilizing amidst Violence against Women and Girls in Africa and Its Diaspora” in both an academic and emotional manner. The passion with which the paper was delivered points to the pain and anguish women suffer. The approach adopted put gender-based violence in the proper context, indicating its hydra-headedness that demands a holistic approach if it is to be tackled effectively and sustainably. Delving into the various dimensions of gender-based violence – religious, socio- economic, theological, cultural, etc. – Dr. Oduyoye’s articulation of the religious and cultural underpinnings of the scourge and the need to interrogate the structures and texts that underpin and perpetuate violence at all levels was highly educative and appreciated. Her proposal for parallel readings of texts/scripture to offer better appreciation of God’s intent to humanity, male and female in the community of God on earth, elicited positive responses of hope.

As part of her lamentations she expressed optimism and hope in God through two Akan song ministrations. Songs, therefore, become good indigenous resources that can be mobilized amidst the violence to assuage hurt feeling and bring hope to the dejected. This came out in the small group discussions about finding indigenous resources to mitigate the problem. The first song enunciates the nearness or closeness of Jesus to human beings. It states: “Jesus is with me, he is in front of me, behind me and by my side.... Therefore, I shall not fear.” Explicit in the song is the theme of hope and grieflessness when Jesus is in control. Consequently, the salvific

nature of Jesus himself is a rich source of hope for women who are agents of God. This song¹⁶ resonates with Muslim understanding of hope and God's immanence. Muslim women as agents of God and in quest of justice heavily rely on God, knowing and hoping they will gain out of pain like Hajara (Hagar) did in the desert with her son Ismail.

Dianne Stewart's address on "Rethinking Indigenous African Sources of Womanist-Feminist Activism in the 21st Century" offered African women some more hope. Her critical evaluation of the issues of women challenged the stereotyped views of Western feminists with regard to the status, position and role of the African female. She proffered new insights into understanding African femaleness and women and her role in both private and public space. Espousing the concept of mothering as per the Nigerian experience, she provided some evidence to suggest the huge amount of indigenous resources it contains. But who is a mother? Is she only biologically determined? Are biological mothers necessarily mothers? These questions attracted a lot of discussion, and provided solace for both biological mothers and mothers of communities.

Clearly, motherhood from the Islamic angle is a divine resource that ought to be utilized to the fullest extent, and whose contribution to humanity is beyond measure. It cannot be construed merely as an accident of life that the woman's womb¹⁷ that bears, linguistically, is of the same root as ar-Rahman¹⁸ one of the great attributes of Allah. The importance of motherhood is again well articulated in the tradition of the Prophet thus: "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers."

¹⁶ Because of the strict nature of Islamic monotheism, and the position of Jesus as God's Prophet, the lyrics are not acceptable to Muslims. The replacement of Jesus with God makes the song a perfect source of hope, Cf. Qur'an 50:16, which teaches that God is closer to humans than their jugular veins.

¹⁷ Rahm is derived from the Arabic root rhm.

¹⁸ Ar- Rahman means "the Gracious," and is the first attribute to be recited in the Suratul Fatiha, or the opening chapter of the Qur'an.

The second Akan religious song can be translated as: “Cry/call unto your lord. Your lord will hear and respond. You are lord, a mother and caring Lord, In my bowing and prostrations I call on you...” It also affirms understanding the Lord God with maternal instincts, and who verily and with certainty will heed the call of the “oppressed and marginalized” like women. It confirms the experience of Hajara (Hagar) who, despite her low social origins, had her prayers answered by Allah. The strong arm that she raised to supplicate to Allah and held on to amidst pain and fright has become that arm all Muslims, both men and women, raise to supplicate as part of the rituals of Hajj, one of the five pillars on which Islam is built. Hajara as a mother never lost hope; she trusted in her lord God, albeit still having to complete her running between the hills of Safa and Marwa to look for sustenance for Ismail. But Hajara was socially responsible in her action. So although Hajara trusted in God she nevertheless tied her camel. As stated by Abugideri, “She symbolizes the strength and courage of God’s chosen agents.”¹⁹ Hajara’s experience presents a good model that may lead to transformation for “active *taqwa* engenders a type of thinking about God and his intended plan that often translate into a mission of social reform.”²⁰ As a *khalifa* Hajara was imbued with responsibility and accountability and, therefore, had to surmount the task of looking for sustenance for herself and Ismail. This, in my view, became her “*Jihad*” – striving to achieve and succeed in an endeavor. In this case it was their survival. Going between the two hills was an indication not only of her resolve to surmount the problem, but it also showed that Hajara persevered and did not relent in her efforts. She was

¹⁹ Hibba Abugideri “Hagar: A Historical Model for Gender Jihad” in *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L Esposito (Florida: University of Florida Press, 2001), 88,

²⁰ Hibba Abugideri, 99.

active and tried all means to achieve her goal. Consequently, Muslim women must bear in mind that in the midst of challenges, it is their responsibility to do everything possible to get results. Thus, the *Jihad* of Muslim women today is to find the best methodologies and strategies for taking their destinies into their own hands. If women are God's agents, God will not leave them alone!!!

