

Church Discipline as Virginity Testing: Shaping Adolescent Girls' Sexuality in the Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Africa

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Abstract

Church discipline for falling pregnant out of wedlock is in practice discriminatory as it effectively affects girls than boys in the majority of cases. This article seeks to explore the role of church discipline in the Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Africa in controlling and shaping adolescent girls' sexuality. The church teaches about abstinence before marriage to both boys and girls. However reality as evidenced by pregnancies in schools by adolescents and the high rate of new HIV infections attests to the failure of the message of abstinence. The message of abstinence implies that the church views virginity until marriage as a sign of purity. The Lutheran churches' church discipline and subsequent process of public absolution to adolescent girls who fall pregnant out of wedlock is considered by this study as a form of virginity testing that is practiced by the church in order to control and shape women's sexuality at an early age. This qualitative exploratory study is non empirical however some empirical research is taken from participant observation research that was conducted during an earlier research project. The study seeks to present a meta-narrative analysis of the Lutheran church discipline process as a gendered power issue used to control and shape adolescent girls' sexuality. Findings of this study are that the Christian church's emphasis on abstinence is in fact a focus on virginity as a form of purity which is a way of controlling and shaping women's sexuality since in most cases girls are the ones seen seeking for absolution after giving birth. Those who make them pregnant are not usual visible. This way, those who seek for absolution are no longer virgins, ideally implying that those who have not fallen pregnant are still virgins and pure. Findings of this study are

evaluated through African women's cultural hermeneutics and hermeneutics of suspicion.

Keywords: Adolescent girls, Sexuality, Virginity Testing, Christian church, Church discipline

Introduction and Background of Study

Religious traditional practices that are oppressive to women are resilient to the multi-disciplinary approach to the transformation of socio-religious, political and cultural gender based oppressive tendencies. Despite so much research and information on the evils and ills of gender based violence, the practices are still shockingly resilient. African women's studies and gender studies may feel that they have exhausted research on traditional and cultural practices that harm women and girls, but reality is that, these practices are still being implemented in some religious spaces. The Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Africa (hereafter the church) is an accomplice in implementing gender biased practices that contribute to 'the restriction of women rather than helping them to develop. Women are taught to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others and, in doing so, disappear into the background' (Dreyer 2011:2). The Church shapes women's sexuality as early as their childhood and adolescence stages. Virginity is highly valued as sign of purity. However it is always the virginity of the girl child that is put to test both through church practices and traditional cultural practices.

Scholars of adolescents and sexuality studies have extensively written on perspectives of adolescents on sexuality and the factors that influence their developments (Dykstra 2013; cf. Maluleke 2007). Christian churches value virginity as a sign of purity particularly for adolescent girls. As a result, the church has a history of shaping adolescent girls' sexuality by insisting on abstinence until marriage. In some congregations adolescent girls have been identified as a group that needs to be taught about their sexuality while adolescent boys are considered knowledgeable about their sexuality (Chisale 2014). Yet these adolescent girls do not make themselves pregnant. In some cases adolescent girls are pregnant by elderly men in infamous trans-generational sex. In 17 of the church services that we visited in the process of

our data collection during absolution for public sin only girls were absolved¹. The church's disciplinary machinery seemed not to care about the invisibility of the boys and men who pregnant the girls. The pastor would have dealt with the whereabouts of the boys in private while offering pastoral counselling to the girl.

The process of absolution begins with the pastor in pastoral care to a congregant who will have been involved in public sin. The congregant should be able to realise their public sin and feel contrite about it. This happens in private. The pastor can then go on to offer the congregant a choice for public or private absolution. In the majority of cases congregants in Lutheran Churches apt for public absolution to overcome public 'gossip' about their known sin. However in the public confession the congregant does not have to mention their sin(s) by name. In the whole process the emphasis is not on confession but on absolution.

In the Lutheran church, the emphasis on confession and absolution is never placed on confession—listing all the sins one has committed. The emphasis is always on absolution—the forgiveness which Christ Himself won for us by His suffering and death on the cross. In absolution we have a wonderful gift from Christ. By it we can hear with our own ears and know in our hearts that, as our sins have been forgiven here on earth by our pastor, they are just as surely forgiven before our Lord in heaven. The Small Catechism teaches us, 'Confession has two parts. One is that we confess our sins and the other, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself not doubting but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven' (The Lutheran Church in Canada).

