

## SILENT NO MORE

The untapped potential of the worldwide church  
in addressing sexual violence.

Names have been changed to protect identities.

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# SILENT NO MORE

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## Foreword

**This report, *Silent No More*, calls all churches to account and to action. It paints a painfully honest picture of the way churches have perpetuated a culture of silence around sexual violence and have largely failed to respond to the crisis and may even worsen the impact by reinforcing stigma and discrimination experienced by survivors.**



Photo: Geoff Crawford/Tearfund.

Yet communities continue to look to their churches for leadership and care to transform this devastating situation. The study demonstrates how the largely untapped potential of churches can be released to help prevent sexual violence and reduce its impact.

Some churches have embarked on such a journey over recent years, responding to the pained voices of survivors around the world. At a recent gathering, the leaders of the Anglican Communion discussed the appalling prevalence of gender based violence, including sexual violence. In a joint letter to the churches of the Anglican Communion, they stated: "Our churches must accept responsibility for our own part in perpetuating oppressive attitudes towards women. In penitence and faith we must move forward in such a way that our churches truly become a living witness to our belief that both women and men are made in the image of God. In recent years we have seen a growing resolve to engage ... and we commit to strengthening our mission and ministry in these areas."

Church leaders and the wider community need to learn from the inspiring examples, some included in this report, where churches and other faith communities have worked effectively and with commitment to overcome sexual violence. Faith communities, supported by governments and other agencies, need to strengthen their response through changing the attitudes and behaviours that lead to violence, through awareness raising and advocacy, through the care and re-integration into society of survivors of violence and work with perpetrators of violence.

This report, *Silent No More*, provides further valuable insights into how churches can respond constructively to the crisis of sexual violence to transform the lives of women, girls, boys and men. The survivors of sexual violence, speaking through the pages of this report, are calling the churches to act together with their communities and governments to bring about an end to the outrage and suffering of sexual violence.

**Archbishop of Canterbury**

Dr Rowan Williams

**Archbishop of the Congo**

Henri Kahwa Isingoma

**Archbishop of Burundi**

Bernard Ntahoturi

**Tearfund is a Christian relief and development agency building a global network of local churches to help eradicate poverty.**

**Tearfund has around ten years' experience of working through church-based partners in the response to sexual violence.**



**Tearfund is a member of Restored – a global Christian alliance to transform relationships and end violence against women.**

**[www.restoredrelationships.org](http://www.restoredrelationships.org)**

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The full copies of both the original research report and the executive summary are available for download at <http://tilz.tearfund.org/Topics/HIV.htm>

**Cover photo:** After rebels attacked her village and killed her father, Eugenie, 18, of Kamituga, DRC experienced psychological disorientation. Later, Eugenie's baby died during labour and delivery and by the time she arrived at the hospital, she needed 12 blood transfusions before doctors were able to perform surgery.

**Photo:** Melanie Blanding.



Three rebels attacked Nabintu, 43, of South Kivu, DRC while she was travelling on a small path just outside the village. When her husband came to search for her, the same rebels attacked and killed him, leaving her to care for their six children. Photo: Melanie Blanding.

## This report highlights three key points about the largely untapped potential of the church in preventing and reducing the impact of sexual violence:

- 1** Sexual violence is endemic to many communities across the world but its scale and impact are largely hidden.
- 2** Many churches deepen the impact of the sexual violence crisis through silence and by reinforcing stigma and discrimination. Action is needed to overcome this.
- 3** Churches worldwide, and especially in Africa, have huge untapped potential to respond to the crisis, as they are a key part of community life.

