

Knowing Who We Are Key to Ending Gender-Based Violence

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In an interview marking the 16 Days of advocacy against Gender-Based Violence Rev. Dr Faith Kokubelwa Lugazia called on churches to work and pray together for justice in the world. Photo: LWF

Tanzanian theologian Rev. Dr Faith Kokubelwa Lugazia says churches that remain silent in the face of gender injustice are renouncing their prophetic role and she sees the 21st century as a ‘kairos moment’ to tackle the issue.

“I believe more and more women of faith today know who they really are and push the churches to go further in the analysis of violence and discrimination as a problem harming the whole community of believers, not only women,” Lugazia said.

She called on churches to work and pray together for justice in the world and urged them to look at their pastoral care processes and structures as a concrete way of unveiling the unbalanced power relations at the core of gender injustice.

An active member of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) women’s network, [Women in Church and Society \(WICAS\)](#), Lugazia has embraced gender justice as an integral

dimension of her personal journey.

She was one of the first two women to be ordained in the Northwestern Diocese of the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania](#) in 2006, gained her PhD in systematic theology at Luther Seminary St. Paul, Minnesota, and is a lecturer at the Protestant Institute of Arts and Social Sciences in Rwanda.

These experiences have nourished her commitment to women's full participation in the life of the church and society.

"Realizing who I am, made me be strong. I grew up as a second class citizen in my family and in the wider community with an 'obeying faith' that progressively became a 'questioning faith'" she said.

"The moment when you are able to ask "why?" leads to another crucial step: to stand firm and to be able to say "No" to any injustices."

Having said "no" to gender injustice, the Tanzanian theologian spent three years writing Naweza ("I Can Do It") to try and build bridges between educated women and those who have little opportunity for education.

In an interview marking the 16 Days of advocacy against Gender-Based Violence, Lugazia said churches must revisit practices which reflect double standards, and have an honest conversation about violence and sexual abuse, which are still largely taboo topics.

In some African contexts, for instance, she said churches' disciplinary practices around pregnancy outside of marriage falls on women. Fear galvanizes women to keep silent about the man's responsibility in such situations.

Gender-biased hierarchical structures discriminate against women and increase their vulnerability to abuse. The women targeted cannot take Holy Communion, sing in the choir or be buried in a Christian way, whereas in most cases the concerned men do not undergo church discipline.

"In cases of sexual abuse, the fear of being killed by the perpetrator if they denounce him perpetuates impunity and even when it is only a threat with little chances of being effective, most of them won't speak out," Lugazia said.

The churches must raise their prophetic voice on issues like rape and not assume that this is a challenge to be tackled by the government. If it does, it loses an opportunity to make a difference.

“There should be more reflection and preaching around this issue. Aren’t many of the abusers baptized Christians?” she asked.

Women in the churches need to build up their knowledge about women’s rights and responsibilities and encourage their churches to interact more with civil society actors and governments to address painful issues such as child marriage and other forms of abuse.

They should pay attention to the language used by male church leaders, which often suggests men are giving, ensuring or offering things, while women’s are understood to be passive recipients or beneficiaries of men’s gifts.

“Patriarchy needs to be challenged with gender analysis and being attentive to the way we speak is part of what we as women can do,” she added.

Lugazia urged women to develop tools that allow them to mentor one another so they can make concrete contributions to bringing about gender justice in church and society, pointing to the women of the Bible as models of resistance and change.

“Giving visibility to strong female characters in the biblical texts, like Zelophehad’s daughters who challenged the inheritance laws, can inspire women in similar situations today,” she concluded.