In the absolution the role of the priest is to enable the congregant to hear the words of forgiveness being pronounced as gospel from the mouth of

¹ It must be noted that the authors of this paper are members of the Lutheran Church. One is an ordained minister while the other is a vicar in the church. This means that we are writing from an insider perspective which might affect objectivity. However we tried to remain factual based on empirical evidence of the absolution process and how it is practical skewed against females who cannot hide their pregnancies which are evidence for sexual intercourse.

the minister. The Priest does not have to be sure of the seriousness of the contrition by the congregant because even if they want to know, that is impossible as this will be between the congregant and God. Luther says:

The priest is necessarily uncertain as to your contrition and faith, but this is not what matters. To him it is enough that you make confession and seek an absolution. He is supposed to give it to you and is obligated to do so. What will come of it, however, he should leave to God and to your faith. You should not be debating in the first place whether or not your contrition is sufficient. Rather you should be assured of this, that after all your efforts your contrition is not sufficient. This is why you must cast yourself upon the grace of God, hear his sufficiently sure word in the sacrament, accept it in free and joyful faith, and never doubt that you have come to grace—not by your own merits or contrition but by his gracious and divine mercy, which promises, offers, and grants you full and free forgiveness of sins in order that in the face of all the assaults of sin, conscience, and the devil, you thus learn to glory and trust not in yourself or your own actions, but in the grace and mercy of your dear Father in heaven (Luther's Works Vol 35.15).

In theory church discipline offers a congregant who acknowledges sin an opportunity to do an introspection and meditation seeking to change from sinfulness to a holy life as expected by the Church as an agent for the will of God on earth. It becomes unfortunate as noted in our research that 50% of the pastors and all congregants view church discipline as punishment by the church to church members involved in public sin. In this case any act that goes against the teachings of the church which is publicly visible is considered as public sin. This includes such sins as being found guilty of adultery, corruption in public office or failing to abstain from sexual intercourse before marriage. In the majority of cases public sin affects boys and girls who indulge in sexual intercourse outside marriage. This usually becomes visible when the girl becomes pregnant. The public sin cannot be seen in the boy but it is visible in the girl since pregnancy becomes a sign that the girl was involved in sexual intercourse outside marriage. The church practices church discipline with the intention to reconcile the sinner to the self, church and God. Pregnancy out of wedlock is considered a sin since the 'culprits' will have failed to abstain from sexual intercourse until marriage. Therefore, females who fall pregnant out of

wedlock and males who pregnant females out of wedlock are expected to go through a process of church discipline.

This study explores how church discipline and the subsequent absolution is a form of virginity testing to girls who fall pregnant out of wedlock. The study critically explores and describes how the Christian church blindly implements virginity testing through the process of church discipline and absolution with the same good intentions as that of African Traditional Religions (ATRs); that is to protect adolescent girls from 'sin' and HIV infection. Researched and written from African women's cultural hermeneutics and hermeneutics of suspicion, this study seeks to explore how the church controls and shapes women and adolescent girls' sexuality through its church teachings of sexual abstinence enforced through church discipline.

Methodology

The observations being critically discussed in this article emerged from the empirical research that was conducted between 2012 and 2016. The research was conducted through interviews with 35 Lutheran clergy from South Africa, Swaziland, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Togo. We also interviewed 20 adolescent girls that have experienced church discipline and absolution from Zimbabwe and South Africa. We interviewed church elders, 15 male and 15 females from Zimbabwe, South Africa and Swaziland on their understanding of church discipline and absolution. In the process of data collection we visited and observed public absolutions in 21 Lutheran congregations in Zimbabwe and South Africa. We can already say that all the recipients of absolution were girls that had fallen pregnant out of wedlock. Then there was this seemingly glaring discrimination in the administration of church discipline which could be seen by the number of young women not receiving Holy Communion of which on further investigation we discovered that the young women were under church discipline.

