

The background of the cover is a painting of three African women in white dresses dancing. They are captured in dynamic, expressive poses with their arms raised. The background is a warm, reddish-pink color. The title 'LIVING WITH DIGNITY' is written in a large, bold, serif font across the middle of the image.

# LIVING WITH DIGNITY

## AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER EQUALITY

### EDITORS

Elna Mouton

Gertrude Kapuma

Len Hansen

Thomas Togom

**EFSA** |

INSTITUTE FOR THEOLOGICAL &  
INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH





# LIVING WITH DIGNITY

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Editors

*Elna Mouton, Gertrude Kapuma,  
Len Hansen & Thomas Togom*



*Living with dignity: African perspectives on gender equality*

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The EFS A Institute, founded in 1990, is an independent ecumenical institute that functions as a division of the non-profitable “Cape Development and Dialogue Centre Trust” (CDDC). Trustees include Dr Welile Mazamisa, Archbishop Dr Thabo Makgoba, Dr André van Niekerk, Prof. Nico Koopman and Dr Renier Koegelenberg. It consists of a unique network of participating institutions: representatives of the Faculties of Theology and the Departments of Religious Studies of the Universities in the Western Cape are represented on the Board and Executive of the EFS A Institute.

Generally speaking, the EFS A Institute attempts to promote consensus between different sectors, interest groups and stakeholders on the challenges and problems facing our society. It strives to play a facilitating role by providing a platform for public debate, even of controversial issues.

Both in its structure and function there is a dialectic tension between an academic (research-based) approach and the need to address specific needs of the church and other religious communities. This tension is embedded in the main issues facing the churches in our society. In a general sense the EFS A Institute tries to focus public attention (and the attention of the church or academic institutions) on specific problems in society.

Currently, the focus is on the following priorities.

Firstly, the *development role of the church* and other religious communities: the eradication of poverty in South Africa; the role of religious networks in community development, in social and welfare services; and the development of community and youth leadership.

Secondly, the *healing and reconciliatory role of the church* and other religious communities: this includes a project on the role of women in the healing of our violent society; the mobilisation of the church and religious communities against crime and violence; and the breaking down of stereotypes (racism) in our society.

Thirdly, the *formation of values in the strengthening of a moral society by the church* and other religious communities: the promotion of moral values such as honesty; support for the weak; respect for life and human rights.

Fourthly, the *development of youth and community leadership*: special courses for the development of leadership skills among our youth have been developed and are presented to support the building of a new society.

It is also significant that the EFS A Institute acts as Secretariat to the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD), which is a Principal Recipient of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in South Africa. It is also a partner of Johns Hopkins Health and Education in South Africa (JHHESA – a USAID funded programme). It currently serves as the national secretariat of the religious sector – for the South African National Aids Council (SANAC).

These priorities cannot be separated from one another, since many of the complex social issues are interrelated.

*Dr Renier A Koegelenberg*

**Executive Director**

**Executive Chairperson**, Prof. N. Koopman  
**Executive Director**, Dr Renier A. Koegelenberg  
**Postal address:** P.O. Box 3103, Matieland, Stellenbosch,  
7602,  
South Africa

**Physical address:** 24-26 Longifolia Street,  
Paradyskloof, Stellenbosch

Office of the Executive Director

**Phone:** +27 (0)21 880-1734

**Fax.:** +27 (0)21 880-1735

**Fax.:** +27 (0)86 768-4121

**Mobile:** +27 (0)83 625-1047

**E-mail:** [efs@cddc.co.za](mailto:efs@cddc.co.za)

**Websites:** <http://www.efs-a-institute.org.za>

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	7
<i>Elna Mouton, Gertrude Kapuma, Len Hansen &amp; Thomas Togom</i>	
GENDER EQUALITY: AN ISSUE OF FAITH AND DIGNITY	
1. Men and women in church and society: Equal in dignity? United in diversity? .....	19
<i>Nico Koopman</i>	
2. In God's image: A biblical-theological survey of the dignity of women and men .....	33
<i>Florence Matsveru and Simon Gillham</i>	
GENDER EQUALITY: A QUESTION OF CULTURE	
3. Cultural perspectives on gender equality: Preliminary indicators for the Christian church in Sub-Saharan Africa .....	53
<i>Petria Theron</i>	
4. Masks and the men behind them: Unmasking culturally-sanctioned gender inequality .....	81
<i>Edwin Zulu</i>	
5. Gender and the challenge of witchcraft .....	97
<i>Jonathan Iorkighir</i>	
GENDER EQUALITY: A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH	
6. Aware and empowered responses to gender injustice: A challenge to the church .....	125
<i>Elize Morkel</i>	
7. Women and the church: A case study of the CCAP, Nkhoma Synod, Malawi .....	147
<i>Phoebe Chifungo</i>	
8. Challenging gender prejudice amongst church youth: The case of the Dutch Reformed Church in Nigeria .....	159
<i>Dorcas Weor and Agnes Ntanyi</i>	



GENDER EQUALITY: AN ISSUE OF ECONOMIC SURVIVAL  
AND WELLBEING

9. Revisiting economic justice: An examination of dignity of women in a  
Zambian context ..... 179  
*Nolipher Moyo*
10. Gender and poverty: Rereading Proverbs 31 in pursuit of socio-economic  
justice for women in the Reformed Church of East Africa ..... 193  
*Dorcas Chebet and Beatrice Cherop*
11. The power to change the world: Reflections on (theological) education  
and gender justice from Malawi ..... 219  
*Maggie Madimbo*

GENDER EQUALITY: AN ISSUE OF HEALTH AND SECURITY

12. “Telling stories”: Talking about VAW within church and seminary ..... 235  
*Elisabet le Roux*
13. Gender-based violence and the church?: Malawian women  
speaking out ..... 253  
*Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma*
14. “Do not tell the person carrying you that s/he stinks”: Reflections in  
*ubuntu* and masculinities in the context of sexual and gender-based  
violence and HIV ..... 269  
*Ezra Chitando*
15. Disability and gender: Twofold discrimination ..... 285  
*Mia Lintvelt*

GENDER EQUALITY: AN ISSUE AT HOME AND IN THE FAMILY

16. “Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you!”:  
Desire and rule in traditional Shona understandings of marriage ..... 309  
*Ester Rutoro*
17. Gender equality from the perspective of single womanhood ..... 325  
*Ester Rutoro and Maggie Madimbo*
18. From patriarchy to participatory freedom?: The transformative potential  
of the Ephesians household code in view of changing gender roles in  
Kenyan families ..... 343  
*Lydia Mwaniki (Kenya) & Elna Mouton (South Africa)*

GENDER EQUALITY: TOWARDS THE FUTURE

19. Gender equality: A *kairos* for *status confessionis* or *processus confessionis*? ..... 379  
*Olo Ndukwe*

# INTRODUCTION

## Continuing the NetACT journey

This collection of essays continues the journey on which NetACT (Network for African Congregational Theology) set out fifteen years ago, and which eventually culminated in the publication of *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew? Addressing Gender Inequality in Africa* in 2012 (Stellenbosch: SUN PReSS).

NetACT was formed in Nairobi, Kenya, in February 2000, with a vision to develop transformational leadership in Africa through theological education that would meet the dire needs of congregations (in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition in sub-Saharan Africa) in bold and prophetic ways. At that stage the topic most discussed on the continent was that of HIV and AIDS, and already during its first meeting the network of theological institutions minuted the following: “If we want to address the issue of HIV and AIDS effectively and faithfully, we will have to move from denial to truth-telling.”<sup>1</sup> In order to achieve this goal, members committed themselves to an ever-deepening process of trust building – through personal friendship and working together on various projects. In the first formulation of its identity, NetACT declared that it “aims at assisting participating institutions to develop congregational theology and leadership. It seeks to achieve this aim (*inter alia*) through addressing the HIV and AIDS problem, especially by providing the theological, moral and spiritual undergirding to curb this pandemic.”<sup>2</sup>

This led to an ensuing “journey in discernment” for NetACT, during which it was realised that *ad hoc* attempts to address the encompassing and complex issues related to the pandemic would not necessarily lead to “a change in attitudes and deeply ingrained cultural assumptions”.<sup>3</sup> In the process, the network agreed to focus on curriculum development in theological education, and started to present workshops in Kenya, Malawi, Angola and Nigeria. Various publications resulted from these consultations, which *inter alia* contributed to the fundamental awareness that women are especially vulnerable to the disease, and that “very little in the

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1 Hendriks, “Introduction”, 18-19.

2 Hendriks, “Introduction”, 19.

3 Hendriks, “Introduction”, 20.

African AIDS scenario would change if gender equality is not attained.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, ways had to be sought to engage students in discussions not only about health and gender, but also about the gender imbalance in leadership in church and society, “aiming at raising awareness, encouraging critical analysis and acquainting students with theological insights from African women’s perspectives.”<sup>5</sup>

This awareness led to decisions at the NetACT Board meetings of 2011 (Limuru, Kenya) and 2012 (Worcester, South Africa) to include extended gender workshops, with (mostly male) principals and/or board members of the NetACT institutions present. A significant step was, however, taken by inviting a female staff or church members from each constituency to attend these two workshops in order to enable all members, male and female, to critically discuss engendering theological education *together*. It has been a rich and rewarding yet often complex and emotionally intense journey. The editors thus gratefully and proudly present this volume, *Living with Dignity: African Perspectives on Gender Equality*, as the fruit of these two workshops and, at the same time, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to those institutions without whose support these workshops would never have realised: the Presbyterian Church (PC)USA, Christian Reformed World Missions, Gereformeerde Zendingbond (GZA), the Fondation Pour l’Aide Au Protestantisme Réformé (FAP), the Stellenbosch University Hope Project, the Commission for Witness of the Dutch Reformed Church Western and Southern Cape and the National Institute for the Deaf in South Africa. This publication reflects the contributors’ passionate yearning to see every person on the continent flourish in the presence of a living God who identified with humanity by becoming flesh (John 1:14) so that all would have life in abundance (John 10:10).

### **Transformative potential of a (theological) curriculum**

By addressing gender equality as a fundamental expression of human dignity and justice on our continent, this collage of nineteen essays is meant to serve as a concrete alternative to aspects of gender inequality identified in the first volume, *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew?* Its format is particularly devised for use in the classroom, and for critical-constructive group engagement (with themes and questions for discussion at the end of each essay). It is our sincere prayer that it will also be used in imaginative ways by clergy and in congregations as a necessary part of adult learning programmes.

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4 Hendriks, “Introduction”, 21.

5 Mombo & Joziassé, “From the Pew to the Pulpit”, 183.

The book is divided into seven major sections. In the introductory part, *Gender Equality: An Issue of Faith and Dignity*, the two essays by Nico Koopman and Florence Matsveru/Simon Gillham set important biblical and theological parameters for the project as a whole. In view of the relation between the Triune God of the Bible and humankind, Koopman unequivocally argues for the equal dignity of men and women. This dignity, he continues, is expressed by the unity of God's people, also between men and women – a unity in diversity. In order to assist local churches in their quest to faithfully embody this unity, he proposes a commitment to gender freedom and justice as two interdependent quests. He concludes by stating: “Where the unity in diversity of women and men is betrayed, there the ecclesiastical confession of the unity in diversity of all God's children is betrayed.” In their contribution, “In God's Image: A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Dignity of Women and Men”, Matsveru and Gillham give a broad yet nuanced overview of the relation between God and humankind in the light of diverse scriptural witnesses throughout the history of salvation. They ultimately challenge their audience by emphasising Jesus Christ as God's truthful redemption from gender-based violence and oppression, and as the truest expression of human dignity. Christian men and women should therefore take the lead in sharing God's light with a dark world by respecting all who have been made in the image of God.

The second section, *Gender Equality: A Question of Culture*, consists of three essays dealing with the rich yet sensitive issue of culture and gender. In her contribution, Petria Theron states that culture, well-meant as it may be, often seems to be an obstacle in the realisation of gender equality, with the effect that people, especially women, neither reach their full potential nor experience their inherent dignity as people created in the image of God. She reminds the church in sub-Saharan Africa about its key role in bringing about sociocultural transformation, and proposes the concept *Imago Dei* and the example of Jesus Christ as powerful indicators in the church's quest for gender justice and equality. Edwin Zulu subsequently looks at cultural practices from a male perspective. While he affirms the important and formative role of cultural practices (such as ritual, religion, and entertainment) in African communities, he radically challenges (Christian) men to use their unique position (of power and authority) by taking the lead in reforming or removing enslaving and life-threatening practices, and to reclaim gender justice, liberation and dignity for all. Jonathan Iorkighir then investigates the complex relation between gender, culture and witchcraft in African communities. Acknowledging that witchcraft is a pervasive force in the psyche of African people,

due to the belief in and fear of supernatural forces beyond human control, he examines the influence of witchcraft (and particularly its dangerous relation to gender-stereotyping) in African churches and communities. The essay concludes by challenging the church to remain truthful to its discerning role, by proclaiming the eternal power of Jesus Christ over all forces as comforting news to all people.

In the third section on *Gender Equality: A Challenge to the Church*, three essays concentrate on women's personal biographies and journeys with the church – in South Africa, Malawi, and Nigeria. Elize Morkel courageously challenges the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa through her story, “Aware and Empowered Responses to Gender Injustice”. By means of psychologist Kaethe Weingarten's grid which describes people's responses to the everyday witnessing of violence, four positions are developed from the intersection between *awareness and empowerment*. She concludes by reiterating two salient points – that gender inequality is constructed as a social hierarchy with devastating effects on the safety of women, and that language plays an important role in sustaining hierarchical structures, with detrimental effects on the mental health and identity of women. In the following essay, Phoebe Chifungo relates the story of women and the CCAP Nkhoma Synod, Malawi, by discussing historical, cultural and theological-biblical factors which contributed to the absence of women in leadership positions in the Nkhoma Synod. In their essay, Dorcas Weor and Agnes Ntanyi challenge gender prejudice amongst church youths in the Dutch Reformed Church in Nigeria. Through careful statistical data, an overview is given of the many challenges faced by the youth in Nigeria, especially girls.

The fourth section, *Gender Equality: An Issue of Economic Survival and Well-being*, presents four essays from different geographical, cultural and church contexts, focusing on gender justice in Zambia, Kenya and Malawi. Nolipher Moyo first looks at economic justice and the dignity of women in Zambia. With reference to the *Zambian Church Declaration on Gender Injustice and Gender-Based Violence* (2009), she boldly challenges churches to interpret the Bible in ways that would indeed set people free, also economically, and by suggesting practical ways in which churches may address economic injustices towards women. Dorcas Chebet and Beatrice Cherop continue this discussion by describing the tragic interface between gender and poverty in Kenya. After presenting a brave alternative to economic injustice in Africa by rereading Proverbs 31 for the socio-economic justice of women in the Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA), they conclude by stating that equal education for girls and boys remains the most fundamental way of curbing

poverty for women and girls. They plead with the church to identify and challenge unjust systems at all levels of society, such as the unequal distribution of resources and (economic) power. Maggie Madimbo's essay takes the discussion on gender and education significantly further by arguing that women and men should have equal access to education in general and theological education in particular. She substantiates her plea by referring to the "success story" of the African Bible College in Lilongwe, Malawi, in terms of recruiting both male and female students over the years.

The fifth section, *Gender Equality: An Issue of Health and Security*, focuses on the serious and pervasive reality of sexual and gender-based violence in Africa, while searching for radical solutions. Lisa le Roux looks at various studies on violence against women (VAW) within the church and seminary, in different African countries and globally. These *inter alia* involve physical abuse (including sexual abuse and rape), emotional or psychological abuse, and economic and political abuse. She identifies various reasons why the church is not addressing VAW (effectively), and explores practical ways in which seminaries and congregations may be motivated to talk about, teach on, and address VAW, particularly through a case study approach. Gertrude Kapuma's essay on gender-based violence and the church's response, tragically and ironically confirms that violence targeted at women exists everywhere, even in the places where one would expect security – in homes, among relatives, and in churches. She defines violence as "conduct intended to undermine a person's humanity, identity and dignity." Her experience as a minister of a local congregation has made her understand what women are going through, and the lack of support systems in the communities where they live. She briefly looks at cultural understandings of male and female (in Malawi), and at socialisation processes through which perceptions and values are ingrained in people's psyches. The final section of her essay questions the church's awareness of, and engagement with, the pain and suffering of numerous violated women, and profoundly challenges the church's response to it. In the following essay, Ezra Chitando critically-constructively discusses the concept of *ubuntu* in the context of sexual and gender-based violence and HIV in Africa, and the insistence on recovering indigenous values in recent democratic discourse. In response to the question, "Can *ubuntu* empower us to reject violence and embrace peace and justice?", he argues and concludes that, "if we de-patriarchalise *ubuntu*, it can be deployed to contribute towards detoxifying aggressive masculinities ... *ubuntu* may be utilised to assist men to challenge sexual and gender-based violence and embrace

more harmonious ways of being human.” Finally, through telling the stories of different physically challenged people, Mia Lintvelt explores “women with disabilities in Africa” as a phenomenon of multifold discrimination. After discussing attitudes of the church and society towards people with disability, particularly towards women, she searches for biblical perspectives on (causes of) disability. In the process, she unlocks and reinterprets rich biblical resources, and concludes with a powerful section on images of a vulnerable, compassionate, “disabled” God who identifies with people in unconditional love and care.

The sixth section, *Gender Equality: An Issue of Home and in the Family*, aims to relate challenges pertaining to gender equality in Africa to the primary, intimate relations of household and family. In a crucially important discussion, Esther Rutoro investigates the nature and purpose of Genesis 3:16 (“Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you”) in view of desire and rule in traditional (“highly patriarchal”) Shona understandings of marriage. Through telling various stories from within the Zimbabwean context, and through engaging with a wide range of biblical texts and contexts, traditional norms and values pertaining to marriage (with husbands being viewed as superior to wives), as well as the church’s response to these issues are challenged to their root. In an equally important essay, Esther Rutoro and Maggie Madimbo investigate gender equality from the sensitive perspective of single womanhood in the Shona culture. They deliberately assign the status of “a gift from God” to single womanhood, and bring traditional cultural–philosophical orientations in critical and creative discussion with biblical perspectives, thereby inviting the church to prophetically address dehumanising cultural stereotypes associated with singlehood. Lydia Mwaniki and Elna Mouton subsequently wrestle with complex rhetorical challenges involved in assisting (Christian) households to move from patriarchy to “participatory freedom”. Through exploring the transformative potential of the Ephesians household code in view of changing gender roles in Kenyan families, they find an analogy from which to draw wisdom and energy for the dire interpretative task at hand.

In the final section of the book, *Gender Equality: Towards the Future*, Olo Ndukwe regards the urgent need for gender equality as a *kairos* for *status* or *processus confessionis* in the church. With reference to the Barmen Declaration (1934), the Belhar Confession (1986), the Accra Confession and commitment to (economic) justice and the integrity of creation by the World Council (now Communion) of Reformed Churches (2004), Ndukwe yearns for a prophetic initiative by churches in Africa that would acknowledge that nothing less than *the integrity of the gospel of*

*Jesus Christ* is at stake where the dignity of humanity is threatened. He challenges his audience with an open invitation to decide for themselves whether the picture revealed in these essays does not at least deserve a *processus* (if not *status*) *confessionis*...

### **EFSA's vision**

Words fail us to express our deep gratitude towards EFSA, Institute for Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, for sponsoring the completion of this extended writing project. EFSA, a unique network of theological institutions in the Western Cape and the South African Council of Churches Western Cape (SACCWC), strives to play a facilitating role by providing a platform for public debate on challenges facing the South African society, even of controversial issues. It thereby endeavours to focus public attention (and the attention of the church or academic institutions) on specific problems in society. EFSA currently concentrates on various priorities, amongst which is “the healing and reconciliatory role of the church and other religious communities,” including projects on the role of women in the healing of violent societies, and the breaking down of stereotypes (such as sexism and racism) in society. For further information, see their website <http://www.efsa-institute.org.za>.

### **Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians**

In 1989, eleven years before the formation of NetACT, a ground-breaking initiative was taken through the launch of the *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* in Accra, Ghana, to address issues related to culture and gender. Today, the Circle consists of hundreds of women from across Africa, within various contexts and disciplines, committed to searching for, and publishing on creative alternatives to *all* forms of power abuse and injustice in African churches and societies, and to gender justice in particular. For the purpose of developing women's ways of interpreting reality, the Circle considers *storytelling* as a potentially powerful instrument for rereading and reimagining the Bible and culture towards liberating, healing and sense-making practices in churches and societies.<sup>6</sup> In the words of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, doyenne of African Women's Theologies, “(t)he stories we tell of our hurts and joys are sacred. Telling them makes us vulnerable, but without sharing we cannot build community and solidarity. Our stories are precious paths on which

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6 Dube, “Introduction”.



we have walked with God and struggled for a passage to full humanity.”<sup>7</sup> Further, like the Bible and other religious texts, “African cultures remain vibrant and authoritative texts in the lives of women, and they need to be studied, analyzed, and reinterpreted for the creation of a just world and the empowerment of women.”<sup>8</sup>

As the Circle celebrates their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year (2014), we gladly and respectfully dedicate this volume to them, acknowledging their profound and creative role on the continent and internationally. Apart from their impressive publication record since 1989,<sup>9</sup> we particularly honour the Circle for giving a voice to trained as well as “ordinary” women.

In the final analysis, it is our sincere prayer and hope that these two initiatives, the Circle and NetACT, will continue to weave connections and work together in the future – be it from different perspectives and with different styles and emphases – to bring about a new, just and dignified way of living together in every corner, every congregation, every home, every school, every neighbourhood, every workplace on the continent with the warm, welcoming heart.

Elna Mouton (South Africa)

Len Hansen (South Africa)

Gertrude Kapuma (Malawi)

Thomas Togom (Kenya)

*December 2014*

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7 Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 21.

8 Dube, “Introduction”, 1.

9 Cf. <http://www.thecirclecawt.org>.

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# GENDER EQUALITY

AN ISSUE OF FAITH AND DIGNITY



~1~

## MEN AND WOMEN IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Equal in dignity? United in diversity?

*Nico Koopman*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

This essay first argues in favour of the equal dignity of men and women. A Trinitarian rationale for the equal dignity of men and women is offered. Second, the unity of men and women is portrayed as a unity in diversity. The unity of God's people is also a unity between men and women. The notion of unity in diversity among men and women is argued for by opting for a so-called *strategic essentialist position* over against either a purely essentialist/ontological or a purely constructivist position to describe the unity between men and women. In the third part of this essay, some ecclesial imperatives of the notion of equality in dignity are discussed. The commitment to gender freedom and to gender justice (access, inclusion, participation) is discussed as two interdependent quests, which advance the actualisation of dignity for men and women. In the fourth and final part, some challenges for churches are inferred from the notion of unity in diversity. Unity in diversity between men and women is advanced through attempts like the cherished partnership of men and women approaches of international denominational bodies like the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and international ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches. It is also advanced through theological discourses like those in feminist and womanist theologies, masculine liberation theology and possibly also public theology. These two sets of attempts

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1 Nico Koopman is professor of Christian Ethics in and Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. He is also director of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology.

offer assistance to local churches in their quest to faithfully confess and embody unity in diversity.

### **Men and women: Equal in dignity**

The equality of men and women in dignity can be based in the Trinitarian rationale for dignity that is in an illuminating way offered by the British Barth scholar and Methodist theologian, John Webster.<sup>2</sup>

### **Dignity based on God the Creator**

Our dignity resides in the loving act of *God the Creator* who summons us into being. Our dignity is a created dignity. Our vulnerability, as expressed in our creaturely needs, is not in conflict with our created dignity. Our needs reflect our dependence upon God who summoned us into being and who gave life to us, and who fulfils and consummates a life of full glory for us. Human dignity as responsible selfhood, identity across time and creaturely continuity cannot be had *remote Deo*, i.e., in separation from the Creator's summons. Dignity does not reside in autonomy and independence, but in this dependence upon God the Creator. The dignity, worth, honour and glory of creatures rest in our calling to live in fellowship and communion with God. Webster states: "God crowns creatures with glory and honour, marking them out as the recipient of his approval, and setting them apart for fellowship with himself. Creation is exaltation; creatures have dignity as they are dignified by God."<sup>3</sup>

From this divine foundation of our dignity emanates the theological imperative to acknowledge and respect dignity. To quote Webster again:

Only God the creator can crown with glory and honour; creatures are not competent to ascribe dignity to themselves or to other creatures. Human judgements about dignity can only be repetitions of the divine judgement, acts in which honour is recognised as an indicative and imperative which rests on the divine decision.<sup>4</sup>

Human dignity as created dignity means that we receive our dignity from the Creator. Our dignity is inalienable because it is given by the Creator. It is inalienable because it does not come from humans, but it comes from the Creator.

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2 Cf. Webster, "The Dignity of Creatures". I have also used this analysis of Webster in a 2010 publication, "Human Dignity".

3 Webster, "The Dignity of Creatures", 24.

4 Webster, "The Dignity of Creatures", 24.

It is inalienable because it is not dependent upon the recognition of dignity by the frail and unreliable hearts, minds and actions of humans, but it is dependent upon the living God. Creaturely dignity as inalienable dignity implies that our dignity does not reside in our own merit, capabilities and performance. Inalienable, creaturely dignity is received dignity. It is dignity in the presence of, in communion with, and in dependence upon God the Creator.

Our calling with regard to acknowledging and affirming, actualising and fulfilling dignity is to witness in word and deed to the dignifying decisions and actions of God the Creator. But even our unfaithfulness to this calling does not mean that people can be alienated from their dignity. We may deny, disregard, disrespect, betray, abuse and violate this dignity, but we cannot bereft and alienate people from their God-given, creaturely dignity.

Webster refers to the fact that the Creator calls us to enact our being in fellowship with God. The Christian tradition teaches that this human being is created in the image of God. And as God's image we share in God's freedom, authority, creativity, rationality, responsibility and in God's desire and capability to live life in communion.<sup>5</sup> Through the lens of Webster these features are defined and substantiated in terms of the recognition of the vulnerability of humans who are called to live in dependence upon and in communion with God. Therefore our freedom is in harmony with God's freedom, which is always a freedom for the other, specifically for the *suffering* other. Our authority is always authority received from the Creator and therefore redemptive, serving and liberative authority. Our creativity and work and labour are to create for the sake of communion and joy. Our rationality reflects the rationality and logic of God, and therefore transcends the modernistic criteria of rationality, namely, that which makes logical sense and that which can be empirically verified. Our desire for communion resonates with God's desire for, and realisation of, a communion of care and solidarity, mutuality and reciprocity.

## Dignity based on Christ

Our dignity is also *Christologically* based. Webster argues that a theology of dignity should be developed within the context of Saint Augustine's appeal that dignity

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5 For helpful discussions of the meaning of the image of God for our reflection upon theological anthropology and human dignity see Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*; Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*; Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*; Huber, *Violence*; Huber, *Der Gemachte Mensch*; Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*.



discourse should be part of *hamartiological* and *soteriological* discourse. As human beings we cannot destroy our dignity, but we can alienate ourselves from the relationship with God our Creator. Human dignity can only flourish in the context of a relationship with God where we thankfully accept the gift of dignity and our calling to live a dignifying life. We trample our dignity through at least two sinful ways, i.e., through our rush for carnal fulfilment and dishonourable passion, as well as through our conviction that we ourselves, and not God, are responsible for the establishment and protection of our dignity. This carnality and skewed form of responsibility are ways of refusing to accept the gift of dignity. This refusal to accept the divine gift, according to Webster, causes alienation and misery:

The sinful state which eventuates may be characterised by alienation (the objective breach of relations between creator and creatures in which creatures come to discover that they have placed themselves at a mortal distance from the source of life and blessing) and by misery (the subjective degradation which comes from the futile attempt to have life on conditions other than those established by the creator's love).<sup>6</sup>

Where we isolate ourselves from God, and where we follow our own logic for our lives instead of God's logic, there we do not enjoy the blessing of dignified living that God has in store for us.

Through the Person and the extensive and comprehensive work of Jesus Christ, God affirms our dignity. According to Webster, Christ affirms and protects our dignity "by the full scope of this divine mission: its origin in the eternal procession of the Son; the assumption of flesh; the state of humiliation; the exaltation of Easter; the glorious rule of the Son as the ascended and enthroned reconciler who presents himself in the Spirit's power."<sup>7</sup>

Through the work of Christ, God provides a way for sinners to live in communion with God again; to accept God's gift of dignity and the vocation to live and witness to a God-given life of dignity. In this regard Webster cites Calvin's comment on Psalm 8:

...(t)he heavenly Father has again bestowed the fullness of all gifts upon his Son, that all of us should draw out of this well-spring; whatsoever God bestows upon us by him, the same of right belongs in the first degree to him; yea, rather, he is the lively image of God, according to which we must be amended, upon which all other things depend. [And so] His excellence and heavenly dignity are extended unto us also, for whose sakes he is enriched with them.<sup>8</sup>

6 Webster, "The Dignity of Creatures", 26.

7 Webster, "The Dignity of Creatures", 27.

8 Webster, "The Dignity of Creatures", 29.

The gift of creaturely dignity that humans do not accept and enjoy, is embodied by Jesus Christ. This dignity is confirmed by Christ. And in Christ this gift is offered afresh to us. The Christological dignity is therefore embodied dignity, confirmed dignity. The dignity and glory of Christ are *pro nobis*. Christ's dignity is for us, it is our dignity.

### **Dignity based on the work of the Holy Spirit**

Our dignity is also based in the person and work of the *Holy Spirit*. The Spirit is the Spirit of God through whom God perfects and actualises the dignity of human beings in correspondence to God's plans and purposes, calling and summons. The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ through whom the glorified Son directs creaturely realities to their completion. In this journey the Spirit generates, sustains and purifies obedience and active consent on the part of creatures. Webster states: "The Spirit moves creatures, and in moving gives them their proper spontaneity and integrity, that is, their dignity as the active children of God."<sup>9</sup>

Dignity is actualised in the Christian communion, in the Trinitarian communion, in the church. In communion with the triune God our dignity is created, confirmed and actualised. In communion with fellow creatures it becomes clear that this dignity is not only metaphysical, but that it is also orientational and moral. Dignity as gift from God also takes on social shape and form amongst God's creatures. Our moral imperative is to acknowledge, protect and testify to this Trinitarian and ecclesial dignity. We are called upon to resist the denial and betrayal of dignity.

This Trinitarian dignity is bestowed upon all human beings, both male and female, and for that matter also upon people with various other sexual orientations.

### **Unity in diversity**

The unity of all God's people in their rich diversity is confessed clearly in Article One of the Belhar Confession (1986). I quote from this rich article at length:

We believe in one holy, universal Christian church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family. We believe

that Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;

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<sup>9</sup> Webster, "The Dignity of Creatures", 30.

that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought, one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;

that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe; that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted;

that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways ...

that this unity can take form only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the diversity of languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;

From this quote it is quite clear that this unity is a unity in diversity, which includes the unity of men and women. The exciting ecclesial imperatives emanating from this confession of the unity of men and women will be discussed below.

The nature of the unity in diversity of men and women is discussed extensively in feminist discourses. The North American Reformed systematic theologian, Serene Jones,<sup>10</sup> discusses the distinction between three positions regarding the unity in diversity of men and women, namely essentialism, constructivism and strategic essentialism.

Essentialism,<sup>11</sup> Jones argues, refers to the inherent and unchanging qualities and essences, to the fundamental and indispensable properties of persons or objects that constitute their most basic or core identity. According to the essentialist view, these properties do not vary over time, they are immune to historical forces, and they cannot be attributed to culture or convention. These features are determined by nature, by both biological and physiological (sex) make-up, and psychological and sociological dispositions and characteristics, i.e., gender make-up. They are inborn, innate, native, instinctual and pre-social. Over the centuries various lists of male and female essentials were formulated. These essentials were also called universals, because it is implied that these features were applicable in all times and all places to all women or men. The features of women and men were framed in oppositional terms: women are relational and dependent, and men are autonomous

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<sup>10</sup> Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 22-48.

<sup>11</sup> Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 25-29.

and independent. These lists of features were also framed in complementary terms: Women are emotional and men rational, and women are receptive and men assertive. The lists also reflected hierarchy: men are physically superior and women are emotionally superior. The lists reflected lack: Men have a penis, and women suffer from penis-envy. Difference in degree also formed part of the categorisation: Women are better with children, and men are better with technology.

Constructivism,<sup>12</sup> Jones continues, refers to the social, cultural and linguistic sources of our views about men and women. What is viewed as gender essentials, universals and givens, are actually historically, culturally, linguistically and socially formed features. According to the constructivist view, linguistic, social and cultural constructs form gender characteristics and features. These constructs are symbols, languages, beliefs, actions and attitudes within which persons live and learn to organise and make sense of their lives. These constructs are imaginative. Imagination does not refer to fantasy in the narrow sense, but to the vast world of our conceptual capacities. Constructs are thus imaginative lenses through which the world, ourselves, our relationships, and also our faith come into view and receive shape and significance.

While one may shift cultural frames over one's life or even live in a number of different imaginative frames or cultural constructs at the same time, one can never know anything outside them, because these constructs are what make knowing possible.<sup>13</sup>

These constructs are also lived. They literally construct our lives, from the level of individual actions and lifestyles to the broader levels of institutions and social structures. These constructs are thus not just imagined but they are materially manifested and present.

Jones further explains that strategic essentialism,<sup>14</sup> also called normative constructivism, pragmatic utopianism, and pragmatic universalism, constitutes a sort of in-between position between essentialism and constructivism. It has at its core the question whether our theories are activist, i.e., whether they serve the cause and struggle for justice and emancipation, in this case the liberation of women and men. The notion of "strategic" serves this idea of being pragmatic in service of the struggle for liberation.

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<sup>12</sup> Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 31-40.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 42-48.

Strategic essentialism does not throw away the idea of essential features of males and females. Jones argues:

The claim that women are by nature more nurturing than men may be oppressive when used to argue that women are not tough-minded enough to be good political leaders. The same view, however, may be emancipatory when it brings women's nurturing sensibilities into public politics in order to challenge patriarchal views of power, hierarchy and control.<sup>15</sup>

Jones's distinction between strategic essentialism and constructivism<sup>16</sup> illuminates her position. The constructivist is content to offer thick descriptions of constructed essences, whereas the strategic essentialist discerns the meaning and power of these universals with respect to the emancipation and flourishing of both women and men. She argues that the rejection of essentialist, oppressive views of women does not imply the rejection of commonalities among women and among men.

As the name strategic essentialist suggests, a feminist theorist in this camp finds positive value in making essentialist claims about human nature in general and women's nature in particular. She pragmatically values essentialism because she believes people simply cannot live without a view of human nature that includes "essentials" or "universals". Further, she believes that constructivism alone cannot sustain ongoing movements that require not only collective action but also normative visions of human nature and the human good.<sup>17</sup>

Jones clearly explains the difference between the strategic essentialist and the essentialist:

...(t)he most significant difference lies in the degree to which strategic essentialism stays open to critique and hence continually revises its "universals". Revisions may be prompted by a number of things: the "universals" may no longer serve feminist emancipatory ends or be intelligible to the community that holds them; they may come into direct conflict with other, more important "universals", or they may be "essentials" that historical and cultural reflection disproves. When "in use", they may also prove not to be universal but exclusive. A Strategic essentialist therefore keeps one foot in the constructivist camp; she remembers that all "universals" are inescapably marked by context. A healthy dose of constructivist suspicion, along with an emphasis on feminist practice, thus keeps strategic essentialism from assuming the fixed positions associated with traditional forms of essentialist reflection.<sup>18</sup>

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15 Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 45.

16 Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 45-46.

17 Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 45.

18 Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 46-47.

Jones strives to enrich the notion of strategic essentialism by developing an image of the nature of men and women that is ideal, utopian and even eschatological.<sup>19</sup> This eschatological strategic essentialism opens up new and surprising ways for thinking about human nature, specifically about the nature of women. The eschatological approach affirms and celebrates the diversity and difference and particularity that God bestows upon humans and specifically upon men and women. Its activism is motivated and inspired and guided by the transformative, redemptive and renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

The choice of Serene Jones for strategic essentialism fills me with some hesitation, because the word “essentialism” might be used in an oppressive manner. It, however, perhaps deserves our attention in light of its liberative motive, in light of its activist motive, i.e., its quest for concrete decisions and actions in service of dignity, freedom and justice in all walks of life, and in light of its motive to seek eschatological, idealistic and utopian ways to advance dignity.

### **Equal in dignity – Some ecclesial imperatives for churches in Africa**

The confession of the equality in dignity of women and men offers some concrete mandates and imperatives for churches, both on our continent and elsewhere in the world. The ecclesial imperatives entails that we jointly seek interrelated and interdependent freedom and justice for women and men. The interdependent notions of freedom and justice constitute the two legs of a life of dignity. Without freedom there is no dignity. Without justice there is no dignity. In the works of both Luther and Calvin, these two notions are indispensable for Christian living.

#### **Freedom from injustice as oppression**

Serene Jones<sup>20</sup> identifies five forms of oppression that we need to be freed from, namely, freedom from exploitation, freedom from marginalisation, freedom from powerlessness, freedom from cultural imperialism, and freedom from violence.

#### **Freedom for justice as access, inclusion and participation**

A second imperative for churches is that women and men jointly participate in the quest for justice for all. This would concretely entail that we seek justice as *access*

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<sup>19</sup> Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 46, 52-55.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 79-93.

to the most basic necessities of life, i.e., water, food, clothes, housing, health care, education, employment, leisure, a healthy environment, et cetera.

This also entails that we seek justice as *inclusion* in the various social and ecological bonds of life, from the most intimate to the most cosmic, from family and marriage or single life, to friendship, culture, art, civil society, politics, workplace, and to caring for the natural environment.

The joint quest for justice entails that all of us participate in the decision-making and decision-implementation processes of life, from the most intimate to the most global.

The joint creation of a human rights culture, within which woman human rights is a crucial dimension, might be a vehicle to actualise dignity, freedom and justice.

### **Unity in diversity – Some ecclesial imperatives for churches in Africa**

The confession of the unity in diversity of women and men also pose concrete challenges to churches in Africa and elsewhere. The Belhar Confession clearly spells out that life in unity implies life in partnership and life in service of each other:

...that we love one another; that we experience, practise and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptised with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ; that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against everything that may threaten or hinder this unity.<sup>21</sup>

This service of women and men to each other comes to expression in two sets of collaborations and partnerships between women and men.

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<sup>21</sup> URCSA, *Belhar Confession*.

## **The partnership of men and women: Lessons from international Churches**

Perhaps we need to drink to a higher extent from the cherished wells of the former World Alliance of Reformed Churches, currently the World Communion of Reformed Churches, regarding partnership of men and women. This approach entails that women and men work jointly to address the freedom and justice imperatives discussed above.

At a pre-conference of the 2013 General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in South Korea, the focus was on the following question: How can we build a community of women and men in the church to serve as a core to the calling, nature and mission of the church, especially as a response to the call for unity? How do we reconstruct an understanding of being men and women that aims at building mutual partnership for gender justice as part of the justice and peace agenda?

## **The partnership of men and women: Lessons from theological discourses**

The partnership of various theological discourses might also enhance the quest for dignity, freedom and justice.

We need to learn from the voices of women as they are expressed in theologies like feminist theologies, womanist theologies, and other forms of theology where women's voices are clearly articulated.

We also need to take seriously the appeal of Jürgen Moltmann<sup>22</sup> to develop so-called masculine theologies of liberation, which he views as a manner in which men can respond faithfully to the challenge of dignity, freedom and justice for all. We may also consider the development of a public theology of *hybridity*,<sup>23</sup> which entails that women and men live in spaces of constructive proximity; that we show sympathy (feel each others' pain), empathy (live in each others' skins) and interpathy (feel with each other despite histories of division and enmity); that we participate in each others' lives; that we live with porous boundaries; that we wear each others' lenses; and that we are actually freed from minimalistic gender identities and live with maximalistic identities which make us say: I am male, but due to my hybridic living with females I am more than male. I also wear the lenses of women.

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22 Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*.

23 For my reflections upon the notion of hybridity, see Koopman "Towards a Pedagogy of Hybridity, Reconciliation and Justice".



## Conclusion

On our continent of patriarchy and misogyny the cause of dignity, freedom and justice for women and men might be enhanced through serious attention to the confession of Trinitarian dignity of women and men, and the unity in diversity of women and men. Where the dignity, freedom and justice of women are betrayed, there the dignity, freedom and justice of all are betrayed. Where the unity in diversity of women and men is betrayed, there the ecclesial confession of the unity in diversity of all God's children is betrayed.

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### **Questions for further reflection**

- ♦ Discuss the meaning of faith in God the Creator for the dignity of men and women.
- ♦ Discuss the meaning of faith in Jesus the Saviour for the equal dignity of men and women.
- ♦ Discuss the meaning of faith in the Holy Spirit for the equal dignity of men and women.
- ♦ Discuss the meaning of the confession of unity in diversity for the relationship of men and women.
- ♦ Is Jones's notion of strategic essentialism of any use in our quest for gender justice?



## IN GOD'S IMAGE A BIBLICAL

### Theological survey of the dignity of women and men

*Florence Matsveru and Simon Gillham<sup>1</sup>*

#### Introduction

As we examine what the Bible has to say regarding the dignity of women and men, we need a hermeneutic<sup>2</sup> that takes seriously the diversity and unity of scriptural witness, and takes into account the progressive self-revelation<sup>3</sup> of God to people throughout salvation history.<sup>4</sup> The contributors to this essay will use a biblical-theological<sup>5</sup> approach. Such an approach is characterised by a desire to look at this important subject through the lens of the “big story” of the whole Bible, rather

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- 1 Florence Matsveru is a part-time lecturer at Namibia Evangelical Theological Seminary (NETS). Simon Gillham is the Acting Principal and a lecturer of Biblical Studies at NETS. The authors of this essay would like to acknowledge with gratitude the contributions made by their colleague, Josh Hooker, at various stages of its preparation.
  - 2 The term “hermeneutic” refers to “a method or principle of interpretation”. Different schools of thought use different methods to interpret the Bible. The argument of the authors of this essay is that a biblical theological hermeneutic seems to cover, in their view, the unity and diversity of Scripture and the progressive self-revelation of God in Scripture.
  - 3 “Progressive revelation” is a way of describing the fact that God has revealed Godself over thousands of years of history rather than at one point in time. The consequence of this is that, as we read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, our knowledge of God becomes clearer and more detailed as we go along. This is not to imply that God changes, but that God’s self-revelation builds towards a climax in the sending of God’s Son the Lord Jesus (cf. Heb 1:1–4).
  - 4 The authors of this essay take the view that God has been and continues to be active throughout all of history and that God’s purpose is to save people for Godself (see Titus 2:11–14, Eph 1:3–10). In this essay, the term “salvation history” is used as a means of describing all of the biblical material in a manner that highlights the progressive revelation of God throughout history. In this way “salvation history” also provides an organisational structure for the discussion which follows.
  - 5 The term “biblical-theological” is used in a technical sense with reference to the recognised approach to biblical studies described below, not in contrast to other “unbiblical theologies”. For a fuller description of a biblical theological methodology see, for example, Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centred Biblical Theology*.

than using selected “proof texts”. This methodology helps to guard readers from the danger of skewing the biblical message to suit their own preconceptions or agendas. This essay, therefore, looks at human dignity in the light of the biblical story from Creation (Genesis) to the new Creation (Revelation).

In accordance with this approach, biblical material will be examined and presented as it appears throughout salvation history. The socio-cultural context and literary genre of each passage will be respected and the place within the unfolding progressive revelation considered. The structure of the essay therefore reflects the structure of salvation history. Whilst it would be impossible to write comprehensively about what the Bible teaches about women and men in one essay, the salient points and developments in each epoch will be highlighted.

The essay is divided into the following sections:

- ♦ A Christocentric approach to human dignity
- ♦ The value of a biblical-theological approach to human dignity
- ♦ The dignity of women and men in Creation
- ♦ The effects of the Fall (Genesis 3) on the dignity of women and men
- ♦ The dignity of women and men in God’s redemptive plan
- ♦ The dignity of women and men under the New Covenant
- ♦ The dignity of women and men in the New Creation.

### **A Christocentric approach to human dignity**

In her philosophical work on human dignity, Mette Lebech<sup>6</sup> identifies four frameworks within which human dignity has been applied through the centuries, from antiquity to postmodernity. These are: the cosmocentric framework (antiquity, whereby the fundamental value of humans lies in their moral dominion over the rest of Creation); the Christocentric framework (Middle Ages, explained below); the logocentric (modernity, whereby the dignity of humans lies in reason, i.e., in the rationality of human beings); and the poliscentric framework (postmodernity, whereby human dignity is the foundation of society and society defines what

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<sup>6</sup> Mette Lebech defines human dignity as “the status of human beings entitling them to respect, a status which is first and to be taken for granted”. For Lebech, the “principle” of human dignity is universal and therefore has no history, but the “idea” of human dignity does have a history as people began to conceptualise it. Lebech’s work therefore traces the development of the human dignity “idea”, giving a picture of how it has been understood over the centuries. For a more detailed reading on the four accounts on human dignity, see Lebech, “What is Human Dignity?”.

human dignity is). Based on the nature and the presuppositions of this essay, the Christocentric approach to understanding human dignity becomes the most appropriate approach to pursue here.

In the Christocentric approach to human dignity, the fundamental value of human beings lies in the fact that they are created in the image of God. All human beings therefore deserve to be valued and respected. The incarnation of Christ as human also affirms this fundamental value of human beings. The Christocentric approach recognises the distortion of human dignity at the Fall, which – according to the biblical narrative – can only fully be restored in Christ Jesus. Those who are “in Christ” have the hope of complete restoration of the image of God because Christ bears “the true image of God” (1 Cor 15:48-49; Col 1:15; 3:10). It should, however, be noted that it is God’s responsibility to execute judgment upon those who are in Christ and those who are not in Christ. The responsibility of those who are in Christ is to love one another as well as those who are not in Christ. This is in line with Christ’s commandment to “love your neighbour as yourself” and to “love [even] your enemies” (Matt 5:43-48; 19:19; Mark 12:31; cf. Lev 19:18), which calls Christians to value and respect all people because they carry the image of God.

As one reads through this essay, it will become clear that its authors presuppose a Christocentric approach to human dignity. This approach therefore forms the basis for the discussion of the dignity of women and men in this essay.

### **The value of a biblical-theological approach to human dignity**

The sixty-six books of the Bible were written over a period of more than 1500 years, by more than forty different authors from a great variety of cultural and historical backgrounds. This tremendous diversity is further complicated by a great variety of literary genres and formulations evident within the biblical canon. Yet the Bible claims for itself a unity based on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16).

In our investigating of the Bible’s teaching on the dignity of women and men, or any other topic of interest for that matter, it is essential that we consider this diversity and unity of Scripture, and the progressive self-revelation of God throughout salvation history.

If the diversity of scriptural witness is not respected, the result will be biblical interpretation that is insensitive to differences in genre and historical-cultural context. Sinaitic laws may be pronounced as though Christ’s fulfilment of the Law

made no material difference; proverbs may be quoted as though they were promises, and the powerful beauty of the poetry may be destroyed.

If the unity of scriptural witness is not respected, interpreters will be tempted to choose between passages of Scripture, and the basis for that choice would become the new authoritative norm. This is evident, for example, in Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion where passages of the Bible are lauded, reinterpreted or dismissed on the basis of their perceived patriarchal influences.<sup>7</sup>

If God's progressive self-revelation throughout Scripture is not taken into account, interpreters will be at risk of misapplying Old Testament texts in particular. The significance of the Lord Jesus as the fulfilment of the Mosaic Covenant and the foundation of the New Covenant will easily be overlooked. Contemporary application of scriptural principles would be left with insufficient guidance to determine the trajectory of developments throughout biblical salvation history. The application of Scripture could easily be cut free "from any control by the biblical text and surrender[ed] to the creativity of interpreters".<sup>8</sup>

A biblical-theological approach therefore seems to provide some desirable safeguards against these dangers in our discussion of the dignity of women and men. According to this approach, this essay examines and presents biblical material as it appears throughout the canon of Scripture.

## **The dignity of women and men in creation**

### **Male and female created in the image of God**

Any biblical discussion of the dignity of women and men has to start with Genesis 1:27: "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."<sup>9</sup> Köstenberger emphasises that "(t)he fact that both men and women are *created in the likeness and image of their Creator* invests them with inestimable worth, dignity, and significance."<sup>10</sup> Human dignity is, therefore, rooted in creation and this implies that both women and men are intrinsically worthy of respect. This respect is derived from being part of God's

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7 See Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, as well as her focus on the intended rhetorical effect of biblical texts, i.e., on what these were supposed to *do* in the lives of their recipients (and also Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, especially Chapter 1).

8 Ferdinando, "Mission", 48.

9 All references in this essay are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.

10 Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 23.

creation and particularly being made in God's *image*. Hendrik Bosman rightly states that "(t)he *imago Dei* establishes a niche for humankind in creation that impacts on how we understand ourselves and interact with one another, as well as with the rest of creation."<sup>11</sup> The concept of the image of God in humanity should bring us to the conclusion that both women and men have a God-ordained dignity and are equally worthy of respect both by themselves and by others.

It is important to note that – for Christians – human dignity transcends any human policies, conventions, charters, acts or any other such legislative instruments. It is something that God brought into being. It is not a human invention. The dignity of both women and men should, therefore, be upheld in acknowledgement of and submission to God's sovereign design. When God had finally created the man and the woman as the climax of God's creative process, God saw that "it was very good" (Gen 1:31). When Eve was brought to Adam, Adam exclaimed: "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). Here, Adam was not simply stating an anatomical fact; he was expressing deep appreciation of the woman.

The man and the woman were given *joint* stewardship and benefits of the earth (Gen 1:26, 28–29): "...*they* may rule [the rest of nature]" (v. 26). "God blessed *them* and said to *them*, ... Rule over [the rest of creation]" (v. 28). Counter to the increasingly popular ethics of radical proponents of animal rights like Peter Singer who maintains that "the life of a newborn is of less value than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee",<sup>12</sup> the responsibility given to human beings highlights their dignity over and above other created things.

In relationship to one another, women and men were created to be interdependent. "In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God" (1 Cor 11:11–12).<sup>13</sup> In other words, men cannot do without women and women cannot do without men; and neither of them can do without God, whether consciously or unconsciously (cf. Acts 17:28 – "For in him we live and move and have our being"). A world where only men or only women exist would be unthinkable and even undesirable.

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11 Bosman, "Humankind as Being Created", 569.

12 Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 122–123.

13 New Testament references will be considered here and there in discussions of the Old Testament and vice versa to emphasise certain points and also to stress the unity of Scripture. This should not confuse the readers regarding the progressive self-revelation of God in different epochs.



## **Celebrating the differences between maleness and femaleness**

While it is clear from Scripture that both males and females are created in the image of God, the phrase “male and female” denotes profound difference and distinctness. God created the man and the woman different. Even the initial creation process itself was different. This difference, however, has nothing to do with superiority or inferiority of one to the other. In fact, the distinctness is necessary for God’s purposes of companionship and procreation.

Maleness and femaleness are both gifts from God and are to be cherished and respected. “Male and female, *he created* them” (Gen 1:27). No single person decided to be born male or female.

Any notable differences between males and females should be lauded rather than being regarded as areas of contention. One of the surest differences is the physical or anatomical difference. Through the ages, other differences (psychological, emotional and behavioural) have been debated.<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of our conclusions on the significance and scope of the differences between women and men, we must affirm that human dignity does not flow from our differences or similarities but rather from God’s design of women and men as God’s image bearers. The issue is not whether males and females are different or not in certain areas, but how we perceive these apparent differences. One’s gender, or gender role, should not determine one’s value. All that has been placed in people by God serves God’s purposes. The God-ordained human dignity, derived from the concept of the image of God, does not give us room to view one gender as more valuable than the other.

Our major problem is that we have learned to categorise people as superior or inferior, and to attach value to people according to those categories. We have confused function with value. Every role that a man or a woman plays for the glory of God and the good of humanity, regardless of gender, should be valued.

## **The effects of the fall on the dignity of women and men**

Since the Genesis 3 Fall until today, the whole of “creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth” (Rom 8:22). Sin has distorted the image of God in humanity in three areas: the rule of humanity, the harmony of relationships, and the expression of God’s character. The distortion of the image of God in these three areas is explained below.

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<sup>14</sup> Part of these debates also, of course, concerned, instead of the appreciation of gender differences, the overemphasis of such differences and therefore led to negative gender stereotyping.

## **The rule of humanity is distorted**

Although women and men as God's image bearers were to rule over other living creatures (Gen 1:28), integral to the Fall is that one of the creatures, the serpent, takes the lead. Indeed the picture of original sin in Genesis 3 is presented in terms of a profound inversion of God's creation order. The serpent leads the woman and the woman then leads the man into sin. As God returns to the garden in verse 8, consistent with God's creation mandate, God calls the man to account (Gen 3:11). The man blames the woman, and the woman blames the serpent. It is clear that although the man and woman had inverted God's creation order in practice, their status as image bearers meant that they could not shift the responsibility that they had been given by God. As a consequence of the Fall however, their ongoing rule over creation would be distorted and frustrated by an introduced enmity between the serpent's and woman's descendants (Gen 3:15) and the resistance of the earth to produce crops for food (Gen 3:17-19).

## **The harmony of relationships is distorted**

At the Fall, the harmony of relationships epitomised in the Godhead is also distorted in God's image bearers.

- ♦ The relationship between humanity and the rest of creation is subjected to the frustrations mentioned above (enmity between the serpent and the woman and their descendants and failure of the earth to produce crops).
- ♦ The relationship between the man and the woman is distorted by competing desires for selfish rule. "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Gen 3:16). It is not immediately clear here what is meant by these words. In fact, the words "desire" and "rule" are only found together in one other place – Genesis 4:7 – to describe the way that sin "desires" to have Cain, but he must "rule" over it.

In the context of God pronouncing the effects of the curse, the desire of the woman must more naturally be a negative, destructive or painful thing, rather than a cause of pleasure. For Susan Foh, "(t)hese words mark the beginning of the battle of the sexes."<sup>15</sup> Given the sense in which the word is used in Genesis 4:7, this desire is probably an urge of the woman to dominate her husband. Likewise, the rule of the husband in Genesis 3:16 must be a distortion of the creation mandate to rule, or it would make no sense for this to be a result of the curse of sin. This rule or domination of the husband over the wife is a consequence and expression of sin. Radmacher clarifies the meaning of these two statements thus: "You will now have a tendency to dominate your husband,

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15 Susan Foh, "What is the Woman's Desire?", 382.

and he will have the tendency to act as a tyrant over you.”<sup>16</sup> The tendencies of women and men to dominate each other often lead to gender-based violence (be it physical, emotional or psychological violence). Gender-based violence, both within the biblical narrative and also throughout the world today, is therefore a typical example of the distortion of the harmony of relationships as a result of sin.

When artists draw a caricature of somebody, they usually exaggerate the size of the person’s prominent features. The final picture is not like a photograph, but a distorted representation of the real thing. It seems that marriage – because of sin – has become a distorted representation of the real thing. This is not to say that there cannot be good marriages, but that the marriage relationship easily results in abuse. Rather than being companions, husband and wife easily become competitors.

- ♦ The relationship between humanity and God is also distorted by the Fall. The covering with fig leaves and hiding in the garden are evidence that shame, guilt and fear are introduced into this relationship (Gen 3:7-10). God, however, respects their continued dignity by providing better clothing for them (v. 21). The painful separation between God and humanity is epitomised by the banishment from the garden and the withdrawn access to the tree of life. Indeed, although women and men continue to bear God’s image, they are in fact separated from God. Verse 24 suggests not that God wants man to stay in his previous (presumably fallen) position but that God does not want the man and woman to live in that fallen state for ever. Death has now entered the world through sin and as a result people are barred from eternal life. This verse heralds the need for someone to rescue humanity from this awful reality.

### **The expression of God’s character is distorted**

As image bearers, women and men have a tremendous capacity for reflecting the character of God in their own lives. God’s “common grace” to all the people that God has made (for example, Rom 2:14-15) means that people still reflect something of the image of God. The doctrine of total depravity does not mean that people are incapable of doing good in any area of life. Rather, it means that every area of life has been affected by sin. This means that as Christians we can (and must) affirm goodness in the lives of unbelievers. Being made “in the image of God” means that even the most depraved person reflects God’s image to some extent (even if dimly). However, our hope is found in Christ – the One who reverses the effects of Adam’s sin for those who believe. He is the true image of the invisible God (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3) and by the work of God’s Spirit human beings can exhibit God’s character (Gal 5:22-23) and reflect God’s image (Col 3:10; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18).

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<sup>16</sup> Radmacher, as quoted by Parker, “He Shall Rule Over You”.

The love, faithfulness and mercy evident in every human society are, however, always off-set by the hatred, faithlessness and ruthlessness of that same group of people. The balance will differ from person to person but, with the one exception of the Lord Jesus, no person has perfectly exemplified God's image in their own character. Since the Fall, and as a result of it, we see a display of both good and evil – both conformity to God's character and the distortion of that character.

An example of conformity to God's character is the relationship between Hannah and Elkanah. Elkanah loved and respected his wife: "Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?... Do what seems best to you" (1 Sam 1:8, 23). This was countercultural because men usually expected their wives to give them sons and usually made decisions for their wives.

On the other hand, the distortion of God's character is seen when Lot's daughters sexually abused their father. They made him drunk and took turns to rape him (Gen 19:30-38); also, the Shechemites raped Dinah (Gen 34).

The inclusion of incidents such as these in the historical narrative cannot be argued as a basis for God condoning the gender-based evils perpetrated by people against one another. In fact, throughout the Old Testament we see God's prophets preaching against such evils, and at times we see God intervening by punishing individuals and nations for wrongdoing.<sup>17</sup>

What do we make of the suffering of women and men in the Old Testament? The Book of Judges seems to summarise the moral decadence of people as a result of sin. In Israel at this time, sin had risen to unprecedented levels. All did what was pleasing in their own eyes, even among Israel, the nation of God (Judges 17:6; 21:25).

Commenting on the Judges 19 incident, Cheryl Brown reasons that "the first step to social chaos is to dehumanize, and the first step to shalom is to humanize."<sup>18</sup>

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17 Potiphar's wife sexually assaulted Joseph (Gen 39:7-20), but God saved Joseph and elevated him to a high position. Pharaoh, in rebellion against the God of Israel, commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill all male Israelite children at birth (Exod 1:16; 22). Here we see Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, being commended for saving these children because they feared God (Exod 1:17-21). Pharaoh's daughter is also commended for rescuing Moses (Exod 2:1-10). God raised Moses, Aaron and Miriam as leaders and prophets as he led Israel out of Egypt (Exod 15:20-21, Micah 6:4). The firstborn sons of Egypt died as a punishment of God against the enemies of his people. Male children were generally valued more than female children during these times. One of the reasons was that they would go to war against the enemies of their nations. Even more valued were the firstborn sons because they would inherit their father's estates and keep the family name alive. God therefore went straight to the "heart" of the Egyptians in order to bring deliverance to his people. Jezebel killed the Lord's prophets and led her husband Ahab into idolatry (1 Kings 19-21), and God punished both (1 Kings 22:1-40; 2 Kings 9:30-10:17).

18 Cheryl Brown, "Judges", 74-75.

According to Brown, the dehumanisation of the Judges 19 woman resulted in social chaos when her man sought revenge. The intrinsic dignity of people needs to be upheld if they are to experience the sense of wholeness which God intended for them. When people are respected as they should be, this will not only benefit individuals, but societies at large. It is important for the church to ensure that the way it views, values and treats women and men is not dehumanising, and to oppose the dehumanisation of humanity by societies.

Time and again, God raised prophets and judges to lead God's people and to warn them of God's judgment. But they continued to perpetrate violence against each other. Gender-based violence, like any other sin, became the order of the day. In the Book of Judges we see a peak in gender-based violence. The Levite's concubine was gruesomely raped, murdered and chopped into pieces (Judges 19); six hundred women were raped by the Benjamites; virgin girls were forcefully handed over to the Benjamites by the Israelites (Judges 21). The story of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19 resembles the story in Genesis 19, showing that Israel had become as bad as gentile Sodom and Gomorrah – a result of a distorted humanity. Later, in response to Israel's demands and against his own will, God raised kings who were to mediate God's justice, but in many cases these kings themselves became the perpetrators of gender-based violence, oppression and injustice. The picture was so gruesome that God eventually handed Israel and Judah over to their enemies (Assyria and Babylon respectively).

The later prophets, such as Ezekiel, prophesied against gender-based evils. For Ezekiel it was the violence perpetrated by Israel's princes against the women and men of Israel (Ezek 22:6-13). Such violence included disrespect for fathers and mothers; neglecting widows; sexually abusing women; adultery and incest. God's message through Ezekiel was, "I [will] deal with you!" (vv. 13-16). Although God is slow to anger, God does not let sin go unpunished (Nah 1:3).

In the Old Testament period, women as well as men were held responsible for their sins (Gen 3:16).

"Hear this word, ... *you women* who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, 'Bring us some drinks!'" The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his holiness: "The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks, the last of you with fishhooks. You will each go straight out through breaches in the wall, and you will be cast out toward Harmon", declares the LORD (Amos 4:1-3).

The overall testimony of the Old Testament is that the Fall left both women and men in a depraved state and in desperate need of salvation (Ps 14:3; 53:3). Yen

rightly points this out when she says: “Each person, male or female, has at the same time both an infinite equality of worth before God and one another and a total equality of need for Jesus Christ as saviour.”<sup>19</sup>

### **The dignity of women and men in God’s redemptive plan**

Despite the effects of the Fall, God did not abandon the people God had made in God’s own image. Throughout the pages of the Bible, we find examples of God using women and men of all kinds<sup>20</sup> to effect the salvation of God’s people. Many of these people were not necessarily upright, but God used them in order to redeem the people that God had made in his image.

In the pages of the New Testament we find radical and countercultural inclusion of women and men, regardless of their social standing, in the new covenant people of God. We find slaves and paupers like Onesimus (Philemon 1:10-16), but also wealthy people of high standing like Erastus (Acts 19:22; Rom 16:23) and Lydia (Acts 16:14, 40). Indeed, one of the defining marks of new covenant communities is that they ought to welcome and be comprised of people from all stations of life (see James 2:1-12; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). It is not simply that women and men from all backgrounds are eligible to be saved and to join the new covenant community, but all those who are saved are expected to be part of God’s ongoing work of salvation in the world. Jesus calls those who follow him to this work in the Sermon on the Mount where He declares that they are “the light of the world” (Matt 5:14). This description is picking up on the expectations that were to be fulfilled in the Isaiahan Servant of the Lord (Isa 42:6; 49:6). The New Testament epistles confirm this role for believers in the ongoing salvific work of God in many ways. For example, in 2 Corinthians 6:1-2, Paul describes those who share ministry with him as “God’s fellow workers”, for “now is the day of salvation”.

As much as God invites people from all walks of life, not just to salvation but to a role within the ongoing work of the salvation of others, this is only possible because of the unique role of the Lord Jesus within salvation history. The Bible places a singular hope in the descendant of Eve (who is heralded in Genesis 3:15 as the one who would crush the serpent’s head), Jesus Christ. Adam named the

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<sup>19</sup> Yen, “Gender in Judeo-Christian Tradition”.

<sup>20</sup> Old Testament examples include Abraham, the father and model of faith in God (Gen 22); Joseph, a man of integrity and wisdom (Gen 39); Moses; Deborah, the prophetess, judge and leader (Judges 4:4-5); Samson, the philanderer (Judges 14-16); Rahab, the prostitute (Joshua 2; Heb. 11); Joshua and David, great warriors and leaders; Huldah, the prophetess (2 Kings 22:14-20); Esther, the queen in a foreign land and; Ruth, the faithful Moabite.

woman Eve (meaning “living” – Gen 3:20) not simply in anticipation of her role as mother of the human race, but also in anticipation of her role (in the light of Gen 3:15) as the mother of the Saviour of the human race. It was her greatest son who would finally defeat the power of evil at large within Creation and reverse sin’s effects (Heb 2:14–15; Rom 16:20). The first woman then plays a unique role in the history of salvation, as Mary the mother of Jesus did later. By virtue of their roles though, both of them point us to their “child”.

Anticipation regarding this descendant of Eve is focussed more and more sharply as God progressively reveals God’s plan for the redemption of humanity. It will be a descendant of Abraham through whom the whole world will be blessed (Gen 12:3). It will be a son of David who will rule with peace and justice forever (2 Sam 7:16). Indeed, no matter how many promises God has made, they find their “yes” and “amen” in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 1:20), and so it is that all of the hopes for human redemption are fulfilled in him.

Those who trust in Jesus find the locus of their identity “in him” (Gal 3:26–28). It is in this sense that all believers are united in their own redemption and in their call to redemptive ministry.

### **The dignity of women and men under the new covenant**

Upon the arrival of Jesus, John the Baptist exclaimed, “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Jesus Christ ushered a new covenant between God and his people (Luke 22:30; Heb 9:15). The aforementioned effects of the Fall on the dignity of women and men would be reversed in Christ and God’s image restored.

The New Testament is frequently countercultural in celebrating the dignity of women. In a distinctly patriarchal context, Jesus uplifted women. He treated them with dignity and respect. Jesus upheld the dignity of women throughout his earthly ministry. For example, he chose to come into the world by means of Mary; Anna, the prophetess “spoke about [Jesus Christ] to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel” (Luke 2:36–38); he had concern for a Samaritan woman of questionable reputation (John 4:7–29). It was contrary to cultural conventions for Jews and Samaritans to interact (v. 9), let alone Jewish men and Samaritan women; he defended a “sinful woman” over against a respectable Pharisee (Luke 7:36–

50); he appeared to women first upon his resurrection, and made them his first witnesses (Matt 28:8-10; Mark 9-11; John 20:10-18).<sup>21</sup>

As Jesus restored the dignity of women, he did not sideline men. For example, Jesus came in the form of a man, and he chose twelve men as the inner circle of his disciples. Jesus did not come to strip men of their dignity, but recognised both men and women as equally significant and worthy of respect.