## Executive summary

**Prevalent in conflict, sexual violence is common within communities worldwide – but as an issue it remains largely hidden. Women, girls, men and boys are all at risk of sexual violence.**

UN statistics find that:<sup>1</sup>

- today, many women – in some countries as many as one in three – are beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in their lifetimes
- worldwide, one in five women will become a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime
- on the basis of data collected from 24,000 women in ten countries, between 55 and 95 per cent of women who have been physically abused by their partners have never contacted NGOs, shelters or the police for help

Tearfund commissioned a research report to explore the current and potential role of the church within communities affected by sexual violence and conflict. The findings were harsh, detailing stories of deep suffering and often silence from the church. Yet all of these communities looked to the church for that care and comfort, hoping to find that safe place they so needed.

Sexual violence is an immensely challenging issue to tackle, and churches have failed to respond adequately. The silence of the churches on this issue is often the result of fear and their inability to envisage how to engage effectively. If churches could acknowledge their failure to provide the much-needed care, support, safety and leadership that communities are looking for this could be changed. Churches, however, cannot do it alone and need the support of aid agencies, governments and donors in order to walk this path. This is possible, but it needs to happen immediately. Until then, the church will continue to be an untapped resource in the response to sexual violence.

There are church networks stretching across many communities, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa. The church is a part of communities that governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) cannot easily reach. The nature and influence of faith in such communities, and the work that the church is doing to reach out to those in poverty, is not often understood by aid agencies, governments or donors. Churches have too often failed to realise their mandate to care and to stand up for people on the margins – particularly those living with and affected by sexual violence. For this reason aid agencies, donors and governments too have failed to recognise the potential of the church to respond to this need.

### **Tearfund makes the following recommendations based on these findings:**

1. Churches need to show leadership to challenge the prevalence of sexual violence that has become endemic in communities today.
2. Churches need to equip themselves to be people who demonstrate compassion and care for those affected by sexual violence.
3. Aid agencies, governments and donors need to recognise the potential of the church and work together to support them in this journey.

This report summarises the findings from Tearfund's research study across three African countries that have been in or are still facing conflict. It also charts a way forward to build on the potential of churches to support survivors more effectively and to address issues of stigma and discrimination which exacerbate the crisis.

<sup>1</sup> UNITE to End Violence Against Women, 2009

## What's happening?

### An overview of sexual violence in conflict situations

Sexual violence, or rape, is a stark reality of recent wars. But it's not confined to war. Sexual violence exists in all societies as well as being endemic in a number of countries worldwide. It's a desperate problem that simply isn't going away. And it's something that many of Tearfund's partners encounter every day.

During the conflicts in these three countries sexual violence was used as a weapon of war and involved the rape, or gang rape, of women and children.

Estimates vary, but it's believed that hundreds of thousands of women, girls and babies were raped in these three conflicts alone. Men and boys were also assaulted.

In the war in DRC some 200,000 women and girls were raped. In the Rwandan genocide in 1994 between 250,000 and 500,000 were sexually assaulted, and in Liberia sexual violence was a recognised weapon of war.

It continues today. DRC's war ended in 2003. However, in 2010 alone some 8,000 women and girls were raped within the continuing conflict in DRC.<sup>2</sup>

According to the UN, in 2010 armed militia launched a four-day attack on the eastern Congolese town of Luvungi. Some 235 women, 52 girls, 13 men and three boys were raped, many of them 'multiple times'.

Sexual violence has many forms. It can be within marriage or, as our research found in Liberia, committed mainly against girls under 17 years old.

Sexual violence brings with it physical injury, humiliation and psychological trauma. It tears families and communities apart. The outcomes can include some or all of the following: lasting severe physical injury, sexually-transmitted diseases (including HIV), unwanted pregnancy and even death.

For those that live, the experience can affect their lives for many years. Survivors can be rejected by their spouses, families and communities. Stigma and discrimination can follow. All this can mean that survivors struggle to live and progress with their lives as well as having to overcome the trauma of their experience.



Henriette, 35, and her eight-month-old twins spend each evening at 'House Two' – a facility rented by Panzi Hospital in the DRC to house more than 100 women affected by sexual violence. Photo: Melanie Blanding.

