

GRACE KICONCO-SIRRAH - UGANDA: MY STORY

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My story starts with an insertion of my faith commitment and professional context which have influenced my undertaking of human dignity, gender and development work. I am a Christian Gender, peace and development worker in the criminal justice system and community. Secondly, I do peace and development work because I hate humiliation, discrimination, stigmatization, alienation and all the violence they breed. I am engaged in processes by which explicit connections are made between belief and practice and I let this inform my human dignity, gender, peace and development practice. I understand my faith as needing to be alert to the challenges faced by the poor and marginalized people in their traditions, religious and political institutions. My faith is concerned with the tension between what I believe and what I do about what I believe. I try to have my actions as concrete manifestations of who I am and what I believe. My story is divided into the following, my early childhood and the violent structures that impacted on it, some of the humiliation I suffered and how it informed and influenced my current work over the years and some summarised case studies of programmes I have undertaken.

Early childhood and gender discrimination

As early as my childhood memories can go I was aware and hated humiliation, discrimination, stigmatization and alienation. I always saw unwritten signals of 'you are not doing the normal thing, you don't belong to the right group or you are not conventional and I interpreted it as a putdown, humiliation or violence against me'. I remember sometimes resisting the treatment, running away from it, pretending that it was okay and be nice or just be quiet or occasionally gave my side of the story.

Religious power impacted on my life through the institutional alienation which was from a Church stream that stigmatized children born out of wedlock as illegitimate because of misinterpretation of scriptures. I ended up not being part of my mother's or father's congregations at an early age and I later joined another Church stream altogether. I saw my mother not take Holy Communion in her Church because she did not wed in the Church and had produced out of wedlock. She however, continued to love and serve in the same Church. My father however, continued to have Holy Communion in his Church as the Church did not get to know that he had produced out of wedlock since I was staying with my mother until the age of 12 years. The concern for me is that there seemed to be an evil "mark" that alienated us and it was common knowledge and prevailed that none of us could dare get near the sacred things like baptism or Holy Communion until such a time when we were old enough or the right people. This was not the case with other children whose parents were wedded in church. Baptism in adulthood was not the problem, but the fact that this was not the same treatment with other children of our age was the point of discrimination. In fact in the church I joined later people are baptized when they are grown up and that is for all members.

The Church institution used the scriptures to affirm its discriminating behavior. My sister was told that a verse in the Bible was used to stop what was referred to as bastards (Deut. 23:2) from being baptized in the Church. I experienced the love of my mother and she had taught us that God loves us at the time that I did not care whether there were any other judgments wherever as long as God loved me at that time that was enough for me.

At the age of 13 years the Church I joined was of a Pentecostal stream and back home, in Uganda; and among some other Christian traditional denominations it is not among the very 'respected' Christian denominations. In Uganda it is stereotyped as the 'breakaway' papyrus churches that snatch people from other congregations and make a lot of noise. Despite that, I was happy to be part of it because I had made the decision to belong there and was accepted. I continued to get spiritual guidance and inspiration from some of the leadership of the very traditional Churches that did not help then when my story was swallowed up in the illegitimate children. I have got spiritual support in the prison, criminal justice, restorative justice, reconciliation and development work from Anglican, Catholic and Pentecostal prison ministers and criminal justice workers and in the latter part of my work from faith communities that uphold a nonviolence testimony who have mainly included Quakers/Friends and Mennonites.

I was baptized in my father's Church (Anglican) when I was twelve, but inside me I knew I was not going to be Anglican since they had refused to baptize me earlier and all I knew up to that time was the catholic faith where my mother took us. Since I could not change the way I came into this world, I relied on my mother's words that God loves me as some hope against hope. I left the Anglican Church when I joined a secondary school at the age of 13 years and joined the Pentecostal Church.

Most of my father's neighbours did not know me when I joined him at 12 years of age so I could be introduced as the first daughter that was produced 'outside' since most people knew my younger siblings from 'inside' (Wedded Mother) and I was the new comer. I didn't like the description but that is how children born out of a given marriage are called in my tribe and most parts of Uganda.

I have also been discriminated because of my gender like many women in Africa and other parts of the world. We were economically poor with my mother and whatever little she earned from her poor paying job she paid for my school fees and our upkeep. I did not experience glamour in my childhood but my mother's love seemed to reduce most of the suffering I would have experienced. The assumption of homogeneity among the marginalized often hides a lot of inequality and oppression and households in Uganda are also not homogeneous. In my case, while my mother had become the head of our household and she gave us socio-economic and spiritual support, culture dictated according to her that I live and belong to my father's people, religion, language and tribe. So if my father declared that he was ready to take me I should be ready to go to my true home. This happened when I was twelve years of age as stated above.

