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***“There Is Something in the Heavens”:  
Mobilizing amidst Violence against Women and Girls***

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If my husband asks me to stop work, I will not hesitate at all.  
I shall leave this place at once and go home.

This or something to this effect is what a cleaner at a hospital said in a discussion with colleagues on submission to her husband. Such sentiments are rampant and seem to be the norm that makes those who talk about violence against women seem to be the deviants of the Ghanaian community. Nevertheless, the campaign continues and is promoted by both women and men who seek justice in the struggle against violence against women and girls. The struggle continues, fed by the hope that things cannot remain as they are if we want a community of women and men living in a state of mutual respect and compassion.

Hope, clearly and loudly articulated or left as the hidden strength that moves us, never is absent when African women are present and their children *in vitro*, on their backs, hanging on their arm, male and female, grown up or still on mother's milk. Children, girls and boys, survive on mother's hope. Women of Africa and its diaspora are never without hope.

The symbol of hope in the Akan Adinkra repertoire is an open bean, a sign of expectation that new life will never elude us. Then we can say to God, "There is something in the heavens; let it get into our hands." It is hope of resurrection, even out of what others see as our hopeless situation.

Yes, "hope is as strong as a woman's arm." This affirmation recalls for me my mother's story of how during the earthquake of June 22, 1939, with my father away at college in Kumasi, she struggled to get her three children – sleepy me, my brother four years old, hanging on her two arms, and my toddler sister on her back – to the safety of a cocoa shed where all were asked

to run for shelter. (I earned the epithet, “Oh that one will sleep even through an earthquake.”) It must have taken some doing for Mama to drag me from my bed, onto my feet and to pull me along with her. As she tells the story, everybody was doing the same, and it was mostly women with their children. There was no way any mother was going to leave a sleeping child behind as long as there is hope of reaching safety. The scene is recreated for me every time I see TV pictures of African women and children in flight from disasters.

A woman’s arms have to be strong on this continent where seeking shelter remains as the consequence of floods, wars, and political upheavals. In Africa, a woman’s arms have to be strong to lift the pestle high and land firmly on what is in the mortar, or there will be no food. Arms have to be strong to lift the axe and bring it down on the dry wood, or there will be no fuel to cook the food. Arms have to be strong to lift the pot from the stream and the bucket from the well, or there will be no water. Arms have to be strong to grind the pepper and the maize. A woman’s arms have to be strong because she hopes they will yield life giving results. And a woman’s hope is as strong as her faith.

Since the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was created in 1989, followed by the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture (IWRC) in Ghana in 1999, African women theologians have had Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) on its agenda. Articulated as such or not, most of our research, writing and advocacy have had VAWG at its base. In fact, we began all this because of our observation of what exclusion and marginalization of women have done to women’s perception of their self-worth. What I say about VAWG at this

forum can be said about all the organizations that make up networks of women's rights advocates in Ghana, into which I immersed myself in the first ten years of my return to Ghana, with the singular objective of putting religion and culture on their agenda and advocating for the inclusion of women of faith in their networks.

In the educational events organized by IWRC, whether in Accra or in the ten regions, participants were made up of Women Traditional Rulers (Queen Mothers), church women's organizations of all churches willing to participate, women from the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Ghana, and from the Ghana Muslim Women's Mission. Participants have come from the Ark Foundation which now is very well established: It has a shelter for women fleeing from violence, women lawyers who organize themselves to counsel and take up women's cases pro-bono, women from the academic world who research and now have created a gender research institute at the University of Ghana. IWRC has interacted with and learnt from all of them. What I present here captures only the very tip of what all these dynamic women are doing to keep the menace of VAWG on the public agenda as well as advocate and work for legislation to counter it. All these women and the men who support them work in the hope that VAWG could be stemmed, minimized, if not eliminated altogether. They are all mobilizing public opinion via the media, especially in TV programs, against the impunity with which women and girls' humanity is downgraded or totally overlooked.

