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*Women's Experiences of Gender Based Violence in Tigray,
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Summary Report

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Women's Experiences of Gender Based Violence in Tigray, Ethiopia.

**Summary Report for the Vincentian Lay Missionaries
(Ireland) and the Daughters of Charity (Ethiopia).**

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Summary of Findings.

This study was carried out in two locations within the Tigray Region of Ethiopia. Four focus groups were used to discuss with local women the forms, consequences and causes of the violence experienced by women. The primary findings of the study focused on rape both within and outside marriage, HIV, physical and emotional abuse, poverty and the implications of lack of access to the legal system and lack of education.

Forms of violence and oppression

Sexual violence was the form of violence that was spoken about in most depth. The accounts of the participants indicate that this form of violence is commonplace. The women spoke about marital rape, which is not a crime in Ethiopia. As one woman described this form of abuse:

“My husband likes sex too much; he is also elder and more experienced than me. And he knew all sorts of sex acts. He was demanding much sex that I couldn’t cope with, it was a tormenting experience. Earlier I have informed my uncle about my situations and he has discussed the issue with my husband. His answer was: ‘The reason I chose a very young girl was in order for her to satisfy me.’ ...I have informed to my uncle and elders that I am being sexually abused. Then I got divorced for it was beyond what I can bear. Such types of offences do occur but they are not known because they are not talked about.”

“There are many types of attacks that occur on women such as under age marriage, raping and forcing the wife to have many children. The husband decides for the wife whether to use birth control or not”.

It is clear from these and other similar statements that many women have no control over their sexual relations with their husbands or partners. This leads to distress and to an inability to decide how many children they feel they can have, something which is particularly problematic within a context of severe poverty.

Rape and sexual violence outside of marriage was also discussed in great detail. This type of violence took many forms. According to the participants, some women were raped by people they knew – friends, boyfriends or people acquainted to their families. Others were raped by complete strangers. Regarding stranger rape, several references were made to girls being kidnapped:

“She told me when she was collecting firewood three men came to her, they kidnapped her and then took her virginity forcefully. That time she was too young and was supposed to be engaged sooner. After she was kidnapped she kept the problem secret and left her parents and came to Mekelle. Therefore, in the country side there is no

change in behaviour towards women. The mentality of men towards practicing kidnapping is still there and in the rural areas kidnapping is not considered as taboo.”

Others told stories of women being raped while working in prostitution. Some women leave their local village and move to larger towns, where their only means of making a living may be to enter prostitution. Many women who are raped become pregnant and have to leave their education, thereby preventing them from obtaining jobs which can support them, and making them more dependent on their husbands, and more susceptible to further violence.

Physical abuse was discussed less frequently and in less depth than sexual abuse. The reasons for this were unclear. It may have reflected the fact that this time of abuse was commonplace and almost expected. Many of the women recounted experiences of physical abuse. These experiences were always within relationships, often within marriage:

“So I have been through many sufferings, I still do. ... While he still treats me badly, I am living with him until today. All my neighbors know my problems. Sometimes he beats me with a stick accusing me of locking the house when I leave. When you are especially empty handed the abuse gets worse.”

Many participants also described forms of **emotional abuse** and degradation which they experience as women. These included being denigrated, being blamed unfairly, being disrespected and being humiliated. Such emotional abuse often amounted to **coercive control** within the relationship, with men trying to exert control over their wives.

“Some few males tell her never to leave the house. It could be for good reason. But most of them do it because they believe that male should be worshipped. They want to be at the top and the female under male control, and they have the attitude of ‘she is to listen to what I say’.”

Other forms of violence and oppression included an **unequal division of labour, unfaithful marriages** and **abandonment by partners**. Participants spoke about their role as women and the inequality that existed between them and their partners resulting in women taking on the bulk of responsibility for childrearing, cooking and household tasks. In circumstances where women were abandoned by their partners, the responsibility became even greater, with the pressure to feed and educate children resulting in women choosing to engage in prostitution or being forced to beg. In all of the focus groups very frequent reference was made to men having multiple sexual partners and to married men being unfaithful to their wives. This often led to women **contracting HIV**, something which was discussed at length and was considered a form of violence in its own right. The following is a typical comment made by the women as to how they contracted HIV.

“This man asked my mother to allow him to return to his marriage and support her and the children. He was not giving any penny, she was suffering from the pain of her illness; she neither knew the cause of her illness. What he did to her was, he brought

her a strange disease, HIV disease. She was healthy for about 10 years, but now look, her life was destroyed.”

The women also spoke at great length about the shame and stigma attached to HIV, and many knew of women who were too ashamed to discuss the issue or seek medical help because of this stigma.

Impact of violence and oppression

The impact of the violence and oppression was evident both from comments that the women made about how they themselves felt after their experiences and also from their observations of how violence affected others, including their children. It was evident that the participants felt that the violence and oppression had significant and long term effects. There was a range of different types of effects but primarily the effects were **poverty, physical effects, emotional** and **psychological effects** and **educational effects**. Comments that were made included the following:

“I struggle to raise my children selling soaked beans and roasted grain. They are not successful with their education. 3 of my daughters failed at grade 10. Now they are trading cactus fruit and other items.”

