



EWI Fellowship Research Programme

**THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE CHURCH IN PREVENTING
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

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Biography



Biljana Petkovska MA¹ was born in 1968. She finished her elementary and secondary education in Skopje. In 1971 she achieved a BA degree at the Eastern Orthodox Theology Faculty in Skopje with the topic “The Church as a Factor in the Education of Children”. Later, she enrolled in post-graduate studies in the area of national history at the University “St. Cyril and Methodius” in Skopje where she defended her MA thesis “Bitola Theology Faculty ‘St John the Theologian’ 1922-1941”

In the period 1991–1998 she worked as a technical editor in the Department of Education of the Macedonian Archdiocese. Following that she was employed as a religious teacher at the Temple “St Dimitri” in Skopje. Since 1999 she has been working at the Eastern Orthodox Theology Faculty in Skopje, first as a Chief of the Registrar’s Office and later as a Faculty Secretary.

She has participated in numerous international scientific and ecumenical forums and meetings of young Christians throughout Europe. In addition, she has taken part in different interreligious gatherings in Macedonia that aimed at promoting women-believers in Macedonian society. She has cooperated with EWI since 2019.

¹ I would like to express thanks to the Organization Ecumenical Women’s Initiative from Omiš, Croatia, which enabled the publishing of this study. In addition, I’d like to underline that the use of “gender” in the research paper is considered as a binary category.

Abstract

The Eastern-Orthodox doctrine indicates an overall equality of men and women in terms of their status, values and dignity. (Genesis: 1,26-28; Gal. 3,28). However, the abuse of the patriarchal cultural stereotypes throughout the history until today, provides grounds for gender-based violence against women and, at the same time, for its justification. Such practices are a consequence of customs and tradition and not of the authentic Eastern-Orthodox teachings. This statement has been clarified in this paper by applying the Christian-Anthropological method, the method of proof as well as the historical method, that provide for an observation of the problem from different aspects, both cultural and religious, as well as social-political. Furthermore, this research paper analyzes the origin and the development of gender-based violence against women by applying the analytical method, while providing adequate alternatives as potential contribution of the Eastern-Orthodox Church in preventing this type of violence.

Keywords: *violence against women, gender stereotypes, patriarchate, religion, Eastern-Orthodox Church, Eastern-Orthodox doctrine.*

1. Introduction

Modern lifestyles tend to establish violence more frequently, on a larger scale and more deeply in all its different forms, circumstances and environments. We are witnessing on a daily basis, innumerable outbursts of violent behavior among families, at the workplace, and on the streets. Violence represents a serious social phenomenon and consequences from violence can be fatal, to a great extent. Although the phenomenon itself can be extremely complex and it always requires a contextual definition, nonetheless, at the very beginning, I would like to point out the basic problematic aspects of this phenomenon in society.

The term violence itself has been considered as one of the most frequently used terms in public discourse. (Dietrich, Mayordomo 2005, 11). Violence has been defined by the World Health Organization as intentional use of physical force or power against oneself, another person, or against a group or community which can either result in, or has high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (World Health Organization, 2002, 14). Certain female and male authors believe that violence, in its essence, represents an anthropological anomaly which is often divided in two categories: possibility and ability on our part to harm the other and the contrary perspective, the possibility and ability of another person to hurt us and commit violence against us. In the sphere of psychological-social research, this phenomenon is considered as part of human nature and is not subject to any special preconditions (Fischer, 2013, 13).

The spectrum of societal-social phenomena that can be nominated as violence is rather extensive. The forms of violence such as: terrorism, murder or physical assault against another person, are extremely well known. However, there are other forms of violence that are present in the everyday lives of people. Here, we are talking about social, psychological, economic or verbal violence. Considering that this is a complex phenomenon, violence by the rules can affect several spheres of the life of persons who are victims of violence (according to Cornell and associates, 1996, pp.785).

Violence should be recognized in all of its forms. Thus, the following can be considered as types of physical violence. For example: hitting, beating, strangling, pushing, slapping, threats to

use weapons or use of weapons, stalking a person, hitting a person with hard objects, isolating a person, deprivation of medical drugs, preventing a person from seeking medical help, forced drug abuse, breaking, damaging, stealing, not permitting the partner to leave, and the like.

The psychological violence can be expressed as verbal threats, humiliation, use of offensive words, constant criticism or degradation of the victim, yelling to scare the victim, blaming, obsessive jealousy, abuse and threats to cause harm to victim's children, including threats of self-harm by the aggressor.

Different types of economic violence include prohibiting a person from taking a job, compromising the job of the victim by creating conflicting situations at the workplace, on the part of the aggressor, controlling the income, bank accounts and property of the victim of violence, taking victim's income, forging victim's signature, etc.