I would like to place the emphasis of these opening remarks on the following:

- The general well-being of women and girls
- The marriage factor
- The quest for formal education
- Women and wealth
- Women and power

These are the arena of my observations. Of course, they are all linked, and my focus will be the cultural and religious component of these factors. I choose this approach because most of the time the economic factor, with the visibility of the feminization of poverty, suggests to some activists that when women are economically empowered they will be cushioned from violence. The impact of economic empowerment on lessening violence against women is the typical case of “Yes, but.” It is also the case that one is able more easily to quantify results of the efforts to alleviate poverty. It is not so easy to tabulate and demonstrate the change in attitudes towards women, which, in the final analysis, is what generates the violence against women and girls. Therefore, overtly demonstrable or not, it is our duty to mobilize amidst the violence against women and girls that we continue to witness.

### **General Well-being of Women and Girls**

I begin here as the locus of some of the differences in the experiences of women on the continent of Africa and those in the diaspora because the word culture marks the watershed. Women of African descent whether in Brazil, the Caribbean Islands, Canada, or the United States of America have different lifestyles and stories shaped by the general cultures they participate in. On the Continent – and by this I mean the Continent of Africa – culture is used to regulate women’s lives and to control them “as good African women” who keep the ancient practices and beliefs alive. Reasoning and discussion stops as soon as “It is our culture” is dropped into the deliberations. Child marriage is our culture; wife-beating is our culture; women doing all the necessary house chores is our culture; women dressing “decently” is our culture; female genital

mutilation is our culture; alienating women from land ownership is our culture; having as many children as nature/God will permit is our culture; and total subservience to elders and “betters” is our culture. There are taboos around sexuality as there are around food, rites of passage, and even greeting persons. Not all violate the humanity of women. Some protect women, but most are androcentric, if not downright misogynist and seek to guard the perceived entitlement of men.

The crucial factor often ignored in discussions is that not all of this applies evenly across Africa, and that ethnic groups, even among the artificial national borders, do things differently. The challenge in this transition period and in the hybridity of our lives is to ensure that as things change they change in the direction of humanizing rights for all, not just for the comfort of men. It is in this arena of what we on the continent see as VAWG that we need to examine things together. We do not know enough of what has been preserved or transferred to the diaspora. We do not know much of what goes on in Brazil, Jamaica, Cuba, Guyana, Aruba or Atlanta. However, we have been operating from the impression that these are outside the experience of women in the diaspora, while at the same time the innate affinity that Africa is in our blood remains and draws us together. *What should be the positive outcome of this time together?*

### **The Marriage Factor**

Marriage, the common experience of human interactions, is now under scrutiny. The debates on what marriage is are now becoming global. But even as restricted to heterosexual unions, the regulations as we experience them in Africa are clearly androcentric. Girls are

socialized to believe they are incomplete until married, and that if not married they are unprotected from men who are brought up to prey on women who are not attached to other men. Mobilizing against violence in marriage has been recognized as a societal responsibility, but the need to mobilize against the innate violence of the institution itself is yet to receive due attention.

### **The Quest for Formal Education**

The challenges women have faced in Western education that operates in Africa is closely related to the expectations of the traditional institution of marriage. Study all you can, but never forget that one day you will end up in somebody's kitchen, which is where you belong. This continues to be the popular counseling of girls. Even the popular Aggrey saying on the education of women – “Educate a man and you educate an individual; educate a woman you educate a nation” – carries the same message, however covert it may seem. You could as well say: “Educate a boy and you educate a person seeking his own individual wellbeing. Educate a girl and you educate a selfless being seeking only the good of the community.”

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western education of girls would only be allowed to go on if parents could be assured that the girls would come out with the graces and demeanor that makes a good companion for the Western educated man who needs the domestic services of an educated woman. Women were not being educated to get into professions, but to be proficient in housekeeping and home management. Women are born to be homemakers, period. Stated as crudely as this or not, that is what constitutes violence against the humanity of women. To be circumscribed by society as to the extent to which your humanity can be developed constitutes

violence against the individual, and I think is an insult to the God who created human beings in the divine image. To mobilize men and women to begin to discuss this is a real challenge. Much that goes for biblical theology in preaching will need to be revisited. We just need to get persons interested in re-reading the Bible and in re-thinking the meaning of marriage.