<sup>2</sup> The UN Secretary-General's database on violence against women

“A dead rat is worth more than the body of a woman”

Margot Wallstrom, the UN's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, appalled by what she has witnessed

Tearfund commissioned research involving partners in three African countries – Rwanda, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Subsequent similar research was completed in Burundi to assess the role of the church there.

The research showed that there have been various responses from the church. In many cases the church has remained silent, where the church has spoken out, it has often led to increased stigma

towards survivors. The findings of Tearfund's commissioned research are a shocking indictment of the widespread lack of a church-based response. The church has often failed its communities.

But there is hope. Some local churches, including Tearfund's partners, are providing medical care and counselling to survivors and are working to prevent sexual violence within communities. Lives are being changed.

### Sexual violence in the DRC

When the war started, soldiers were responsible for perpetrating sexual violence. It was an acknowledged act of war. Nowhere was safe. Any woman could be attacked, whether she was alone, in a group or with her husband. Age was no barrier.

Sexual violence goes on today. The aim is to humiliate and intimidate. Our research found that it's now viewed as the norm by some members of the communities. Any woman is at risk regardless of age or ethnicity. And women say that they feel powerless to stop what's happening.

Most people will know someone who's been sexually attacked. It affects everyone: churchgoers and the wider community. Yet many people believe that survivors are somehow responsible for what's happened to them. Survivors are often described by their communities as being medically and psychologically wrecked and so no longer of any value.

## The challenges

### The church's failure to act

In Rwanda, Liberia and DRC, instead of being part of the solution, Tearfund's research found that the church has largely been part of the problem.

Very often it's remained silent on the issue of sexual violence. It's closed its eyes to the very real problem that is within its four walls as well as in the wider community.

In doing so it's failed the communities that it's meant to serve.

'Religious institutions are undermining women,' says Vicky, a survivor of sexual violence in DRC. 'They do not see women as important and they do not see a role for them.'

Worse, when some clergy do speak out they can often just add to the stigma experienced by people who have been raped. In the research in DRC many pastors say that domestic violence and sexual violence within marriage should be kept a household secret.

Many clergy aren't willing to speak out on the problem, so in general there's little leadership about how to address the issue, how to care for survivors or to challenge the convention that women are men's sexual possessions.

Yet despite the church's failure, in all three countries people still want the church to speak out. They are waiting for its leadership and practical help.

If the church breaks the silence, it will enable them to talk about what happened too. But so far, most church leaders and members see addressing sexual violence as being outside the church's mandate. In most contexts, it's not perceived as the church's concern.



HEAL Africa has been working for many years, providing emotional, medical and practical assistance in collaboration with local churches. Photo: Richard Hanson/Tearfund.

“The church has no decided strategy on dealing with sexual violence. The church is a mere observer. We pray. That is all we do”

Charles, Rwanda

“Churches do know what is happening. But when it comes to doing something, they are lethargic”

Xavier, DRC

### A glimmer of hope



Young women receive basic education at the HEAL Africa facility in Goma, Congo. Education is an integral part of recovery for victims of sexual violence who have been ostracised by their families and home communities. Photo: Melanie Blanding.

It doesn't have to be like this. In Rwanda, churches generally support survivors of sexual violence, providing prayer, counselling, comfort and training on the issue.

Sometimes they provide more tangible support, for example by cultivating land, carrying out repairs to homes and giving financial allowances.

Witness what's happening in Goma, a town in the DRC to which tens of thousands of refugees fled at the time of the Rwandan genocide. Here, Tearfund partner HEAL Africa has been working for many years, providing emotional, medical and practical assistance in collaboration with local churches.

In Goma the church is reported to be 'supportive and compassionate'. 'The church contributes to our internal healing,' one survivor said.

Eight-year-old Katie is awaiting surgery from Tearfund partner HEAL Africa in DRC. She can't have the surgery until completion of treatment for the sexually transmitted diseases that she contracted during her attack.

She's been with HEAL Africa for three months and has learned to read. It's the first time she's attended school.