We Are Not Alone

As a Muslim woman, I am able to easily identify with the many issues raised especially in the panel and plenary discussions, as they related to experiences and challenges Muslim women face. Universally, Muslim women, including Ghanaians, are struggling to deal with gender-based violence as evident in the many reports and publications²¹ about violence. Many scholarly studies on violence against Muslim women globally and in Ghana, have shown the prevalence of violence irrespective of the social and economic status of women. Several reasons account for this. Whilst some acts of violence against Muslim woman are rooted in the interpretation/misinterpretation of Qur'anic texts,²² others can be traced to harmful cultural practices²³ in many Muslim communities. In Ghana for instance, Fulera Issaka's research shows that the Muslim communities are bedeviled with various forms of gender-based violence. It is,

²¹ See Rabiatu Ammah "Violence against Women in Ghanaian Muslim Communities" in *The Architecture for Violence against Women in Ghana*, ed. Kathy Cusack and Takyiwaa Manuh (Accra: Gender Studies and Documentation Centre, 2009).

²² Qur'an 4:34 has been used to justify physical violence against women. See, Shannon Dunn and Rosemary B. Kellison "At the Intersection of Scripture and Law: Qur'an 4:34 and Violence against Women" in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26.2 (2010) 11-36.

²³ The presentation on Female Genital Mutilation by Shittu Tahiru of the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Ghana shows the effort Muslim women are making to eradicate this practice in the endemic areas in the Northern part of Ghana.

however, gratifying to note the several interventions that have been made to mitigate gender-based violence by some Muslim institutions, one of which is the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Ghana (FOMWAG), in spite of the different obstacles.²⁴ Among the major objectives of FOMWAG are the creation of awareness among Muslim women of the true teachings of Islam in the Qur'an and Sunnah, enlightenment and education of Muslim women, and economic empowerment and networking with other organizations to improve the lives of Muslim women. Through this platform Muslim women have networked with several NGOs in the area of gender-based violence to create more awareness and build capacity. For example, Ghanaian Muslims have participated in the programs organized to celebrate the seven days of activism against gender violence. Muslim women have also been involved in the Way Forward seminars and other programs organized under the auspices of The Institute of Women in Religion and Culture. No doubt the meeting clearly showed the ubiquitous nature of gender-based violence irrespective of religious, cultural or ideological background as well as the underlying economic power structures that inure to its perpetuation. The various responses elicited during the small group discussions and the plenary, in addition to the passion and emotions attached to this subject, point to the urgency with which resources need to be mobilized to mitigate it. In doing this, the economic empowerment of women and its related issues cannot be downplayed. The subject matter of *trokowsi*,²⁵ Female Genital Mutilation and Child-trafficking were clear

²⁴ Fulera Issaka, "Gender-Based Violence in the Nima Muslim Community, Master's Thesis, University of Ghana, 2010; also Negotiating Marriage and Divorce in Accra: Muslim Women's Experiences, Master's Thesis, University of Cape Town, South Africa, 2012.

²⁵ *Trokosi* is a cultural practice in parts of Ghana where virgins are given to shrines to atone for the 'sins' of their relatives.

examples of the interplay of power, control, and economics. No wonder then that one of the major recommendations of the conference is more collaboration to bring sustainable economic development, to bring dignity, honor and empowerment to the African Woman. In Ghana one way by which women may be helped is through the institutionalization of an effective Zakat scheme through which Muslim women will be capitalized to invest in sustainable income generating activities. As a result, Muslim women can become economically and financially independent.