Under sexual violence we consider unwanted touching, humiliating remarks about the body or appearance of the victim, criticism about victim's sexual past, coercing victim into sex or sexual activities with the aggressor, rape, coercing victim into sexual intercourse with other persons, exposing victim to sexually transmissible diseases, unwanted sadistic sexual activities, etc.

A special type of violence is the one directed towards female and male members of certain social groups, where the basis of intolerance of the perpetrator of violence is a certain trait, usually their "difference" in relation to the group to which he/she belongs. Male and female feminist authors point to the fact that gender-based violence, such as the one directed towards the largest vulnerable social group on the planet, from the standpoint of its motif, is the most detrimental of all types of violence, since it dwells on the abuse of widespread and deeply rooted patriarchal patterns permeated into various aspects of life and of humanity nowadays. This is the reason why the emphasis of this research study is placed on gender-based violence against women and the role of the Macedonian Eastern-Orthodox Church–Ohrid Archdiocese in preventing this type of violence in the Republic of North Macedonia.

1.1 Gender-based violence and violence against women

In recent years we can often hear discussions about violence which is gender-based in its essence. However, it does not necessarily mean that it concerns a “new” type of violence, unheard of, in the history of humankind and typical uniquely for our epoch. On the contrary, gender-based violence has been present in every single epoch. (Fischer, 2013, 83).

Most often, women are the ones under attack from gender-based violence, being subject to all kinds of gender-based violence with a special emphasis on psychological, social, economic, verbal, physical and sexual violence². This naturally raises the question of the origin of gender-based violence. According to Perovik-Ivanovik, the core and elementary problem that leads to gender-based violence is the historic injustice of women and men not possessing the same social powers (Perović-Ivanović, 2021, 14).

This led to complete prevention of women advancing equally with men, in all spheres of social life – a form of discrimination, through which men exhibited their dominance in society.

Social power that was in the hands of men allowed them to impose their own interests, solutions or changes which in certain cases resulted in different forms of discrimination, as well as violence against women who were considered as “the gentler” sex. This is a regular occurrence in the patriarchal matrix of stereotype gender roles and abuse of power (Bahlieda, 2015, 17).

Nowadays, violence against women on a global level is considered a serious form of human rights violation and, as a result, in 2011 the Council of Europe has adopted the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Family Violence (i.e., The Istanbul Convention). In addition, in 2011 the Republic of North Macedonia has adopted the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence, where violence against women and gender-based violence are treated as special phenomena of violence. (Official Gazette of RNM, 2021, 1).

²According to the research report: “*Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women*” of the UN Agency for gender equality and empowerment of women UN Women, it is estimated that globally 81,000 women and girls were killed intentionally in 2020, more than half of them (47,000 or 58%) died at the hands of an intimate partner or a family member, which equals to a woman or a girl being killed in their family house, every 11 minutes. (<https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures#notes>).

According to this Law *“violence against women has been defined as violation of human rights, discrimination against women and it refers to all acts of gender-based violence which can result in, or may result in physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering of women, including direct and indirect threats or intimidation to perform such acts, extortion, arbitrary limitation or deprivation of freedom, in either public or private life” (ibid. 2).*

“Gender-based violence against women is violence directed towards woman, because she is a woman or is disproportionately affecting her. Gender-based violence against women encompasses the causes and the effects of an unequal balance of power between women and men which is a result of social, rather than an individual problem.” (ibid.).

The same Law defines family violence as: *“harassment, insult, threats to safety, bodily harm, sexual or other psychological, physical or economic violence that causes a feeling of uncertainty, intimidation or fear, including threats of such acts, towards a spouse, parents or children...(ibid.).*

The Law mandates the state administration bodies, local self-government units and other competent institutions to implement the prescribed obligations and regulations, nevertheless gender-based violence, in all its forms, is a daily occurrence in women's lives. According to a survey conducted by OSCE on Violence Against Women in North Macedonia, almost half (45%) of women have experienced some form of intimate partner violence (physical, sexual and/or psychological) since the age of 15, while every third woman (30 %) has experienced sexual harassment. The data demonstrates that more than 80% of victims of domestic violence are women. The prevalence of violence against women in North Macedonia is significantly lower than in other European countries, which indicates an existence of fear and shame of reporting and mistrust in the institutions. It is also worrying that three times more women think that domestic violence is a private matter that should remain within the family, compared to women across the European Union, while a significant number of women think that some "minor" violence is considered normal behavior...