When I got married I was an alien in my husband's tribe as we come from different tribes with my husband. We worked on the differences ourselves to reduce on the alienation from our relatives. There were however occasions when people from my tribe or my husband's tribe spoke the dialect that kept

the 'outsiders' out. I would feel humiliated especially in my home when people spoke what I did not understand just to keep me out when they had a communicating language that united us.

I have had an opportunity to write my 'outsider' story as the 'subject' and not 'object' of my story and to have my story told by me and written by me is transformative. I take this opportunity of writing my story very seriously for I have found many marginalized people that I work with like me needing to share their struggles themselves from their perspective to be heard. My work has given me opportunity to be in the spaces where prisoners, victims, women and the poor have space to share their experiences of humiliation, discrimination, alienation and faith.

Doing human dignity, gender, peace and development work has therefore been for me standing together with the oppressed. However as we stand together we need to be aware of the contradictions that are imposed on us by our differences. These may be of culture including gender, religion or tribe. There is still need to work on educating ourselves, not labeling and demeaning each other or doing anything that disempowers us.

Continuation to respect the human dignity of all human beings continues to be inspirational in my work. The experiences of AVP'ERS (alternatives to violence-AVP) around the world who have tried to advocate for more humane prisons in their nonviolence approach to power and to life, capital (political) offenders like Mandela (former president of South Africa 1994-) the icon of reconciliation, condemned prisoners of Luzira prison, Uganda, in 1998 who were singing as they faced the gallows, the inner change programmes by prison fellowship international, the Kwa Zulu, Natal Phoenix Zululand rehumanising project and the myriad successful projects by nonviolence proponents are some examples of affirming the dignity we all share.

I end my point of inception with the words of my old mother when her last daughter finished college as a way of emphasizing that together we can bring out the message of human dignity, nonviolence and justice in the areas of oppression. She said (paraphrase) "I have invited you all so that I can thank you and identify with you. There are good things, which have happened to my family and me because you stood with us. As I look around I see women who were despised like me, who accommodated me and went hungry for a cause. Our children have now finished school and we can now rejoice. We rejoice not because we are 'powerful' but because we worked together. This made us irresistible and enabled us to rejoice today. God's power worked for us and as we joined our work to God's work we were able to go forward." As those elderly women shared their stories of struggle we (children) found ourselves moved to tears. Thank God it was tears of joy.

I offer my personal story as a way of reminding myself and those in the work of human dignity, gender and development and peace and development that restoring human dignity and justice and doing peace and development where violence is systemic and manifests at individual and community levels; while we have been there for some time and other friends were there before us; it is still in its early stages with a lot yet to be done in analysis, reflection and action.

My Work

I have discovered that it is easier for leaders of faith communities to listen and make changes if these are founded in their beliefs. Working for the last twenty six years as a training and development director for Prison Fellowship Uganda and later for Prison Resource Mobilisation and management Centre programme has put me in contact with criminal justice officials, local church leadership, and Peace and development NGO's or workers, leaders of various faith communities that work among prisoners, victims of crime, ex-prisoners and prisoners' families. I have interfaced some of the challenges of women, offenders, victims, the poor rural communities, the affluent in society through multicultural Alternatives to Violence Project initiated by Society of Friends and other restorative justice training programmes that I have carried out in prisons and community in Uganda. This has driven my desire to work for a social theological peace and development framework for reflection and response to humiliation of offenders, victims, women and the economically poor.

As a trainer in Alternatives to Violence, mediation, reconciliation, HROC, development, gender, theology and development I encountered with violence suffered and perpetuated by prisoners and other people which opened my awareness of untold stories of people struggling to be human that need to be told by the women, the prisoners and the poor themselves not as objects but as subjects of their own stories. I have also been a mobiliser of NGO's and faith communities in an attempt to get them involved in supporting women, prisoners and the poor in rural communities materially and spiritually. I have been inspired by the resilience and faith that these marginalized groups have portrayed through their religious activities and formation of fellowships and social meetings despite their violence experiences. They handle stigma they experience in the institutions, at work places, at church and in their resettlement and reintegration which inspire me by their willingness to live their lives again despite life challenges.