Three areas where human dignity is upheld under the new covenant are marriage, family and church.

### **In marriage**

The New Testament tells us what marriage in the new covenant should look like and how husband and wife should relate. When a man gets married, he is to leave both his father and mother, and become *one* with his wife (Matt 19:5; Eph 5:31).<sup>22</sup>

The husband's body belongs to his wife, and the wife's body belongs to her husband (1 Cor 7:3-4). They mutually and reciprocally belong to each other. A culture that insists that the wife belongs to her husband while the husband is free to do whatever he wants with his body is unbiblical. They are both accountable to each other and must give themselves freely to each other, and to no one else. Marriage is meant to be a joy for both the husband and the wife.

Both husband and the wife are called to live for the sake of the other – the husband to love his wife even to the point of death; the wife to submit to her husband in obedience to the Lord (Eph 5:22-33). It is the radical self-sacrifice of both husband and wife that brings dignity to the institution of marriage in this present age once more. If this passage is misunderstood, unhealthy relational or emotional dominance may result. Such passages as this one have been misused as proof texts to degrade women. In many instances preachers have focused on the submission of the wife to her husband whilst neglecting the reciprocal demand for the husband to love his wife and be prepared to lay down his life for her. However, this passage should encourage harmony between husband and wife rather than selfish demands from either the husband or the wife. In actual fact,

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21 Other examples are: He spoke against divorce (Matt 19:3-9); he commended the queen of Sheba (Matt 12:42); he made friends with Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:17-40); he defended a woman caught in adultery against injustice – not her sin (John 8:3-11); he commended Mary for her desire to learn (Luke 10:42); he ensured that his mother would be cared for after his death (John 19:26-27).

22 Cf. Gen 2:24.



Ephesians 5:22-33 is the reverse of “the battle of the sexes” (Gen 3:16) rather than its confirmation!

### **In the family**

The New Testament gives us guidance on how children should view their mother and father and describes the responsibility bestowed on parents. Children are commanded to honour and obey both their *mother and father* (Eph 6:1-2).<sup>23</sup>

While many cultural practices place the responsibility of raising children on mothers, Ephesians 6:4 shows that fathers have that responsibility as well.<sup>24</sup> The twenty-first-century church has to fight against the spirit of father absenteeism. A father figure and a mother figure are both essential for every child, whether male or female.

### **In the church**

Salvation is extended to all people regardless of gender (Gal 3:28). At Pentecost, both women and men received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17-18, cf. 1:12-15). God empowers both women and men to serve him. “Even on *my servants, both men and women*, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:29). Paul writes about both women and men when he tells the Corinthian Christians that God’s image is being renewed within them day by day by the work of God’s Spirit. He speaks of “being transformed into [Christ’s] likeness with ever-increasing glory” (2 Cor 3:18).

Many women are mentioned alongside men as disciples, leaders, prophets and co-workers. Examples of these are Tabitha, Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), Phillip’s daughters (Acts 21:9) and Priscilla (Acts 18:27). In Romans 16, Paul sent his greetings to the church. In the list of twenty-six people mentioned, nine were women: Priscilla (v. 3), Mary (v. 6), Junia (v. 7), Tryphena and Tryphosa (v. 12a), Persis (v. 12b), Rufus’ mother (v. 13), Julia and Nereus’ sister (v. 15).<sup>25</sup> Paul speaks with both affection (she “has been a mother to me” – v.13) and admiration (four are said to have “worked hard”) of these women. Alongside the glowing report (vv.1-2) he gives to the Romans about “our sister Phoebe” (probably the one who delivered the letter from Corinth to Rome), this list of Christians and the relationships they represent explodes the myth of Paul the male chauvinist and highlights the integrated

23 Cf. Exod 20:12; 21:15,17; 27:15; Lev 19:3; 20:9; Prov 23:22; 30:17.

24 Cf. Deut 21:18; Prov 1:8; 6:20. If there is any gender role difference at all, the burden of responsibility for parenting in the Bible seems to rest *more* heavily on fathers than mothers.

25 Cf. Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 395-396.

composition of the first-century church. This indicates active involvement of women in the New Testament church and the acknowledgement thereof.

The first-century church gives us guidance as to what today's church should be like. It should be a Christ-headed institution in which people from all walks of life have equal value and are able to exercise their gifts for the benefit of one another and for the glory of God. Today's church should encourage both women and men to be responsible members of the Body of Christ. "The harvest is plentiful!" (Matt 9:37-38; Luke 10:2). Women and men are, therefore, needed to work in the Master's vineyard.

The church has a role to speak against gender-based social evils in societies, in marriages, in families and in churches, and to advocate for gender justice.

### **The dignity of women and men in the new creation**

In the biblical presentation of the new heavens and the new earth, it is clear that God takes a rightful place at the centre and as the focal point of all things (Rev 1:8; 4:11; 19:6; 21; 22). In the genre used by John, his vision is described in apocalyptic imagery that conveys the eschatological reality of God's majestic rule. In a wonderful confirmation of human dignity, we see that around the throne is gathered an uncountable number of people from every nation, tribe, language and tongue (Rev 7:9). Three things happen in the New Creation: Familiar categories of distinction are superseded; humanity is elevated in Christ; and the effects of the Fall are reversed.

#### **Familiar categories of distinction are superseded**

This uncountable gathering serves to remind us of the goal towards which those who are "in Christ"<sup>26</sup> are headed. There are no racial, tribal or linguistic barriers to being counted amongst this number (Rev 5:9). Indeed in terms of being justified by God, "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ" (Gal 3:28). Whilst it is certainly true that all of these distinctions are still part of the created order in which we live now, they are not the ultimate distinction that will define humanity in eternity. Whilst becoming a Christian does not change one's race, socio-economic circumstances or gender, those things no longer define the Christian in the way that they once might have done. The central identity and therefore the source of human dignity for the Christian person is their

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<sup>26</sup> Or, in the language of Revelation: those who "overcome" (Rev 21:7) or "whose names are written in the book of life" (Rev 20:15).

inclusion “in Christ”. For the Christian then, there can be no discrimination or ranking in terms of human dignity on the basis of race, socio-economic status or gender.

### **Humanity is elevated in Christ**

Although the whole of creation is “made new”, just as at the first Creation (Rev 21:5), humanity is elevated to a position of prominence. In the final images of Revelation, the people of the heavenly city are corporately identified as the Bride of Christ (Rev 19:7; 21:2), and the eternal celebrations described as their wedding banquet (Rev 19:9). While great care is taken with the whole of Creation, the elevated description of humanity again makes clear that there is a distinction between them and the rest of the created order.

### **The effects of the fall are reversed**

In the New Creation, women and men are again able to function perfectly as God’s image bearers, as the effects of sin are reversed in the New Creation. Humanity’s relationship with God is restored as God again dwells directly with humanity in unhindered fellowship (Rev 21:3). No longer cursed, the new earth readily gives up the crops and food for which we must at the moment sweat and toil (Rev 22:2-3); access to the tree of life is granted; and the pain and frustration that sin brought into human relationships are removed (Rev 22:1-2) as Eden is restored.

## **Conclusion**

The concept of male and female dignity carries both theological and ethical importance. The theological understanding that both women and men were created in the image of God should lead to respectful behaviour towards, and caring action for, one another.

The progression of the biblical story shows that both women and men, as God’s image bearers, have intrinsic dignity. They are created different and yet they are equal in dignity and worth as God’s image bearers. However, that image has been distorted by sin and, since the Fall, women and men have been struggling under the weight of sin. Sin has found particular expression throughout history, both within and beyond the biblical narrative, in deplorable incidents of gender-based violence and oppression. These aberrations form part of the desperate circumstances from which humanity needs to be redeemed. In Jesus Christ we find not just the redemption which we need, but also the truest expression of

human dignity. He redeems from sin and restores women and men to their former dignity. Christian women and men are further invited not just to experience this restoration themselves, but also to be God's agents, partners and fellow-workers in restoring others. Women and men who know God should therefore be the light in this dark world and take the lead in showing the world how to respect all who have been made in the image of God.

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### **Questions for further reflection**

- ♦ How does the Bible portray women and men in the Old Testament?
- ♦ How does the Bible portray women and men in the New Testament?
- ♦ What truths can we learn from God's progressive self-revelation about his relationship with women and men in the Bible?
- ♦ What is the relationship between equality, sameness and human dignity in terms of women and men?
- ♦ How does our (theological) understanding of the dignity of women and men affect our Christian lifestyle?
- ♦ What practical action can Christians take in acknowledging the dignity of women and men?

# GENDER EQUALITY

A QUESTION OF CULTURE



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## CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER EQUALITY

### Preliminary indicators for the Christian church in Sub-Saharan Africa

*Petria Theron*<sup>1</sup>

#### **Introduction**

Gender equality is one of the pressing issues in contemporary Africa as part of an increasing need for a praxis of justice and dignity towards all people on the continent. As will be indicated later, African women do not have the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities as men. Gender equality does not only ensure social justice and human rights, but also sustainable, people-centred development.<sup>2</sup> In 2000, the United Nations Millennium Summit formulated eight so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by 2015. Gender equality is not only one of the eight goals (goal 3), but is instrumental in reaching some of the other goals, especially goals number 2 (on universal primary education), 4 (on reducing child mortality), 5 (on improving maternal health) and 6 (on combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases).<sup>3</sup> I am convinced that women could also play an enormous role in reaching goal number 1, pertaining to the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, as women are more involved in subsistence agricultural

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1 The author was living and working for 17 years as a missionary in Mozambique. For the last seven years, from 2004 until 2011, she was a lecturer at Hefsiba Instituto Superior Cristão in Vila Ulónguè. It was during this time that she got to know the Chewa people and their culture better. She understands that people are passionate about their culture and one should thus tread lightly and with great sensitivity in addressing cultural and gender issues. Petria is currently Manager: Portuguese Programmes at the Faculty of Theology, North-West University, South Africa.

2 Omoyibo & Ajayi, "Understanding Gender", 3736-3737.

3 Oxfam, "What are the Millennium Development Goals?". Cf. Kotzé, "Linking Human Rights", 4.



production in Africa than men<sup>4</sup> and gender equality and the empowerment of women will unquestionably improve their ability to provide for their families.

Gender inequality, however, is not an exclusive African phenomenon, but is sadly encountered worldwide. In almost every society, men have more power than women; they are more free to make decisions; to determine their own behaviour; to access and control resources. The following statistics of the Feminist Women's Health Center<sup>5</sup> and Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch<sup>6</sup> confirm this. In the US, more women are injured in domestic violence incidents than in car accidents, rapes, and muggings put together. Reports from France indicate that 95% of victims of violence are women, 51% at the hands of their own husbands. Between 20% and 50% of women worldwide experience domestic violence in their marriages. In several countries, tests for genetic defects are used to determine the sex of the unborn baby in order to abort girls. Women represent 66% of the more than one billion illiterate adults who have no access to basic education. By age 18, girls receive, on average, 4.4 years less education than boys. Of those who live in poverty, it is estimated that 70% are women. In most countries of the world women still earn less than their male counterparts. In an interview, Michelle Bachelet,<sup>7</sup> the executive director of UN-Women and former president of Chile, reported that of the 194 member countries of the UN, only 17 have women as heads of state, only 31 have at least 33% female members of parliament, and 10 member countries have no females in parliament. It is apparent that much still needs to be done by 2015 if the third MDG is to be reached! This may be true for most of the world, but it certainly is true for African women.

Gender is a socio-cultural variable.<sup>8</sup> It is a socially-perceived set of characteristics that distinguishes between males and females and determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a man/woman (boy/girl) in a specific context and culture. Gender roles are learned through socialisation processes and institutionalised through education, political and economic systems, legislation, culture and traditions. The question can thus be asked to what extent the surrounding culture specifically influences gender equality in a particular group of people. In other words, to what extent do cultural norms and practices allow,

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4 Omoyibo & Ajayi, "Understanding Gender", 3743.

5 Feminist Women's Health Center, "World wide status of women".

6 "Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch Joint Statement".

7 SABC2 18:00 News.

8 Omoyibo & Ajayi, "Understanding Gender", 3733-3735. Cf. Louw, "From Phenomenology to Ontology", 98.

support or even enforce (and perhaps prevent) certain behaviour, rituals and ways of thinking that make life difficult for women. In Burundi, Le Roux<sup>9</sup> identified some cultural beliefs and practices that cause women and girls to be extremely vulnerable to physical abuse: polygamy; young girls are expected to share the room with male guests; and women are often forced by their families to stay in abusive marriages. There are even idioms that put women at risk: “a woman is a mat for guests”; “no one can set a limit to the bull”; and “a true man is one who eats his food and that of other”. Hall and Gennrich<sup>10</sup> ask about the effect that proverbs or popular sayings like “women have no mouth” (among the Beti of Cameroon) or “women never reign” (among the Igbo of Nigeria) have on the way men see and treat women and on how women see themselves.

Taking a step back, the concept of culture itself is difficult to define. Kluckhohn and Kroeber describe it as “a pattern of thinking, feeling and reacting to various situations”.<sup>11</sup> For Hofstede, culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group from another, the “software” that determines how people operate. Well-known American anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes culture as the “web of significance” that people spin and in which they themselves are suspended. A common thread between these definitions is that culture has to do with what people *think* and how they *live*. Scholars agree that culture is a product of social interaction. It is not inherited, but learned in the family, in school, through the media, in church, and later through professional networks and environments.<sup>12</sup> There can also be little doubt that the dominating culture in which a church finds itself is exerting influence on it. It is very possible that some cultural norms and practices may have entered a church and are shaping – consciously or unconsciously – its actions and decisions, causing suffering to those who usually form the largest part of its membership, the women. According to Owanikin,<sup>13</sup> this at least is true for the Nigerian church. Christian prejudice concerning the status of women in the church can be rooted in the Nigerian culture. Isabel Phiri,<sup>14</sup> a Malawian theologian, is also of the opinion that Christianity maintains and justifies the oppression of women. On the other

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9 Le Roux, “Why sexual violence?”, 54-55.

10 Hall & Gennrich, *Created in God's Image*, 37.

11 Kluckhohn & Kroeber, Hofstede and Geertz as referred to by Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence*, 80-81.

12 Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence*, 83, 87.

13 Owanikin, “The Priesthood of Church Women”, 209.

14 Sparrow & Clowes, “Fighting Male Supremacy”, 132.

hand, the church could influence culture in a positive way. In fact, Silvos<sup>15</sup> states that Christ intended the church to be a *counterculture*, instead of a *subculture*. In a subculture, people are satisfied to exist under the dominant culture, but in a counterculture the aim is to change the dominant culture to adhere to a different set of values. Therefore, culture and cultural practices, say Kanyoro<sup>16</sup> and Besha,<sup>17</sup> need to be challenged. Aspects such as social subordination, the lack of basic human rights for women, poverty and discriminatory traditions need to be addressed. The church needs to be part of this process and it needs to do so on biblical and theological grounds.

My hypothesis in this essay is that culture could be an obstacle in the realisation of gender equality with the effect that people, especially females, can neither reach their full potential, nor experience their inherent dignity as people created in the image of God. I posit that the church could be instrumental in the transformation of cultural norms and practices which promote discrimination against women. In my argumentation, I shall follow the methodology proposed by Richard Osmer.<sup>18</sup> It consists of four tasks and each task is associated with a specific question to guide practical theological interpretation: descriptive task (what is happening?); interpretive task (why is it happening?); normative task (what should happen?); and pragmatic task (how can we make it happen?). The first task I shall do by way of an empirical study and, the second by way of a short literature overview of some themes related to the influence of culture on gender equality. The normative task will consist of an attempt to formulate biblical principles on gender and culture from a Reformed theological perspective. To conclude, I shall propose some preliminary themes for dialogue, which may prove instrumental for the church in transforming discriminatory cultural practices and in promoting gender equality.

### **Gender equality in different African cultural contexts**

A questionnaire consisting of 50 mostly open-ended questions was sent to 12 theological schools associated with NetACT.<sup>19</sup> The aim of the questionnaire was

15 Silvos, *Anointed for business*, 50.

16 Kanyoro, "Preface", xi.

17 Besha, "A Life of Endless Struggle", 62.

18 Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.

19 The Network for African Congregational Theology (NetACT) is a network of theological institutions in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition in sub-Saharan Africa. See Hendriks, *Studying Congregations in Africa*, 11.

to learn from the experiences of people living in different African cultural contexts. The request was that a male and a female (lecturers or students) from each African cultural group represented at the school complete the questionnaire anonymously, but from the perspective of their own, particular culture. In the paragraphs below, information regarding the respondents and a summary of the results are given.

## **Respondents**

One of the schools did not respond and most of the schools did not respond to the request that a male and a female respondent from each cultural group complete a questionnaire. Two questionnaires were incomplete and one non-African respondent's questionnaire was not taken into consideration. Important information was gathered from 29 respondents, representing 12 cultural groups.<sup>20</sup> After analysing the results, it was apparent that the nine countries could be divided into two groups. The responses from Angola, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Zambia and Zimbabwe are very similar and grouped together (reflected under A in the results below) and the South African and Namibian respondents are grouped together (B). In the culture groups where questionnaires from male and female respondents were received, similarities between the answers from the two sexes were noticeable. Within the same cultural group, respondents differed as their particular situations differed, for example, the level of education or living in a village or a city. According to some respondents, progress in gender equality has already been made through education, churches, governments and NGOs. Globalisation and political changes have contributed to sociocultural changes and more women occupy leadership positions. While some churches contribute significantly to gender equality, others still uphold the conviction that women should be silent.

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20 Angola: one Bakongo male (50's); Kenya: one Kalenjin female (30's); Malawi: one Ngoni female (20's), one Yao female (50's), three Chewa females and one Chewa male (30's & 40's); Mozambique: one Nguni male (40's) and female (30's); Namibia: one Shona female (30's) and two Coloured males (30's); Nigeria: one Tiv male (40's); South Africa: one white male (50's) and female (30's); Zambia: three Shona females (30's & 40's), one Bemba female (30's), one Bisa male (30's), one Chewa male and female (40's), two Ngoni females (20's & 30's) and two Tumbuka males (30's); Zimbabwe: one Shona female (40's) and male (20's).

**Results****♦ The position of women in the church:**

A: Although women form the biggest part of congregations and are the most active members, they are not always allowed in leadership<sup>21</sup> positions. In the cities, it is more common that families sit together, while men and women usually sit separately in the rural areas (one should not be close to somebody else's wife or husband).

B: Women are in leadership positions and families sit together in church.

**♦ How women are generally viewed and treated in society:**

A: Women are generally seen as second class citizens, weaklings, inferior, submissive to men and are not really respected. It is expected of them to serve, obey and not to question men. They are dependent, need to be looked after and protected. Women are usually not leaders, but followers. Men often undermine and abuse women. It is the women's role to take care of the home and nurture the children. They are responsible for all domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, washing and collecting water. In the villages they must also work in the fields. In the cities, some women follow a career, but if they become more successful than their husbands, the latter may feel threatened, because of the traditional view that men are the primary breadwinners. Career women remain responsible for the household and should respect their husbands as the head of the family. Wives are expected to prepare the food and serve visitors with due respect. In the cities, wives may eat with guests, but it is uncommon in the villages. In some cultures it is unacceptable for wives to eat with their in-laws.

B: Women are still not completely equal to men. Although more women are becoming leaders, they have to work extra hard to earn the respect of their male as well as some female colleagues. While some men respect and treat women with dignity, others still see women as lesser beings. Women are the primary caregivers at home, doing the cooking, cleaning, washing and nurturing the children. Although women are growing more independent by following their own careers, a wife that becomes more successful than her husband may hurt his ego. When visitors come, the wife normally does the cooking and joins the guests for the meal.

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21 Most churches allow women to be deacons and elders, but not many allow them to be ministers. There are also very few women lecturers at theological seminaries.

♦ **How men are viewed and treated:**

A: Men are usually seen as first class citizens, leaders, decision makers, heads of family, providers and protectors. They are normally respected and never questioned. They are not so involved in raising the children, but will help if necessary, especially with discipline. They usually provide the means for the children's education. In rural areas, they will supervise women's work and are often responsible for the selling of produce. They will do the harder work like chopping wood, building, fencing and tending the animals. One exception seems to be men in the Benga culture, who nowadays may also help in the house.

B: Men are the breadwinners, but they also support their wives in the home, help with the children, help with cooking and other traditional "female" activities. They are responsible for the outside duties like maintaining the garden, the house and the vehicle.

♦ **Single status:**

A: It depends on individual preference, but it is usually unacceptable for young people to stay single. Everyone is expected to marry. The perception exists that single women may endanger marriages, as she is a potential third party. In some cultures it is possible for single persons to live celibate, but it is not really acceptable. In other cultures it seems almost impossible, as women are often expected to have children even before marriage. Single women are more vulnerable and more exposed to abuse.

B: It depends on individual preference and to stay single is acceptable, although the perception exists that it is "normal" to marry. Religious and moral values can enable single persons to choose a celibate lifestyle, but they might experience peer pressure to have sexual relationships.

♦ **Reasons for marriage:**

A: Men marry to have a family of their own, to continue their family line, to be respected, to have someone to care for them, to have a sexual partner and for companionship. Women marry because it is a taboo to stay single. They also marry for security, companionship, sexual gratification, to gain respect, to have children and to have someone to care for them.<sup>22</sup>

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22 It is interesting to note that none of the respondents cited "arranged" or "forced" marriages to be one of the reasons for marriage. Of course, this does not mean that it does not happen; it is just that the respondents did not mention it.

B: Men marry someone they love and with whom they can start a family. Women marry someone they love, to have a partner, to give them a feeling of security, and not to grow old alone.

♦ **Wives' attitudes towards husbands:**

A: In the cities, most wives see their husbands as their friends, companions, and partners. In the rural areas they often see their husbands as someone to serve and obey. They are dependent on their husbands and treat them with respect.

B: Most wives see their husbands as their best friend and partner, somebody to share decision-making and household responsibilities.

♦ **Husbands' attitudes towards wives:**

A: Some husbands see their wives as their companions, but not necessarily on the same level. Others see them as an asset, as sex objects and cheap labour, especially in the rural areas. They expect their wives to obey them without questioning. Sometimes little respect is shown for a wife. Husbands will rarely ask their wives' advice.

B: Most men see their wives as their best friends and equals, someone to discuss decisions with and to ask advice, someone who shares the responsibilities, a helper.

♦ **The influence of paternalism on marriage:**

A and B: Paternalism gives men all the authority and they make the decisions, while wives are powerless and need to obey. Some respondents felt that paternalism strengthens the marriage relationship and that it is biblical.

♦ **Finances:**

A: In modern families, wives may be involved in the family's finances, but in the villages men are usually in charge. Wives often do not know what their husbands' income is. They usually receive some money that has to last the rest of the month, without any questions.

B: In most families, both work and earn an income. They share a bank account and budget together. In other families, husbands tend to be responsible for the finances.

♦ **Polygamy, extramarital affairs and divorce:**

A: Men should not have affairs. It is seen as unfaithfulness and may result in divorce and church discipline. In the rural areas, however, unfaithfulness is less of an issue for men. As the head of the family, husbands may have an affair and/or "marry" a second wife. Polygamous men are seen as "strong" and viral. Wives usually accept it,

because “men are made like that.” It is, however, completely forbidden for wives to have an affair. It probably will result in divorce, church discipline and consequent social isolation, rejection and stigmatisation. Husbands are free to divorce their wives if they do not satisfy them anymore, if they are barren, or if they had an affair. Wives may usually not ask for divorce, unless there is valid proof of abuse or unfaithfulness, but often even these are not sufficient reason for divorce. Women are actually taught to stay in difficult marriages for the sake of the children.

B: Neither men nor women may have affairs. It is seen as adultery and might end in divorce. Sometimes wives will stay in the relationship because of the children and for financial security. Either husband or wife may ask for a divorce if there are legitimate reasons.

♦ **Inheritance:**

A: The system of marriage in community of property functions in Angola.<sup>23</sup> If the husband dies, the property belongs to the widow and the children. If she marries again, the property goes to the children. Two Shona respondents and one Bisa respondent said this is also true for their culture. Other respondents said that the husband’s family inherits his possessions, which usually amounts to the majority of the family’s possessions (the wife may perhaps get the kitchen utensils). They argue that the woman can remarry and therefore she does not need her late husband’s possessions. The widow is often exploited. If the wife dies, the husband gets everything (except perhaps the kitchen utensils and her clothes). In some Shona families, the wife’s family inherits all her possessions.

B: If the husband or wife dies, the property will be distributed according to the will, usually between the widow/er and the children.

♦ **Family planning and gender preference:**

A: Educated people normally use family planning to space their children, but most people in the villages believe that God is in control and that families should have many children. In some cultures family planning is a taboo. For some tribes, when they are expecting a baby, it does not matter whether it is a boy or a girl. Others prefer a boy, because he will look after the family and will carry on the family name.

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<sup>23</sup> Although the respondent did not clarify it, it seems that the situation is partly in accordance with the Angolan Family Law Code, stating that widows and girls have inheritance rights, but according to the Angolan Customary Law, girls may not inherit land, or they inherit a smaller amount than the boys. Although widows may officially inherit land, it is usually put in trust for their children; cf. Social Institutions and Gender Index.



In the Bakongo culture, parents may wish for a girl, because it will be expected of her to look after her elderly parents. Sometimes girls are preferred because of the dowry they earn for their parents when they marry.

B: People use family planning to limit the number of children, depending on the finances of the family. Parents usually decide together when and how many children they will have. Some parents prefer a boy to carry the family name while others only wish for a healthy baby.

♦ **Children's education:**

A: If parents cannot afford to send all their children to school, most will send the boy, because he needs to take care of the family, while the girl will probably marry and her husband will look after her. Boys are also regarded as more intelligent than girls. Others will send only their firstborn.

B: Parents prefer to send all their children to school, but if they cannot, some will send the firstborn (boy or girl) while others may send the boy.

### Understanding culture's influence on gender equality

From the results of the empirical study, culture clearly plays a significant role in gender relations. Literature substantiates the experiences of the respondents and confirms that cultural norms determine people's behaviour. The interpretation of the results of the empirical study resulted in the identification of some, albeit somewhat intermingled, trends.

#### Patriarchy

All 13 topics of the empirical study relate to patriarchy. According to Castells,<sup>24</sup> patriarchalism is alive and well around the world and many authors confirm that it is certainly the case in African societies.<sup>25</sup> Even if a society is matrilineal, it may still be patriarchal in its determination of and perceptions of gender roles.<sup>26</sup> In all contemporary societies, Castells argues,<sup>27</sup> patriarchalism is a founding structure. It refers to the authority of men over women and children in the family unit and this authority is institutionally enforced. Louw<sup>28</sup> identifies four cornerstones of

24 Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 242.

25 Lalthapersad-Pillay, "Infected and Affected", 17. Cf. Besha, "A Life of Endless Struggle", 59.

26 Mwaura, "Gender and Power", 412. Cf. Omoyibo & Ajayi, "Understanding Gender", 3732.

27 Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 134.

28 Louw, "From Phenomenology to Ontology", 99.

patriarchalism and how these justify oppressive social structures and behaviour. The first is the *biological* cornerstone, according to which male physical strength is part of the intended natural law. The second is *cultural*, according to which families and societies are naturally based on aggression, domination, procreation, and spouse and child protection. Cornerstone 3 is *economical*, according to which property, production and the distribution of goods are the natural domain of men. *Religion* forms the fourth cornerstone, according to which male superiority, dominance and privilege are part of the received religious revelation. Women's inferior position is clearly visible by looking at these cornerstones.

It is Bahemuka's<sup>29</sup> opinion that, with reference to East Africa, the father not only dominates the family unit, but also the members of the extended kinship network and the economic production of the household. The man owns his wife and her reproductive ability and rights.<sup>30</sup> The average age difference between spouses in Africa is between 5.5 and 9.2 years. This causes unequal power relations and leave young married women with little negotiation power with their older husbands.<sup>31</sup> When O'Donovan<sup>32</sup> refers to the strong African culture of male dominance, he shows how this influences how men regard and treat women. African women are often treated as slaves and servants in the household. In some cultures, women have less value than cattle and are seen as mere sex objects, while men are considered as kings. Once men see women and children as their property, they have the "right" to treat them as they want.<sup>33</sup> They may even use violence to solve domestic problems. Because wives believe that they should be submissive to their husbands, they feel obligated to do what their husbands want, even against their own will. Togom<sup>34</sup> notes a change in contemporary Africa, especially among the Christians in Kenya, where women act powerfully behind the scene and husbands often consult their wives before making decisions, although husbands are reluctant to admit this in public.

In the traditional patriarchal Africa, the family line should be perpetuated through children. Many wives and many children ensure the "immortality" of the family and a respectable position in society. Women are seen as a production

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29 Bahemuka, "Social Changes and Women's Attitudes", 129-130.

30 Omoyibo & Ajayi, "Understanding Gender", 3734. Cf. Dube, "Grant Me Justice", 8.

31 Lalthapersad-Pillay, "Infected and Affected", 18.

32 O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity*, 50, 188, 190.

33 Davhana-Mselesele et al., "Lived Experiences of Women Victims", 2519-2520, 2533.

34 Togom, Personal communication.

field and if a woman is barren, she is considered useless. A childless marriage is meaningless and the man is pressurised into polygamy.<sup>35</sup>

### **Culture of silence**

Davhana-Mselesele et al.<sup>36</sup> confirm that women are not supposed to talk about hardships in marriage, but should tolerate it. Because of this culture of silence, incidences of gender-based violence, for example, are not reported.<sup>37</sup>

### **Economic factors**

Husbands often keep wives dependent by handling the finances of the household and by taking the wives' salaries (if they are not excluded from the labour market altogether).<sup>38</sup> Another custom that forces women to stay in unhappy relationships is the payment of *lobola* (dowry), because if wives want to leave, the *lobola* must be returned.<sup>39</sup> The custom that forbids women to own and inherit property,<sup>40</sup> leaves women powerless and vulnerable after the death of their spouses. It is clear that gender inequality causes women to be economically dependent and susceptible to poverty.<sup>41</sup>

### **Education**

The cultural custom that it is not a priority for girls to go to school, leads to high rates of illiteracy among women.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, they cannot contribute meaningfully to society and the church.<sup>43</sup>

## **Biblical perspectives on gender equality and culture**

A central concept in the discourse on gender equality is the dignity of *all* people. Scripture gives clear guidance on how dignity is attained for all. Foundational to this discourse is an understanding of identity, of *who* people are; to *Whom* they belong; and *Whose* example they should follow.

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35 Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Polygamy", 102-104.

36 Davhana-Mselesele et al., "Lived Experiences", 2534.

37 Adekeye, "Prevalence and Patterns", 1829.

38 Lalthapersad-Pillay, "Infected and Affected", 17. Cf. Dube, "Grant Me Justice", 8.

39 Davhana-Mselesele et al., "Lived Experiences", 2529, 2534.

40 Lalthapersad-Pillay, "Infected and Affected", 17-18.

41 Dube, "Grant Me Justice", 8. Cf. Njoroge, "A New Way of Facilitating Leadership", 458.

42 Lalthapersad-Pillay, "Infected and Affected", 17. Cf. Kanyoro, "Preface", xiii.

43 Fiedler & Hofmeyr, "The Conception of the Circle", 42.

## Imago Dei and Missio Dei

Human beings' identity has already been established at Creation. In Genesis 1, two key concepts are immediately addressed: *imago Dei* and *missio Dei*. God created human beings as male and female, according to God's image (Gen 1:26-27). That implies that neither gender is inferior. Man and woman not only equally bear the image of God, but they also bear the image together. Maleness alone is not the image of God, but male and female together. Furthermore, God mandates both, man and woman, to rule over creation (Gen 1:26, 28).<sup>44</sup> In Genesis 2, another account of creation, with a different sequence, is given. It is interesting to note that many churches and Christians in Kenya do not acknowledge this first Creation account.<sup>45</sup> This raises the question why it is not acknowledged. One possible reason may be the influence of a patriarchal culture, as the second account probably fits the culture better. In the second creation account, man is created first and only he is mandated to cultivate and guard over creation (Gen 2:15-18).<sup>46</sup> The question can be asked whether this conveys a distinction between man and woman in respect to equality and the mandate to rule. O'Donovan<sup>47</sup> and Breed et al.<sup>48</sup> argue that when the passage in Genesis 2:18 refers to the woman as the man's helpmeet (*ezer*), it does not necessarily imply that the woman is inferior to the man, but rather that she has a complementary role (*kenegdo*). When *kenegdo* is used in conjunction with *ezer*, it carries the meaning of "like his counterpart". This understanding corresponds with the fact that the woman received a similar mandate to rule in her own right (Gen 1:28). From this, the authors deduct equality on the one hand and inequality on the other. The woman is co-responsible, but in a different capacity. There is an underscoring paradox, an *unequal equality*, between male and female. Both genders, mutually dependent on each other, exercise dominion in different capacities.

## The fall and sparks of hope

I am of the opinion that this *unequal equality* in Genesis 2 in itself does not necessarily impair the dignity of women, but that the problem arises with the events recorded in Genesis 3. The Fall distorts God's created balance. The relationship between man and woman is scarred and with that, the dignity that God intended as well (cf. "the

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44 Gillham, "Combating gender-based violence", 95-96.

45 Togom, Personal communication.

46 Breed et al., *Male and Female*, 69. Cf. O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity*, 192.

47 O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity*, 193-194.

48 Breed et al., *Male and Female*, 70.

woman's desire will be for her husband and he will rule over her," Gen 3:16). With the Fall, dominion and the lust for power entered the relationship between men and women. Ample examples of this are found in the Old Testament: Lot's proposal (Gen 19:6-8); Absalom's rape of Tamar (2 Sam 13); the treatment of the Levite's concubine (Judg 19); David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:2-5); and how women were taken as part of the loot in times of war (Num 31:9).

Despite these "terror texts" – to use Phyllis Trible's now-famous expression – one also finds instances where women's positions improved: Zelophehad's daughters could inherit (Num 27); and widows' rights are protected (Exod 22:22). One even finds examples of women in public roles: Debora is a judge (Judg 4, 5); and Huldah is a prophetess (2 Kgs 22:14). These examples serve as exceptions to the customary patriarchal culture in the Old Testament. The cultural norms are clearly being countered.

### **Jesus Christ's example**

When the long-awaited Messiah enters world history, He comes to give *all* people abundant life (John 10:10). Jesus Christ fought against inequalities, injustices and oppression of women in the traditional Jewish society.<sup>49</sup> He condemns the Hellenistic world's perception of women as sex objects (Matt 5:28) and is willing to break cultural conventions and customs by, for example, speaking to women in public (John 4). In Jesus' way of relating to women, it is clear that He wants to convey the message that women may not be regarded or treated as inferior to men.<sup>50</sup> He indeed demonstrated a counterculture. Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman and how He helps her to become aware of, and to overcome some of the socio-historic, cultural and religious barriers imposed on women, deserve special attention.<sup>51</sup>

In the first-century Mediterranean world, space was divided according to gender, with men operating in public space and women in private space. Their social world and relationships were organised according to the dominant value of honour in their culture. Honour has to do with a person's feeling of self-worth and other's acknowledgement of that worth and thus this value applies to both sexes. Another value that goes hand in hand with honour is shame. To "have shame" signifies that a person has sensitivity for his/her own reputation and the opinion

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49 Beshar, "A Life of Endless Struggle", 62.

50 Breed et al., *Male and Female*, 78, 184.

51 Cloete, "The Role of Women", 208-211.

of others. As the value of shame implies that the person accepts and respects the rules of human interaction and social boundaries, it enables the person to live in a dignified manner.<sup>52</sup> Within this context of the ancient Mediterranean world, women were not allowed to talk to men in public and that is probably why the disciples are so stunned that Jesus speaks to a woman in a public space (John 4:27).<sup>53</sup> From a cultural point of view, the woman's response to His request for water is likewise unacceptable. She should not have talked with Him as a stranger and a Jew, and her counter-question that introduced her argument is very unusual and brave. Women were not supposed to publicly engage on controversial issues like racial tensions, let alone with a man. From a cultural perspective, Jesus could have rebuked her or simply could have ignored her question, but He engages with her in conversation so that she can move away from a natural understanding to a deeper, spiritual understanding. He wants her to understand that He is not talking about natural water, but that He can offer her water for eternal life and is therefore of more significance than father Jacob. When she still does not fully grasp what He says, Jesus makes the conversation more personal and talks about her private life. The fact that He knows about her personal and moral life, convinces her that He is a prophet and she suspects that He is the Messiah. After Jesus' declaration that He is the One, she witnesses about Him in her town and many people believed her and came to Him. After her liberating encounter with Jesus in which her dignity and confidence were restored, she could live her life to the fullest because she broke through cultural, social and religious barriers. Faith in Jesus Christ breaks bondages of female submissiveness, racial discrimination, prejudice, moral degeneration and sexual inferiority.

### **Lessons from Luke**

Luke gives much attention to women in his Gospel – some even call him the evangelist for women. Luke's Gospel was written in a time of political unrest; society was divided by conflicts between rich and poor; people in certain occupations, like tax collectors and shepherds, were despised; and widespread discrimination and prejudice against women and children were rife (Luke 5:29-30; 7:34; 18:15-16). I agree with Scheffler<sup>54</sup> that, considering the context of his day, Luke portrays women

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52 Malina & Neyrey, "Honor and shame", 25, 44-45.

53 Malina & Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary*, 104-105.

54 Scheffler, "Towards Gender Equality", 185-188.

and gender relationships in a “progressive” manner although there are researchers who do not agree that Luke gives a new identity and social status to women.<sup>55</sup>

By making use of narratives, Luke questions traditional gender roles.<sup>56</sup> He begins his narrative with the annunciations of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ (Luke 1:5-66). Elizabeth and Mary are the main characters and are portrayed in special ways. When the angel announces the birth of John to Zechariah, the latter does not believe, but Elizabeth believes. Jesus’ birth is not announced to Joseph, but to Mary, who without hesitation believes. Elizabeth is the first person in the Gospel to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Although there were restrictions on women’s religious utterances, Mary glorifies God. Luke does not create a power struggle between men and women by presenting women positively and men negatively. For instance, after Zechariah believes, he too is filled with the Spirit and praises God, and Joseph is not presented in a negative manner. Among the Gospels, only Luke writes about the prophetess Anna and he depicts her as an “ideal” widow who is totally dedicated to God. She prophesied “to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:36-38). By stressing the point that she spoke “to all” about religious matters, Luke wants to show that it is not an exclusively male domain.

The manner in which Luke relates the events in Simon’s house plainly shows his empathy with women (Luke 7:36-50). He reports on Jesus’ unexpected reaction when the prostitute anoints his feet. Jesus’ non-judgmental attitude and lack of social condemnation towards the prostitute is revolutionary and undeniably countercultural. He does not reject her, but forgives her sins and she becomes one of His followers. It may have been Mary Magdalene, as she is mentioned in the next passage as a prominent disciple of Jesus (Luke 8:1-3). Be that as it may, women did play an important role in Jesus’ ministry and they were active witnesses to His message. The women even travelled with Jesus, something uncommon at that time. The women served Him and provided in His physical needs (Luke 8:1-3). For Luke, this was not an inferior feminine role, but the essence of true discipleship. Luke puts the women on equal footing with the Twelve. The women are present and play an active role at Jesus’ crucifixion, burial and resurrection (Luke 23:49;

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55 Schaberg & Ringe, “Gospel of Luke”, 493.

56 Scheffler, “Towards Gender Equality”, 189-192.

55-6; 24:1-12). They are the first to pronounce His resurrection to the unbelieving apostles (Luke 24:7-11).<sup>57</sup>

To promote gender equality further, Luke uses the technique of complementary parallelism.<sup>58</sup> Men and women alternately take the leading role in the same event: Anna and Simeon (Luke 2:25-38); the Roman centurion and the widow of Nain (Luke 7:1-17); serving women and male servants (Luke 12:45); mother, wife, sister and father, brothers (Luke 14:26); scribes and widows (Luke 20:46-47); and the women at the grave and the angels and Peter (Luke 24:1-12). In this way Luke transmits the message that men and women are equal before God.

Staying with the Gospel of Luke, Okure<sup>59</sup> gives a moving exposition of the events recorded in Luke 8:40-56. In this passage, the evangelist narrates how Jesus Christ met two women at critical points in their lives. The 12-year-old daughter of Jairus had already died and no one could cure the woman who suffered for twelve years with the flow of blood. As a man, Jairus could reach out to Jesus. He falls at Jesus' feet and pleads with Him to come and heal his daughter. As a 12-year-old, she is at the age of maturity in the Jewish culture, but is still dependent on her father. Soon she would marry and be dependent on her husband. When Jesus says: "Child, arise," He restores and empowers her for life. The ill woman, on the other hand, is also in dire need of Jesus' help, but culture prohibits her to approach Him directly. She is in a hopeless situation, because she does not have any family and her sickness makes her an outcast of society. Her determination to be cured, however, is stronger than the inhibitions of her fears and cultural traditions. She reaches out and touches the hem of Jesus' garment. Only Jesus and the woman knew this had happened, but He wants to make her faith known. He calls her forward, not to disgrace her, but to praise her for her faith. Jesus Christ goes against the cultural norms and sends her away to experience the fullness of life. Both women were physically and socially as good as dead, but because of their encounter with Jesus and His personal touch, they are empowered to arise and live.

### **Paul and women**

It would be almost impossible to write about gender equality from a New Testament perspective without referring to Paul's teachings. As this article also focuses on the church, the 1 Timothy 2:8-15 passage cannot be excluded from

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57 Scheffler, "Towards Gender Equality", 193-198. Cf. Owanikin, "The Priesthood of Church Women", 211; and Cloete, "The Role of Women", 214-216.

58 Scheffler, "Towards Gender Equality", 199-200.

59 Okure, "The Will to Arise", 221-230.



the discussion. This passage is another of the New Testament's "terror texts", as it is often used to legitimise women's submissive and restrictive positions in church and society. Perriman<sup>60</sup> argues that Paul's restriction on women to speak in the church (1 Tim 2:12), should be seen in the light of the sociocultural and religious background of his time. In the Greek and Roman public life, women were not allowed to participate and had to operate under their husbands' authority. Within this context, Paul's statement that a woman should learn (1 Tim 2:11), is quite remarkable. Mouton and Van Wolde<sup>61</sup> explain that men were the public speakers and women were forbidden to learn and interpret the Torah. Immediately after this statement follows Paul's instruction that a woman is not permitted to teach (1 Tim 2:12). This command appears only once in the New Testament. Taking the context of 1 Timothy into consideration, Paul probably does not prohibit all female speaking as such, but only disruptive speech. The last part, that "she must be silent", could refer to the fact that she does not *yet* have the authority to speak, as she has not *yet* learned to do so (1 Tim 2:11). Mouton and Van Wolde conclude that 1 Timothy 2:8-15 cannot be seen as a universal statement on human dignity or as a moral prescription for all times and all places. It should rather be seen as an example of the dynamic processes in which the early faith communities struggled to understand God's will for their particular time while using the available language from their contexts. This passage invites the church to continue the struggle of the early faith communities to interpret God's radical presence in this world.

In Galatians 3:28, Paul writes that "(t)here is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." To understand what he says, one needs again to look at the socio-historical context in which Paul wrote the letter. The women in the Greek and Roman tradition had to conduct themselves humbly and discreetly. The first readers of the letter to the Galatians were probably gentiles from that tradition before they converted to Christianity. The new religions granted women more freedom and greater equality and the followers of the traditional religions probably experienced this as a threat to the harmony in their households and the well-being of society. In this verse, Paul uses three groups of people, each time contrasting people who fall in the same category, but on opposite sides of the spectrum. He refers to Jew and Greek; slave and free; and man and woman. Breed et al.<sup>62</sup> argue that these antitheses were distinctions

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60 Perriman, *Speaking of Women*, 113-115.

61 Mouton & Van Wolde, "New Life", 588-589; 596-597.

62 Breed et al., *Male and Female*, 98, 101.

and barriers known in the culture of the day and Paul uses it to refer to religious/ethnic, socioeconomic and gender distinctions. The apostle wants to convey the message that *all* who believe in Jesus Christ share in God's promises. With that he overturns the cultural norms of his day by clearly stating that there is no distinction between male and female.<sup>63</sup>

### **The church as advocate for gender equality in Africa**

The results of the empirical and literature study confirm the hypothesis that culture could be an obstacle in the realisation of gender equality. In a process to attain gender equality, cultural aspects need to be addressed. I believe that the church has a crucial voice and responsibility to transform cultural norms and practices that cause gender inequality. The church should help people, especially females, to reach their full potential and experience their inherent dignity as people created in the image of God.

Perhaps the general concept "church" could be broken down into more tangible entities. One possible divide could be leadership on synodical level; leadership on theological institutional level; leadership on congregational level; and members. The pastors in the congregations are working with the majority of the church members. The pastor cannot address discriminatory cultural norms in his/her community if s/he has not already experienced a change of heart and mind in this regard. The most probable time for that to happen is during his/her theological training. It will probably not happen if gender equality is not practised and taught by the leadership at theological institutions. Again, they will only be able to do that if they were mandated by leadership on synodical level. People with experiential knowledge of synods might observe that even though the synodical leadership may be advocates for gender equality, synods' decisions are influenced by pastors and elders. The question can justly be asked where change should start. Perhaps it starts with each one of us. The complexity of gender issues and the church is apparent. We should be humble enough to acknowledge that we do not have all the solutions and probably never will, but that does not give us the right to close our eyes and uphold the status quo. We need to participate openly and with integrity in the dialogue. Through this study, the following themes emerged.

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63 See Gillham, *Combatting Misogyny*, 7.

## **Patriarchy**

As a result of patriarchal traditions and practices, African women's status is secondary to that of their husbands. Ackermann<sup>64</sup> and Mwaura<sup>65</sup> refer to the role of churches in promoting and maintaining gender inequality by supporting the patriarchal system. On the other hand, Mwaura also confirms that churches are liberating women through education. Ackermann encourages churches to continually convey the message that women and children, their bodies and their humanity, should be honoured.

Mercy Oduyoye, a founding member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, experienced how women can be liberated in the church and in society if men are willing to reinterpret oppressive customs in African cultures. Her father, husband and uncle re-defined their culture through an enlightened understanding of masculinity and the importance of education for girls. That liberated women in their family.<sup>66</sup> Kamuzu Banda, the first president of Malawi, also encouraged women to attain higher education and to seek higher positions in the private sector and in government.<sup>67</sup> Oduyoye speaks about a reinterpretation of culture, while Adekeye<sup>68</sup> refers to a cultural reorientation. Musopole<sup>69</sup> mentions how her father did exactly that. He felt that women should be treated justly, because all human beings are children of God. He also felt that men should look at women through the eyes of Jesus. Women should not be seen as objects, but as partners. They should not be seen as dependent, powerless and worthless, but as people with dignity.

Rajuili<sup>70</sup> argues that women “contribute” to their own oppression and marginalisation by accepting uncritically the patriarchal culture. Women need to be equipped to challenge it. They need to challenge cultural practices such as the lack of basic human rights for women, poverty and the inferior status of women.<sup>71</sup> Women's fellowship groups and Bible studies are effective means to equip women. There they can discover God's special place for them – God called some into

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64 Ackermann, “Tamar's Cry”, 40.

65 Mwaura, “Gender and Power”, 412.

66 Fiedler & Hofmeyr, “The Conception of the Circle”, 39-41.

67 Musopole, “Sexuality and Religion”, 201.

68 Adekeye, “Prevalence and Patterns”, 1837.

69 Musopole, “Sexuality and Religion”, 203.

70 Rajuili, “Developing a Curriculum”, 82.

71 Kanyoro, “Preface”, xi.

leadership like Deborah and Esther; that they are reconciled with God through Jesus Christ; and that God's Holy Spirit was given to all.<sup>72</sup>

### **Break the silence**

There is a Swahili proverb "*asiyekuwepo, na lake halipo*" (if one is invisible, s/he cannot share in whatever the others get). As long as women are silent, nothing can change. That which was traditionally *personal* and *private*, needs to become *political* and *public*. Women will break the silence over things like sexual abuse, rituals, rape, domestic violence and other forms of discrimination if they have a safe place to speak.<sup>73</sup>

### **Luke and/or Paul?**

Through the centuries, Paul's theology dominated activities in the Christian church.<sup>74</sup> When it comes to women in the church, it is perhaps necessary to look at other approaches too, for example the way in which Luke portrays Jesus' interaction with women and their role in His ministry.<sup>75</sup>

### **Image of God: Equality**

Because of different understandings of what equality before the Lord means and how it should be implemented in practice, the church struggles to make a significant contribution to gender equality.<sup>76</sup> The gender discussion is about the meaning of being human as male and female.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps the answer should not be sought in culture, but in Creation. Men and women need to understand the concept of "created in the image of God". The correct understanding might ensure human dignity for men *and* women so that they can take up their rightful place in society as God intended it to be.<sup>78</sup>

### **Images of Jesus Christ**

Through their study of the Bible, Africans have formed different images of Christ.<sup>79</sup> One image is that of Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour and Friend. If people

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72 Musopole, "Sexuality and Religion", 198-199.

73 Kanyoro, "Preface", xi-xii.

74 Scheffler, "Towards Gender Equality", 189.

75 See paragraphs Lessons from Luke and Paul and women.

76 Rajuili, "Developing a Curriculum", 82.

77 Louw, "From Phenomenology to Ontology", 101.

78 See paragraph Imago Dei and Missio Dei.

79 Hinga, "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women", 190-192.

believe in Him, He accepts them, meets their needs and heals them spiritually and physically. This is a popular image among African women, because they need a personal Friend who bears their loneliness and suffering. Another popular image of Christ is that He is the embodiment of the Spirit. He gives voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless, also to women who are victims of oppression and muteness in society. A third image portrays Christ as a heroic prophet, speaking out against social injustices and marginalisation of certain groups in society. Christ is thus on the side of the women as victims of unjust social structures.<sup>80</sup>

### **Theological training**

In recent years, the traditional beliefs regarding women have been challenged in business and politics, but are often still maintained in the church and theological schools.<sup>81</sup> As long as appointments at tertiary institutions and bursaries for further studies are based on gender, patriarchy and intolerance will persist.<sup>82</sup> To have a real impact, theological schools will have to lead by example regarding equity of staff and student corps, and the content of the curriculum. Theological students can serve as agents for change, but then they need to be exposed to a contextual, gender-sensitive curriculum which addresses the grave needs of African women.<sup>83</sup> According to Du Preez,<sup>84</sup> the content of subjects like Old Testament, New Testament, Ethics, Church Polity, Systematic Theology and Practical Theology should reflect gender equality and values such as respect, justice, honesty, compassion and responsibilities between the sexes.

## **Conclusion**

This essay shows unquestionably that culture could be an obstacle in the realisation of gender equality and a barrier preventing people, especially females, to reach their full potential and experience their inherent dignity as people created in the image of God. Does this imply that people should abandon their culture? I do

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80 See paragraph Jesus Christ's example.

81 Statistics obtained from respondents in the empirical study on the number of women lecturers and women students at their schools present a bleak picture. No claim is made on the accuracy of the statistics as respondents from the same institutions gave different numbers, but they can give an indication. Respondents reported that 12.3% of the lecturers and 19.7% of the students are women. Respondents from three schools indicated that there are no women as lecturers or students at their institutions.

82 Rajuili, "Developing a Curriculum", 90.

83 Rajuili, "Developing a Curriculum", 91.

84 Du Preez, Kruger P. 2013. A framework for curriculum development, 108.

not think so, because culture makes people who they are, gives them a sense of belonging and distinguishes people groups from each other. But I do believe that people should take a critical look at their culture and maintain that which is good and honourable, but discard or change that which is negative. The justification of gender inequality and discrimination by saying “but it is our culture”, can no longer be accepted as a legitimate reason for these practices and perceptions. This process of examining what is good and what is bad should be done according to the Word of God. I believe that the church could play a strategic role in the process of sociocultural transformation. Our understanding of the image of God, God’s mission, and the teaching and example of Jesus Christ, the head of the church, serve as powerful indicators for the church on her quest towards gender equality. The process of inculturation,<sup>85</sup> where peoples’ faith is “translated” into their culture and the church becomes the bearer of culture and the “indigenising” principle, where the gospel is at home in every culture and vice versa, could cause the gospel to become a *prisoner of culture*. No, the process of inculturation should be balanced by the “pilgrim” principle, the fact that the gospel is foreign to every culture and out of step with society. Then the Word of God has transforming possibilities and can be a *liberator of culture*.

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<sup>85</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 447-448, 455.

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## **Questions for further reflection**

- ♦ With regard to gender, what is good in your culture and what does not promote gender equality?
- ♦ What can be done to break the culture of silence and to create safe places where people can speak freely about gender and marriage issues?
- ♦ How can the church become involved in education regarding personal finances, the family budgeting, inheritance issues and empowering strategies like micro finance?
- ♦ Design a contextual, gender-sensitive curriculum for your theological school.
- ♦ Give a critique of Bosch's concept of inculturation. How can the Gospel be a prisoner of culture and a liberator of culture? What is your response on the question: Should Christians be guided by the Word of God and/or by their culture? Motivate your answer.



## MASKS AND THE MEN BEHIND THEM

### Unmasking culturally-sanctioned gender inequality

*Edwin Zulu<sup>1</sup>*

#### **Introduction**

Cultural practices serve various purposes in African cultures<sup>2</sup> and communities – ritual, religious, cultic and entertainment purposes. In addition, these cultural practices are vehicles of history and identity; they are sometimes frightful and imposing, but always powerful symbols. As symbols, however, cultural practices are also artificial and temporary representations, and they may be reinvented, changed or even discarded. This is due to the fact that cultural norms, values and practices are transitional; they are never permanent; they transform and reinvent themselves with time.

In some African communities, men and women continue to uphold cultural traditions and practices that enslave them. These enslaving cultural practices constantly make them vulnerable, and in the process they lose dignity and self-esteem.

The issue of culture and cultural practices has been written and discussed in academia from various disciplines and perspectives for a very long time. In fact, the definition of culture itself has a long history of contestation and no single definition has ever been agreed upon by scholars. The well-known 1952 study by American anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn critically reviewed concepts

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1 Edwin Zulu is Rector of Justo Mwale Theological University College in Zambia, and research associate of the Department of Old and New Testament, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

2 In spite of the danger of essentialism in speaking of “African culture”, as though there is only one uniform African culture, some cultural characteristics, such as the propensity for patriarchy in African societies, remains a fact. Although this essay at times refers to African cultures, it does so in the plural, except when referring to the specific case of Zambian culture, which forms the cultural background of the author.

and definitions of culture, and ended up with a list of 164 different definitions of the term!<sup>3</sup> In the *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, Apte states:

Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s [still] no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature. Much of the difficulty in understanding the concept, characteristic and definition of culture stem from the different usages of the term as it was increasingly employed in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Be that as it may, this paper is written from a male perspective within an African cultural and religious context. It is an attempt to offer a male view on gender and cultural practices and it is aimed at speaking to men by a man on how demeaning cultural practices can be transformed and/or eradicated. It actually challenges our masculinities as being the product of our socialisation, and as such, as creations of ourselves and our societies. This is motivated by the fact that most of these practices are gender-based and more often than not gender biased, since they are mostly dominated and enforced by men or their agents (surprisingly enough sometimes women working under instructions from men).

The thesis of this contribution is that, whilst some cultural traditions and practices are good and mean well for the community and should be cherished and respected, others are enslaving and need to be reformed or even abandoned altogether. The sad fact of the majority of African societies being patriarchal in nature also means that to do so successfully men must be convinced of the negative influence of some cultural practices and this has to be part of dismantling their influence. In addition, the gospel of Jesus Christ can be a tool that may assist in removing and reforming these cultural practices and in reclaiming (gender) justice, liberation and dignity in

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3 Spencer-Oatey, "What is culture?"

4 Apte, "Language in sociocultural context", 2001. For Ruth Benedict (*Patterns of Culture*), for example, culture is that which binds people together, and it refers to the ideas and the standards they have in common. Margaret Mead (*Culture and Commitment*, 17), states that culture refers to the whole complex of traditional behaviour which has been developed by the human race and which is successively learned by each generation. For the authoritative American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, Chapter One), culture refers to the total way of life of a people and serves as the social legacy the individual acquires from his or her group; as a way of thinking, feeling, and believing; as an abstraction from behaviour; as a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave; as a storehouse of pooled learning; as a set of standardised orientations to recurrent problems; as learned behaviour; as a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour; as a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other people; as a precipitate of history; as a behavioural map, sieve, or matrix.

African communities. The cultural practices are selected due to their prominence in the gender discourse.

### Theoretical approaches to culture

Not only are there different definitions of culture, but there are many approaches or schools to cultural analysis, which Bate summarises as follows:<sup>5</sup>

- ♦ *Functionalism*: This approach to cultural analysis views the society as a system or a network of interconnected parts. Each part in this system has a function in maintaining the unity and the wholeness.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, “culture can be analysed into a set of systems of cultural forms each of which has a cultural function in the society and is understood within a particular cultural meaning.”<sup>7</sup>
- ♦ *Structuralism*: In this approach to cultural analysis the belief is that a human society consists of groups of people who live within determined structures in the society. Different societies have different kinds of structures. Therefore, “structuralism tries to discover the underlying structural reason behind the worldview, values and belief systems which inform morality and behaviour of people.”<sup>8</sup>
- ♦ *Phenomenology*: This approach to culture is concerned with the problem of how we receive and process information from the outside world in order to make sense of it.<sup>9</sup>
- ♦ *Semiotics*: This approach to cultural analysis looks at culture as a meaning-making system made up of signs and codes which transmit messages through culture texts.<sup>10</sup>

The above-mentioned theories indicate that culture can be approached from various perspectives by different people. In this contribution, therefore, culture will be understood in an inclusive way to incorporate the theories discussed above.

### The characteristics of culture

According to Helen Spencer-Oatey,<sup>11</sup> a series of characteristics of any culture may be identified and some of these, as we shall see, have very important implications for this essay.

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5 Bate, *Human Life is Cultural*, 39-49.

6 Bate, *Human Life is Cultural*, 40.

7 Bate, *Human Life is Cultural*, 50.

8 Bate, *Human Life is Cultural*, 42.

9 Bate, *Human Life is Cultural*, 43-44.

10 Bate, *Human Life is Cultural*, 46.

11 Spencer-Oatey, “What is Culture?”, 3-16.

- ◆ Culture is manifested at different layers of depth – i.e., as observable artefacts, values, and basic assumptions.
- ◆ Culture affects behaviour and interpretations of behaviour. Although certain aspects of culture are physically visible, their meaning is not: “their cultural meaning lies precisely and only in the way these practices are interpreted by the insiders.”<sup>12</sup> For example, a gesture may reflect positive behaviour somewhere and negative behaviour in other parts of the world.
- ◆ Culture can be differentiated from both universal human nature and unique individual personality. Culture is learned, not inherited, and as such derives from one’s social environment, not from one’s genes. In this sense, culture should be distinguished from human nature on one hand, and from an individual’s personality on the other.
- ◆ Culture influences biological processes. Even responses to our purely biological needs (e.g., eating, coughing, laughing, etc.) are frequently influenced by our cultures. All people eat, but what, how often, how much, with whom, and according to what set of rules we eat are regulated, at least in part, by our culture.
- ◆ Culture is associated with social groups. Culture is shared and almost everyone belongs to a number of different groups and categories of people at the same time, such as culture at a national level, regional level, gender level, generational level, in a role such as parent or spouse, at a social class level (personal education and occupational), and at organisational level.
- ◆ Culture is both an individual construct and a social construct. “As social construct culture is a derivative of individual experience, something learned or created by individuals themselves or passed on to them socially by contemporaries or ancestors.”<sup>13</sup>
- ◆ Culture is always both socially and psychologically distributed in a group. “Delineation of a culture’s feature will always be fuzzy,” according to Spencer-Oatey.<sup>14</sup> Culture is a “fuzzy” concept, in that group members are unlikely to share identical sets of attitudes, beliefs, et cetera, but will rather show “family resemblances” in that similar cultural representations are held by a significant proportion of the group’s members.
- ◆ Culture has both universal (“etic”) and distinctive (“emic”) elements. Humans live in fairly similar social structures and physical environments, which create major similarities in the way they form cultures. But within the framework of similarities there are differences. The same happens with language, for example.
- ◆ Culture is learned. Spencer-Oatey explains this by referring to how adults react and talk to babies as a way to see the actual symbolic transmission of culture

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12 Hofstede in Spencer-Oatey, “What is Culture?”, 4.

13 Spencer-Oatey, “What is Culture?”, 8.

14 Spencer-Oatey, “What is Culture?”, 9.

among people.<sup>15</sup> Two babies born at exactly the same time in two parts of the globe may be taught to respond to physical and social stimuli in very different ways – some babies are, for example, taught to smile at strangers, whereas others are taught to smile only in very specific circumstances.

- ♦ Culture is subject to gradual change. No culture remains completely static year after year. Culture is not a choice of an individual: it is in fact a framework of socialisation.
- ♦ Finally, the various parts of a culture are all to some degree interrelated. Components of cultures are more than a random assortment of customs. Particular cultural traits fit into the integrated whole and consequently tend to make sense within that context.

### **The traditional mask in African cultures**

African communities have ways to depict their lives and values. One way is through images and symbols. These form part of everyday life and are weaved into a complex tapestry of what we call culture. One way in which cultures may be expressed and celebrated is through the making and wearing of traditional masks. The masks worn in Africa are made from various materials such as wood, copper, ivory, leather or even glazed pottery. Furthermore, they are crafted in an artistic manner and decorated with paint, cloth, feathers, beads, animal skin and various other objects. Despite the great variety of appearances of masks or how and what they are made of, traditional masks have a much deeper meaning than what is exhibited on the surface. In general, the mask's form is a physical mechanism to initiate transformation whereby the wearer takes on a new entity, allowing him (sic) to have influence on the spirits to whom he is appealing to or offering thanks.<sup>16</sup>

### **The significance and function of traditional masks in African societies**

Masks are most often used during dance ceremonies to make connections between the human and the spirit world: "Traditional masks are worn during celebrations, dances and festive and ritual ceremonies commemorating social and religious events."<sup>17</sup>

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15 Spencer-Oatey, "What is Culture?", 11.

16 "African Masks". The reference here to the masculine form is intentional as it is usually men who not only make, but who also wear the masks during African cultural ceremonies and rituals.

17 "African Masks".



Traditional masks basically have three main functions: In *ceremonies*, masks are representative of some spirit and the spirit is believed to inhabit and possess the dancer as they take part in the performance. Some of the spirits that these masks evoke are represented in masks depicting women, royalty and animals. In *rituals*, some African traditional masks may represent deities, mythological beasts and gods; they may thus serve as metaphors for good and evil, the dead, animals, nature and any other force that is considered more powerful than humans.<sup>18</sup> In *celebrations* traditional masks may be used during a performances such as crop harvesting or commemorative occasions.

First, however, masks are human artefacts. They are the products of human creativity and artistic ingenuity and as such they represent culture as a human construct (as referred to in Spencer-Oatey's reflections on the characteristics of cultures themselves). From the description above, it is clear that masks are powerful cultural symbols. What is not often emphasised, however, is the temporal nature of the role and significance of the masks. The performer may for a short time be "transformed" into a spirit represented by the mask and perform a dance or ritual, but at the end of the day, he (usually male) returns to his normal self. Therefore, although powerful, frightful and strong in appeal, masks are removed at the end of the day and may even be discarded forever after a ceremony or ritual. This reminds one of the temporal nature of cultural practices as referred to by Spencer-Oatey and also applies to the fact that masks have been and are over time reshaped and redesigned to make new representations of changed realities. This can also be seen from the way in which masks are crafted. The same can happen to our cultural practices, too.

Like culture in general, these masks are cherished cultural goods and they are important to their makers, wearers and to those who participate in or who are spectators when they are used. Masks, however, often have a gender bias; it is men who make them and ascribe meaning to them. It is also mostly men who wear them. For example, in a *Nyau*<sup>19</sup> dance of the Chewa people of Zambia, various masks adorn dancers and these depict various characters ranging from humans (both male and female), to animals to spirits. In all these performances, the role

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18 "African masks".

19 This tribe is found in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia and they all fall under the Paramount Chief Kalonga Gawa Undi who resides in Zambia at Mkaika in Katete District. Nyau cult has been often associated with various myths; for example the person performing is transformed into a beast. This is the reason why a Nyau dancer is often referred to as *chirombo* or beast. Sometimes, it is associated with witchcraft or black magic, even though members of the cult deny this.

of women is mostly limited to clapping and singing. The men play the drums and dance. Even in a situation where the mask portrays a female character, it is worn by men. The men often assume a powerful and imposing role. In many ways masks are indeed similar to our culture, where the men “beat the drum”, are the performers, take centre stage, and the woman clap their hands and sing, but in the circle around the dancers, at the margins of the “stage”, marginalised. This is also the case with *Cimtali* dance.<sup>20</sup> Whilst the dance is mostly for women, the women dance in the circle when a man beats the drum in the centre.

As we have seen, cultural practices are temporal, like masks, despite their importance and the powerful role they play in communities. Cultural practices can and do change or transform just like masks. But why exactly are cultural practices, even if changeable, so difficult to change; in short, why are they so important?

### Functions of cultural practices

The importance of cultural practices is directly related to their functions in society. They have:

- ♦ *An identity-forming function:* Some cultural practices may serve to reconnect to the past and to our identity. According to Bourdillon and Pilosof, “many people are concerned that their traditional cultures be maintained, because these cultures serve to give them an identity and some kind of security in the modern society.”<sup>21</sup>
- ♦ *A preserving function:* Some cultural practices may serve as a means to preserve a particular culture. But we must bear in mind that cultures are evolving and dynamic.
- ♦ *A social function:* Some cultural practices are aimed at unifying a particular ethnic group. They provide an environment for social interaction.
- ♦ *An ideological function:* Some cultural practices are ideological to a particular ethnic group; they help to uphold certain values and ideals. They are vehicles through which meaning, ideals or values are passed from generation to generation.
- ♦ *A religious function:* There is an important connection between culture and religion. King describes religion as: “(t)he organisation of life around the depth dimensions of experience varied in form, completeness and clarity in accordance with the envioning culture.”<sup>22</sup>

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20 This is a dance performed mostly by women among the Chewa people.