Theoretical Focus

Findings of this study are informed by African women's cultural hermeneutics. African women's cultural hermeneutics developed from feminist hermeneutics

which emphasizes the awareness of the patriarchal bias of the scriptures, leading to a hermeneutic of suspicion. Relevant to this study, African women's cultural hermeneutics argue that the 'one right meaning of male, androcentric exegesis cannot support the desires of women to find good news in the scriptures' (Rakoczy 2004: 164). Critical and significant to this study is that African women's cultural hermeneutics stress that women must 'view the Bible with African eyes and distinguish and extract from it what is liberating' (Oduyoye 2001:11; Dreyer 2011:7) to women and adolescent girls. Religious practices can be both liberative and oppressive depending on context. Therefore, Kanyoro (2001:106) advocates that African women's hermeneutics require women to critically read the Bible in dialogue with their own cultural understanding so that they will be able to reach out to women held in bondage by it. According to African women's cultural hermeneutics any interpretation of the Bible that harms women, vulnerable groups and the voiceless is unacceptable (Oduyoye 2001:11). African women's cultural hermeneutics acknowledge that women in Christian contexts have internalized and accepted the male androcentric exegesis of the Bible and enforce it by socializing young girls and adolescents in the churches and cultural contexts.

Findings are also evaluated through the African women's hermeneutics of suspicion. According to Fiorenza (2001:176) 'hermeneutics of suspicion is concerned with the distorted ways in which women's actual presences and practices are constructed and represented in and through kyriocentric language and media'. Hermeneutics of suspicion are applied in four ways according to Fiorenza (2001). Firstly, to grammatically masculine kyriocentric (Biblical) texts in order to expose their ideological functions and power; secondly, to kyriocentric stories in order to analyze the point of view of the story, demonstrating the ideological perspective of the story and its treatment of women; thirdly, to past and present interpretations of the text; and fourthly, our common sense approach to the text which is so profoundly shaped by our social location and experiences of domination (Fiorenza 2001:176). The phenomenon such as virginity and sexuality should be interpreted and its relevance explained from the perspective of hermeneutic of suspicion.

Tracing Marks of Virginity Testing in Church Discipline

Virginity testing is a 'practice that is used to inspect the genitalia of unmarried girls and women to determine if they are sexually chaste' (Wickstrom 2008:1).

This practice is common in the sub-Saharan Africa in countries such as South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Ethiopia (Win 2004). Different cultures practice virginity testing for different reasons. In some cultures virginity testing is purely a patriarchal cultural tradition that is linked to the preparation of girls and unmarried women for marriage. In some cases virginity testing increases the value of a woman in *lobola* negotiations, while some countries revived virginity testing in efforts to reduce HIV infections among adolescent girls (George 2008; cf. Kinoti 2005). It is also true that virginity testing is practiced to check the sexual purity of a woman. According to cultural and religious constructions, seemingly, a woman's sexual purity may be defiled either by sexual penetration and or pregnancy out of wedlock. Virginity testing has been widely challenged and critiqued by gender and human rights organizations for its negative implications on the girls' health and dignity.

Since the practice of virginity testing has and is still criticized by gender and human rights organizations, it can be assumed that the church does not want to be associated with this cultural practice, yet it continues to blindly practice it through church discipline and absolution. The church does not practically and openly test adolescent girls for virginity but it practices this tradition through its church teachings and emphasis on sexual purity. The church emphasizes abstinence from sex before marriage as a way of preserving virginity and sexual purity (Chisale & Buffel 2014:292). Consequently adolescent girls live and practice their faith through protecting their virginities. In all the congregations that we visited virginity of unmarried adolescent girls was stressed in different ways. Though the church does not test for virginity physically like in African Religions, this paper argues that their discriminatory practices of separating non-virgins from virgins and pregnant adolescents from other adolescents is a way of testing virginity every Sunday.

