

#SilencelsNotSpiritual

Breaking the Silence on Violence Against Women and Girls

We are experiencing a *kairos* moment—a window of opportunity to bring healing in the world and in the church. The rise of the recent #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements have compelled us to examine our own beliefs and actions concerning the state of women.

Fundamentally, we understand violence against any individual, regardless of their ethnicity, creed or gender, to be a matter of our Christian faith. Genesis 1: 26 declares that all people are made in the image of God, both men and women. Women are equally called and created with the full potential and capacity to steward the world. All abuse disfigures human dignity and distorts the image of God.

Therefore, violence against her is violence against God.

Evidence of physical, sexual and psychological harm—ranging from sexual harassment and assault to trafficking and rape as a weapon of war—is on the rise. Globally, **1 out of every 3 women** have experienced physical and/or sexual violence and 200 million girls are missing. According to a 2016 Center for Disease Control **report**, 1 out of every 5 women in the U.S. have experienced rape or attempted rape. Forty-four percent have experienced some other form of sexual violence, including: sexual coercion, unwanted sexual contact and non-contact unwanted sexual experiences. Among women who have experienced rape more than 28 percent report it happened between 11 and 17 years old. Twenty-five to 85 percent of women in the workforce report that they have experienced **sexual harassment**. Yet, 75 percent of harassment victims experience retaliation when they speak up while 95 percent of reported incidents go unpunished. At the intersection of racial and gender violence women of color bear the disproportionate **burden**. 43.7 percent of African American/black women, 37.1 percent of Hispanic/Latina women, and 19.6 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander women have experienced rape, physical, violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner. Native American women are most likely of all women to experience violence in their lifetime (**84 percent**) and on some reservations they are murdered at 10x the national average. Finally, when disability, gender identification and social stigma is considered, rates of violence increase dramatically for all people.

For too long the voices of women and girls who suffer violence have been marginalized, ignored or silenced. When women anywhere are harassed or assaulted, we are all violated. When girls anywhere are forced into servitude and slavery, we are all enslaved with them. When women anywhere become weapons of war, we too become weapons.

Violence against her is violence against us.

We face an urgent and defining moment in history. As Christian women leaders, we recognize those in the churches who stand with and support survivors of violence. We are thankful for their example of holy and just relationships. Following their and others' faithful witness, we choose to rise and speak up. We will not retreat from the pain in our midst. Women of all faiths, races, cultures and backgrounds are bravely breaking their silence, yet many in communities of faith do not match their bravery with action. Instead, feeling the problem is too pervasive, they have acquiesced, leaving whole churches and communities paralyzed.

But doing nothing is not acceptable. Silence is not spiritual. And action is not optional. This moment in history is ours to steward. We are calling churches, particularly those in our stream of the Christian faith—Evangelical churches, to end the silence and stop all participation in violence against women. We call our pastors, our elders, and our parishioners who have been silent to speak up and stand up for all who experience abuse. There is no institution with greater capacity to create protected spaces for healing and restoration for survivors, as well as confession, repentance and rehabilitation for perpetrators.

To this end, we, as women elders and leaders, issue a call of action to end violence against women. Throughout the Christmas season—symbolic of God's incarnation among the suffering—and culminating on Easter Sunday—symbolic of God's victory over sin and oppression—we call Evangelical churches into two streams of action:

1. To **stand with** *women who experience violence*. A call to solidarity by making space for women to break their silence in our congregations and communities. Recognizing each woman's inherent dignity, we call on churches to create protected spaces where survivors of violence can offer their stories, as they choose, and where the body can receive these stories with empathy, love and care.

2. To **stand up for** women who experience violence. A call to advocacy, repenting of our silent ascent to systems, structures, and practices that harm our sisters. We desire to spark action at all levels affecting the lives of women. We call the leaders and influencers within the greater faith community to action. We invite the Body of Christ to adopt a genuine willingness to repent where we have failed and to fight both systemic and individual injustices in our midst.

Called by faith, compelled by love, and committed to the promise that women will live free from the terror of violence, we, the undersigned, invite you to join this historic moment, an awakening of repentance and reconciliation, sparking genuine change in the very place we call our home—the local church.

Note: Go to www.SilencelsNotSpiritual.org for a list of Initial Signatories