21 Bourdillon & Pilosof, *Where are the Ancestors?*, 14.

22 King, “Religion”, 282.

Therefore, there cannot be any separation of the two entities of religion and culture. Dearman,<sup>23</sup> for example, argues that there is an inseparable relationship between worldview, religion and culture since religion is not only an idea or ideology, but it is also an expression of cultural symbols in a specific society, and in a real life situation. As Christians, however, what should our relationship be with culture and is the latter indeed inseparable from the former?

### Culture and the gospel

The question of exactly what the relationship may be between theology and culture, or religion and culture has for centuries been part of the Christian tradition. Ever since the spread of Christianity to the gentiles in New Testament times up to the present, theologians have grappled with this question. Space does not allow us to enter into this history in detail, apart from referring to one of the most influential and most well-known, relatively recent perspectives on the issue, namely, the five paradigms of “Christ and culture” as proposed by the twentieth-century American theologian Richard Niebuhr.<sup>24</sup>

According to Niebuhr, there are five different paradigms in which the relationship between religion (Christ) and culture may be or have been understood over the centuries:

- ♦ *Christ against Culture:* For Niebuhr, this is the most uncompromising view towards culture. It affirms the sole authority of Christ over culture and resolutely rejects culture’s claims to loyalty. Here the emphasis is on opposition to culture, even to the point of withdrawal from society. Christians using this model consider the world outside of the church to be hopelessly corrupted by sin.<sup>25</sup>
- ♦ *Christ of Culture:* According to this view, men and women “hail Jesus as the Messiah of their society, the fulfiller of its hopes and aspiration, the *perfecta* of its true faith, the source of its holiest spirit.” The emphasis is on an essential harmony between Christ and culture. Jesus is seen as the embodiment of the greatest human aspirations, as the ultimate hero of human culture, as representing the very best which culture can give. In short, the very best of human achievement is Christ, and therefore there is little or no difference between loyalty to Christ and the best a particular culture has to offer.<sup>26</sup>
- ♦ *Christ above Culture:* In this view, the “battle” between Christ and culture is rather seen as a “battle” between (the holy) God and (sinful) humanity. Christ is

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23 Dearman, *Religion and Culture*, 2-3.

24 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*.

25 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 54.

26 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 83.

Lord of both this world and of the other world and the two cannot be entirely separated. Christ enters culture from above with gifts that human aspiration has not envisioned and which human efforts cannot attain unless they relate humans to a supernatural society and a new value centre.<sup>27</sup>

- ◆ *Christ and Culture*: Niebuhr describes this as dualistic because of the way it recognises the reality of both law and grace, wrath and mercy, revelation and reason, time and eternity. Despite the ongoing reality of sin and corruption within culture, Christians simultaneously operate within both realities recognising that life will be filled with inevitable contradictions. But it is precisely within these contradictions and paradoxical locations that God sustains God's people, and works out God's will in mysterious ways.<sup>28</sup>
- ◆ *Christ transforming Culture*: This group, the so-called "conversionists", have a more "hopeful view toward culture".<sup>29</sup> Their theological conviction comes from seeing God as Creator, knowing that humanity's fall was from something good, and that we see God's dramatic interaction with people in historical human events.<sup>30</sup> It recognises the corruption of culture but is optimistic and hopeful about the possibility of cultural renewal. Culture is perceived critically as perverted good, but not as inherently evil. Conversion makes it possible for human beings and culture to move from self-centredness to Christ-centredness. Niebuhr claims that Augustine, John Calvin, and F.D. Maurice were examples of this type. Niebuhr recommends this view according to which to be Christian in the world and witnessing to its culture will require that believers seek creative ways to advocate and live out the loving ethics of God's kingdom both in their private and public, social lives. This will help to transform culture in line with Christian influence.

With these different possible Christian responses to culture and cultural practices in mind, let us look at some specific practices often found in African cultures.

### **Persistent enslaving cultural practices**

A number of cultural practices are practised by various communities despite the fact that some of them are in fact enslaving and victimising others. Let us consider some examples:

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27 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 117.

28 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 149.

29 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 191.

30 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 194.

## Rites of passage

The transition from one stage of life to the other is often marked by a number of customs, practices and rites. No life event in most parts of Africa passes by without a rite being performed. These events include birth, puberty, marriage or death.

Some rites are significant since, according to Mugambi, they serve as the “means of educating the young to become responsible adults at home and within the community.”<sup>31</sup>

These rites of passage create a meaningful transformation in the human life cycle.<sup>32</sup> With this important function they serve in the community, they cannot and should not be ignored. However, they have to be done in a dignified and humane way.

## Polygamy – Traditional and cultural view

Two types of polygamy are common in African societies. The first is an official polygamy where one man marries more than one wife. The second wife or other wives will be known by the first wife and in some instance the first wife is part and parcel of the arrangement. She may herself look for a second wife for her husband. Mostly, the women would stay in the same household or house. In this type of polygamy the man may pay the bride price (dowry) for all his wives.

The second type of polygamy is “unofficial polygamy”, mostly known as “small house” polygamy. In this arrangement one has a secret wife mostly not known to the wife and/or relatives. One may even have children in this type of polygamy and support them like any of his publicly known children. Marrying more than one man (polyandry) by a woman is not very common. There are many reasons why men would enter into a polygamous marriage. The most prominent, however, is men’s perception of themselves through their socialisation. Having more than one wife or sexual partner is perceived as a masculine identity and prowess and virility of the individual. The “real men” would have more than one partner. This explains why some men uphold this practice, despite the fact that polygamy has proved to be one of the drivers of epidemics such as HIV and AIDS. According to Gausset, “polygamy might be responsible for accelerating the spread of infection. If one partner is infected within a polygamous family, the number of persons at risk becomes higher than in a monogamous family.”<sup>33</sup>

31 Mugambi, “Rites of passage”, 243.

32 Ray, *African Religions*, 59.

33 Gausset, “AIDS and Cultural Practices”, 512.

It has, however, also been noted that the practice is exceedingly difficult to eradicate due to various cultural beliefs in many African societies. Gausset asserts that “polygamy is deeply ingrained in a great number of African cultures, and part of a complex set of social and economic relations, which make it unlikely that one could eradicate this practice in the near future.”<sup>34</sup> In essence, polygamy concerns power. By marrying a number of wives, the man exercises control and rule over the women he marries – the more women, the greater the extent of the man’s power. Clearly, addressing this requires some sort of deconstruction of perceptions of masculinities projected by society about being a man.

Usually, the first wife feels the brunt of being subjected to the ridicule by her husband’s bringing another woman into the family and the new wife often turns out to be her competitor. Most of these women are powerless to prevent this or to leave the marriage, as they are often caught in a polygamous web due to poverty and/or lack of education. Furthermore, due to the cultural perceptions in some societies that every woman ought to have a husband, desperation sometimes causes even some “enlightened women” to enter into a polygamous marriage despite the risks involved. Finally, in some African countries second or further wives are not recognised in terms of civil law to be legally married to their husbands and they may, for example, not claim any inheritance from him unless he expressly provides for it in his will. These women usually only have recourse to customary law, which is much weaker in its protection of their rights and which is mostly not enforced by governments’ judicial machinery. Clearly, if in the terminology of Niebuhr, Christ (and Christian faith) is the transformer of culture, one has to look anew at the institution of marriage and ask whether polygamous marriages are not perhaps a cultural perversion of the institution, of the dignity of women and, indeed, of men in the sense that the latter’s worth is equated with their power over women and their virility.

### **Under-age marriages**

The practice of marrying off young girls is still common in a number of cultures. There are often a number of reasons why young girls are married off at a tender age. Sometimes it has to do with the emphasis placed on the virginity of the wife one marries – the younger the wife the greater the chances of her being a virgin. Sometimes it is because it is believed that the younger the women the greater her chances of producing a long line of descendants, in which case the worth of

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<sup>34</sup> Gausset, “AIDS and Cultural Practices”, 512.

women is determined by their fertility. One of the reasons may be the belief that it is logical for women, as “the weaker sex”, to be younger than their husbands. In addition, some children are married off for economic reasons as their parents are paid the bride price – in this case the worth of the women is determined by her economic value.

Medically speaking, it is extremely risky for under-aged women to give birth. The World Health Organization offers some frightening statistics in this regard.<sup>35</sup> About 16 million women 15 to 19 years old give birth each year – about 11% of all births worldwide. Of these, 50% are in sub-Saharan Africa. And although adolescents aged 10 to 19 account for 11% of all births worldwide, they account for 23% of the overall burden of disease due to pregnancy and childbirth. Many health problems are particularly associated with negative outcomes of pregnancy during adolescence. These include anaemia, malaria, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, postpartum haemorrhage and mental disorders, such as depression. Up to 65% of women with obstetric fistula develop this as adolescents, with dire consequences for their lives, physically and socially.

Not only is pregnancy and giving birth dangerous for young women, but also for their children. Stillbirths and death in the first week of life are 50% higher among babies born to mothers younger than 20 as opposed to babies born to mothers 20 to 29 years old. The rates of preterm birth, low birth-weight and asphyxia are also higher among the children of adolescents, all of which increase the chance of death and of future health problems for the baby. Clearly the cultural motives behind under-aged marriage and its consequences throw a completely different light on the goodness of the institution of marriage and the gift of parenthood.

The major driver of the under-age marriage is the perception of men who tend to think and believe that a young wife would be easy to control. In most instances, young wives have little say on how their homes are managed due to the wide age differences. Men, in turn, lose out on sharing a life with a person of their age.

### **Widow cleansings and inheritance**

After the death of a partner (the husband) the surviving spouse is subjected to “cleansing”, which in some cases involves (involuntary, culturally-ordained) sex. The practice emanates from the perception that when one’s husband dies one needs to be cleansed sexually or simply inherited by the brother of the deceased. This is due

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35 WHO, “Adolescent Pregnancy”.

to the belief that if the widow is not cleansed by this rite, the ghost of her deceased husband will follow and haunt her. In most instances, the widow is dependent on the man and his family for survival; she often has no or little means of survival. She has to submit to this humiliating practice or may even be eager to participate for the sake of her own and her children's survival. Among the Tonga of Zambia, for example, this practice is embedded in socioeconomic conditions and entails that a woman needs the support of a man to raise her children and have access to land.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the fact that this cultural practice applies to both men and women, it is in most instances the women who are subjected to it in practice. This is so because in most situations the woman would be dependent on her husband for her livelihood. One also sees that this gender-based prejudice or threat to women is linked with other culturally legitimised forms of discrimination – in some contexts, with a women's inability to inherit from her husband, or women's inability to own land. This means that in the event of death of a husband she becomes helpless and vulnerable. Men would often use her fellow women to subject her to all sorts of practices in the name of culture.

## Conclusion

Many cultural practices discriminate against women and girls. In addition, they are demeaning and deny women their dignity. We should indeed again consider the view of Bourdillon and Pilosof that “cultural and rules are obeyed when they serve a purpose. But cultures change, when old practices no longer serve a useful purpose.”<sup>37</sup> And for Christian believers, if Christ is supposed to be, as Niebuhr says, the transformer of the cultures,<sup>38</sup> cultural practices, views and values in some instances *should* be changed in light of the gospel of Christ. “This may be a change either in the perception of reality itself or the understanding of what reality could be. Ordinarily we perceive reality in terms of our culturally governed conceptions (worldview) of what that reality ought to be.”<sup>39</sup>

Men ought to take the lead in the call for reform and/or eradication of humiliating cultural practices, since most of these cultural practices are often enforced by men in authority and with power of various kinds in our societies. Furthermore, since it is often men who dominate in the enforcement of many

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36 Gausset, “AIDS and Cultural Practices”, 513.

37 Bourdillon & Pilosof, *Where are the Ancestors?*, 14.

38 Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, 27.

39 Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 59.



cultural practices, they can use their unique position to spearhead the reform and/or eradication of enslaving cultural practices. It is an ironic and unfortunate fact that in many African cultures women and not men are the custodians of culture and the primary transmitters of culture in society, and by not questioning prevailing customs – in fact, by often openly supporting them and transmitting them to the next generation, they act as agents of men in perpetuating culturally-sanctioned gender inequality.

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### Questions for further reflection

- ♦ Which of Niebuhr's five paradigms of Christ and Culture is the dominant one in your community and, to your mind, what are the consequences thereof?
- ♦ Can you think of any cultural practices in your community which distort something that should in essence be something good, according the gospel?
- ♦ Do you think cultures and their practices can change? Can you name any examples where this has happened to the better in your own culture?
- ♦ What are the perceptions of what constitutes a man in your cultural context?
- ♦ In what ways do you think can churches in your context help people to discern whether cultural practices are beneficial or detrimental to the dignity of women, and how might churches assist in promoting the former and challenging the latter?
- ♦ Which person in the smallest unity of society (the family) should be a cultural agent for transformation?



## GENDER AND THE CHALLENGE OF WITCHCRAFT

*Jonathan Iorkighir<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

Witchcraft, “especially as an evil force, is a universal principle – as portrayed in mythology, fairy tales, legends, history, religions, and the theories and practice of ... psychology.”<sup>2</sup> In Africa, the term “witchcraft” refers to a complex phenomenon both with regard to its manifestations and essence. To wave away belief in the phenomenon and its existence is naïve and amounts to ignoring a vital part of human existence and the worldview and view of human nature of many African people. Belief in witchcraft can be conceptualised as an attempt by people to rationalise the misfortunes of life; it shapes perceptions and provides an answer to “why me?” questions whenever disaster strikes. Witchcraft functions in the realm of and is treated by most scholars of African traditional religion under the rubric of mystical powers.<sup>3</sup> Although a continent-wide phenomenon, this essay will explore the phenomenon of witchcraft in Africa with particular reference to its prevalence and practice among specific tribes in Nigeria. It will explain what witchcraft is believed to be. It will also outline the older forms of witchcraft and how it has been transformed into what it is today. A biblical perspective on witchcraft will be outlined and the church’s reaction to it advanced. In line with the aims of this volume as a whole, particular reference will be made with regard to witchcraft and gender to show that also in this area women are often left more vulnerable to the dangerous, even life-threatening consequences of the phenomenon than men. A

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1 Dr Jonathan Iorkighir is an ordained minister and Rector of the Reformed Theological Seminary, Mkar, Benue State, Nigeria.

2 Bührmann, “The Feminine in Witchcraft”.

3 Cf. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion*, 43-74; Fuller, *A Missionary Handbook*, 86-105. Cf. also Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 194-205.

good place to start is by referring to a personal experience I had as a child that first made me aware of the reality of the belief in witchcraft in my own community.

At dawn one morning during my childhood (about 45 years ago) as I and others stood around the fire to warm our bodies from the cold harmattan winds, Wandagu, an elderly woman from our compound approached us, carrying a calabash with its lid on. Wandagu placed the calabash on the ground beside Torkwembe, the head of our compound. We thought she had brought some roasted yam in the calabash for our breakfast. But as she quickly removed the lid on the calabash Torkwembe, whom we considered to be strong and fearless, jumped back in fear. As we peeped into the calabash, a chameleon reared its head from inside. As children, we took to our heels. Standing at a safe distance, we heard Wandagu explain that, as she came out of her hut that morning, she saw the chameleon in the fireplace in front of her hut with its head stuck in the ashes of the previous evening's fire. She demanded an explanation from Torkwembe as to why they (i.e., the witches) would want to visit her in this way. After all, she protested, she has no child left to give to them for another sacrifice. She explained that her children were all killed by witchcraft just because she did not have a man she could call her husband, since children whose fathers are alive enjoy protection from the visits of witches and wizards. She then appealed to Torkwembe to summon the traditional village council to put a stop to what the witches were up to. This is only one personal experience of belief in witchcraft and its effect on women in Africa.<sup>4</sup>

### **Defining and understanding witchcraft**

The worldview of many Africans includes an ancient and pervasive belief in the existence of an unseen world, a spiritual realm that is in constant interaction with the physical world and its inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> As early as 1937, Evans-Pritchard created

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4 The victim of witchcraft in my story was an unsophisticated elderly woman from a village in Nigeria, but the victims are not limited to the elderly, powerless or women. Decades earlier, the following account showed this: Ayittey writes a fascinating report concerning elections in fairly recent elections in Ghana where one Philip Kofi Amoah won a parliamentary seat, but soon after was hit by a flying crow. Though inexplicable and perhaps even slightly comical to Western ears, Amoah was convinced that this was an attack by his enemies because of his political success. According to him, this was a spiritual assault. Amoah complained of dizziness and died soon after on his way to the hospital. Unwanted and unwelcomed occurrences like these, which defy an immediate human explanation but has some kind of devastating influence on victims are attributed to witchcraft and that is why the phenomenon thrives. Cf. Elizabeth Colson, "The Father as Witch".

5 Cf. Hill, "Witchcraft and the Gospel", 334.

an awareness concerning the existence of such an African phenomenon from an anthropological perspective.<sup>6</sup> In his seminal research into witchcraft among the Azande of Congo, he postulated that witchcraft could be explained as misfortune, or is an explanation of misfortune when it strikes. This is sometimes referred to as the “misfortune theory” or “explanation theory” of witchcraft.<sup>7</sup> Hill offers a helpful table that summarises the different theories behind the existence of witchcraft offered by various scholars, all referring to the use of some hidden power, but along a continuum of spiritual to non-spiritual explanations for the phenomenon:<sup>8</sup> Firstly, as non-spiritual reality: i) *due to stress on society*: famine, rapid change, oppression, economic distress, ii) *due to the social structure*: close living quarters, no channels for open confrontation, iii) *due to psychological problems*: guilt projection, unconscious hostility, anxiety, paranoia, depression; and, secondly, as spiritual realities: (i) *due strictly to superstition*: to be ignored (cultural evolutionists, some missionaries) (ii) *due to Satan*, (iii) *due to psychic powers which can be used for evil*. More on this follows below.

The concept “witchcraft” itself, due to variations in practices and beliefs across Africa (and indeed, across the world), is extremely difficult to define, as almost all scholars in their works on the issue, regardless their discipline, admit. Many agree, however, that in order to come to some understanding of the concept of witchcraft, it is necessary to also refer to the concept of magic. Magic has to do with the manipulation of the supernatural in order to obtain results in this life. Such results could be harmful or benevolent. Magic is therefore understood to exist in two forms, depending on the goal for which it is employed. It is important in this regard to distinguish between white magic and black magic. Black magic has traditionally been referred to as the manipulation of supernatural powers for evil and selfish purposes and can be understood to refer to witchcraft.<sup>9</sup> White magic, on the other hand, has a benevolent aim and is understood as a counterpart to black magic. This means that white magic is the tapping and manipulation of the mystical world for the good of the person or the community in general. In this essay, the activities of black magic are given prominence in the discussion, since it is black magic that leaves women especially vulnerable.

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6 Cf. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*.

7 Onyinah, “Deliverance as a Way of Confronting Witchcraft”; cf. also Onyinah, “Contemporary ‘Witchdemonology’ in Africa”, 330.

8 Hill, “Witchcraft and the Gospel”, 326.

9 “Black Magic”, in Melton, *Encyclopedia of Occultism & Parapsychology*.

As suggested above, one can also not adequately define witchcraft without first noting that it is widely believed in Africa that there exist “invisible, mystical forces and powers in the universe”.<sup>10</sup> It is also believed that certain humans have the knowledge of and ability to tap into, control and use these forces either for good or evil. When some individuals use these forces to destroy the products of others, or to damage or even kill, such people are said to be practising witchcraft. Therefore, the notion of witchcraft, despite its suggestion of referring to multiple abilities, can in a large majority of African contexts perhaps be best defined as the ability to harm someone through the use of mystical power.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the practitioner, the sorcerer or witch, embodies a wicked persona, driven to commit evil deeds under the influence of the force of witchcraft.<sup>12</sup>

According to the Tiv people of central Nigeria, witchcraft is generally associated with *any* kind of evil that befalls an individual or society as a whole. Evans-Pritchard contends that witches are associated with misfortune, jealousy, and rivalry and that it creates tensions and conflict.<sup>13</sup> More recently, writing on the Tiv, Dzurgba states that witchcraft concerns “wickedness, aggression, cruelty, and hostility” and that it is believed to have the power to “cause sickness, infertility, impotence, pests, failure of crops, snake bite, tree accidents, river accidents, bad luck, death and other forms of evil.” It can also “harass the weak, the poor, orphans, widows, the deaf, the blind, the lame, the young and the aged.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Siegfried Nadel, the Nupe and Gwari, also of central Nigeria, believe that witches are people who destroy life and eat the souls of their victims in mysterious ways.<sup>15</sup> In a related study, Gluckman asserts that witchcraft is an outcome of social instability such as famine, rapid change, oppression and economic distress in that it tries to account for the negative consequences of these occurrences.<sup>16</sup>

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10 Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*.

11 Cf. Stabell, “The Modernity of Witchcraft”, 461: “Witchcraft” will refer to ideas about dangerous occult power in social contexts where misfortune is attributed by many if not most members of society to the alleged mystical powers of individuals referred to as ‘witches’.”

12 For Redding’s view that witchcraft is causing harm through the use of supernatural powers see, Redding, “Deaths in the Family”.

13 Quoted in an article by Ajala & Ediomu-ubong, “It’s my Stepmother”, 455.

14 Dzurgba, *On the Tiv of Central Nigeria*, 195. In one fairly recent study conducted in Ghana, it was shown that a considerable number of Ghanaians believe HIV and AIDS to be the result of witchcraft – one unfortunate consequence of this, it was found, was that those who believe this are more likely not to use protection during sexual intercourse. Cf. also Tenkorang et al., “Superstition, Witchcraft and HIV Prevention”, 1001-1014.

15 Nadel, “Witchcraft in Four African Societies”, 18.

16 Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa*, 101.

Referring to Bever and Redding, Ajala and Ediomu-ubong contend that “in many African societies, the hostility of witches is seen as a threat to the whole society.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it could be said that witchcraft is perceived as a certain attitude aimed at a hostile debilitating effect against some person or group in society and it is a set of human beings called witches and wizards who are considered responsible for such hostility. And, since witches are held to have control over or can manipulate the spiritual realm in order to cause harm, they are perceived to be dangerous and are to be feared.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the reality of witchcraft for many Africans, many people share Margaret Field’s opinion that fears of witches are merely psychological. According to her findings in research on what she calls the “so-called witches in Ghana”, the whole phenomenon of witchcraft is rooted in the psychological reactions of those suffering from the misfortunes of this life like ill-health, poor harvests, loss of virility, fertility or vitality and, in general, the inability to control their destinies.<sup>19</sup> It needs to be seen, however, whether Field’s assertions are true because the successful people in many African societies also display a level of dread of witchcraft.

Daniel Offiong adds an important element in the anthropological study of witchcraft by stating that witchcraft plays an important role in the maintenance of social relations.<sup>20</sup> Referring to the Ibibio of southern Nigeria, he asserts that the mere fear of being accused of being a witch helps to minimise tensions in the social equilibrium. There are actions one might perform or attitudes one might exhibit which make him or her liable to being accused of witchcraft. Such attitudinal displays may include being licentious, gluttonous, aggressive or stingy. Because one fears to be labelled a witch through those attitudes, one restrains oneself from them, the end result being the minimisation of social tension that would have been caused by such attitudes or behaviour.

These varied explanations and interpretations of witchcraft have, over the years, led some theologians, missionaries and anthropologists to conclude that belief in witchcraft is only a remnant of pagan superstition and with the advance of

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17 Ajala & Ediomu-ubong, “It’s my Stepmother,” 456. Cf. also Bever, “Witchcraft Fears and Psychosocial Factors in Disease”; and Redding, “Deaths in the Family”.

18 Edward Bever agrees with the conception of witches as evincing “patterns of behaviour that appear to convey deep hostility toward people in general ... A witch’s hostility is seen as a threat to a whole community,” Bever, “Witchcraft Fears and Psychosocial Factors in Disease”, 574.

19 Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People*; Field, *Search for Security*.

20 Offiong, “Social Relations and Witch Beliefs”, 95.



modernity and civilisation it would become a matter of the past.<sup>21</sup> This is reflected, for example, in the view of anthropologist George Parrinder who postulates that “enlightened religion, education, medicine and better social and racial conditions will help to dispel witchcraft beliefs.”<sup>22</sup> From research and reports (including shocking witchcraft-related crime reports), it is however clear that the belief in and practising of witchcraft remains widespread and pervasive across Africa despite in modernisation and the spread of religion (such as Christianity and Islam) as never before on the continent. Many studies point toward this, such as the empirical studies by Charles Chilimampungu in Malawi,<sup>23</sup> David T. Ngong<sup>24</sup> and Geschiere and Fisiy in Cameroon,<sup>25</sup> Opoku Onyinah in Ghana,<sup>26</sup> and Elisabeth Colson in Zambia,<sup>27</sup> to mention but a few.

In summary, the following list of negative consequences of the belief in witchcraft are offered by Hill.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly enough, with reference to the work of anthropologists, Hill also identifies possible *positive* consequences of the belief in witchcraft which may at the same time offer some reasons for its persistence in Africa:

### **Negative effects**

- ◆ causes fear of attack, of becoming a witch, or of being responsible for misfortune (death);
- ◆ causes suspicion and isolation: the witch is ostracised and sometimes tortured or killed;
- ◆ encourages spiritual reductionism, avoidance of responsibility for actions, or consideration of other factors;
- ◆ creates displacement of guilt;
- ◆ blocks progress because success incurs envy which brings on attack.

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21 Cf. Hill, “Witchcraft and the Gospel”, 337.

22 Parrinder, *Witchcraft*, 202–203.

23 Chilimampungu, “The Extent and Nature of Witchcraft-Based Violence”.

24 Ngong, “Stifling the Imagination”.

25 Geschiere & Fisiy, “Domesticating Personal Violence”.

26 Onyinah, “Deliverance as a Way of Confronting Witchcraft”.

27 Elisabeth Colson, “The Father as Witch”.

28 Hill, “Witchcraft and the Gospel”, 330.

### Positive effects

- ◆ checks anti-social behaviour;
- ◆ gives unity through a common foe (scapegoat);
- ◆ enforces group ethics and good behaviour by all;
- ◆ explains the causes of misfortune;
- ◆ provides a way to rupture face-to-face relationships without confrontation;
- ◆ gets rid of dissidents;
- ◆ gives power to the powerless, an identity to deviants.

But what forms do witchcraft practices take in order to achieve the above-mentioned positive consequences or to result in the negative consequences, as listed by Hill?

### Witchcraft practices

First of all, it must be remembered that, despite its persistence in Africa, what we know or hear about witchcraft today is not completely the same as what was described or explained a century ago. The patterns of witchcraft in Africa have indeed undergone change. One example which was prominent among beliefs regarding witchcraft in the past is that witchcraft was seen as a substance attached internally to the body of a person. Previously, “(w)itchcraft’s nature is said to be found within the intestines of a witch after death,” writes Gehman.<sup>29</sup> Among the Azande of Ghana, the substance of witchcraft was seen as a “blackish swelling, which may be the gall-bladder or part of the small intestine.”<sup>30</sup> The Tiv of central Nigeria believed that the witchcraft substance (*tsav*) is attached to the liver, heart or lungs.<sup>31</sup> If one died, both among the Azande and Tiv, a postmortem was performed to check whether the deceased had “the witchcraft substance” attached to the said organs. If any abnormal growth or swelling on those organs was found, it was concluded that the person was a witch or wizard and that is why they died – this also shows the belief that witches may possibly themselves die as a result of their witchcraft. Today, such beliefs in the attachment of “the witchcraft” to a part of one’s body no longer exists, nor are postmortems conducted to prove this. However, the belief in witchcraft persists. Also no longer in practice is the traditional inquest to determine

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29 Gehman, *African Traditional Religion*, 60.

30 Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 124.

31 Dzurumba, *On Tiv of Central Nigeria*, 194.

who was or is the witch responsible for certain misfortunes or general disasters in society. In the past, when disaster struck (for example the sudden death of a family member, a locust invasion, a natural disaster such as torrential rainfall that washed away crops or when someone was struck by lightning) the village elders would be summoned to look for the possible culpable party in the strange event. This does not mean, however, that there is no form of contemporary “witch hunts” left. Traditional inquests have now been taken over, for example, by some spiritualists who, by way of prophecy can identify someone as a witch requiring exorcising and often this happens in church contexts or in Christian crusade and revival settings.<sup>32</sup>

It will be impossible to give a full account of what qualifies as witchcraft or what contemporary manifestations these practices take. There are simply too wide a variety of and differences in African contexts with regard to these. In an attempt to give some idea of what these practices may be, however, the focus will be here on the phenomenon among the Tiv of central Nigeria, which is the context that I am most familiar with.

*Charms or fetishes* are normally associated with witchcraft. Among the Tiv of Nigeria, some charms associated with witchcraft are kept within the family and may even become a bone of contention when the owner of the charms dies. Relatives of the deceased would want to know who inherited those symbols even if no one is expected to openly ask about them, because the one who possesses them will also have to provide human blood to cleanse them to forestall their potency. The charm referred to here is the most powerful of witchcraft charms among the Tiv and is called the *imborivungu*. It is this charm that must be kept within the family and passed on at the time of death of the owner. This *imborivungu* may take different forms. It might, for example, be bone with some cloth tied around it, or it may be a carefully carved wood in any specific shape wrapped around with the tail of the animal attached to it. An *imborivungu* is understood to be used by witches to kill and to bless; it is believed to bring blessings in terms of good harvests or success that can be passed on from parent to child via this charm. When someone is seen to be successful in life, he/she is believed to have inherited the family *imborivungu*. Unfortunately the inheritor often becomes the object of envy and strife and other family members may even struggle to take the *imborivungu* from the one holding

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32 In Africa, these crusades developed in a “deliverance ministry” in many churches. Examples and the consequences of this ministry, called “witchdemonology” by Onyinah, “Deliverance as a Way of Confronting Witchcraft”, 345, is discussed in more detail later in this essay.

it. The charm is mostly kept in secret, because even if it may bring success to its owner, “if a person sees it, he is in serious danger of death.”<sup>33</sup>

Unlike the common perception of the lone, feared witch living on the margins of society, witchcraft is in fact mostly seen as a *social activity*. Witches are taught to be organised into companies (not unlike the covens of witches in Western terminology) and at night even those old women who live in solitude are thought to join their fellow witches and move together. The meetings and activities of witches are believed to occur in the spiritual realm. The witch’s soul is understood to leave his/her body while the latter remains asleep. The soul then flies to those meetings either in the form of a ball of fire or on the back of a strange bird like an owl, an insect, a firefly or an animal (often a cat).<sup>34</sup> The soul of the witch cannot be perceived with the naked eye, but only through the eyes of those enabled to do so by witchcraft. Members of the group of witches are required in turn to bring human victims to the meetings for communal feasting on the latter’s souls. The person whose soul was feasted upon may wake up sick and weak in the morning. As the witches spiritually “suck his blood and eat his [the victim’s] body, he wastes away and finally dies.”<sup>35</sup> This is one way by which it is believed that witchcraft leads to the death of innocent people.

It is also believed that witches use *incantations, spells, rituals, magic objects or animals* to inflict harm on their victims. To do this they may use nails, hair, clothes, or other possessions of the victim which they burn, prick, or wish evil upon. It is thus believed that by inflicting harm on what once belonged to a person, that person is automatically harmed.<sup>36</sup> Another method is to bury magic objects in the ground across the path where the intended victim is likely to pass, or at the gate to a house of the compound, or in someone’s fields. It is also believed that witches use animals – flies, bees, other insects, certain birds or animals – to bring harm to the victim or that when they touch the animal or see it, the victims will fall sick or meet the intended misfortune.

A very important element of the belief in witchcraft, referred to above and which will be seen as also especially important in the context of this essay, is that of the *witch hunt*. The latter refers to an activity whereby those perceived to be witches

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33 Dzurgba, *On Tiv of Central Nigeria*, 195.

34 Wegh, “A Praxiology of Traditional Tiv Therapy”, 117. Also in Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 125; cf. also Lois Fuller, *A Missionary Handbook*, 87.

35 Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 167. See also Fuller, *A Missionary Handbook*, 87.

36 See Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 155–168. See also Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 122–131.

are sought out and subjected to a variety of forms of either punishment or means to force them to confess to being a witch or possessing witchcraft paraphernalia. These acts may include being forced to drink some concoction, beaten brutally and imprisoned. Witch hunts have been part of the story of witchcraft since time immemorial. In fact, during colonial times in Africa, witch hunt expeditions were sometimes even undertaken or officially sanctioned by colonial powers. One account of this is found in the history of the colonial administration in Nigeria, particularly in Tivland, where it was a consequence of allegations that witches were eating human flesh. In 1929, in an attempt to arrest the culprits and bring them to justice, the colonial authority drafted local police to collect witchcraft charms, *imborivungu*. Those elders who denied having a witchcraft charm had “their hands or legs tied with ropes and were beaten cruelly to force them to bring out *imborivungu*. The torture was dreadful. Tiv elders were tortured mercilessly.”<sup>37</sup> However, no such charms were found. Rev. Botha, a South African missionary in Tivland at the time, who also witnessed the hunt, testified that “the wizard-witchcraft hunt eventually ended in nothing”. He argued that “there was no evidence to convince him that witches really killed people.”<sup>38</sup> At another occasion, a witch hunt was organised in Nigeria in 1939 in which people were forcefully arraigned to produce their witchcraft paraphernalia or to confess that they were witches. This witch hunt was called the *inyamibuan* among the Tiv (the meaning of which no one seems to know today, but it is related to the word “meat”).<sup>39</sup>

Apart from those witch hunts organised by the colonial administration, Africans themselves did and still do organise witch hunts, whereby youths go out in groups from house to house in search of witches. Large numbers of people are rounded up, interrogated and made to pass through the traditional ordeal of proving their innocence if accused. An earlier example of such a witch hunt is the infamous 1934 witch hunt movement known as the Bamucapi,<sup>40</sup> which spread across Malawi, Zambia, central Rhodesia and into parts of Congo. Young men clad themselves in European clothing and travelled about in twos and threes searching for witches. Elders were made to line people up, men separately from women, and as they passed by the Bamucapi tried to catch their reflections in a mirror. The mirror was supposed to reveal the witch. Mostly women were accused. The accused witch had

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37 Dzurgha, *On Tiv of Central Nigeria*, 196.

38 In Casaleggio, *The Land will Yield its Fruits*, also cited in Dzurgha, *On Tiv of Central Nigeria*, 196.

39 Rubingh, *Sons of Tiv*, 144-147.

40 Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 128.

to drink a reddish soapy medicine out of bottles and had to surrender their “horn of witchcraft”, but if they denied having any their houses would be searched. But, since most people at the time carried medicines in horns, horns were abundant and nobody could be accused of being a culprit.

Yet another famous witch hunt group that spread out in West Africa after the Second World War was the Atinga. It came from the northern part of Ghana to the south and spread eastward to Togo, Dahomey and Nigeria. It enjoyed a lot of prestige among the Yoruba of Nigeria until this hunt was finally prohibited by the government in 1951. The Atinga made a concoction of blood, water and kola nuts which the accused, *all women*, had to drink. The accused women had to surrender the “tools of their trade”. The main item was supposed to be “a pot of witchcraft containing the witches’ familiar bird”.<sup>41</sup> During the event, many pots and calabashes were collected, but observers never saw a bird or model of one. This shows another instance of the mystery surrounding the truth or not of witchcraft. No particular evidence of the said witchcraft items was ever actually obtained by the witch hunt groups and people would submit items due to the threat of beatings or worse, and it seems anything was accepted on face value. Despite this, it seems almost impossible to rebut accusations of witchcraft. As Hill explains, “a medium is brought in to divine who is guilty, and ... the medium never lies. It is in a person’s best interest to accept the verdict even if he or she is unaware of having committed an evil act. Attempting to convince the community that the medium is mistaken is nearly impossible, especially if the divination is repeated several times with the same response.”<sup>42</sup> This is even more the case where the accused already is a vulnerable or marginalised member of society, such as an elderly person, widow or orphan without the protection of male members of a family.

One does not have to look very hard to find even recent examples of accusations of witchcraft and witch hunts resulting in attacks or even the death of supposed witches in Africa. In the Eastern Cape of South Africa, a woman, her daughter and her grandson were hacked to death for allegedly practising witchcraft; in Ghana a woman – Samata Karim – was almost lynched by a mob on the suspicion that she was a witch – the mob that pursued Samata did so after a neighbour dreamed that Samata was strangling her to death;<sup>43</sup> in Uganda, three suspected witches, accused of causing the death of a man in the area, were lynched

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41 Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 129.

42 Hill, “Witchcraft and the Gospel”, 323.

43 Cf. the website of the International Humanist and Ethical Union for similar reports.

in Kitgum; in 2004, in Edo State, Nigeria, 27 men and women suspected of witchcraft died after being forced to drink a local concoction believed to identify witches; in Tanzania and Mozambique there have also been reports of incidents of killing, torture and maiming of suspected sorcerers;<sup>44</sup> in June, 2013 a seventy-year-old man killed his son in Kaduna in northern Nigeria, alleging that he had used witchcraft to kill his own three children in quick succession; and, in the same year, a middle-aged man, Vincent Igwe of Enyikpe Ulayi community in Ado local government area of Benue State (Nigeria) was allegedly hacked to death by his siblings for his alleged involvement in witchcraft and sorcery.<sup>45</sup> The list continues, and as elsewhere, even though the victims of witch hunts and killings are from both sexes, globally it is more often women than men who are the targets of these crimes. Writing from the context of Papua New Guinea, journalist Richard Shears of Associated Press recently expressed his outrage at this tendency:

It is reprehensible that women, the old and the weak in our society should be targeted for alleged sorcery and wrongs that they actually have nothing to do with. The US Embassy on New Guinea issued a statement condemning the “brutal murder” calling it evidence of pervasive gender-based violence.<sup>46</sup>

This brings us specifically to the gendered face of witchcraft in Africa.

### **Witchcraft and gender**

In Africa, as elsewhere, accusations of witchcraft are gender biased against women (and also children) and even though it is also practised by men, most references to witchcraft are directed at women. According to Richard Gehman, the belief is that “most witches are women ... born with an evil nature that gives them the ability to do evil.”<sup>47</sup> Bührmann notes that some studies in Southern Africa have shown that witches share some common characteristics, which are: Firstly and most importantly, they are mostly adult females; they usually exhibit externally some sort of stigmata, identifying them as a witch (e.g. red eyes or some “devil’s mark” on the body); internally they have some animals, such as snakes in their bellies; they are usually reserved, quarrelsome and stingy and often come from a “witch family”; their victims often see or experience them as being naked.<sup>48</sup> Most Africans who

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44 Cf. the website of the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

45 Duru, *The Vanguard*, 4.

46 NBC News, “Accused Witch Tortured”.

47 Gehman, *African Traditional Religion*, 60.

48 Bührmann, “The Feminine in Witchcraft”, 146.

believe in witchcraft also believe that most, if not all, witches are women, and that it is the mother that passes down her witchcraft to her daughter<sup>49</sup> and never to her sons. Bührmann states that the Zulu of South Africa believe *only* women can be witches.<sup>50</sup> This is the case even with regard to young girls, who, although they cannot practise it immediately, are believed to have a latent ability in them until they pass puberty. It is also said that women who practise the art of witchcraft are more dangerous at it than men doing so. This gender-biased view of witchcraft was also expressed by Gbenda in Nigeria some years ago, specifically in the context of a consultation on the promotion of human dignity in light of the fact that women are painted as more evil than men in the witchcraft discourse and are seen as being born to witchcraft, unlike men.<sup>51</sup>

Even when reflecting on terms used in the discourse on witchcraft, one finds a gender bias. The word “witchcraft” denotes the practice of this (mostly dark) art. A man who is considered to practise this art is known as a wizard. But in common parlance the female form is used as the practice, even at the hands of men, and called witchcraft and not wizardry. Thus, the art by its common rendition appears to be a feminine practice. Interestingly enough, even in the Bible, when Saul could not get word from the Lord through dreams, visions, the *urim* or word of prophets (1 Sam 28:6, RSV), he requested: “seek out for me a *woman* who is a medium (1 Sam 28:7, RSV).

All in all, witchcraft as practised by women is considered more nefarious, wicked and deadly. Every adverse situation is the wicked act of a witch, who is invariably a woman or even a child. Since a witch is said to cause harm to members of her family or community, she is viewed as especially dangerous in a close-knit community. But why is it that mainly women and children are perceived as witches? The answer to this can in one sense be traced to patriarchy. Being called a witch in a patriarchal society is no easy matter. In most cases it spells certain death for the accused. History is full of accounts of women burned alive, stoned to death, or in rare instances banished for allegedly being witches. This accusation is strategic. Within a hierarchical society, especially a paternalistic society, the fear of being branded a witch is designed to keep young people from criticising the “elders”, women from challenging male domination and the poor from showing

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49 Cf. the story of the death and infertility of the four consecutive wives of an evangelist due to the witchcraft of his mother which was perpetuated by his sister after the mother’s death, in Hill, “Witchcraft and the Gospel”, 323.

50 Bührmann, “The Feminine in Witchcraft”, 146.

51 Gbenda, “Superstition and Witchcraft”.



open resentment of the “well-to-do”. In other words, threatening the existing order of things in any form may result in being branded as witches. However, in a similar way, when disaster strikes, be it in the form of natural disasters, unexplained death or misfortune, even (at times fuelled by envy) when it is incomprehensible that a specific individual is more successful or more wealthy than his or her kin or the rest of society, these events also threaten the existing order, “the way things are or should be.” It is then quite easy to progress from these inexplicable fortunes or reversals of fortunes to thinking that these are ways in which witches attack the existing order for their own or others’ evil means. Witchcraft is thus also a means to strengthen patriarchy. The way to do that is to label women and children as witches in order to keep them on the margins of societal life.

### The Bible and witchcraft

When looking for the way in which witchcraft is viewed in the Bible, one can look at the Hebrew and Greek words referring to it in the contexts in which the Bible was written. The problem one faces here is that of translation with a view to dynamic equivalence instead of literal translations. According to Merz,

...(t)he Bible does not directly address “witchcraft” as traditionally understood in Africa ... thus leaving room for different views and speculations. There is, however, a major trend of diabolizing and reducing witchcraft to demonic possession in order to see it as something more directly discussed in the Bible and thus more addressable within a Christian framework. In doing so, however, witchcraft, which is traditionally believed to be an impersonal and usually internal power, is misrepresented as an exorcisable evil spirit.<sup>52</sup>

When one looks at the Old Testament, however, one does find references to the possession of innate powers instead of being possessed by such powers. Such powers could be displayed through sorcery or divination. The words mostly translated as “witch, witchcraft or wizard” in the Bible are either *ov* from the Hebrew or *yidoni* (Exod 22:18, Lev 20:7; Deut 18:9-12; 1 Sam 28:3, 9). Both words mean soothsayer, sorcerer, spiritist or medium. Since these all deal with mystical powers, they easily fit with the African understanding and use of witchcraft as the practice of being in touch with mystical powers and using them to one’s own advantage or to the disadvantage of others. The Hebrew word *mekassepa* (Exod 7:11; Exod 22:18; Deut 1:10) is also often translated as “witchcraft”, but in its more consistent rendering it fits best with “sorcery” and “magic”. Such practice was pejoratively considered as

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52 Merz, “I am a Witch in the Holy Spirit”, 201-202.

antisocial and anti-religious among the Hebrews in the sense that it sought meaning, interpretation of events and benefits outside of the regulated religious forms. The Hebrews were to seek all meaning and benefit from and through Yahweh and not by any other means. *Pharmakeia* (Gal 5:20), the New Testament counterpart of *mekassepa*, refers to the use of evil drugs, medicine, charms and bad magic, which actually amounts to sorcery. Witchcraft, as understood in the context of this essay, does make use of sorcery in this sense in order to achieve its ends.<sup>53</sup>

Both the Old and New Testaments treat witchcraft (*mekassepa* and *pharmakeia*) as an evil, rebellious, and loathsome practice. Those who practice it are not to be tolerated. “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” commands Exodus 22:18 (KJV). Moses cautioned the children of Israel:

When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in [who makes his son or daughter pass through] the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the LORD your God. The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so (Deut 18:9-14, NIV).

Divination or sorcery, the interpretation of omens and the engagement in witchcraft as forbidden in Deuteronomy (above), all point to the use of supernatural means or consultation with the spirit world to discover the course of the future or to influence events or persons.<sup>54</sup> In this sense it is similar to what happens in modern witchcraft practices, which are also the manipulation of the supernatural powers to influence the course of events, either positively or negatively, for oneself or others.

With respect to the evil king Manasseh who reigned in Jerusalem for fifty-five years, the Bible states: “He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites” (2 Chron 33:2, NIV). Among the “detestable practices” of the king were the fact that “(h)e sacrificed his sons in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and consulted mediums and spiritists”, all of which were “evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger” (2 Chron 33:6, NIV).

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53 Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*.

54 Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 260-261.

When Samuel reproved King Saul, he compared rebellion to the sin of divination and arrogance, like the evil of idolatry. “For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king” (1 Sam 23, NIV). In this case, Saul’s sin of rebellion is considered to be as bad as that of divination which is a central element of witchcraft. The punishment for this is therefore nothing less than the loss of the throne.

Paul includes witchcraft among the deeds of the flesh which would not permit one to inherit the gift of the kingdom:

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and *witchcraft*; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal 5:19-21, NIV – emphasis added).

It is interesting to note that Paul’s warning is aimed at the churches of Galatia, whose members are already Christians. They are warned that by engaging in sinful conduct including witchcraft, they would not inherit the kingdom of God. The situation in Ephesus too was one that included idolatry and witchcraft, but as the people embraced the gospel, many abandoned witchcraft and destroyed its paraphernalia. The practice of and belief in the powers of witchcraft thus not only existed among some members of the early church but was also condemned by it and in one case one finds a clear account on how it was acted upon. In Acts 19:19 (NIV), we read that: “...(m)any of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of all; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver.”

### **The church and witchcraft**

In many parts of Africa, the issue of witchcraft remains unresolved and it remains a challenge to the church, despite the flamboyant spread of the faith and the mushrooming of new churches across the continent. It was previously thought that belief in witchcraft would disappear as the churches in Africa continued to grow and Africans became more educated, received better medical care and grew in their understanding of the phenomenon, but the current situation indicates the contrary. Far from fading away, these social and cultural representations, if in places transformed, have been maintained. According to McVeigh, “(t)he truth of the matter is that the belief in witchcraft has not been reduced by missionary

influence or contact with the West. It is possible to argue that belief in witchcraft has never been greater and that it is in fact growing rapidly today.”<sup>55</sup> Gehman adds that witchcraft activities are also on the increase in the Western world despite its high levels of education and sophisticated medical care. “In the West today there is sharp rise in the belief and practice of mystical powers. Westerners, with all their education and medical care, have growing faith in astrology, witchcraft, divination, fortune telling and spiritism.”<sup>56</sup> One thus may ask why witchcraft continues to grow side by side with the church. A number of reasons could be offered and these may give an indication of what churches may do in the face of this.

As in other aspects of African life and society, the Christian churches, despite some laudable efforts, have confused and complicated efforts to eradicate witchcraft and realise social and cultural progress. Indeed, the belief in witchcraft predates the advent of Christianity. But over the centuries Christianity has spread while reinforcing and appropriating this belief. How has this happened? In Africa, many churches themselves establish fellowships and revival meetings to cast out demons and counteract witchcraft activities. Because the Bible enjoined the Israelites to torture and kill witches, today churches on the continent (especially among the myriad of new Pentecostals), following literalist approaches to the Bible, are championing new witch hunts across Africa. So Christians in Africa torture, persecute and even kill those alleged to be witches based on their belief, which includes the literal following of biblical injunctions against witchcraft. By allowing (or even endorsing) such practices, if not the actions that flow from them, churches tend to magnify the power of witchcraft instead of the liberative power of Jesus Christ.

Such continued action against proposed witches occurs in churches across the continent. By no means do these examples suggest that this is the way in which witchcraft is dealt with in all churches, but it does show that in the extreme it has dangerous and utterly dehumanising effects on some Christian believers. Witches claim to be in touch with the spirit world and to be able to manipulate it for good or evil. People want protection from these powers here and now. Many times, traditionalists can only be convinced that Jesus is more powerful than the gods and mystical powers when they see a contest between these powers like the case of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:20-39). The Reverend V.W. Khua is described as leading witchcraft confessions in his church

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55 McVeigh, *God in Africa*, 168.

56 Gehman, *African Traditional Religion*, 85.

in South Africa. As the description goes, during his revival crusades, it is mostly his followers that take the lead in those confessions. According to the testimony of one young woman at one of these occasions, “they [witches] speak of arcane worlds, magical transportation, violence, and bloody murder...” According to Badstuebner, in the process, “the hitherto hidden world of witches and the *modus operandi* of witchcraft are, apparently, laid bare.”<sup>57</sup> The more pronounced your confession sounds, the more you are looked upon as being a truly repentant member of the church.

In another case in point, a video by Bishop David Oyedepo of Winners’ Chapel, Otta, spread very fast on the internet in Nigeria.<sup>58</sup> In it, the bishop is ostensibly conducting deliverance in his church on a group of teenage girls alleged to be witches. The girls are made to kneel submissively in front of the bishop. However, to his annoyance, one of the girls has the audacity to contradict him. The girl namely declares: “I am not a witch. I am a witch for Jesus. My own witch is for Jesus.” This response angers the bishop to no end. He shouts at her: “You are a foul devil. Do you know whom you are talking to?” Then, consumed with rage, Bishop Oyedepo slaps the girl and condemns her to eternal damnation, even though she came to him for deliverance. He barks at her: “Jesus has no witches. You are a devil. You are not set for deliverance and you are free to go to hell!” One also wonders whether Oyedepo would have slapped the girl if she were a young boy, or if she were rich and powerful? Would he have slapped her if she were one of the major benefactors of Winners Chapel? I doubt it very much. Justifying his actions in a later video, the bishop boasts:

I slapped a witch here last year. She came back in February to apologise. She begged me to forgive her. She went back to her witchcraft company and they told her: “Ah, if the man says you are dead, you are dead. That small thing can kill you forever.”

Interestingly enough, nowhere in the videos is Bishop Oyedepo ever shown to act in a similar way towards a man.

In another example, Helen Ukpabio, founder of Liberty Gospel Church in Nigeria, is known for her preaching which focuses on delivering people from witchcraft. However, since a documentary was made and aired (by the evangelist herself) which showed how children branded as witches by pastors in Akwa Ibom are in fact maltreated, the evangelist has been at the centre of a storm, following

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<sup>57</sup> Badstuebner, “Drinking the Hot Blood of Humans”, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Aribisala, “Witchcraft in the Church”.

allegations that her actions encourage the stigmatisation of witches. The evangelist remains adamant, however, even proclaiming that she has been sent by God to deliver people from witchcraft:

There is witchcraft in Nigeria. There is witchcraft in Africa. There is witchcraft all over the world. So I will not join the campaign that says there is no witchcraft, because that is the devil speaking. And when the devil speaks, he makes a lot of people powerless and intimidates them. So I am not going to be part of that campaign. There are witches and those witches have to be delivered as they come for it.<sup>59</sup>

Another question to be asked is whether such deliverance ceremonies are at all the proper way to address the issue of witchcraft. The deliverance from possession of mystical powers is after all older than the Bible itself and in the Bible one finds Jesus himself casting out demons. In this regard, some Nigerian Pentecostal churches, for example, sell blessed holy water in vials purported to provide protection against witches and which will provide healing and bring good fortune. The issue here is, however, that such action rather reinforces deeper belief and fear of witches among church members. It amounts to a simple substitution of one set of “charms” aimed at protecting or cleansing a person for another charm.

To assert the prevalence of witchcraft in Africa today is not the main concern here: the facts speak for themselves. What is important, is the way in which the church goes about the ministry of deliverance that does not engender the holistic proclamation of the gospel. Ukpabio (above) makes her ministry solely that of witchcraft deliverance. However, when people are supposedly delivered from witchcraft, this does not necessarily entail belief in the totality of the saving work of Jesus Christ. We still need to ponder and come up with ways in which the church can be a safe place from witchcraft.

Unfortunately, the way in which some churches behave towards witchcraft may be conceived simply as a manipulative device widely used by pastors who aspire to build bigger parishes in support of their bids to affluence and power. Preying on the fear of unseen powers of ordinary people and on the (understandable) extent of their gratitude, many of these churches develop a cult of its founder or the pastor who appears to have the power to deliver them. These pastors manipulate their congregants so effectively that they end up believing that to disobey their pastor is to disobey God. In the end, the power of Christ that surpasses all forms of marginalisation is reduced to only the pastors’ powers against witchcraft. The

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59 Ukpabio, “I will Never Stop Fighting Witchcraft”.

church does not remove the intense and debilitating fear of the unseen, nor does it address the deeper reasons behind these fears.

As Lois Fuller<sup>60</sup> observes, power encounters such as those found in deliverance ministries may convince people initially, but more teaching is required when people return without fear to their normal lives. The task of the church should include much more than just conducting field crusades where people are supposedly delivered from mystical powers, if at all. Believers and converts are to be taught *who* they are in Christ and *who* this Christ is within a context where there is a real and terrifying consciousness of the powers of darkness.

One may, of course, always blame the missionaries for introducing the gospel to Africa in the way they did. According to Merz, “(m)issionaries have usually responded to witchcraft beliefs either by denying their existence or by diabolizing them.”<sup>61</sup> Neither of these attitudes are very helpful when addressing the issue in Africa. Dismissing claims of witchcraft as mere pagan superstition, as in most of the mainline churches in Africa, missionaries failed to emphasise all dimensions of the spiritual aspect of the Christian life. The role and power of the Holy Spirit, the unseen power of Christianity, were often not emphasised or explained adequately. Seminary education was reduced to critical (rational) analysis of the faith in order to present a reasonable faith.<sup>62</sup> Several seminaries which were established in Africa in the early days did not even include courses on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In many cases, the sacrament of baptism was withheld from converts upon their profession of belief in the existence of witchcraft. As a result of this, many African churches were established without a thorough understanding of the relationship between God and the mystical powers, and the practice of church ministry in the area of spiritual forces (good and bad) in one’s life was also badly affected. The prominence and function of mystical powers in the everyday life of the people was not adequately addressed in Christian teaching. Now, in Nigeria and elsewhere, where African independent churches have appeared, they overreact in many ways with regard to the issue of the spirit world and they do so with aggression, ignorance and theological imbalance. They believe themselves to be the heirs of the prophets

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60 Fuller, *A Missionary Handbook*, 125.

61 Merz, “I am A Witch in the Holy Spirit”, 201; cf. Hill, “Witchcraft and the Gospel”, 337.

62 For the influence of Enlightenment rationality of missionaries on the way the Christian faith was introduced into Africa and its consequences for the discourse on witchcraft, as well as the way in which, for example, the belief among the Yoruba in Nigeria in a Supreme Being was equated with God and how the so-called lesser gods (the *orisa*) became diabolised (one of them, Eshu, becoming the devil) or declared non-existent, see Merz, “I am a Witch in the Holy Spirit”, 207.

of old castigating and overpowering the Baals of their time, while getting rich in the process. And in the midst of all of this, the most vulnerable remain women and children who are mostly identified as witches even in the church.

Another aspect where the church may fall short in its efforts to address witchcraft is in the emphasis on a future heavenly kingdom. The benefits of salvation are not presented as a present reality as such; mystical powers are the present reality, total liberation will only be a reality in the future heavenly kingdom. A religion whose benefits are only future benefits, whose liberative force is only realised in totality in another, better world in future, will never replace fear from evil forces like witchcraft, because witchcraft's effects are felt here and now. Therefore, it is vitally important to stress the victory of Christ over the powers of evil here and right now, that although the future heavenly kingdom awaits, the good news of the gospel has already come; Christ has already defeated the powers of death and darkness and it is in this truth that lives may be lived here and now.

In light of the above, what may assist the church in Nigeria (and in Africa) in the face of the challenge in a practical manner includes the following:

- ♦ The church has to realistically attend to biblical interpretation on the matter of evil spirits and shy away from a literalist interpretation which gives pastors false power to accuse people of being witches.
- ♦ The church needs to stop the practice of hunting witches (also in the church). Instead, it should present the saving power of Jesus Christ which affords the Christian the gift of the Holy Spirit that has power over all other powers.
- ♦ The church must address the matter of labelling women and children as inherently evil and, therefore, the most probable practitioners of witchcraft. We confess that, through our own sinfulness, all of humankind, women and men, young and old became alienated from the true holiness and righteousness of God. As such, we all stand in need of "deliverance".
- ♦ The church has to carefully address the issue of witchcraft in her seminary training. Seminaries need to develop concrete steps towards counseling those living under the threat and fear of witchcraft, also to prevent a relapse after they are genuinely delivered by the power of Jesus Christ. This requires a great deal of patience, spiritual understanding, and a thorough knowledge of Scripture.
- ♦ It must be noted that when the kingdom of God invades the kingdom of darkness with the gospel, there will be strong opposition from the powers that be. We must continue to believe that in the final instance, despite opposition, the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ has already overcome the powers of darkness.



This brings us to the conclusion of this essay and the formulation of the first and primary task of the church with regard to the challenge of witchcraft.

### **Conclusion – The first task of the church**

Right at the beginning of this essay, it was stated that witchcraft attempts to answer the “why me?” question when disaster strikes. This question is as old as humanity itself, and definitely as old as the Bible. The centrality of this question in human life is reflected in the way in which it is grappled with in the Book of Job. And, as was referred to in the case of accusations of witchcraft linked to jealousy and greed, sometimes the reasons behind illness, misfortune and death may be found in the dark recesses of the hearts of our fellow humans. However, more often than not, misfortune is our part for no apparent reason at all – as Job was fated to find out. We fall sick, we suffer bad harvests or our relationships or businesses fail without our doing and we want to know not only “why me?” but also “who?” was the cause of it. The church must be conscious of the fact that these human reactions to misfortune evoke irresponsible, dangerous and unbiblical responses in many people, even in some pastors (in providing explanations or solutions for what would be otherwise inexplicable, for hardships such as the consequences of unemployment and poverty, more often than not for their own monetary gain). Churches must address this, not by identifying possible culprits and punishing them – and thereby, in most cases, only increasing the extent of injustice to and suffering of the latter, but if one is to believe anthropological explanations given for the persistence of witchcraft beliefs, by addressing the needs that evokes the desire for such beliefs, be they physical or economic hardship, tension in familial or societal relationships, anxiety or depression, or the need to project guilt. These can be addressed by working towards the transformation of society to one that provides social and material support and infrastructure, employment and ways to eradication of poverty. In theological terms, what missiologists and scholars of theology and development will tell us forms part of the holistic salvation offered by Christ: freedom from the powers of darkness and death, for sure, but also liberation from inhumane conditions of life; spiritual, but also material freedom to live dignified lives. And in the here and now, in the already, but not yet fully, the church has a central role to play. In short, what is needed, according to Stabell is,

...a full-orbed theological, pastoral, and ecclesiological response focusing on the development of a community of believers who, in the midst of a world marred by human sin and rebellious principalities and powers, are learning to trust in Christ for fullness of salvation, and to love one another as fellow redeemed

sinners. Christians who are actively living out the story of redemption in their own context will, I believe, be much less inclined to find the ambiguities of witchcraft discourse at all attractive as a guide for living.<sup>63</sup>

Even where the hardships of life are incomprehensible and apparently random, the church must lead in offering compassion, assistance and love to enable people to live lives of hope in the God we profess as the God of love and justice, to live according to the Good News which is the gospel of Christ. The proclamation of this Good News is the first and most important way in which the church may address the issue of witchcraft.

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<sup>63</sup> Stabell, "The Modernity of Witchcraft", 470.

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## Questions for further reflection

- ◆ What is witchcraft and what is its relationship with mystical powers?
- ◆ What is taught about witchcraft to the seminarians of your church? Do you think this is adequate?
- ◆ What is the relationship between witchcraft and gender?
- ◆ What should the Church's ministry be towards those under the influence of witchcraft? Outline what the Bible says about witchcraft.
- ◆ In practical ways, how may we work towards a better understanding of witchcraft and how may we address its implications, especially for women, in Africa?



# GENDER EQUALITY

A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH



# AWARE AND EMPOWERED RESPONSES TO GENDER INJUSTICE

## A challenge to the church

*Elize Morkel<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

Violence against women in South Africa again came under the spotlight in February 2013 when seventeen-year-old Anene Booysen was brutally gang raped and murdered in Bredasdorp in the southern part of the Western Cape Province. Twelve days later, on Valentine's Day, paralympic sport icon, Oscar Pistorius, shot and killed his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, in Pretoria – an event that solicited unprecedented global media and public response.

In my middle-class practice as a psychologist, my work as a supervisor and trainer, and my collaboration with disadvantaged communities, I have witnessed countless stories of violence, violations and oppression experienced by women. While we were bombarded by the media with the stories of violence in February/March 2013, my practice was hit by a wave of women who were experiencing violence in their relationships. My involvement in this work resulted in a threat to my own safety, which confronted me with ethical issues regarding client confidentiality versus public protection. At that time a journalist discarded my critical analysis of power relations in a contribution to an article on gender abuse. Furthermore, responses to a talk on issues relating to masculinity and gender with a group of men in a church context left me completely shaken up. In the last week of February 2013, I contracted a virus and was ill for two weeks.

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1 Elize Morkel is a practicing clinical psychologist in Somerset West, South Africa. She holds a doctorate of theology, specialising in pastoral theology and is part-time lecturer and research fellow of the Department of Practical Theology and Missiology at Stellenbosch University.



## A personal story via the “witness positions” grid

It was clear to me and everyone around me that my body was reacting to what I had been witnessing personally, professionally and publicly. In her book, *Common Shock – Witnessing Violence Every Day*, published in 2003, psychologist Kaethe Weingarten discusses people’s responses to witnessing the everyday incidents of violence and violations and its effect on their bodies. Weingarten developed a grid with four witnessing positions that arise from the intersection between two dimensions: awareness and empowerment (below).<sup>2</sup> Position 1 occurs when a person is an aware and empowered witness to violence or violation.<sup>3</sup> People’s position on the grid may shift as their awareness and the extent of their empowerment change over time, in different contexts and in the different roles they fulfil:

All of us, whichever role (victim, perpetrator, witness) we are currently in, can witness ourselves. We can become aware of what we see – witnessing ourselves as witnesses. We can become aware of what has happened to us – witnessing ourselves as victims. We can become aware of what we do to others – witnessing ourselves as perpetrators. More able to witness ourselves in each of these roles, we will be better able to witness others in each of these roles as well.<sup>4</sup>

### Witness positions

	Aware	Unaware
Empowered	1	2
Disempowered	3	4

<sup>2</sup> Weingarten, “Witnessing”; *Common Shock*; and “Reasonable Hope”.

<sup>3</sup> Weingarten, “Reasonable Hope”, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Weingarten, “Witnessing”, 26.

I find the grid above extremely useful in making sense of my experiences as a white Afrikaner woman and a member of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), as a person who has lived in apartheid South Africa for the first thirty-seven years of my life.<sup>5</sup> I have witnessed my own movement on this grid as I became more aware of the injustices of the apartheid system and its horrendous effects on the lives of millions of South Africans – both black and white. I have described its devastating effects on my faith, life and work when I became aware of the extent to which “my” people and “my” Church were responsible for justifying and supporting this evil system.<sup>6</sup> I had to face my own complicity and the many ways in which I had benefitted and still benefit from the injustices of apartheid. When I was confronted with (the consequences of) my disempowered position, I became physically and mentally ill, especially when I realised that my training in Western medical models, coupled with my sheltered and privileged life, did not adequately equip me to respond to the trauma experienced by the majority of people in our country. By developing a participatory praxis based on narrative therapy principles, I eventually moved to a more empowered position from where I am currently participating more effectively in a wider South African community.

I have also used the grid to witness my own life as a woman in the patriarchal context of the South African society in general and the DRC in particular. I have become aware of the complexity of being part of the oppressors as a white person, while simultaneously being part of the oppressed as a woman, realising that, compared to most black women, I am very privileged indeed. For the purpose of this essay, I will explore my personal experiences as a woman in the church in relation to the witness positions on the grid.

#### **Unaware and disempowered (Position 4)**

I am the eldest of the four children of a farmer. I knew that the birth of my brother, the third child, was of great significance since he would be the heir of the “family farm”; he would carry the “family name” and would ensure that the farm stays in the family. The photographs of three generations of landowners and their wives in the farm’s office depict this connection between male lineage and the land. Despite her yearning to teach, my mom had to give up her career as a teacher to become a farmer’s wife. As the only son in the family, my scholarly brother had to give up his dreams to study medicine, simply because he felt that he had no choice but to

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Morkel, *Pastoral Participation*.

<sup>6</sup> Morkel, “A Participatory Approach”; and Morkel, *Pastoral Participation*.

farm. At the same time, the need to attract a husband who would “look after me”, was impressed upon me from a very young age as the ultimate goal of womanhood – it was regarded a great tragedy that two of my aunts never married. The wedding pictures above my parents’ bed bear testimony to their three daughters’ success in this sphere.

I became a committed Christian at a young age and was very active in church and youth organisations, where I also served as a leader. I accepted unquestioningly that only men filled the pews of the church council, and that only men discussed important matters in church meetings, while women were to tend to the children and serve the tea. Despite its male dominance, I had no doubt that God had gifted me for and was calling me to the fulltime ordained ministry in the DRC. Rude was my awakening when, in my final year of school (1975), I had to face the fact that only men were ordained in the DRC. I vividly remember a conversation with a career counsellor where I sat and cried about the disempowered position I found myself in. I (uncritically) accepted and internalised the patriarchal culture of the church as a given. I even felt guilty for acting so “out of line” with my idea that God was calling me in a way similar to men. As a young person, I was unaware and disempowered at the bottom of the hierarchy, where children were taught to respect the authority of the church and its elders.