Participant observations confirm that the Lutheran churches still practice church discipline to adolescents for falling pregnant out of wedlock and in our view this is one form of practicing virginity testing in a public humiliating form. We observed this in the congregations that we visited, and then we decided to ask other pastors in the interviews if they still practice church discipline to pregnant adolescents out of wedlock. All the pastors agreed that it is still practiced. 28 pastors said that they do not force women and adolescents who are pregnant to go through church discipline and public absolution but in most cases those who are pregnant choose to go through the

process for public reprieve. In our view this not a question of choice as it is part of the culture of the affected churches. African women's cultural hermeneutics state that adult women encourage young women to submit to church teachings so that the image of the church will be protected (Kanyoro 1996:150). This can also be viewed as a phenomenon of internalized oppression. Women take it as a norm that if they fall pregnant they are not expected to participate in the holy things of the church. Pregnancy is visible evidence of having indulged in sexual intercourse. On the other hand, the boys (at times older men) who are responsible for the pregnancies have nothing visible attached to them to compel them to go for absolution. We observed a total of 19 absolutions for pregnancy out of wedlock. Interestingly the concerned pastors who conducted absolutions and church discipline said that the issue dealing with the male counterpart responsible for the pregnancy belongs to the family and not the church. Pastors said that the church deals with contrite sinners who come forward and seek forgiveness. This raises another issue, are adolescent girls more contrite than their male counterparts or it is just an issue of the obviousness of a pregnancy and the invisibility of the boys responsible for the pregnancy?

Pastors, elders and the affected girls all agreed that everyone knows that those who have received absolution are no-longer virgins. In this sense Church discipline is a form of virginity testing as it displays those that have been involved in sex evidenced by pregnancy and celebrating those who are not yet pregnant as if they are all still be virgins. All the girls and a few elders whose own daughters have been absolved in public agreed that the exercise was humiliating and energy sapping because of the fear of standing before the congregation. In fact we discovered that the pregnant girl is suspended from active ministry and participation in the Eucharist for the duration of the church discipline which is usually equivalent to the duration of the pregnancy. According to the tradition a person under church discipline is expected to stop playing any leadership role and partaking in the Holy Communion. Participant observations also confirm that there are some Lutheran churches that still make or force the pregnant girl to sit in the last bench or 'sinners' bench of the congregation until absolution.

On the other hand, during this journey we discovered that some Lutheran congregations and pastors insist on private absolution as a pastoral care intervention by the pastor. However, change is not always easy because the majority feel that the right thing to do is to do a public absolution in front

of the congregation instead of private absolution. 11 pastors spoke about some women who encourage their pregnant daughters to stay at home and not attend church services because the girl's pregnancy out of wedlock is an embarrassment to the church and God. The girls only reappear in church when they are asking for absolution especially when the new born baby is to be baptized. In one Lutheran church it was shocking to learn that pastors do not baptize or touch children born out of wedlock. In their view, these children cannot be members of the body of Christ because they are conceived in sin, implying that they are sin in themselves. In this case the mother of the baby can receive absolution but the child will never be absolved of being conceived in sin. The motive of church discipline is to encourage girls to strictly protect their virginity which is referred to as purity.

The church encourages sexual abstinence to all those not yet married because of teachings of the Hebrew Bible, but emphasis seem to be directed to adolescent girls and single adult women. In the Old Testament virginity is firstly emphasized by the interpretations of the sixth commandment, 'You shall not commit adultery'. However this commandment is not clear as to whom it applies to, because adultery takes place where there is a commitment or marriage but observations on the implementation of this commandment proves that the church's interpretation of this practice is directed to women and adolescent girls. In this case some may argue that it does not apply to adolescents and unmarried women because they are not yet in commitment relationships such as marriage. Additionally, the small catechism of the Lutheran church that is used to prepare children or adolescents for confirmation into the church, explains this commandment in a context of marriage between husband and wife (Luther 2011:5). One may genuinely argue that this commandment has nothing to do with abstinence from sex before marriage. The Old Testament has many scriptures that highlight the value attached to the status of being a virgin (Bruce 2003:56). However we are not going to analyze them in this study. Though the Bible narrates the significance of virginity, its emphasis is on women and girls but not man and boys. In addition there is no virginity testing in the Hebrew Bible though virginity is emphasized.

