HUMAN RIGHTS

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
AND THE PRINCIPLE
OF SOLIDARITY

Education for Justice, a project of Center of Concern
Violence against women is a violation of human dignity and rights that permeates all cultures and societies, affecting all classes, races, ages, and geographical regions, and “reflecting the pervasive imbalance of power between women and men.”

Throughout history, women have been objectified and violated for the sake of “male dominance”—violence against women has been and is used as a weapon of war and a civil rite of passage. Catholic social thought (CST) thus calls “for a moral revolution to replace a culture of violence.”

Globally, more than one-third of women have been victims of domestic or sexual violence, and in some regions, victimization is as high as 65%. In all regions, women face the threat of violence in educational settings, while using public transportation, and in the workplace. The occurrence of violence increases in conflict areas, and in areas where human trafficking is prevalent, since women and girls comprise over 70% of those trafficked for sexual exploitation.

Not only is the experience of violence immediately harmful to the victim; the psychological fallout is debilitating and plays a role in continuing the oppression of women, inhibiting the survivor’s ability “to work, care for her family and contribute to society.” Victims of violence are more likely to lack interest in or drop out of school, to become substance abusers, and to miss out on advancement opportunities or lose their jobs. Further, fear of violence deters women from using public transportation, making it difficult to travel to work via economically and environmentally sustainable means. These factors all limit the participation of women in public and familial life, which violates dignity and detracts from the common good by preventing the flourishing of victims and maintaining the subjugation of all women.

Despite the omnipresence of violence against women, the United Nations notes that it is an “often silenced topic.” In most countries, less than 40% of all women report incidences of violence, and of those who do, the vast majority seek help from family and friends rather than the police. This seems to suggest that violence against women is either condoned or treated with a dismissive mentality that perpetuates myths of male dominance and female deference, which can make it “difficult for behaviours to change and for women to feel they can discuss their experiences of violence and ask for help.”

In October 2017, in an effort to “give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem” of violence against women, actress Alyssa Milano called on women to post their stories of victimization on social media, using the hashtag #MeToo. The thread quickly went viral as thousands of survivors shared their stories in a global expression of solidarity.
Solidarity is one of the pillars of CST, and awareness of injustice is an important factor in the development of solidarity. The solidarity of CST, however, goes beyond hashtags: solidarity involves “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.” Solidarity is thus both a moral virtue and a social principle, in that this commitment is personal but must motivate us to work with others for systemic changes that address injustice. In the words of Christine Firer Hinze, if “genuine peace—which encompasses both justice and charity—[is to be] attained, God’s reign must be restored to the heart of each person and to the heart of familial, political, and economic life.”

“In fact, the Church’s social doctrine places alongside the value of justice that of solidarity, in that it is the privileged way of peace.” This is because Christian solidarity enables us to move beyond simplistic thinking about equality and rights by recognizing in ourselves and others the “living image of God,” which necessitates a deep concern for the flourishing of others and the common good, “even to the point of ‘death on a cross’ (Philippians 2:8).” Christian solidarity calls us to work tirelessly to make every other human being “a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.”

Recognizing that Christ, in contradiction to the culture of his time, unfailingly affirmed the dignity of women, CST maintains that women “cannot become the ‘object’ of ‘domination’ and male ‘possession.’” CST thus asks all people of goodwill to stand in solidarity to promote a culture of dignity that values and enables the participation of women in public and private life. We must make it possible for women to contribute their gifts to the common good and to live with dignity and autonomy. Solidarity calls us to struggle against the injustice done to women, whether or not we are direct victims of the violence, to ensure that all women are able to share equally in “the banquet of life” on this earth, for “we are all really responsible for all.”
REFLECTION QUESTIONS

• Why is it important to think of solidarity as “both a moral virtue and a social principle”? What does solidarity look like as a virtue? What does it look like as a social principle?

• What are some ways in your own lives and communities that you can stand in solidarity with women who are victims of violence?

• What will it take to change the culture so that violence against women is not viewed as a given and women are viewed fully as human beings, rather than objects?

FAITH IN ACTION

• Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline for crisis intervention and referrals to local service providers. Call 800-799-SAFE (7233) or 800-787-3224 (TTY). For more information, go to www.thelhelpline.org.

• Avoid being a bystander. Call the police if you see or hear evidence of sexual or domestic violence.

• Lead by example. Work to create a culture that rejects violence. Speak up against messages that say violence or the mistreatment of women is okay; refuse to watch pornography or media that objectify women; volunteer at a local violence shelter, violence prevention organization, or teen mentoring organization; teach children to respect others.

• Participate in an anti-violence event like a local Take Back the Night march.

• Tell your congressional representatives that you want them to support domestic violence services and national and international violence prevention programs. (Visit http://bit.ly/1P6djt to look up and contact your officials.)

• Visit the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, http://bit.ly/1FylbP8, to find out more ways to get involved in the struggle against sexual violence.

PRAYER

God of Unity, teach us to love one another. Teach us all, men and women, to embrace and live out our full humanity and the dignity we share equally as your beloved children. Be with survivors of violence in their suffering, and heal the wounds of those women and of our communities, which suffer from their inability to flourish. Give us the grace to love and the wisdom and courage to act. Help us to speak the truth and to work to end injustice everywhere. Amen.
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goes beyond hashtags: solidarity involves
“a firm and persevering determination
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Endnotes

4 Ibid., 143.
15 Ibid., 159.
22 Ibid., I.4.VI.d.196.
23 Ibid.
26 John Paul II, *Sollicitus Rei Socialis*, §38.