Sexism and sexist behavior are associated with violence against women and girls, with acts of "everyday" sexism being part of a continuum of violence creating an atmosphere of intimidation, fear, discrimination, exclusion and insecurity, thus limiting the opportunities and freedoms of women and girls. Gender stereotypes and prejudices shape norms, behavior and expectations of men and boys leading to sexist acts. Stereotypical traditional beliefs about the place and role of women and men at home and in society are still predominant, which represent an obstacle to women's advancement in almost all spheres of private and public life. Men are still considered dominant at home and in public life, while women are expected to put their own personal and professional needs and ambitions as secondary and devote themselves first and foremost to the household. There is a significant number of women (37%) who believe that a woman should submit to her husband, even if she disagrees, while a similar number (32%) believe that it is important for a man to show his partner who is in charge. Also, every third woman expresses doubt about the statements of other women who have reported harassment or violence (OSCE, 2019, 13-21).

The data of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy in North Macedonia show that the number of women-victims of domestic violence has doubled in the last four years. From the analyses of the Ministry, it can be seen that the number of victims in 2018 was 919, of which 665 were women, while in 2021 their number increased to 1,608, of which even 1,190 were women. Most of them experienced some forms of physical or psychological violence. The Ministry of Internal Affairs has similar data, whose reports show that the largest number of victims are wives, followed by parents and children. The report states:

“The most common victims of domestic violence are women – 77%, and in terms of family relations with the perpetrators, in 38.5% of cases the victim of domestic violence is the wife. Most of the criminal acts or 85% were committed by using physical force or threat, while 7.4% of violent acts were committed by weapons and in 11 cases in 2021 firearms were used” (Paskoska, Petrovska, 2022).

Out of the data available in the literature, it is not clear whether the number of cases of gender-based i.e., family violence has increased in the quoted period, since it is definitely more

common compared to the period prior to 2018, or whether the victims, encouraged by the Law, tend to report violence more often. This kind of suspicion prevails in the entire region and wider, since it is practically impossible to identify it or to prove it.

Hence, we can indisputably draw the conclusion that there is a need for more comprehensive and structured care and protection of victims of domestic violence in the Republic of North Macedonia and in order to ensure that, it is important to raise awareness among citizens about this problem, undertake collective responsibility and specific measures aimed at preventing and protecting the victims from violence.

That is why we demand responsibility for reducing the risks of violence and protection of women from all local and national institutions, including churches and other religious communities in North Macedonia. As part of society, churches and other religious communities have a responsibility and therefore a duty and an obligation to identify gender-based violence and to confront it. They should send out a clear message about the unacceptability of violence and express serious commitment to systemic changes that can lead to an adequate, timely and comprehensive response to this problem.

1.2 The Christian View of Gender-Based Violence and Violence Against Women

The Christian view of violence is quite clear: every form of violence is considered as sin against human dignity, which is God-given to every human being. In terms of violence against women, Christianity considers it as direct sacrilegious act against God who was born of a woman. Hence, from the woman's body came the salvation of humankind. Therefore, the way we treat women is the way we understand being humane.

According to the words of Pope Francis, “the woman puts life into her heart and thanks to her gifts a better world and peace are being built, that is why we should protect her dignity” (Pope Francis, 2020) Moreover, in the same address to his believers, the Pope emphasized that despite

the fact that women are the source of life³ they are often disrespected, being constantly insulted, beaten, raped, forced into prostitution and in killing the life they carry in their wombs.

The increase in cases of violence against women contributed to making this issue a recurring topic of discussion in church parishes. How should the Christians react to gender-based violence against women and violence against women in the family? How should the believers who are victims of violence be counselled and how can the Church help them? The goal of this research study is to contribute to a better understanding of the teachings of the Bible about building healthy relationships between women and men and how to prevent violence against women. We are all called upon to recognize the prevalence and seriousness of violence, by compassionately responding to those who are exposed to it, while offering selfless assistance to the same through practical and spiritual support.

2. Biblical Perspective on the Worth of Every Human Being

The first Chapter of the Bible says that all people are created in the image of God and shall have the same dignity and worth in the eyes of God:

“God said: “Let us make man in our image (and) after our likeness. And let them have dominion... So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1, 26-27; see also: Genesis 5,2-3; Acts 17,25-26; James 3,9)

Hence, all believers are expected to respect each other, to honor one another and to contribute to the well-being of every human being. The Apostle Paul, on the other hand spoke to the Romans:

“Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom, 12, 10; see same: Rom. 15, 1-2; Gal. 6.2 Col, 3, 12-13).

³ In Christianity the birth of the Messiah is a gift to all people. The ability to give birth as a source of life is a special gift of women, however not the only reason for which women should be valued.

There is no bias nor discrimination within Christ on the grounds of social class, financial status, gender or race. The Holy Apostle Paul explains this in the following Biblical citation: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3,28). We are called forth to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesus 5,21) and since we have the power of the Holy Spirit, these high standards of mutual relations are possible to achieve (according to Gal., 5.22 Col. 3,8 4,5)

Such interpersonal relations entail everything we have to leave aside: rage, anger, maliciousness, slander, swear words, as well as those we should be striving for: tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (according to Col. 3,5-10) These expectations were addressed by the Apostle Paul to all Christians, which means that both women and men should equally strive towards the same.