But there are hundreds of thousands of people just like Katie needing help. Despite the church's silence so far, they are looking to the church to take a lead in speaking out on sexual violence and helping its survivors.

If the church is to fulfil its mandate to protect and serve the vulnerable, it now has to rise to that challenge. This is a challenge for the church not just in Africa but throughout the world, for sexual violence is present everywhere.

# The church's role

## The untapped potential of the church

When asked, people told Tearfund's researcher that the church had more potential than any other organisation to address sexual violence effectively.

'The church is the only reliable social network within poor countries,' a community leader in Rwanda told Tearfund.

'People cannot go to the cinema or a club in order to find a space where they can get away from their problems. The church is all they have. Also, many people no longer have family left. The church becomes their only source of "family".'

### Restoring 'hope for life'

A number of rebel groups are active in the Democratic Republic of Congo, particularly in the east of the country, and serious atrocities against the Congolese people continue. The government has proved unwilling to act against these rebel groups, resulting in impunity for war criminals and indifference to sexual violence against women.

Violence against women and girls is one of the most destructive consequences of these conflicts. It has become a weapon of war used by both rebel combatants and governmental militias. Even the presence of UN forces has not guaranteed women safety from the danger of rape.

The Anglican Church of Congo has been deeply moved by the situation and has responded with sympathy towards the suffering of women and girls. They have established an Association of Women known as the UFPPS (Women's Union for the Advancement of Peace in Society), which works in collaboration with the Mothers' Union. This ministry aims to give back to Congolese women their 'espoir de vivre' – their hope for life.

UFPPS works to prevent sexual violence through raising awareness of laws that punish rapists; they campaign against violence; sensitising men to prevent violence occurring. Churches use the Word of God to bring about spiritual transformation – including men who carry out sexual violence.

UFPPS helps women to reach a health centre within 72 hours of an assault to receive preventive treatment for HIV. However facilities and financial support for treatment vary. For example, within the Diocese of Kindu, of 651 women tested after rape, 372 had contracted sexually transmitted infections. Of these, 250 received primary care, but a lack of finance meant that the remaining 122 women received no medical treatment.

UFPPS also challenges social stigma. The Diocese provides training seminars on peace and reconciliation, and the rights of women and girls. Practical action to support traumatised victims includes social reintegration, meetings to share pain and emotional release, provision of clothing and rotating micro-credit schemes for those able to work.

The Anglican Church of Congo faces considerable challenges in this ministry:

- A lack of qualified staff and counselors.
- Insufficient medical facilities for treating victims.
- The stigmatisation of victims (often resulting in divorce).
- Weak legal systems which often allow impunity for rapists.
- Lack of transport to enable women to quickly reach health centres.

The Anglican church welcomes support to help us meet these challenging needs. In addition there is a need for wider advocacy work to enable the legal system to function and to demand that the UN peace mission provides effective protection for human rights and from sexual violence.

*HG Mgr Isingoma K. Henri, Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Congo.*

Churches are at the heart of communities, especially in Africa. They are full of dedicated people, driven by their faith to serve others. They are there every day of the week, not just on Sundays. So the church is ideally placed to play an active role in addressing sexual violence.

The church has the ability to reach many people in both urban and rural situations. Its reach goes far beyond that of any other institution – it is not only stable, it is trusted. This is crucial when responding to such a sensitive subject.

The current challenge to church leaders at both a national and a local level, is that the church can and should be making a difference.

### The role of the clergy

Leaders of denominations can take a lead by starting to talk about the subject, which is so often taboo. Training the next generation of clergy at seminaries in how to better understand, speak out, train and counsel on the subject will begin to create the space and openness in which people feel they can talk about sexual violence.

But local clergy can bring changes in their communities today. By working with organisations that are helping survivors and simply by speaking out they show that this is a crucial issue for individuals, families and communities. They challenge attitudes, promoting a culture of zero tolerance.

Leadership within the church can speak out and advocate both locally and nationally for policy changes and government leadership regarding sexual violence.