African Women's Cultural Hermeneutics and Hermeneutics of Suspicion of Church Discipline

In most religions premarital sex is not accepted, with emphasis on purity of the

body. The religions that prohibit premarital sex focus their teachings on unmarried women and girls. The focus of church discipline is on those who have violated the church's teaching with a practical focus on women and girls with references to the Bible. African women's cultural hermeneutics stress that women must read and interpret the Bible through African lens and distinguish and extract from it what is liberating (Oduyoye 2001:11). The use of religion or the Bible to control women and girls in church and families has long been used by the African patriarchal societies to satisfy their male egos. This is because the Bible; particularly the Hebrew Bible and the African culture have similarities (Phiri & Nadar 2010: 224). Therefore Christian feminists link cultural hermeneutics to Biblical hermeneutics and comprehend this link through a hermeneutics of suspicion as a very fertile ground for imaginative theological reflection (Oduyoye 2001:13). Women's sexuality is at the forefront of cultural and biblical hermeneutics' reflections. This is because women's sexuality also seems to be at the forefront of culture and religion.

The Christian church informs and shapes adolescents sexuality in a biased way, the focus on sexual abstinence is enforced on adolescent girls more than adolescent boys. Just like society the church does not put more emphasis on the adolescent boys' sexuality the way it does to adolescent girls. Adolescent girls go through humiliation if they fall pregnant out of wedlock. The process of the church discipline is humiliating and infringing in a private space of adolescent girls. The trauma of experiencing pregnancy out of wedlock without the necessary support system is a challenge on its own to young women. The best the pastoral care ministry of the church can do is to give support to these pregnant girls. Rather than being judgmental the church should be welcoming and supportive.

Our observations indicate that girls and single women who fall pregnant out of wedlock cannot run away from the 'world' to the church because the church will also administer in most cases public church discipline and absolution. In heterosexual relationships a baby is made by a man and a woman or a boy and girl but in the process of church discipline, in most cases the girl is the only one who goes through this confession and the forgiveness of sins. African women's cultural hermeneutics' focus in the intersection of the gospel and culture highlight this bias, by arguing that the experiences of women in church comes with a contradiction between a sense of belonging and silencing them (Kanyoro 1996:150). One pastor explained that; 'though it is believed that both parties should go through the church discipline but boys or

men may choose to reject the pregnancy humiliating the girl even further for not knowing the father of her baby'. This indicates that some men and boys may undergo the process of church discipline on choice. The suspension from Holy Communion is mainly experienced by the woman or girl while a man who rejects the pregnancy enjoys participating in the sacrament if they happen to be in the church. This indicates that church discipline for pregnant adolescent girls is a form of implied virginity testing and like virginity testing it undermines the dignity of women and we do not see the liberative potential or anything that is life affirming from this process. Rather it destroys adolescent girls' pride and may even encourage abortion not out of choice but out of the fear of humiliation by the church. African women's cultural hermeneutics retain and promote aspects of religion or Bible and culture that are liberative and reject those that are oppressive (Dreyer 2011:7; cf. Phiri & Nadar 2010:220).

African women combine cultural hermeneutics and hermeneutics of suspicion in taking a critical stance on African culture as well as promoting its commitment to wholeness and sustenance of life in a community (Oduyoye 2001:14). As a result, the meaning and relevance of church discipline and emphasis on virginity as a sign of sexual purity should be interpreted from a hermeneutic of suspicion. Though virginity and sexuality form a part of fixed Biblical traditions, however interpretations change and they keep changing with time. Virginity testing still needs to be critically studied through the lens of the current African adolescent girls and experiences of adolescent girls in the Hebrew Bible. The liberative potential of virginity testing should be defined by African adolescent girls from their experiences in society and church. These girls should be given a platform to carefully interpret church practices that affect them, this will give them a voice in deconstructing some church traditions that have an impact on their dignity.