The Holy Testament proclaims perfect love, one that we are called forth to attain in all our interpersonal relations:

“Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice, but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance... Love never ends”
(1 Cor. 13, 4-8).

It is important to emphasize that this kind of unconditional love that the Holy Scriptures teach us does not mean tolerating violence. God did not create us to live with violence, to suffer violence or to commit violence. The women, on the other hand, have equal rights to life without violence. “God questions both the righteous and the ungodly, and His Soul despises those who enjoy violence” (Psalm 11,5) Does the woman destroy the family and the holy matrimony of the marriage, by leaving the aggressive partner or is the family destroyed by the violence itself? Is God judging the woman who leaves her husband because of violence, or is he judging the violence per se? God wants us to live in peace and compassionate relations. Faith should build us to be open

to love and not harshness; to be gentle, not cruel. Since “In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all others” (Rome 12,5).

3. Biblical–Historical Perspective of Gender-Based Violence Against Women

This Chapter discusses the abuse of power in patriarchally structured society throughout the centuries as one of the causes of violence against women and, at the same time, for its justification. There is a summary of independent non-contextual and ideological interpretations of certain citations from the Holy Testament that under the influence of the Patriarch present the woman as “relational being”, hence she should consider it her privilege to be attached to her husband’s destiny. This raises the question whether the inferiority of women can be attributed to her own character or to the sociological conditions that have not changed for thousands of years?

3.1 The Patriarchate as Biblical Concept

Upon the first reading of the Old Testament, one could easily notice a number of narratives and chronicles of everyday life in ancient Israel where the patriarchate was extremely predominant and represented the only form of governing not only within the family, but also in social life. However, this is not only the case in ancient Israel, but also of all patriarchally structured societies. It concerns a social-culturological system in which a certain number of men represent power and authority over the rest of the community consisting of men, women, children, as well as slaves. (Sals, Frau, 2006).

The Patriarchate being well established in ancient Israel, started being applied as a key element in other cultures without any difficulties. Thus, the model “pater familias” started to be introduced in ancient Rome, according to which the eldest male in the family represented the head of the entire family. The subject matter is much more complex than it appears. The man, as the head of the family, had the right to decide on the activities of all other family members. For example, the father was the one to decide on the person his daughter would marry and, following that rule, his word was the decisive one, in the entire process. (Lehner, 2001).

The system constituted in this manner was passed down from generation to generation and was understood as completely common and normal. However, according to modern-day thinking, the main problem of this archaic system is not its sexual-ethical aspect, but rather the concept of slavery.

3.2 Male-Female Relationship in the Bible

The complex anthropological topic of the male-female relationship in the Bible is extremely important for the development of theology and it occupies a special place in it. Namely, at the very beginning of the Old Testament and the first Book of Moses we can read that this relationship has a central position in the Book of Genesis, where it says that “in the image of God he created Him, male and female he created them” (Gen. 1,27) without making any distinction between the two. The question that is often raised is the necessity to have two different sexes in the creation of man, a question whose response lies in the necessity of a relationship, in the specific case, the relationship between a man and a woman.

Further on, we can read that man and woman were created for each other, to help each other (Gen 2, 18-20) This concept can be considered extremely accurate in day-to-day male-female relationship. It is important to note that, although men and women were created different in terms of their role in society, they have a common goal: that is establishing a relationship between two equal human beings, both created as equals according to God’s image and likeness.

Nevertheless, the marital relationship and the matrimony of men and women are not a result of human wisdom, but of God’s omnipotent wisdom that has initiated this relationship with the final goal of establishing a communion. From its early beginnings, the relationship of men and women has been perfectly conceived and specifically highlighted. Man and woman should become one flesh (Gen.1,24), to jointly cultivate and manage the land. These are the fundamental Biblical concepts that formulate the male-female relationship (compare: Jovkovska, 2021).

As we know already, the fall of the man brought unrest on earth and simultaneously it started disrupting the initially perfect communion between the man and the woman. The perspectives have

been distorted, thus under the influence of Greek philosophy woman was no longer equal to men. The relationship started to lose its original conception. (Dietrich, Mayordromo, 2005, 41).

3.2.1 Is there a Theological Justification of the Submissiveness of Women in Relation to Men?

The theme of having theological grounds for the submissiveness of women in relation to men, especially in marital union - a relationship which in its essence should be founded on love, is a complex one. Knowing the Christian principles, this theme should not be a topic of discussion at all, however, certain historical-societal situations and contexts require a response to it.

The Bible points to the fact that man and woman were created according to the image of God – created to help each other without any pretenses of demonstrating power over each other. This definition should serve as the basis for all future theological interpretations about the male-female relationship.