### **Unaware and empowered (Position 2)**

I was able to complete my university studies in psychology and education with success. During my student years, I remained very active in the church, and served in various leadership positions together with a large number of men who attended the Seminary. Since then, God truly blessed my career as a psychologist – I became a popular public speaker in our community, where I acted and spoke with the authority of a professional expert. However, in our personal lives, my husband Jaco and I were confronted with the problem of infertility. I struggled with my identity as a woman and with my relationship with God, who called me to be a wife and a mother, but now I found myself “not woman enough” to be a mother and “too much of a woman” to be ordained in the Church.

I increasingly experienced a deep sense of frustration in the Church where I always had to keep quiet and had to know my proper place, while men were taking important decisions and had plenty of opportunities to participate and develop their gifts. Yet, I kept on participating according to the rules and within the limitations prescribed by the church. I even used to give talks on marriage,

presenting people with a very patriarchal (and harmful, I now realise) blueprint of the roles of husbands and wives. While I was occupying position 2 on the witness position grid, being unaware and empowered, I was in an extremely dangerous position, as Weingarten observes:

Position Two may be the position that is most dangerous to others. People who witness violence and violation, who are oblivious about what they are witnessing, but nonetheless respond as if they know what they are doing, will be misguided. Their actions will be ineffective at best and harmful at worst. The negative impact of witnessing from this position may be far-reaching, particularly if the person witnessing occupies a position of power or is perceived as having power.<sup>7</sup>

### **Aware and disempowered (Position 3)**

My growing awareness of the implications of the social injustice of apartheid was further heightened through the political changes in South Africa during the early 1990s. I began to understand the way in which the DRC abused the Word of God to justify apartheid. I was filled with anger and despair because of the lies I had been fed all my life and the way in which I had swallowed these – largely because it suited me so well. Then, in the (re)structuring processes of our new democracy, my husband was retrenched, and I found myself having to juggle the responsibilities of supporting him in redirecting his career and caring for a young child (our adopted son), while managing a full-time psychology practice that was now to provide our family with financial stability.

Suddenly the “proper” gender roles that I previously subscribed to were turned upside down. In 1997, the year of my 40th birthday, I was diagnosed with a major depressive episode. I subsequently had to put my practice on hold and it took me two full years to recover. Mid-life reflections during this (forced) sabbatical led me to understand that my generation could no longer be passive, blame others, or look at our parents for acts of restitution for the mistakes of the past. “We” would have to read the Bible and be church in new ways. I experienced this period – of raising an awareness yet being disempowered to do what I knew I was called to do – as extremely disheartening, uncomfortable and undermining of my confidence and hope for the future.

Weingarten acknowledges that people often want to move back from this position to unawareness, which would cognitively be a numbing strategy.<sup>8</sup> She

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<sup>7</sup> Weingarten, “Reasonable Hope”, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Weingarten, “Reasonable Hope”, 12.

points out that true relief only comes when people are prepared to move into the aware and empowered position.

### **Aware and empowered (Position 1)**

During my sabbatical leave, I attended training sessions in Narrative Therapy – a healing approach that takes into account the broader socio-political context, its power relations and its effects on people’s lives and relationships.<sup>9</sup> In the process, I learnt more about how to approach communities in distress and how to combine therapy with a firm stance on social justice.<sup>10</sup> When I resumed my career as a psychologist, I worked from home in order to keep overhead costs low and to enable me to volunteer my services as a psychologist in poor communities for two days a week. This work became known to colleagues in psychology and pastoral therapy, who were keen to do similar work and I started offering them training and supervision.

When, in light of my training in Narrative Therapy, I became a supervisor for Master of Theology students in pastoral therapy, I was introduced to liberation and contextual theologies which yet again raised my awareness of social injustices. I, therefore, decided to enrol for the Master’s programme myself. During this time, the writings of feminist practical theologians marked another significant shift in my awareness and empowerment. I learnt that racism and sexism use similar methods to justify the domination of one group over the other. The more I grew in the understanding of the oppression that I have experienced as a woman, the more I became sensitised to the oppression of racism. Through my training work, I was able to develop a strong network of colleagues who shared my values. They served as an alternative faith community where I could practise and give voice to the ways in which I believed God was calling me.

My participation in the DRC, on the other hand, became increasingly problematic. Although the offices of the Church were all open to women by 1990, the clerical paradigm and hierarchical structures of the DRC made it almost impossible for ordinary members to utilise and develop their gifts. I declined opportunities to serve in offices because I knew that my theological views and the leadership style in the DRC would create tension and conflict. While my participation in formal church structures was marginal at that stage, my involvement in underprivileged communities, and with colleagues from other racial groups

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<sup>9</sup> White & Epston, *Narrative Means*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Waldegrave et al., *Just Therapy*.

expressed what I believed a church should actually be. In the process, I embraced the empowering knowledge that I was embodying the church wherever I participated in practices of healing and justice.

In 2004, my relationship with the Church changed drastically when my husband and I decided to move our membership to another congregation within the DRC – a painful step, for it was like leaving a beloved family. In the new congregation, the leadership honoured and embraced the gifts of ordinary members. The congregation was involved in outreach work on various levels of society, and I took the courageous step to serve as an elder in this community. Later I served as chairperson of the church council.

A turning-point in my participation in the wider DRC came in 2005, when I was invited to be a plenary speaker at a seminar attended by a large group of pastors and other leaders from a regional synod. I made a prophetic appeal regarding the importance of contextual listening from the side of the DRC, as the Church that was primarily responsible for the biblical and theological justification of apartheid. As a woman who had felt discredited, excluded and marginalised for so many years, claiming a public voice from within the DRC became a significant and healing event for me. More invitations to speak followed and then the Synod of the Western and Southern Cape decided in 2008 that they should have more women in leadership structures. In 2010, I was elected as a member of the DRC Moderature of the Regional Synod of the Western Cape, and in the same year, I became the representative of the latter synod at the General Synod. Now, in middle-age, I was granted the opportunity to serve God in the leadership of the DRC. My focus has now become that of an aware and empowered witness (of my own life as an Afrikaner), as I struggled together with “my” church and “my” people to deal with our racist and sexist past.

Feminist practical theologian, Denise Ackermann, asserts that “(t)he longing for changes that will mend the world, is born in awareness.”<sup>11</sup> She continues to say that

(t)he healing we require is one which combines both a rigorous accountability to our different communities and histories with a reaching across differences to “the other” seeking collaboration in the cause of healing, and being prepared to be vulnerable yet actively contributing and concerned citizens.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Ackermann, “A Voice was heard”, 90.

12 Ackermann, “A Voice was heard”, 91.

What Ackermann refers to as awareness, accountability and healing seem to be similar to the aware and empowered responses that Weingarten refers to.

### **My story through a critical lens**

I shall now use the critical lenses of contextual theology – especially feminist theology – as well as the poststructuralist theories offered by narrative therapy and feminist theory to reflect on my personal story. I believe that these are the lenses that may assist the church in becoming more aware and empowered regarding gender injustice.

Ackermann reminds us of how the outcries of prophets in the Old Testament and the stories of Jesus' life and ministry, as told in the New Testament, revolve around the themes of justice and love as God's intentions for the world. She points out how the analysis of one's social reality may be done through the recording and analysis of stories. She explains how women doing theology may (and should) allow their experiences and stories to engage critically with biblical and theological traditions. She concludes: "Out of experience and critical questioning the search for clues for transformation emerge that can translate into actions on behalf of healing and freedom."<sup>13</sup>

### **Patriarchy**

My story as the daughter of a farmer told above vividly illustrates the concept of patriarchy, which is a key category for social analysis in feminist theologies. Rosemary Radford Ruether describes patriarchal societies as "those in which the rule of the father is the basic principle of social organization of the family and of society as a whole."<sup>14</sup> The family pictures in my father's office depict the patriarchal system whereby male family members become the masters and owners of the land passed on from father to son. It is difficult not to see my brother's privileged position – as heir and owner of the farm where we all grew up as siblings, but from which my sisters and I have been marginalised and excluded – as a concrete confirmation of the superiority of sons (men) and the inferiority of daughters (women). However, we as his sisters find it difficult to talk about our sense of sadness and loss. We dare not speak about the injustice of significant financial benefits and opportunities that my brother enjoys for fear that it would be interpreted as greed or jealousy.

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<sup>13</sup> Ackermann, *After the Locusts*, xvi.

<sup>14</sup> Ruether, "Patriarchy", 173.

## Power and discourse

Referring to the relationship between discourse and power as described by Michel Foucault, Burr explains the kind of power that silences people.<sup>15</sup> For Foucault, “knowledge, the particular common-sense view of the world prevailing in a culture at any one time, is intimately bound up with power.”<sup>16</sup> A discourse provides a frame of reference from which to interpret the world to give it meaning.<sup>17</sup> Some discourses, however, have greater potential for enjoying “common-sense” or “truth” status in a given culture, which may marginalise other discourses at the time. In the farming community where I grew up, the patriarchal discourse on the ownership of land is such a dominant discourse, that my sisters and I were silenced or deeply frustrated when we tried to raise the injustice of the social practices associated with it.

Ruether further points out that, despite changes regarding women’s rights, patriarchal culture – particularly via religion – continues to reproduce the ideal (discourse) of the dependent housewife whose main work is in the home.<sup>18</sup> The idea of complementarity is partly based on obvious physiological differences between men and women, but is mainly based on traditions of biblical interpretation and on historically based Christian practice.<sup>19</sup> This has led to the assumption that the sexes are not whole without one another. Biblical claims that women and men were created to complement one another begin with the Genesis account of Creation. The argument for rigid complementarity is that woman is made from man, for man, after man and named by man, all of which are said to indicate her inferiority.<sup>20</sup> New Testament texts are abused as meaning that the submission of women to men is divinely ordained and that it is wrong for women to take leadership roles. Gelder explains how these texts have been used as proof texts for woman’s inferiority to man, justifying her position as a secondary or incomplete image of God.<sup>21</sup> She points out that, since these arguments have taken place in the context of patriarchy, a hermeneutics of suspicion towards the notions of female inferiority and rigid complementarity is necessary. In the process, many other dualisms have been set

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15 Burr, *An Introduction*, 62.

16 In Burr, *An Introduction*, 63.

17 Burr, *An Introduction*, 57.

18 Ruether, “Patriarchy”, 174.

19 Gelder, “Community”, 33.

20 Gelder, “Community”, 33.

21 Gelder, “Community”, 34.



up, resulting in the perception that male as “mind” is closer to God, and female as “body” is closer to the earth:

Rigid complementarity is a type of apartheid. It pays lip service to a form of equality between the sexes but sees nothing valuable in women beyond their difference from men. It is inextricably linked with false claims about inferiority of women. It works to prevent both women and men from developing full humanity and more perfectly imaging God.<sup>22</sup>

During my childhood, most Afrikaner women resigned themselves to patriarchal authority and domestic roles.<sup>23</sup> My mother’s function was a private one as mother to the children and head of the household. It was a role that denied her the opportunities to develop her many gifts (which were much better suited for public life) while she supported my father. The picture of my brother in the public space of the farm’s office signifies his calling as a man, while the bridal pictures of my sisters and me in the privacy of my parent’s bedroom signify the reaching of our destiny as women in the domestic sphere. I have thus struggled with my identity as a woman.

### **Social construction of identity**

Weedon discusses how poststructuralist theory provides a way of understanding the relationship between the individual and the social, the private and the public domains of life.<sup>24</sup> She explains that the social institutions we enter as individuals – family, school, university, church, and fashion culture – preexist us. We learn that the values and norms that they seek to maintain and the ways that they operate, are true, natural and good. This is how we learn, from an early age, what and how girls and boys – and later men and women – should be.

These ways of being an individual (subject positions) might not always be compatible and we learn that we can choose between them. Although a range of subject positions exist for women, all the possibilities nevertheless involve accepting, negotiating or rejecting what is constantly being offered to us as our primary role – that of wife and mother. In my family I have learnt that spinsterhood reflects failure and tragedy, while marriage and motherhood speak of fulfilment. Foucault’s ideas of self-surveillance in response to what is perceived to be “natural” in a society, would offer an explanation of how women internalise and act according to these

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<sup>22</sup> Gelder, “Community”, 34.

<sup>23</sup> Du Pisani, “Puritanism Transformed”, 164.

<sup>24</sup> Weedon, *Feminist Practice*, 3.

dominant discourses.<sup>25</sup> Isherwood and McEwan aptly describe the effect of these stereotypes as follows:

Sex-role stereotypes, sweetly smiling females neatly turned out and proportioned, ever submissive, docile, helpful, as if developed according to a formula, replicate the pattern of domination and subordination: if one sex is defined as being submissive, if stress is laid on this quality, then it follows that the other sex is rightfully dominant.<sup>26</sup>

Foucault regards power and resistance as two sides of the same coin.<sup>27</sup> The power implicit in one discourse is only apparent from the resistance implicit in another. This can be illustrated by the way in which both my parents supported and celebrated my gifts and talents, thereby providing me with an alternative subject position. This led to confusion at times, when I realised that to achieve and beat boys at public speaking is rewarded, yet it is also dangerous as it might make me less attractive as a woman. I sensed this same tension in my parents who expressed fear that I might not get married if I was “too career-orientated”, yet they both took my call to ordained ministry seriously and shared my pain at the injustice of exclusion from this calling by the patriarchal DRC.

In a patriarchal society, the Christian God is male, communicates with men first and men in their turn share the message from God with the community of believers.<sup>28</sup> I experienced overwhelming confirmation of this “truth” in church and at university as my male friends became increasingly educated as theologians while my voice as a theological agent was effectively marginalised in the process. The story of my calling to the ordained ministry soon became subjugated to what Laird describes as an “unstory” or a “story that is not there”.<sup>29</sup> The door is shut on an “unstory”, for it contains roles for women that clash with the proper roles dictated by dominant cultural discourses. I was coerced into accepting my “proper role” as one of following: a second choice career or fitting into life as a married woman whose husband’s career came first. It was when I struggled to fall pregnant that I got angry and confused about my worth and identity in relation to an “Almighty” God who had rejected my gifts for “his” church. Moreover, “he” had prescribed the role of wife and mother for me, but had then deprived me of the fulfilment of motherhood.

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25 In Burr, *An Introduction*, 67.

26 Isherwood & McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 24.

27 In Burr, *An Introduction*, 64.

28 Aguilar, “Ecclesiology/Models”, 43.

29 In Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman*, 57-58.

## Deconstruction

In poststructuralist theory, language is the common factor in the analysis of social organisation, social meanings and power, as well as individual consciousness.<sup>30</sup> Our subjectivity is constructed through language and is produced within a whole range of discursive practices, such as economic, social and political discourses. Experiencing myself as “the infertile woman” had devastating effects for my identity as a woman:

The prevailing assumption that motherhood and child-rearing bring women “natural fulfilment”, and by inference, that childless women are not quite what they should be, involves attributing particular social meaning and values to the physical capacity to bear children.<sup>31</sup>

Ironically, it was an experience in church that provided me with the opportunity to deconstruct the meaning of infertility. A minister, once preaching from John 15, said: “Wees vrugbaar!” (Be fruitful), and immediately I thought: “No, you don’t understand, I am infertile.” I then realised that I had huge potential to bear the kind of fruit that comes from abiding in God and loving others in the way that John 15 teaches. Referring to the work of Derrida, Sampson explains: “To deconstruct is to undo, not to destroy.”<sup>32</sup> Placing a term under erasure means to cross the word out, but to print both the word and its deletion. Putting “infertile” under erasure, I am able to understand that it is both necessary to hold it in order to acknowledge a painful part of my life and identity, while at the same time it is also an inaccurate description of my life and identity. This understanding gave me many alternative ways to live my life. My act of resistance to the pain, loss and helplessness of infertility was to focus on bearing fruit through living the marginal (paradoxical!) discourse of a married woman being a public figure in a successful career. Weedon points out what Foucault’s work offers feminists:

Although the subject in poststructuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available.<sup>33</sup>

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30 Weedon, *Feminist Practice*, 21.

31 Weedon, *Feminist Practice*, 130.

32 Sampson, “Foundations for a Textual Analysis”, 7.

33 Weedon, *Feminist Practice*, 125.

Patriarchy affects everyone in society.<sup>34</sup> Morrell describes the dominant discourse of being a white man during the apartheid era as “being a protector, a wage-earner and knowing the right thing to do.”<sup>35</sup> My father lived strictly according to these prescribed principles. For the thousands of white men who, like my husband, lost their jobs as a result of the transformation, restructuring and affirmative action in South Africa post 1994, it has been extremely difficult to lose the central part of their identities as “breadwinners” as prescribed by a patriarchal culture. I have indicated how my brother struggled with the conflict arising from his dream to be a medical doctor and the discourse on “the right thing to do”, which prescribed that he took up his role as heir and farmer at significant personal cost.

### **Becoming aware and empowered: a case example from the DRC**

South African feminist theologian Sarojini Nadar believes that every woman is called to the “fullness of life” as expressed in John 10:10, and concludes that one could question the spirituality of the church that denies the full humanity of women.<sup>36</sup> Colleagues often confront me with the suggestion: “If your church discriminates against you, leave it!” But this is not such a simple choice at all. Through my growing awareness of the powerful strand of prophetic, liberating thought within the Christian tradition and particularly in the Bible, I have come to understand that God is calling me to counter racist, discriminatory and patriarchal traditions and practices within the DRC – right in the midst of where the majority of my people, the white Afrikaners, still worship.

My doctoral research in practical theology includes various examples from my participation within the leadership of the DRC.<sup>37</sup> For the purpose of this essay, I shall focus on a short summary of the feedback about my participation in, and its effect as received from my colleagues in the Moderature of the Synod of the Western and Southern Cape. I hope to illustrate how the participation of politically aware women may serve to raise awareness and encourage empowered responses in relation to gender injustice in the church and society. I add two points of my own reflections on my participation in the Moderature at the time.

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34 Isherwood & McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 105.

35 Morrell, “Times of Change”, 17.

36 Nadar, “On Being the Pentecostal Church”, 361.

37 Morkel, Pastoral Participation.

## Prophetic stance

My colleagues emphasised that it was my prophetic stance and active, purposeful contributions that raised their awareness of patriarchal ideology and the way in which sexism, racism and homophobia are interrelated. They pointed out that not all women would be able to act as agents of transformation. They felt that my personal story, my professional experience and academic research added authority to my voice. This reminded of Isherwood and McEwan who articulate the position of women in analogous ways:

Women on the margins of the church assume the role of prophets. They protest against the injustices emanating from the pinnacle because, from their position outside the power arena, they see how inequalities affect those on the margin – and in the ultimate analysis those at the pinnacle as well. They have nothing to protect as participation as equals is denied them. To protest is a way to survive. To protest is the way to deal with the situation, forcefully but non-violently, peacefully to enter into dialogue and to learn to understand phobias and fears.<sup>38</sup>

For years, my position on the margins enabled me to see injustice more clearly. In fact, I had nothing to lose in protesting for survival. However, I had limited opportunities to enter into dialogue and to be heard within church structures. This changed (ironically) when I started to participate in the power structures of the church.

## Embodied presence

Our male colleagues experienced that the embodied presence of two women (myself and women minister Franziska Andrag-Meyer) in the male-dominated meetings brought greater awareness about the previous use of language and the assumptions on which arguments and perceptions were based. In this regard, Ackermann and Bons-Storm remind us that “the male” was the subject of modernity.<sup>39</sup> The male was also the subject of the clergy where a male clerical paradigm excluded women from being theological subjects and actors. The result was an androcentric focus and ethos where male experience was viewed as normative and female as “the other”.<sup>40</sup> This has serious implications for the church:

Hierarchies of power, a separation of the laity from the clergy, and preaching and teaching based on men’s experience and insights in the world, all give rise

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38 Isherwood & McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 17.

39 Ackermann & Bons-Storm, “Introduction”, 2.

40 Moore, *Introducing Feminist Perspectives*, 102.

to a clericalism which makes it difficult for the church to live out its prophetic calling.<sup>41</sup>

Ackermann proposes new models for church and ministry that will acknowledge differences, but at the same time be inclusive and sensitive to patterns of injustice and discrimination.

It is as an embodied participant within the power structures of the DRC that I experienced most profoundly the pain, discomfort and challenges which confront the church when engaging in efforts to include the marginalised and oppressed. When Franziska and I joined the leadership structures according to a quota system, we experienced a significant difference in power compared with the men. As women we found ourselves to be a very inexperienced minority who were not elected on an equal basis with the men. Carol Becker describes how women – though invited into leadership positions in the church – do not necessarily feel welcome there since these positions often remain fundamentally male-oriented.<sup>42</sup> I experienced enormous impotence, frustration, anger and despair at times. My experience in the church formed a particularly stark contrast to the level of participation, legitimacy, authority and congruency that I was used to within my profession as a psychologist. In hierarchical systems, the dominant group – white males, in the case of the DRC – is the norm. This eliminates diversity and instead supports sameness, uniformity and control.<sup>43</sup> In the process, women experience the “ungifting” of their gifts and of themselves as givers.<sup>44</sup>

### **Voicing injustices**

Some of my male colleagues reported that the voicing of “my prophetic stance” was most effective when engaging in “well-informed debate”, and when presenting training sessions or papers. I was heard most clearly when I fitted the white male paradigm of speaking with power and authority. For women, a part of speaking up means speaking in a language that men understand.<sup>45</sup> They also emphasised the importance of using my prophetic voice in a gracious, compassionate, respectful and sensitive way. Hardy and Laszloffy point out that most people find it painful and difficult to realise that they have unintentionally supported pro-racist (or patriarchal) ideologies which deeply challenge individuals’ preferred views of

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41 Ackermann, “Faith and Feminism”, 204.

42 Becker, *Leading Women*, 30.

43 Becker, *Leading Women*, 67.

44 Yocum in Becker, *Leading Women*, 68.

45 Becker, *Leading Women*, 169.

themselves.<sup>46</sup> The realisation can invite tremendous defensiveness and anxiety and, if sensitisation is not pursued in a thoughtful and gentle manner, it might even have the opposite effect.

Apart from structural power inequalities, patriarchal leadership models make participation difficult for women. I often felt like an “immigrant in a foreign land”,<sup>47</sup> where I did not understand the language or rules of the dominant culture. It was, therefore, in the context of meetings and discussions that it was most difficult to find the language and the courage to speak, especially about issues of justice. A number of my colleagues mentioned that their awareness was raised to the ways in which women’s voices had been silenced when these became discordant with the dominant discourse. This intolerance of the voices of others is reflected in the dismissal of critical voices, the denial of women’s experiences and the unwillingness to engage in critical self-reflection. There were many occasions when I experienced silencing, invisibility and a lack of emotional safety in meetings. I found this to be extremely oppressive, often leading to severe feelings of violation and rage. I frequently did not speak up in meetings, out of fear of what others might think of me, fear of conflict, or because I needed time for reflection to understand what it was that I was experiencing. At times I spoke up in a “raw voice”, the primitive, unrefined voice that is often the result of having been mute and evolving your own voice for the first time.<sup>48</sup> While speaking in and listening to a “raw voice” might be very uncomfortable, fear of using it promotes silence.

At such times of deep emotional turmoil and outrage, after meetings, there were always colleagues who were affirming my voice, willing to “listen me to speech”.<sup>49</sup> This would take place in private conversations following these meetings. I suspect that these “authentic conversations”<sup>50</sup> were (for us as conversation partners) some of the most valuable experiences in terms of raising our awareness of injustice. We learnt that becoming a mixed gender team required courage, time and patience.

Though celebration of difference is an appropriate part of conversation, authentic conversation is not a “tourist’s delight” where surface sharing takes place. Real conversation that highlights difference entails clash and conflict. When we

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46 Hardy & Laszloffy, “The Dynamics of Pro-Racist Ideology”, 233-234.

47 Becker, *Leading Women*, 95.

48 Cf. Hardy in Wyatt, “Diversity”, 5.

49 Morton in Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman*, 12.

50 Hess, “Becoming Mid-Wives to Justice”, 58.

“celebrate” differentness, we must be aware that the exhilaration that can come from engaging others is often on the other side of pain and struggle.<sup>51</sup>

Sharing and comparing my realities with Franziska and engaging in conversations with other women assisted in strengthening our authentic voices. Writing down my thoughts and reflections after meetings became a useful way to gain clarity, develop my voice, and assert my understandings. I spent hours and hours developing these documents. I often shared these with supportive colleagues who assisted me in finding ways to express my anger in respectful and gracious ways before sharing it in the wider group. Writing about being angry and merciful, Becker quotes Schaper’s suggestion that women should “require the church and society to repent of their sins against us as women, while standing ready to forgive and receive the transformation that it implies.”<sup>52</sup> Being open to forgive – while refusing to be abused again – we may find new ways to move forward as leaders.

### **Men listening to women**

Some of my male colleagues reported on their raised awareness and about the importance of men listening to women. The first requirement from men to change sexism within the church is to admit that it exists, and that it is subtle and insidious. While some men do not understand sexism at all, there are others who react swiftly and decisively: they want to hear all about it, fix it and move on in a typical male dominant style.<sup>53</sup>

I have, however, encountered a third group of men among my colleagues who display real courage. Upon hearing about gender discrimination and their participation in it, they pause and listen. It takes a lot of patience indeed. They are willing to look inward and to learn. I was often deeply touched by the effort from male colleagues to make time and provide safe spaces just by listening – without pretending to understand or know – and by accepting my experience as valid. I know that it has been very hard for them at times. Women have an advantage when listening is required. As women living in a male-dominated world we already know much about the world of men: we have been required to listen to them (particularly in the church) for most of our lives! For men, it is harder. Once men have started undertaking reflective tasks of looking inwardly and listening to women, they can start taking positive action.

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51 Hess, “Becoming Mid-Wives to Justice”, 58.

52 Becker, *Leading Women*, 173.

53 Becker, *Leading Women*, 149.



### **Men assisting women's participation**

In my relationship with the men in the Moderature, I encountered many of the actions that assist women's participation in church leadership as listed by Becker.<sup>54</sup> Male colleagues created an environment of safety for me to speak honestly when I most needed it. Their affirmation of my contributions and encouragement to voice my experiences assisted in increasing my confidence and the authority with which I was able to participate. These men were willing to share power with me by valuing my opinion and entrusting me with specific tasks. It was through men's advocacy for women's participation in leadership that I was co-opted in the first place, and through men's constant creation of an atmosphere of acceptance for women leaders that opportunities opened up and that my voice could be heard. I received consistent thoughtful and untiring mentoring from a number of my male colleagues. At times this implied sacrifices – like taking on more assignments in their already full schedules, or by going out of their way to be there and act as “cultural consultants” within the culture of male leadership. Their role was of utmost significance in helping me succeed in a culture where I was an “immigrant” or “alien”, so that they and others could learn from me.

### **Men teaching women to be direct and ambitious**

It was not until my participation in the leadership of the DRC that I became aware of the complexity of my own response to power and authority. As chairperson of a church council I became aware of my reluctance to claim authority. This resonates strongly with Becker's observation<sup>55</sup> that women have been oppressed and abused by power for so long that we almost automatically come to reject authority as a bad thing: I feared that through claiming (any) authority I might hurt others, or be abandoned. In the process, I learned that I personally prefer a collaborative leadership style. Another reason for not claiming power is the internalised oppression of sexism which constantly makes me doubt my own abilities and power – especially in the context of a church where I do not have the authority of an ordained minister. In many ways it is easier and safer not to claim authority, but to hide behind the men and get them to take care of difficult tasks. “Men can teach women to be direct and to be unapologetically ambitious”, according to Becker.<sup>56</sup> This requires women to speak in a frank and unapologetic manner, to take on

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54 Becker, *Leading Women*, 155-159.

55 Becker, *Leading Women*, 162.

56 Becker, *Leading Women*, 167.

tasks and to complete them well. It is through hard work and determination that women can manage to break through the glass ceiling in male-dominated contexts. This is as true in the secular world as it is in the church context.

## Conclusion

I conclude with two quotations from feminist and pro-feminist practical theologians which summarise two important points that this essay wishes to make – first, that gender inequality is constructed as a social hierarchy with devastating effects on the safety of women; and second, the importance of understanding the need for speaking out and the role of language in sustaining these hierarchical structures and the effects thereof on the mental health and identity of women.

As women have become *conscious* of themselves as an oppressed class [cf. Weingarten's concept of "awareness"], although experiencing different kinds of oppression from one another depending on race, economic status, sexual orientation, religion, and nationality, they *have challenged* both the liberal and conservative views [cf. Weingarten's concept of "empowerment"]. They reject the conservative view that gender inequality is God-ordained and that restoration of male dominance will decrease male violence. They also reject the liberal view that violence is caused by individual sinfulness. Violence is not evenly distributed within society as it would be if its basis were a fallen human nature. Rather, women and children, especially girl-children, experience violence out of proportion to their numbers.<sup>57</sup>

Chopp and Taylor describe how language impacts the lives (and health) of women:

Social structures create individual ills. And social structures are linguistic – they are created, sustained, and mediated through language. Oppression, then, is not simply a physical reality but a psychic reality, for one's perceptions of self and world are formed linguistically, and the language is received from the social reality within which one is embedded. When this language makes the male gender systemically normative, then women as the other gender are precisely that: other, outsiders, marginalized. In addition, insofar as the language pervades the culture, all of the institutions within that culture will reflect and perpetuate the normative and therefore privileged status of the male as over against the female. This pervasiveness not only includes the religious institutions within the culture; indeed, insofar as religious institutions are the culturally appointed conservers of value, these institutions become prime guardians of the patriarchal status quo.<sup>58</sup>

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57 Neuger & Poling, *The Care of Men*, 146 – emphasis added.

58 Chopp & Taylor, *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, 36–37.

I therefore challenge and urge the church in Africa in general and the DRC in particular to become (more) aware of its patriarchal structures and language, its devastating effects on both women and men in the church and in wider society, and to act as empowered agents of change in (Southern) African societies.

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### **Questions for further reflection**

- ♦ What are some of the hardships and inequalities that women suffer in your community and church? Could they be explained in terms of patriarchal structures and beliefs?
- ♦ Where would you plot yourself on the witness positions grid in terms of your awareness of gender injustice?
- ♦ What is the percentage of women participating in the leadership structures of your church and what is their experience and contribution?
- ♦ In which ways have you been challenged or encouraged through reading this essay?
- ♦ Can you think of possible empowered responses to support the dignity of women in your church and community?



## WOMEN AND THE CHURCH

A case study of the CCAP, Nkhoma Synod, Malawi

*Phoebe Chifungo*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in Malawi includes three synods: Blantyre in the South, Livingstonia in the North and Nkhoma Synod in central Malawi. Nkhoma Synod represents a major part of the Presbyterian tradition in Malawi and traces its roots back to missionary work by the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa that began in 1889. From one single congregation, the Church has grown to 156 congregations and over 2000 prayer houses.<sup>2</sup> Although women are very influential in the life of this Church, its leadership remains basically male and this forms the focus of this essay.

In Malawi, as in many parts of the world, women constitute the majority of the population, not only in society, but also in the church. In 2012, the National Statistics Office of Malawi reported that the population of Malawi numbered 14.8 million of which 7.1 million were men and 7.7 million were women.<sup>3</sup> A similar

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1 Dr Phoebe Chifungo is a teacher, preacher, missionary and Presbyterian advocate for the rights of women. She recently completed her doctoral studies in Practical Theology at Stellenbosch University. Her focus during these studies was the role of women in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod, Malawi.

2 Prayer houses are small praying stations which meet every Sunday for prayers, Sunday school and catechumen classes. A pastor visits them at particular times, especially for baptisms, Holy Communion, and sometimes to officiate at weddings or funerals. It operates under the main station (a congregation) where the minister is based and it reports all its activities to this main station.

3 National Statistics Office of Malawi, *Malawi Population Data Sheet*, 6.

picture presents itself in the CCAP, Nkhoma synod, for almost 70% are women. Women are also the most active single group of church members. Despite this, they are a much neglected group in the Church when it comes to leadership roles. Unlike in many parts of the Reformed world, the Synod is still debating whether it was correct to allow women to be ordained as elders and even deacons – the issue of women ministers is not even on the agenda yet! The Nkhoma Synod is also the only Presbyterian synod in Malawi that does not allow women as ministers.

Before the issue of women in church leadership is further pursued, a short overview of the history behind this sorry state of affairs will offer some necessary background to the current perspectives in the Nkhoma Synod.

### **The historical background to the position of women in central Malawi and the CCAP Nkhoma Synod**

As mentioned above, the Nkhoma Synod is situated in the central region of Malawi. The inhabitants of this region are predominantly from the Chewa ethnic group, which ironically was originally a matrilineal society. The women acted as mediums and had total control of the rain shrines (religion); they also enjoyed political leadership.<sup>4</sup> Chewa women were looked upon as the source of lineage and as such they were seen as sacred vessels of life that were responsible for the continuation of the community. This meant that the community's future and destiny were seen as dependent on them.<sup>5</sup> In the words of Longwe,

(f)ertility was therefore at the core of the Chewa female initiation rituals. As the custodians of the ancestral customs, the *anakungwi*<sup>6</sup> (counsellors of initiations) ensured that all necessary precautions were taken and taboos observed to ensure that nothing endangered the life of individuals and society.<sup>7</sup>

Over time, the matrilineal society was abandoned in favour of patrilineal and patriarchal type of leadership and society. Phiri mentions three factors that contributed to this, which she unabashedly calls the “destruction of the dignity of Chewa women”.<sup>8</sup>

4 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, rev. ed., 23. Isabel Phiri taught theology at University of Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa and currently works at the World Council of Reformed Churches in Geneva. She is a Malawian and a Chewa by tribe.

5 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, rev. ed., 36.

6 “Anakungwi” are elderly women in the village who provide traditional counselling and initiation rituals to the young girls. They are also the custodians of the Chewa belief system and culture.

7 Longwe, *Growing Up*, 19.

8 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, rev. ed., 36ff.

The first one was the introduction of slave trade in 1810 whereby men preferred to marry slave women who were more submissive to their husbands rather than free Chewa women, who were not as subordinate. In order to secure husbands or to ensure the survival of their marriages, Chewa women began to emulate the submissiveness of “slave wives”. This inevitably meant that husbands became more powerful at the expense of their wives.

Second, the matrilineal system also went into decline because of increased foreign influence of other patriarchal societies. Groups like the Swahili from the east coast of Africa, the Chikunda from Mozambique and the Ngoni from South Africa settled among the Chewa of Dedza, Dowa and Nkhotakota after defeating them and the Chewa began to adopt the patriarchal marriage system of the conquerors.

The final contributing factor to the decline of the matrilineal system was the arrival of the missionaries in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. The historical background of Nkhoma Synod shows the absence or shortage of women in leadership positions. As indicated earlier, when Christianity came to Africa, it came as a male-dominated religion. According to Phiri, these missionaries imposed their own views on women by maintaining a patriarchal theology which has pushed women away from leadership positions.<sup>9</sup> The wives of the missionaries themselves were very much to the background, reduced to teaching girls and women how to read and write, home crafts and did some charity work. This “mother church” (the DRC in South Africa) itself only allowed women deacons in 1982 and elders in 1990. Early missionaries ignored the long tradition of female-led traditional cults. The missionaries refused to recognise that in the Chewa context it was often the women who took on leadership roles in religious matters.<sup>10</sup> The missionaries were confident that their views were biblically legitimate and they based these in particular on their understanding of Genesis and the Pauline Epistles.<sup>11</sup>

The above-mentioned religious views also affected the education of African girls in Nkhoma Synod – for a long time they only made Standard Three (five years of schooling). Phiri quotes one missionary, a certain Retief, as having said that,

(W)omen have the shaping and training of the next generation to a great degree in their hands, and they have great influence over their husbands, either for good or for evil. If a Christian native should marry a pagan woman, then it is practically certain that he will revert to paganism. On the other hand, Christian wives, generally speaking, are a very great help and encouragement to their husbands

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9 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, 43.

10 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, rev. ed., 23.

11 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, 49.



in their Christian lives. It is particularly necessary that teachers, evangelists, native preachers and members of the church council and Presbytery should have wives who are Christians.<sup>12</sup>

Phiri interprets Retief's words to mean that mission provided women and girls just enough education to be good wives and not to become economically independent.<sup>13</sup> Phiri believes that the type of education given to girls was to prepare them for home management.<sup>14</sup> This still has implications for today. One man in the Synod states: "In fact when the missionaries came they showed it very clearly to us that women should not hold positions of leadership; therefore, the Synod is only following that example."<sup>15</sup> The missionaries introduced Christianity which was then still very much a male-dominated religion. Anything incompatible with this perspective was crushed. Koevering<sup>16</sup> is quite blunt in calling the missionaries' perspective representative of the arrogant and power-hungry, convinced of the innate superiority of the white man [sic!], views that characterised the age of imperialism. And, since the arrival of the missionaries in the region of the later Nkhoma Synod, this stand of male domination in the Church has been maintained. This, despite the fact that women are not only by far the majority of members of the Church, but they are also by far the most active in Bible study groups, prayer meetings and the Church's charity work, and the ones most committed to the maintenance of Sunday school.<sup>17</sup>

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12 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, 47.

13 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, 48, 53.

14 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, 53.

15 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, rev. ed., 109-110.

16 Koevering, *Dancing Their Dreams*, 28.

17 Nkhoma Synod, Malongosledwe, 2. This can be seen, especially with regard to the work of *Chigwirizano Cha Amai* (the Synod's Women's Guild). According to Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, 71ff., the impact of *Chigwirizano Cha Amai*, founded in 1940, can hardly be overestimated. This includes its spiritual impact by way of evangelisation efforts (Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, 107) and their efforts at strengthening the spiritual and devotional lives of women (e.g., by way of bi-monthly meetings, annual conferences (80), organising revival meetings and door-to-door witnessing (80-81). Kawale, "The Role of Women", 213, writes: "Apart from sharing testimonies in their monthly and annual meetings, women go from door to door evangelizing the people in their neighborhood where they speak to both men and women." And regarding revival meetings, Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, 80-81, remarks that "(o)originally they were organized by *Chigwirizano* women at presbytery level who invited a number of ministers to preach. It is only in the late eighties that the synod gave permission to women to organize revival meetings and choose speakers among themselves." It has now become part of *Chigwirizano*'s programme in almost every congregation to hold these revival meetings once a year. It is thus little wonder that Kawale, "The Role of Women", 213, asserts that "(t)he church in Nkhoma Synod is growing and remains very strong because the women in their evangelistic outreach have helped many Christians to

It seems very unfortunate that the Nkhoma Synod seems to be losing out on the potential contributions of women in its leadership structures. Especially because women's leadership, according to Willhauck and Thorpe,<sup>18</sup> is characterised by the embracing of diversity; it is process-oriented, focuses on the bigger picture and shares information in a participatory way with a special concern for human relationships. No wonder Bishop Montefiore<sup>19</sup> already asserted decades ago that by leaving women outside of the priestly ministry of the Anglican Church, the latter deprives itself of resources for a deeply significant pastoral wisdom.

With such a wonderful evidence of the activity of women in Nkhoma Synod, one may legitimately ask why they are then not allowed to hold leadership positions outside the women's ministry of this Church. Even more importantly: What may be the biblical or theological grounds for maintaining this state of affairs?

### **The theological arguments for the absence or shortage of women in leadership roles**

From a Christian perspective, the main question that needs to be answered is: Is the exclusion of women from the majority of leadership positions in the Nkhoma Synod biblically justifiable? And rightly, from the beginning, the debate about the leadership of women in the Nkhoma Synod concerned issues of biblical interpretation. Phiri<sup>20</sup> offers an account of the debates in September 1966 when a question was first raised at synodical level on whether women should be allowed to attend theological colleges and whether they may be ordained. The issue was referred for further investigation and a year later the Synod's representative on the

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keep their faith." The guild also has a physical impact. Besides moral and psychological support to the community, they also offer material/physical support to all other classes of disadvantaged people in their communities. This is seen in their efforts to teach women business administration skills, how to start small-scale income-generating businesses and how to solicit funding for these ventures. This is also seen in the guild's efforts at teaching women regarding HIV and AIDS and other health issues. The guild is also involved in community development projects – they have financed the building of conference centres and kitchens – the conference Centre at Kanin'ga is also used by the youth, church elders and even the Synod. The Msonkhamanja kitchen also caters for church and youth activities. The guild even constructed houses in both Nkhoma and Lilongwe for Synod employees; it owns and runs a maize mill in Lilongwe and takes care of many orphans, widows and people with disabilities.

18 Willhauck & Thorpe, *The Web of Women's Leadership*, 95-96.

19 Montefiore, *Yes to Woman Priests*, 15.

20 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, 50.

Theological College Board<sup>21</sup> tabled a report to Synod in which the former agreed that female students may be admitted but *only* where the sending synod had some special ministry in mind for them, e.g., a specific “women’s work”, but not with a view to ordination.<sup>22</sup> The minutes of the Synodical Committee meetings (S. 4066) which took place in 1972 and 1975 both show that the Synod’s argument against women’s ordination was biblically motivated. It was especially 1 Corinthians 14: 34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:9–15 that were quoted as evidence of this. Views such as these – smacking of what Becker calls “patriarchal notions of the supremacy of the male”<sup>23</sup> – led to many women worldwide describing their denominations as hierarchical, male-dominated and oppressive. According to Ponce, these fundamentalists [sic] (whose interpretation of Scripture does not allow for the ordination of women), describe women as people of a secondary status, being created after man which makes her submission to man divinely instituted, unconditional and non-negotiable.<sup>24</sup> Hence it follows that they may also not be ordained as ministers and in this way rule over men.

The use of the Bible as in the case of the Nkhoma Synod seems to be at the centre of the problem, especially their understanding of specific Pauline passages.<sup>25</sup> According to Moloney, however, “(w)hat must stand at the heart of the Pauline discussion is his overarching theology of the Christian life as being a life ‘in Christ’ which ... is found in Gal 3:27–28: [where] there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, many pastors and leaders in the Nkhoma Synod do not

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21 This board includes three Synods (Livingstonia, Nkhoma and Blantyre) who were sending their students to Zomba Theological College. It was responsible for the running and welfare of the College.

22 Minute S.238.

23 Becker, *Leading Women*, 30.

24 Ponce, “The Ordination of Women”, 137–138.

25 Space does not allow for any detailed alternative interpretation of the notorious 1 Corinthians 14: 34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:9–15; however, these texts have been authoritatively interpreted in a multidimensional way, offering a much more nuanced understanding of the text which is much less threatening to women and which is sensitive to the epistles’ original cultural context and rhetorical intent (as opposed to a one-dimensional way which takes the texts at face value and ignore the latter considerations). See, e.g., Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*; Mouton, “Human Dignity”; Hultgren, *1-2 Timothy, Titus*; Mouton & Van Wolde, “New Life”; Elna Mouton, “Reading a Pastoral ‘Text of Terror’”; Lea & Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*; Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*; West, “Taming Texts of Terror”; Kroeger & Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman*.

26 Moloney, *Woman in the New Testament*, 28.

seem to agree and refused and still refuse to use Moloney's suggestion as a lens through which to view other (less positive) Pauline utterances regarding women.

### **Cultural reasons for the absence or shortage of women in leadership roles**

With regard to the issue of the leadership of women in the church, some ministers, elders and deacons have in the history of the Nkhoma Synod also taken the point of view that what prohibits the ordination of women are not only scriptural arguments, but also cultural ones, and among these the following especially pertinent arguments will now be discussed.

#### **Women are a source of evil**

In Chewa culture (which is the culture of most of the Nkhoma Synod's members), it is often believed that women are a source of evil (an idea which the biblical creation narratives of Eve leading Adam into sin only added to). Ponce calls this "the sexist myth", according to which women are "by nature" seductive and should not unnecessarily come in contact with men because they might lead them to sin.<sup>27</sup> For this reason, women and girls also sit separate from men at gatherings (including political meetings, chiefs' meetings, meal times, etc.). What is even worse is that this is also practised in the churches themselves. Among the 156 congregations of Nkhoma Synod, only two (urban congregations in Lilongwe) have seating arrangements that allow couples or people of the opposite sex to sit together. The reason behind this separation is that women with their "seductive nature" may disturb men when the Word of God is preached.

According to Phiri, the situation is only exacerbated by rumours, such as those spread about "(a) woman from one synod [who] ... started working at the synod's office and twice got involved in relationships with married ministers working with her."<sup>28</sup> In this way, women are regarded as sources of sexual danger to men, and heaven forbid that they should, as part of their pastoral duties, minister to men. Phiri tells of cases where men objected even to the idea of a female minister accompanying a married male elder and sharing a car when going on visitations or to meetings.<sup>29</sup>

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27 Ponce, "The Ordination of Women", 140.

28 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, rev. ed., 110.

29 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, rev. ed., 113. Interestingly enough, in April 1999, the Synod used exactly this argument of travelling to meetings with women as one of its reasons for rejecting a

### **Women are unreliable**

According to Ponce, “(t)here are religious people who emphasize the necessity to maintain severe discretion in pastoral secrets, and they argue that a woman pastor would not be able to maintain such a silence.”<sup>30</sup> Similar opinions also exist in the Nkhoma Synod.

### **Women are volatile**

Chewa culture sees women not only as fragile, but also as volatile. Phiri quotes one man in the Synod of saying that, “(w)omen lose their tempers quickly [and] church leadership positions require patience. Women do not have patience.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Women are child bearers and home makers**

The traditional roles of women have also contributed to the rejection of women as leaders in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod. Some men feel that women cannot be leaders because if they are married their responsibilities towards their husbands and children do not allow them to fulfil the demanding role of a minister. Phiri also refers to the opinion some men have that women in ministry will then have two occupations: taking care of the home as well as taking care of one or two congregations.<sup>32</sup> This, it is felt, would be too much work for them, especially should they fall pregnant.

Ironically, as Phiri mentions, one of the agenda points of the Nkhoma Synod during the time of missionaries was to free women from dehumanising cultural practices.<sup>33</sup> By continuing to deprive women from leadership, however, they are simply subjected to another form of dehumanisation.

### **A positive change of leadership roles in the CCAP Nkhoma Synod**

Little by little, things have started to change for the better. In 2007, the Synod decided that women should be allowed to preach during church service (S. 4144). Before this, they were only allowed to preach to other women. This was the beginning of more breakthroughs which met with a lot of resistance. Some men

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proposal to allow women in positions of leadership in the church, Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, rev. ed., 114.

30 Ponce, “The Ordination of Women”, 140.

31 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, rev. ed., 111.

32 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, 113.

33 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism*, 43.

even went on to say that they will march out of church when a women steps onto the pulpit.

The 2009 decision, which allowed women to be church elders and deacons was also not received positively by many ministers and male church elders. They disputed the Synod's decision on radio, in newspapers and on the internet. A major conflict even arose in one urban congregation where the minister and some church elders agreed to disregard the synodical decision of electing women as church elders. To their surprise, for the first time in the history of this church, the whole congregation decided to resist their decision.

During the synodical meeting of 2011, some members tried their best to force a withdrawal of the 2009 decision. Again, to their surprise, the meeting confirmed that women should continue to hold leadership positions until the next synodical meeting in 2013 when they would evaluate their performance.

In the end, the acceptance of women into some leadership positions was less on theological grounds than pragmatic ones. The simple fact was that there were few men, let alone ministers, available for preaching during mid-week services in prayer houses. Due to this, the Synod agreed to allow women to start preaching as one way of addressing this problem. So, when the debate of ordaining women as deacons and elders was raised in 2009, some used the earlier allowing of women to preach as a stepping stone in that direction. And since, according to one of the delegates at the Synod, the preaching of the Word is more important than being a deacon or elder in the Reformed tradition, it follows that as women are already allowed to preach, they may also become deacons and elders. The decision was therefore taken to allow women into these positions.

In the wake of the 2009 decision there were still those who wished for its reversal – some did so at the 2011 Synod. Given the fact that there still was no unanimous acceptance of the 2009 decision among some leaders of the Church, the issue of ordaining women as ministers remains a non-starter because the Synod is still debating whether the 2009 decision should be upheld or reversed. A hot debate again raged during the 2011 synodical meeting where some ministers and elders wanted the Synod to revisit its decision of women leadership. The issue has been sent back to the presbyteries who will decide on the blessing or the fate of women. It is at the moment too early to tackle the issue of women becoming ministers, but the same biblical and cultural reasons will no doubt be given. They quote the same passages of 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 and 2 Timothy 2:11-13 and see the issue of the ordination of women as an abomination.

## Conclusion

The research has shown that the CCAP Nkhoma Synod (especially men leaders) has used the historical and cultural background together with some biblical verses to fight against the leadership of women. In fact, Phiri says that when the Synod denies leadership roles in the church to women, what they are saying to them is that “they are not of the right gender to be used by God in that capacity.”<sup>34</sup> The essay shows that in 2007 a door was opened for women to start preaching in church services and another door was opened even wider in 2009 when women were allowed to become elders and deacons. I strongly believe that Nkhoma Synod should be in a position to move towards gender equality in its approach to women leadership. In terms of their cultural and historical argument, I believe the Synod is able to see and read that with the passing of time things have tremendously changed. Back home, where the early missionaries came from, people have adopted inclusive leadership which has seen women becoming not only church elders but also ministers. This defeats the whole historical argument. As for the cultural argument, the nation already had its first woman president, women cabinet ministers, women members of parliament and women chiefs. Nkhoma Synod stands in the Reformed tradition. Being a Reformed denomination means it should be ready and open to change under the direction of the Holy Spirit. May the Spirit guide it on its journey towards the ordination of women as ministers.

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### **Questions for further reflection**

- ♦ Discuss your local synod's views on women as ministers, and give your personal views on this matter, including theological arguments.
- ♦ Do you personally know of women leaders in the church who have suffered from discrimination? Tell their stories.
- ♦ How do the women in your own congregation organise themselves?
- ♦ Give some suggestions on how the church can contribute to the education of young women who are called to serve as leaders in the church.

## CHALLENGING GENDER PREJUDICE AMONGST CHURCH YOUTH

The case of the Dutch Reformed Church in Nigeria

*Dorcas Weor and Agnes Ntanyi*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In recent times, scholars worldwide have become increasingly conscious of gender discrimination to the extent that much research is currently aimed at investigating gender inequality. According to Nigerian scholar Okpeh O. Okpeh, gender studies have become so central in contemporary research that almost every discipline feels the need to show its significance for and relevance to the subject.<sup>2</sup> Okpeh also observes in his essay that the increased interest in gender studies has in some cases already brought about changes in gender roles, but that these changes have not always been unchallenged. This essay will give an overview of the state and challenges faced by the youth (especially girls) in Africa, and Nigeria in particular. Moving from the extreme of street children to gendered roles of youth in Nigeria in general to the gendered roles of the youth in church life in Nigeria, the essay ends with reference to research done among the youth in the Universal Reformed Christian Church on the experiences of gender and involvement of young people themselves in the church.

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1 Dorcas Weor is a lecturer at the College of Agriculture, Yandev, Benue State, Nigeria. She currently works towards her PhD on gender and performance in Agricultural Science. Dorcas is a member and former leader of her church's Women's Fellowship. She is also a catechist, and a Child Evangelism Fellowship-trained evangelist. Agnes Ntanyi is an ordained Ruling Elder of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, Ikeja Parish. She is a seasoned evangelist, the convener of her church's Evangelism Committee and coordinator of its basic training for commissioned lay preachers that focuses on the work of the laity with regard to church planting in the Presbyterian Synod of the West.

2 Cf. Okpeh, "Perspectives on Gender Relations".

## What is and who are “(the) youth”?

Arguably, the most fascinating and exciting stage in human life is youth. During this stage, human beings often discover, develop and pursue their unique capabilities, interests and talents. As is true of all stages of life, but perhaps especially of youth, it reveals much of the beauty of human life: energy and agility, intelligence, enthusiasm and healthy curiosity. And, of course, like other people, young people may live lives according to God’s purpose and will for them; in other words, lives of dignity. They may, however, also choose to or be forced to live lives devoid of dignity. The youth undeniably often have the passion, commitment and energy to bring about social, political, economic and religious change for the better, but alas also for the worse.

According to Wyn and White, the term “youth” should be seen as an age-related process, rather than a group of people sharing a certain set of characteristics. In other words, the focus should not fall on the inherent characteristics of young people themselves, but on the construction of what constitutes “the youth” through social processes – including agents such as schools, family and labour market.<sup>3</sup> “Age”, according to these authors, refers to a biological reality and its social meaning has to do with cultural understandings of life stages, processes of growing up and ageing. In this way, the concept of youth should be broad and without a clearly demarcated beginning or end in terms of age. Usually, however, “the youth” is mostly thought of in categories pertaining to age, as is clear, for example, in the Nigerian government’s presidential broadcast marking the 1999 Youth Day. In his address, Nigerian President at that time, Olusegun Obasanjo expressly referred to youths as males and females between the ages of twelve and forty.<sup>4</sup> Despite the above-mentioned shortcomings of such clear age parameters, these ages have been chosen for the purpose of formulating clear sampling criteria in the data collection process of this study.

## Nigerian youth: A lost generation? Nigerian girls: A social underclass?

Young people in the developing world have been the subject of much research in recent times and the picture does not look good.<sup>5</sup> An extreme example of this

3 Wyn & White, “The Concept of Youth”, 8-12.

4 This address is referred to in Uchendu, “Masculinity and Nigerian Youths”, 279.

5 Research conducted on youths include studies on youth development; rural youth programmes for the development of life skills; masculinity and gender expressions at Nigerian universities and cognitive adjustment studies among teenagers in Nigeria.

globally, but especially in Africa, is linked to rapid urbanisation.<sup>6</sup> This has led to the youth in Nigeria sometimes being called a lost generation, specifically in the context of the growth in numbers of so-called “street children” associated with urbanisation. According to UNESCO, there are currently about 150 million street children worldwide, and

... (c) hased from home by violence, drug and alcohol abuse, the death of a parent, family breakdown, war, natural disaster or simply socio-economic collapse, many destitute children are forced to eke out a living on the streets, scavenging, begging, hawking in the slums and polluted cities of the developing world.<sup>7</sup>

In most developing nations, young people turn to the streets mainly due to poverty.<sup>8</sup> They engage in any kind of job and even criminal activities to earn a living. In Nigeria, these jobs and activities may include acting as garage boys,<sup>9</sup> drug pushers, cult boys and girls,<sup>10</sup> and include robbery, rape or other forms of criminality.

From the above-mentioned scenario, it is quite clear that many young people are marginalised and are therefore sometimes referred to as “a lost generation”, “anti-socials”, et cetera.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, gender discrimination is also suffered by female street children, but unfortunately it is a reality faced by many or most girls across the board in Nigerian society. Gender discrimination starts at the family level as soon as a child is born. The response shown by family members when a boy child is born is quite different from that of a girl child. Right from birth the girl child is subjected to conditions promoting low self-esteem and later on an inferiority complex. This

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6 Cf. African Development Bank Group, “Urbanization in Africa”.

7 UNESCO, “Street Children”. There are no known statistics for street children in Nigeria. One study, however, suggests that in Lagos in the early 1990s there were about 8000 of them, Faloore Olutola Omiyinka, “Social networks”, 83. In 2005, UNICEF 2005 reported that over 7.3 Million Nigerian children of school age were not in schools. And this subsequently led to spiralling proportions of “street urchins” in the major towns and cities of Nigeria. Another important source of street children are children who have lost one or both parents to AIDS and currently estimated at 700,000 – Fakoya, “The Street Children of Nigeria”.

8 Cf. Okpukpara & Odurukwe, Incidence and Determinants.

9 “Garage boys” work in the motor parks, in some cases they spend their nights in parked vehicles. In day time they wash windshields of vehicles in heavy traffic, sell packaged water or steal money or other goods, beg for food and money, etc.

10 These are boys and girls who become involved in cultic activities and undergo violent initiation rites into secret societies. Often identified by tattoos, many of these societies practise dark arts, produce charms for protection, take hard drugs, etc.

11 Cf. Ann Oakaly, quoted in Adenigbagbe, “Gender Disparity in Education”, 22-23.

invariably constitutes hindrances in making vital lifelong decisions such as career choice and the task of contributing to the development of the nation.<sup>12</sup>

According to Uchendu,<sup>13</sup> Nigerian culture in general affords men more power and status than women. Men are placed above women and have privileges accrued to them in most spheres of life. A male youth expressed the association of masculinity with superiority in the following words:

Men are presented as the first in everything even when they are not. They are the king and they are the head. They lead in every matter whether they can take decisions that would be of importance to the society or not. They are made more important than women.<sup>14</sup>

Like other members of society, the roles of youths are also defined by the society. Any youth contravening the set rules will usually face the consequences.<sup>15</sup> Adherence to cultural norms and societal values is rewarded with achievement or success and satisfaction in life.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, youths are expected to emulate adults based on societal norms, including gender-based issues.

Girls aged between ten and eighteen years often serve as domestic workers who are paid wages in the household of the rich and educated in township areas. Some of them work without pay, receiving only food and lodging in return. These girls engage in all kinds of household chores and even street vending, farming or minding shops on behalf of their employers.<sup>17</sup> More girls than boys are found involved in domestic work as house helps. This is because in the rural areas with a high predominance of illiterate parents, boys are often regarded to be more valuable than girls. They easily part with their daughters for the purpose of house-help employment.<sup>18</sup>

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12 N. C. Ugwuebulam in Adenigbagbe “Gender Disparity in Education”, 25.

13 Uchendu, “Masculinity and Nigerian Youths”, 281.

14 Uchendu, “Masculinity and Nigerian Youths”, 281.

15 Parents may disown them, they may be denied the privilege of going to a good school, may be flogged at each instant, or denied food. Some parents sometimes hand over their problem youths to homes for physical torture. Curses are also placed on them like: “You will not prosper in life, you will be childless,” etc. The conditions are not different for girls, but this depends on the offence and the cultural setting.

16 For boys – a responsible wife and children, success in education, business, blessings and love from family members and society in general, wealth, etc. For girls – happily married life, fertility, love from the husband, family members and society and blessings.

17 Iwuchukwu, “A Comparative Analysis”, 44.

18 Iwuchukwu, “A Comparative Analysis”, 44.

It is also a fact that the majority of the house helps in Nigeria do not have the opportunity to go to school.<sup>19</sup> In some areas, fortunately, encouraging signs are found that things may be different. In Benue state, for example, some rural illiterate parents are becoming aware of the value of education for girls. Therefore, when they give out their daughters as house helps, they insist that their employers should send them to school. A challenge remains, however, because these girls are overworked and do not find enough time for school. Most of them are sent to evening schools, and in most cases they end up returning to their homes in the village or eloping with young men. Such young men may be school dropouts, motorcycle hirers<sup>20</sup> or just street boys.

In some instances, house helps become victims of sexual abuse in the hands of the male employer. This may lead to unwanted pregnancies, abortions and even death of these house helps. House helps found in this situation become stigmatised if the case becomes known by their fellow females and male youths. Their female employers may maltreat them and send them out of the house into the streets. If they are church members, the employer and the girl may be excluded from Holy Communion or other church activities. The sad fact is that this is true even for girls who were the innocent party to these events, and the case may even be overlooked if the family involved is well-to-do or influential. Outside of the church it may be overlooked or settled at family level, following the rules or customs of the people.

The relationship between house helps and their employers have several economic and social advantages if both parties are treated with dignity and respect. In fact, in some cases this may be described as a beneficial symbiotic relationship.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, it may be an expression of the intention of the Nigerian Constitution of 1999 (IV.34.1) which makes provision for the right to dignity of a human person and forbids inhumane or degrading treatment of a person, holding someone in servitude, or in forced or compulsory labour. Despite the praiseworthy ideals of the constitution, many people still practise things such as child labour, and many Nigerian youths continue to grow up without having experienced a culture of kindness.

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19 The information in the paragraph became available through observation and personal interaction with people in Benue, Nigeria.

20 Those who convey passengers from one place to another on motorcycle.

21 Iwuchkwu, "A comparative analysis", 45.

## **The youth and gender equality in Nigerian churches: the case of the URCC**

Of course, Christian theologians have also participated and still participate in the discourses on gender and engage in the challenge of gender inequality in its many forms; they do so from the perspective of their different theological disciplines. Many of them, however, also note that, especially in Africa, gender issues have not been or are not sufficiently addressed in churches and seminaries by pastors, evangelists, preachers or teachers of the Christian religion.<sup>22</sup> It seems as though many African seminaries and churches do not yet see gender inequity as a problem at all – least of all as a problem on biblical grounds.

Although this is not the case in all African churches and seminaries, where gender equality issues have been increasingly addressed in the recent past, the story is quite different in Nigeria, specifically in the Universal Reformed Christian Church (URCC), with its headquarters in Mkar-Gboko in Benue State and its seminary, the Reformed Theological Seminary (in Mkar). The research for this essay has been conducted there. The foundation of the Dutch Reformed Church of Nigeria amongst the Tiv people was in 1911 in what is today Benue State. This Church was the forerunner of the URCC and was established by missionaries from South Africa. Due to the political situation in South Africa, the South African missionaries were no longer tolerated in Nigeria and had to leave in 1960. From then on, the Christian Reformed Church of North America supported it until about 1985. In 1957, the Church was formally established as an autonomous, self-supporting, and self-propagating church with its first four indigenous (Nigerian) pastors. The missionaries' position regarding gender equality – or rather the lack of it – has remained mostly unchanged and mostly unchallenged. The exclusion of women from major church functions has always been the order of the day in the URCC. Women are still prohibited from holding leadership positions in the church, from preaching in any meeting that includes men, from teaching in seminaries (in the case of the Reformed Theological Seminary), and even from studying theology. Women are allowed to study theology in other institutions and at Bible colleges in order to give religious education in secular schools, but not with a view to the ordained ministry or to teaching in theological colleges or seminaries. As a result, any female member of URCC wishing to study theology will also never

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<sup>22</sup> The extent to which this is still the case can be seen in the NetACT publication by Hendriks et al., *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew?*

procure sponsorship or be given the necessary recommendation for application to its seminary.

On the whole, perceptions on gender and practices regarding gender found in the Church are not different from those found in Tiv culture in general. A special cause for concern, however, is that pastors, evangelists, preachers and teachers within the Church often legitimise their teaching, preaching and behaviour with regard to gender, based on the Bible. As such, it also perpetuates what the first missionaries taught and practised a century ago. Women are limited in their service to God; they are regarded as weak and not qualified to serve God in the ways that men do and do not get the opportunity to obtain these qualifications.<sup>23</sup> It seems that in the URCC at least, since its foundation, women remained a disadvantaged group and are set to remain so. In the rest of this essay, the question will be asked whether the marginalised position of women and the privileged position of men in the URCC is also reflected in the experiences of the youth in the church; whether this situation perpetuates this unfortunate state of affairs, and if so, how this may be addressed, amongst others, on biblical grounds. To better understand and to gain some insight into the gender dynamics in churches, research has been done in two Reformed churches with a view to this essay, namely URCC and the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria (PCN). In the section below, some of the stories told by these women are retold, followed by interpreted data from interviews with URCC women and questionnaires completed by URCC male and female youths.

## **Experiences of inequality in the lives of women in the URCC and PCN**

### **Some stories from URCC and PCN women**

The experiences of youths hitherto described are of those outside the church. One may ask: Is gender discrimination, if it exists, properly taken care of by and in the church? In order to get some answers to this question, interviews were conducted with girls and young women. They were also asked to complete a questionnaire. The following are examples of the stories of women and children that came to light during the interviews.

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<sup>23</sup> One of the reasons why women are disregarded in our Church is not different from what Elna Mouton said in "Reading a Pastoral 'Text of Terror'". According to Mouton, teachers and preachers of the Bible tend to focus on the negative aspects of biblical texts, such as 1 Timothy 2:12 and not on 1 Timothy's fundamental perspective on a life-giving and life-sustaining God and the church as God's life-giving and life-sustaining household.



One story, told by a young woman, reflects the grim realities faced by many women in Nigeria: “After my birth, my parents left me in the care of my maternal grandfather’s household. I grew up with other children and all of us attended school. After primary school, however, due to financial problems, I was asked to leave school and to get married while the boys in the family were allowed to continue their education. My marriage was blessed with a son and my husband and I were happy until a divorced woman came between us. My husband became very cruel towards me. I would plead and kneel down and ask what the problem was. The only answers I received were beatings. Eventually I was denied access to the family’s food store, kitchen and our marital bed. I was given a mat to sleep on. My husband’s father and mother blamed me for my husband’s infidelity. They threatened me, refused to help me and I had few sympathizers. However, when I reported the matter to our local church, the church blamed my husband upon which my husband took my son and his belongings and went to live with the other woman. He took me back to my people. After many years, my uncle became hard on me and again insisted that I should marry so that he would get money to build a house. When I resisted, he beat me severely. I finally came to live in town with my son. Today I sell petty things like palm oil, yams and cooked food to survive. I am also trying my best to train my son ... life is not easy for me.”

Another story was told by a teenager who got married to a young man, who violently beat her to the point that she had a miscarriage. When the incident occurred, the man left her bleeding in the house. A neighbour came to her aid and took her to hospital where she received treatment. The reason for the beating? “Because I asked my husband whether we could attend the burial of my uncle.” He replied with punches on my face and stomach and with the question, “Where have you seen money to be asking that kind of question?” According to the girl, “My people would not take me back, saying that it is a shame to give a daughter into marriage and then to have to take her back. My friends said I should stay with my husband, but that I should be more careful in future of asking questions relating to money.”

Yet another woman told me the following story of her life in her father’s and in her husband’s house: “When I was in my father’s house as a teenager my mother would abuse me and say all sorts of unkind words to me. She would say that all the girls of my age were married with children and I was still at home. She wanted me to marry so that she will get salt and new clothes for me. I was fifteen years old then and had to get married. It was my father-in-law that was taking care

of us. All his sons' wives were under his authority. We were treated like slaves and had to work on the farm come rain or shine; only night brought us some rest. My husband was a student at the university. I gave birth to children and struggled to take care of them. Sometimes I would not have bathing soap and, because I had no access to the farm products I helped produce, I would have to ask even for such basic things. Sometimes I would receive a caning if I failed to finish farm work as my father-in-law expected, and my mother-in-law was not sympathetic or helpful to me in the least. The only way to survive was by stealing farm produce during harvest and selling them secretly. Finally, as an adult, I rebelled. I tended my farms and would not pay attention to my in-laws when they threatened me. At first I had no time for church activities except on Sunday, but since I started resisting my in-laws I have time for many more things, including church activities and schooling.

