

Stop Being Silent!
Overview, 2008 – 2010
Rachael Weber

Domestic violence, i.e. violence occurring within the household, is the most widespread form of violence against women. Studies in thirty-five countries suggest that one-quarter to one-half or more of all women have been physically abused by a current or former partner or husband. It is the leading cause of injury to women that, for some, recurs almost every day leading, in some cases, to death.

Priscilla Singh, *Churches Say 'No' to Violence Against Women*¹

The Lingua Franca programme of WSCF Europe started in the early nineties, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, to facilitate ecumenical exchange and to break down barriers of language and culture between the East and West. Student groups in Central and Eastern Europe, in Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, etc., would request teachers from the West, from Germany, the UK, and France, to teach widely spoken languages. The teachers would then live with local families and become acquainted with the culture and daily life, and the families and students would learn about the teachers' cultures and lifestyles, thus facilitating a true dialogue of living and communing together.

Emerging from this beginning, Lingua Franca has developed into an ecumenical leadership training programme, gathering students from diverse backgrounds to live, dialogue, and learn together. The original idea for the *Stop Being Silent!* (SBS!) campaign was initiated in response to the World Council of Churches 'Decade to Overcome Violence' campaign.

We had many questions in the beginning. How can Lingua Franca address the issue of domestic violence from a unique perspective to fill unmet needs in our churches and society? How should the seminars develop from each other? And most importantly, how can we challenge students and young people to break the silence and speak out against domestic violence in their homes, churches, schools, and governments?

The first SBS! seminar was held in Nitra, Slovakia in August 2008, and provided a general overview of the topic. Expanding upon this, in July 2009, the second seminar was held in Novi Sad, Serbia and examined the link between violence in society and violence in the home.

As WSCF-E has never held a conference in Belarus, it was exciting to have the final seminar in Minsk in August 2010. The final training focused more specifically on overcoming views in society, politics, and the Church that perpetuate violence in the family, leading to domestic violence, exploitation, and trafficking.

¹ The Lutheran World Federation's publication, *Churches Say 'No' to Violence Against Women: Church action plan*, was a

valuable resource, among many others, for the SBS! programme. It can be found online at

<http://www.lutheranworld.org/lwf/index.php/resources/lwf-publications>.

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Introductions

If I would have been told in early 2008 that the seminars would have been in a hilltop convent in Slovakia, a Hungarian boarding school in Serbia, and in a seminary in Belarus, I would have doubted the possibilities. The seminar themes ended up flowing from each other in ways I would not have foreseen, from the evolution of the first as an introduction to the specialisations and applications of the the second and third.

Providing an indirect way of introducing the topic, a home-made 'Myths and Facts' game of memory opened the thematics at each seminar. First, a myth was identified, such as 'Domestic abuse is caused by excessive alcohol or the use of drugs'. Then the fact was matched with it, '[A]lthough some abusers are more prone to being violent when drunk, many more abuse when completely sober. Alcohol and drugs may increase the violence, but they do not cause it... [B]laming chemical dependency for abuse is missing the point, the abuser is responsible for his actions'.²

Jaanus Teose, the former WSCF-E gender coordinator, gave the introductory lecture at each seminar, introducing the topic of domestic violence and examining its warning signs. Making the introduction personal, thermometer exercises and role-plays on values and boundaries provided ways for all to introspectively examine personal beliefs relating to the topic. These role-plays were highlights in the programme, and the resulting discussions often went far beyond the allotted time.

To further help to break down barriers of language surrounding the topic, participants examined the meanings, connotations, and implications of the terms victim, abuser, and observer (and their synonyms, survivor, perpetrator or offender, and bystander). Brief lectures and games explored the use of gender-neutral language. Worksheets and discussions were used to further encourage speaking.

Roots, realities, and responses

The input of local activists and health professionals uncovered the ever present reality of domestic violence and its challenges and manifestations in society. Reflecting on the local setting, Bernardina Bodnárová, a local researcher, lectured on statistics about domestic violence throughout Slovakia. Such data is important to both raise awareness about the problem and to support legislation, but also to set up adequate response facilities. Similarly, examining the local context in Novi Sad, Serbia, Biljana Rakic led a session on 'How to Respond', based on her experience working as a psychologist in a local women's centre.

To explain the long term effects and interconnection of war rape, domestic violence, and trafficking on both the individual and on the community, Marijana Senjak, a psychologist from Croatia, spoke on the 'Impact of War Trauma on Domestic Violence in Post-Conflict Societies'. She worked at Medico Zenitsa, women's therapy centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for fifteen years during and after the war. Though she and other staff were Croatian, the Bosnian women bridged the racial hatred perpetrated by the war and allowed

² Some of the myths and facts used for this exercise, including this one, came from this website: <http://www.hiddenhurt.co.uk/Victim/myths.htm>.

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themselves to be helped. The stories and links she shared were very challenging, and she framed her lecture with a personal reflection activity often used in group therapy. Before she spoke, participants chose symbols to represent their feelings and strengths from a pile of stones and shells. The session closed when participants picked another symbol, this time representing future dreams.

In Minsk, Marta Gustavsson, a theology student from Sweden, gave an interactive lecture examining the multi-faceted relationship of globalisation, views of the body, theology, and violence. Dr. Agnes Galajda, a Hungarian judge, spoke on 'Domestic Violence and the Legal System' and examined legal protections, including the restraining order, which are used to safeguard victims. She also examined the challenges which make it difficult for these cases to reach criminal courts and receive verdicts before major injury or death.