“During pregnancy period she was getting sick frequently. Later on she had a problem of miscarriage and became a fistula victim.”

Interestingly, some of the effects of violence and oppression – poverty and lack of education for example – were also identified as causes of the violence, thus suggesting the existence of a vicious cycle of poverty/lack of education and violence for some women and their children.

Causes of violence and oppression

The women suggested various causes of the violence and oppression. As well as **poverty** and **lack of education**, they also talked about **inequality and the role of women and men in society** as causal factors. Regarding poverty, lack of access to employment in a manner which enabled women to support themselves if they left abusive relationships, was one of the main reasons women were entrapped in abusive situations. Women also felt that lack of education and awareness contributed to causing the violence:

“We, it is because we are illiterate and because we have no awareness that we have to face violence. I myself am angry because of my illiteracy ...”

In relation to inequality, one of the clearest reasons for the ongoing abuse of women is the attitude that women are not equal to their partners:

“The attitude of the community which doesn’t consider the woman to be fully human.”

Interestingly, several of the participants suggested that as mothers they themselves had a part to play in causing the violence and oppression that their daughters later suffered in life. From the time of their birth, girls and boys are treated differently, leading to a second class status throughout their lives and resulting in them becoming objects of unequal treatment, rape, abuse and violence.

Participants' resistance to violence and oppression:

The participants talked about various ways in which they themselves and other women respond to the violence and oppression that they face within relationships. For some these strategies involved **placating** the abuser, ensuring he was kept happy so that abuse could be avoided.

"You can do things to protect yourself. For example, when he comes home hot tempered, prepare with kind of talks to calm him down. Even when you accidentally find out he is angry, you have to warmly welcome him, asking him if he is ok, with a concern."

Others stayed out of the abuser's way. Others took a very different approach and **challenged the abuser's sense of control**. However, over time when abuse continued women often **left the relationship and sought a divorce**.

"If their problem gets worse, in order to save the woman from beatings and abuses let her be divorced."

Doing this was risky, however, as often family members and the wider community, including the Church, did not approve of women leaving marital relationships.

Another strategy that was adopted by the women involved **using the legal system**. While, overall, the women showed a lack of faith in the law, believing that it favoured men, and while many did not have the knowledge or financial resources to take legal cases, some women described their determination to get justice through the courts.

"I went to the court and filed a charge against him, and they gave me a letter to deliver to him, and that was for him to appear before the police."

Women also **sought help from family and friends**. For some this involved shouting out when abuse was occurring so that neighbours came to help. For others it meant leaving an abusive relationship and going to live with family members or talking to friends and family about the violence that was occurring. Overall, a wide range of strategies were used.

Key recommendations for the Daughters of Charity:

- Provide further education on HIV / AIDS to increase understanding of transmission and to reduce stigma.
- Provide counselling, support and social networks for those suffering from HIV / AIDS.
- Provide accessible counselling and support for victims of violence. Establishing a support group where women can support each other and where their internal resources can be mobilised would be cost effective.
- Provide community child care so that girls who become pregnant can continue with their education.
- Ensure that victims of violence have access to legal aid, through provision of legal education and financial support or through free legal aid.
- In conjunction with other local organisations, lobby the government to change the law so that marital rape becomes a crime.
- Expand income generating projects and establish more such projects.
- In conjunction with schools and churches, establish awareness raising programmes on equality and human rights so that children learn from a young age that males and females are equal. Men and women should be involved in the delivery of this training.
- Establish a small local refuge where women who are experiencing abuse can temporarily reside if they wish to leave an abusive relationship.
- Provide women with access to contraception and information about family planning.
- Engage with local men in relation to their views about gender based violence.
- Provide pre-marriage courses for couples intending to marry.
- Provide training in conflict resolution to couples.
- Provide gender-based violence training to the Daughters of Charity and to the staff of their projects.

Key recommendations for VLM

- Work with the Daughters of Charity to apply for funding (from Misesan Cara and other organisations) to establish or expand projects relevant to the prevention of gender based violence or to establish or expand projects that will support victims of violence.

- Raise awareness about gender based violence in Ethiopia by including information about these research findings in forthcoming VLM communications.
- Give consideration to all volunteers' attitudes towards women and towards gender equality during the selection process.
- Provide pre-departure training to volunteers in relation to gender inequality and gender based violence in Ethiopia.
- When developing role descriptions consider what role VLM volunteers can play in relation to equality, human rights and gender based violence. Suitably qualified VLM volunteers could assist local staff in providing education and awareness raising programmes.
- If services are set up by the Daughters of Charity to support victims of violence, place volunteers in these services.
- Place volunteers in income-generating projects as they serve an important role in preventing the cycle of abuse from continuing.
- Encourage and facilitate former volunteers to develop gender equality resources for the Daughters of Charity in Ethiopia.
- Encourage and facilitate former volunteers to fundraise for projects that the Daughters of Charity may wish to establish in light of the research findings.
- Incorporate the issues of gender inequality and gender based violence into any education programmes that VLM or its former volunteers are running in Irish schools or third level institutions.