Nonetheless, the role and influence of various culturological-social events can be noticed in the development of certain theological considerations that in fact, intend to emphasize a relationship in which the woman is submissive to the man. (Jonhson, 2006, 145). The different God-like representations in the Bible, the church services, and including subsequent Christian literature have played a great role in emphasizing the superior role of the man. In the Bible, it is easy to recognize that God has been always presented in the male gender, which to some could serve as grounds for supporting the argument of woman's inferior position in relation to man. (compare, Moga, 2019).

Certain theological interpretations started to be incorporated in the everyday life of the Church. Quite contrary to the initial teachings of the Bible, throughout the history of Christianity we can often notice periods during which the woman was not considered to be created in the image of God. It is quite obvious that these statements which pretend to dwell on theological grounds contributed to the loss of the position of women in social life (compare Anic 291-292).

Here we can easily raise the issue about the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ was a man. It concerns a historical reality that has to be respected and it is extremely important, as are his race,

social class, ethnic affiliation, culture and religion (Jonson 2006, 145). The disputable statements come from the circumstances that are under the deep influence of the patriarchal system and not of Jesus himself.

The fact that Christ was a man is not problematic in itself. What is problematic is the self-evident situation where men are less likely to have Jesus as their role model: men who in their daily life would demonstrate Christ's manner of serving the other and would demonstrate an active affirmation of love (same, 151). Here, we can notice whether we are talking about followers of Christ or simply followers of the patriarchal concept.

3.3 Biblical Teachings on Preventing Violence Against Women

The Bible testifies that the prophets were boldly spreading the word of God throughout the world. God has summoned them to disclose the evil in the world, to pray and to contemplate certain issues. The prophets called forth men and women to question their attitudes and to change their behavior. Although the prophets were often rejected by the people, they remained faithful to their assignment. The same model applies to modern-day Christian leaders.

We have to understand the conditions in our society, to recognize its sinfulness to turn to God to enlighten us on how to prevent violence against women. I do believe that the Church as a community is fully aware of the seriousness of this problem – of the physical, social, economic, psychological and spiritual damage inflicted upon women who suffer violence. Very often the Christians do not know how to react when a woman is subjected to violence.

In spite of this, the call for Christian compassion, as well as action, is clearly described by the prophets such as Jeremiah: "Spread justice early in the morning, redeem the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor" (Jer. 21,12). This is the moment when we have to profoundly explore what is said in the Holy Scripture, since a number of women who were subject to violence have become its victims due to non-proclamation of the biblical truth. That is why it is of paramount importance to dispute the misconceptions about the statements in the Bible related to violence against women.

The Bible undoubtedly condemns violence. There are many Biblical paragraphs that speak about beating, violence, rape, incest, stalking, lying, distorting the words of others, threats and intimidation. The Bible says that humiliating behavior is full of serious consequences. God would not tolerate external pious actions concealing quarrels and arguments and would not hear prayers of the people who act in this manner. (Compare: Isaiah: 58,4 and 1 Petr. 3,7).

4. Eastern-Orthodox Perspective on Gender-Based Violence Against Women

This chapter raises the question of the close connection between the patriarchate and the Eastern-Orthodox Church. In continuation, there are two more sub-questions raised which are essentially linked to the central question. Namely, the public standpoint of the Eastern-Orthodox Church against gender-based violence and on the other hand, the abuse of the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition aimed at justifying the existing gender-based violence.

4.1 Eastern-Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate

Basic knowledge of contemporary attitudes and the positioning of the Eastern-Orthodox Church in society are sufficient to easily perceive the obvious identities and the degree of self-evident connection between the patriarchate as a system and the Orthodox Church. The culturological-social developments in certain historical moments contribute to the patriarchate securing its strong position in the predominantly orthodox environments. Hence, the self-evident connection between the patriarchate and the Eastern-Orthodox Church. In its essence, the question of the connection between the patriarchate and the Eastern-Orthodox Church has its equivalent, among other things, in the question of the role of women in the Eastern-Orthodox Church. The paradox is self-evident, although the majority of those who attend church services are women, their active role in the Church is still in a phase of stagnation. This position strengthens and keeps alive the patriarchal set-up of the Orthodox Church. If we go one step further and start thinking about the possible solutions through which the patriarchate would cease to be a part of the daily life of the Church, we will notice that the situation becomes even more complex.

The canonically established patriarchal structures in the Church are responsible for the order and possible changes in it. As such, only these patriarchal structures had the power to change things through the affirmation of Eastern-Orthodox women in the Church (compare: Kizenko, 2013, 596). Here, another paradoxical situation appears as problematic - the position in which the patriarchal structures have the last word in resolving the question of the place and role of the Orthodox woman in the Church (ibid., 598).

