

The Cross and Gendercide: A Theological Response to Global Violence Against Women and Girls

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Gendercide: A Social & Theological Problem

Linda walked tentatively into my small basement office. She was a young woman with short-cropped hair and a fresh, newly stitched wound that stretched from her temple, ran across her cheek and ended at her chin. Linda related her terrifying story with little affect and trembling hand gestures. "My husband chased me around the house with a butcher knife and caught up to me, slashing me in my arm and face." She rolled up her sleeve to show me more stitches. "I ran out of the house screaming, and my neighbor called the police." Linda's face finally began to mirror the pain in her voice, and she began to sob. "The policeman walked across the lawn, looked down on me and asked me what I had done to deserve my husband's abuse." She pointed to her cheek, "I feel like I've been victimized twice, first by my husband and second by the police!" Linda was my first client and my first introduction to the shadow world of violence against women and girls. Over the years I heard hundreds of stories from battered women and girls. Through each story I learned more of the cultural, religious, historical and political supports for violence and the global scope of these heinous crimes.

Violence against women and girls is a human rights problem that impacts the lives of millions of families and communities. In the United States one out of every four women has experienced domestic violence and one out of six has experienced attempted or completed rape. Almost one and a half million women have been abused during the past year, and the health costs are an astounding 5.8 billion dollars. Violence against women has been identified as the leading cause of injury to women between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine and is one of the country's most expensive health problems. Globally, it is a significant and complex human rights problem that exacerbates the problems of poverty, child abandonment, communicable diseases and homelessness. The perception of violence as a private, family problem has obscured efforts to increase the visibility of this dilemma as a public human rights issue that affects all members of society. Violence against women and girls crosses all borders, cultures and classes.

Statistics that provide a snapshot of the extent of this global problem are overwhelming. Although prohibited in most countries, violence continues and is permitted by political, social, and religious institutions and systems and remains the major cause of the most violent attacks on women and girls. Global violence against women and girls takes on many forms: widespread rape as a tool of war, gender-selective abortions, female genital mutilation, sexual trafficking, disfigurement and economic exploitation of women, among other horrific violent crimes. Maymuna, a fifteen-year-old Nigerian girl, was forced into marrying a sixty-five-year-old local man. She conceived three months later. Her labor lasted for days before she was taken to a hospital that was three hours away. By the time she arrived, her uterus had ruptured, and she struggled to survive. As a result of hemorrhaging,

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both she and her baby died. Maymuna's tragic story is one among tens of thousands illustrating this one type of violence and exploitation.

In recent years nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), governmental bodies and other agencies have been effective in bringing attention to this critical problem. Christian churches also contribute in several ways to the prevention and elimination of "gendercide." Efforts include identifying and describing the problem, working to educate Christians as to the extent of the problem, encouraging support to victims, and philanthropic efforts to aid women and girls in need. And yet, there is often a halting acknowledgment by churches to identify violence against women and girls as a theological and confessional issue that requires a unified, holistic church response. The underlying causes of global violence against women and girls are rooted deep in our cultures, and the scandal of this violence is symptomatic of a pervasive and deep misogyny. Millions of girls have undergone the brutal practice of female genital mutilation. Millions of women been forced to undergo sex-selective abortions. Millions more have experienced the horror of sex trafficking and have been imprisoned as slaves with no hope of escape. The list of reprehensible acts is long, and the targets are primarily girls and women. The stubborn pervasiveness of this violence and its deep rootedness in misogyny is best defined as a theological issue, rather than merely an ethical or moral issue. Christian confession concerns an orientation that begins with our understanding of the being of God and, subsequently, God's mission in the world. By using this theological approach, the church can offer a broad, imaginative and effective response.

— Adapted from Chapter 1, "A Point of Departure:
The Cross and Global Violence Against Women and Girls"



Elizabeth Gerhardt (Th.D., Boston University) is professor of theology and social ethics at Northeastern Seminary, Rochester, New York, and adjunct professor in the department of religion and humanities at Roberts Wesleyan College, Rochester.

The Problem of Gendercide

*In her new book, *The Cross and Gendercide*, Elizabeth Gerhardt makes a case that violence and sexual assault against women is heresy. In her groundbreaking study, Gerhardt proposes a holistic theology of the cross as the basis for a prophetic response by the church to a problem that is not only moral and ethical, but also confessional.*

What made you want to research the topic of gendercide to write this book?

Elizabeth Gerhardt: I have worked with victims of domestic and sexual violence for over twenty-five years in different capacities: shelter director, clinical counselor and educator. In addition, through research and networking I developed an interest in global violence against women and the common roots of violence that exist both in domestic abuse in the United States and gender violence around the world.

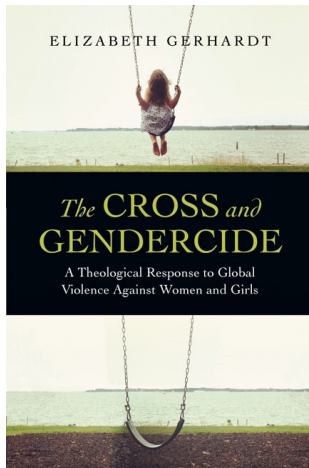
How does your experience working with victims of violence here in the US relate to global gendercide issues?

Gerhardt: Years of working with abused women has led me to a deeper understanding of the systemic causes of violence against women and girls. These underlying causes of violence, patriarchy, domination and objectification of girls and women are the same for domestic violence in the home, exploitation of women and girls in sweatshops across the world, gender-selective abortions, female infanticide, widespread rape during war, female genital mutilation and many other types of horrific gender-related violent crimes. Currently, there are many good reading resources that focus on education, counseling and self-help in the area of domestic violence. However, it is important for the church to develop a holistic and theologically based response to global violence against women that addresses the underlying economic, cultural, religious and political causes of violence against women and girls.

Why did you want to write a book that integrated theology with the global struggle of violence against women?

Gerhardt: I was interested in not only providing a global perspective but also a theological paradigm that would enable the church to view this problem as a confessional issue that needs broader and deeper solutions. I thought that my background in the areas of counseling, theology, social justice and research in global studies would provide a unique perspective for addressing violence against women and girls. . . .

A theology of the cross offers a useful approach and methodology by providing a perspective that roots social ethics in faith and a correction to the misuse of the Christian tradition. From this viewpoint, global violence against women and girls is defined in both



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legal and spiritual language and challenges the church to engage in both realms. A theology of the cross provides the foundation for the church to be a prophetic voice that counters violence.

What do you want *The Cross and Gendercide* to accomplish within the church?

Gerhardt: The purpose of this book is to educate church leaders, scholars and lay persons on the global issue of abused women and girls, the subsequent complexity of this problem and the need for a theologically based response. It is vital that the Christian church gain an understanding of violence against women and girls as a particularly heinous type of violence that is related to other global social concerns such as poverty, the international AIDS crisis and the proliferation of orphaned children in undeveloped countries. . . .

The major unique contribution of the book is to challenge the church to engage in a paradigm shift in addressing the problem of global violence against women and girls, and related social issues. Luther's theology of the cross and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethics and activism provide a framework for addressing the church's prophetic role in the work to end violence against women and girls. This book proposes a cohesive church response to the problem of global violence as a confessional issue, not merely an ethical and moral issue.