### The role of women's leadership

Women leaders within the church, such as women's fellowships and the Mothers' Union, also have a vital role to play in creating a safe environment for discussing sexual violence and assisting survivors. This has been noticed through experience with Tearfund partners.

In some countries, such female leaders have been documenting cases of sexual violence and seeking to bring perpetrators to justice, while offering care and counselling for survivors.



The church is ideally placed to play an active role in addressing sexual violence. Photo: Geoff Crawford/Tearfund.



Families and communities need help to raise awareness, overcoming stigma and identifying positive ways of responding.  
Photo: Layton Thompson/Tearfund.

## Stigma

Survivors of sexual violence are often marginalised in society and stigmatised by their neighbours. The research found that this is a key area that the church – with its ethos of love and community – needs to address.

For this reason, families and communities whilst sometimes responding well, cannot be relied upon alone to provide the support that a survivor needs, both emotionally and physically. They too need help to raise awareness, overcome stigma and identify positive ways of responding.

People refuse to go to hospital for much-needed assistance because they're afraid of being found out.

Children born of rape are often stigmatised, mistreated and discriminated against in the community and in their own family. The church can help tackle the stigma that blights people's lives. The church has learnt many lessons from its response to HIV and AIDS over the past few

years. Although the church is still on a journey, many of the lessons can be applied to the response to sexual violence.

It can become a safe place for people to discuss what's happened to them, to find reconciliation and restoration in their families and communities.

Pamela was raped during the Rwandan genocide and became pregnant. For a long time she admitted that she did not love the child. Later, she joined a church and as a result of the care, support and biblical teaching from the church she started loving and caring for him. But even now, though she loves him very much, sometimes when she looks at him she is reminded of what happened and she feels guilty about this.

“ Although my church has never done anything for me, I still feel welcome in church. It is a positive space for me ”

A survivor from DRC

## What can be done

### Changing lives

Sarah has seen things that no one should see: rape, torture and murder in her home in DRC.

'There were lots of attacks against people by rebel soldiers,' she says. 'They even dug holes and buried people alive. They told people to have sex with their own partners in the presence of everyone, even to have sex with their own brothers and sisters. If we didn't do that they would kill us.'

Sarah was raped several times. She survived her ordeal, but there was no one to support her or provide treatment for her physical or emotional injuries.

However, one of Tearfund's partners, HEAL Africa was working with the local church to enable them to better support those affected by sexual violence.

At first, Sarah was so traumatised that she feared that even those within the church would kill her.

Today things have changed. She's now receiving medical treatment and is awaiting surgery. The church and Tearfund's partner have been able to offer her counselling to help her overcome the trauma.

'When we have counselling we are told that we are human beings and we feel better in our hearts and encouraged,' Sarah says.

Astonishingly, the help she's received from HEAL Africa has led Sarah to forgive her attackers.

'I have a very strong faith,' she says. 'I have forgiven them. If I don't, I won't be free.'



A woman is left alone at Panzi Hospital's (DRC) ward unit for victims of sexual violence while Bijoux, 13, waits quietly in the background. Bijoux arrived alone at the hospital after being gang raped on her way to her grandmother's house. Photo: Melanie Blanding.

## Conclusion

**The church needs to act. It can no longer remain silent on the issue of sexual violence.**

It can do so in three main ways:

- 1 Speaking out
- 2 Helping to change entrenched attitudes
- 3 Providing practical care for survivors of rape

### Speaking Out

By speaking out about the issue, clergy will make sexual violence a concern for their own congregations and the whole community. Clergy at all levels can speak out, at international, national and grassroots level within communities.

Clergy and church members need to understand the types of sexual violence that happen or have happened in their area and know where survivors can go for medical, emotional, practical and spiritual help.

### Changing attitudes

Changing attitudes to sexual violence is a long process, because it means changing the culture that allows rape to happen in the first place, and those attitudes that stigmatise the survivor rather than the perpetrator. Another key task is to challenge, change and provide alternatives to entrenched attitudes related to gender, specifically around the role of men and behaviour stereotypes.