The final story is about a man who abandoned his wife and went to live in the city. This man stayed away for five years, but returned due to health problems. The wife was reluctant to take him back as a husband. Her mother-in-law was furious when she learnt of this and took the case to the pastor and elders of our church. They used the Bible to convince the woman to take back the deserter. According to the woman, they told her: "You have to be submissive to your husband if you want to make it to heaven." The woman went back and obeyed them. After a short while, the man became very sick and died of AIDS. He had also infected his wife, who died two years later, as did the child they had after she took him back. Today, the surviving orphans live with their aged grandmother.

These are examples of the plight of many women in Nigeria. Some of them refer to cases in which their churches have helped or supported them, others where they only worsened their situation. In the following section, the question is therefore raised whether women belonging to the URCC are indeed experiencing gender inequality or whether these churches are in fact creating spaces where this does not occur, where girls are empowered and gender stereotypes are addressed.

### **Gender equality: URCC interviews**

Forty-two married women were interviewed in this part of the study. Among them, thirty admitted to have married in their teenage years by eloping. All of them go to church and twenty-eight are baptised members of the Church. They work on their husbands' farms, bear children and attend to the full scope of household tasks in their homes. None of them are thus formally employed. As far as their participation in church activities are concerned, most make it clear that this is allowed by their

husbands only to the extent that it does not interfere with their farmwork and household work. Only among those who are older and have been married longer (fifteen of them), some said that they are free to go anywhere and attend all church activities that they want to.

According to these women, their male children have little to do regarding the running and maintenance of the household and family. They do go to the farm with their sisters, but when they return, they are free to play and sometimes run errands. They can attend all the activities in the Church. Most of these women admitted to not being satisfied with their marriages and expressed the need for more freedom to interact with others outside their home.

Polygamy is also common in this area, since having multiple wives means, amongst other things, cheap labour on the farm. In this situation, women do not only have to compete for the affection and attention of their husbands, but every woman is left to care for her own children, and a woman with male and female children always tries to get the males educated, while the female ones are given away in marriage.

### **Analysis of responses to questionnaires**

With a view to this study, a survey was conducted in February 2012 in four different congregations, namely Genyi Yandev, Ahwa, Nor, and Mbaamandev. The churches all belong to the classis of Mkar and the congregations consist only of Tiv-speaking people.

The study population was made up of all members of MIM<sup>24</sup> whose ages were from ten to thirty years. From these congregations, eighty members were randomly sampled, twenty from each congregation, with an equal number of females and males. Structured questionnaires were distributed to them at appointed times in their various congregations. Participants were allowed to individually complete the questionnaires with the aid of research assistants on the day the questionnaires were distributed. All were retrieved and analysed. Simple descriptive statistics were used for data analysis.

### **Results and discussions**

The results presented below reveal areas in MIM where gender disparity exists. Tables 1 to 9 present the results and discussions.

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24 Makeranta u Iyange i Memen (Sunday School).

**Table 1:** Statistical distribution of respondents based on their responses according to age range.

S/no	Age range	Male	%	Female	%	Total	Mean
1.	10-15	6	15	4	10	10	5
2.	16-20	10	25	14	35	24	12
3.	21-25	10	25	8	20	18	9
4.	26-30	14	35	14	35	28	14

Table 1 shows that MIM members are youths. Their age ranges from 10 to 30 years, although not many of them fall within the age of 10 to 15 years.

**Table 2:** Statistical distribution of respondents based on their responses about activities that they are allowed to perform in the church.

S/no	Activities	Male	%	Female	%	Total	Mean
1.	Praying in the church	16	40	26	65	42	21
2.	Preaching in the church	8	20	0	0	8	4
3.	Teaching/Leading songs	8	20	6	15	14	7
4.	Teaching Bible verses/Catechism	8	20	8	20	16	8

The information in Table 2 shows that females are allowed to pray in the Church (65%), teach and lead songs (15%) as well as teach Bible verses and catechism classes (20%). However, they are not allowed to preach in the Church (0%). The NKST (URCC) Church frowns upon the idea of women standing in front of a congregation of men and women, especially on special worship days, to deliver the Word of God. They believe this is the right thing to do and is in line with the biblical injunction that women should not teach but remain silent (1 Cor 14:34; 1 Tim 2:11-12).<sup>25</sup>

**Table 3:** Statistical distribution of respondents based on their responses about constraint on attending meetings.

S/No	Constraints on attending meeting	Male	%	Female	%	Total	Mean
1.	House work	-	-	11	17.5	11	11
2.	Refusal from parents	4	10	1	2.5	5	2.5
3.	No Constraint	34	85	18	45	52	26
4.	Financial Constraint	2	5	10	25	12	6

<sup>25</sup> What Paul refers to in these verses is not to be taken out of context. It was a continuation of his preceding command when he said men should pray with hands lifted, and women should pray with covered heads. To back this up, Paul commanded that every woman who prays or prophesies should do so covering her head (1 Cor 11:5).

The results presented in Table 3 show that males have an edge over the females in attending meetings. About 85% indicated that they have no constraint while only 45% females do not have constraints. Females have constraints like housework and finances. This indicates that females have greater responsibilities in the home which they have to attend to, whether married or unmarried. Even duties which men need to perform are many times left in the hands of women. These include farming, child rearing, shopping and all household chores.

**Table 4:** Statistical distribution of respondents based on their responses about the proportion of male teachers to female teachers.

S/No	Proportion of male Teachers to Female Teachers	Male	%	Female	%	Total	Mean
1.	1:1	8	20	6	15	14	7
2.	2:1	1	2.5	1	2.5	2	1
3.	5:3	31	77.5	33	82.5	64	32
4.	N/A	-	-	-	-	-	-

The result in Table 4 shows that the ratio of male teachers to female teachers is higher on the side of males. Although females teach as well, their number is smaller than that of males (5 males to 3 females), with males showing 77.5% and females 82.5% respectively. This result shows the disparity. This could be on the grounds of discrimination against women in most URCC congregations – that women ought not to teach, as previously explained.

**Table 5:** Statistical distribution of respondents based on their responses about the type of punishment given to members in case of sexual immorality.

S/No	Type of Punishment in case of sexual immorality	Male	%	Female	%	Total	Mean
1.	Suspension from MIM/Church activities	33	82.5	31	77.5	64	32
2.	Scourging	-	-	1	2.5	1	1
3.	Ex-communication from Church	-	-	-	-	-	-
4.	Verbal warning	7	17.5	8	20	15	7.5

In the results above, offenders are suspended from MIM activities and even from attending church. About 82.5% males and 77.5% females attested to this. Another form of punishment said to be given is simply a warning. Only 17.5% males and 20% females attested to this.

**Table 6:** Statistical distribution of respondents based on responses about which gender bears the greater punishment.

S/No	Gender that bears the greater punishment	Male	%	Female	%	Total	Mean
1.	Male	2	5	-	0	2	2
2.	Female	0	0	8	20	8	4
3.	Both male and female	38	95	32	80	70	35

The results presented in Table 6 above show that both males and females are punished when they commit sin. Ninety-five percent of males indicated this and 80% females gave similar indications. This shows that there is no gender bias in punishing the sin of sexual immorality as far as the church or MIM is concerned.<sup>26</sup>

**Table 7:** Statistical distribution of respondents based on their responses about which gender trains children at home.

S/No	Training children at home	Male	%	Female	%	Total	Mean
1.	Father	20	50	2	5	22	11
2.	Mother	6	15	24	60	30	15
3.	Peer group	3	7.5	3	7.5	6	3
4.	Elderly women	1	2.5	3	7.5	4	2
5.	Male elders	10	25	8	20	18	9

Table 7 above presents results on home training in Christian homes. The result shows that male children are trained by their father (50%) and female children are trained by their mother (60%). Other trainers include peer group, elderly women, and male elders. The Christian home does not differ from indigenous practice in this aspect. Tiv traditions have many challenges which need to be addressed spiritually or biblically.

The results presented in Table 8 show that 17.5% of both males and females feel they can preach, lead songs, compose songs, teach Bible verses, and memorise them. A greater percentage (32.5%) of the females feels they can memorise Bible verses, while only 5% indicated that they can preach. This can be attributed to the fact that traditionally it is not allowed and they do not want to be singled out or wish for what is not possible. Leading of songs is another area women like. 25% of them indicated that they can lead songs while only 7.5% male indicated this.

<sup>26</sup> The female suffers most when pregnancy results due to the act. If she attempts abortion, she suffers pains and even death. In addition to this, her parents may disown her or maltreat her. She may even be sent out of school if she is a student. The young man may only face church discipline if they are from the same church.

**Table 8:** Statistical distribution of respondents based on their responses about roles they feel they can play in the church.

S/ No	Roles that you feel you can play in the Church	Male	%	Female	%	Total	Mean
1.	Preaching the Gospel	7	17.5	2	5	9	4.5
2.	Leading Songs	3	7.5	10	25	13	6.5
3.	Composing Songs	5	12.5	4	10	8	4.5
4.	Teaching Bible Verses	4	10	4	10	8	4
5.	Memorising Bible Verses	14	35	13	32.5	27	13.5
6.	All of the above	7	17.5	7	17.5	14	7

### Summary of the empirical research and response to the questionnaire

All respondents in this research were young people. It is therefore believed that they are teachable, independent and possess all other characteristics of youths. The results in Table 2 showed that females are discriminated against on the issue of preaching in the Church. This has been a long-standing tradition that cuts across entire congregations. The result in Table 3 shows that men have time for leisure and church activities more than women. The results in Table 4 indicate that there are more male teachers than females. It shows that women are also given the opportunity to teach in this arm of service, namely, the Sunday school. Table 5 gives the result of the type of punishment given on sexual sin. There seems to be no discrimination. Table 6's results on the gender which bears greater punishment indicates that there is no discrimination on the punishment of sexual sin. In Table 7, the result on child training follows traditional methods: mothers train girls and fathers train boys. Results on the roles that men and women play in the Church, as shown in Table 8, indicate two roles which women like to play in the Church. These are leading songs and memorising Bible verses. Preaching seems to be an area that women do not desire. There seem to be elements of stereotyping in leading songs as the role of women and preaching as the role of men.

### Female youths' involvement in church activities

The situation described above has not discouraged young women and girls in their faith and in rendering service to God. They have ways in which they can serve God, empower themselves and help their communities. These are Girls' Brigade and Girls' Fellowship.

The Girls' Brigade is involved in many activities of service to God, including Girls' Fellowship. Their activities range from spiritual ones to physical and social ones. Spiritual activities include Bible studies, prayer meetings, prayer all night, house to house evangelism and plays. Physical activities are church parades, conference parades and drills. They visit the elderly and the very old people to clean their surroundings, wash their clothes and fetch water for them. They visit the sick at home and in hospitals. They raise funds through paid labour to host meetings and give support to their members in need. They also plan and execute projects.

During evangelism, they preach to both men and women. The Girls' Brigade comprises of elderly women, young women and girls. The elderly mentor younger ones. There is a high discipline during their camping activities. Girls are taught good morals and also how they can respect their husbands when they get married. Girls' Fellowship is a replica of the Women's Fellowship.

However much appreciated these fellowships and brigades are, they remain clothed in the garb of stereotyping and gender discrimination. Worst of all, such institutionalised stereotyping becomes normative and internalised, as many women are not even keen to become pastors, elders, deacons or heads in the Church. Three out of five women that were interviewed indicated some interest, but they concluded that the men who are the heads of their households will not allow it.

The position of women described above is not the same in other churches in Nigeria. The Presbyterian Church is also a Reformed church, but it does not discriminate against women in terms of leadership in the Church. The Church believes in service to God for all who will avail themselves. They give every member a chance, irrespective of gender. This Church ordains women and also appoints them as elders. Other churches in Nigeria, like the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Living Faith Church and Assemblies of God's Church, all ordain women and allow them in leadership positions in the Church.

Both boys and girls avail themselves, starting from childhood as Sunday School children. They are guided to discover their potential and this includes leadership qualities. Boys and girls may belong to the Presbyterian Young People's Association of Nigeria and students also join the Presbyterian Students' Fellowship. Both girls and boys participate fully in all the activities.

It is clear that there is freedom of worship and of service in the Church. And in most denominations, women form a larger part of the congregation. Men avail themselves for the privilege of service much more than women because of child rearing and household chores, traditional beliefs, early marriages, cultures, societal



restrictions or lack of self-confidence. As for the Presbyterian Church (PCN), there is less gender inequality than in the society and it is clear that this church creates a much more level playing ground for both males and females in the distribution of responsibilities and leadership roles, combating gender bias in their congregations.

### Summary and conclusion

It is no secret that in many Reformed churches all over African countries shifts have occurred with regard to gender issues. The result of this is found, for example, in the appointment of women leaders in churches, also as ordained ministers. This is not the case with the URCC in Nigeria, and also with some other Reformed churches on the continent. This church has remained adamant on excluding women from leadership positions. This research looked at the challenges faced by youths in the society and in the URCC. All these women more often than not constitute a disadvantaged group. Through interviews, questionnaires, and the collection of stories, some experiences of this inequality were given and commented on. In short, these experiences deprive both young men and women of their God-given dignity, especially the women. In some churches the challenges are especially great. These churches must learn from others about gender equality within and outside of the church, and this should be passed on to ministers, seminarians and congregations. Then these churches will also contribute to lives of dignity for the women and girls in their midst and within society outside of their walls.

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## Questions for further reflection

- ◆ Gender inequality exists in Nigerian society and in some Nigerian churches. Does it exist in your context and what do you think are the primary reasons for it?
- ◆ Does gender inequality exist specifically with regard to the youth in your society and/or church? Are these based on biblical or cultural reasons or on both?
- ◆ Do you think girls have a lesser role to play in church activities? Should these be confined to "women ministry" or may they contribute to the ministry of the church at all levels?
- ◆ Men are the root cause of gender discrimination in the society and church. Do you agree with this statement? To what extent may women contribute to this view?
- ◆ What do you think your denomination or congregation understands under the concept of "dignity"? Do you think it applies to both men and women/boys and girls? How is this reflected or not in your congregation?



# GENDER EQUALITY

AN ISSUE OF ECONOMIC SURVIVAL  
AND WELLBEING





## REVISITING ECONOMIC JUSTICE

### An examination of dignity of women in a Zambian context

*Nolipher Moyo<sup>1</sup>*

#### **Introduction**

This essay revisits the issue of economic justice and the ways in which its absence violates the dignity of Zambian women. As a point of departure is taken the fact that, despite several national and international instruments which seek to promote gendered economic justice and despite the laudable efforts of many NGOs, the economic situation of the majority of Zambian women remains dire and the church is yet to put its whole weight behind efforts to address this.

The position of women, as far as economic empowerment is concerned, does not present a rosy picture. In most instances, women are at a disadvantage compared to men. This is in spite of the many protocols on gender justice to which many African countries have assented, including our country, Zambia. In addition, the influence of the church is significant and it may therefore play a crucial role in bringing about a greater balance as far as economic justice is concerned. Given a number of protocols on gender equality the Government, church and NGOs can play a critical role in propagating economic justice and consequently assist in bringing about the dignity of women through economic empowerment.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Dr Nolipher Jere Moyo is a representative of gender studies and HIV/AIDS at Justo Mwale Theological University College. She is also a part-time lecturer at the University of Zambia, Gender Studies Department.

2 According to the Zambia Association for Research and Development (ZARD), about 51% women of Zambia's population have not benefited from the development process in comparison to men; 72% of women in Zambia are in the informal sector, cf. Siame et al., *Beyond Inequalities*; and United Nations, "The World's Women".

## What is economic justice?

Many definitions of justice have been suggested by a variety of scholars from a variety of academic disciplines. The same is true of *economic* justice. Exactly how difficult it is to define, one finds by looking at Lester C. Thurow's essay (written in 1973 already), "Toward a Definition of Economic Justice". According to Thurow,

(m)odern economics springs from the search for a definition of economic justice ... Thus, 19th-century utilitarian economists, such as John Stuart Mill, spent much of their time searching for the principles that would lead to a condition of equity. But by the 1940's, economists reluctantly came to the conclusion that there were no economic statements that could be made about equity ... By the 1950's questions of economic equity were not even discussed in the basic textbooks...<sup>3</sup>

However, in the past couple of decades, it seems that the expression "economic justice" has gained new currency, and the meaning of the term is debated in many disciplines – not only in economics, but also in theology.<sup>4</sup> According to the Global Justice Academy, "(t)he ... content of economic justice is the enhancement of the welfare of individuals, groups, and nations within national and international and intra- and inter-generational contexts."<sup>5</sup>

Finally, according to the Center for Social and Economic Justice in Washington, DC,

Economic justice ... touches the individual person as well as the social order, encompasses the moral principles which guide us in designing our economic institutions. These institutions determine how each person earns a living, enters into contracts, exchanges goods and services with others and otherwise produces an independent material foundation for his or her economic sustenance. The ultimate purpose of economic justice is to free each person to engage creatively in the unlimited work beyond economics, that of the mind and the spirit.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Thurow, "Toward a Definition", 56.

4 Cf. Block & Shaw, *Theology, Third World Development*; Hartropp, *What is Economic Justice?*; Rundle, *Economic Justice in a Flat World*; Jarl, *In Justice*.

5 According to the Global Justice Academy, it also entails: a) distributive justice (the norms and policies that determine the distribution of resources in society); b) commutative justice (the honesty/truthfulness of the parties to an economic exchange); and c) restorative/remedial justice (the payment of compensation or undertaking of other punitive action to redress an economic wrong done to homogeneous groups of individuals, such as ethnic, social, racial or sexual groups), Global Justice Academy, "Economic Justice".

6 Center for Social and Economic Justice, "Defining Economic Justice".

## The faces of gendered economic injustice in Zambia

Economic injustice towards women has many faces; it is indeed a multifaceted challenge and therefore addressing it requires a multifaceted approach. This section will look at some of the faces of gendered economic injustice in Zambia, before looking at what is done to address this in civil society and the church (including what the motivation for the church may be to do so), before finally making some suggestions regarding how this may be addressed in practice.

### Gender and land ownership

Women have always played an important role in agriculture; women play a big role on the land in food production. Unfortunately they lack access to land, resource entitlements and inputs such as credit and technology.<sup>7</sup> According to Zambian law, any women may in principle own land. In fact, the National Gender Policy (see section below on this) even contains a positive discrimination provision, aiming at allocating at least a 30% quota to vulnerable groups, including women. In practice, however, this is not easily achieved, since

...the cost, bureaucracy and time required to acquire title deeds mean that it is unlikely that the poorest women, particularly those living outside of Lusaka are able to acquire a title deed. In addition, research shows that the majority of women are unaware of their rights and the policies put in place by government to protect them.<sup>8</sup>

According to statistics, 78% of women in Zambia are involved in the agricultural sector, as opposed to 69% of men.<sup>9</sup> Still, women in Zambia grow 80% of locally produced food. They are, however, neither part of agricultural decision-making processes and even though they constitute the majority of agricultural labour, men are 94% of agricultural extension officers.<sup>10</sup> Women have also less contact with extension services because most women do not own land and most agricultural extension officers do not share knowledge with women, partly because they only do so with the owners of land – in other words – men, and partly because they

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7 Cf. Parmar, "Microcredit".

8 Zambia Land Alliance, "Social and Economic Justice".

9 Sitko et al., "Technical Compendium", iv.

10 These are persons appointed by government to aid farmers in making better decisions regarding the increase of agricultural production. The extension officer is constantly provided with the latest techniques and information related to agriculture and they relay this information to farmers and agricultural businesses.



consider rural women either illiterate or incapable of learning modern scientific agricultural methods.

Even in instances where women own or have access to land, they often have limited access to agricultural support services, particularly to credit. This limited access may be due to a number of factors, including legal restrictions (such as needing a male signatory); lack of collateral (they seldom own land themselves); lack of information about credit availability and lack of small-scale services such as microcredit schemes. All of this leads to low self-esteem and low self-confidence and only exacerbate the dependency of women on men.<sup>11</sup>

### **Inheritance laws and customs**

Inheritance is the practice of passing on property, title, debts and obligations upon the death of an individual. It has long played an extremely important role in human societies. Women are frequently denied the right to inherit. According to Steinzor, this practice is common in most parts of Africa for example, Kenya, Namibia, Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia.<sup>12</sup> Under the patrilineal system, succession is traced through the father's lineage, and often the eldest son inherits, or if there is more than one wife, the eldest son of the senior wife inherits the property of the deceased. In the event that there are no male heirs, the eldest daughter may inherit. In the absence of children, the eldest brother of the deceased inherits and if there are no brothers, then the eldest sister inherits. In the event of having no siblings, the parents will inherit.

A good example of this patrilineal system is that of the Ngoni of Zambia. The Ngoni people of the Eastern Province of Zambia are synonymous with these inheritance practices. For instance, under the Ngoni customary law, the widow is cared for by the family of the deceased and is to be supported until she remarries – or is forced to marry her husband's family's choice of a husband for her, which is usually a brother of the deceased to ensure that the latter's property remains in the family (this is, for example, the case among the Chewa of eastern Zambia). With traditions and economic fortunes changing rapidly, however, the situation of widows has deteriorated considerably.<sup>13</sup>

A widow's position is not less precarious under a matrilineal inheritance system. The husband's estate will simply go to the husband's oldest sister, or worse,

11 Cf. the study by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, titled "2009 The World Survey on the Role of Women in Development".

12 Steinzor, *Women's Property*, 5-7.

13 Davies, "The relative impact", 471.

to her children and not to the deceased's children or wife. It is therefore little wonder that among more educated urban Zambians there is a movement away from the matrilineal customary laws of inheritance towards claiming their rights as the rightful heirs to their fathers' or husbands' estates.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, this is not the case in many traditional societies, especially those in rural areas where women are the farmers of land which will never become their own.

## Gender and employment

Despite the fact that some data are sometimes offered as proof that employment levels among women in Zambia are on the increase in both the formal and informal sectors, women are still in the minority in the formal sector and are rarely found at upper or management levels (only one in ten persons employed at that level are women). In addition, women are the most affected by retrenchment, either because they are often less qualified than men (for the link to this fact and gender, cf. the next section below), or they are not regarded as the primary breadwinners of families.<sup>15</sup>

Women are also employed in lesser-paid jobs than men. At first, clerical occupations were male dominated in the developed regions of the country, but today they are typically filled by women. Women are also more often found in occupations which are losing status among men, such as teaching (school administrators are, however, mostly men), nursing (however, most hospital managers and consultants are men), secretarial jobs, et cetera.<sup>16</sup> New types of occupations with higher status and remuneration are dominated by men.<sup>17</sup>

Vertical segregation in the workplace among genders also translate into disadvantages for women regarding salaries, differences in working hours, being

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14 Matters of inheritance in Zambia are governed by the Intestate Succession Act of 1989 and the Wills and the Administration of Estates Act of 1989. These took almost twenty years to become law and merged the previously separate customary and statutory laws of inheritance. Under these laws, distribution of the intestate estate (that is when a person dies without a will stipulating something to the contrary) at the death of a spouse is as follows: 50% to the children; 20% to the surviving spouse; 20% to the parents of deceased; and 10% to other dependents. This still differs considerably from most Western societies where the wife inherits the total estate of the husband – usually being the only one who contributed to it over years, or at least by looking after the home and children she allowed the husband the freedom to accumulate “their” property. In such systems, the children are cared for by the mother and only inherit directly if she is also deceased. Only if there are no children do the property go to the parents.

15 Cf. Siame et al. *Beyond Inequalities*; SARDC, *The Gender and Development Newsletter*.

16 Cf. Rakodi, *Evaluation*.

17 Siame et al., *Beyond Inequalities*, 26.

considered for contract or permanent appointments and opportunities for promotion. Women are underrepresented in more advantaged professional and technical occupations and overrepresented in less-advantageous jobs.

Gender inequality also finds expression in other ways which may either not benefit women or may influence their employability (in the eyes of prospective employers) and which in turn lessen their chances to find economic independence. The possibility of having to allow for paid maternity leave (which is women's statutory right) on the one hand makes the employment of men more attractive for employers. On the other hand, it may lead to women working under contract and not on a permanent basis or as unskilled labour in the agricultural or informal sectors where maternity leave is simply not given.

### **Gender, education and economic justice in Zambia**

There are gender imbalances and inadequacies in Zambia's education system which disadvantage girls and young women with regard to the contents of curricula, educational resources, et cetera. Teachers' attitudes also reflect those of their societies which often give preference to boys rather than girls in terms of education opportunities and the quality of education they receive. The self-confidence of girls are often not boosted by either teachers or parents and they are seldom encouraged to aspire to occupations which are "traditionally male".<sup>18</sup> In the end, due to lower access to education and lower quality education, girls are caught in a cycle of being prepared for either unemployment or low-paying employment and a life of economic dependence on others (men).

### **Addressing gendered economic injustice in Zambia: Government and civil society**

#### **National gender policy**

The Zambian Government adopted the National Gender Policy in 2000 and launched the strategic plan of action (2004–2008) in 2004. The National Gender Policy highlights a number of policy areas requiring gender consideration and all-inclusive development. These include poverty, health, education, gender-based violence, agriculture and many more areas and, of course, economic development

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18 For perspectives on gendered education practices and systems in Malawi, see Maggie Madimbo's contribution to this publication. In almost all aspects, the same situation exists in Zambia. These include government policies toward gender equality in education – such as allowing for pregnant teenage learners to return to school – which are not applied in practice.

participation. By its own admission, the National Gender Policy takes into account the issues and concerns contained in strategic documents, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women of 1979, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995, the SADC Declaration Gender and Development of 1997 and the Millennium Declaration and Development Goals of 2000.<sup>19</sup>

With regard to the promotion of gender equality in Zambia, the policy aims at addressing a wide spectrum of issues relating to gender imbalances in the country. Key among these are: (i) power relations between men and women, and the cultural and traditional practices which systematically subject females to male domination; (ii) the feminisation of poverty, reflected in women's limited access to health services, maternal and child health care, food, safe water and sanitation social services, employment opportunities, and decision-making processes; and (iii) the integration of reproductive health education into the school curriculum to prevent and reduce early pregnancies and HIV and AIDS.<sup>20</sup>

Overall, the vision of the National Gender Policy is to achieve and support gender equity and equality in the development process by 2030. To this end, in 2006, government created a Ministry of Women, Gender and Development.

### **Zambian NGOs promoting gender equality**

NGOs in Zambia sometimes cooperate with government in mainstreaming gender equality in development processes. The women's movement in Zambia is fairly well organised as is shown, for example, by the establishment of the Non-Governmental Organizations Coordinating Committee (NGOCC). As an umbrella organisation for NGOs addressing gender and development challenges, NGOCC was established in 1985 following the United Nations World Conference on Women in Nairobi.

Member organisations of the NGOCC have in their individual capacities endeavoured to promote gender equality through various activities. The Forum for African Women Educationalists of Zambia (FAWEZA), for example, has been active in the promotion of girls' education. FAWEZA advocates educational policies and programmes, with special attention given to science, mathematics and technology in the education of girls.<sup>21</sup> It is believed that the promotion of education is a route to high-paying employment which may give girls access to capital and the chance

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<sup>19</sup> Siame et al., *Beyond Inequalities*, 26–28.

<sup>20</sup> NORAD, "Gender Review".

<sup>21</sup> NGOCC, "Directory of Members", 15.

of accessing scarce productive resources in society. In addition, it also prepares the girl child for decision-making and economic independence.

From a legal perspective, the National Legal Aid Clinic for Women (NLACW) has, since its establishment in 1992, advanced the cause for women's rights.<sup>22</sup> NLACW provides legal aid for women, mainly assisting widows in retaining inheritance rights, whereas Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF) and Women in Law and Development in Southern Africa (WLSA) have also been active in providing legal information to women. These organisations have also undertaken research on different aspects of Zambian law to reveal the extent to which women are marginalised by the law.

A final example of civil society efforts to promote the cause of women, is Zambia National Women's Lobby (ZNWL) which seeks to promote the participation of women at all levels of decision-making through advocacy, lobbying and capacity building in women, in order to enable them to influence decision-making on developmental issues.<sup>23</sup>

This brings us to the church in Zambia. According to the Global Justice Academy,

...(t)here are certain forms of economic activity, e.g., slavery, which would not only constitute an affront to fundamental human values, but would also violate all forms of economic justice. In addition, philosophical and *biblical/religious views of justice and prohibitions of humans on human exploitation can be particularly enriching in identifying the values and policies that further economic justice.*<sup>24</sup>

In the following section, some examples of such biblical or religious views that "can be enriching in identifying values and policies which further economic justice" will be discussed.

### **The church and economic justice: Challenges and suggestions**

One of the basic tenets of biblical faith and one of the values it represents, which should be emphasised with a view to economic justice towards women, is the fundamental belief that all people are created equal and share equal dignity. Genesis 1:27 states that God created male and female in God's own image. This means that humans are like God and represent God. This implies that people of every race and gender deserve dignity, "no matter how much the image of God is marred by sin,

22 Cf. Siame et al., *Beyond Inequalities*.

23 ZNWL, "Election Monitoring", 7.

24 Global Justice Academy, "Economic Justice" — emphasis added.

illness, or weakness or age or any other disability, [it] still has the status of being in God's image and therefore must be treated with dignity and respect that is due to God's image bearer."<sup>25</sup>

The Bible also teaches that Christ in his ministry showed that *all* people are essential to the kingdom of God. He understood their concerns (John 2:1-90), met their needs (Mark 7:24-34; John 4), he healed them (Matt 9:20-22, Luke 4:38-39), even raised them from the dead (Luke 7:11-15), he forgave and restored them to meaningful existence (Luke 7:36-50; John 8:3-11), and he defended them and affirmed their acts of service (Matt 26:6-13), and instructed them (Luke 10:39).

The church must continue the ministry of the compassion of Christ, of bringing the good news, not only of salvation from sin, but also of liberation from societal norms and customs which keep people imprisoned in lives of indignity. Unjust societal norms and structures must be unmasked, the reality of gendered power imbalances must be acknowledged and rejected and through it all, the greatest and most authoritative guide for the church, the Bible, must be used in a responsible way; a way that sets free and does not enslave. As J. Lee Grady warns, churches should guard against telling women lies, such as that God created women as inferior beings, destined to serve their husbands; or that God made a helper, and helpers are subordinate to the ones they help. These are cultural biases, not spiritual or scientific principles. Or, as Grady contends, that a man needs to "cover" a woman in ministry activities, since women cannot be leaders and only men should lead as pastors, deacons and elders. Or that women cannot be fulfilled or spiritually effective without a husband or children. In some churches, women are not allowed to carry out some church duties because they are single.<sup>26</sup>

The church should assist in and should be the first to acknowledge that women are not what society say they are; they are image bearers of God and possess an inherent dignity because of that. They cannot and must not be reduced to socially-constructed roles. As well-known theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza passionately summarises: "Women are not ladies (to serve men), wives (to bear children), handmaids, seductresses, or beasts of burden but full citizens."<sup>27</sup>

In all honesty, the Zambian Church, through the three mother bodies, namely, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ), Council of Churches in Zambia, (CCZ), and Zambia Episcopalian Conference (ZEC), is not complacent towards

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25 Gruden, *Systematic Theology*, 449-450.

26 Grady, *Some Lies*.

27 Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of Naming*, xvii.

the plight of women and should be applauded for this. The three above-mentioned bodies responded to the challenge of the voices both in the church and community by issuing a theological declaration in 2009, called *The Zambian Church Declaration on Gender Injustice and Gender-Based Violence*.<sup>28</sup> However, despite the policies of government, despite the advocacy from NGOs and civil society, and despite the churches' declarations, the pace of change has generally been slow and the responses from various institutions with regard to gender matters vary considerably. At the end of the day, gender inequality is still prevalent and often the position of women's participation in and benefits from development initiatives in general remain low.

So, what may the churches do in practical ways to address economic injustice towards women? First of all, the church cannot be silent or accept the unequal treatment of persons based on their sex in any form, including unequal treatment in the economic sphere of life.

Church leaders should be able to scout for banks or other financial institutions or NGOs which can come to the aid of their women members in the form of microloans at low or no interest to enable them to fully develop their economic potential, be that in the agricultural sector, the business sector or to further their education.

The church may even initiate skills training for women – tailoring, tie and dye, basket making, pottery, et cetera – to start their own home industries and to allow them to make their own living, to become financially more independent and as such to increase their self-confidence and self-esteem and ultimately to live dignified lives.

The church as an institution should not only participate in public, political and economic discourse, but should support and encourage its members to do so as well, collectively or individually, at work, at school, or wherever people are discriminated against or when injustice is done.

Finally, it is also a sad fact that women often, due to circumstances or cultural pressure, simply accept the disadvantages they suffer in life. In fact, their circumstances may be internalised to such an extent that they may not even be aware of the day-to-day ways in which their dignity is violated at work, at school, and in the market place. It is the duty of the churches to sensitise women towards injustice done against them or the unfair nature of their economic life.

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28 Cf. Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance, "Zambian Churches".

And, once the churches have done this, they should create safe spaces, be safe spaces, where women may share their stories of hardship and injustice. And, when these stories are shared, the churches must listen, and they must lament with these women in Christian solidarity and should join them, government and civil society to make their lives more than mere instances of economic survival, but lives in which their economic potential is reached and ultimately be lives of (also economic) dignity.

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### **Questions for further reflection**

- ♦ What must the church do to come up with a theology of economic justice that will help to spearhead efforts to empowering women?
- ♦ How can the church help women who are victims of economic injustice and who need to be sensitised through discussion as a way to open up?
- ♦ How can the church practise what it preaches to others about economic justice?
- ♦ How can the church persuade law makers to enact laws that are just toward women?
- ♦ What can the church do to hear the stories of economic injustice against women?



## GENDER AND POVERTY

### Rereading Proverbs 31 in pursuit of socio-economic justice for women in the Reformed Church of East Africa

*Dorcas Chebet<sup>1</sup> and Beatrice Cherop<sup>2</sup>*

#### Introduction

Poverty remains a main challenge facing women in the Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA)<sup>3</sup> and, in fact, in Kenya at large. According to Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, poverty in Kenya is so extreme that more than 50% of the population survives on less than one US dollar a day.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, as Ngunjiri points out, “gender disparity has a strong impact on poverty levels, with over 70% of the poor in Kenya being women.”<sup>5</sup> Poverty among women in Kenya leads to social exclusion, dependency, and diminished capacity to participate in society, or to develop meaningful relationships with other people in society. RCEA women and Kenyan women in general have a low income and are often unable to acquire basic goods and services necessary for living a life of dignity. Ngunjiri maintains that “cultural norms, inequitable government policies, lack of access to credit, limited

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1 Dr. Dorcas Chebet is a senior lecturer and Head of the School of Theology at The Presbyterian University of East Africa, Kikuyu, Kenya.

2 Beatrice Cherop coordinates Bible study at the Centre for Mission and Leadership training (CML) in the Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA) and is a lecturer at the Reformed Institute for Theological Training (RITT).

3 Chebet and Cherop, “Teaching Gender and Theology”, give a detailed history of the RCEA.

4 Ngunjiri, “Banking on Women”, 95.

5 Ngunjiri, “Banking on Women”, 95.

educational opportunities for girls and other contextual factors limit the economic opportunities of [RCEA] women.”<sup>6</sup>

Tabitha W. Kiriti and Kartik C. Roy have stated that access to education does not necessarily lead to the empowerment of Kenyan women.<sup>7</sup> In this essay, however, we argue that education remains the most fundamental way out of poverty for women and girls in the RCEA and in Kenya.<sup>8</sup> In most rural areas, if a choice has to be made between a girl’s and a boy’s education, a boy is given priority to continue with education and a girl is told to stay at home. This is done on the assumption that the girl will eventually get married.<sup>9</sup> Gender parity in education is lagging behind and has severe consequences for alleviating, if not eradicating, poverty.

The aim of this essay is to underscore the importance of empowering RCEA women economically and socially so that they can contribute to the economic growth of church and society, but also in a way that RCEA women can benefit from their economic contribution to society. If the empowerment of women is to be realised, the voices for empowerment will have to come from women themselves. With this in mind, this essay will make some general observations regarding poverty in the Bible, and give an overview of the challenge and causes of poverty of women in the RCEA and then, focusing on the Book of Proverbs in particular, show that the voice which challenges King Lamuel (in Proverbs 31:1-9) to speak for the voiceless is the voice of a woman. Moreover, it will be shown that the “noble wife” of Proverbs 31:10-31 is portrayed as working very hard to contribute to the socio-economic sustenance of her family and her society, but that it is the husband who receives praise at the city gate. We shall, therefore, use a socioeconomic perspective as a hermeneutical key to read Proverbs 31.<sup>10</sup> We shall also argue that education remains the basic strategy for poverty alleviation. We also propose that there is a

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6 Ngunjiri, “Banking on Women”, 95.

7 Kiriti & Roy, “Gender Inequality”, 13.

8 According to Tabitha Kiriti-Nganga, *Institutions and Gender Inequality*, 5, girls’ education has been shown to have a dramatic impact on women’s economic power and on families’ welfare – a matter that is strongly emphasised in this essay. The main challenge remains that “progress towards gender equality in education still lags behind both in absolute terms and relative to that of boys”, Kiriti-Nganga, *Institutions and Gender Inequality*, 5.

9 In Kenya, among the Sabaot people, as long as the girl is circumcised, dowry is paid even without education and therefore most parents do not see any problem with not educating girls further than the most elementary level. The problem is that ignorance among women remains the biggest weapon that is used to deny women their right to live with dignity.

10 A socioeconomic approach in the perspective of this essay is an approach which argues that the realisation of poverty alleviation depends on empowering RCEA women, not as a favour, but as a right.

need to sensitise these women to available means of generating income. In all of this, a consciousness of the underlying gender-based causes of poverty will be important, since “(g)ender inequality is generally manifested in unequal rights for women to access basic social services such as education and health, unequal opportunities for participation in political and economic decision making nationally and at the household level.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Gender, poverty and human dignity: A Kenyan perspective**

Gendered poverty and the right to human dignity have been recognised as the most central challenges to the development of humanity. Poverty is a dehumanising condition for everyone. It violates the human rights of the affected, whether women or men. Poverty subjects an individual to a state of powerlessness, hopelessness, and a lack of self-esteem, confidence and integrity. It leads to a situation of multidimensional vulnerability. Poverty cuts across race, age and ethnicity. It also has a clear gender dimension and women and men experience and react differently to its impact. Unless there are realistic and workable interventions to address the situation, a vicious circle of perpetual poverty develops where it is inherited from one generation to the next in households, communities and society at large. Breaking the cycle of poverty, or at least reducing its impact, requires a concerted effort which will also include a gender perspective in all intervention strategies.

#### **Poverty in Kenya**

Kenya has one of the highest rates of population growth in the world. Over the past 30 years, the population has more than tripled, greatly increasing pressure on the country’s resources. Together with widening the income gap between rich and poor, this has also eroded gains in education, health, food security and employment. Kenya’s population currently stands at forty million, of which 75 to 80% live in rural areas. Some ten million people live in urban areas, with over three million residing in the capital, Nairobi.<sup>12</sup> Kenya is among the thirty poorest countries in the world, number 152 of 177 countries on the 2006 Human Development Index. Inequalities are rife, wide with the top ten percent of Kenyans earning 44% of the national income, whilst the bottom 10% earns less than one percent.<sup>13</sup> Kenya’s

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11 Kiriti & Roy, “Gender Inequality”, 1.

12 IFAD, “Rural Poverty Portal”.

13 UNICEF, “Kenya at a Glance”.

national poverty rate<sup>14</sup> was 53% in 2005. In 1997, the Kenya Central Bureau of Statistics noted that 54% of rural and 63% of urban women and girls live below the poverty line.<sup>15</sup>

Although experiencing relative political stability, poverty and traditionalism remain two serious obstacles to women's rights in Kenya. The World Bank's "Country Assistance Strategy" recognises that women are more likely than men to be poor and more vulnerable to adverse shocks than men.<sup>16</sup> Women in Kenya are indeed poorer than men. This is due, among other things, to a limited ability to own land and property (only 5% of land is owned by women), which negatively affects women's ability to participate in economic activity. Levels of education and literacy for men and women also differ widely. Although the number of boys and girls in school is roughly equal at the primary school level, men substantially outnumber women in higher education. With regard to illiteracy, 70% of illiterate Kenyans are female. Even though women make up about 75% of the agricultural work force and some have become active in urban small businesses, the average monthly income of women is about two thirds of that of men.<sup>17</sup> Women also have difficulty moving into fields that are not traditionally open to them, such as teaching and nursing. They are promoted more slowly than men, and bear the brunt of retrenchment, should this occur.

Gender-based inequalities in education, health and nutrition, labour and in other areas are likely to increase the overall level of poverty of women. This was stipulated at the United Nations' Beijing Platform for Action in its Declaration of 1995.<sup>18</sup> Globally, it is mostly women who suffer from lack of income and productive resources, as a result of which they have a poor livelihood, suffer hunger and malnutrition, ill health, limited or lack of access to education and other basic services, increasing morbidity and mortality from illness, homelessness and inadequate housing, unsafe environments and social discrimination as well as exclusion from society.<sup>19</sup>

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14 In 2005, Kenya poverty line was defined as 1,239 Kenya shillings (Ksh.) (US Dollar 16.81) per month and as Ksh. 2,648 (US Dollar 35.95) per month for rural and urban areas respectively.

15 Government of Kenya, Kenya Welfare Monitoring Survey III.

16 World Bank, "Republic of Kenya Country Assistance Strategy".

17 Ngige et al., "Family Diversity", 221.

18 United Nations, Declaration.

19 United Nations, Declaration, 38.

## The concepts of poverty and gender

From a historical perspective, poverty has been regarded as the insufficiency of traditional modes of production that would ensure an entire population a comfortable standard of living. Much has been written on gender and poverty and on the fact that the household has been the unit of analysis for studying gender and poverty, with overall equity concerns. For the last three decades, many women's advocates have also been arguing that women are poorer than men. The most common empirical expression of this phenomenon is the concept of "feminisation of poverty".<sup>20</sup> This phenomenon is based, amongst others, on findings that female-headed households tend to be poorer than male-headed households. Critical analysts of gender and poverty noted that this generalisation of gender poverty narrows the messy complexities posed by gender relations within households. This idea has become popular both in shaping analyses of poverty and poverty alleviation strategies. Thus, targeting women has become the focus of gender-sensitive poverty alleviation.

Aspects of sex will not vary substantially between different human societies, while aspects of gender may vary greatly. While sex refers to physiological characteristics, the World Health Organization defines "gender" as socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.<sup>21</sup> Gender is a central organising principle of societies, and often governs the processes of production and reproduction, consumption and distribution.

Furthermore, though poverty is a relative concept given the variety of contexts in which it is found, it is a multidimensional problem, encompassing not only the material aspects of human life but also its social, physical, mental and spiritual dimensions. As such, poverty has many facets: hunger, malnutrition, high infant and maternal mortality rates, limited access to fresh water and good sanitation, illiteracy, low income, indebtedness, vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change, global exclusion, powerlessness, exposure to disease and epidemics. HIV and AIDS and climate change are arguably the most pressing of these issues. The effects of poverty also cause psychosocial stress, frustration and the disruption of family life and often go hand in hand with increases in crime rates and violence.

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20 Kabeer, *Gender Mainstreaming*.

21 World Health Organization, "What Do We Mean by Sex and Gender?"



## Reasons for the persistence of poverty

Poverty is created and perpetuated not by a single isolated cause but by a number of closely interlinked socioeconomic processes.

### **Poor health and health-related issues**

As in other poor societies, the burden of ill-health continues to be a threat to the overall economic and social development of Kenya and undermines the physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing of Kenyans. In many cases, the poor health of one or several family members leads to an inability to work, or at least to decreased productivity. In addition, such households incur high costs for medical treatment.

Women and children in Kenya have unequal access to basic health resources and primary health care. Children's diseases, malnutrition, anaemia, diarrhoea and malaria are common in poor families.<sup>22</sup> The increasing number of widows and orphans as a result of HIV and AIDS deaths has also significantly increased women's workload and their financial responsibilities.<sup>23</sup>

### **Economic obstacles**

Although women are major role players in Kenya's agriculture and informal business sector, men tend to dominate in the formal sector. Most women (58%) in the formal sector are employed in service industries and they typically occupy the lower-paid jobs.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Poor resource management***

Poor resource management and poverty are closely related. Especially rural poverty and malnutrition are closely linked to degradation of the environment, as poverty depletes natural resources, which in turn exacerbates the suffering of the rural poor. Land degradation and desertification in arid and semi-arid areas are occurring at an alarming rate due to climatic changes, overgrazing and inappropriate agricultural practices, with poor pastoralists and herdsmen cited as both perpetrators and victims.

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22 The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, "Maternal and Child Health: Kenya".

23 USAID, "Review of Gender Issues".

24 Oiro et al., "Poverty and Employment"; Manda, "Globalisation and the Labour Market".

### ***Natural cycles and processes***

In most Kenyan regions, the rural poor are adversely affected by seasonal fluctuations in food supply. Seasonal food shortages are often aggravated because the poor are forced to sell their harvest immediately at cheap prices so as to meet other pressing needs, only to then be forced to buy some of it back later at much higher prices. Seasonal shortages also create indebtedness – in order to survive, the poor have to borrow money at exorbitant interest rates.

### **Poor governance**

Poor governance due to a lack of political will and the public's ignorance of rights and the law are other important factors; so are lack of access to public information, the incomprehensiveness of legal language and practices, and conflict between customary and civil law; all of these affect and marginalise women in particular. Extreme poverty, non-affordability of legal services, impunity of law enforcement officers in executing their duties and poor work conditions of law enforcement agencies leading to poor morals, poor management of law enforcement institutions and corruption are all also contributing factors. The latter cause internal displacement and any development which has been achieved is greatly affected by this.

## **Biblical perspectives on poverty**

Poverty is one of the key themes in the Bible and it is often referred to in both Testaments. Poverty in Scripture can be both social and spiritual. The words “poor” and “poverty” cover a wide range of meanings, sometimes linked to terms like “widow” or “orphan”, underscoring the expansive nature of the topic. In addition, because not all poor people are destitute, the meaning of these terms is heavily dependent upon the context in which it is used.

### **Poverty in the Old Testament**

The word “poverty” is found only once in the Old Testament (Gen 45:11) outside of the Book of Proverbs, in which it occurs many times (6:11; 10:15; 11:24 the KJV; 13:18; 20:13; 23:21; 24:34; 28:19,22 the KJV; 30:8; 31:7). In the Genesis text, *yivaresh* is translated as “to be poor”, “to come to poverty”. In Proverbs, four different Hebrew words are used, all bearing the idea of being in need of the necessities of life – although a distinction is made between being in want and being in extreme want. Proverbs 18:23 illustrates the general meaning of “poverty” as

found in this book well: “The poor (*rush*, “to be impoverished”, “destitute”) useth entreaties; but the rich answereth roughly” (KJV).

In the Old Testament, the poor are those who depend on others for their basic needs. They include orphans, strangers, foreigners and widows (Exod 22:21-24). These people look upon others for the daily provision of their needs. Before entering to the Promised Land, God promised the Israelites prosperity and that none of them will be poor. This promise, however, depended on their obedience to God (Deut 15:4-5).

The Israelites were rebellious and disobedient to God. This led to the presence of many poor people in the land. God had to put laws in place to safeguard the welfare of the poor. The poor should be treated fairly, provided for and paid for their services (Exod 23:2-7; Lev 25; Deut 12-15). During the monarchy, the economic structures changed, with money playing a key role. Rich people exploited the poor, as can be seen in the example of King Ahab and Naboth in 1 Kings 21. At this time, the prophets were the voice of God and poverty became equivalent to being oppressed (Amos 2:6; 4:1; Isa 10:1-2; Micah 2-3).

In Wisdom Literature, virtue is at times associated with poverty and wickedness with wealth. Proverbs, however, also mentions other causes of poverty such as laziness (10:4; 20:13), foolishness (10:14-16) and short-sightedness (21:5). Another cause may be called the “culture of poverty”. According to Proverbs 10:15, “The ruin of the poor is their poverty.” Poverty breeds poverty, and the cycle is not easily broken. People who grow up in an impoverished culture usually lack the nutrition and the education that would enable them to be successful in the future, to break out of the cycle of poverty.

In Psalms, the poor turn to God in their suffering to seek for help (Psalm 72:2-4). Poverty is also associated with misfortune, persecution, or judgment. Poverty is a result of human sinfulness, among other causes. As shown by the prophets, the main cause of poverty, which also applies to our present society, is injustice and exploitation of the poor by the rich. God is, however, concerned about and cares for the poor, even though in the Book of Job God allows Satan to test Job by bringing misfortune upon him, amongst others in the form of poverty (Job 1:12-19).

### **Poverty in the New Testament**

The word “poverty” occurs three times in the New Testament (2 Cor 8:2, 9 and Rev 2:9) and is the translation of *ptocheia*, “to be reduced to a state of beggary”.

The New Testament, by its use of two words for “poor”, distinguishes between two forms of “the poor”. In 2 Corinthians 9:9 (“he hath given to the poor” – all quotations here from the KJV), the word used is *penes*, which does not indicate extreme poverty, but simply a condition of living from hand to mouth. In other words, the poor being those who do not have the means to secure a livelihood or at best a bare and scant livelihood – such as the widow who casts her two mites into the treasury (Luke 21:2). In passages such as 2 Corinthians 6:10 (“As poor, yet making many rich”), and Luke 6:20 (“Blessed are ye poor”), *ptochoi* refers to a condition of abject beggary, pauperism, such as that of Lazarus, who lay at the gate of the rich man’s palace, begging for the crumbs that fell from the table of the rich man (Luke 16:20, 21). It was into this latter condition, according to 2 Corinthians 8:9, that Christ voluntarily entered for our sakes: “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor [a mendicant, a beggar], that you through his poverty might become rich.”

The parables highlight compassion and care for the needy (Luke 16:19-31; 19:1-10; Mark 12:38-44). Apart from teaching about the necessity to help the poor, Jesus also showed compassion and care for them (Luke 7:12-15; Mark 8:1-9; Matt 25:31-36). In fact, most of the teachings about the poor in the New Testament are found in the gospels. The life of Christ was one of poverty, an impression very generally derived from the familiar words of Isaiah 53 and also from Philippians 2:7 (“took Himself the form of a slave”) and 2 Corinthians 8:9 (“He became poor that ye through his poverty might become rich”).

Jesus understood the reality of poverty in society (Matt 26:9-11) and the difficulties of the poor (Mark 12:42-44). He stressed the need to give to the poor (Matt 19:21; Luke 12:33) and to provide for them (Luke 14:13 and Luke 14:21). Jesus himself identified with poor people and, like many poor persons, he did not have a home (Luke 9:58). However, he also taught how difficult it was to be rich (Matt 19:23-24) and the necessity of spiritual poverty for a relationship with God (Matt 5:3).

Upon Jesus’ ascension, the early church took care of the poor and the needy (Acts 2:44-45; 4:33-35). As the church spread beyond Jerusalem, this practice of caring for the needy continued. This is clear in the writings of Paul (1 Cor 16:1-2; 2 Cor 8:1-4 on the collections being made for needy). Paul encourages Christians to be mindful of the welfare of the needy and to always remember them (Rom 12:13). James was also against the unfair treatment of the poor (James 2:1-6).<sup>25</sup>

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25 Cf. Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 147.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament asserts the reality of poverty and the continued presence of the poor in our midst. And in the New Testament, as in the Old Testament, poverty is also no respecter of gender.

### **Christian response to poverty**

The poor are not simply the responsibility of government and social welfare programmes; they are members of our own communities. When we reflect on the writings of the prophets, the teachings of Jesus, or the letters of the apostles, we are challenged to take the issue of the poor very seriously and to act on it. Christians throughout the centuries have been in the forefront of the fight against poverty and injustice and it will be easy to name countless examples from the history of Christianity. The poor are “living images of God”, wrote Martin Luther in 1522, an opinion shared by Ulrich Zwingli, who argued that God “turned all visible cults from himself to the poor”.<sup>26</sup> John Calvin similarly drew on early Christian writers, particularly on John Chrysostom, the late fourth-century bishop of Antioch and Constantinople, for his views on social welfare.<sup>27</sup>

Christians should reach out to those in poverty by distributing their own financial resources and by supporting ministries working in this area. Such an outreach provides churches with a mechanism to meet the physical needs of the poor as well as a context to meet their spiritual needs. As referred to above, in 1 Corinthians 16, Paul talks about a collection that was sent from the churches to the Jerusalem believers. We also find many scriptural admonitions calling on Christians to share their resources with others (2 Cor 9:7; 1 Tim 5:9-10; 6:18; James 1:27).

### **Care for the poor and hungry**

Most of the poor live in places which are often physically or socially isolated. They are neglected, stigmatised, and even brutalised. But, as Jesus did, we should make deliberate efforts to regularly visit and make friends of the poor and neglected and show our love for and solidarity with them to remove the stigma associated with poverty.

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<sup>26</sup> Palmer Wandel, *Always among us*, 40 (n.17) (Luther) and 62 (Zwingli).

<sup>27</sup> Palmer Wandel, *Always among us*, 41 (Oecolampadius). For an English translation of Gregory's *Oration 14*, see Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 76-97.

## **Community empowerment**

In order to rebuild and upgrade the quality of life of the poverty-stricken, the church can provide the surrounding communities with education on sanitation and general health in a language that they understand. The church can provide parent education in such areas as nutrition, hygiene, family planning and childcare. The church can teach the poor better methods of farming to increase their food production, to protect their environment and to improve their water supply. Attention should be given to the establishment of industries so the poor can get employment or learn some skills that can make them employable. Those with employable skills should consider it a responsibility and calling to help those without skills to learn these skills.

## **Concern for social welfare as the church's celebration of human dignity**

This essay also calls for serious reflection on and theologising of social welfare ministries in the church. This must also be done in pulpits as a *nota ecclesia* (mark of the church). It also places the church under the obligation to practise political discernment in the pursuit of giving preferential option for the poor as it is so clearly formulated by the so-called liberation theologians. Rulers should be taught not to oppress the poor (Prov 28:3; 29:14; 31:9) and Christians should be exhorted to abound in the virtue of hospitality, which of course also finds expression in kindness to those in need (Rom 12:13; 1 Tim 6:18; 1 John 3:17).

## **RCEA women**

Returning to the issue of poverty among women in the RCEA, most of the latter church's members are women.<sup>28</sup> Women are the most active and devoted members of the church. When it comes to faithfulness in contributing to the financial survival of the church, women take the lead, giving from the little income they have. They also often work extra hard for the church. Some of these women come from communities in which girls and women are already generally expected to work extra hard in order to provide for the family in addition to their usual occupation of keeping the house.

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28 Mombo and Joziase have made one observation in relation to the church attendance of women in most churches in Kenya: "One observation can immediately be made when one enters a Kenyan church, no matter the denomination or the geographical area in which it is situated: the pews are overwhelmingly filled with women," Mombo & Joziase, "From the Pew to the Pulpit", 183.

Christine Bodewes notes that “(s)ingle mothers ... in the Kibera slums [in Nairobi, the biggest of its kind in Africa] suffer a high degree of poverty ... Some have a very hard time getting access to loans in order to start small business.”<sup>29</sup> This combined with poor education and few skills cause single women in the RCEA to continue living in a cycle of poverty. Some women serve as the mentors of their daughters. They teach them small trades, including how to run a household, because of the assumption that women will eventually get married. Bearing in mind the engendered roles in the Kenyan society, many women would rather teach their daughters to earn an income through small businesses than help them to obtain formal higher education. This they do in order to prepare their daughters for life in a society as they know it; a society which discriminates against women with regard to the kinds of employment they may pursue. Oanda et al. have established that in Kenya, women constitute over 50% of the population, but 70% live in poverty. According to a 2004 Republic of Kenya report, “female enrolment average 49%, 48.2% and 30.8% in public primary, secondary and tertiary levels respectively in 2004.”<sup>30</sup> With such difficulty to access higher education, girls are unlikely to develop skills that will permit them to enter high status positions, for example, civil service or even being ordained as a pastor in the RCEA.

Unfortunately, not all of those girls who are enrolled in higher educational levels (secondary and tertiary levels) complete their education. Some drop out of school due to lack of funds. According to Mutindi Mumbua Kiluva-Ndunda (2001:11), “(g)irls are more likely to be withdrawn from school by their parents to help with household chores or to render services as maids (child labourers) to help feed their families ... Additionally, young girls are married off as child brides to elderly men for bride wealth; part of which usually finances the education of male siblings.”<sup>31</sup> This has made it very difficult to reduce if not to break the cycle of poverty among RCEA women.

Men, on the other hand, may pursue a more or less steady course of education, whether they are peasants or urban workers. Men thus acquire the necessary skills for an occupation. In towns, in order to earn an income, a shop is often attached to the living quarters of a family, while in rural places, a kiosk may often be found within the homestead and these are run by women. In many cases, when women are given any new skills, these skills are domestically oriented. They are taught by

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29 Christine Bodewes, *Parish Transformation*, 164.

30 Oanda et al., *Privatisation*, 66.

31 Kiluva-Ndunda, *Women's Agency*, 11.

their mothers to engage in trade only in as far as they need to assist in running the family.

Because of poverty, some RCEA women may even be “involved in polyandrous relationships where a woman has one man providing for food and another man paying house rent.”<sup>32</sup> Marriage is considered an important rite of passage in Kenyan society.<sup>33</sup> This is a notion that also permeates the RCEA and therefore affects many RCEA women. Unmarried women in the RCEA generally hold lower-status jobs, with the majority of them being domestic servants.<sup>34</sup> Some towns in Kenya place restrictions on certain jobs, based on a woman’s marital status. Moreover, women who operate their own businesses without a male figure are called names (for example “these are spoiled women”). Like many other mainline churches in Kenya, membership of RCEA was initially not even open to single women.<sup>35</sup> Today, however, four categories of single women are found in the RCEA: divorcees, single mothers, spinsters and widows.

As is the case with many other mainline churches in Kenya, the RCEA has been criticised for neglecting single women and for not allowing women into leadership positions.

In widowhood, a woman does not have many options. She cannot determine whether or not to remarry, whom or whom not to marry, and whether or not to continue with her husband’s business. When the husband dies, the relatives scramble for his property. The widow will have no choice but to accept to be inherited by a man whom the relatives of the husband will choose for her. Widows who refuse to be inherited in this way are left without anything.<sup>36</sup> This again shows the relationship between gender and economic power or the lack thereof.

Because of poverty levels and gender disparity, many RCEA women who do have employment frequently change their work over the course of their lifetime. Men are at liberty to choose a trade and to keep to it. Because women’s duties are seen as lying primarily within the home and in motherhood, they are more likely than men to lose or to change their occupation due to a change in circumstances at home. Furthermore, in Kisii District in Kenya, for example, as Margrethe Silberschmidt reports, “(a)lcohol abuse mainly by men has become very common

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32 Simon & Altstein, *Global Perspectives*, 97.

33 Cf. Knox & Schacht, *Choices in Relationships*, 211.

34 Cf. Spronk, *Ambiguous Pleasures*, 75.

35 Cf. Freeman, *Pentecostalism*, 135.

36 Cf. Englund, *Christianity and Public Culture*, 117.



... Men have become increasingly alienated from their household ... [and] where women's responsibilities have increased, gender antagonism has intensified."<sup>37</sup> Even when a woman helps her family through their economic struggles, respect, praise and honour is usually given to her husband and rarely to her.

There are, however, also stories of RCEA women who have struggled in their own humble ways to educate their children, even in homes where husbands are constantly absent and where financial support by these husbands is often lacking. It is against the above-mentioned background that we seek to read Proverbs 31 for the socioeconomic justice of RCEA women.

### **The Book of Proverbs in general**

From a socioeconomic perspective, Dave Bland has argued that the Book of Proverbs, and particularly chapter 31, stems from the wealthy and elite of the Israelite culture. According to Bland,

“(t)hree basic types of women described in Proverbs are rich and emancipated ... The temptress woman of chapter 5, 6 and 7 who lives a life of ease using wealth to entrap unsuspecting husbands ... the quarrelsome woman of 21:9 and 25:24 who lives in a spacious house yet drives her husband to live in a corner rooftop of her house ... and the woman of noble character in Proverbs 31:10-31 who manages her household and engages in foreign trade.”<sup>38</sup>

Arguably, even though the temptress woman of Proverbs 5, 6 and 7 and the quarrelsome woman of 21:9 and 25:24 are described in negative terms, it is worth noting that the three women lived in a time when society apparently allowed women to be socioeconomically active.

The Book of Proverbs falls in the category of Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament, together with books such as the Book of Job, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. According to Richard J. Clifford, “(t)he book of Proverbs consists of several collections, speeches, poems and two-line sayings.”<sup>39</sup> In most cases, the Book of Proverbs contains instructions from a father to a son (Prov 1-9) or from a mother to a son (Prov 31:1-9). We do not hear instructions from a father to the daughter or from a mother to a daughter in the Book of Proverbs. In general, the Book of Proverbs seems to emphasise that if one lives life according to the stipulated rules, then life will bring rewards. However, if one violates rules and,

<sup>37</sup> Silberschmidt, “*Women forget*”, 50-51.

<sup>38</sup> Bland, *Proverbs*, 20.

<sup>39</sup> Clifford, *Proverbs*, 1.

for example, misuses one's strength (e.g., for sex and alcohol, Prov 31:1-9), then it bodes disaster for one's life.

Roland E. Murphy points out that "(t)he confidence that the Israelite sages had in their teachings is rather disarming. Peace, prosperity, success – every blessing, in short – seem to flow from observance of Proverbs that were handed down."<sup>40</sup> By analogy, proverbs have been used in Kenya and among many RCEA communities to pass on communal values from one generation to another. Arguably, the Book of Proverbs may thus be one mode in which the RCEA church can instil values, also about poverty and wealth.

### **Proverbs 31:1-9 from the perspective of Proverbs 31:10-31**

Some commentators who read Proverbs 31 concentrate specifically on 31:10-31. For a person who reads commentaries on Proverbs 31, it may be difficult to realise that Proverbs 31:1-9 is in fact part of Proverbs 31:10-31, since the former is often read as though the latter does not exist.<sup>41</sup> One example is the view of Alice Giraud, who commences to write on Proverbs 31 by saying that in "Proverbs 31 woman is not mentioned as being perfect, but living in the maximized state that God created her to be in."<sup>42</sup>

In this essay, we read Proverbs 31:10-31 against the background of verses 1-9 to show that for a woman to be portrayed as working as hard as the "noble woman" of Proverbs 31:10-31, there must have been a reason. That reason, we argue, is probably because some men were possibly using their energy in pursuit of sexual pleasures and in craving alcohol (Prov 31: 1-9). It is also possible that the "noble woman" of Proverbs 31:10-31 has to work hard because her husband was mostly not at home, but at the city gates receiving praises on the account of the hard work *of his wife*.<sup>43</sup>

According to Murphy, the *lamed* before Lamuel in 31:1 can be interpreted "either as possessive ('of'), or as the indirect object of the teaching of the queen

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40 Murphy, *Proverbs*, xxv.

41 In fact, in the RCEA there is always an annual conference which brings together RCEA women from across Kenya. The conference usually brings together about 800 women representatives from different parishes of different presbyteries in Kenya (East Africa). Notably, Proverbs 31:10-31 is always read to women to emphasise the importance of RCEA women being as hard working as the "noble wife" of Proverbs 31:10-31. An attempt to read Proverbs 31:1-9 showed that some women did not know of the existence of Proverbs 31:1-9.

42 Giraud, *The Single Proverbs 31 Woman*, 9-10.

43 Murphy, *Proverbs*, 247; and Proverbs 31:23.

mother.”<sup>44</sup> If it is interpreted as the indirect object of the teaching of Lamuel’s mother, then a possible reading of the *lamed* should be “the words for”, or the “words dedicated to”. Understood in this way, the translation “for” or “dedicated to” goes well with the advice Lamuel’s mother gives to her son, because from verses 2-9 one finds direct speech (from Lamuel’s mother to Lamuel).

With this translation in mind, not much information is given about this king who is addressed in Proverbs 31:1 besides the mention of the name Lamuel by his mother. Rodney E. Whittle asserts that there is no record of any King Lamuel who sat on the throne of Judah, nor of Israel; neither is there any record of any king by the name among the surrounding nations.<sup>45</sup> Whittle therefore points to a possible connection of the name Lamuel to King Solomon. According to Whittle, “the prophet Nathan, apparently at the word of the Lord gave the name ‘Jedidah’ to the child whom David called Solomon.”<sup>46</sup> Whittle also notes that “Jedidah” means “beloved of the Lord”, while Lamuel means “devoted to the Lord”.

In any case, Whittle points out that “most commentators agree that Lamuel was very likely a nickname or a pet name which his mother, Bathsheba, gave to Solomon.”<sup>47</sup> Even so, what we do know is that in Proverbs 31:1-3, Lamuel’s mother repeatedly uses the word “son” referring to him as a son of her own womb.<sup>48</sup> She also uses language of endearment (Proverbs 31: 2-3 “my son, the son of my womb”) to show her close kinship to the king and the seriousness of the advice that she is giving.<sup>49</sup> Murphy contends that Lamuel’s mother is here emphasising her authority by referring to her maternal privilege. She has not only given birth to the King but also possibly dedicated him, hence the use of the vows, in the same sense as Hannah in 1 Sam. 1:11 and 28.<sup>50</sup> The advice is very clear: King Lamuel should not use all his strength in pursuit of sexual pleasure. The word translated with “strength”

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44 Murphy, *Proverbs*, 239.

45 Whittle, *Exploring the Word*, 155.

46 Whittle, *Exploring the Word*, 155.

47 Whittle, *Exploring the Word*, 155.

48 It is important here to take note of the fact that the text only mentions the name of the king as Lamuel. However, despite the quality of the wisdom that the mother of King Lamuel is giving him, the text does not mention the name of the king’s mother or the name of the king’s father.