### **Women and Wealth**

There are statistics indicating that globally, women earn much less than men. Economic empowerment has been the theme of women's rights advocates for over four decades. In Africa, income-generating projects targeting women, small loans schemes and skills transfer have been part of the agenda of those working with and on behalf of women. Indeed, these take precedence over educational events that urge women to look critically at their lives and their world to see the root causes of why their lives are as they are. What I would like to highlight here is the cultural component of this syndrome, for in my experience it is the engine that runs women's lives.

In many parts of Ghana, land is *de facto* culturally controlled by men. Even among the matrilineal groups where women are entitled to land, family land is often in the custody of men. Legally, what is in the constitution of Ghana is that women can buy and sell land, but in practice we have evidence of land bought by women being controlled by the husbands and even sold without their knowledge or consent. Instances abound of land that was supposedly jointly owned becoming the property solely of the husband. The culture that orients women towards depending on men for their economic well-being, makes women accept this alienation from wealth as

normal. A wealthy woman is a scarce phenomenon, an anomaly. It is suspected that she must be doing something not quite right.

There are many sayings and attitudes that make women afraid to acquire wealth. All this is generally oriented towards making women dependent on men for their livelihood. This has been one of the cardinal causes for the impunity with which women are violated by men. Men are oriented towards ensuring that “their” women do not earn more than they do. Their egos are deflated, self-esteem dented, resulting in venting their felt inadequacies and frustrations in the form of violence against their wives. *How is a community to be mobilized to examine this syndrome and to put things right?*

### **Women and Power**

“Knowledge is power; a man (stet) is but what he knoweth.” I read this adage in a school reader that belonged to my mother. I must have been still in the first decade of my life, but I still remember it. I also remember that the book had a poem of Milton, “On His Blindness.” I cannot provide any bibliographical data on this publication, but I can assure you that “Knowledge is power” has stayed with me. Like most adages, there is always the flip side to it. You must have heard it said that “Where ignorance is bliss, it is folly to be wise.” Well, unfortunately, this used to be the state in which women and girls were kept. Their ignorance concerning their potential to be the image of God kept them striving to be what society wanted them to be, persons who came to be in this world to make life comfortable for men.

Knowledge is power, so the less women are admitted into knowledgeable circles the better for the men who see themselves entitled to rule the women and to benefit from their productive and reproductive potentials. Wealth, too, is power, so the same principle applies here: Women should not have power that makes them autonomous human beings. These perspectives suggest that what national constitutions and legal systems stipulate is not what people live by; people claim their authority to subject women under men from religion and culture.

Both Christianity and Islam have been allies with the Ghanaian culture in alienating women from power. The authority of women is limited to taking care of babies, the sick and the aged, and keeping house so all can be healthy and comfortable – never mind if, psychologically, the women feel unfulfilled, exploited, and violated. Women in public utterances claim they are very comfortable with the status quo and are applauded by men as being the “good woman.” Women have acclimatized to this by imagining themselves “the neck that turns the head,” “the power behind the throne,” and “the hands that rock the cradle.” All these commonplace platitudes are still thrown around and do affect what results in women being violated.

These five items are only some of what constitute the context and reason for mobilizing persons to effect positive change. There is need to mobilize, to take violence out of marriage, to level the field for education, for inclusion of women in creating wealth. We should mobilize to make power the ability of all women and men to enhance the humanity of all and to humanize the human community so that women and girls may live their lives free of violence.

## Strength in Numbers

In this context of general violence against women and girls, we still have women and girls who “escape” the violence. We do have marriages that are partnerships based on mutual respect, admiration, support, and cooperation. We have families that have educated their daughters and accepted women’s rights to be in the professions, and to become wealthy in business. Women who have chosen to remain unmarried are no longer openly stigmatized nor are women who have walked out of violent marriages shunned as “bad women.” It is no longer taken for granted that women will submit to female genital mutilation (FGM) and Trokosi.<sup>1</sup> It is true that individual women sometimes become the exceptions that prove the rule or simply tokens to assuage the guilt of those who know what is right but cannot bring themselves to do it. Nevertheless, all these “minorities” constitute the source of hope that the value of women’s lives as persons will become evident. Their lives constitute a demonstrative effect for the entire community.