I have learnt through my work that the struggle to be human and to belong when excluded faces most human beings if not all but not in the same way as some groups of people or individuals wield power while others seem to be denied the expression of their power and humanity in life. The stories of women, the poor or prisoners which are power loaded terms have often not been heard. Their stories of faith and struggle to survive as human beings have also often been ignored.

I have also discovered that criminal justice and development work do not often connect. The little connection that has been there has mainly been in how to protect the good people's business and property from being destroyed by the 'bad' people and not necessarily how to reduce the factors that favour crime and eventually stop some of the 'bad' people from being bad in the first place. Gender and development work has raised some of the overlooked information on crime and development by highlighting gender violence situations, Theology and development work seems to be raising several issues of peace and development like gender, land, poverty, justice and recently HIV and AIDS but also this work has left connection between crime, criminal justice, restorative justice and development in the background. Prisoners', women's and the poor's dignity whereby their life, freedom and equality are addressed to bring some peace to them are still a challenge. There is still great need for a continuation of the wider human dignity, nonviolence, mediation, restorative justice, reconciliation and development

work to humanize the dehumanized, and the recognition of the powers that dehumanize so as to engage these powers.

I have been aware and continue to be aware that some of these alienating relational powers tend to inadvertently present themselves in a compounded manner. I have experienced a combination of social, economic and religious excluding powers in institutional, cultural and gender packages, often with one type feeding into the other power. It is not a particular person against one but systems/structures like family networks, the Church and the institutions. For example, the Church, as a locus of ideological and institutional power, did not address any of the alienations I suffered as an 'outside daughter' and in some cases negatively fuelled the situation through her creeds. I am concerned that prisoners, women and the poor too face compounded alienations.

Summarised case studies

AVP WORK

In 1998 I was asked by the Mennonite Central Committee - MCC country directors if I would be happy to introduce Alternatives to Violence- AVP in a maximum security prison where I was doing some group and individual counseling work. I accepted and we did a basic workshop and that turned out to be the beginning of human dignity and nonviolence responses at individual level done by individuals and communities in Uganda through workshops to address various humiliations in their lives.

AVP in Uganda, like in many countries, is a volunteer, grassroots peace building program. It has its beginnings in USA prisons and has since spread in communities in USA and abroad. Worldwide AVP is done in schools, prisons, communities and conflict zones.

In Uganda we started in what we called Shalom House. Quaker Peace and Social Witness -QPSW, Mennonite Central Committee-MCC, Leggart Trust in UK and individual peace builders were the early sponsors of AVP. This was done in prisons-men and women, women who had been raped (hope after rape), among ex-combatants (COVEMA), catholic nuns and brothers, rural communities, school children and rural communities in Uganda where I participated. The program gained momentum after the prisons and ex-combatants conducted workshops among ex-combatants in Northern Uganda and around the country, Kampala communities and prisons around the country. It has been a time of sharing and experiencing transformation from expected and unexpected places and moments.

I was later asked by a GTZ Consultant who was working in the newly started peace and conflict programme at Makerere University to do a basic AVP workshop and together with him and another facilitator from Eastern Uganda we did a basic workshop. After a TOT workshop many students were interested in AVP training and they spread this to Northern and North Western Uganda. The Makerere students and former students have since continued to invite me to facilitate workshops that they have organized either at the University or with other peacebuilding organizations. The

ripples go on and on and some of them I will never know but will continue to feel good that they are going on and somebody out there was able to find some alternatives to violence in a violent world.

Uganda has participated in two International Gatherings; in Oxford United Kingdom and then in South Africa in 2011 and Narciso Bangirana one of those trained at Makerere University, recently; 2014 represented Uganda in an international AVP gathering in the Republic of Ireland. Under the leadership and coordination of the people I trained hereby listed starting with me: Grace Kiconco, Patric Teko Samson, Narcisio Bangirana, Joseph Olowo Sirrah and Esibo Simon Omaada; there have been over 200 workshops since AVP inception in 1998. These workshops have been in prisons, Universities, war torn areas, among victims of gender violence, religious leaders, ex-combatants and various other communities. AVP in Uganda has over 100 experienced/ lead facilitators and significant numbers apprenticing. This does not include AVP workshops which have been done in eastern Uganda particularly by the Bududa group and Teso group which I know are doing a lot of good work in schools and communities.