Examining links to violence in the Church, Dr. Valli Batchelor, an activist from Malaysia, led an interactive session on 'Redefining Domestic Violence: Sexual Exploitation in the Church'. She focused on the issue of clergy sexual violence against women. The victims of clergy exploitation often do not receive the same help and care as those who are victimised by other professionals. Valli also led participants in dance to help release, through movement, the challenging stories they had heard.

In addition, participant-led panel discussions further explored the roots of domestic violence in Europe. In panel discussions at each seminar, four to five participants from different countries presented on the realities of domestic violence in their own national and local settings, examining societal stereotypes, legislation, and social resources available for victims. These discussions allowed the participants to see examples of strategies used in different countries, as well as to observe the amount of resources still needed.

Responses to domestic violence were discussed and explored further in a variety of ways. In Nitra, much time was spent on learning to recognise situations of domestic violence and exploring ways to respond and get help. In Novi Sad, Andrijana Covic, from the local ombudsman office, led a training session on 'Raising Awareness and Holding a Public Dialogue'. Using examples of challenges in the region, participants were divided into groups to brainstorm solutions and to identify where these solutions could be implemented (in the general public, the local government, or NGOs). In Minsk, a young Belarussian activist led a session on campaigning. He talked about efforts in Belarus to raise awareness of human rights and about the challenge of helping people to overcome fear and realise that they are capable of speaking out for change. He described the deep interconnection of faith and action, which provides the reason and internal strength for all of his work for social justice.

Breaking the silence

Direct responses to domestic violence are essential to help all get out of danger. Indirect responses, to change attitudes and mechanisms in society that ignore domestic violence or diminish its effect, are also integral to work to break the silence and end violence against women.

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Sessions explored using alternative means, such as art, to address and transform stereotypes about domestic violence. Contrasting with media forms that reinforce gender stereotypes, current campaign and publicity materials used to combat domestic violence were shared in Nitra. In Novi Sad, Zana Hoxha Krasniqi, a theatre director from Kosovo, gave a presentation on 'Using Theater as a Tool in Fighting Stereotypes on Gender Roles and Domestic Violence in the Balkans'. In the final SBS! seminar, Dr. Valli Batchelor shared about her work with 'Journey Towards Hope', an intercultural project which works to break down barriers and empower women through dance.

Examining the necessity of breaking the silence, in Novi Sad all listened to a broadcast discussing the release of a coming film, *A Woman in Berlin*, which explored the crimes committed by the Soviet army in East Berlin against German women. Even decades after the crimes were committed in East Germany, it was important for the German women to break the silence. Previously, because they felt guilt for their country's crimes, they had been even more reluctant to share their own experiences. The broadcast also explained how all armies in WWII, Allied and Axis alike, were guilty of such crimes, emphasising that the challenge of fighting violence against women is universal.

The 2001 film *Chocolat*, shown in Minsk, and the 2005 film *North Country*, shown at all 3 seminars, further explored the challenges of speaking out. *North Country* is based the true story of Lois Jenson, who experienced sexual harassment in her work at the coal mines. Her response to this abuse led to the first class-action lawsuit about sexual harassment in the work place, *Jenson vs. Eveleth Taconite Company*, setting a precedent for legal code throughout the world. The film starkly depicts the challenges and hardships faced when speaking out against violence, as other silent victims, friends, and the community re-victimise the victim. Yet, for all of the victims and the community in the film, breaking the silence was essential to find justice, healing, and safety for the future.

Prayer and Bible study

Bible study was an essential part of the SBS! programme. In Nitra, participants divided into groups to explore stories in the Bible related to the topic. Intense discussion followed, beginning with Adam and Eve, and continuing to Dinah and Shechem, Tamar and Amnon, to Christ's teachings and Paul's letters. The World Council of Churches' Tamar Campaign, a Bible study on 2 Samuel 13, was shared as an example of a way to use Bible study to raise awareness about domestic violence in society.

In Minsk, in the Bible study on 'Christ and Four Women in the Gospels', participants divided into four groups to study passages about risks and healing (Mark 5; 21-43), condemnation (John 7; 53-8:11), worship and anointing (Luke 7; 36-50), and prejudice and faith (John 4; 1-42). Participants explored these questions in small groups and plenary: Is there any violence in this text? What barriers are present? What are the responses of the disciples, the women, Jesus and/or others? Is a cycle of violence broken? Does any vindication or healing take place?

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In all seminars, in daily ecumenical prayers, participants joined together in prayer on domestic and gender violence in the world today. In the Sunday morning prayer, following the same pattern at each of the three SBS! seminars, participants read stories of women throughout the Bible, from Rehab to Mary Magdalene, and reflected on the voices of women silenced throughout history. In denominational prayers in the evenings, participants created and shared liturgies based on their own home traditions, allowing all to learn from and share in the diversity present.

What can we do now?

Each seminar ended with a 'What can we do now?' session. This took various forms in the different seminars, from using a four corners exercise to interactive skits. This is a challenge inherent in the subject and in the aim and work of WSCF. What can we as young people do?

The *Stop Being Silent!* campaign was the first of WSCF-E's efforts to develop the Lingua Franca training program into a sustainable campaign. We hope to branch from it, to launch into another focusing on combating trafficking and sexual exploitation.

But what are our responsibilities as individuals as we continue on with our daily routines after the seminars? By learning about domestic violence, and by being able to name and recognise the problem, already one hurdle is overcome. In closing sessions, from the organisers to the participants, all were challenged to raise the awareness of others and to respond when discovering situations of domestic violence. Echoing the quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. on the SBS! flyer, 'We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality... Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.'

Rachael Weber will conclude her time as WSCF-E Lingua Franca Coordinator at the end of 2010. She is from Virginia, USA. Her favorite things include the Danube, Swiss chocolate, and the smell of books.