

Respecting Human Dignity and Integrity: Gender and Theological Perspectives on Human Rights

18–24 April 2005, Vilnius, Lithuania

Forty-five participants joined the spring gender conference focusing on the practice of women trafficking within the context of human rights. The selection of Lithuania as the conference locale was particularly apropos, as it is one of the hot spots in Europe for this problem.

The conference was structured to provide a general overview on human rights for the first half; and for the second, to focus more specifically on gender issues and trafficking. After a short introduction to the topic, the first day began with Elisabeth Gerle, a Swedish ethicist and Lutheran pastor, speaking about the history of the concept of human rights and the question of whether or not they are in fact universal. Gerle was followed by Esohe Aghatise, a Nigerian lawyer and founder of the NGO Associazione Iroko Onlus in Italy to aid trafficked women; she gave a fascinating lecture on the role of voodoo and magic rites in enslaving Nigerian women trafficked into Italy.

The programme allowed plenty of time for questions and discussion, both in plenary and in smaller groups, after all the lectures. Furthermore, youth participating had the opportunity to share their own ideas and experiences related to the topic in the form of workshops. These workshops continued throughout the week in the late afternoons and covered a wide range of topics, including: human rights and the church in the Orthodox perspective; sexual harassment education and prevention; human rights in Ukraine; the position of women in various Christian denominations; judgment and perception (the difference between gender and sex); prostitution, HIV and AIDS; the situation of women in South East Asia; human rights in early Christian writings; the situation of women in Ukraine; and a Bible study on good and wicked women.

Holger Lahayne, a German theologian who has been working for an evangelical student mission in Lithuania for the past 12 years, opened the second day with a Biblical reflection on the topic, considering the creation account in Genesis 1,26–27 as the moral justification for human rights—i.e. humans have dignity because we are created in the image of God. In the afternoon, Indrė Mackevičiūtė from the Lithuanian Office of the Equal Opportunity Ombudsperson informed us about the facts and figures regarding gender equality in Lithuania and how images of gender inequality are still embedded in Lithuanian culture.

Thursday, the third day of the conference, began with a brief presentation about the status of human rights in Lithuania (particularly regarding the rights of Roma and disabled persons), led by Kristina Vrubliauskaite, a member of the Lithuanian student Christian movement. Following this presentation, the group made an excursion to the KGB museum and Trakai castle to better understand how human rights have and have not been upheld throughout Lithuania's history. We saw the "detention" and execution cells used by the secret police throughout the Soviet occupation; as well as seeing the marks of several other attempts at occupation and subjugation left on Trakai castle during its seven centuries of existence.

That evening our introduction to Lithuania continued with the Lithuanian cultural evening. We saw the film 510 Seconds of Silence or a Flight over Lithuania by Audrius Stonys, which

was shown at the EXPO 2000 in Hanover, Germany, and highlights the magnificent landscape of the country against a contemporary setting of Lithuanian folk music. Later a Danish expatriate, Gunnar Madsen, gave us a humorous outsider's perspective on Lithuanian culture, from the national obsession with basketball and mushroom gathering to the disdain of schedules and planning in advance. Then Gediminas Pulokas performed some original songs in Lithuanian, accompanying himself on guitar. And finally, the rock band ?Ashtrey,? made up of members from the local SCM, gave us a live show including such favorites as "What if God was One of Us" and "The Show Must Go On."

On Friday Kristina Ivanauskiene, an Evangelical-Lutheran theologian, gave us a touching lecture about feminist theological perspectives on human rights. She spoke in particular about masculine God-imagery in the Bible and liturgy; and about women's struggles for equality in Church hierarchy. Later that day, Dovile Rukaite of the Women's Issues Information Centre spoke about women trafficking in the Baltic countries with a specific focus on the situation in Lithuania. She mentioned that one reason why Lithuania is so heavily involved in trafficking is the relative simplicity of forging Lithuanian documents, as well as its close proximity to the major destination countries of Scandinavia.

In the evening, one of the highlights of the conference occurred with the screening of the film *Lilja 4ever*, which is a graphic and brutally honest account of a 16-year-old girl trafficked from Russia into Sweden. Following the film there was a period for small group discussions so participants could share their reactions to it, as emotionally it is quite a heavy film. Many participants—most notably the Romanians, coming from one of the source countries for trafficked women—were deeply moved by the film and felt impelled to return to their home countries to increase awareness about the issue of women trafficking and to take what steps they could to prevent it.

The final day began with the valuable addition of the male perspective on the topic. Per Kristian Dotterud and Ulf Rikter-Svedsen from the Resource Centre for Men in Norway spoke about the connection between masculinity and prostitution, examining the impetus behind the market. They included many interesting statistics to illustrate the connection between culture and prostitution; for example, across the Scandinavian countries, uniformly 12–13 percent of men report having bought sex, while in Germany it is 20 percent, in the U.K. 8 percent and in the Netherlands 60 percent. The formal programme ended on an optimistic note with a presentation by Lene Hopland Bergset, who works with the Changemakers youth programme of Norwegian Church Aid, titled "Of Course We Can Change the World." She spoke primarily about ways to raise attention to problems of trafficking, and afterwards participants broke up into small groups to brainstorm ways they could share what they have learned at the conference in their local contexts. After this, Arvydas Malinauskas, an Evangelical-Lutheran pastor, shared briefly about his experiences ministering in a women's prison in northeast Lithuania.

And of course interwoven amongst all these activities was time for intercultural sharing and common worship. Overall participants rated the conference very highly and many showed strong interest in getting further involved in the work of WSCF Europe. The lecturers as well reported a very positive experience and showed appreciation that youth were concerning themselves with such an important issue.

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