From a practical perspective, church discipline and the subsequent absolution following pregnancy has become a gendered practice which can now be described as patriarchal as it affects females more than males. In this view church discipline and absolution needs to be reviewed using African women's cultural hermeneutics. African women's cultural hermeneutics are against the internalization of patriarchy by adult women or Prayer Women's League (PWL) who force adolescent girls to uncritical accept gender roles. African women theologians have indicated that although women are the majority in many churches they still succumb and enforce oppressive,

patriarchal teachings of the church. Old traditional church women expect adolescent girls to respect and enforce those traditions that were introduced by missionaries which socialized women to a culture of silence and submission. Anything that does not conform to missionary teachings is associated with 'sin'. Sexual socialization in religion subordinate women sexuality to men, who own and control it by telling them when, where and how to have sex (Moyo 2004: 73). Therefore, adult women take this teaching to adolescent girls and guide them to adult womanhood through the lens of patriarchy. The church's valuing of virginity also position women in lower positions and uphold patriarchy by socializing adolescent girls and boys; women and men to believe that women ought to be taught how to have sex while men were born knowledgeable (Moyo 2004:73). The valuing of virginity should not overlook the significance of the dignity of humanity as some do not lose their virginity willingly. Some women lose virginity through sports and medical procedures (Phiri, 2003: 67; cf. Chisale & Buffel 2014). Mhlongo's (2009:63) study reveals that the traditional virginity testing through insertion of fingers sometimes breaks the hymen of those who are tested. Therefore the valuing of virginity in church may create a sense of doubt and mistrust particularly to men or husbands who may find their wives no longer virgins on their first sexual encounter, despite the sexual innocence of the wife. Also the valuing of virginity diverts the church's attention from the real social issues that affect women, children and adolescents girls such as gender based violence and sexual abuse. The church should reflect on these social ills through cultural hermeneutics, hermeneutics of suspicion and Biblical hermeneutics.

Conclusion: Tending Boundaries and Telling the Truth

This study has shown that church discipline and absolution are skewed against girls as they are the ones who cannot hide the results of sexual intercourse when they happen to fall pregnant. Observations have shown that absolution is mainly done to girls as if they pregnant themselves. The practice has been described by the girls as humiliating even though at the end it exonerates one from the public enabling one to receive once again all the graces of the church. This study also shows that church discipline and absolution can be viewed as a covert form of virginity testing as it publicly separates those who have been defiled by pregnancy from those perceived to still be pure. It can be argued that the way the church shapes and inform adolescent girls' sexuality is similar to

the way African Religion informs and shapes adolescent girls' sexuality through virginity testing as they both concentrate on the girls and not boys.

The bias of church discipline is a fertile ground for gender based violence and women abuse in communities and households. As a result, African women's cultural hermeneutics challenge the church and all religions to revisit their teachings that perpetuate gender injustice. Church discipline based on pregnancy is a fallacy that the church needs to accept. If the church is interested in abstinence, then it should carry out a survey and see the number of young people that are still abstaining. Those who fall pregnant are just a tip to show that young people are not abstaining from sexual intercourse as taught by the church. Another sign that abstinence is not working is the number of new HIV infections within the 12 to 24 year age group in Sub-Saharan Africa. Those who fall pregnant are the unfortunate ones who does what everyone else does. As a result of this study we started asking new difficult questions:

- What is the problem with sex before marriage especial if it is safe sex?
- Why abstinence?
- What is it that is being put under church discipline, is it the pregnancy since church discipline lasts the duration of the pregnancy?
- Or, is it having had sex before marriage which is then discovered through pregnancy?

May be pregnancy and sexuality should be embraced and celebrated instead of being linked to sin, church discipline and absolution. Though virginity is God given, however interpretations of virginity are socially constructed such should not be used to discriminate people.

The study therefore recommends that:

- Raising the issue of virginity has proven to be a gender biased issue that may cultivate the land for gender based violence and rape; hence instead of valuing virginity the church should value the dignity of a person. Scriptures that address virginity should be revisited and interpreted in a life-affirming and liberative way than discriminatory.
- Church teachings should facilitate for gender justice and equality and protect the dignity of both men and women. The church should not discipline its congregants but rather should be therapeutic to

adolescent girls and help them celebrate the life that a woman or girl is carrying rather than treat the baby as a sin.

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