WOMEN PRISONERS RESPONDING TO ANGER CONSTRUCTIVELY

We did several anger and response to it workshops using art in several places in Northern Uganda and in prisons. Here are some highlights of some women prisoner's experiences of violence and humiliation. Many of these were also related to their gender and in dealing with the institutional violence there is great need to address the gender violence roots as well. Below are some of the experiences that women themselves shared of how they responded to anger as told by themselves. The names below were adjectives the women prisoners gave themselves to feel good about themselves.

Promising 2050 : She was angry after quarrelling with the husband and threw herself in water with her children. They had been quarrelling and the husband was becoming too abusive for her. They were rescued and did not die but she was later imprisoned. Whenever she gets angry she first rests in her bed as a way of calming down.

Keen 2052-2056: She was happy in her home but the husband got involved with another woman and she was chased from her home. She felt like fire was burning in her head because of much anger and the humiliation she suffered being replaced. The headaches remained for long time whenever she remembered her home and children. She however found ways of calming down in prison by joining friends to prepare the place of worship, by putting chairs in place before a prayer service and singing in the Church.

Nice 2057-2061: She was angry with her children and would quarrel and beat them. She sent them to the mosque to learn good manners. She realized that her children were happy and playing with other children. This calmed some of her anger towards her children because she realized that her children did not have rotten manners but she was pushing some of her stress on them. She made a basket as a way of calming down as it occupied much of her time and shared seeds she kept there with her children.

Compassionate:2067-2071: She was mistreated by step mother and was angry and helpless most of the time. Out of much anger she left home and joined a bad group. The group pressure influenced her to

drink too much and have several boyfriends. She calms down her anger by going to a disco or dancing to some lively music.

Gift 2077-2079: She was angry and felt like there were mountains growing in her. She calms down by playing with her children.

Noble 2081-2084: She was angry after quarreling with her husband. The husband beat the child instead. She decided to put water in her mouth as a way of calming down.

Josyln 2086-2089: Her life had many experiences of anger particularly in the family. One way of calming down was by playing with her children. She goes to pray when she feels angry as a way of calming down.

Lucky 2090-2095: When she gets angry she goes to dig, plays with her children and she will be going to church in future as a way of calming down.

Natukunda 20103-20106: When the police came to arrest her the whole village was in disarray as she first hid herself. She is angry in prison when she thinks about her children who must be loitering the village. She will go to a solitary place as a way of calming down.

Tongirwe 20107-20108: On arrest the whole world seemed to have turned upside down. Her ways of calming down anger include going to collect firewood, going to church and picking flowers.

Katusime 2115-20120: For her when angry ways of calming down include going to dig. In prison she calms down while sharing with friends and dancing.

Dear 22122-2125: Dropped out of school and was taken in by a boyfriend in marriage at an early age. She was angered by the same boyfriend when he got another girl and dear got to know. In great anger she fought with the new girl friend and she was arrested.

Komuani 2148-2151: She was happy in her home with all family around her. Ways of calming down in prison include playing netball with guards. She also gets counselling and reads the Bible as a way of calming down.

Koru 20152-2156 : Used to see mother fight with father when she was young. She left home and started staying with a Reverend who taught her to read the Bible. She never had formal education and was angry with father. She was grateful that she could participate in education using art. She will be finding a solitary place as a way of calming down.

Mediation by prison authorities, making baskets, going to sleep and listening to radio were some of the other ways that other prisoners would use to calm down. All this was done by drawing pictures

THE HROC (healing and reconciling our communities) WORKSHOPS IN GULU

I coordinated the first Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities - HROC training in Gulu on behalf of AGLI (Africa great lakes initiative) and later I was also trained as a trainer in Rwanda after which I trained others in Rwanda and Gulu in 2014 and 2015. I don't know if I have come to terms with the pain that people

shared in Northern Uganda and Rwanda during HROC workshops. The resilience they have to continue with life demonstrated that different type of power that the poor, marginalized and women have demonstrated again and again that enables them to survive and overcome. The relationships of kinship of all kinds were central in most of the experiences shared.

Northern Uganda is resettling after over two decades of brutal Lord's Resistance Army war led by the Joseph Kony who used terror that displaced the entire population into Internally Displaced People's Camps. Joseph Kony built his army through forceful abduction and indoctrination of children. Official statistics estimate about 30,000 children in Uganda were abducted by the Lord Resistance Army (LRA). Most of these children either served as fighters especially the boys or were given as wives to Commanders especially girls. As child soldiers, many of the children were forced to commit atrocities in their own communities in pursuit of Joseph Kony's spiritual propaganda.