As I mentioned before, we need to make a clear distinction between the values of the patriarchy and the values of Christ. The first stage, in the final comprehension of this distinction, is the need not to equate these two concepts. The patriarchy as an ideological concept, which in its essence has the demonstration of power, and the concept of Christ which in its essence has love.

4.2 The Position of the Eastern-Orthodox Church on Gender-Based Violence Against Women

Due to the extensive number of violent acts committed on the territories where the majority of the population is Orthodox-Christian, the Eastern-Orthodox Church often proclaims its categorical position on condemning violence.

Nevertheless, raising the voice and confronting gender-based violence is not common nor a customary phenomenon. Since the very beginnings we have concluded that the violence against women is a common phenomenon in the Macedonian society, however there are no sufficient adequate measures undertaken to prevent the same. Gender-based violence is present in our everyday life and can be committed by both sexes. In this context, there are no prejudices. Still, the empirical research shows that the largest number of gender-based violence cases were committed against women. (OSCE, 2019). Hence, gender-based violence deserves a special attention in the pastoral activity of the Church, through the simple, yet essential Christian message: love and violence do not go hand in hand. True love excludes violence (compare: Antic, 2010, 200-202).

Nowadays, we can hear wise voices that have a good understanding of the subject matter and try hard to emphasize this problem by using the power of authority they have in the society. More recently, this has been the case with the Serbian Patriarch Porfirij who openly condemns this

act of violence, while stressing that every human being represents an icon for the Church. In order to emphasize the role of women in the Eastern-Orthodox Church, the Patriarch takes into consideration the Holy Mother, who is the most respectable and most dignified figure among all humankind.

This is a proof, continues the Patriarch, that the Eastern-Orthodox Church perceives each woman, mother, sister or daughter as a Godly icon. (Patriarch of Serbia, Porfirije, 2022). By saying this, the Patriarch identifies the main problem – the problem which is in fact present in every type of violence. This is the instant when we forget that the other, in the specific case, the victim of gender-based violence, is an icon of God. At the very end of his loudly outspoken and revolutionary speech the Patriarch stressed that those who consider themselves Orthodox-Christians cannot be perpetrators of such acts and that by committing such acts they inflict additional wounds on Jesus's Body. I sincerely hope that other religious leaders will follow the example of Patriarch Porfirij and that they will publicly address the believers more and more often, condemning every act of gender-based violence against women.

4.3 Is there a Theological Justification of Violence Against Women?

In accordance with the fundamental Christian principle – the love, the question of the theological justification of violence is pointless. However, historical and contemporary doubts point to the fact that the Church should loudly and publicly proclaim its position in relation to gender-based violence against women. Since the early beginnings of Christianity as well as during its later development, we can come across some interpretations of the Bible that have ideological grounds and the tendencies to be presented as authentically Christian. In such cases, there is a direct abuse of the biblical motifs, in order to make certain violent acts legitimate, in the name of God (compare: Jäger, Werkner, 2018, 6). Quite often, the target of such interpretations are the epistles of the Holy Apostle Paul who emphasized the role of women on several occasions, not only in the Church, but also in social life. Here, I have to point out that the problem is not in the epistles of the Apostle Paul, as such, but in their interpretation. The interpretation gives life to the written word and, as I mentioned, certain interpretations do not always aim to present the truth, per se. (Magda, 2020, 64-90; 104-152).

That is the case with the frequent interpretations of the First Epistle of the Holy Apostle Paul to the Corinthians. One of the open-ended questions here is the head covering of women during church services. Still, if we read this part of the Apostle Paul's epistle in its historical context, we can truly understand its narrative and at the same time resolve the misunderstanding implied in it. Namely, in the Judeo-Christian context, in the Apostle Paul's era, loose hair was seen as a non-hygienic habit. Therefore, during their daily routine, Jewish women observed the habit of wearing their hair tied up, usually in braids. (compare: Schüssler, 1983, 284). This is just one example where we can notice that it concerns an extremely practical advice, bearing no intention of humiliating the woman.

The claims that the family, by the rule, is the sanctuary for all family members can lead to misperception that women should endure domestic violence, taking Jesus as an example who, although innocent, suffered on behalf of all of us. Hence, the woman should by all means try to save the family and the marriage, especially for the sake of her children, believing that her husband is going to convert through her suffering. (see Luke 4,28-30; John 8,48-59; 10,39; Mark 3,22-30). It is true that the Bible talks about justice being served for those who suffer as Christians and refuse to renounce their faith. Yet, the well-known paragraph about suffering from the First Epistle of the Apostle Peter is addressed to those who suffer as Christians during the persecution and not to those Christians who allow themselves to be unjustly abused (see: 1 Petr. 2,18-19; 4,14-16). Although Jesus was ready to give his life to ensure the redemption of the entire humankind, in other instances he protected himself from cruelty, slander, fraud, verbal and emotional abuse.