49 Carol Fontaine, “Proverbs”, 154, has posed that Proverbs 31 is highly unusual since it presents an instruction given by the mother of Lamuel rather than the typical father-to-son form encountered in other proverbs, as in Proverbs 1:8, 4:1ff and 10:1.

50 Murphy, *Proverbs*, 241.

here can also be used in reference to physical powers as in “vigour” or “stamina”.<sup>51</sup> According to the Bible, King Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines.<sup>52</sup> Thus the mother of King Lamuel is clearly telling her son that doing this is unwise.

Lamuel’s mother also warns her son against drinking wine, telling him that rulers should not crave strong drink that intoxicates as it can cause them to forget what they decreed, and it may remove from the poor their legal rights (31:4–6). Strong drink can only be given to those who are dying in order to ease their suffering and help them forget.<sup>53</sup> The kings and rulers were supposed to stay sober so that they could pay attention to the suffering and the poor.<sup>54</sup> According to Murphy, the tone of Proverbs 31 and particularly of verses 1–9 is unusual: “From the lips of the mother of the king come demands that go beyond the more carefully phrased royal sayings as 28:16 and 29:12.”<sup>55</sup> The emphatic words “you must defend” serve to show that because of poverty, the poor during this time could not defend themselves physically in court. It is not clear from the text if lack of education cause many people during this time not to conduct legal defence for themselves, hence being left with muted voices.

Even so, at this point of our discussion, it is important to accentuate that there is no clear transition between Proverbs 31:1–9 and Proverbs 31:10–31. From Proverbs 31:2–3, one knows that it is the mother of Lamuel who speaks until verse 9. However, it is not immediately possible to know from the text whose voice poses the rhetorical question “A wife of noble character who can find?” Who the narrator of the story of the noble wife is, we do not know. However, one can arguably notice that there is an immediate shift from the voice of a woman who names and exposes the plight of the poor and vulnerable in her society in order to inform Lamuel that it is his duty to use his royal power to address the plight of the poor. From the voice of the latter woman, the text immediately moves to emphatically describe a woman living in economic luxury and enjoying a higher

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51 The Good News Bible translates this in a concrete way: “Do not use all your energy on sex and all your money on women; they have destroyed kings.” However, it is important to note that several translations, including the NRSV and NIV, just say: “Do not use all your strength on women.” If we adopt the words “your strength on women”, then it is not immediately clear as to what exactly the king would be doing with women while using his strength. Thus, for the purpose of this essay, we adopt the Good News translation because it is more specific.

52 Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, 157.

53 According to Murphy, “the king here is to provide a supply of drink for the unfortunate people who need it as a kind of comfort (?) for their misery,” Murphy, *Proverbs*, 239.

54 Murphy, *Proverbs*, 239.

55 Murphy, *Proverbs*, 241.

social status, *but* one who also shares her economic luxury with the poor in her society. Does this show that the narrator explains that in the society of Proverbs 31 women have to be proactive for poverty to be reduced? We do not know.

The detailed description of the nameless “noble” woman of Proverbs 31 leaves one with many questions. Specifically since King Lamuel’s mother just advised her son that a king should not (ab)use his strength and should not use strong drink. The question is: Does this mean that the woman described in Proverbs 31:10–31 is exactly one like the mother of King Lamuel? Otherwise, would she perhaps not have given such details if it was not possible to find such a hard-working woman?<sup>56</sup> According to Clifford, the poem of Proverbs 31 is unique in genre. For Clifford, “(l)ike hymns to Yahweh the Warrior such as Exodus 15 and Judges 5, it extols the subject’s strength, wisdom and success or ‘victory.’”<sup>57</sup> Because of the nature of the poem, Clifford suggests that “the unity of the poem comes more from its alphabetic sequences than from its narrative logic.”<sup>58</sup>

If this is the case, then it is quite probable that Lamuel’s mother lived in a time when most kings and rulers, and by extension most men, did use most of their strength in sexual pursuit and spent much of their time drinking. She, therefore, sings praises for a woman who took care of the family when some men were possibly misusing their strength, drinking, and sitting idly at the city gates receiving praises on account of the hard work of their wives (31:23). Was the reason behind the mother’s words perhaps also because poverty was at the order of the day during that time?

Furthermore, does this mean that this nameless woman of Proverbs 31 could only be economically successful if unjust systems against the poor were addressed? Again, one cannot be sure. What one can see though, is that the woman of Proverbs 31 is described as a hard-working woman who rises very early to economically sustain her family, and this follows on Lamuel’s mother words of wisdom on the do’s and don’ts to address the plight of the poor and the vulnerable in society. Understood this way, Lamuel’s mother’s words certainly present a pattern for women to follow, as well as for men. Thus one may argue that this is intended to make the point that, while it was common to find kings and rulers who drink wine and strong drink, the nameless noble wife of Proverbs 31:10–31 was indeed

56 The nameless hard-working woman of Proverbs 31 resembles most African women. Most of them do rise up very early in the morning to look for food so that they can be able to feed their families (cf. Worldviews, “Women in Africa”).

57 Clifford, *Proverbs*, 273.

58 Clifford, *Proverbs*, 273.

rare. The following issues stand out from the discussion above on the voice of a woman in Proverbs 31:1-9 and from the description of the “noble wife” of Proverbs 31:10-31:

- ♦ The voice of one championing for the rights of the poor and the vulnerable in the society of Proverbs 31 is that of a woman;
- ♦ The nameless woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 uses her strength to sustain her family at a time when kings were probably using their strength for sexual pleasure;
- ♦ After using all their strength and money on women and becoming hopeless, the kings and rulers probably sought solace in drink, thus leaving the poor in society defenceless;
- ♦ The act of taking care of the poor and the needy in society is shown as coming from a woman (Prov 31:20);
- ♦ While it was the nameless woman of Proverbs 31:10-31 who worked hard to sustain the family, it was her husband who received praise at the gates of the city (31:23).

We have specifically raised the above-mentioned issues in the text so that we can be able to reread Proverbs 31 with a view to the socioeconomic justice of RCEA women and by extension of all Kenyan women. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner maintain that such a rereading highlights the liberating elements of the Bible in order to challenge and resist the oppressive ones: “With such a re-reading, one is able to focus not only on the socio-historical contexts of Proverbs 31, but even more importantly on the contexts and the social locations of African women readers of biblical texts.”<sup>59</sup>

### **Rereading Proverbs 31 for the socio-economic justice of RCEA women**

With the above reading of Proverbs 31, we once again return to the situation in Kenya with regard to poverty.<sup>60</sup> One of the faces of poverty in Kenya is also the face of HIV and AIDS. Because of poverty, many rural women in the RCEA are infected by husbands returning from their places of work that are often hundreds of miles away in urban areas like Mombasa, Nairobi, Nakuru, Eldoret and Kisumu, where they patronise sex workers or even establish second families. Because Kenyan society is a patriarchal society, men are socially constructed to believe that it is

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59 Vander Stichele & Penner, *Feminist And Postcolonial Engagements*, 184.

60 Cf. Kiriti & Roy, “Gender Inequality”, 147.

normative for them to have multiple sexual relationships.<sup>61</sup> Unlike in the Kenyan traditional society where polygamous husbands were able to take care of the wives they marry, many men in Kenya today will run away from the responsibility of economically sustaining polygamous marriages. In fact, some men in Kenya will marry a second wife in case the first wife has many children. In this way, it is possible for this man to take shelter in the house of a wife who has a small family so that he can run away from the economic responsibility of taking care of the family of a wife who has many children.

Kiriti and Roy state that in Kenya 1.4 million women in the age bracket 15–49 years were HIV-positive compared to 0.9 million men in the same category by the end of 2001.<sup>62</sup> Women and girls are more exposed to HIV because of their limited access to economic and educational opportunities and because of the multiple household and community roles for which they are responsible. As such, many RCEA women are left to struggle not only with this burden, but the burden of being the backbone of the rural economies, farming small plots, selling fruit and vegetables and providing in the basic necessities for their families.

Indeed, many RCEA women work as hard as the noble woman described in Proverbs 31:10–31, even with scarcity of resources and in the midst of unjust structures where there are few champions for the needs of the poor and the vulnerable.<sup>63</sup> RCEA women often must travel long distances on bad roads to the markets (especially in the rainy season), sometimes late at night. Moreover, not only the spread of HIV to women by adulterous husbands, but also the idleness of many men in the RCEA (which all sounds very familiar in light of Proverbs 31) continues to be a breeding ground for increased poverty levels among RCEA women. Finally, and ironically, the culturally-accepted “ideal woman” in Kenya is also one who works as hard as the woman of Proverbs 31, which unfortunately

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61 Kamau, in *Researching AIDS*, 112, has pointed out that “(p)atriarchy in Kenya has its roots in long established traditions of male dominance, which have made male perspective to be the social perspective and therefore social norm. It is within such a context that multiple sexual relationships among Kenyan men continue to remain uncriticised.”

62 Kiriti & Roy, “Gender Inequality”, 170.

63 According to Christine Roy Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 78, “the business-like dynamics of marriage provide a backdrop against which to interpret the explanation for the high ‘price’ of the woman of substance given in Prov. 31:11–12 ... There, her husband is said to trust her not because he loves her, but because he never lacks for ‘loot’. His ‘plunder’ from what she brings home makes him a wealthy man.” Could this be a reason why Proverbs 31:10–31 is a favourite text in many churches in Kenya? In every women’s fellowship in the RCEA, it is possible that there will at least be a reference to Proverbs 31:10–31. One could ascribe such incidents to the patriarchal setting of the RCEA.

causes more than one man to watch his wife from a distance as she struggles to economically sustain the family, often including himself.<sup>64</sup>

As was seen, Lamuel's mother opens 31:1-9 with an exhortation that is followed by two admonitions for self-restraint. That is self-restraint with regard to sexual pleasures, but also with regard to the use of alcohol.<sup>65</sup> Ironically, in contemporary Kenya, both worsen the plight of women.<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, whenever Proverbs 31 is read and preached on, especially at women's conventions, women are usually encouraged to be like the "ideal" woman of Proverbs 31. Proverbs 31:1-9 is rarely read to encourage men to shun sexual promiscuity and alcohol abuse.

When it comes to alcohol abuse, many men would pretend that they are totally drunk so that they cannot be held responsible for economic sustenance of their families. Some of the men wake up very early in the morning looking for places where *busaa* and *changaa* (types of Kenyan local brew) are sold. Some men will spend the rest of the day in these places called *mama pima* (literally "the mother who measures" as there is a specific tin used to measure the amount of alcohol depending on the amount of the money offered or depending on how strong the alcohol is). The men will then sometimes engage in unprotected sex with sex workers or return to their homes very late at night and will often become violent towards their wives. Because of such incidences of alcohol abuse, in the

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64 Cf. Ochieng' & Maxon, *An Economic History*, 124.

65 Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*, 288.

66 Silberschmidt, "Women forget", 119 shows just how big the challenge is of alcohol abuse in Kenya by referring to one of the District Offices where the following poem has been placed on the wall at a place where everybody who enters the office will be able to see and read it.

*ALCOHOL*

My name is alcohol  
I am the greatest killer in history  
I have killed more than any one battle  
I have turned men into brutes  
Made millions of homes miserable  
Transformed many promising youths into hopeless parasites  
Destroyed the weak and weakened the strong  
Made wise men fools and trampled fools into disaster  
The abandoned wives know me well  
The hungry children and the unfortunate husbands know me well too  
Under my influence one wishes to take more and more of me for they cannot resist me  
Therefore I am the "greatest" being.  
Three big cheers to me strong alcohol  
I am dangerous to your life, so  
Beware.



Nyeri district in Kenya some women have even tried to stage a demonstration demanding from government to intervene in the alcohol abuse of their husbands.

### **Alternative means of socioeconomic survival for RCEA women**

For single women, due to scarcity of resources especially in rural areas, the easiest option is often to leave children with their grandmothers and move to urban areas with the option of earning money by doing commercial sex work. The money is then sent to the grandmother to provide for the children. According to Wanjohi Kibicho, poverty has highly contributed to the growth of sex trade in Kenya.<sup>67</sup> Some widows opt for being inherited by either the relative of the deceased or any available man who can help to provide for the needs of her family. Others decide to illicitly brew *busaa* or *changaa*, running the risk of arrest and imprisonment or fines.<sup>68</sup> In light of this, it is necessary to make women aware of alternative ways of generating income.

## **Conclusion**

As was referred to in passing above, about 20-30% of RCEA women have succeeded to bring up and educate their children in spite of the existence of a continued cycle of poverty. Most of these women have on average at least nine children and in most cases they take care of the family while the husbands are absent or away from home. These RCEA women have succeeded to economically sustain their families through local microfinance methods of support groups called *Chama* in Swahili, i.e., “merry-go-round”. These groups are based on friendship, trust and mutual support.<sup>69</sup> As a testament to the reliability and hard-working nature of Kenyan women, most microfinance banks in Kenya also target women, for example, Faulu, Kenyan Women and the Women Enterprise Fund. Some women are even brave enough to get loans from these banks in order to venture into big business. According to Gita Gopal and Maryan Salim, the potential of these organisations in poverty alleviation specifically lies in the economic advancement of women.<sup>70</sup>

67 Kibicho, *Sex Tourism in Africa*, 10.

68 See Bodewes, *Parish Transformation*, 135.

69 Bonnie G. Smith, *Imperialism*, 103, has pointed out that such a women’s movement is not a recent phenomenon in Kenya. Its origins lie in the precolonial period when women did indeed form self-help groups and work parties to assist one another during periods of economic and social distress. According to Smith, this tradition has been carried forward into the present.

70 Gopal & Salim, *Gender and Law*, 26.

Given the success of these initiatives, there is a need for the RCEA to organise forums to sensitise women in terms of available microfinance enterprises and the opportunities this offers for creating employment for themselves and other women. At the same time, women should receive guidance in managing their loans in order to pay them back in time. These women should also receive training by business managers, programme managers, et cetera, to ensure that their business ventures are successful. These services should not only be offered to women who wish to enter business, but also to women in agriculture, to enable them to access finance and get training in better farming methods.

Education for both girls and boys at an equal level remains the most fundamental way out of poverty for women and girls in the RCEA and Kenya. Without education, poverty levels will remain the same. Finally, unjust systems at all levels of society have to be identified and challenged, as well as unequal distribution of available resources and power imbalances, particularly with regard to economic power.<sup>71</sup> Finally, this must also be done by women: they must find their voices and raise their voices, also concerning their economic struggle, economic marginalisation and the economic injustices committed against them and against their dignity. And those female voices that champion the rights of women to a life of dignity have to be supported by fellow women, men and the church.

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71 Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, 18, gives a detailed discussion on how the church of Christ on earth has not come to terms with, or even recognises the limits of her own power. This shows that while the church is still struggling with the issue of her own power, women will continue to live in the cycle of poverty unless this is addressed.

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### Questions for further reflection

- ♦ What is the relationship between the socioeconomic context of Proverbs 31 and the current socioeconomic context of the women in your specific society?
- ♦ What is the relationship between gender parity and poverty eradication in your society?
- ♦ How may education empower women in patriarchal societies?
- ♦ How may rereading Proverbs 31:1-9 from the perspective of Proverbs 31:10-31 be of assistance in offering a balanced view of gender equality in the Bible?

## THE POWER TO CHANGE THE WORLD

### Reflections on (theological) education and gender justice from Malawi

*Maggie Madimbo<sup>1</sup>*

#### Introduction

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world ... Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another.<sup>2</sup>

The quotation above is one of my favourite Nelson Mandela quotes. And he is correct: education is key to transforming life; it has the power to change someone's future; it equips individuals with necessary skills to face life and its challenges, to confidently make informed decisions, to become critical and creative thinkers. It follows that it should be accessible to all. For the poor, education represents a way out of poverty to a better life. This essay shares some thoughts about the importance of equal access to education, including theological education and training, for men *and* women, girls *and* boys.

There are many benefits to education. These benefits include, but are not limited to, financial, social, psychological, emotional and even intellectual benefits. According to studies by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), educated people as a rule live longer than uneducated

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1 Maggie Madimbo is a lecturer in Education and Leadership Studies at African Bible College and adjunct professor for Eastern University in the USA, holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership from Eastern University in Pennsylvania, USA. She is also the current vice-chairperson of NetACT.

2 Nelson Mandela Quotes.

people, they experience higher levels of well-being and tend to be happier and they are more engaged in civil society (in terms of voting, volunteering, political interest and interpersonal trust).<sup>3</sup> Psychologically, people tend to understand the developmental stages of their lives better and thereby are able to better manage their own lives and to steer them in the right direction. Educated people not only have better opportunities of securing better-paying jobs, and, if not employed by others, they have better skills and tools to use for income-generating activities like starting and running a business.

If the above is true, then many of the people of the world face a bleak future and, as is often the case, the future of women will be even bleaker than that of men:

In 20 years, today's children will be adults, with life stories and experiences that are unfolding now. In 20 years, today's students will be professionals, with knowledge and skills that were acquired through years of education. And in 20 years, today's out-of-school children, most of whom are girls, will wonder why we allowed them to slip through the cracks. Of an estimated 101 million children not in school, more than half are girls. They are being denied their basic human right to education, with far-reaching consequences: Without it, their future opportunities are dramatically limited. If schooling unlocks the gate to a bright and successful future, a childhood bereft of education erects nearly insurmountable barriers.<sup>4</sup>

It seems that education is indeed a gender issue, especially if “*equality of educational opportunity* is a basic right of every citizen, because education is both a prerequisite and a dimension of full social and political participation” [emphasis added – MM].<sup>5</sup> And, if gender is “... the division of people into male and female with their accompanying socially constructed roles, rules of behaviour, activities, and attributes,”<sup>6</sup> all of the latter also find expression and have bearing upon women's access to education (or not), their experiences of education and their chances of success with regard to education, especially in poor, male-dominated societies. Education is also connected to power and it will empower people to participate in decision-making and in the transformation of their lives and societies.<sup>7</sup> Education also empowers people to be less vulnerable to exploitation by and abuse at the hands of others, since it makes them conscious of their rights and of their innate

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3 OECD, “What are the social benefits”.

4 UNICEF, “Basic Education”.

5 Nash, “Equality of Educational Opportunity”, 362.

6 Harawa-Katumbi, “The Bible, Gender”, 105.

7 Maluwa-Banda, “Gender Sensitive Educational Policy”, 4.

dignity and where to find assistance when their rights or dignity are violated or threatened.

## The right to (equal) education: An issue of (gender) justice?

### Philosophical considerations

According to Article 26(1) of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.<sup>8</sup>

Gender equality in education, according to UNESCO's interpretation, refers to the notion of boys/men and girls/women experiencing the same advantages or disadvantages in attending school, receiving teaching methods, curricula, and academic orientation, and producing equal learning achievements and subsequent life opportunities.<sup>9</sup> But people will often suggest that this is only applicable to the so-called developed Western societies. In other societies, such as African societies, for cultural or pragmatic reasons, and in a context where resources are scarce, men and boys should be given preference.

But what is wrong with an argument such as this? For one, this means that at a most fundamental level, distinguishing between boys and girls, men and women, constitutes injustice. And, from both a secular perspective and a religious one, injustice is wrong, or in theological terms, sinful. Much has been written over the centuries on the theme of justice, but no reflection on it can fail to take note of the philosophical discourse on the concept and of the seminal work in this area, namely, that of John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Even though almost half a century old and not above critique, Rawls' book remains most influential. Rawls' analysis of justice rests on the basis of the maximum amount of equal liberty regarding basic rights and duties for all members of society.<sup>10</sup> One of the areas in which Rawls sees injustice is with regard to socioeconomic inequalities: that which opposes equal opportunities and beneficial results for all members of society. From Rawls' view of "Justice as Fairness,"<sup>11</sup> one may infer that "injustice is unfairness" and Rawls identifies two types of justice.

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8 United Nations, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights".

9 Cf. SACMEQ, "Progress in Gender Equality", 1.

10 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 60.

11 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 303.



Central to Rawls' theory of justice are these two concepts: the one is that of "fairness" and the other is "equality". For Rawls, justice is to be thought of as "fairness" and the latter may be understood as the demand to avoid bias of any kind in people's decisions, evaluations and in the execution of justice. It is from this concept of "fairness" that this type of justice became commonly known as "distributive justice", which is mainly concerned with the allocation of people's rights, powers, duties, and the challenges faced by the members of a society or group. For Rawls, the distributive nature of this type of justice is more important because "all social values ... are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these values is to everyone's advantage."<sup>12</sup> Likewise, for Rawls, the nature of this fairness has to be regarded as "the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought."<sup>13</sup>

As far as the concept of "equality" is concerned, fair and equal opportunity is key to Rawls' analysis. His emphasis on this concerns the fact that justice becomes evident through the elimination of all inequalities of opportunity. This argument is also linked to what Rawls would call "principles of social justice", which are central to his formulation of his "principles of justice" – fairness and equality<sup>14</sup> where, for him, "the appropriate division of advantages must be in accordance with principles acceptable to all parties."<sup>15</sup> According to Rawls then, justice entails that "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all."<sup>16</sup>

Rawls also speaks in particular of so-called *substantive justice*, which refers to the content of the rules of an institution, which will then include, for the purposes of this essay, educational institutions, and *formal justice or procedural justice*, which for Rawls refers to the actions of the individuals in the application of the above rules – in our case primarily those education officials and teachers who implement the sets of rules. Procedures are considered fair if they were made in the right way. People believe procedures are fair if they are consistent, unbiased and inclusive.<sup>17</sup> The procedural justice model suggest that procedural justice is defined by criteria which are relational in nature, such as status recognition, trust in the benevolence of authorities, and neutrality.

12 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 25.

13 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 54.

14 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 13.

15 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 14-15.

16 Quoted in Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice*, 33.

17 Phillips, "Antecedents and Consequences", 32.

This principle centres on the fact that justice should be *practised* to ensure that there is fair competition, open to all people. This does not mean that there will not be differences in the outcomes. The differences will come because people are, after all, individuals. But, even though the results will be different, the entry point or point of departure needs to be the same so that all people can compete fairly for public goods, including education.

### **Theological considerations**

For us Christians, the Bible is our standard and without a doubt justice is one of the most basic Christian notions. Space does not allow any detailed discussion of the subject, but to merely offer a short reflection on the topic here.

First of all, the God of the Bible is a God of justice. It is one of the basic biblical characteristics of God. This is seen, for example, in the Exodus story (Exod 2-5), a leading biblical motif of liberation theologians, where God stood for Israel's liberation from oppression. Biblical norms and values with regard to justice mentioned here also include, but are not limited to, Old Testament emphases on compassion for the vulnerable, marginalised and oppressed (Exod 22:22), care for the poor (Lev 23:22), the promotion of justice (for example, fairness in trade – Lev 19:36), not charging interest (Lev 25:36), fair distribution of land (Lev 25:8-54) and paying fair wages to labourers (Mal 3:5).

Likewise, love and active responsibility towards others are at the heart of Jesus' ministry (cf. Matt 22:37-40). In fact, we shall be judged according to how we treat others (Matt 25:31-46). Together with love, God intends women and men to enjoy a high degree of freedom, which includes freedom to know God and to pursue a life as they choose, within the limits of their responsibilities towards others. Other values are reconciliation and peace within communities – God intends all people to live in peace with each other and reconciliation (between people) is also part of the heart of God's plan for humanity (Matt 5:9).

Justice is further given distinctive content by being linked with *hesed* – steadfast love or loving kindness, and with humbly walking with the God of justice. Justice here is something to be *done*, not simply or primarily a matter for reflection. In the Matthean version of the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12), it is said that those who hunger and thirst after justice (*dikaïosuné*) are blessed, and will be satisfied. According to public theologian Duncan Forrester,

... (j)ustice here is something about which we should be passionate, something for which we should hunger and thirst. And those people who are passionate about justice are seldom those who live in “the culture of contentment”, but rather the

victims, the oppressed, the forgotten and the excluded – the poor and the poor in spirit as well, those who are persecuted for justice’s sake, and those who take their stand alongside those who suffer from injustice.<sup>18</sup>

American ethicist Karin Lebacqz offers a fitting summary for the understanding of biblical justice. She writes that (and this makes for a fruitful comparison with non-biblical/theological theories of justice, such as that of Rawls),

...(j)ustice is not “to each according to need”. Nor is it “benefit the least advantaged”. Nor is it “the greatest good for the greatest number”. Because justice emerges out of protest against injustice, justice is not so much a state of being as a struggle and a constant process. It is the process of correcting what is unjust. It is the process of providing new beginnings, not an ideal state of distribution.<sup>19</sup>

In Africa, when looking at the situation in which the majority of women and girls find themselves, one often wonders whether we really understand this God of justice. Isabel Phiri, Malawi’s first female professor of theology, has ably critiqued Africa’s propensity towards patriarchy which is also reflected in its many forms of patriarchal theology. She has demonstrated how patriarchal tendencies in theology has led to the use of traditional culture and reliance on selected biblical passages, detrimental to women (of which there, unfortunately are also many) that have historically perpetuated oppressive attitudes toward women.<sup>20</sup>

But what is the situation in Malawi? As a poor African country, the example of Malawi may serve to illustrate the kind of challenges that women and girls face to obtain an education – as will be seen, to a much larger extent than men and boys. This will first be discussed with regard to the education system in Malawi in general before asking whether this at all differs with regard to theological education, for which I shall refer to my own experiences and to the institution of which I am part, namely, the African Bible College in Lilongwe, Malawi.

### **Gendered education challenges in Malawi in general**

The education system in Malawi follows an 8-4-4 pattern which comprises of eight years of primary, four years of secondary and four years of tertiary education.<sup>21</sup> A child is expected to embark on this journey at the age of six, entering primary school. Whether girls will continue on the journey to the end, is, however, very

18 Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies*, 225.

19 Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice*, 152.

20 Phiri, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy*.

21 DEP (Department of Education Planning), “Education Statistics 2012”, 3.

uncertain.<sup>22</sup> In most rural areas, parents often favour boys above girls to receive an education.<sup>23</sup> Due to a lack of support, financially or psychologically, or being forced to work harder at home with less time to dedicate to schoolwork, many girls, by the time they reach Standard Eight, have repeated grades quite often and are thus often much older than their male classmates, leaving them demotivated and with little self-esteem.

In Standard Eight, at the end of their primary education, pupils sit for national examinations. On the strength of the results of the latter, learners are selected to proceed to secondary education. The transition rate to the latter phase is overall less than 20%, but the transition rates are always higher among Malawian boys than among Malawian girls.<sup>24</sup> The same is true, if not more so, with regard to finishing secondary education, and after learners have obtained their Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE), transitioning to tertiary education. Statistics show that for over a period of close to fifteen years the enrolment for female students in the two public universities in Malawi has remained at an average of 25%, and this is with an increase in the enrolment every year.<sup>25</sup>

It seems the Malawian government is not blind to gender disparities in the education system and it has been working hard to improve the education standard for both boys and girls. Policies have been introduced to improve gender equality in the education system and this is, for example, reflected in gender-sensitive text books. Now the Malawian government aims at 50% participation in terms of both access to and equity at all levels of education.<sup>26</sup>

However, girls continue to perform poorly at national public examinations and the dropout rates among them remain high.<sup>27</sup> The latter may in part be attributed to levels of absenteeism which also leads to high dropout rates due to repetition at Standard Eight. But why are girls the ones that are more absent?

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22 For the continuously lower enrolment rates for girls as opposed to boys in primary education in Malawi from 2009 to 2012, see DEP, "Education Statistics", 10.

23 In Malawi, as in many parts of Africa, the rural population is quite worse off with regard to education. According to 2012 statistics, while the percentage of adult literate Malawians is 63%, 84.7 % of these live in urban areas and only 15.3% in rural areas; DEP, "Education Statistics", 5.

24 Maluwa-Banda, "Gender Sensitive Educational Policy", 10.

25 Statistics show that the pass rates for girls over the five years from 2008-2012 in both their final primary and secondary education examinations have constantly been *at least* 10% below that of boys, DEP, "Education Statistics", 19.

26 Maluwa-Banda, "Gender Sensitive Educational Policy", 1-2.

27 For statistics on "survival rates" of boys as opposed to girls in Malawi and the fact that that of girls are lower, see DEP, "Education Statistics", 18.

Part of this is of course the favouring of male siblings when it comes to spending limited financial resources on education and the other is the mere fact that girls are expected to do more in the home than boys – which sometimes includes nursing sick family members or looking after small pre-school members of the family when the mother can not. But there are still more reasons bound up with their gender.

For one, the whole school system has for long been geared towards boys. They were believed to be more clever – especially in some subjects such as mathematics and science – and these views were internalised by generations of girls. Boys were the ones favoured by teachers, for example, with regard to extra lessons or class participation. With limited resources in the form of desks, books and writing utensils, boys were also the natural recipients of such necessary equipment – in the 1990s girls were still expected to sit on the floor when there were shortages of desks. Even school infrastructure favoured boys, since girls will sometimes stay at home, for example, during their monthly periods simply because schools do not adequately provide facilities conducive to feminine hygiene.

Another reason is early pregnancy. Unwise sexual choices force many girls to leave school – something that is, of course, not applicable to boys. Though a government policy is in place that allows such girls to go back to school after they have delivered, many are too ashamed to return or simply cannot due to the demands of motherhood. In some cases, girls opt to drop out of school because they are being harassed by male teachers. With only 35% of primary school teachers being female<sup>28</sup> and most of them teaching in urban areas, rural schools are left without female teachers to provide support to female students, especially in suspected cases of sexual abuse or harassment by male teachers.

But where does the Christian church (in general and not referring to a specific denomination) fit into all of this? What is the stance of the church with regard to education in general? One would expect that it would champion the cause of equal education and this would have an overall positive effect on the Malawian education system – after all, the Malawian population supposedly comprises of 82.7% Christians, 13.0% Muslims, 1.9% of adherents of other religions and 2.5% without any religion.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, history shows that education, as it is understood in the context of this essay, was first brought to Malawi by the early missionaries. They saw it as part of their ministry and most of the schools founded by the early

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28 Maluwa-Banda, “Gender Sensitive Educational Policy”, 9.

29 Republic of Malawi, *2008 Population and Housing Census*.

missionaries are still operational to this day.<sup>30</sup> In 2011, 37% of all primary and secondary schools in Malawi were either owned or controlled by churches.<sup>31</sup> One would therefore think that churches would be at the forefront of ensuring that there is gender equality in its educational systems. Does the church not confess its belief in justice (also gender justice) and (gender) equality? Does it not confess that men and women, boys and girls are all equal in dignity?

Unfortunately, there does not seem to be much difference in practice between public and church schools. As was seen above, there are government policies in place in Malawi aimed at promoting gender equality in education, but, as Darling-Hammond argues, for good educational policies to be in place, and then implemented, leaders need to have the vision, capacity, and policy support to create much more accessible and quality education.<sup>32</sup> Or, even worse, as Lumby and Coleman argue, sometimes even good policies can be “used in public and organizational life to mask or promote the denial of continuing inequalities and ... there is a possibility of it being used to defend and underpin the status quo by drawing attention away from inequalities.”<sup>33</sup> Might this be what is happening in Malawi, when policy demands that to progress from primary to secondary to tertiary education one needs specific government examination certificates, but the circumstances conducive to girls or young women obtaining them are not created by society or sometimes by teachers themselves? This will clearly constitute, in Rawls’ definition referred to above, not a case of substantive justice, but formal *injustice*.

So, it seems that the picture remains bleak with regard to gender equality in general in Malawian public schools, and even in church-owned schools. But this should surely differ with regard to *theological* education. To see whether this is the case, I want to tell first of my own experiences, then of the institution that I am affiliated with, before making some general observations with regard to theological education in Malawi and in Africa.

## **Gender and theological education: A personal account**

To my mind, theological education plays a crucial role in societal life in general and the church in particular, as it leads to the general development of individuals

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30 Lamba, “African Women’s Education in Malawi, 1875-1952”.

31 Matemba, A Comparative Study, 5.

32 Darling-Hammond, *The Flat World and Education*, 279.

33 Lumby & Coleman, *Leadership and Diversity*, 55.

and society. I think of the benefits of theological education in my own life. Being a Malawian woman who earned my first degree at a Bible college, I know first-hand the importance of theological education to women leaders in the community. Back then, when I enrolled at a Bible college, the idea of a woman attending such an institution was quite foreign in Malawi. People found it difficult to understand why a woman could go to a theological school, yet she could not be ordained and had no intentions of being ordained in the future. Now, two decades later, more people know the importance of theological education to both ordained ministers and lay people. Hence, they are not asking the same question, but they are rather wondering why there is still gender inequality in the church. As I look back today, I am grateful to God that there was an institution that was willing to accept me even though I am a woman. The fact that I was able to get my first degree from a theological institution laid the foundation for the rest of my career, and it has also given me the confidence that I need to serve God wherever God leads me. It was important for me to get theological training because it prepared me for ministry and service in the church even though I always knew that my call was not a pastoral calling but a call to Christian service.

Fortunately, some institutions and some perceptions regarding the “male world” of theological education has changed and I refer in this essay to the African Bible College (ABC) in Lilongwe, Malawi, as a theological institution that has grown over the years in its recruitment of both male and female students. I hope that my essay will inspire its reader(s) to challenge the leaders of their theological institutions to examine their views and values on the importance of making theological education accessible to all, especially in light of the fact that theological seminaries and other theological institutions still remain the domain of males across Africa. According to a survey conducted in 2012, of the twelve institutions which were members of NetACT at that time, only 218 women students were found as opposed to 730 male students.<sup>34</sup>

ABC opened its doors to both males and females. Graduates from ABC, both males and females, have over the years proved to be one of the best gifts to the African Church. ABC has produced great leaders for the church, both male and female. It could be a big mistake to think that well-trained Christian leaders should only be male. Denying some people access based on gender is one way of denying the church necessary skills. Graduates of ABC in Malawi and beyond are also sought-after by many Christian organisations. Different organisations, both

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34 Hendriks, “Introduction. A Journey”, 32.

Christian and secular, need different skills and tools, well-trained graduates who can look at the workplace as their calling and work in such a way as working for the Lord. And these graduates should also be women, on grounds of justice, on *biblical* grounds of justice, and also for purely pragmatic reasons.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

Since education worldwide is considered a basic right, theological education too should not be treated differently. In fact, if anything, theological education should be more accessible to both men and women. Considering the teaching of the Bible, Christians should be *more* concerned than any other group of people to promote (gender) justice. In fact, the Christian teaching centres on the fact that in Christianity there is no discrimination.<sup>36</sup> At the foot of the cross, humankind is equal before God. Therefore, Christians should be in the forefront of promoting this equality in every sector of church life, also with regard to its own educational and training institutions.<sup>37</sup>

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35 Recently, I visited my mother who lives in one of the rural townships in Malawi. I was surprised on a Wednesday afternoon that she was not going out for midweek prayers. In my church midweek prayers are something that is done with passion and zeal. My mother's reason was the new elder and deacon (both men) for her ward were men who did not know how to preach or pray, so they were not comfortable going for the midweek prayers (in December 2012 there was a shortage of 30 ministers in my denomination). According to my church, an elder or a deacon is supposed to lead or at least be present. In the absence of these people, the prayers are cancelled. I know that in that area, if there would be a woman who had studied theology, she could have had the courage and self-confidence to prepare and teach the group of women and children that gathered for the prayer meetings.

36 Galatians 3:28: "There is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female for you are one in Christ."

37 At this point, it needs to be mentioned that this essay is not promoting ordination of women as such – it is a related, but different issue. Rather, it wants to challenge theological institutions to ensure that there is equal access for those who seek to enrol in theological studies, as I did, even if it was neither possible nor intended by me to become a minister. It is important simply because theological education plays a very important role in the development and growth of the church and it may serve society as a whole as well.



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## Questions for further reflection

- ◆ Share some cases where you had interacted with a situation that needed an intervention on issues of gender injustice in the church but you were not able to confront it. Why did you not confront it? Do you think such cases still happen? If you were the leader at that time, how would you deal with it?
- ◆ How can we ensure that the church and our seminaries promote gender-related justice in theological institutions?
- ◆ How best can we change our system and attitude?
- ◆ How can you help a congregation to change its mind-set on issues of gender injustice as it relates to education and empowerment?



# GENDER EQUALITY

AN ISSUE OF HEALTH AND SECURITY



## “TELLING STORIES”

### Talking about VAW within church and seminary

*Elisabet le Roux<sup>1</sup>*

#### **Introduction**

Xoliswa was born in a small town in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. When she finished Tenth Grade, she moved to an informal settlement close to Cape Town to find work. She was able to do a six-month course, training as a home-based carer and since then she has worked at an organisation caring for HIV-positive individuals. She is a pillar of the community, a leader in the church, and someone many young women look up to.

Xoliswa’s boyfriend lives with her in her house. He does odd jobs and relies on her income. He drinks quite heavily and has done so ever since she met him. While he has always been verbally abusive, in the last six months he has started beating her. While word of this has spread in the community (neighbours can hear her screaming and pleading), she used to pretend that nothing happened. However, now he has started to beat her around the face and neck and she can no longer hide the cuts and bruises. Xoliswa continues to work and provide for him; he continues to beat her.

This is a story set in South Africa, but VAW (Violence Against Women) is endemic across the world. UN Women states that 35% of all women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence either from an intimate partner or non-partner. In some countries, the tendency of intimate partner violence (IPV) consistently translates into femicide. For example, in Australia, Israel, South Africa and the United States of America, 40-70% of all female murder victims are killed

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1 Dr Elisabet le Roux is a sociologist and researcher in the Unit for Religion and Development Research, Stellenbosch University.

by their intimate partner.<sup>2</sup> While studies vary considerably in terms of methods used and results obtained,<sup>3</sup> it is clear that VAW is a serious problem globally. It is also important to keep in mind that VAW is not limited to physical abuse. Oosthuizen and Wissing emphasise that the effect of various kinds of violence can be overlooked if one only focuses on physical abuse and therefore they define VAW as “...physical abuse, ... emotional and or psychological abuse, economic abuse, intimidation and isolation, sexual abuse or rape.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite the overwhelming evidence for the pervasive nature of VAW, it appears that it remains a phenomenon that many still choose to disbelieve, ignore or find acceptable. While people tend to acknowledge the VAW in other countries or locations (saying, for example, that “Women are raped in the war over there” or “in that community men beat women all the time”), it is less common for people to acknowledge the prevalence of VAW in their own communities. This will always remain the first challenge to be faced by anyone trying to address VAW in any community. Indeed, it seems as if no-one is as blind as those who do not want to see. Unfortunately this includes the church.<sup>5</sup>

If one directly asks people whether churches should address VAW, they usually agree. For example, in research done specifically on sexual violence against women (SVAW) in five different African countries, no single participant disagreed that churches should be addressing SVAW, although they differed on what form their role should take.<sup>6</sup> The same participants (almost all of whom were church members and many church leaders as well), however, indicated that their churches are seldom intervening in this issue. It thus seems that people will on an abstract, theoretical level agree that churches should address VAW, but when it comes to

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2 UN Women, “Facts and Figures”.

3 Oosthuizen & Wissing, “Prevalence of Violence”, explain the variation in prevalence of figures as a result of sampling differences, methodological differences, under-reporting by women, group/cultural differences in the acceptance of violence and various forms of violence in different contexts. Differences in what is defined and viewed as violence can be added to this list.

4 Oosthuizen & Wissing, “Prevalence of Violence”, 639.

5 For example, see the results from empirical research on the role of the church in addressing sexual violence (SV) in the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, and South Africa in Le Roux, “An Explorative Baseline”; “A View on the Current Situation”; and “Sexual Violence”. The popular press also offers a multitude of examples of churches across the world refusing to condemn SV, or even worse, being complicit in sexual violence (cf. Woodiwiss, “I believe you”; IOL News, “Church Leader”; Agence France Presse, “Cardinal George Pell”; and Bingham, “Cardinal Keith O’Brien”).

6 Cf. the above-mentioned studies by Le Roux.

practical involvement and interventions, these same people do not drive any action and their churches remain absent.

This essay explores the ways in which seminaries and congregations can be motivated to talk about, teach on and address VAW. Patriarchy is identified as one of the main causes of the current situation, while African feminist theologies are explored as it offers various ways of rectifying this situation through engendered theology.<sup>7</sup> The importance of narrative, specifically the stories of women, is highlighted and suggested as a unique way of making VAW part of the church agenda. Lastly, some generic, practical ways of talking about, teaching on and addressing VAW within seminaries and congregations are proposed. At the same time some remaining challenges are identified, culminating in questions on how these should be addressed. Thus this essay is an exploratory one, demanding response and conversation.

### Why is VAW being ignored?

If VAW is a problem in our communities, why is it not being addressed? Arguably it is because the structures that enable the perpetration of VAW are the same structures that empower men. Those who are in power and have the most ability to instigate and drive VAW interventions, i.e., men, will not risk challenging a system that guarantees the perpetuation of their own power. Feminist theory argues that there is an inherent power imbalance present within society, favouring men at the cost of women.<sup>8</sup> Hegemonic masculinity,<sup>9</sup> as dominant form of masculinity, creates a societal structure – patriarchy – that supports and enforces the hegemonic ideal. It is a structure through which “power and social value are disproportionately endowed upon men as a group at the expense of women as a group. As a system, patriarchy rewards behaviour that can be interpreted as anti-women and oppressive.”<sup>10</sup> Adrienne Rich’s definition of patriarchy draws attention

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7 Engendered theology has the express purpose of ensuring that women and their experiences also have a voice in theology, as this will be relevant and life-affirming to both women and men. It counters the assumption that male theologies and experiences can speak for women and goes out from the assumption that “the understanding of gender in society has affected our understanding of God, the Scripture, the teachings and practices of the church and our relationships as men and women with one another”, Singh, “Engendering Theological Education”.

8 Antai, “Controlling Behavior”, 511.

9 The most dominant form of masculinity is what has been referred to by R.W. Connell as hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is what allows and facilitates male dominance over women; Connell, *Masculinities*.

10 Meger, “Rape of the Congo”, 121.



to its pervasiveness and the manner in which it functions on and is supported by all levels and activities of society:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.<sup>11</sup>

As patriarchy upholds the power of men, interventions and resolutions that challenge and change patriarchal institutions and societies are often not embraced. Where patriarchy dominates and where women are subsumed under men, VAW is more likely and prevalent, especially in contexts where women fear the use of violent means by men, as power is arguably intimately linked to the potential for violence. Under such circumstances, men are able to control women's behaviour and maintain control of social institutions. Not all women have to experience violence for this process to continue, they need only fear violence. It is this "culture of fear that secures men's control over women".<sup>12</sup> Power thus remains the key issue in patriarchy and "(t)he liberation of women must mean a loss of power for most men; and given the structuring of personality by power, also a great deal of personal pain."<sup>13</sup> It is these patriarchal structures that construe men as superior to women that – directly or indirectly – allow for the condoning of VAW. Practices and beliefs that enforce this superiority are thus accepted and supported, even if they lead to VAW.

Challenging these patriarchal structures would mean challenging culture, as patriarchy is culturally supported and its practices and beliefs are culturally condoned. Even in communities that are seen as less patriarchal, for example urban communities, many patriarchal cultural practices remain.<sup>14</sup> Not only is challenging culture a very difficult and controversial exercise, it is usually perceived as a threat to the community and thus there is often resistance to any efforts at changing culture and to those who do so. Furthermore, in many (if not most) African countries, culture remains a critical element of and encompasses every area of any individual's

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11 In Puechguirbal, "Discourses on Gender", 172.

12 Yodanis, "Gender Inequality", 657-658.

13 Carrigan et al., "Toward a New Sociology", 107.

14 For example, amongst many affluent upper-middle class Xhosa couples living in Cape Town, many men still uphold the traditional cultural practice of paying *lobola* to their wives' family once they get married. This despite the fact that both man and woman work corporate jobs, earn considerable salaries, in many cases have lived together for an extended period of time, and live a thoroughly Westernised lifestyle.

life. Therefore it is perceived as a threat to community security if one is critical of culture, for “there are elements in these cultures which are the very veins through which the solidarity of communities are nurtured.”<sup>15</sup> Especially in light of the fact that women are seen as of the utmost importance for ensuring family unity and community cohesion,<sup>16</sup> changing the role and position of women challenges the community structure and safety as a whole. Especially within a context of suffering, which is unfortunately common in Africa, culture is often the only constant in the life of a community.<sup>17</sup>

The challenge is thus to find a way of challenging culture and the cultural practices which empower men at the expense of women, and which enable and lead to VAW, while at the same time not denying or denigrating the importance of culture. One cannot talk about, teach and address VAW if one does not meet this challenge. African feminist theologies have been engaging in this exercise for some time now, developing culture-sensitive methods of empowering and liberating women, and it is thus African feminist theologies that we turn to next.

### **African feminist theologies: A different attitude towards culture**

In this essay, the term “African *feminist* theologies” is deliberately used instead of “African *women* theologies”. This is done to counter the habit of avoiding the term “feminist” because of the stereotypes and negative connotations connected with the term, especially in theological institutions. Using the term “feminist” is done here in order to counter these connotations and stereotypes. As Isabel Phiri explains: “...it is important to have dialogue over the word so that we dispel the myths that dominate our theological institutions.”<sup>18</sup>

African feminist theologies are built on the premise that African theology is incomplete without women’s voices.<sup>19</sup> It is thus aimed at including African women’s experiences, perspectives and interpretations within African theology. It is an outflow of feminist theology,<sup>20</sup> which in turn originated in the secular

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15 Kanyoro, “Engendered Communal Theology”, 37.

16 Seifert, “War and Rape”, 62.

17 Kanyoro, “Engendered Communal Theology”, 43.

18 Phiri, “The Circle”, 39.

19 Frederiks, “Miss Jairus Speaks”.

20 The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (from here on “Circle”) has been largely responsible for this development. Started in 1989 by Mercy Oduyoye, this organisation has done much for advancing the situation and cause of African women within theology and religion.

women's movement of the 1960s.<sup>21</sup> Feminist theology as a whole is seen as a form of liberation theology,<sup>22</sup> with a specific focus on issues such as sexism and patriarchy, which were largely ignored within liberation theology as a movement.<sup>23</sup>

African feminist theologies form part of a world-wide phenomenon of women developing and raising their theological voices, thus interpreting and speaking out of and from the perspective of their particular experiences in their particular contexts. As a result, feminist theologies in these different contexts carry different names. One finds, for example, *mujerista* theology amongst Hispanic women and womanist theology amongst black women in the USA. This is also why one speaks of African feminist theologies, in recognition of the fact that all African women's experiences are not the same.<sup>24</sup>

African feminist theologies focus on two closely related yet distinct main themes, namely, culture and religion. From the start, African feminist theologians paid attention to how culture influences the position of women, drawing attention to how it is neither neutral nor gender-neutral. Cultures are constructed in ways that benefit some at the expense of others and at times, theological justification has even been given for this. A gendered approach to theology, on the other hand, acknowledges that people construct culture and that our cultural practices or the cultural practices in the Bible should therefore not be confused with the will of God.<sup>25</sup>

This led to African feminist theologies challenging the notion of the neutrality of African-inculturated theology. With both the source (the Gospel) and target (culture) being guilty of patriarchy, oppression and dehumanisation of women and other vulnerable groups, inculturated theology becomes something to be challenged and transformed.<sup>26</sup> So-called *inculturation theology* was a reaction to the colonial and imperialistic stance of most mission churches in Africa. As such, it recognised and wished to include the African voice and perspective in Christian

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21 Phiri, "African Women's Theologies", 16.

22 Phiri, "African Women's Theologies", 16.

23 Frederiks, "Miss Jairus Speaks", 69.

24 Phiri, "African Women's Theologies", 16, explains this well: "The word theologies is used in its plural form because African women theologians want to acknowledge the fact that even within Africa, there is diversity of women's experiences due to differences in race, culture, politics, economy and religions. Despite the differences in terminology, all women would like to see the end of sexism in their lives and the establishment of a more just society of men and women who see the well-being of the other." Cf. also Phiri, "HIV/AIDS".

25 Phiri, "The Circle", 36.

26 Frederiks, "Miss Jairus Speaks", 74.

theology, affirming African culture and using it as the basis for developing African liberation theology.<sup>27</sup> Yet, even though this theology was perceived as speaking on behalf of all African people, men were the dominant participants in the exercise. This is what African feminist theologies are challenging, arguing that while there is a need for reclaiming culture via inculturation theology, such inculturation is not sufficient if the cultures that are reclaimed are not scrutinised and deemed worthy, particularly in as far as it supports the life and dignity of women.<sup>28</sup>

African feminist theologies, on the other hand, work from the foundational premise that both men and women are created in God's image, and that this means that women, like men, should also be allowed to live in dignity. Of course this is not an exclusively feminist theological theme, but African feminist theologians are especially conscious of the fact that this does not currently happen in many of our African cultures. This means that African feminist theologians take upon themselves the challenging task of facilitating discussions of culture that are safe for women and which enable them to speak safely about issues and practices that harm them, all in an attempt to challenge and transform culture. To do so calls for a gender-sensitive cultural hermeneutic, a hermeneutic that addresses cultural issues while at the same time being critical of that culture from a gender perspective.<sup>29</sup> African feminist theologies are not anti-culture and they appreciate and support the many ways in which culture is good and wholesome. Culture is only challenged on those points where it threatens the dignity of people, especially women.

African feminist theologies have thus introduced a way of allowing and creating a theology that can engage with and criticise practices that are harmful to women. Thus it is of utmost importance that we incorporate African feminist theologies into our seminaries' theology and curriculum, and by extension into our churches' theology. Currently, there is much resistance to and prejudice against African feminist theologies, arguably due to misunderstanding and misconception of what it entails.<sup>30</sup> But African feminist theologies offer particular opportunities for facilitating discussion around VAW and for transforming beliefs and practices that violate women. Its emphasis on the importance of narrative creates one such unique way in which VAW can be brought into focus.

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27 Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology", 44.

28 Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology", 46.

29 Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology", 41.

30 See the section titled African Feminist Theologies as Complementary, not Alternative.

## Telling stories

“Telling stories” can be interpreted in different ways, especially in relation to VAW. Firstly, many survivors of VAW are blamed for disclosing what happened to them and they are seen as telling stories which should not be told and which they have no right to tell. In communities and cultures where violent acts against women are condoned (implicitly or explicitly), telling others about such an act is somehow seen as betraying one’s culture, family and community. Secondly, disclosing VAW can be seen as elaborate lies, made-up stories that are told in order to discredit another person. The survivor is “telling stories” and it is put on par with the fantastic tales told by children. Thirdly, “telling stories” can refer to the nature of the stories. These are stories that say a lot about the reality of being a woman, about subjugation, and about the way culture positions women.

Yet, “telling stories” can also quite literally refer to the oral method of communication that is so characteristic of and popular in most African societies. Traditionally, telling stories has a very important role and function in African society and narratives are seen as the domain of especially women.<sup>31</sup> With illiteracy being more prevalent amongst African women than men, the importance of narrative for women is even more marked. It is a method of empowerment, both for the storyteller and the listener. The storyteller’s experiences, interpretation, values and skills are recognised, while the listener is empowered and enriched by learning from the storyteller and by being recognised as trusted and worthy of sharing the story with. Telling stories, it is thus suggested here, is a way in which VAW can be addressed that is sensitive, relevant and appropriate to the African context and especially African women.

African feminist theologies see stories as an acceptable source of theology. This is why African feminist theologies are often described as narrative theologies.<sup>32</sup> These stories can be traditional (i.e., stories that are retold from generation to generation, usually containing moral lessons) or personal, and their telling encourages both teller and listener to reflect and reinterpret our experiences.<sup>33</sup> Through the act of story-telling, women become participants and actors instead of observers and victims, and since it is a woman’s medium recognised within African societies it can easily be incorporated as a basis for theology.<sup>34</sup>

31 Frederiks, “Miss Jairus Speaks”, 72.

32 Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 10, 17.

33 Phiri, in Frederiks, “Miss Jairus Speaks”, 72.

34 Frederiks, “Miss Jairus Speaks”, 72.

Narrative is an excellent way of communicating the experiences and ideas of those who are denied the communication structures of the powerful. African women have not been quiet and have used this avenue to communicate their feelings and experiences. Unfortunately, Christians and their churches have not been listening.<sup>35</sup> Having the theological establishment – seminaries, synods and churches – listen to and acknowledge these stories, address the issues highlighted through it, as well as see it as a legitimate basis for theology, would be quite a novel experience. It is not enough to simply listen to these stories as a pastoral exercise. The theological establishment has to recognise the stories as identifying important communal issues which need to be addressed (which will by extension mean addressing culture), and at the same time recognise the stories as a basis for theology.<sup>36</sup>

The challenge for the church is thus to start listening to the so-called alternative voices, those that are using such different methods of communication. There has often been resistance to doing so. Often this has been because women's voices are seen as in opposition to men's voices, and thus as a threat.

### **African feminist theologies as complementary, not alternative**

There appears to be much resistance to feminism, and to African feminist theologies, in Africa. Accusations are made ranging from that it denies the proper place of women, to that it actively denigrates and emasculates men. African feminist theologies are at times even taught in such a way as to promote such misconceptions and provoke negative reaction to the project of engendered theology.<sup>37</sup> While African feminist theologies do challenge traditional notions of the “proper” place of women and the relationship between men and women, it is unfair to say that it is anti-men. Whilst calling for the inclusion for women's perspectives, experiences and ideas within African theology, African feminist theologies at no time denies the importance of men and male perspectives, experiences and ideas to the African theological project. Partnership with men and male perspectives is envisioned,<sup>38</sup> in order to create a joint, complete project and vision for ending all forms of

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35 Njoroge, in Frederiks, “Miss Jairus Speaks”, 72.

36 See, for example, how this narrative approach is included in formal academic theology, in Mombo & Joziase, *If You Have No Voice*. Analysing theological education for women at St. Paul's University and in general, the book largely comprises of stories – told in the first person – of different women.

37 Phiri, “The Circle”, 36.

38 Frederiks, “Miss Jairus Speaks”, 73.

oppression.<sup>39</sup> African feminist theologies explicitly seek to further the humanity of all people and not only of women. Its aim is not to dissolve patriarchy in favour of matriarchy. Men and women of all societies are included in its agenda and a just society, where the well-being of men and women is sought and promoted, is its goal.<sup>40</sup> The fact that African feminist theologies focus on gender issues, and not solely on women's issues,<sup>41</sup> highlights the inclusive nature of its approach.<sup>42</sup> Arguably there is no other way to bring change within African theology and within oppressive cultural systems. The whole community has to be part of the process, and one cannot engage an entire community if men are seen as not important to the project. Kanyoro draws attention to this:

*In Africa, commitment to the change of oppressive systems has to be done within the community, otherwise its validity will be questioned. It is for this reason that I would like to refer to theology currently being done by women in Africa as engendered communal theology (emphasised in original).<sup>43</sup>*

Thus is introduced a situation in which men and women's perspectives, experiences and opinions are equally valued in the creation of theology. Engendered theology would mean that VAW is included and addressed by our theologies. How can this be done, both at seminary and congregational levels? If one looks at this process from a theological education perspective, Circle theologians have made recommendations for ways of engendering theological education and curriculum.<sup>44</sup> In the next section, we continue to explore how VAW can be included at seminary and congregational level.

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39 Phiri, "African Women's Theologies", 21.

40 Phiri, "HIV/AIDS", 423.

41 Women's issues refer to issues focused on "raising awareness on the experiences of women which have been side-lined for a long time due to the existence of sexism and patriarchy", Phiri, "African Women's Theologies", 39.

42 It has to be recognised, though, that there might be a bias towards women's issues. Circle work on theological education and curriculum development, for example, has focused more on women's issues, in recognition of the fact that "women's experiences in Africa have been ignored for a very long time, and therefore this has contributed to the imbalance between the two genders", Phiri, "African Women's Theologies", 40.

43 Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology", 46.

44 For example: institutional capacity must be built; an infrastructure that takes gender issues seriously on all levels must be created; and the task of engendering theological education should also include male lecturers; Beverley Haddad, in Phiri, "African Women's Theologies", 41.

## Addressing VAW through engendered theology and engendered curricula

The seminary is arguably the best place to start such a process of engendered theology that addresses VAW. In seminaries, pastors are trained who can guide and facilitate the same process within the congregations they will one day serve. Thus we shall first look at how the issue of VAW can be incorporated at seminary level. It is proposed that a case study approach holds great potential to do this effectively.

### The case study approach

The project of engendering theology, theological education and theological curriculum is promoted by focusing on the issue of VAW. It is, however, strongly advised that such a process takes into account the sensitive nature of the issue by using techniques and approaches that are comfortable for and sensitive to women. Therefore it is suggested that a case study approach, which draws on the stories of the lived experiences of women, should be used within theological education in addressing the issue of VAW.

A case study is a form of empirical research where a contemporary phenomenon is investigated in depth and within its real-life context and the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not obvious. Case studies rely on multiple sources of evidence and benefits from the prior development theories to guide the process of data collection and analysis.<sup>45</sup> In doing so, it allows for an understanding of the phenomenon to develop within its specific context. Contextual conditions are highly pertinent to the phenomenon of VAW and the case study method recognises this. Storytelling is a possible way of data collection for a case study and the two complement each other. At the same time, a case study can be a useful and effective way of teaching.<sup>46</sup>

The case study method thus allows for VAW to be studied within its particular communal and societal context. This is important, as VAW takes on different forms within different contexts. Furthermore, it allows for stories to be “enough” in terms of data collection, for these stories provide in-depth, real-life perspectives that help one to develop a proper understanding of VAW. The case study approach

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45 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 18.

46 It is, however, important to realise that a case study is not the same thing as a story. Story-telling is a method that can be used in a case study, but also in other research methods. At the same time, case studies can be done without relying on story-telling. In this essay, the method of story-telling is explored as a key way of doing case studies.



should not only be seen as (solely) a research method, though. It should be viewed as a teaching method as well, allowing for the realities and nuances of VAW to be studied within a non-theoretical context. Stories of VAW are thus collected and told not (only) in order to promote good research methods, but to enable teaching about the phenomenon. Such an approach enables students to have contact with their communities and develop an understanding of the issues and situations within their communities. As stated earlier, VAW takes different forms in different contexts and thus students start to understand the importance of knowing the context and situation of the community they serve.

### Using case studies

The case study approach can be used in different ways to explore VAW. For example:

- ◆ lecturers can do their own case studies and present the studies to the class;
- ◆ students can do case studies, individually or in groups, and present them to the class;
- ◆ case studies can be focused on representing different perspectives, for example, having one case study focused on the experience and story of a VAW perpetrator, another on a VAW survivor;
- ◆ students can do case studies based on their own experiences of VAW;
- ◆ case studies from the Bible can be used.<sup>47</sup>

The case study approach should be seen as an introduction to proper discussion of the phenomenon of VAW and its underlying causal issues. Whilst students may be resistant or disbelieving during a theoretical discussion on VAW and the cultural factors contributing to it, such a discussion – if preceded by fieldwork that make it “real” – can be very effective. It is important to emphasise the following, though. These case studies are used to facilitate learning and the transformation of cultural conceptions of men, women, patriarchy and power. It is not a voyeuristic exercise. Stories are collected and told in order to facilitate an understanding of the phenomenon of VAW, its causes, how it can be addressed, and what churches and church leaders should be doing to address it. The goal of the exercise is to change the way in which students think. Lecturers have to constantly keep this in mind, so that the process of doing case studies and telling stories actually affects change. The case studies should lead to critical conversations on issues such as culture, power

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47 Many resources exist which have such biblical case studies and engage with them from a critical, African feminist theological perspective. For example, Phyllis Trible’s *Texts of Terror*; Musa W. Dube’s *Other Ways of Reading*; and Mercy Oduyoye’s *Introducing African Women’s Theology*.

and patriarchy, and lecturers should be guiding the process, which can be very challenging. Part of this challenge is to create a safe space for stories to be told in, one that respects confidentiality and is non-voyeuristic. Within different cultural and social contexts, such a space will take different forms, but it remains the lecturer's responsibility to create a space that is safe and nurturing, as a prerequisite for honest story-telling. Furthermore, teaching should also include some guidelines for students on how to facilitate the same process within their own congregations.

### **How to get people to talk**

It is very easy to say that students should collect stories of VAW, yet it is often difficult to get people to share such stories. Thus it is important to help students identify the contexts in their communities and cultures in which such stories will be shared. Perhaps the best way to explain this is by telling a story, one told to me by my mother.

My parents once spent some time in Chongoni, Malawi, where my father was teaching. My mother was particularly fascinated by how, every day, local women would walk to the station with their maize, to get it ground at the station. Old grandmothers, young mothers, and little girls would walk with the bags of maize on their heads and would talk for hours next to the machine, waiting for their maize to be ground. My mother, chatting with these women, learnt that in Chewa culture anything can be talked about while the maize is being ground. In the olden days it was done by the women themselves, sitting in a group and talking while they pound away at the maize. Now they have a machine that does it, but the same tradition still applies. Anything can be said, any story be told, nothing is off-limits.

Identifying such situations or locations can be an important way of getting women to share their stories of VAW. At the same time, there might be some limitations. For example, such sharing of stories while at maize mills or at wells is informal discussion and it is not a legal forum. Therefore, should some of the stories be spread throughout the community, a woman can be punished for dishonouring her husband, family and/or community. A venue for sharing is thus not necessarily a safe forum for women. Those who collect these stories must take the utmost care that it is handled in the strictest confidence and that anything that can lead to the person being identified or personally shamed or embarrassed must be removed from the case study.

## **VAW as multi-disciplinary subject**

It is often the case within seminaries that topics like gender and/or HIV&AIDS, if addressed at all, are pigeon-holed into one course and taught by one lecturer. However, it is important to realise that an issue like VAW should be addressed in all of the courses taught at seminary. For example:

- ♦ Old and New Testament departments should be part of the discussion, especially on how biblical texts apply and are interpreted in terms of VAW, and through such applications challenge traditional cultural notions that disempower women;
- ♦ Pastoral care should spend time on VAW, focusing on how survivors should be counselled whilst not condoning cultural structures that allowed such violence;
- ♦ Students should be taught on how to preach about VAW in a culturally-sensitive, yet culture-challenging way;
- ♦ Addressing VAW at seminary level should be a multi-disciplinary task engaged in by all lecturers, and not the task of only one course and only one lecturer.

## **Facilitating the same process in congregations**

Arguably, the same approach can be used in congregations as well, when pastors endeavour to sensitise their congregations to the realities of VAW and seek to transform violent cultures and communities. African communities tend to be receptive to stories. In much the same way as Jesus used parables, these stories can be used to engage with the difficult topic of VAW, as well as to facilitate engagement with cultural practices that disempower and/or violate women. Pastors should be sensitive, though, not to use stories that can lead to the identification of people within the congregation and/or community. Furthermore, one must realise that this process will take longer within a congregation than it will in the seminary, and pastors will have to be very patient and very sensitive. It is also important that the pastor has a thorough understanding of the community context of VAW.

The importance of female pastors is highlighted during this step. It will arguably be easier for a female pastor to guide a congregation in this process. Women will probably disclose and discuss VAW much more easily with a female pastor, and arguably a female pastor will also be more open to challenging cultural structures that empower men at the expense of women.

## **Challenges**

Nevertheless, there are some serious challenges to the process of including VAW within the curriculum, which I highlight in order to invite suggestions and discussion on how it can possibly be addressed.

First, can male students engage in such a process of case study research of VAW? Will female survivors of VAW be willing to talk to them? And will they truly listen? It is important that one is responsible in one's teaching methods. Sending insensitive, patriarchal male students out to collect stories can be very irresponsible, causing hurt to those who have already been hurt. Thus, while you want to expose all students to the realities of VAW, is it worth the risk?

Second, one will come across students who simply refuse to engage with a process of challenging and criticising culture. There will thus be extreme resistance to any teaching activity that criticises the "traditional" roles and ways of doing things. How does one handle such students and situations? Furthermore, how does one handle such a situation within a teaching context, with a group of students witnessing the conversation?

## Conclusion

VAW is a serious and pervasive issue, present in all communities and societies. Patriarchy and patriarchal cultural structures, indirectly or directly supported by church leaders and church members, were identified as one of the primary reasons why the church is not addressing VAW. In this essay, an attempt was made to explore how this issue can be talked about and taught at seminary and congregational level, with the end goal of having churches which talk about and address VAW. African feminist theologies were proposed as offering many innovative ways of introducing and developing an engendered theology which recognises and incorporates women and women's issues. Specifically the narrative approach, much lauded by African feminist theologies, can be very effective when it comes to VAW. Practical suggestions were made of how VAW can be introduced into the seminary classroom and the case study approach was explored as an effective way of doing so.

Nevertheless, this essay is only a start to the conversation about how VAW can be introduced to the classroom and in congregations. It is such a loaded and sensitive issue that it remains a challenge. It is, however, a challenge that *must* be met.

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### **Questions for further reflection**

- ♦ What would be a story-sharing location in your culture?
- ♦ In your context, what would be needed to create a safe space for sharing stories on VAW? What must be done to create such spaces in the classroom, in the church, and in homes?
- ♦ What are your connotations with the word “feminist”? Why?
- ♦ Which cultural practices do you think facilitates VAW?
- ♦ Do you think culture can be changed?

## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND THE CHURCH?

Malawian women speaking out

*Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction: From silence to speech**

In recent years, there have been numerous incidents of violence targeted at women in Malawian society. As several of the essays in this volume will attest to, violence exists everywhere, even in places where one would expect safety and security: in homes, among relatives, and even in churches, where people should be able to run to for refuge.

Of course, to say that gender-based violence is on the increase these days does not mean that there was no violence before. But previously, in many African countries, incidents of violence were not disclosed. No one spoke of violence; it was considered a private family matter. In many cases, this was because perpetrators were largely men and members of patriarchal societies, where this kind of action was accepted as “normal” family practice; a man *should* “discipline” his wife for “misbehaving”. Ironically, though rationalised by many perpetrators as part of their husbandly duties, when gender-based violence is disclosed in a community it was nevertheless thought of as reflecting badly on the community. The perpetrator and the survivor kept silent. If it was exposed per chance, it was often ignored in families as the woman was always accused of being careless and disrespectful to her husband and other male family members and thus deserving of the punishment she received.