Bible studies, sermons and teaching materials could all help to change these distorted values. These materials need to be developed or adapted for local use to suit the context.

Small groups could study biblical values such as love, fidelity, justice and compassion. This can facilitate discussion where groups can reclaim and lift up positive cultural attributes that have been lost.

Addressing the attitude of the clergy is vital in all of this. Most church leaders are influenced by the same cultural values as the rest of the community, including colluding with a taboo on discussing sexual violence and stigmatising its survivors.

But clergy with a different set of values could become role models for their communities. They could promote care and support for survivors and lobby their governments for new laws about sexual violence, including pursuing justice with regard to the perpetrators.

### Practical Care

Survivors of sexual violence need both immediate and long term medical care, as well as psychological care.

If they're abandoned by their family, they may need financial support, or legal aid if the case goes to court.

The church can help with all of this, particularly if it works with partner organisations that specialise in these areas.

In the long term, an ecumenical and inter-faith movement will be most effective in achieving this, working across all denominations and religions, cutting across political and cultural divides.

International organisations can support churches on the journey they need to travel. They can bring specific expertise that the church may lack, such as training church and community members or providing medical help.

**In the past, the church has largely failed victims and survivors of sexual violence. If it is to fulfil its mandate, this has to change, now!**

**The church must work to end sexual violence during armed conflict and in peacetime, stand up and speak out to ensure sexual violence will no longer be tolerated, no matter what the circumstances.**

### Using biblical stories to break the silence

The United Nations has estimated that 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 worldwide have experienced sexual violence – with significant consequences for their future well-being. Education can play a critical part in increasing awareness of the impact of sexual violence against children. Schools, including faith-based schools, can help young people to avoid violence and empower girls to live free of violence and abuse.

In eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), The Baptist Community in the Centre of Africa (CBCA) have taken the issue of sexual violence very seriously, particularly that targeting children. In this area of DRC, approximately 75% of schools are run by churches. CBCA runs over 400 schools and over 100 training centres in North and South Kivu provinces. The church has mobilised its members and the teachers, pupils and parents of its schools to become key players in the fight against sexual violence.

CBCA organized a five-day training workshop for 40 of its staff involved in education. Materials developed by South Africa's Tamar campaign on violence were used to enable extensive discussion of a shocking story of rape in the Bible (2 Samuel Chapter 13). This enabled participants to reflect on the silencing of women who have been raped, cultural issues around rape within communities and the difficulty of bringing justice. They brought great dignity, honesty and sometimes painful or costly responses to questions concerning deep-seated cultural attitudes to sexual violence.

In response, participants decided that the greatest need was to challenge the current understanding of church members concerning sexual violence. They set out a declaration calling for those in authority in church and government to speak out about sexual violence and to develop policies to address the issue in schools. Within weeks of the workshop, words were turned into action. CBCA's Bishop announced the formation of a high-level group to address issues of sexual violence targeting church schools. In many areas, teachers benefited from workshops and training concerning life-skills and education about sexual violence.

The scale of sexual violence committed against children around the world means that actions to address the issue can feel like drops in the ocean. However, combined action by institutions, including government and churches, can have a significant impact upon the problem. If similar approaches like that of CBCA took place within Africa's thousands of churches and church schools, their impact could be considerable.

*By Revd Dr Michael Beasley, Dan Ochieng, Isaac Muyonga and Yvonne Kavuo. Adapted with permission from a report in Practical Theology, Equinox Publishing Ltd 2010*

The Baptist community has also engaged with high ranking soldiers in the Congolese army, itself implicated in some of the worst cases of rape, in its attempts to stamp out the culture of sexual violence in eastern DRC. CBCA has organised training on topics including sexual violence in an attempt to get the army to address its own behaviour.

*Adapted with permission from Christian Aid case study*

**“Violence against women is never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable”**

Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General, 2008