Another misperception is that the woman who is married to an aggressor should pray more zealously in order to "resolve" the abuse, since it was considered wrongdoing if she were to leave the marital union.⁴ If the marriage was estimated as primary and the safety of the victim as secondary, it might suggest that the woman herself was inflicting the violence. Naturally, the healthy recovery of non-functional marriages is welcome, however if the aggressor refuses to change, the wife who is abused is obliged to protect her own life and the lives of her children. Such protection shall be enabled by other adult members of the family. The best option for violent

⁴ Marriage was granted to unite man and woman as one flesh in perfect union. See Genesis 2:24 and Eph. 5.31.

relationships is to put an end to the violence, since the family in which the aggressor is the one who “rules” is not a safe place for its victims.

Therefore, it is important to emphasize that Eastern-Orthodox Christians who are prone to a correct and authentic reading of the Bible, should read the Bible in a synchronic manner, or more precisely, to read the Bible as a whole. This is the only way to avoid the selective collection of biblical citations with the only purpose of providing arguments for one’s own personal standpoints and ideological beliefs (compare: Behr, 2017).

5. Modern-Day Perspectives of the Eastern-Orthodox Church

The fifth chapter illustrates specific examples of the pastoral role of Eastern-Orthodox women in the church. The central part of this chapter presents the thoughts of some of the Macedonian Eastern-Orthodox Church hierarchy where we can notice the clear position on the role of the Eastern-Orthodox woman not only in the Church, but in the society as a whole.

5.1 The Voice of the Eastern-Orthodox Church against Violence

Although the theological archives testify to a large number of Eastern-Orthodox statements against the acts of violence, I would like to present here the common position of the Eastern-Orthodox women on the violence in the world, with a special emphasis on the violence in Eastern-Orthodox communities.

The common statement dates from 2019 and it is quite unique in its content. (compare: Sauca, Mihoc, 2022, 107). At the very beginning of the statement, women emphasize their indisputable role in the Church and stress that they are also part of Christ’s Body. Any person who commits gender-based violence or any other act of violence inflicts new wounds on Christ’s Body.

Furthermore, the statement illustrates the pastoral role of Eastern-Orthodox women in the modern world, through specific examples, especially from the point of securing peace, justice and stability in the specific communities. In the section where they share personal experiences, one can notice that the voice of the Eastern-Orthodox women was extremely important for the pastoral

restoration of the Albanian church, in building peace and education for the youth on daily basis (ibid. 111).

The proposed initiatives and the recent experiences shown in the report, confirm the importance of the female voice in the modern-day religious society and recognize the role of Eastern-Orthodox women in building peace and tolerance.

5.2 The Role of the Eastern-Orthodox Church in Combatting Gender-Based Violence

The position of the Macedonian Eastern-Orthodox Church regarding any type of violence is extremely clear and well known to the public in the Republic of North Macedonia. Whenever there is a need to respond to a certain violent act committed against an individual or against a group of people, the Church is one of the first institutions in the country to present its position in public. This is another example out of many where the Church proves to be a true representative of the Evangelic message of non-violence and love for all people.

Although the topic of the Church's position against violence is indeed extensive and requires a separate study, nonetheless, in this paper I would like to point out several examples from part of the clerical hierarchy of our Church, in which the role of women in the Orthodox Church is clearly emphasized. The indicated homilies affirm women as active and equal members of the church community who contribute to the well-being of the Church and the society, equally with men.

Hence, for example, we can often read about the role and the place of Eastern-Orthodox women in Church's life, in the homilies of our Archbishop from Ohrid and Macedonia and of Justiniana First, G.G. Stefan. In the very beginning of one of his homilies, the archbishop emphasized the role of women, not only in the life of the Church, but also in social life.

Furthermore, the archbishop speaks with exaltation about the courage of the women – the courage they manifested during the most tragic moments in the life of our Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. Through this act, women have reaffirmed their commitment towards truth and justice. In the script of the Archbishop we can further read about the importance of women for the Macedonian Eastern-Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archdiocese. According to the words of the archbishop, the savior's myrrh was transferred to us by God-fearing Lydia, who converted herself

and let her home become the first temple on the Balkans (compare: Archbishop Stefan, 2019, 52 and 54).

The role of women in child upbringing in the spirit of Christian religion, is indisputable. This was stressed by the archbishop himself. He gives examples from the lives of the Saints where we can recognize the important role of women, pointing to the lives of those women who were dignified to become saints, as well as to those women who are equal in dignity to the apostles. In addition, the archbishop preaches about the Macedonian myrrh-bearers, women who pray to God, day and night, and who are active participants in the daily church services in the Macedonian Eastern-Orthodox Church. (ibid., 55).