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1 Gertrude Kapuma is a lecturer in Practical Theology and Academic Dean at Zomba Theological College, Malawi. She is also an ordained minister in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Blantyre Synod, Malawi.



Malawi used to be such a closed society, where people mostly did not speak freely of issues that affected them. Among these issues was violence against women. The impression this created was that all was well in Malawian society; Malawians were a cultured, well-mannered and disciplined people. However, over time this has changed. On the eve of democracy in 1992, Malawians began to look at themselves differently. They became increasingly aware of the new rights that they may claim under a new dispensation, and one of these was the right to freely express their views on the problems they saw around them in society. People began to reveal issues that adversely affect communities, including the issue of gender-based violence. The media began reporting on the harsh reality of the violence to which especially women were subjected.<sup>2</sup> With this, ordinary Malawians also began reflecting on the consequences of gender-based violence beyond the physical suffering it entails. It was increasingly seen as a violation of peoples' rights in families, communities, places of work, and even the church. As such, violence came to be more and more acknowledged as conduct intended to undermine a person's humanity, identity and dignity.

The changes that occurred in Malawi over the past two-and-a-half decades were not limited to political change, as socially, too, much has changed. For one, many people no longer live in family units as before. Many have left their traditional homes and rural way of life to migrate to urban areas in search of opportunities and money. This affected them both socially and economically. But changes in lifestyle also came at a price: an increased pace of life; struggles to find and keep employment; and increased pressure to acquire "the good things in life" – all within a context where it is "each one for him- or herself" where traditional support structures have fallen away. In many cases, this leads to frustration or disappointment needing an outlet, and this often comes in the form of violence aimed at the nearest and dearest – in many cases intimate partners, especially women.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, I shall look at different forms, causes and consequences of gender-based violence as told to me over years of being a lecturer in theology and a minister in a local congregation. These stories will give some view of the

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2 Cf. the study by the University of Malawi, Centre for Social Research, which states that a total of 2,547 cases of gender-based violence were reported in the 10 years from 1994 to 2004. Of these, 4.2% were cases of wife-battery, 9.7% were rape cases, 5.9% were cases of defilement, 13.0% were cases of unlawful wounding and 10.6% cases of assault.

3 According to the NGO "Men for Gender Equality Now", recent studies indicate that 85% of gender-based violence in Malawi is done by men towards women and girls. Cf. Masina, "Breaking Tradition".

magnitude of the problem of gender-based violence and also of the response of the churches through the eyes of these women. These women came to me as a minister, but also as a woman, hoping that as such I would be able to understand them and help them.<sup>4</sup>

## **Contributing factors to gender-based violence in Malawi**

### **The influence of culture**

In order for us to understand the existence of gender-based violence in Malawi, it will be important to briefly talk about the cultural understanding of male and female in this context. Like many African societies, Malawian society for the most part believes that the man is the head of the family and as such women are expected to be submissive and to tolerate whatever is done to them. Men are regarded as strong and women as weak. Even from birth many families afford more respect, freedom and privileges to male children. Should one then at all be surprised when male children grow up thinking themselves more important than their female siblings, or even their mothers?

Recently, I performed the funeral of a young man who caused a lot of trouble for his mother after the death of his father. He had sold all the family's property and was planning to chase the mother away from the house so that he could sell the house as well. He claimed that, as the son and according to their culture, he was the sole recipient of the family's property after his father's death and that he had the authority to do with it as he pleased. Before this could happen, however, he was killed in a car accident. It is terrible to see how a mother, who should have been heartbroken due to the tragic loss of her son, is now relieved, saying that she can now sleep without fear of what will happen to her.

As in the above case, the concepts of "culture" and "tradition" have often been used to legitimise poor treatment of those who are considered inferior in society; those who are powerless, and unfortunately, usually those who are female, especially in patriarchal societies such as that of Malawi. According to Gnanadason, the link between patriarchy, power and gender violence is clear:

In recent years, women have used the term "patriarchy" to articulate one understanding of existing unequal power relations in the world, and to describe the violence that women face in their homes, in the workplace, and elsewhere in

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4 The stories I recount here were not part of a specific research project, but rather a personal reflection on years of experience in the ministry. As such, no dates and places will be given as befits usual interviewing for research purposes.

society. Such violence is seen as expression of the wider violent and militarized context of the world in which we live. Patriarchy is identified as a system of “graded subjugation” in which some have power over others. This power can be manifested in economic, political, social or cultural terms.<sup>5</sup>

But if this what culture is about, what is it meant for? Does culture that is so cherished and protected have to imply oppression, discrimination and marginalisation for some and power, status, even wealth for others? Who are the creators of culture, and who sustain it?

Of course, as will be clear from many other reflections in this volume, “culture” may be understood in a variety of ways. In essence, however, it embodies people’s primary identity and values. And as such, it is of course of the greatest importance; it shapes who we are, and how we understand and perceive the world around us. Culture is expressed in a system of symbols – of which the most basic pervasive form is language.<sup>6</sup> It concerns peoples’ place in life, where they belong, and is (supposed to be) aimed at the well-being of the whole of society. And yet, ironically, culture over the ages has been and continues to be potentially one of the most oppressive characteristics of human societies, and even more so in patriarchal societies, as

...(t)he inherent logic of patriarchy says that since men have the right to dominance and control, they also have the right to enforce that control. It is this control-over component of patriarchy and its assumptions of ownership of women and children by men that make it vulnerable to violence and abuse – not only against women and children, but against the earth and its resources.<sup>7</sup>

### **The influence of socialisation processes**

Socialisation and education play a major role in informing us of our culture and the traditional beliefs that are dear to our society. According to Horton and Horton, “Socialization is a process by which we develop personally by internalizing the culture of our society.”<sup>8</sup> According to the Malawian tradition, it is important to teach a child basic life-skills. Parents, especially the mother, play an important role in this exercise. Although these skills are supposed to be taught to children regardless their gender, in practice girl children are expected to learn more of these traditional beliefs, values and skills (mainly relating to domestic chores) than the

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5 Gnanadason, *No longer a secret*, 4.

6 Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 110.

7 Heggen, “Religious Beliefs and Abuse”, 17.

8 Horton & Horton, *Programmed Learning Aid*, 13.

male child. These values that are instilled in girls include being submissive and subservient to the men in the family. This leaves them disempowered and without the “skills” to escape violent situations or relationships.

### **The influence of unequal access to education**

One may hear in many of the contributions to this volume that many African societies give boys preferential treatment in educational opportunities over girls. This is also the case in Malawi and is reflected in higher illiteracy rates among Malawian women.<sup>9</sup> The reason for this is that, when people are faced with limited resources to provide for education, it is believed that girls will marry when they grow up and have a husband to look after them. In the words of one Malawian girl:

At school, during break, the girls used to share their fritters with me. But school is no longer for me. Daddy has said there was not enough money left to pay for all of us. Only my brothers still go to school: for girls, we were told that we will find a husband.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, even when a girl child goes to school, this is only one of her daily chores as she is inevitably expected to still do household chores as well. As a result she may often be tired and unable to concentrate at school or to study. She may fail her examinations, because of this, outgrow her classmates and may be too ashamed to return to school. The following account, told to me by my own sister, reflects something of the situation girl children often face in Malawi:

In 2011, I went on a field trip to Mchinji district to visit village chiefs regarding progress reports on the development projects. Sitting on the veranda of the chief's house, I saw two kids a boy and a girl of about 12 and 13, years coming back from school. The girl went straight into the house to leave her books and to change her uniform. She came out and went to the kitchen to cook lunch. She made a fire and placed a pot for *nsima* [Malawi's staple food] on the fire. She then went to draw more water for cooking. Meanwhile, the brother sat on the veranda of their house doing his homework. When food was ready, she went inside and brought with her a small baby. They sat to eat together with the brother whilst she was feeding the small one. The boy finished eating first, and went to change his uniform. He came out with a bicycle and rode away. The sister continued to clear everything with the baby on her back. I wondered whether the girl will have a chance to do her homework and why the brother could not help in all that she had to do. When commenting on this to the village chief, he could not

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9 According to UNESCO, the literacy rate for Malawian women above 15 years old was 33.52% (1987), 54.00% (1998) and 68.49% (2010) compared to men with 65.28; 74.93 and 81.13 in the same years, Index Mundi, “Malawi – Literacy rate”.

10 AACC, “Report on Mobilization”, 35.

see anything wrong with the situation, although he would have been the right person to help.<sup>11</sup>

## Types of gender-based violence

There are a number of forms of abuse to which mostly women are subjected; some of them are overtly violent but others may be very subtle, leaving no physical scars, but inflicting deep psychological wounds.

### Physical violence in the family

The home is a place where everybody is supposed to feel safe and secure, protected, cared for and loved. The home is also the first and best school for children where they learn many things to guide them through life, and many of these are learned by example. Parents have this responsibility to prepare a child for future challenges. However, this does not necessarily happen in all homes. In many homes, children are often the witnesses to violence and abuse or even the subjects thereof, which will scar them for life. Domestic violence cuts across divides of class, income and culture even though people think that violence occurs mainly in lower income families. The abuse may not necessarily be physical, but rather psychological and emotional, and equally detrimental.

Domestic violence includes *wife-battering*, which over time often grows worse. Two years ago Malawian society was shocked at an incident where a man chopped off both arms of his wife because he was jealous of her. The woman was left with a terribly disability. To add to her ordeal, her husband then left her and she became destitute. According to a recent newspaper report, a woman in Ndirande Township in Blantyre has suffered a broken leg after her husband assaulted her when she broke the news to him that she was pregnant – something which infuriated him.<sup>12</sup> Many forms of abuse take place behind closed doors and cultural views encourage women not to disclose whatever abuses they are subjected to. Other examples of excessive violence which women have experienced in the recent past in Malawi include being scalded with boiling water, being set on fire<sup>13</sup> or being denied food, sometimes to the brink of starvation.<sup>14</sup> Yet still, the advice well-meaning women

11 Kandulu, Laura. Personal Communication, 4 July 2012.

12 *The Nation*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

13 *Malawi Voice*, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

14 A case I personally had to deal with was that of a husband and wife who both had children from previous marriages and two children together. When the husband was retrenched, he received his pension pay-out but he spent it on alcohol. He bought food, but only for himself and no one

would often give prospective brides at bridal showers to keep intact their future marriages would include lying about the origin of injuries suffered at the hands of their husbands, since telling the truth will only worsen their fate and running away back to their parents' houses does not guarantee finding refuge there. Clearly, better advice would have been:

If you have been beaten or threatened, do not wait for another attack. Do something to protect yourself or the beatings may turn into a habit. The longer you wait, the more difficult it becomes to act. Even if you have been beaten for many years, you can still protect yourself from more beatings, it is never too late.<sup>15</sup>

*Incest* is another manifestation of gender-based violence where the victim is often forced into silence. Even if disclosed, it is often not reported to the authorities for fear of stigma, or of the incarceration of the perpetrator, who is often the sole provider of the family. I once encountered a woman who had four children with her husband and one of her own from a previous relationship. Desperate for help, she related her story to me. Her older daughter (the one from the previous relationship) was continuously abused sexually by her stepfather when she (his wife) went home to the village to tend to her sick mother. As a result of this the thirteen-year-old girl became pregnant. In fear of stigmatisation, she took her daughter for an abortion without disclosing to anyone what had happened. Two years after this incident, the woman left her ten-year-old daughter sleeping in the house while visiting a neighbour who was not well. Gone for less than an hour, she heard her daughter crying to find that the latter was subject to the same violence than her elder sister earlier. The mother did not know what to do. She was afraid of losing the financial support of her husband if she reported the matter to the police, but her children were not safe in their own home. In desperation she tried to talk to one of the elders of her church, only to be told not to talk about the incident because “these things happen in the home” and talking about it would only disgrace the family. This woman is a telling example of what Miller refers to as ...trapped emotionally and in other ways. Financially, she is likely to be dependent on her husband, unable to support herself and the children. She may already have attempted single parenting, and found the stress and isolation of living alone with her children to be unbearable.<sup>16</sup>

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in the family was allowed to touch it. He would even eat his food in the presence of his wife, children and stepchildren. His wife was left to provide for her own and all the children's needs. When she threatened to leave him, he approached the church to reprimand her for her behaviour towards him.

15 Armstrong, *Violence Against Women*, 6.

16 Miller, *Family Violence*, 35.

Recently, a local newspaper reported that a fifty-year-old uncle raped his three-year-old niece in order to secure good luck for the sale of his tobacco at the market. Upon investigation of the incident, the mother of this girl disclosed that she too was raped as a girl by the same man.<sup>17</sup> Had someone spoken up then, it might not have happened again to her own daughter.

The above-mentioned story reminds one of a notorious biblical account of incest, namely, the story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:1-22 who was abused by her half-brother Amnon. What makes this story all the more terrifying is that the plot of Amnon was known to some members of his and Tamar's family. And Amnon "...is portrayed as cruel and manipulative. He methodically planned his crime. He ignored the cultural and religious prohibitions against such a violent act. Nor did he show any regard for the consequences of his abuse on Tamar."<sup>18</sup>

Again the issue of unequal power looms large. According to Cooper-White, Whether the act is rape, sexual harassment, battery or the sexual abuse of a child all our approaches towards prevention as well as intervention and healing will fail until we recognize these not as acts of passion, lust or temper but acts of power and aggression often using or targeting sexual body parts or sexist language – simply because this is the area of greatest vulnerability and greatest violation.<sup>19</sup>

The story told by the woman above as well as that of Tamar remind and challenge us today to consider what we ourselves may do, or what we perhaps left undone. As members of churches, we should also ask what the churches do, have done or fail to do to help such people.

Another form of domestic violence is *forced (early) marriage*. When young girls enter into marriage at a young age, they do not comprehend what is happening and they often suddenly find themselves in the midst of an abusive relationship. I recently came across a very young girl during my round of home visits in our congregation. At first, I thought she was a daughter in that home, but she told me that she was married. Upon asking her how this is possible as she was still so young, she told me that when she was still very young her father accepted the equivalent of USD 1.20 in return for her getting engaged to a man she did not know. As soon as the girl was twelve, her father was paid the equivalent of USD 3.50 as *lobola* (bride price) and she was forced to leave school to marry this stranger who was himself merely sixteen years old, immature and unable to care for a wife, let alone a family. After a year she gave birth to a premature baby who died within a week

<sup>17</sup> *The Nation on Sunday*, 20 May 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Miller, *Family Violence*, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Cooper-White, "The Rape of Tamar", 28.

of its birth.<sup>20</sup> According to the girl, the premature birth was the result of repeated daily beatings at the hand of her husband. Having had to stay at home all day with no food, her husband would return in the evenings and demand dinner. If there was nothing, she was severely beaten. Whilst crying, the girl said, “I am struggling, living with a man I did not choose. I cannot go back to my parents because they received money for me. I was brought to a town where I do not know anybody. I am struggling, why?”

### **Physical violence outside the family**

Many Malawians understand rape to refer to forced sexual intercourse with someone unknown to the victim. However, as Jane Ansah, a Malawian judge, explains, rape is defined by law as *any* sexual intercourse with a woman without her consent. She also mentions that rape is not sexual desire expressed violently; it is violence expressed sexually.<sup>21</sup> Firstly, rape also takes place in many homes: it is committed by and against intimate partners. Secondly, sex in the form of rape is used by some men to exercise power.

Unfortunately, the true extent of rape in Malawi remains unknown.<sup>22</sup> The media seem to suggest that there is at least one woman or girl child being raped every day. It seems that women are no longer safe even to go to the market, the hospital or clinics alone, or to walk to work alone. The statistics that do exist may also only reflect the urban and peri-urban areas, excluding the rural areas. In the latter areas, rape cases are normally kept secret among members of the immediate family and are not even reported to the chief, let alone the police.

Rape is often accompanied by extreme cruelty and extreme violence, such as the recent case of a 42-year-old woman who was raped and hacked to death by a 36-year-old man. Cases have also been reported where women would visit the traditional medicine men only to be raped by the latter under the guise that the women are in fact cleansed in order to be cured. This is again a situation of power; desperate women are being violated again. Particularly violent rape cases are often those where women are gang raped by a number of men. Two years ago this happened to my daughter’s friend during a burglary at their house. The girl was home alone and was raped by all five the burglars. It has left indelible scars on

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20 On the health risks for both baby and mother in the case of early pregnancy specifically in Africa, such as “increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases, cervical cancer, malaria, death during childbirth, and obstetric fistulas”, cf. Nour, “Health Consequences”.

21 Ansah, Workshop.

22 Cf. Singizi, “In Malawi”.



the young woman for the rest of her life. She trusts no man, and for a long period preferred to keep to herself. Long after the incident, the trauma she experienced still impacts her life daily. Long after the physical trauma has been recovered from, the emotional and psychological wounds seem as fresh as ever. It is to these kinds of instances that we now turn.

### **Psychological and emotional violence**

Not one of the above-mentioned examples of physical violence comes without its fair share of psychological and emotional damage. Sometimes, however, the result of violence is mainly emotional damage. This makes it even less visible, more difficult to talk about and to prove, but no less traumatic.

### **Discrimination against women**

Many people do not realise that discrimination is a form of violence. This may take the form of privileges being denied to women, discrimination against women in the workplace (e.g., in terms of qualifying for promotion), or even simply to get employment, or rather even being allowed by their husbands to apply for a job. Sometimes, words we use carry with them discriminatory or derogative views regarding women. In fact, people often say things even without knowing what pain they cause, or what the danger is of their words when internalised by women or when taken to heart. Simple, everyday expressions are, for example, “Osalira ngati nkazi” (don’t cry like a woman); “Osachita zinthu ngati akazi” (do not do things like a woman); “akazi ndi wosokoneza” (women are confusing); or “akazi alibe ntchito” (women are not important).

These and many more expressions of verbal abuse are the insults that women get from men in general and even from their male partners. A husband can discriminate against his wife in many ways by making unwanted comments to/about her, even in the presence of children. Such men expect their wives to accept this and even to laugh about it. I was told by an evangelist’s wife who had undergone a hysterectomy because she suffered from fibroids, that after the operation the relationship between her and her husband deteriorated. Her husband was told by other men that he will no longer enjoy sex with his wife due to the removal of his wife’s uterus. In the eyes of the man this made the woman less of a woman and as a result he insulted her all the time, saying that living with her was like living with a man and calling her by insulting names. Due to the constant verbal abuse the woman’s health deteriorated and she eventually died from a heart attack.

## **The violence of (male) infidelity**

In a patriarchal society, husbands have the freedom to go where and do pretty much as they please without having to answer to their wives. This attitude makes it easy for some men to have sexual partners outside their marriage. Traditional leaders do not seem to help in such cases as they are part of “the cultural system”. They would rather tell women not to follow their husbands wherever they go. I was told by one woman that one traditional leader actually went as far as to say that even if the husband is caught in the act with another woman, the wife should not shout at them, but should instead accept it and go home. Furthermore, traditionally a woman cannot divorce her husband, even in cases of infidelity, and such attitudes only encourage men to persist in these activities. This leaves women with no way out of such a situation. She may struggle to find solace even among other women, as she may be afraid of being seen as a bad wife, hence her husband’s infidelity, and she may soon find herself in isolation. Women have not been empowered to make decisions that will protect their own self-respect and dignity and they do not know how to teach it any differently to their daughters, or indeed to their sons, who may very well accept their fathers’ actions as normal and acceptable.

## **Sexual harassment**

Women are often sexually objectified and experience sexual harassment, even if in no physical way, in all spheres of life. Men make unwanted advances at women, embarrassing them by speaking in sexually suggestive ways, even by using ostensibly “flattering” and “innocent” words and phrases. Examples women have referred to in conversations with me include “You look beautiful today; may I just touch your hair?”, “You have sexy eyes”, “You are wearing a nice perfume, come closer for me to smell it better”, “You are dressed to kill, what are you up to?” As far back as in 1994, a study in Malawi showed that of 150 working women interviewed, 40% had experienced some kind of sexual harassment in the workplace. A University of Malawi lecturer described her ordeal with a colleague. Her problem began when he was promoted to head of the department. He then began to pursue her with a series of unwanted advances. “He would wait for me and take any opportunity to put his arms around me and squeeze me against him telling me how beautifully I smelt.” Such incidents continued until she said enough is enough and told his boss about it. The outcome of her act of resistance was yet another form of discrimination: “I received a letter terminating my contract.”<sup>23</sup>

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23 *The Nation*, 6 March 1997.

This kind of situation makes women uncomfortable (and vulnerable) and they often have no one with whom they can share these experiences – being once again isolated in and by their predicament. This is, however, far from being a phenomenon limited to a working environment. On the streets, women are subjected to unwanted suggestive comments. In 2012, vendors took out their frustration with the political instability in the country on women wearing trousers in public, insisting that it was not according to Malawian traditions. Some women were even intensely humiliated by being forced to take off their trousers in public and to go on their way wearing only their underwear. It only ended when the President herself intervened.

### **If women speak out, do churches listen?**

It is a sad fact that many of the attitudes and perspectives behind gender-based violence are not only culturally sanctioned, but have been and still are sanctioned religiously by many men in Malawi. Bible texts, such as Paul's words in Ephesians 5:22-24 are often heard, reminding women to "be subject in everything to their husbands".<sup>24</sup> Paul, however, also tells us how we ought to live together as the Body of Christ and as parts of this Body, and that we should respond to the hurt of other parts of the Body (1 Cor 12: 26). From Christians, nothing less is expected than to stand in solidarity with those who suffer.

As we have seen from many examples above, the church is at least in some cases aware of those who are suffering from gender-based violence, although only in the rare cases where women do speak up. Many times the only advice women get is to return home and sort out their family problems. In other cases, women are told that they themselves are the cause of the trouble; that they need to respect their husbands and do what is expected of them as women. Heggen even tells of one instance where

...(a) woman told her pastor about her husband's abusive behavior, [and] the pastor's response was: "No matter what he's doing to you, he is still your spiritual head. Respect those behaviors that you can respect and pray for those you can't respect. But remember, no matter what, you owe it to him and to God to live in submission to your husband."<sup>25</sup>

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24 See the chapter in this volume by Mwaniki and Mouton on the interpretation of Ephesians 5 in view of changing marriage structures in Kenya.

25 Heggen, "Religious Beliefs and Abuse", 17.

If this is how women are treated when they bring their cases forward for counselling and support, then we should not be surprised that the few women who speak out to the church may also wish to remain silent in future. We may even not be surprised if this causes these courageous women to fall into doubt regarding their faith as such. As Heggen says:

I was surprised and saddened that many of the perpetrators of sexual abuse and domestic violence I counseled professed to be Christians. I was particularly confused by many perpetrators who claimed to see no conflict between their behavior and their Christian beliefs.<sup>26</sup>

This makes it all the more important that church leaders, who are mostly men, come clean about their own complicity in gender-based violence. It is difficult if not impossible for someone who is guilty of gender-based violence to help and counsel a person who comes to him crying for help. Instead of the woman being helped, she may easily be condemned and, as has happened before,

...(i)n some cases church leaders denied that violence against women is an issue in the lives of church members or clergy; violence was seen as something that happens only in the community outside the church. Mostly however, this is not the case, and too often the perpetrators of the violence against women are members of the clergy and church leaders. In one church we heard clergy say that they would be opposed to violence “except in certain circumstances.”<sup>27</sup>

We are called as churches to follow the example of Jesus, by not condemning, but by affirming and healing. This begins with an openness to victims of gender-based violence in a non-judgmental way (cf. the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11). But we should also do more.

### **How can the church respond to gender-based violence?**

We have seen throughout this essay that women are exposed to many types of violence and often have no safe place to go to. Even the church does not seem to be a safe place for women. We have also seen that there is a serious lack of understanding of the nature and extent of violence and its impact on people. It is therefore important for the church to transform itself with a view to becoming the healing and holistic church it was meant to be. Churches are expected to be models of love and caring. They should be actively involved in addressing social ills and they should become places of refuge. According to Holmes and Williams,

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<sup>26</sup> Heggen, “Religious Beliefs and Abuse”, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Gnanadason, *No Longer A Secret*, 72.

...(t)he church can begin to address the issues of abuse in order to offer a safe place by taking steps to prevent it. We can believe in the empowering of people and their rights to know. We believe that we can all make our churches safer, and that there is a huge amount we can do to ensure that abuse and betrayal are minimized. Likewise we can help ensure that when abuse does occur, it is dealt with openly, in a way that allows healing and reconciliation, rather than being left to store up bitterness and division.<sup>28</sup>

In order to begin such a restructuring process, the church should consider the following:

- ♦ *Introducing a truly liberating and healing ministry:* The church must be an inclusive organisation within the society; women and men should be given equal opportunities of leadership so that the church can give witness (also in its structures) to equality and inclusivity.
- ♦ *Governance issues:* Women who are excluded in leadership cannot take any positions of power. As a result they are marginalised and in most cases discriminated against. An inclusive church will ensure that issues affecting all members are dealt with accordingly, with representation of women and youth.
- ♦ *An accountable theology:* Our theological thinking has to be revisited and begin to prepare people for ministry with knowledge of the present challenges. The Bible has to be contextualised in order to empower those that are marginalised, and to help ministers and laity to bring the good news of the gospel to those who suffer from gender-based violence.
- ♦ *Revisiting the institution of marriage:* The church needs to intensify premarital and marriage counselling so that people go into marriage with a clear understanding of what a truly Christian marriage entails, especially with regard to the meaning of “wives submitting to husbands” and similar biblical texts.
- ♦ *Leadership of pastoral care:* Leadership is a shared responsibility and the goal of the church is to care for God’s people. Leaders should be trained in counselling church members adequately and in a sensitive way.
- ♦ *A loving church:* Christ loves his church and the church is called upon to listen with love to the many cries of people in and outside of the church. “Traditionally, it is the leader’s job to ensure that things run smoothly, and that the values of the community are maintained. But no leader in any organization has the power by him/herself alone to make that organization a safe place. For a place to be safe everyone must be involved.”<sup>29</sup> This is a calling of not only a few people; it is the calling of all.

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<sup>28</sup> Holmes & Williams, *Church as a Safe Place*, 80.

<sup>29</sup> Holmes & Williams, *Church as a Safe Place*, 131.

## Conclusion

In summary, this essay tried to answer questions which others are also asking in other contexts throughout the world:

Is the church present in the pain and suffering of the millions of violated women in the world? The church has been in the vanguard in challenging global economic and political injustice, and articulate in condemning policies and practices that keep millions of people subjugated ... [M]ovements of oppressed peoples for justice and dignity are a spiritual necessity of our time. Why is the church not a fore-runner in challenging all the forces that hold women ransom to a violent and ruthless world? Why has the theology of the church been silent on this issue? Why has the church in many instances condoned sexual harassment and even violence in its own institutional life? These are the questions women are asking as we call the church to respond with resolute action.<sup>30</sup>

The women of Malawi have finally begun to speak up. May the churches of Malawi and in Africa match their courage in speaking out against all forms of gender violence and may the churches become truly places of refuge for women to speak out and to tell their stories.

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30 Gnanadason, *No Longer A Secret*, 60.

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## Questions for further reflection

- ◆ Is gender-based violence a challenge in your context?
- ◆ Do women in your context voice their concerns about gender violence? Why do you think they do or do not?
- ◆ How do you think do cultural perceptions promote or inhibit gender-based violence in your context?
- ◆ Would you say your denomination is aware of the plight of women due to gender-based violence?
- ◆ In your opinion should churches provide safe spaces for women to share their experiences of gender-based violence? Does your denomination do this and if not, what may they do to create such spaces?

## “DO NOT TELL THE PERSON CARRYING YOU THAT S/HE STINKS”

Reflections in *ubuntu* and masculinities  
in the context of sexual and gender-  
based violence and HIV

*Ezra Chitando*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

*Ubuntu* has received “favourable press” in the last two decades. The attainment of democracy in South Africa in 1994 and the insistence on recovering indigenous values have given the concept a much-needed lift. Reuel J. Khoza observes that his own earlier reflections on *ubuntu* were indeed prompted by the end of apartheid and that “there was a heady atmosphere of intellectual ferment.”<sup>2</sup> *Ubuntu* is conceived as a valuable ethical resource that will heal most (if not all) of the pressing ethical challenges of our time. The underlying conviction is that “...*ubuntu* has much to offer to the wider world, in particular South African society.”<sup>3</sup> As if to compensate for the many years of minimising the value of African ethical precepts and indigenous knowledge systems, there has been a marked interest in *ubuntu*. One might characterise the current enchantment with the concept as “*ubuntumania*”.

In this essay, I seek to examine the importance of *ubuntu* against the backdrop of the emerging interest in masculinities in Africa. I ask the question: How relevant or applicable is *ubuntu* to constructions of masculinities in contexts of sexual and

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1 Ezra Chitando is Anglophone Theology Consultant for the World Council of Churches Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa and professor of History of Religions at the University of Zimbabwe. He works with theological institutions and religious leaders to respond to sexual and gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health rights, sexuality and HIV.

2 Khoza, *Attuned Leadership*, xxxv.

3 Bennett & Patrick, “*Ubuntu*”, 224.



gender-based violence and HIV? Whereas I was initially highly critical of the applicability of *ubuntu* to the current ways of being male in Africa,<sup>4</sup> I am more willing to engage the concept now.<sup>5</sup> My earlier frustration was prompted by the glorification of *ubuntu* in the midst of a culture of impunity by many men in Africa. Why did proponents of *ubuntu* appear insensitive to the cries of women and children? Why were they celebrating the African concept of solidarity when some men appeared to be driven by the desire to obliterate their neighbours? Recently, I discovered that some of my other questions had also been taken up by Charles Villa-Vicencio when asking:

Can a rediscovery of *ubuntu* realistically assist a people to heal themselves? How valid is the *ubuntu* ideal as a viable political ethic? To what extent is *ubuntu* a little more than a nostalgic longing for a projected sense of precolonial cultural homogeneity and coexistence? Did it emerge as a colonial imposition designed to exclude African communities from colonial privilege? Given its origins in a preindustrial society, grounded in family, clan and tribal belonging, can it be updated to address the complexities facing heterogeneous contemporary societies? Has *ubuntu* made South African and traditional African nations more humane than other societies? What are the limitations and strengths of *ubuntu*? What, if anything, does *ubuntu* offer the modern state?<sup>6</sup>

In this essay, I shall thus seek to utilise some of the questions posed above by analysing whether and to what extent *ubuntu* is relevant to the discourses on masculinities in the face of sexual and gender-based violence in sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, I would like to reflect on how *ubuntu* could be utilised towards contributing to the emergence of more harmonious, life-giving and transformative/liberating masculinities. Such masculinities would empower men to become actively involved in the overall response to sexual and gender-based violence and HIV. They would nurture gender-equitable men who are opposed to violence against women in their intimate relationships.<sup>7</sup> Critically, such masculinities would appreciate the vital role that women play in sustaining families, communities and nations. Cognisant of the debates around the applicability of the feminist ethic of care and the *ubuntu* ethic of care,<sup>8</sup> this essay maintains that *ubuntu* needs to be de-patriarchalised if it is to serve the needs of children, women and men in Africa.

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4 Chitando, "Religious Ethics".

5 Cf., for example, Mangena and Chitando, "Millennium Development Goals".

6 Villa-Vicencio, *Walk with us*, 114.

7 Chitando & Chirongoma, "Introduction", 26.

8 Mangena, "The Search for an African Feminist Ethic".

## **Men behaving badly: Masculinity and sexual and gender-based violence**

Across many cultures, men tend to enjoy dominance and privileges. In many instances, men have been socialised to command and to have their demands met. Concepts of “maleness” that are lubricated by religion<sup>9</sup> enable boys and men to dominate and to “do” violence. Globally, boy children tend to receive preferential treatment as patriarchy celebrates the arrival of its “chief technical operators”. Mostly pampered and assured of the benefits of being male, young boys and men know that they occupy a rung higher than that occupied by their sisters and mothers. Paul Leshota, a theologian from Lesotho, shares his socialisation into patriarchy as follows:

Already at this early stage, I felt it my duty to protect and – in the absence of my parents – to watch over my sister. I knew already what my sister was supposed to do and what she was not supposed to do. It was dangerous for her to be seen in the company of boys. It was not only unbecoming, it was offensive and it interfered with and challenged my role in protecting her. She was weaker and unable to take care of herself. She needed my constant supervision. Obviously, my masculinity needed this hierarchical relation to what it can subordinate, in order to have its symbolic force and familiar status ... It allowed me and other men to exert control over my sister and other women and their bodies. In this manner it determined relations of power and authority. It therefore upheld my superiority over my sister, irrespective of our ages.<sup>10</sup>

Critical in Leshota’s analysis of his “becoming” moment is the identification that manhood entailed control over women and their bodies. Sexual and gender-based violence, where men are by far the prime “doers” of violence, is informed by this very sense of power, control and authority. Across cultures, men are led to believe that they are “more human” than women. Violence by men is a strategy of “putting women in their rightful place”.<sup>11</sup> The net effect has been dramatic: men “doing” violence against women and children in homes, religious institutions, workplaces and in different other places. Writing within an African context, Musa W. Dube from Botswana observes that violence against women and children happens both in streets and in homes. She writes:

Women and children are beaten and raped and do not feel safe to walk freely without looking behind their backs. Is this God’s will for women and children?

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9 Owino, “Maleness”.

10 Leshota, “Under the Spell”, 159.

11 Gabaitse, *Passion Killings*, 308.

Are there other ways of dealing with our differences rather than turning to violence?<sup>12</sup>

Although I have insisted on the global character of sexual and gender-based violence, I would like to pay particular attention to violence in the African context. This is a major challenge as focusing on violence in Africa runs the risk of perpetuating the negative image of the continent. Surely, there is already enough negative publicity on Africa. Why would an African activist feed this industry by talking about violence? Are there no joyous stories about the continent: the smiles at weddings, the generosity, the conviviality, the refusal to be overwhelmed and *ubuntu*? Yes, I submit that Africa is not a dark continent.<sup>13</sup> If someone asks me if Africa is cursed,<sup>14</sup> I will readily refute the notion. Instead, I will challenge them to anticipate Africa's prosperous future.<sup>15</sup>

Despite acknowledging the many traits worth celebrating in the rich tapestry that constitutes the continent, I refuse to gloss over its culture of impunity that characterises sexual and gender-based violence in Africa. I refuse to refute the fact that, as a man, I am directly implicated in heinous crimes against women and children. I am a partaker of the patriarchal dividend, even as I constantly struggle to challenge myself to question my privileges. My social location<sup>16</sup> is that of the only male child in a family of five; heterosexual, married, above forty years old, academic, member of the dominant ethnic group (Shona, in Zimbabwe) and consultant of the World Council of Churches. All of this accords me many advantages. These are advantages over my sisters, homosexuals, wife and children, younger men and women, students and non-academic members of the community, citizens from minority ethnic groups and those who belong to smaller communities of faith.

I find it imperative to reflect on masculinities and sexual and gender-based violence because it invokes a sense of vulnerability in me. It challenges my masculinity in a very profound way. It awakens me to the frightening reality that sexual and gender-based violence is not done by "a few mad men" out there,<sup>17</sup> but that, as a man, I am implicated as an "indirect beneficiary" of their acts. Upon closer scrutiny, the men who "do" violence do it on behalf of "man-kind", that is, we, their fellow men. In addition, if all women are made vulnerable by their "rape-

12 Dube, *The HIV & AIDS Bible*, 54–55.

13 Stenger, *Africa is not a Dark Continent*.

14 Adeyemo, *Is Africa Cursed?*

15 Clarke, *Africa's Future*.

16 Cf. Dube, "Social Location", 101.

17 Du Toit, "Rape Understood as Torture", 65.

bility” that is, susceptibility to rape, as well as to being victims of sexual and gender-based violence, as a man, I am permanently susceptible to being a rapist and a doer of violence.

Those of us who are male have to admit that we have not treated women and children with justice. We have done violence to women and children on the basis of our pursuit of our idealised masculinities. Socialised to dominate and to always have things go our way, we have done violence to known women,<sup>18</sup> marshalled state resources to do violence to women citizens of our countries, done violence in war situations and in various other contexts. Although some women also do violence – sometimes more than men,<sup>19</sup> by far many more of us men across the region do violence than women. Counting on the privileges bestowed upon us by religion, culture and economic systems, we have raped, battered, slapped and suffocated women and children. Philomena N. Mwaura, a Kenyan woman theologian, clarifies gender-based violence when writing that it

... refers to any harm that is perpetrated against a person as a result of gender power inequalities that exist among males and females. It is an umbrella term covering any act of violence inflicted on a person primarily because of their gender. Gender-based violence is often a display of male power which manifests itself in various forms including physical, psychological, cultural, economic and sexual.<sup>20</sup>

Sexual and gender-based violence is rampant in sub-Saharan Africa. Over here, in Zimbabwe, militias rape women supporters of the opposition party to punish them for being “sell-outs” and to convert them to the “revolutionary path/party”. Over there, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a woman has a bayonet inserted into her vagina, while over in Nigeria, a woman is saved from death by stoning on the basis of a legal technicality as a version of Shariah Law had been invoked on her. At the same time, in Ethiopia, a young girl is ambushed and sexually assaulted while coming from school, while across the border in Kenya, a school teacher forces himself on a schoolgirl. To the south, in Malawi, a husband beats his wife for “bad cooking” and in South Africa a young man kicks his girlfriend for receiving “a suspicious call” on her mobile phone. Many more examples may be mentioned, but the motivation behind all of these acts tends to be quite similar: men expressing

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18 Hearn, “A Multi-Faceted Analysis”.

19 Coulter et al., *Young Female Fighters*, 7-8.

20 Mwaura, “Gender Based Violence”, 102.

their power, control and dominance over women. Across the region, many women have lamented, “let me not die before my time.”<sup>21</sup>

What is the profile of a male doer of violence? Trying to answer this question is an exercise in futility, similar to trying to create the profile of the male client in sex work. Basically, men from all races, classes, religions, nationalities and so forth are signatories to the “covenant of violence” against women.<sup>22</sup> Highly intelligent and well-educated men, male religious leaders, male politicians, sportsmen, boys and young men, unemployed men, taxi touts, et cetera, do violence against women, children and other men. A longer narrative is required to examine the economic violence that men in cosmopolitan centres author against citizens of the global South.

At the heart of dominant masculinities in the region is the ideology of heterosexuality. This has seen the debate on homosexuality in the region becoming highly politicised.<sup>23</sup> Despite the presence of homosexuality in Africa since time immemorial,<sup>24</sup> there is a persistent framing of sexuality exclusively in heterosexual terms. Those who dare to depart from this ideological path have violence done to them. Violence is deployed in an effort to remind them of the “correct order of things”. In most parts of the region, men and women are enjoined to uphold heterosexuality. Thus,

...(f)or its sustenance, the power of patriarchy and certain forms of masculinity needs the majority of men and women to believe in it and support its ideology and systems. At a minimum the system of gender domination needs men and women not to mobilise against its structures, to remain acquiescent and not rock the patriarchal boat. Another fundamental premise for the rule of men over women is the denial of male sexualities other than heterosexuality.<sup>25</sup>

### **Redefining masculinity: Refining *ubuntu***

The journey from violent to harmonious and peaceful masculinities will not be achieved through enacting fabulous pieces of legislation – although legal reform is necessary. Profound shifts in mind-sets are required if men’s violence against women and children is to be addressed effectively, and the concept of *ubuntu* offers considerable promise in this quest. Although I have previously strongly questioned

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21 IRC, *Let me Not Die*.

22 Maluleke & Nadar, “Breaking the Covenant”.

23 Gunda, *The Bible and Homosexuality*; HRW, *More than a Name*.

24 GALZ, *Unspoken Facts*.

25 Ratele, “Male sexualities”, 407.

the value of *ubuntu* in the face of men's impunity with regard to sexual and gender-based violence and HIV,<sup>26</sup> my continuing reflections have led me to the conclusion that a refined, gender-sensitive *ubuntu* may indeed contribute towards transformative masculinity in Africa. *Ubuntu* can contribute to women's health and well-being, especially in a post-conflict society where they remain vulnerable.<sup>27</sup>

*Ubuntu* has received considerable scholarly attention.<sup>28</sup> Essentially, *ubuntu* is an African approach to reality that places emphasis on the community and taking responsibility for each other's burdens. Challenging the colonial tendency to dismiss indigenous knowledge systems, *ubuntu* has enjoyed a lot of currency in postcolonial studies in Africa. It has been invoked within African philosophy, legal studies, business studies and other fields. *Ubuntu* has also been appealed to in the context of human rights and HIV.<sup>29</sup> Writing within the context of the search for reconciliation, Villa-Vicencio rates the concept highly:

*Ubuntu*, progressively understood and adapted to meet the challenges of modernity, offers a cultural incentive to promote a level of communal coexistence among individuals, clans, ethnic groups, and nations that lingers in the ethos and memory of a continent devastated by greed, conflict and war. It provides an African proposal for resolving a global problem of moving an abusive and tyrannical society to the beginnings of democratic rule and respect for human rights. It lies at the heart of a viable understanding of political reconciliation, without which shared positive peace is constantly undermined.<sup>30</sup>

Villa-Vicencio's formulation is valuable as it helps to address my initial fears that the uncritical appropriation of *ubuntu* glosses over its patriarchal foundations. He suggests that the concept should be "progressively understood and adapted to meet the challenges of modernity", thereby acknowledging that *ubuntu* stands in need of refinement. In the following section, I seek to suggest that *ubuntu* needs to be divested of its patriarchal packaging if it is to be a resource in the struggle against sexual and gender-based violence in Africa.

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26 Chitando, "Religious Ethics".

27 Meintjes et al., *The Aftermath*.

28 Cf., among others, Ramose, *African Philosophy*; Shutte, *Ubuntu*; Rukuni, *Being African*; and Chirongoma et al., "Ubuntu and Women's Health Agency".

29 Chinouya & O'Keefe, "Zimbabwean Cultural Traditions".

30 Villa-Vicencio, *Walk with us*, 127.

## **Standing tall without standing on someone: Eliminating the patriarchal foundations of *ubuntu***

As I have argued above, sexual and gender-based violence is prompted by the problematic socialisation of boy children. Brought up to command and dominate, boys regard women and girls as being permanently available to meet their desires. Whereas *ubuntu* expresses the notion that “I am because we are, and we are because I am,” in practice, the personhood of women has not been upheld consistently. Personhood in African cultures has been construed and constructed in a hierarchical manner, with men enjoying a full and privileged status. The full membership of women in a community that places emphasis on solidarity has not been taken as a given. Indeed, as women activists (theologians, ethicists, gender and literature scholars and others) have argued, African societies need to accept this simple but profound truth: A woman is a human being!

Expunged of its patriarchal underpinnings, *ubuntu* can socialise boys and men to fight sexual and gender-based violence. Currently, African men committing violence are not exuding *ubuntu* (particularly in its refined form). *Ubuntu* can empower men to realise and accept the full humanity of women. As such, I fully subscribe to Dube’s contention that appropriating *ubuntu* “...would force men who express their manhood through subjugating women, raping them, and infecting young girl-children to rethink their masculinity.”<sup>31</sup>

When *ubuntu* has been cleansed of its patriarchal foundations, it has the potential to inspire men to become advocates of gender justice. Such men will accept the full humanity of women and will challenge sexual and gender-based violence wherever it is found. They will recognise the need to break ranks with patriarchy<sup>32</sup> and to face the backlash that will result as patriarchy seeks to consolidate its gains. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, an African woman theologian who has been actively involved in the struggle to affirm women’s dignity and to counter sexual and gender-based violence, contends that African men must be willing to share power and to become aware of new possibilities.

Power-sharing has become difficult for African men as to have to learn to unlearn dictatorial and self-serving attitudes is of course painful. The transformation of power that women seek could enable men to see the importance of service as a key element in the responsible use of leadership positions. Empowering women to succeed in their many critical and laudable life-sustaining projects is a duty expected of African men. To be afraid of women, not to trust women, to exclude

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31 Dube, “Adinkra!”, 141.

32 Maimela, “Seeking to be a Christian”.

women, to treat women with contempt, to patronize women are all signs of insecurity of men afraid to be simply human.<sup>33</sup>

Exorcised of its masculinist assumptions, *ubuntu* can contribute towards the emergence of friendly and tolerant masculinities. As I have shown above, the masculinities that are currently dominant are largely toxic and explosive.<sup>34</sup> By inculcating the tenets of non-patriarchal *ubuntu* in homes, religious institutions, schools, the media and other strategies, it is possible to engineer non-violent masculinities. Men who are convinced that women have the same rights and privileges as men are a powerful resource to the struggle against sexual and gender-based violence and HIV.

### **African resources for African challenges: *Ubuntu* and the transformation of masculinities**

Gender transformation has taken long in Africa, for various reasons. One of the most dominant challenges has, however, been the perception that the whole discourse appears to emerge from the global North, leaving the global South to be consumers of ideas developed elsewhere. In particular, male African nationalists have resisted the call for gender transformation on the (spurious) grounds that it is a “Western imposition”; African gender activists are attacked for lacking authenticity and mimicking Western culture.

Appropriating *ubuntu* to challenge sexual and gender-based violence equips the African gender activist with an indigenous resource, thereby cushioning her/him from using foreign concepts to address African existential issues. By utilising *ubuntu* and emphasising its potential to promote gender justice, the African activist would be disarming critics who resist gender transformation by insisting that it is a foreign concept. *Ubuntu* empowers the African activist to highlight that an indigenous concept challenges sexual and gender-based violence.

The cultural ideology that projects men as the defenders of African culture suggests that men would be more inclined to endorse the struggle against sexual and gender-based violence when it is couched in vernacular idiom. Men are more likely to embrace the quest for gender justice when it has been demonstrated that their own value system leads to gender justice. Domoka Lucinda Manda, a woman ethicist from Malawi, argues that African indigenous religions promote the notion of *ubuntu* or an ethic of solidarity. She elaborates:

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33 Oduyoye, “Acting to Construct Africa”, 40.

34 MEW, *The Crisis of Explosive Masculinity*.



The practical application of these values challenges men to put an end to hegemonic, dominant conceptions of masculinity while simultaneously encouraging men to uphold and affirm dignity, equality and respect for women. The values of dignity and respect are non-negotiable in any culture. However, in the African context, what makes a difference in the application of these values is that dignity, equality and respect give expression to the concept of being fully human.<sup>35</sup>

*Ubuntu* can therefore be appropriated to transform African masculinities in the face of sexual and gender-based violence and HIV in the same way that some subversive proverbs and sayings can be used to generate positive ways of being male. Although there has been greater focus on African myths, folktales, proverbs and sayings that promote hegemonic masculinities,<sup>36</sup> there is need to retrieve and emphasise subversive African myths, folktales, proverbs and sayings which challenge the dominant narrative of fearless, dominant and violent men. Men are more willing to reflect on these resources when they are put forward as platforms for building transformative masculinities.

### ***Ubuntu and non-violent masculinities***

I shall readily admit that the call for non-violent masculinities in Africa can sound suspicious at a time when former colonisers and abusers of African resources continue to train their young men to become killing machines. Critics have some justification to ask: why are young African men being asked to become soft when their age-mates elsewhere are being toughened systematically? Despite such suspicions, I would like to reiterate that the call for a non-violent world has a global thrust.<sup>37</sup> It is in Africa's own interest to generate cultures of peace, as the spiral of violence threatens the vibrancy of the continent. Furthermore, the continent could still develop strategies of self-defence that do not entail militarising all the young men and women.

*Ubuntu* has the capacity to contribute towards the emergence of more non-violent masculinities in Africa. In particular, boys and young men can be socialised to appreciate the value of accepting the full humanity and dignity of women from an early age. In homes, schools, religious institutions and communities, resources must be availed to impart the values of *ubuntu* to young men and women. The agency of men needs to be acknowledged and expanded. Galvanised by *ubuntu*,

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35 Manda, "Religions and the Responsibility", 488.

36 Kiyimba, "Men and Power".

37 Kässmann, *Overcoming Violence*.

boys and men can play a critical role in the struggle against sexual and gender-based violence and HIV. As Ugandan Catholic priest, John Mary Waliggo observes, "...the success of the women's liberation struggle needs both men and women."<sup>38</sup>

Where boys and men are being socialised to command and to have their desires addressed by any means necessary, *ubuntu* can be applied to influence new ways of being a man. *Ubuntu* potentially empowers the young man to realise that he does not have to use violence in relationships, as his value does not lie in imposing himself on others. *Ubuntu* can provide a platform for men to adjust to the emerging reality of empowered women who are calling for dialogue in relationships. *Ubuntu* is an ethical resource that can enable men to appreciate the new context where their partners can be more successful than them in every facet of life. It does this by placing emphasis on the full humanity of women and men.

It is critical for those of us who are men to realise that although our masculinities are fragile, we should not use violence in the hope of stabilising them. *Ubuntu* can assist in this process by reassuring us of our humanity even if we are not as successful as society demands. Yes, we may not have the fattest bank accounts, flashiest cars or the most sophisticated gadgets, but we remain fully human. Yes, we may not have the fittest bodies or the most glamorous partners, but we remain fully human. *Ubuntu* counsels us to simply provide a caring male presence. This should triumph over aggressive, domineering and presumptuous masculinities.<sup>39</sup> Rosinah M. Gabaitse, a woman biblical scholar from Botswana, suggests that *botho* (a variant of *ubuntu*) can lead to new ways of being. I cite her at considerable length as she articulates the core argument of this essay:

When men are taught *botho*, they are taught to respect every living creature and to respect women on the basis that they are simply human, alive and bear the image of God. Whenever a man violates a woman he should know more than anything they are destroying the very essence and being of God. They will be taught to adopt the attributes of a human being that are life-giving and life-enhancing. *Botho* discourages violent masculinities, because they diminish life. As such, men who violate and kill women can be characterised as lacking that value ... If it means dissolving gender inequalities and doing away with our constructions of men and women, then so be it. *Botho* requires that men and women have life and have it in abundance, so much so that a community that has *botho* is a community that speaks openly and eloquently against gender injustices, especially violence against women.<sup>40</sup>

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38 John Mary Waliggo, *Struggle for Equality*, xxi.

39 Mugambi, "Masculinity on Trial", 92.

40 Gabaitse, "Passion Killings", 318.

## Conclusion

We African men have struggled to provide effective and compassionate leadership in our homes, religious organisations, professional institutions and nations. To compound the situation, we are heavily implicated in sexual and gender-based violence and HIV. We have revelled in the patriarchal dividend, hurting the very people who toil and break themselves for us. Can *ubuntu* empower us to reject violence and embrace peace and justice? In this essay, I have argued that if we de-patriarchalise *ubuntu*, it can be deployed to contribute towards detoxifying aggressive masculinities. I have maintained that *ubuntu* may be utilised to assist men to challenge sexual and gender-based violence and embrace more harmonious ways of being human. *Ubuntu*-inspired men in Africa would begin to appreciate women more and salute them for their daily “miracle-working” capacities. They would acknowledge the justice men owe to women.<sup>41</sup> Such men would, in trembling and fear, decipher the full meaning of the wisdom of African elders: “Do not tell the person carrying you that s/he stinks!”

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### Questions for further reflection

- ♦ Discuss your (personal) understanding of *ubuntu* in an honest and critical-constructive way. What are the strengths and limitations of the term, also with regard to gender?
- ♦ What, according to your culture, is an "ideal man"? Can *ubuntu* be utilised as an indigenous resource towards more liberating and life-giving masculinities (manhood) in Africa, particularly in contexts of sexual violence? If yes, how?
- ♦ Describe the kind of masculinities that would equip African men (a) to treat women and children with respect and justice, and (b) to become actively involved in the response to gender-based violence and HIV on our continent. Where are such (non-patriarchal, caring) masculinities to be formed, and who should be responsible for it?
- ♦ How has this essay influenced or challenged your understanding of verbal and sexual violence against women and children?
- ♦ How does the practical example of Jesus of Nazareth inspire you to *rethink* and *redefine* "personhood" (in Africa, today)?



## DISABILITY AND GENDER

### Twofold discrimination

*Mia Lintvelt*<sup>1</sup>

#### **Introduction**

Sarah is an intelligent, competent woman. She is also profoundly deaf. She cannot have any children. The latter fact is not due to any fault of her own, but to a decision made by a physician to sterilise her after she suffered a miscarriage. The sterilisation was performed without Sarah's consent and without informing her of the operation afterwards because no one could communicate with her. It took years for her to find out the reason for her barrenness.

Jenna was born with a split lip and palate and with a mental impairment. She was hidden away in a cupboard from birth because the family did not want to show her to the world – she was a disgrace to them. She was only found by a social worker at the age of five. She was in a very bad physical condition, could neither walk nor communicate and was severely malnourished.

Amy was born in Congo and suffered polio as a child. She cannot walk. When civil war broke out in her country, her family and friends fled, leaving her behind to be killed along other people living with disabilities. Incredibly, however, she survived to tell her story of survival to the world.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Disability: Towards conceptual clarity**

The term “disability” is not easily defined. According to one common definition, disability refers to a permanent impairment in the functioning of a person that

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1 Mia Lintvelt is lecturer in theology at the National Institute for the Deaf (DCMA) Worcester, South Africa.

2 These are three true stories, only the names have been changed to protect the identity of the women/girls involved.



restricts such a person's interaction and/or participation in society. The impairment may be physical, sensory, cognitive, or intellectual, as well as mental illness, and various types of chronic illnesses.<sup>3</sup>

However, an important distinction must be made between the term disability and the term "impairment". The term impairment refers to "a physical, intellectual, mental or sensory characteristic or condition, which places limitations on an individual's personal or social functioning in comparison with someone who does not have that characteristic or condition."<sup>4</sup> The word impairment is often seen as something "individual". It can be the result of illness, injury, or a congenital condition and can "affect someone's physical mobility or dexterity, her ability to learn, to communicate or interact with other people or to hear or see."<sup>5</sup> This view is associated with the medical model<sup>6</sup> based on an individualistic perspective on disability. In contrast, the term "disability" is seen as a social issue: "It is the exclusion of people with impairments, due to social and environmental discrimination that acts as a barrier to their full and equal participation in mainstream society. [Therefore,] (d)isability is fundamentally an issue of rights."<sup>7</sup>

A useful illustration of this point can be found within the Deaf community.<sup>8</sup> Because they see themselves as a minority group with their own language, culture and identity, deaf people call themselves "Deaf" and not people with a disability. They recognise that they live with impairment, but do not see themselves as "disabled". In fact, they regard the attitude of the broader community as *disabling*, as this often impairs their functioning far more than their physical impairment itself. In a society where people can communicate in sign language, the Deaf function on the same level as any so-called "normal" person, but within a society

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3 Disabled World, "Definition of Disabilities".

4 Webster, *A Handbook of Mainstreaming Disability*, 6.

5 Webster, *A Handbook of Mainstreaming Disability*, 6.

6 There are two distinct models of disability: The medical and the social models. The medical model looks at disability as a condition resulting from the malfunction of a part or parts of the human body or mind. The result is that the person cannot function "normally" in life. The aim is to correct this mistake in order to ensure that a person can function optimally. The social model looks at disability as a problem created by a society that does not cater for the person's alternative needs. The lack of adequate support systems results in the person being unable to function "normally". The aim is then to fix society to accommodate the special needs of the person living with an impairment. Cf. Van Niekerk, "Disability and biomedical enhancement", 105-106.

7 Webster, *A Handbook on Mainstreaming Disability*, 6.

8 Technically, when one refers to the entire group of deaf people who consider themselves a cultural minority community, one uses the word "Deaf" in upper case.

where the Deaf cannot communicate or get access to services or information, they *become disabled*.

Thus, understanding disability does not only look at individuals and their impairments, but it is also about society and the way these persons with impairments are perceived and treated by the society – meaning their families, the church, their community at large and the state. The World Health Organization therefore also rightly refers to disability as “... a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he or she lives”.<sup>9</sup>

For the purposes of this essay, I will use the phrase “people with disabilities”, as this highlights the fact that the problems that the women living with an impairment face is not just a physical one, but rather the disabling effects of the attitudes and responses of society on their well-being. While we cannot fix or change the fact of the impairment, we can change the way we think and act towards women living with disabilities – restoring them as rightful members of the body of Christ.

## **Getting a glimpse of the situation of women living with disabilities<sup>10</sup>**

### **Incidence of disability**

An estimated 650 million people worldwide live with a disability.<sup>11</sup> A staggering 80%<sup>12</sup> of all people (approximately 480 million people) living with disabilities live in low-income countries, are poor and have limited or no access to basic health services, including rehabilitation facilities.<sup>13</sup>

People with disabilities are among the most marginalized groups in the world. People with disabilities have poorer health outcomes, lower education achievements, less economic participation and higher rates of poverty than people without disabilities.<sup>14</sup>

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9 WHO, “Disabilities”.

10 The expression “disabled woman/person” will not be used in this essay. The worth of people does not vest in their abilities/disabilities, but in their being. The latter is not affected by her disability. Therefore, in this essay the expression “person/woman with a disability” will be used.

11 Disabled World, “World Health and Disability Statistics”.

12 UN, “Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities: Some Facts”.

13 WHO, “What is being done”.

14 WHO, “Facts on Disability”.

The UN reports that, in most developing countries, more women are disabled than men.<sup>15</sup> In South Africa, it is interesting to note that more boys are born with disabilities than girls, but more women will become disabled later in life.<sup>16</sup>

### **The position of the women with disabilities in African society**

In many parts of the world, but particularly in Africa, many women with disabilities face double discrimination – firstly due to their gender, and secondly due to their disability. In the Masaya communities of East Africa for example, “persons with disabilities are usually termed as cursed, burden, disgrace and unwanted.”<sup>17</sup>

For many parents, having a child with a disability is equal to having something broken, useless and worthless. The son with a disability will still have some use – maybe as a goat herder or beggar, but the disabled girl is of no use. In the minds of many parents, being disabled means a girl cannot have any children and cannot work. A female child with a disability will mean nothing to the family, and is seen as nothing more than a burden – even something to get rid of as soon as possible.

A woman living with a disability is frequently targeted and abused for a number of reasons. This can include her own vulnerability, her inability to communicate what happened to her or the attitude of family members or broader society towards her. The lack of accessible services and skilled service providers makes it very difficult for a person with a disability to report such a crime.

Another factor, identified by Disabled Women in Africa (DIWA), is patriarchy: “Violence against women with disabilities occurs primarily as a result of attitudes towards women in patriarchal society coupled with vulnerability from the conditions that result from the disability itself.”<sup>18</sup>

A small survey done in 2004 in Orissa, India, found that virtually all women and girls with disabilities in the study were beaten at home, that 25% of women with intellectual disabilities had been raped, and 6% of disabled women were sterilised without their consent.<sup>19</sup> Although conducted in India, similar (or worse) figures might be found in Africa. For one, in Malawi, Swaziland and Lesotho one finds the belief that having sex with a disabled person will cure one of HIV/AIDS.<sup>20</sup> Albino women are frequently “...raped and killed for ritual sacrifice. They

15 UN, “Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and Optional Protocol”.

16 Statistics South Africa, *Prevalence of Disability in South Africa*, 11–12, 22.

17 Mbuthia, “Disability Is Not A Curse”.

18 DIWA, “Demand of African Women with Disabilities”, 2.

19 UN, “Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities: Some Facts”.

20 DIWA, “Demand of African Women with Disabilities”, 1.

also reported of being the victims of rape due to their white skin colour and the desire of some black men ‘to sleep with a white woman’.”<sup>21</sup>

It has been mentioned that women with disabilities are often amongst the most poor and marginalised members of society and in fact trapped and unable to move out of this, as they do not have access to education. Perhaps a lack of education even means that they are not aware of their rights, for example, the right to education or personal safety, in countries where such rights are guaranteed. Education for people with disabilities in developing countries is not always accessible/adequate or even seen as important. According to UNESCO, 90% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school. Because society’s perception of a disabled person is so low, it is considered an unnecessary expense to send a person with a disability to school. Schools for disabled children are also sometimes far from home, which makes it even more of a challenge in terms of transport, fees, et cetera. In most African countries a disabled child may be seen as a disgrace and may therefore be hidden at home.<sup>22</sup> Sending such a person to school is almost unthinkable. Girls with disabilities even fare far worse than the boys, with studies indicating that only one percent of women with disabilities in developing countries are literate, compared to the three percent literacy rate of men with disabilities.<sup>23</sup>

Unemployment is a challenge for all people, especially females. As was alluded to earlier, if a female has an added disadvantage of having a disability, her prospects of finding employment are indeed very limited. In South Africa, women with disabilities have the lowest employment rate of all, with only 15% being employed.<sup>24</sup> It is said that in most African countries the employment rate is near zero percent for people living with a disability.<sup>25</sup>

Sexuality, marriage and family life is central to the being of most women. This is also true for many women with disabilities. A woman with disability has exactly the same sexual needs and caring instincts as any other woman. In Africa, the stigmatisation often results in the lack of marriage proposals. Often it is assumed that a disabled person cannot or should not have children, without having all the facts about the extent and challenges of the particular impairment (see the story of

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21 DIWA, “Demand of African Women with Disabilities”, 3.

22 DAWN, “Factsheets”.

23 UN, “Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities: Some Facts”.

24 Statistics South Africa, *Prevalence*, 22.

25 DAWN, “Factsheets”.

Sarah on page one). And, even if a disabled woman does have children, her road is often more difficult from the start. Women with disabilities often find that there is no knowledgeable staff or support in hospitals to provide the right assistance during pregnancy and childbirth. One deaf woman in Uganda lost a baby (one of twins) because the nurse could not communicate with her. She thought she only had one baby and stopped pushing after delivering the first one. The second baby died.<sup>26</sup> It is often the case that medical staff do not have the training or sensitivity to serve women with disabilities, especially when it comes to pregnancy, HIV and childbirth. Divorce is common if a psychosocial disability is perceived, and “children would often be taken away from mothers when it becomes evident that she has a psychosocial disability.”<sup>27</sup> This happens without the necessary knowledge of the person’s particular impairment and how this will impact the life of the child.

### **Societal attitudes**

In society, we find a wide variety of different attitudes towards women with disabilities. Geiger remarks that “attitudes and responses to people with diverse disabilities vary widely across and even within cultures.”<sup>28</sup> She adds “that most attitudes and responses are rooted in beliefs about the cause of the disability.” DIWA reports that “...(t)he Women with Disabilities in Africa have to contend with the less value attached to women by the African Cultures as well as the perception of Disability as a curse.”<sup>29</sup>

I would like to explore some of the attitudes towards people with disabilities. This should be read against the background of the general situation of all women in Africa.

Some people see people with disabilities as somehow less human, useless and strange. In Swaziland there are two words for a disabled person – a more politically correct word meaning people who have a disability, and the other word, *sigua*, which means “a nothing person, like a baboon”.<sup>30</sup> The common perception is that a person with a disability is stupid and unable to work. The system of government grants supports this theory. In Zimbabwe, Ghana and Zambia, a deaf person is not allowed to have a driver’s licence, because they are not considered safe drivers. According to a report by the World Federation for the Deaf, deaf people are not

26 DIWA, “Demand of African Women with Disabilities”, 1.

27 Robb, “Towards strengthening the Rights”, 30.

28 Geiger, “Through the eyes of Children”, 95.

29 DIWA, “Demand of African Women with Disabilities”, 3.

30 Langwenya, personal communication.

allowed to vote in Egypt.<sup>31</sup> In Tanzania, for example, persons with “mental illness” cannot be registered and participate in the electoral process.<sup>32</sup> It clearly indicates that a person with disability is seen as someone who is incapable of making sound decisions or participating in society. The impairment is emphasised and projected over the personhood of the person who lives with a disability.

Society sometimes responds to people with disabilities in an overly sympathetic way. People with disabilities are viewed as suffering, needy and dependent individuals who need special care and cannot contribute to society in any way. This perspective marginalises the person with disabilities even more.

From the above, it is clear that in many cases the person with a disability is perceived as nothing more than his/her disability and this is seen as an individual problem that needs to be fixed. This perspective links closely to the medical model where people are evaluated in the light of their abilities. Any person with an impairment is defined by their illness or medical condition. They are viewed “as dependent and needing to be cured or cared for”.<sup>33</sup> This leads to people with disabilities being excluded from society. The disabled person, not society, is seen as the problem. She needs to be fixed and is put into the hands of the professionals who propose ways to fix the “problem”.<sup>34</sup> This perspective leads to comments like: “Why don’t you just get a hearing aid?” or, “Can’t they operate on your legs?” or, “Can’t the *sangoma* (traditional healer) cure you?” People with assistive devices like cochlear implants or prostheses are then seen as “fixed” and “normal”. The people that cannot be “fixed” are then cared for in institutions outside “mainstream” society, where they are not expected to contribute to society in any constructive way.

As indicated above, there is a perception in Africa that disability is caused by evil spirits. One popular belief is that a child is born with a disability because the mother was cursed during pregnancy. Women with disabilities are frequently sent to *sangomas* to be cured. It is believed that the *sangoma* can find the cause of the disability with the help of the ancestors by shaking some bones. In some South African rural communities epilepsy is “thought to be related to a visitation by the devil, to witchcraft or to spirits”.<sup>35</sup> Terrible things may be done to the disabled person in an attempt to cure the disability. One example, related to me some time

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31 Huauland & Allen, “Deaf People and Human Rights”.

32 Robb, “Towards strengthening the Rights”, 29.

33 Open University, “Making your Teaching Inclusive”.

34 Open University, “Making your Teaching Inclusive”.

35 Foyaca-Sibat et al., “Neuroepidemiological Survey”.

ago, is that of a small deaf boy's parents who took him to a *sangoma*. The *sangoma's* solution was to place halved tennis balls on the boy's ears and to "pop" the ears. This caused severe damage to the child's eardrums, and did not result in a cure.

Just as society at large varies in its attitudes towards people living with disabilities, the church also varies in its attitudes and responses towards people living with disabilities.