Paradigm Shift

Though activism and advocacy are essential components in the fight to alleviate violence against women and the girls in Africa and its Diaspora, an area that is critical, especially for Muslim women, is academics and scholarship. This is not to suggest the lack of Muslim women scholars in the areas of religion and theology. Scholars like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, Sadiyya Shaikh, and Fatima Mernissi are highly acclaimed Muslim women who have tried to re-read the Qur'an and have offered alternative interpretations in their own right amidst grave critique from both male and female Muslims. Using different tools of scholarship they have done a critical reading of both Qur'anic and Hadith texts that have been used to silence women for so long. Muslim feminists have interrogated interpretation of the sources and particularly the use of classical jurisprudence or *fiqh*, which is unrepresentative. They have argued that because classical jurisprudence, for example, does not take experiences into consideration, it raises the question of epistemology. Iqbal, thus, finds justification in the

endeavor of Muslim feminists to re-interpret (in the light of their experiences and the altered conditions of modern life) what he calls the “foundational legal principles” that have been used by men to shape the lives of women negatively.²⁶ In my view, therefore, there should be a radical paradigm shift in understanding the import of knowledge “to save the religion from stagnation and becoming out of date.”²⁷ The agency of women, particularly the Muslim woman, would be better appreciated if Muslims take seriously Iqbal’s critique of Islamic culture when he suggests that “the teaching that life is a process of progressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessors.... should be permitted to solve its own problems.”²⁸

I have come to the realization that as a Ghanaian Muslim woman struggling to deal with gender-based violence, another way by which it can be mitigated is through holistic education not only of women, but of all. It has to be done in concert with “concerned Muslim men” to complement the efforts of women. This position is one that Oduyoye has championed, arguing that without the education of men on womanist/feminist issues, the clarion call to empower women will not be effective. It probably accounts for the presence of the only man who stayed in throughout the conference. The challenges facing Muslim education in Ghana are enormous, but surmountable if Muslim leadership champions holistic education and heavily invests in it.

Through serious education at all levels of the Muslim community and at various fora,

²⁶See Sir Muhammad Iqbal *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1974), 168.

²⁷Ibrahim, 187.

²⁸ Iqbal, 168.

spearheaded by the academics and intellectuals in the community, progressively, some success will be chalked.

If this is done it would enable women access to better quality education and improve their lives to aid acceleration of the development of the Muslim community, for their laps are the pre-school of every child. As stated elsewhere “the already existing women’s groups which do their own *makaranta* and *tafsir* (Qur’anic commentary and exegesis) during Ramadan should be encouraged to develop the tools of critical thinking and scholarship, as this is woefully lacking.”²⁹ Additionally, the many Muslim social groups should also be mobilized and helped to understand the need for self-assessment of practices and re-orientation. Muslim Family Counseling Services where women could go for relief in the community should be set up and managed by competent Muslim women. For as a frustrated survivor of violence who wanted relief said to a researcher on gender-based violence, “I hope this project you are undertaking will assist me after you finish.” This is important in view of the fact that women with these problems need to be counseled within the Islamic framework, for religion is still an important regulator of everyday life and a source of identity.³⁰

Potential Areas of Collaboration

As part of the many ways by which mobilization could be done to mitigate gender-based violence, certain potential areas were identified by participants. First was economic development

²⁹ Cf. Ammah , “Violence against Muslim Women” p,187

³⁰See Ammah, 187.

of African and African Diasporan women. This component of the collaboration is critical since the issues involved in gender-based violence, particularly child-trafficking, female genital mutilation, and Trowkosi, are intricately interlinked with economic structures. How does a woman who is not economically empowered detach herself from dependency? For example, how does a woman *wanzam*³¹ whose livelihood depends on circumcision survive if female genital mutilation is abolished, but she is then left without alternative income generating activities? Though these issues of economic empowerment of women cannot be overemphasized, the challenge also involves what kind of modalities would be put in place and how effective they would be. This would be an arduous task as the economic dimensions are structural and endemic problems of different governments and countries. Other areas that participants proposed as potential areas of collaboration were recommending future conferences, joint publication and mentoring cum exchange activities. These projects are good ways of building communities and networking; collectively they would help build capacity of those in less endowed academic institutions particularly in Africa through the mentoring project. Coupled with this, conferences and publication would also project the unique views of women of Africa and its Diaspora.

Conclusion

The paper sought to reflect on the conference organized by the African Diasporic Women in Religion and Theology group under the theme “Hope Is as Strong as a Woman’s Arm: Mobilizing Amidst Violence against Women and Girls in Africa and Its Diaspora.” Judged

³¹ This is the title given to the traditional circumcisers in Ghana.

against the backdrop of the objectives of the organizers, there is every reason to say that the consultation was successful, in spite of the few challenges. Whilst affording participants space to build community, it also encouraged women to be hopeful in their quest to mitigate gender-based violence. It was clear that women, irrespective of the cultural, religious, and social background, have similar issues and cries. But what was also evident was the will of women groaning in faith, to arise, as silence was no longer an option. The conference's proposal to collaborate in four major areas is highly commendable. As women opt for faith, I hope and pray these collaborations will materialize.