After years of cruel, inhumane treatment in the bush, many of the children escaped from captivity, lacking the basic skills for survival and traumatized by their experiences/atrocities they were forced to commit only to a hostile reception from the community they were alienated from through forceful conscription; a community still fresh with memories of the atrocities committed by their own children and still pursuing revenge for the losses they incurred in the hands of the child soldiers. The children that many of the young mothers return with from captivity are classified as evil and the Formerly abducted persons – FAPS, discriminated in society, forcing them to live in isolation and desolation.

The Healing and Rebuilding of our Communities –HROC in Gulu was a response to the above situation and Africa Great Lakes Initiative financially supported facilitators from Kenya and Burundi to do the first HROC workshops in Gulu. Koro subcounty was the starting point. The area chosen (Koro sub county) had shown a lot of trauma in people who exhibit a lot of signs such as; torture, madness, lack of sleep, thinking of suicide and committing it. For instance there had been high rates of suicide particularly in the area of Koro kal. The incidence of suicide in this area was 60 deaths in a period of two months only! This was too high for such a small area (subcounty). There was also a very high rate of madness in the area with almost every family having someone who is at least showing critical signs of Depression and trauma. People in this area do not care much about the world around them as they do not see how it connects to them. They do not see the children of the returnees as their own children there by leaving them to support themselves.

MEDIATION AND RECONCILIATION WORK

I have trained mediators in prisons and communities and I have also trained trainers in reconciliation who do their work in prisons and community and among child offenders. I have mainly watched role plays of true stories during training and like all the other peace building work I have done; it has been inspiring. I have also shared stories of those in the field after the training we have done together and the experiences are encouraging. Communities however, still do not to balance the child's responsibility and the parent's intervention. They continue in some community mediation by the local council situations to have most compensation, while rightly done by parents, children are not given enough opportunity to

share their side of the story. There has been restoration of human dignity in some humiliation situations which is a great encouragement.

HUMAN DIGNITY, RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT

I repeatedly see, hear and feel real life among prisoners as their true humanity is depicted in their sincerity, hard work and kindness; virtues that some would least expect among such people when stereotyped. I have just completed some work in 10 prisons where we have shared with prisoners some ways they can restore their human dignity, shared experiences of restorative justice prisoners know and their development experiences and plans. They shared great experiences and plans that they hope to put in place for economic empowerment and moving humiliation stories especially in their childhood. I am still compiling the report. It was a learning experience for me and my life resonated with theirs as they shared their early childhood discriminations and alienation.

I also remember working with a group of thirty women, whose partners were in prison, on income generating projects. The smiles, the beauty, the courage and the money that helped them make some decisions they could not make before was worthwhile the project. This was funded through connection with a lady who was a wife of a diplomat from Denmark. It was worth the effort. We were not able to help more but the 30 we worked with were a real encouragement and sign that poverty and oppression can be rendered not permanent.

Most of the restorative justice work I have done has been in training of trainers in various restorative justice work. My husband has done more of the actual mediations and reconciliations. I was once asked to present a paper on restorative justice during a prisons staff welfare officer's workshop and was amazed to hear from a senior welfare officer about 10 years later that it was from me that he first heard of the term restorative justice.

GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

Lecturing to priests from various Christian denominations in Theology, Gender and Development was a dream come true. It gives me pleasure to share with clergy some of the ways the church has frustrated its own objective of sharing life in its fullness with all its people ;particularly women and the poor. Some of my former students have been an encouragement as they have shared some of what they are doing with our lectures; what gender and development programmes they are introducing. I am reminded of one Bishop telling me that " if our children; both girls and boys do not learn what can help them now and in the future they will be rendered irrelevant...if they remain in the traditional roles of men or women they will be out of place because they may not get those women who only stay at home to wait for the husband to supply her needs" In a recent concluded lecture, on my student proposed in his essay that the Church needs to repent the sin of men's subordination that humiliates women, even spouses that men live within the same house. It was profound to hear that from a priest.

The benefits to me and to my Organisation from attending the conference,

When I get the opportunity to attend I will share my experiences from the conference with my colleagues. This will benefit us a lot as we shall put in practice what we can that is applicable to our situation and is good practice.

The writing of my story and documentation of it will give visibility to our work, our organization and as it will make the stories of the people we work with be heard.

I am positive that some people may learn from our experiences, professors may want to do research or write stories about our work, individuals or groups may want to respond to the issues we raise or know how to address the challenges we face.

It also feels good to know that we are not alone. There are people out there who are involved in similar or related work of human dignity and reducing humiliation. This will encourage us to continue in our work.