The scripture of Metropolitan Naum written only several years after the bishop returned from Sveta Gora is extremely important for the Macedonian Eastern-Orthodox Church. In his spiritual contemplation “On Clergy and Women” we can come across authentic Christian positions about the role of Eastern-Orthodox women originating from his personal experience in the church community. It is important to note that Bishop Naum writes revolutionary paragraphs where women are portrayed as the image of God from an ascetic-theological point of view.

It concerns a time period in which we can rarely find scriptures that elaborate the theological aspect of the role of women in the Eastern-Orthodox Church. There are two notable aspects in his works on the male-female relationship: the relation in Paradise, before the firstborn sin and the relation in the mundane world, after the firstborn sin of Adam and Eve took place. (compare: Metropolitan Naum, 2002, 161). In continuation, in his spiritual script the bishop writes about another interesting relation. That is, the relation between love and hierarchy. By citing the spiritual tradition of the Eastern-Orthodox Church, the bishop teaches that where there is love there is no need of any hierarchy. (ibid, 162).

It is worth emphasizing that in the homilies of the Archbishop and Metropolitan the dogmatic aspect is not left out, which reaffirms the role of Eastern-Orthodox woman in the Church. The homilies emphasize the role and the significance of Virgin Mary – the new Eve, for the Eastern-Orthodox theology. Namely, in the Eastern-Orthodox theology, apart from the typological connection between Christ and Adam, there is the same typological connection of Virgin Mary and Eve. Christ is represented as New Adam, since via Him a new generation of humanity is being

born, generation that is given another chance. This new creation has the opportunity via Virgin Mary – the New Eve, to break the chains in which humanity has fallen due to the disobedience and the complacency of the first Eve. (Matzarioti-Kostara, 2017).

As church leaders publicly emphasize the importance of the role of women in the Church and society, I believe that it is important for them to condemn all forms of violence against women even more loudly and openly, in order to make it clear to the believers that it is unacceptable both in this world, and in the Kingdom of God. Thus, they can actively contribute to putting an end to the silence which additionally discourages women who suffer violence. When there is silence about gender-based violence and violence against women, it reinforces the idea that it is normal and acceptable just because it is a common occurrence.

Concluding Thoughts

Religion is personal and institutional reality in the lives of the majority of the population, so it is not surprising that religious teaching provides a significant context for many women when it comes to experiences of victimization as a consequence of gender-based violence. Through their scripts, traditions, teachings and doctrines, churches and religious communities are conveying their values and belief systems to their believers. The religious scripts and teachings can serve as resources for preventing gender-based violence against women, but they can also help women who have experienced violence to find security and support during the medical treatment process.

Nonetheless, religion can also be misused to justify or condone violent behavior. Female religious believers, as well as non-religious women who suffer violence should have access to resources for advocacy, community shelter, support and counseling. The churches and the religious communities can contribute to the protection of victims through information, shelter, support, comfort and protection. On the other hand, churches and religious communities are obliged to raise their voices against violence, since it is contrary to everything that represents the basis of Christianity, but also the ethics of other religions: love, respect, mutual respect, acceptance, cooperation and doing good deeds.

The religious leaders can use their positions to assist in structuring the debate on the issues related to violence against women. It is also an imperative that secular advocates and councilors take into consideration the religious identity of women who experienced gender-based violence in order to reach out to the clergy and find resources to advocate for these women. When the Church and the religious communities are “someone” who uses their capacity and unquestionable authority to prevent violence, it is a mission that both heaven and earth rejoice over!

After carefully researching the literature on how the church can contribute to the prevention of violence against women, I would suggest the following guidelines:

The first one refers to the clergy and that is, information: its absence, as well as the inability to recognize signs of violence, can increase the risk of violence against women. The second guideline is, as mentioned above, to put an end to the silence by openly raising the issue together with believers, listening to the victims and offering support from the Church.

Thirdly, maximum spiritual support is needed for women, children, the old and weak who are subject to domestic violence as one of the types of gender-based violence. Fourth, greater attention should be paid to the prevention of violence against women. The church, in cooperation with the state institutions should be committed to develop programs on changing the prevailing mentality that leads to perceiving domestic violence as something normal, only because it is a common phenomenon. I do believe that the church leaders as the proclaimers of God’s teachings in the contemporary society and by means of their authority in the same, can help overcome gender-based violence against women, which still represents a serious problem in the society.

In the end, I would like to point out that prevention of violence is only possible by an upbringing in the spirit of non-violence within the families, in the schools and in society at large. Christian ethics, as the basis of such upbringing, can contribute a lot, whether it concerns children’s upbringing in the family or through the study of values in favor of a non-violent and non-discriminatory society.

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