To have effective change, we need a critical mass of women and men to be mobilized against the violence meted out to women and girls. There is strength in women’s arms, but more strength in the numbers that are moved by the hope of protecting women and girls from being violated. There will be more strength to move the hope if the strength of the arms of men who are converted to share the affirmation that women are simply human could be mobilized to join the struggle.

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<sup>1</sup> Trokosi means wife of the gods. As trokosi, virgin adolescent girls become ritualized servants of shrines, supposedly, to pay for offenses of family members. The girls do not consent to being trokosi, and serve priests and the shrines without remuneration. Though outlawed by the Ghanaian constitution, the practice continues in some remote areas.

In Ghana there are several very active civil society organizations that are mobilizing, advocating, and acting on the challenge of violence against women and girls. Prominent among them are women in the legal profession who act *pro bono* on behalf of women, who help craft legislations on domestic violence, and who educate women on their civic and human rights. Traditional socialization, concentrates on the duties of women without indicating that they have rights as human beings. Organizations targeting traditional rulers, opinion leaders, and religious bodies are attempting to bring a balance to this system of socialization. Legislation has been crafted to criminalize domestic violence, and to challenge accusations of witchcraft and subsequent incarceration of women accused of practicing witchcraft. Women are mobilized and are mobilizing to provide safe havens for demonized women and girls. The best known of these organizations is The Ark Foundation, founded by a lawyer/theologian Angela Dwamena-Aboagye. The Ark Foundation also has a safe haven for women fleeing domestic violence in addition to undertaking educational and advocacy work. Gender advocates located at the University of Ghana—Legon, do intensive research work to feed work of the many activist groups. The Institute of Women in Religion and Culture carries on educational work among women of faith to sensitize them on gender issues and to guide them into meaningful and effective responses. Irene Odotei has galvanized Women Traditional Leaders into a formidable association to reinstate women's participation in traditional governance and to enhance their protection of the humanity of women and girls. These and several other gender advocates – individuals and organizations – research, write, publish, and lobby for laws against violence directed towards women and children.

In the midst of this violence women boldly hold conversations about what needs to change in villages, towns, cities, and on radio and TV to talk shows. The usual target groups are women of faith; vocational associations like those of traders, known here as market women, dressmakers and hairdressers; and spouses associations like those of the police. Often schools become the focus, and some young people's groups do their own programs on the challenges of violence. All these are focused on mobilizing women to deal with their hurts. In Ghana, however, there is one organization the African Women of Faith Network (AWOFNET) that has been able to mobilize a men's group to deal with masculinity. The men have come up with a poster on marriage that I would like to share with you as I have done with many. The poster is a challenge to all women's efforts at mobilization. Its message for me is the following: we have to be mindful of the fact that we can empower women to live fully, but until men come to realize their negative role in women's lives, all we can get from men is a spate of back lashes and violence, overt and covert, out of their insecurity when their sense of entitlement is affronted by women's insistence on not succumbing to the dictates of patriarchy. We need to cultivate the men who are feminist to join us in converting the other men and the women who are comfortable with the status quo.

Raising funds to build Talitha Qumi Centre under the rubric "One in a Million," honouring our mothers and women in mission, I have documented what people, women and men, say is the reason for their participation in the project. Below is what some men say are the reasons to honour women. Several of the men want the women remembered "for the training and upbringing she gave me from my childhood," for their support and love. They name women

missionaries for their dedicated services. They give to support women's initiatives as they strive to promote culture and religion. They give to honour women who have been catechists. Caring features prominently, and they give for women who have been listening ears, teachers and friends. There is a man who laments that not even a grave exists to mark his great grandmother's work in missions. They honour women who sold their belongings in order to see them through school, often even through to university. Men know all this, and we need to mobilize men and women to accept that we do not take these humanizing influences of women for granted, but that they have to be honoured. For this to happen, we all have to join in the task of eliminating acts of violence against women and children.

Truly there is something in the heavens, but we do not only sit with our hands in our laps; we stretch out our hands, with the strength of our arms we drag our children out of danger to seek a safe haven. Our hope is strong because we are assured that there is something in the heavens.