### **The attitude of the church**

The church has done a lot for caring for people with disabilities, and this needs to be acknowledged. In South Africa, all schools for the disabled were started by the church. The Institutes for both the Deaf and the Blind also started as church commissions. This signifies a great caring and love for people with disabilities. Unfortunately, starting a centre for the disabled still does not address the needs of the person living with disability to be included in the activities of the church as fully participating members.

Discrimination and alienation in society is unfortunately also alive within faith communities. Attitudes within society are often largely reflected within the church. The person living with a disability is still often viewed as a broken person who needs to be fixed or cared for. Dutch theologian Hans Reinders refers to a disabled author who once wrote down a variety of "theological" explanations that were offered to him as comfort: "...disability as a special token of God's love, or an opportunity for spiritual growth."<sup>36</sup> None of these could really provide answers or give comfort to him as a disabled person. Reinders suggests that, "(b)ehind these 'theologies' lies the belief that there is something wrong with the disabled since God would not otherwise allow it, or the disabled were chosen by God for to be disabled."<sup>37</sup>

Healing services frequently focus on healing people living with disabilities. It is important to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit can heal people as it has taken place in the past and will certainly continue to happen. Unfortunately, it is often approached in a manner that infringes upon the dignity and may even undermine the faith of the person with disability. At the School for the Deaf where I worked it often happened that children would be invited to healing services where they had horrifying experiences of being pushed over or screamed at in fervent prayer. In many cases, the preacher would even tell the child that the healing did not

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<sup>36</sup> Reinders, "Theology and Disability", 36-37.

<sup>37</sup> Reinders, "Theology and Disability", 37.

take place because the child lacked faith. One small boy came back from such an experience and started to read every religious book he could find in an attempt to get more faith “by Friday”. When his faith was not sufficient by Friday and he could not hear, he vowed never to believe again. Other children came back from healing services without their hearing aids in the belief that they will now be able to hear. The devastation in finding out that this was not the case is often complete, often leading to a child deciding to never trust this God again. All in all, these attempts mostly only strengthen their own perception of their worthlessness. In a research project done by Erna Möller on the experiences of people with disabilities within faith communities, the following comment was made by people with disabilities: “Out of respect I say yes (when they pray for me) but nothing happens, and you begin to hate yourself.”<sup>38</sup> This brings us to the issue of how persons with disability see themselves.

### **How people living with a disability see themselves**

Unfortunately, many people with disabilities learn from the attitudes and responses of society as highlighted above that they are worthless and in need of care and that they cannot do anything for themselves.<sup>39</sup>

In a small class study done with deaf theological students in 2011, it was astonishing that 89% of the participants believed that their disability was due to some form of sin – either their own or that of their parents. In this way, their perception of their own worthlessness/brokenness and sinfulness define their being. One of our deaf students from Malawi even commented that he was astonished that a deaf person could preach the gospel, because he thought such a thing was impossible for a person with a disability.

### **Biblical perspectives on people with disabilities**

There are many references to disability and people with disabilities in the Bible. It is not always easy to understand these references or to interpret them for our purposes today. The Bible is completely silent about the plight of women with disabilities, as if they did not exist, or had no right to existence in a male-dominated

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38 Möller, “The Experiences of People”, 131.

39 This sad truth is beautifully illustrated even in the Bible, in 2 Samuel 9:8, when Mephibosheth, who was lame in both feet, compares himself with a “dead dog”, something that people despise, has no worth, and is considered ritually unclean.



society. The only reference found that might be linked to disability is the woman who suffered from bleeding for twelve years, in Luke 8:40-53.

Unfortunately, some Bible verses and interpretations have caused much confusion and pain in the lives of many people. These perspectives influence the way people with disabilities are treated within our communities and churches. I would like to briefly explore these perspectives, before suggesting some alternative perspectives.

### **Disability as the wages of sin**

The view of disability as a consequence of sin is older than the Bible itself. In John 9:1-2, the popular belief is clearly stated when the disciples saw a man who was blind since birth and asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The biblical connection between sin and disability is, however, a complex one. Otieno states that several biblical passages could indeed be interpreted in such a way to support the belief that disability is the consequence of sin: “The general view of the Old Testament writers is that God brings disability as punishment for transgressions for sin or as an expression of God’s wrath for people’s disobedience. It is seen as a curse and as a result of unbelief and ignorance.”<sup>40</sup>

Otieno quotes passages such as Deuteronomy 28:28-29 to support this view: “The Lord will inflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of the mind. At midday, you will grope about like a blind man in the dark.” Several characters in the Bible also become disabled because of their own disobedience or by divine intervention: Zachariah could not speak (Luke 1:20), King Jeroboam’s hand shrivelled up (1 Kings 13:4), and Paul became blind (Acts 9:8).

Blindness and deafness is also used metaphorically in the Bible to indicate spiritual disobedience. Otieno notes that deafness “symbolizes spiritual stubbornness or wilful refusal to hear and obey the word of God (Jer 5:21; Ez 12:2).” Blindness is often “viewed as a symbol of ignorance, sin, and unbelief. It refers to the lack of intellectual or moral understanding (Isa 29:9-10, 18 and John 9:39-41).”<sup>41</sup>

### **Disability signifying the unclean or broken**

In Leviticus 21:16-23, one finds the following shocking words:

The Lord said to Moses, “Say to Aaron: ‘For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or

40 Otieno, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives”.

41 Otieno, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives”.

lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is hunchbacked or dwarfed, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the food of his God. He has a defect; he must not come near to present the offerings made to the LORD by fire. He may eat the most holy food of his God, as well as the holy food; yet because of his defect, he must not go near the curtain or approach the altar, and so desecrate my sanctuary. I am the LORD, who makes them holy.”<sup>42</sup>

From this passage, it is clear that a person with a disability was not deemed fit for service to God. The impairment or deformity in animal or person made that animal or person unclean in the eyes of God. Every offering had to be “without defect”.<sup>43</sup> In Deuteronomy 17:1, one reads: “Do not sacrifice to the LORD your God an ox or a sheep that has any *defect* or flaw in it, for that would be detestable to him.” The perspective that a disabled person is not to be accepted by God is thus the consequence of a biblical command about the priesthood and about offerings.

### **People with disability are loved by God**

There is, however, also another possible way to understand the perspective of God towards people with disabilities.

In the passage we read above from Leviticus 21, the person living with a disability was not allowed to serve as priests. However, even in this seemingly brutal passage, God did not dismiss persons with disabilities, they are still allowed to eat the holy food. It is amazing to realise that even though God apparently sees the impairment as something impure, God still regards the person as worthy of care. God’s love, care and protection for people with disabilities is also highlighted in Leviticus 19, where God’s people are commanded specifically not to curse the deaf or to put a stumbling block in the path of a blind person.

The heart of God is also visible in the transformation that took place within David in 2 Samuel 5:8. Here, one reads the following about David (literal translation): “And David saith on that day, ‘Any one smiting the Jebusite, (let him go up by the watercourse), and the lame and the blind – the hated of David’s soul.’”<sup>44</sup> This sentence has been understood in a number of ways. It is not clear whether David actually hated people with disabilities or rather his enemies, the Jebusites, but it looks as if he at least had strong feelings against the so-called “blind

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42 All Bible quotations in this essay are from the NIV unless stated otherwise.

43 See Exod 12:5, Lev 22:21 and Num 19:2.

44 2 Samuel 5:8. Young’s Literal Translation.

and lame” that could keep him out of the city. According to Strong’s *Dictionaries*, the words used to express the feelings which David experienced were very intense. It may indeed be translated as hate or loathing,<sup>45</sup> with his whole inner being (this includes thoughts and emotions).<sup>46</sup>

But something, or rather, Someone dramatically changed David’s mind, because in 2 Samuel 9 we read that he invites Mephibosheth – a lame man – to eat at his table. David showed the kindness of God to Mephibosheth because of his father. The Hebrew word used for kindness is *he-sed* “kindness, loving-kindness, merciful kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and love.”<sup>47</sup> A complete transformation took place – from hate to love. In doing this, King David did not only restore the self-esteem of this young man who saw himself as worthless, but he also restored him to his rightful place as a member of the royal family. Mephibosheth was no longer a worthless person; he was a man with property, a man worthy to dine with the king. His disability no longer defined his being.<sup>48</sup> David understood something about the love of God towards all people – a love that sees beyond the disability, and gives the disabled person an opportunity to become all that he/she was created to be.

Jesus’ ministry also confirms the latter. Jesus does not ignore people with disabilities, but spends time with people with various disabilities. The different healing stories reveal a deep compassion and understanding of the unique challenges of each disability: Jesus took the deaf man in Mark 7: 31-37 to one side – away from the crowd. He used signs to indicate what he was going to do by first putting his fingers in the man’s ears, touching his tongue and then looking up to heaven, indicating where the healing would come from. All this was done before Jesus even spoke.

With the blind man Jesus used a different strategy altogether. He took him by the hand (Mark 8:32), spit into his eyes that he could feel the healing, and spoke to him. Jesus’ understanding of the needs of people with disabilities indicates a deep caring for them, and a deep understanding of their needs as whole people. Jesus does not treat people with disabilities as objects that need to be fixed. Jesus not only healed people’s physical impairments, he also restored them to their rightful place in their communities, and reintroduced them into society. In fact, Jesus created new

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45 Strong et al., *AMG’s Annotated Strong’s*, 490.

46 Strong et al., *AMG’s Annotated Strong’s*, 310.

47 Strong et al., *AMG’s Annotated Strong’s*, 149.

48 Rayan, *Prepare the Bride*, 28.

communities, where healed people could again participate fully and equally in all areas of life.

Otieno makes an important comment regarding the fact that many times when Jesus healed someone with disability, He also forgave their sins. In John 9:3 Jesus also makes it clear that disability is not caused by sin, but Jesus still forgives their sin. Otieno explains that in this way, Jesus also took away the stigma attached to that person. The healed person could thus no longer be viewed as sinful, but as fully restored and cleansed. In this way, Jesus ensured that the person would be readmitted and accepted in his/her community. Jesus completely restored the person's health, self-esteem and place within the community.<sup>49</sup> Chomutiri comments that this text challenges the people of his community (and ours),

to understand and believe that the emphasis of Jesus' response is not an explanation of the causes of suffering or the origin of evil, but his ability to deal with suffering as the good shepherd and the light of the world. By granting sight to the blind beggar, Jesus became the light of the world to him.<sup>50</sup>

Through the cross of Jesus, the humanly imposed inequality between people was taken away. Now every person is seen as equal in the eyes of the Lord (Gal 3:28). In Acts 10, Peter struggles with this new perspective when God shows him the vision of the clean and unclean animals. God shows Peter that these distinctions no longer stand and that, in God's eyes, every person is now considered equally important. Even though this passage primarily refers to foreigners, the implication is that every person has equal worth in the eyes of the Lord.

The reality of living with a disability cannot be ignored. Although having a disability does not make a person abnormal, incomplete or of lesser value, it is clear that having an impairment makes people suffer. The person with disabilities has so many more challenges to overcome, and a woman living with a disability especially so. God acknowledges this by promising that every impairment will be taken away in heaven. The promise of restoration is already evident in the Old Testament, where Isaiah promises that on the day of the Lord "the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see" (Isa 29:18). The ministry of Jesus is legitimated, with the realities of the living God alleviating the suffering of people with disabilities. Jesus refers to the passage in Isaiah to indicate that he is indeed the fulfilment of this prophecy. He instructs John's disciples to report these things: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those

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49 Otieno, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives".

50 Chomutiri, *Jesus and Suffering*, 193.

who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matt 11:5). When the suffering of people (also of those living with disabilities) is taken away, the full extent of the greatness of the living, loving God will be manifest.

### **People with disabilities made in the image of God**

According to Genesis 1:27, men and women were created in the image of God. The full impact of this has always been difficult to comprehend when we consider the person living with a disability. The question remains whether a person who lives with a disability could in fact have been created in the image of God. This is strongly linked to the idea of bodily perfection as the image of God, and this is a far more cultural than biblical construct.<sup>51</sup> There are numerous examples of people with disabilities that formed part of God’s plan. Moses’ speech impairment is one such example. Perfection is not a prerequisite for inclusion in God’s community. In Exodus 4:11, God says to Moses that it is God who makes people deaf, mute or blind, signifying that they are part of God’s creation and plan.

The image of God is thus not an image of bodily perfection, but rather an inner reality of being. In a document from the Roman Catholic world on the place of persons with disabilities within the church, the Committee for the Jubilee Day of the Community with Persons with Disabilities states, in preparation for that day (3 December 2000) that “(t)he human person, the living being, beyond all exterior appearances, reflects Love who created him with the ability to love and be loved, with his being, his faculties and his freedom.”<sup>52</sup>

The image of God is that of love and not perfection. When we meet any person living with a disability, it is clear that no sensory, physical or mental impairment takes away the person’s ability to love and to be loved – making them perfect images of God.

The problem is that for a long time the church has associated God with everything that is perfect and good and strong – our Almighty God. A number of theologians have, however, argued that the image of perfection that is part of our theological thinking is not a biblical image, but rather Hellenistic, imbedded in the Greek language that was used to write the New Testament. Louw suggests that God’s Omnipotence does not portray God as a powerful, all-knowing, perfect God, but rather as a God’s unique revelation (his sovereign majesty and splendid

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51 Eiesland, “Encountering The Disabled God”.

52 Committee for the Jubilee Day, “The Person with Disabilities”.

glory); it portrays God as bestowing overwhelming love and steadfast faithfulness. “*El Shaddai* of the Bible refers to the way God is related to our vulnerability.”<sup>53</sup> The cross of Jesus brings us face to face with God’s own vulnerability. Louw explains: “Because of God’s identification with our suffering on the cross, the cross reveals the weakness and vulnerability of God.”<sup>54</sup> The image of a vulnerable (or impaired) God is also explored by Eiesland when she links it to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, where he shows his marred hands and feet to his disciples (Luke 24:36–39). In presenting his impaired hands and feet to his disciples, the resurrected Saviour calls his disciples to recognise in the marks of impairment their connection with God and their own salvation. Jesus not only identifies with weakness, but displays His own impaired body. Thus disability is not a sign of weakness or brokenness but rather a sign of complete humanity.<sup>55</sup>

Vulnerability is a part of God’s image. The person living with a disability reflects the identity of God in a profound way, making the world aware of the fullness of God’s being. The image of the body of Christ, where all people collectively represent the body of Christ, also strengthens the importance to see the person with disability as part of the whole – completing the picture of who God truly is.

Therefore, by understanding that a person living with a disability is not cursed, sinful (any more than the rest of us) or broken, but rather fully human, made in the image of God, part of the body of Christ and loved by God, leads us to ask how we as church can restore these women to their rightful place in our midst.

### **Towards the restoration of women with disabilities**

The challenges faced by women in Africa cannot be denied. It is our Christian calling to ensure that all women, including women with disabilities, receive the respect and are offered the opportunities they deserve. Women and also men living with disabilities pose an added challenge to Christian communities in Africa. They will always be with us. They will always be impaired. But they do not always need to be disabled. They challenge us to change the way we *think* about disability. They further challenge us to change the way we *talk* about disability, and to change the way we *engage* with people with disability.

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53 Louw, “Virtuous Suffering”, 20–21.

54 Louw, “Virtuous Suffering”, 24.

55 Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 207.

I would like to use two passages as a guideline to propose a biblical way to see and respond to people living with disabilities. I propose that we follow a theology of restoration when discussing the challenges faced daily by people living with disability.

The first text is taken from Ezekiel 16:4-14, which reads:

On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloths. *No one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather, you were thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised. Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, "Live!"* Later I passed by ... I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine. So you were adorned with gold and silver; your clothes were of fine linen and costly fabric and embroidered cloth. Your food was honey, olive oil and the finest flour. *You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen.*

The second Bible text I would like to use is that of David and Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel 9, which I use even though I am aware that in this instance the story refers to a male with a disability:

So King David had him brought from Lo Debar, from the house of Makir son of Ammiel. When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, came to David, he bowed down to pay him honor. David said, "Mephibosheth!" "At your service", he replied. "Don't be afraid", David said to him, "for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table." Mephibosheth bowed down and said, "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?"

I would like to highlight five things in these texts that could help us find a way towards restoration: First of all, God acknowledges that Israel, in this case, was despised and considered worthless. *When we acknowledge the plight of people living with disabilities*, we already give recognition of their suffering. Only once we recognise their position and their suffering, can we begin a process of restoration.

Secondly, God did not pass by Israel without becoming involved in their plight. God gave Israel the right to live. *Declaring that women living with disabilities have a right to live* means recognising that they are worthy of life, and declaring that women living with disability, too, carry the image of God. The life that God gives is a full and complete life – see also Jesus in John 10:10. God gave Israel a chance to grow and develop into a beautiful nation. As Christians – followers of Christ – we cannot pass by a woman living with a disability, but should engage and restore

life and human dignity to that person just like Jesus did. Life entails opportunities for development. But it also means speaking life into the life of a person who possibly sees himself/herself as a “nothing”. This can be done practically by showing an attitude of love and respect towards people with disabilities whenever you meet them. Moller suggests an attitude of unconditional acceptance that is “demonstrated in authentic and substantial gestures like spending time together, celebrating success, coming alongside one another in difficult times and nurturing close relationships”.<sup>56</sup>

Thirdly, God clothed Israel with beauty. This could mean providing people with disabilities with *practical support without being condescending*.<sup>57</sup> It may refer to the poverty of women living with disabilities – providing opportunities for study or work or making a living.<sup>58</sup> People living with disabilities need help to do some everyday tasks, like going to the shop or taking their children to school. A helping and loving hand can make it possible for someone to attend church who did not have access to the church before.<sup>59</sup> Helping someone with a disability should not make that person feel worthless, but should show understanding and love for the special needs of the person. Just caring enough to care for women living with severe disabilities in a dignifying way acknowledges their worthiness as human beings.

Fourthly, God did not leave Israel alone after He restored her life. He made a covenant with her, and married her. God’s church cannot walk away from the woman living with disability and leave her in some care facility. Restoration also means *embracing her into the community as an equal*, yet different, family member, someone who can also be a leader, mentor or teacher. King David welcomed Mephibosheth to his table (although he did not expect him to work in his own fields). He welcomed him back into the community. Jesus always restored the person with disability into his/her community. Reinders remarks: “If the theological basis for human dignity lies in the fact that God bestows on all creatures – with or

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56 Möller, “The Experiences of People”, 134.

57 Möller, “The Experiences of People”, 135.

58 An interesting statistic shows that people with disabilities have been found to be far more successful at starting their own businesses – perhaps exactly because of the difficulty they experience in entering the formal labour market. In a report presented in 1996 at the World Institute on Disability Seminar, it was reported that disabled women in developing countries are demonstrating a strong rate of success in self-employment, sometimes surpassing that of disabled men, DAWN, “Factsheets”.

59 Practical help within the church could include transport, interpreters, ramp access, Braille Bibles. It is helpful to have people within the church who focus on the persons with disabilities and to have a meeting with them to determine their specific practical needs.



without disability – his loving kindness, then it is hard to deny that he expects his creatures to do the same.”<sup>60</sup>

The way in which God worked in the above-mentioned passage indicates that mere financial assistance to special care facilities is not enough. The church has a missional obligation to partner with special schools or institutions, and to become fully involved.

Fifthly, there is a change in the perception of disability. God now sees Israel as a queen. She was not only a restored “worthless” person, but became a person of worth, clothed in glory, someone people looked up to. The same happened to Mephibosheth, whose place as prince was restored. In both cases, the reference to kingliness made me realise that, when we want to *restore the human dignity of the woman living with disability*, it is also about identity. Through God’s kindness (*he-sed*), both Israel and Mephibosheth were given an identity far better than they ever thought humanly possible. They became family of the King. Restoration of identity entails a different mind-set when we think and talk about women living with disability. The church needs to address attitudes and structures within the congregation and community that alienate the person living with disability from that community in order to, where possible, restore the person living with disability as a full member of the congregation and community. This could mean changing the theological understanding of disability (the causes and effects) and the perceptions that exist within the community. The women (and men) living with disabilities are children of God – children of the King (a King who cares deeply for those who suffer and are afflicted (Psalm 72:12-14). They, too, have a place at his table. And as fellow children of God it is our responsibility to tell – and show – them that.

In summary, we can do well to quote Reynolds:

Disability is not a problem but a presence calling for affirmation. This call elicits the moral obligation to listen and pay attention, to show compassion in a way that reflects back to them their creaturely beauty and value. One needs to be present to others; what is more, these responses belie the redemptive nearness of God to human vulnerability and brokenness, a nearness of solidarity that does not undo or fix such brokenness but, as I shall argue, paradoxically embraces it.<sup>61</sup>

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60 Reinders, “Theology and Disability”, 40.

61 Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 320.

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### Questions for further reflection

- ◆ What is the situation of people living with disabilities in your own community?
- ◆ After reading this essay, how would you summarise God's attitude towards people with disabilities? Think about your own attitude/position in the light of the above.
- ◆ How can we create spaces where people with disabilities can come to tell their stories and get a feeling that they are heard?
- ◆ How can we as individuals and the church show that we respect people with disabilities as our equals? Think of practical ways that this can be done in your own context.
- ◆ How can people with disabilities be included in your church services and community? Discuss practical ways to do this (for example by building a ramp for wheelchairs)?



# GENDER EQUALITY

AN ISSUE AT HOME AND IN THE FAMILY



“YOUR DESIRE SHALL BE FOR  
YOUR HUSBAND AND HE  
SHALL RULE OVER YOU!”

Desire and rule in traditional Shona  
understandings of marriage

*Ester Rutoro*<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

The Shona culture is highly patriarchal, which means it is a male-ruled culture. In this cultural context, men are not only seen as the decision-makers in society, but also as being superior to females. As may be expected, this affects gender relationships on all levels of Shona society, but also within the institution of marriage. In this essay, the effects of a patriarchal mind-set as reflected in traditional norms and values of the Shona culture will be discussed and brought into conversation with specific biblical perspectives on the relationship between men and women, and in particular on the relationship between spouses.

### **Marriage in African contexts**

Marriage is a central institution in most African contexts. This is shown by the importance put on marriage by different communities. “For African people, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet; the departed, the living and those yet to be born. All the dimensions of time meet here and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed

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1 Dr Ester Rutoro is a lecturer at Morgenster Teachers’ College. She is involved with the Women’s Guild of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe as a minister’s wife and holds a doctoral degree of Philosophy in Education and specialised in Gender and Education Management.



and revitalised.”<sup>2</sup> In many African cultures, marriage is also not an issue that concerns only two people, a husband and a wife coming together, but it involves the combining of two lives, two families and even two communities. Furthermore, it is a revered institution, as is witnessed to by the lengthy, intricate and community-wide rituals and celebrations that often accompany African wedding ceremonies.

### **Marriage in the Shona context**

The Shona culture is not different from most other African cultures. In Shona society, marriage is a social commitment that establishes a social relationship, not just between two people, but between families and communities.<sup>3</sup> In the Shona culture, one does not merely marry to one’s partner, but one marries *into a family*. The result of this is that relationships in marriage are not just dictated by the two marriage partners or dependent upon their wishes, but it is also determined and dictated by the system into which they marry, its rules and the expectations of its members, all of which may affect husband-wife relationships.

### **Desire and rule in the Shona husband-wife relationship**

To gain a deeper understanding of Shona women’s experiences and views on marital relationships, married women were interviewed at a variety of Women’s League Conferences of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe at congregational, presbytery and national levels. Two of the stories of these women are retold below in order to create a picture of gender roles, customs and perspectives within Shona marriage and how these threaten the dignity of Shona women.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from stories such as the two above, themes relating to gender roles in a Shona marriage were also gleaned from pertinent questions put to women in personal interviews. It was interesting to note that the situation Lolita and Ruth found themselves in were not at all uncommon in the responses of the other interviewees – especially when it came to questions about the consequences of the payment of *lobola* for the decision-making power of women, the effects it had on a women’s relationship with her husband’s family and her rights over children. As one participant put it: “I have a price tag attached to me in my marital family. I have dreams and wishes in my heart for my children’s future, but I am deprived the

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2 Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 130.

3 Muzvidziwa, “Marriage as a Survival Strategy”, 152.

4 Pseudonyms are used in both cases.

joy of seeing them come true. I am silenced.” According to another participant, “When decisions are made no one cares to ask me what I also want and how I feel about decisions made, even if they affect my life and that of my children.”

**Lolita’s story**

*I got married at twenty-three after completing a teacher training course. My husband loved me very much. He understood me. He helped me in the kitchen. He supported my development. He did everything some Shona men would never think of doing for their wives. However, I had a problem. My problem came from his extended family. When they found out that my husband was doing “women’s” chores for me, they called him to the rural home alone. They reprimanded him that he should not do what he was doing. They said I had given him a concoction to make him a “woman”. When he refused to listen to them, they hated me. They said all sorts of things about me. They said I was a witch who had bewitched their son. My husband started to do chores in secret without being seen by people. When I went to the rural areas during the holidays, I felt isolated. No one wanted to associate with a “witch”. Even children were told not to eat what I cooked. My husband died ten years after we were married. His family said I killed my husband. They chased me away from the funeral, saying I wanted to eat the corpse! They buried their son in my absence and my two children were taken away from me. All I had worked for in my life was taken away from me as they said it was their son’s property. Ten years of my work was shattered. I reported the matter to the police and I finally reclaimed my children and property, including two houses in town. My husband’s family warned me that if anything was to happen to my children I should not consult them. Yes, it is all over now, but this experience has created indelible marks in my life. I am now hypertensive because of the stress I suffered during those sorrowful years.*

**Ruth’s story**

*I am married to a very abusive husband. When I got married 25 years ago, I thought I was entering paradise. My husband was then a real “angel” during our courtship. He was good and loving, to say the least. I thought how lucky I was to get such a man. However, things changed just after we got married. Things he used to do for me during our courtship just vanished into thin air. The change was so abrupt, it came as a total shock to me. I was confused. He was so impolite towards me that he scolded me in front of his relatives to prove his manhood. He did not lift a finger to help me. He showed me his true colours. However, it was too late for me. I had married him. He had blinded me all these years by not showing his true colours. He no longer sat down to talk to me as he used to do. He no longer made me laugh which was why I fell in love with him. I was trapped and I could not run away. He would often beat me and occasionally raped me afterwards. He always wanted to show me that he had power over me and that I was powerless. Due to the abuse, I had two miscarriages which threatened my life, but still I could not run away from this marriage. His relatives never believed me when I told them what was happening in my marriage. He was too good to his relatives and no one ever thought that he could do such things.*

*Although my parents believed me, they could not interfere in the home of their son-in-law. It goes against our culture for a woman's parents to interfere in the affairs of their son-in-law's home. Only a man's relatives could do that. I suffered in silence and I slowly wasted away. Luckily, he decided to move out of the matrimonial home to live with one of his many girlfriends. Only then did his relatives begin to believe me, but it was too late. I was happy to be without him. I was at peace and was happy for the peace my three children now experienced. However, the happiness was short-lived as he now occasionally returns. He rapes me on these occasions. I cannot refuse him sex because as his wife, I am bound to obey his wishes. He has paid lobola (a bride's price) for me and this gives him power over me. According to our culture, he may have as many wives as he wishes, so I cannot complain about his other "wives". I have not been tested for HIV but I know I have it. I have no power over my body or my destiny, as this power was given to my husband when he paid the lobola to my father. I cannot escape.*

### **Gender issues in the findings**

There are a number of issues that came up time and again in the individual interviews and discussions among groups of participants during the Women's League meetings. Among them, the following stood out:

#### **Patriarchy and gender relations in marriage**

Husband-wife relationships are affected by the influences from the patriarchal system. According to this system, the woman's desire is supposed to be the fulfilment of her husband's wishes and the man should rule over her in all areas of the marriage. Once a Shona girl reaches puberty, all instruction is directed towards her pleasing her future husband.<sup>5</sup> This type of socialisation influences the way in which women perceive their husbands in marriage and how men perceive their wives. From interviews, discussions and case studies, it became clear that in most cases, when the man shows love to the wife, people would say he was given a love potion (*mufuhwira*) by the wife. The Shona believe that women's desire to be loved and accepted by their husbands lead them to seek supernatural intervention. Loving one's wife is not viewed as natural, but a result of supernatural powers used by the wife to make the husband love her. If a man spends a lot of time with his wife at home, people say he was given "*chipotanamadziro*" by the wife, i.e., a concoction that makes him to hover around the house.

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<sup>5</sup> Kambarami, *Femininity, Sexuality and Culture*.

## **Lobola and gender relations in marriage**

Marriage in the Shona culture is cemented by the payment of a bride price by the suitor to the bride's family. This legalises the marriage union and it acts as insurance against marital dissolution.<sup>6</sup> Any marriage that does not involve the payment of *lobola* looks like casual sex or prostitution.<sup>7</sup> Historically, the new husband gave the bride's family a hoe or two as bride price. With the advent of capitalism, however, bride wealth price to be commercialised.

If the practice of *lobola* has such negative social and economic consequences to individuals, families and communities, why does the church in Zimbabwe continue to endorse it? Studies have shown that most women suffer abuse in marriage as a result of *lobola*. Some men argue that they paid a lot of money so they have a right to treat the wife the way they see fit. According to the study, 60% of women in Zimbabwe believe *lobola* contributed to women's oppression; and 64% believed *lobola* forced women to stay in abusive marriages.<sup>8</sup> It is evident, however, that this creates a social distance between husbands and wives and interferes with husband and wife bonding. The social distance is the result of the differential gendered positions they occupy in the family and in the society. While the husband occupies a very high status in the family, the wife occupies the lowest positions. This social distance causes a rift between the husband and the wife, since their thoughts and goals differ because of their respective social positions.<sup>9</sup>

## **Rights over property**

In the patriarchal system, reliance of women upon men in marriage enables husbands to be superior to their wives. "Women toil on the land they do not own, to produce what they do not control and at the end of the marriage through divorce or death, they can be sent away empty handed."<sup>10</sup> Women can not own land or cattle, based on customary law. It is the economic power of men which gives them power over women in the framework of the marriage.

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6 Muzvidziwa, "Marriage as a Survival Strategy", 153.

7 Mangena & Ndlovu, "Implications and Complications", 473.

8 Cf. Chireshe & Chireshe, "Lobola".

9 Cf. also Rippenburg, "Women's Status and Cultural Expression".

10 Nyerere, in "Land Policy Initiative".

## **Rights of decision-making**

It is clear that women in a Shona marriage have little or at times no right to be heard within a marriage. This has an effect on significant aspects, such as lack of power to negotiate sexual concerns. This has also resulted in the rapid spread of the HIV virus within the Shona community, especially among women. While men are free to choose, women have to follow what the husband chooses for them. One woman said she was disgraced at a family court (*dare remusha*) because she had refused to have sex with her husband if he did not use a condom, after she realised that he was very promiscuous. The all-male court accused her of being a prostitute who wanted to use condoms. They ignored their brother's infidelity and turned against the woman.

The issue of rights of decision-making has created a subject-object relationship between husband and wife – the husband being the subject in the marriage relationship and the wife being the object. The subject-object relationship is intensified by payment of the bride price, as was seen in the case studies and in the questions posed to most women during women's meetings. Due to the payment of *lobola*, the wife's freedom is transferred to the husband.

## **Shona morality and gender relations in marriage**

Culturally, the expectations for a woman in the marriage relationship far outweigh the expectations for the male. The way in which the woman conducts herself in the marriage is strictly regulated by clear moral standards which, although not written, are deeply engraved in the heart of every Shona woman. The husbands, however, have greater freedom and there are no strict rules governing how they should conduct themselves.

## **Gender-based violence within the Shona marriage**

There is prevalence of gender-based abuse within Shona marriages. This comes in the form of verbal, emotional, psychological, sexual and physical abuse. Abuse is fuelled by the vulnerability of Shona women within their marriages. People also believe the husband more readily than the wife. The woman is a late-comer to the family and people within the family tend to sympathise more with the male than the female. Thus abuse of a woman within her marital home may sometimes go on for a long time without any action being taken. Some husbands abuse their wives because they reckoned that they paid too much *lobola* for them. Some women indicated that their husbands always reminded them that they paid *lobola* for them.

One woman said: “Since my father charged the exorbitant *lobola* for me for my marriage, his love for me has diminished. He always refers to the *lobola* and never to our love. It pains me because I was not part of the *lobola* payment and I gained nothing from it, but it is me who has to suffer because of it.”

### **The extended family system and gender relations in the Shona marriage**

Shona communities are based on a morality ethic of the communitarian philosophy of *ubuntu*: “I am because we are.” The husband’s relationship with his wife and general relationships within the nuclear family are highly affected by the attitudes in the extended family system. The research for this essay showed that if it is discovered that a wife is not subordinate to her husband, she can be isolated by the extended family. This has resulted in emotional and psychological effects on quite a number of women. It was clear that although husbands may love their wives, social forces can affect the relationship. Interference in the marriage by external forces affect the bonding of married people.<sup>11</sup> This issue was seen to be true in most of the Shona marriages, as shown in the conversations of the Shona women.

### **Positive aspects of Shona culture in upholding marriage**

It may seem that the Shona gender relations in marriage are always negative. The social system, however, jealously guards against divorce by making it very difficult.

There are instances where an abusive husband is taken to the community courts about his maltreatment of his wife. The system of respecting the marital union is shown by the fact that the institution is guarded jealously against dissolution, hence the importance of *lobola*. Aunts and uncles would not stand aside and look on as a marriage falls apart. Restrictions are put on both parties in order to avoid divorce, therefore it is very difficult to divorce in the Shona culture.

Ironically, such restrictions have greater impact on a wife than on a husband, because of the imbalance in rights in the Shona marriage. It is against this background that I now move to what the church in Zimbabwe has done so far in response to the gender inequalities which adversely affect gender relations in marriages.

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11 Van Pelt, “Heart to heart”.

## **The Reformed understanding of marriage**

The seventeenth-century Westminster Confession of Faith contains a clear endorsement of marital union as a public good. In concurrence with this, the Presbyterian Constitution states:

Christian marriage is an institution of God blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, established and sanctified for the happiness and welfare of mankind, into which spiritual and physical union, one man and one woman enter, cherishing a mutual esteem and love, bearing with each other's infirmities and weaknesses, comforting each other in trouble, providing in honesty and industry for each other and for the household, praying for each other and living together the length of their lives and days as heir to the grace of life."<sup>12</sup>

Colby reiterates that marriage is both a sign of grace and a response to grace already given. It is a journey shared by two people in covenant with God as it was the first union instituted by God at Creation. The Westminster Confession of Faith declares:

The distinctive contribution of the church in performing the marriage ceremony is to affirm the divine institution of marriage, to invoke God's blessing upon those who enter the marital relationship in accordance with His word; to hear the vows of those who desire to be married and to assure the partners of God's Grace within their new union."<sup>13</sup>

It is thus imperative to note that the accountability of the church in the preservation the marriage institution is of principal significance in contemporary social order, as it was in the seventeenth-century church.

## **The Reformed Church in Zimbabwe and the “desire and rule” relations in the marriage institution**

Although there have been affirmative developments within the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe on addressing the question of gender relations in marriage, there are still many issues which need to be dealt with. The church has the following approaches to advancing gender issues in marriage:

- ◆ Couples' fellowship;
- ◆ The subject “Home and Family Living” at Murray Theological College;
- ◆ The module on “Magariro emhuri yechikristu”, meaning “Relationships within a Christian Family”, taught through Theological Education by Extension;

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12 *The Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church*, as quoted by Colby, “A Reformed Understanding of Marriage”.

13 Colby, “A Reformed Understanding of Marriage”.

- ◆ Discussions on marriage issues at women's fellowship meetings and men's fellowship meetings.

It was noted, however, that some of the responses to burning questions serve to deepen the gender gap within marriages rather than close it. Women are urged to persevere in the face of maltreatment in marriage. Some ministers' wives even tell women with problems that "men are like that." They do not really assist the person, but use the Bible to reinforce, justify and legitimate male supremacy. It has been noted that the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, being entrenched in a patriarchal system, is affected by the patriarchal approach. There are still very few voices which question why women are held in subordination to men. It is the church which should take the lead on the path to gender equity.

In spite of the patriarchal mind-set, debate between the men and women's leagues has emerged. There is interchange of ideas, since in some congregations the men and women's leagues occasionally meet to discuss pressing questions on marriage. It is, however, critical to note that in dealing with problems, the root cause should be dealt with first before dealing with the symptoms on the outside. Cultural causes are swept under the carpet, as we concentrate on symptoms. This issue is highlighted in the following story. A boy stepped on a thorn and it pricked deep into his foot. He limped to his brother because he was bleeding. The brother thought of a way to stop the bleeding. He took a bandage and tied it around the young brother's foot. The leg, however, swelled more and more. It was only after taking out the thorn that the young brother healed. It was painful, but it was the best solution. The church should question the causes of the negative gender relations in marriage. It may be painful but it has to be done to change gender relations in marriage.

There is still resistance towards gender issues within the church membership and among ministers themselves. The source of the resistance is based on the cultural view of marriage versus the biblical view which is taught to couples during couples' fellowship. The meaning of the words "woman" and "man" still have a lot of cultural connotations within the marital institution. The culturally divided roles of a woman and a man still take precedence within the church itself.



## The Biblical perspective on gender relations between husbands and wives

### Gender relations at creation

The original relationship God created was between woman and man. God set well-defined guidelines to be followed in order to guard and guide relationships between women and men.

If we look at Genesis 1:26-28, it reads:

And God said: "Let us make humankind in our own image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth..."<sup>14</sup>

After this, verse 31 shows that God saw what he had done and it was good. The perfect relationship between male and female was pleasing to God's eye. God is the author of gender equality as shown in this creation text.

This passage is quite significant on the issue of gender relations at Creation. Male and females were both created in the image of God. God did not set any gender-differentiated roles at Creation. The relationship in the first union between Adam and Eve was affectionate. Gender differentiation comes into play in Genesis 2. Adam declares in Genesis 2:23: "...This at last is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." This was the beginning of gender inequality. The scene for gender-based disharmony was set. This is quickly succeeded by the fall of humankind.

In Genesis 3 we read of the fall of humankind. This resulted in the curse of both males and females. In Genesis 3:16, in His curse upon the woman, God said, "...I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet *your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.*" Despite this curse, God still loved His children and in many cases He tried to reunite with them and bring down the curse. He sent prophets and finally His own son Jesus Christ to re-establish His relationship with his people.

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14 All quotations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version.

## **Gender relations and marriage during the times of the prophets**

In the Old Testament, I shall dwell on how God spoke about marriage through the mouth of the prophet Malachi. Malachi 2:13-14 reads:

And this you do as well: You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favour at your hand. You ask, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though is she your companion and your wife by covenant.

In the prophets' time, divorce was common among Jews as they took foreign wives, divorcing their Jewish wives. Marriage is shown not as a contract, but a holy covenant made between husband and wife in the presence of God, who is a witness. Thus marriage relationships should be honoured. Jewish husbands were ill-treating their wives during that time and God saw it fit to admonish husbands. God wanted to show the plan that the two had to be one. The verse shows that ill-treatment in marriage is detested by God and that their offerings were not received.

## **Jesus Christ, gender relations and marriage**

Jesus Christ, to show that he had come to undo the Genesis 3 curse on everyone, rightly elaborated in Luke 4:18 his main mission in these great words:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind  
to let the oppressed go free...

Jesus' commission included setting at liberty the oppressed. In his work on earth, he clearly showed this great mission by taking in women and standing for their rights, as in John 8: 2-11 (the woman caught in adultery). In Mark 10:6-9, he also reiterated God's original plan for marriage: the plan of one flesh and sanctity of marriage.

## **Gender relations and marriage during the times of the apostles**

Let us now turn to the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians 5:21-33. One sees many positive aspects concerning Christian marriage, linking to God's original plan for gender relations within Christian marriage. In verse 21, Paul says, "Be subject to one another, out of reverence for Christ." This is submission to an equal

and not to a superior. Everyone has to submit to each other, which is the divine rule. Most people, however, concentrate on verse 22, which states that wives should submit to their husbands. The context of that verse shows that submission is a two-way process where we should all submit to one another. This submission is to be based on a loving relationship where Christ is seen as the Head. It is not a submission based on fear and force. It is a submission based on love. This is what most of us Christians miss today. We equate the wife's submission as a way for the husband to have absolute authority over the wife and to not let her realise her own individuality. Even though wives are admonished to submit, we should note that husbands are not advised to subjugate or suppress their wives, but to love them.

From my perspective, Paul gave the husbands a greater obligation towards their wives. The nature of the love that husbands are told to give to their wives, would result in marriage being a pleasant experience across all cultures. No wife would be complaining about gender violence in all its forms within the marital union, especially within Christian marriages. Paul says in Ephesians 5:25-29:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they love their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

This type of love is unparalleled. It is self-giving even to the point of death. It adores the loved one and feels her pain.

### **Gender relations and marriage in Revelation**

The above attitude is even shown towards the end of the Bible in Revelation 21:9” “...I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” Jerusalem, being the church, is described to show the great love Christ has for the church. Christ leaves no stone unturned to beautify the church to his liking. This metaphor of Christ and the church correlates with the husband-wife relationship. Revelation 21:9-27 show unparalleled love of Christ towards the church. It is such a relationship that Paul draws as a parallel to the husband-wife relationship.

It is this type of love that husbands are obliged to give to their wives. Why does the Bible admonish men more than women in marriage relations? Because of the Genesis 3 curse, males tended to dominate woman in all spheres. Because of their physical prowess, they are more likely to subjugate women. God saw it fit to

make clear his intention for marriage, despite the fall. Thus men are admonished to balance the gender relationship within marriage.

### The way forward

Colby argues that for a church reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God, God's work is still unfolding.<sup>15</sup> It is against this background that the role of theological education in our time is to ensure that everyone lives a full life with the dignity that God intended for everyone to experience. The church should note that there is breakdown in marriages because of the violation of biblical principles. A Reformed church should reinforce the basic principles of Reformed theology:

- ♦ *Sola scriptura* – Scripture alone. In teaching on marital relations, the church should reflect on the teachings of the bible. There is a need for a deep understanding of Scripture. We have to be able to determine what is Scripture and what is culture. The good news of God is being preached in societies which are intensely entrenched in their cultures, to such an extent that we may “wrap the good news in our cultures”. It is therefore important for the church to teach believers in such a way that they can separate their cultures from the Gospel.
- ♦ *Sola Christus* – Christ alone. We are justified through Christ alone. This understanding is important, because it enlightens every believer that everything we do should be built upon Christ's teachings. Christ respected marriage and thus every believer should respect this institution to uphold Christ's teachings of respect for both sexes. He took both women and men into His fold of disciples, He attended the wedding in Cana, He spoke out against divorce and He stood against injustices towards women (the woman caught in adultery – he exonerated the woman of her crime because there was gender injustice in the condemnation). The great commission of Jesus (Luke 4:18) should be taken up by the church in an endeavour to restore God's intended characterisation of marriage – where God rightly noted that “in the image of God, He created them male and female.” The church should preach the restoration of the original loving relationship between husband and wife.
- ♦ *Soli Deo Gloria* – everything to give glory to God alone. If marriage is to give glory to God, then the church has an obligation to have a reformation regarding marriage in the church.<sup>16</sup> We have to reconstruct what is meant by giving glory to God through the marital institution. It is only through this reconceptualisation that gender relations can be improved, especially in Christian marriages.

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15 Colby, “A Reformed Understanding of Marriage”.

16 DeWaay, “Recovering Reformation Theology”.

The church has an important role to play in balancing gender power relations within marriages.

- ♦ There needs to be gender training to transform people's perception of themselves and their communities.<sup>17</sup> This can be done through deconstructing negative male-female identity perceptions.
- ♦ The church needs to be involved in social transformation by creating forums not just for church members but also for whole communities, e.g., gender equity forums and gender outreaches through a gender desk. The church needs to have a centre for gender equity.
- ♦ The church should work towards a holistic approach in correcting gender relations in marriage by beginning to teach the young what it means to be male and female – at Sunday school (it should be part of what we believe in as a church). The church should be an instrument of socialisation for the young, so that they grow up with the correct perspective of marriage.
- ♦ The church should train marriage counsellors who can work full-time. This will ensure that the correct counselling will be done to couples. They will also do pre-marriage counselling, which will include gender relationships.
- ♦ Ministers and their spouses should frequently have marriage seminars aimed at addressing gender-based discrepancies within marriages. This will ensure that they become role models to communities and it will also equip them to deal with cultural issues affecting marital relations. It will also help them to put gender issues in the correct perspective within their teachings.
- ♦ A theology of marriage should be reinforced so that the church will be seen to champion healthy marital relationships that will give rise to healthy families. This will be a more holistic approach to preaching the love of Jesus. It is only by freeing people that preaching about spiritual well-being will become more meaningful.
- ♦ Theology should challenge the status quo. It should stand boldly in challenging some negative cultural norms which perpetuate gender inequality. A liberative theology should be adopted where issues of justice are explored, including issues of gender justice.
- ♦ Women make up the majority of church membership. They are trying to find a place of security in the church. I propose that the church should come in to educate women on their God-ordained rights as full human beings.
- ♦ Biblical teaching on marital relations should be explored through Bible study and marriage enrichment seminars. This may create the understanding between women and men that we have a problem. It is only after this realisation that we can craft a way forward together. This is not a female issue, but an issue of human dignity.

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17 OXFAM Gender and Development Unit, *The OXFAM Gender Training Manual*, 26-29.

- ♦ A research-based approach is imperative: Theological seminaries are encouraged to have research desks to explore social issues, such as gender issues, affecting their seminaries. This will enable the church to address the problem from the correct perspective.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the marital institution should be reinstated to its original glory, as was explored in this essay. Despite the Genesis 3 fall, God still has a wonderful plan for marriage. Apart from the above-mentioned recommendations, the church should find, through its theological seminaries, ways of forging the agenda forward, in spite of glaring sociocultural influences. These ways have to be context-based. This will ensure that everyone lives in dignity within the marital institution – not only women but also men.

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### Questions for further reflection

- ♦ How does the legislation regarding possession of property in your country differ from legislation in other African countries?
- ♦ How can one reconcile the biblical message of caring within the marriage with traditional cultural approaches to male dominance?
- ♦ Do you know any people who have successfully overcome this issue of traditional cultural views as opposed to the biblical view? Tell their story.
- ♦ How should one approach the issue of male infidelity and polygamy in African communities from a biblical perspective?
- ♦ Referring to the suggestions for churches made in this essay, work out some practical steps that can be taken to positively influence marital relationships.

## GENDER EQUALITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SINGLE WOMANHOOD

*Ester Rutoro<sup>1</sup> and Maggie Madimbo<sup>2</sup>*

### Introduction

Being single, just like being married and being a mother, is a gift from God. It is neither superior nor inferior to any other status. *However, the way people look at any gift from God, and the question whether they indeed see it as such, is the key to either enjoying and celebrating it as a blessing or not.* In other words, no gift from God will be enjoyed if it is not recognised as a gift. One has to decide that a gift from God is just that: a gift. One needs to choose how one wants to perceive it. From many of the contributions to this volume, it will be clear that marriage often becomes a burden to women, for a variety of reasons. Not having children and especially not being married (again for a variety of reasons) may, however, also be a source of discrimination, marginalisation, prejudice, hurt and the disregard of the dignity of women.

For some, of course, being single is a temporary state. There are after all many different reasons why people are or become single. A married person may lose a spouse, or a single person may decide to marry at some later stage of life. The point of departure of this essay is that being single is also a gift from God. Of course, losing a spouse is usually a tragic and traumatic event; the life of a widow is something very few married women would choose, and most would find it difficult, especially after a happy and fulfilling marriage. The same is true of divorced women; it is

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1 Ester Rutoro is a lecturer at Murray Theological College, Zimbabwe. She is also a visiting gender advisor for the Southern Institute for Peace Building and Development. She holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Education.

2 Maggie Madimbo is a lecturer in Education and Leadership Studies at African Bible College, Malawi, and adjunct professor in the Eastern University in the USA. She holds a PhD in Organizational Leadership from Eastern University in Pennsylvania, USA.



simply not easy to be either abandoned by the one you love, or having to leave someone who once loved you or whom you once loved, but that love has died and has been replaced by an abusive, adulterous or otherwise loveless coexistence. Also in the case of widows or divorced women, however, *life itself* remains a gift from God. The life of a widow or the life of a divorced woman remains a life worth living and should, therefore, remain a worthy life, a life of dignity.

In this essay, we shall therefore focus on how being single may be seen as a gift from God. The focus will fall specifically on women who remain single by choice or not. As will be seen from other contributions in this volume, the lives of many widows and divorced women, especially on the African continent, are often filled with insecurity, want, isolation, cruelty and suffering, all of which need to be acknowledged and addressed. In Africa, being single in the sense of “never having been married” is almost exclusively seen as an even worse fate, and the insecurity, isolation, discrimination, cruelty and suffering of these women mostly exceed even that of widows or divorced women. In cases where women are widowed or abandoned by adulterous husbands, some societies may even show compassion or support towards them. We shall explore some biblical perspectives on this form of singleness, as well as some cultural views on the subject. The cultural context will be specifically that of Shona women.<sup>3</sup> The reason for this is on the one hand that we do not want to fall into the trap of essentialist thinking, suggesting that there is something like “an African cultural view of singleness,”<sup>4</sup> however much there may be points of similarity between different African societies. There is another, purely pragmatic reason: in order to explain in concrete terms the cultural perceptions on singleness, we chose a specific example of what is known to one of the authors, and that in fact is the cultural context of the other author.

According to Amy Froide, “(t)hroughout the world history virtually all societies have viewed marriage and family as the cornerstone of social order.

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3 According to Francisca Chimhanda, Africans demographically make up about 98% of the population of Zimbabwe. There are two Bantu-speaking groups, namely, the Shona (about 82% of the population) and the Ndebele (about 14% of the population). The Shona group consists of five major ethnic groups given in numerical order as follows: Karanga (22%), Zezuru (18%), Manyika (13%), Korekore (12%), Rozvi (9%), Chimhanda, “The Liberation Potential”, 306.

4 In fact, according to scholars such as Chimhanda, “The Liberation Potential”, 305, one cannot strictly speaking even talk of “a pure Shona culture” among the above-mentioned ethnic groups that constitute “the Shona”, due to variations.

For women this has meant that wifedom and motherhood have been central to their identity.”<sup>5</sup>

For women, wifedom and motherhood contribute to how they are viewed in society, the roles they fulfil and to the positions they are offered or the opportunities open to them in society. Froide also shows that single women in most societies do not enjoy equal status as other women, besides perhaps for some religious reason (one finds this for example in the context of institutionalised religious life or, in Zimbabwe, for example, in the case of spirit mediums – see section below).<sup>6</sup> The attitude of various societies towards single women also vary, but it is mostly negative, ranging from “simple” neglect or disregard to outright harassment, antagonism and hostility.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, even in conservative societies many women are unmarried.<sup>8</sup>

### Single womanhood in the Shona culture of Zimbabwe

in the Shona culture in Zimbabwe, single womanhood is nothing new. Historically, women remained single due to mainly two factors, both of them having to do with traditional Shona religion:

- ♦ Traditional religious purposes: It was understood that a woman who is a spirit medium (*homwe yemudzimu*) may at times not marry due to the spirit that controlled her life. It would be understood that a male spirit prevented her from being married and that her duties as medium would require her to remain celibate. In these cases, single womanhood is celebrated in the Shona culture. Although the *mhondoro* spirits (the spirits of departed chiefs) were predominantly male, their mediums may be either male or female. The downside of this is, however, that once a medium is identified with the spirit, the medium in fact loses her own social identity. Cheater affirms that any prior social identity of a person becomes irrelevant in his or her role of spirit mediumship.<sup>9</sup>
- ♦ A curse or spell is put on the woman which is believed to repel any prospective suitor: Mungwini argues that, according to traditional Shona metaphysics, being unmarried in the case of females is something unusual, to the extent that all sorts of mysterious accounts or stories are generated to explain the “unnatural” state of being single.<sup>10</sup> A woman who has gone beyond the expected age of

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5 Froide, “Single Womanhood”, 48. Cf. Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, Chapter 3; Grenholm, *Motherhood and Love*, 9.

6 Froide, “Single Womanhood”, 47.

7 Cf. Stolk & Botherton, “Attitudes Towards Single Women”, 73.

8 For example, in 2012, the percentage of Zimbabwean women who have never married was almost 21%; those who were divorced formed 6.5% of all women; and those who were widowed 12.9% of Zimbabwean women. Cf. Zimbabwe Census Office, *Zimbabwe Population Office*, 20.

9 Cheater, “The Role and Position of Women”, 69.

10 Mungwini, “Shona Womanhood”, 206, 208.

marriage may be labelled to be possessed by a *chinzvi* (a spirit that repels a man from marrying her).

Although these reasons are no longer that prevalent, there are pockets of people and tribes that still hold on to these beliefs.

But other trends are also developing in present-day societies regarding female singleness. The causes for single womanhood today are mainly attributable to the prevalence of gender activism where educated women reject the idea of male supremacy and male rule over them, and they consequently shun marriage. This happens mainly for the following reasons:

- ♦ Financial independence of women: Historically, males owned the means of production and the sources of wealth. Women were thus forced into marriages or chose to marry for financial security.
- ♦ Negative views about marriage: Some women choose not to marry because of their experiences at the hands of males as they grew up. These experiences include sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychological and emotional abuse. These women attribute such abuses to the fact that they are women and that they were abused because of their gender. Negative views about marriage also resulted from experiences of other women dear to them who suffered at the hands of their husbands. These experiences shape the views of marriage in the minds of growing children, resulting in the person shunning away from marriage later in life.
- ♦ Some women remain single to maintain their freedom and autonomy, and to avoid the restrictions associated with marriage. These women have a desire to direct their own lives, which is not possible in patriarchal marriages. Singleness thus offers greater freedom than married life.
- ♦ Some women remain single as an act of rebellion against the marriage institution as an epitome of women being subjugated, dominated and exploited.

Apart from reasons aligned to traditional African religion and gender activism, there has been and still is a number of women who choose not to marry due to God's calling to ministry, for example, to become nuns or pastors.

It also seems that a larger number of females choose to remain single than their male counterparts. This is in all probability due to the advantages males generally derive from marriage (as superiors in the marriage relationship), as compared to what women lose when they get married (as inferiors in the marriage relationship). However, in spite of the above-mentioned (mostly valid) reasons for remaining single, the African perspective on singleness in general, and the Shona perspective in particular, seems to remain largely negative.

## The dark side of *ubuntu*: A philosophical basis for discrimination against single Shona women?

Literature shows that the African conception of single womanhood is deeply influenced by the African moral philosophy of *ubuntu*, something which is mostly thought of in very positive terms and may indeed be so in certain contexts. However, *ubuntu* can also be a dangerous concept, especially for women.<sup>11</sup> In the African philosophical context, the concept of *ubuntu* entails among other things that a person should yield to societal norms and values. This determines the personhood and identity of a person within that society. Menkiti (as referred to by Gyekye) analyses moral personhood in African philosophy by asserting that personhood is the sort of thing that is attained in direct proportion to the extent to which one participates in communal life and fulfills one's obligations defined by one's station in life (e.g. as a child or as an adult).<sup>12</sup> One of these obligations is the duty towards one's family and community, to ensure the continuation of community and lineage by procreation in the context of marriage. This is one's duty and not one's right and as such represents a duty-based ethic as opposed to a rights-based ethic. This is in line with Metz's affirmation that *ubuntu* is a normative moral theory based on specific criteria or values and that one of the values which is widespread in the sub-Saharan region is that it is *immoral* not to marry and not to procreate.<sup>13</sup> This is especially true for women and is an integral part of their gender-differentiated positions and roles. These roles and everything that they imply are internalised during the socialisation processes as a girl grows up, which means that girls inevitably grow up with the expectation of getting married. The philosophical orientation of the Shona people of Zimbabwe is also inclined towards a communitarian philosophy rooted in *ubuntu*. In contrast to the everyday reality of most Shona women, Gyekye (as quoted by Famakinwa), however, notes that in a communitarian society the communitarian "self" should not be a cramped or shackled self, responding robotically to ways and demands of communitarian structures.<sup>14</sup> Yet, decision-making on the part of Shona women is still highly dictated by social norms and values. As one single women, in a conversation with the authors, summed up the predicament in which many women find themselves:

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11 Cf. e.g., Bähre, *Money and Violence*, 138; Van Binsbergen, "Ubuntu and the Globalisation of Southern African Thought", par. 9.

12 Gyekye, "African Ethics".

13 Metz's, "Towards an African Moral Theory", 327-328.

14 Famakinwa, "How Moderate is Kwameh Gyekye", 69.

I am not single by choice but I could not get a person who satisfied my criteria for a husband. As I grew up and realised the reality that I was outgrowing most potential suitors, I panicked and once nearly made a wrong decision by agreeing to marry someone who was not at all compatible with me ... [But] (w)hat would society say? That I could not secure a husband?

One of the clearest indications of a negative perception of single life is reflected by Shona language and phrases which also point towards societal expectations of the necessity of marriage.

### Language and single womanhood in the Shona culture

Mazrui<sup>15</sup> shows that language influences the way in which we perceive reality, the way we evaluate it and the ways in which we conduct ourselves with respect to it. Language controls people's thoughts and actions. In Shona societies, language fulfils this role, among other things, through the use of proverbs (*tsumo*) and everyday sayings. Some of these apply to singlehood:

- ♦ *Kuzvara hadzi kuzvara ndume* (to beget a woman is to beget a man). Having a daughter implies having a son(-in-law) as well, since she will inevitably get married.
- ♦ *Mukadzi akanaka ndeane mukutu* (a good wife is the one with a carrying cloth – for a baby). The worth of a woman is determined by bearing children in marriage.
- ♦ *Unaki huvemukadzi huri pamwana* (the beauty of a woman lies in the child). The beauty of a woman is directly linked to her position as mother and hence as being married.
- ♦ *Ane mhuri ndeane mhuri ndume, mhurikadzi vaeni* (the one with a family is the one with sons; daughters are strangers). As women will inevitably get married, they are not really members of their father's family; they will marry, leave the home and be like strangers.
- ♦ *Musikana rufuta runobarika* (a girl is like a seed which scatters from a pod). This reiterates the expectation of the Shona culture for a girl child to move from the natal home to her marital home.
- ♦ *Mwanasikana ndimapfumise* (a girl child enriches the family). This is understood literally: A girl child will/must marry and bring riches to the family in the form of *lobola* (bride price). Singleness deprives the family of these riches.

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15 Mazrui, "Language and the New Imperial Order".

The status of a woman is also expressed in how she is addressed and this has nothing to do with her age, her achievements or even with her being a woman, but by her being married or having children:

- ♦ The title *ambuya* is given only to a married woman, despite her age, as a sign of respect from any male who may not be related to her.
- ♦ The title *mai* is given to any married woman by children of the community, which shows that she is a mother.
- ♦ The term *vakoma* or *sisi* is given to unmarried women, in spite of their age, by young children and older people of the community.
- ♦ Unlike single women, married women will never be called by their first names as this is a sign of disrespect and an affront to them.

The above-mentioned proverbs portray what the expectations of women are with regard to getting married in the Shona culture and also what the implications of not being married are, even in ordinary everyday communication. Of course, the way in which one is spoken to and of is one of the factors that determine one's identity and one's perception of self-worth in society. What exacerbates the situation is that discrimination and its implications, for example, for respect shown to a woman, does not discriminate on grounds of age once a woman passes the normal age of marriage. Rutoro showed that, although newly married women have little or no authority in their husband's home in Shona culture, they acquire authority with age and with motherhood.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, while the new husband's sister, an "unmarried aunt", may have had some authority, this will dwindle away as it becomes clear that she will never marry. She may even be seen as a burden to the family, and someone who interferes with the daughters-in-law (her brothers' wives). As she grows old, she may become isolated with no children or grandchildren of her own. She also does not "own a kitchen" – the symbol and domain of female power within the home. Even though she may have a mothering function in the family and help in raising the children in the family, she in fact is perceived as a child herself, even in old age, since she is not regarded as a "real" mother. An unmarried woman simply has to work very hard to gain social approval or to find other ways of proving her worth. In a conversation with the authors, another woman spoke of her own experience of this:

As a young unmarried woman I was not trusted by my fellow women. They suspected that I would snatch their husbands from them. They thought that no one can live a life without a husband. They did not feel comfortable seeing me

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16 Rutoro, *An Analysis of the Impact*, 209.

talking to their husbands so I had to avoid male company as much as was possible. I had to work very hard to allay their fears that I was a loose woman who was after every man in the community. Now that I am old people tend to trust me more.

Under these conditions, it is easy to understand why some women easily give in to pressure to marry and are forced to marry in spite of their inner conviction to remain single; they simply want to escape social ridicule, financial hardship and at times rejection – especially from the married women of their own age.<sup>17</sup>

### Negative perceptions about single womanhood

Earlier, reference was made to explanations given for why Shona women do not marry. These explanations (and the myths they are based on) and the marginalisation that single women are subjected to by way of commonly used terms and sayings that refer to them, are, however, only part of the stigmatisation that they suffer. Perhaps even more hurtful and dangerous for their already precarious situation are the perceptions about them:

- ♦ “Single women are a bad influence on married women.” Single women are often stereotyped as having a bad influence on married women. It is believed that they may and indeed do lead married women into revolting against their husbands. They do not respect the value of marriage, and are revolting against the *status quo*, i.e., against male headship. It is common to hear men reprimanding their wives against associating with single women, saying *Unodzidzei pamunhu asina murume?* (What do you learn from someone without a husband?). Not only do single women not have anything to offer society; their mere existence threatens it.
- ♦ “Single women are promiscuous; they are husband snatchers.” Many unmarried women maintain that they have at times also experienced that some married women felt it inappropriate to befriend an unmarried woman, the reason being that unmarried women are seen as loose and sexually promiscuous – after all, they do not have husbands to keep them in check – and, besides leading their married friends into illicit affairs, the married friends’ husbands themselves are in danger of being seduced by single women.<sup>18</sup>
- ♦ “They are headstrong and not able to lead.” The reasoning behind this perception is that women need men to make sound decisions. A husband is a natural leader and will advise his wife in a wise manner. According to Moorosi, this shows how women are still looked at through traditional lenses – they are measured against and subject to the ideals and views that have historically served men

<sup>17</sup> Muzvidziwa, “Marriage as a Survival Strategy”.

<sup>18</sup> Mungwini, “Shona Womanhood”, 206.

best.<sup>19</sup> This is true for married women, but being single makes the situation even worse.

As can be seen, negative perceptions about single women are also not limited to men only, but one finds it among married women as well.

To summarise: According to Shona culture, female gender-identity is mainly fulfilled through being a good wife and a good mother. Gender-role socialisation provides a girl child with a model to emulate later in life. Through the socialisation processes of society, the individual assimilates knowledge about the rules, attitudes, customs, values, role requirements and norms that are acceptable in a specific sociocultural context. It is perceived that it is only by fulfilling the role requirements of the community that one can attain full womanhood in the Shona socio-cultural context. As Rutoro says, “the socialization process is the root of gender-based challenges societies are facing today.”<sup>20</sup>

### **The church and Shona single womanhood**

Unfortunately, the general Shona sociocultural views on and attitudes towards single womanhood are also reflected even in church practices.<sup>21</sup> Generally, most single women have little place in the church. While single men can be elected as deacons, elders, et cetera, not a single women (i.e., someone who had never been married, thus not, e.g., widows) has to our knowledge, ever filled such positions. This immediately raises the question why this is the case, as there are no written rules and regulations which discriminate against single women. It therefore seems to suggest that what one finds here is an application of unspoken (cultural) rules.

It seems, however, that there is once again some ambiguity when it comes to religion. In the little more than a decade since the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ) decided to allow women to the ranks of church ministers (2002), the number of single women who train for the ministry nearly equals the number of married women who do so. It therefore is clear that church policy does not discriminate against unmarried women as far as theological education is concerned. This, however, reminds one of the greater leniency towards singlehood that one finds in the case of traditional religion with regard to women spirit mediums. One

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19 Moorosi, “Creating Linkages”, 507.

20 Rutoro, *An Analysis of the Impact*, 26. Regarding the patriarchal socialisation of Zimbabwean girl children, see also Kambarami, “Femininity, Sexuality and Culture”, 2.

21 We are referring here specifically to the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe and do not imply that this is the case in other Zimbabwean (or Malawian) churches, though it may be the case in most of them.



therefore wonders to what extent culture also influences perceptions on singlehood, even in the church. Be that as it may, it is significant to note that only one out of the twelve RCZ presbyteries chose a single woman minister as its chairperson in 2011 (incidentally, the vice chairperson for that term was a single woman). At the level of the Church's moderature, female inclusion began during the August 2010 to August 2012 term. Both women were, however, married, as is the sole woman on the present moderature (Aug 2012 – Aug 2014). Perhaps this is simply due to circumstances; perhaps the single women ministers available in the church today are too young or too inexperienced as yet for senior leadership positions – the senior internal auditor of the RCZ is a single woman, after all. So, the possibility exists that, at least in the church, discrimination against women because of their marital status may slowly be changing. The fact, however, remains undeniable that sociocultural factors still deeply affect attitudes regarding single womanhood among many members of the church.

The latter can be seen, for example, in the topics at youth conferences (e.g., on love and marriage) which seem to suggest that marriage is the normative station in life. Of course, the youth wing of the RCZ (*Chiedza Chenyika*) excludes to a large extent older never-married singles, since it consists mainly of adolescent boys and girls and those who are mainly in their 20s. *Sungano YaVasikana* (Girls' Guild) is also composed of young girls. The fact remains that the unmarried youth are all prepared for marriage, but never for singlehood, whether chosen or not. In sermons, the frame of reference is always that of marriage and parenthood. The composition of even the RCZ Women's Guild and its activities are biased towards the married – even if also sympathetic towards the widowed, divorced, and to a lesser extent those who had children outside of marriage.<sup>22</sup> A gap therefore remains in the church as far as single women are concerned. They may go to the *Varwi VaKristu* (Prayer Warriors for Christ) which is not gender- or age-specific, but their specific needs are in all probability also not addressed there.

In light of this situation, the church should perhaps again reconsider what the Bible may say about single people in its midst. The following section will therefore focus on some biblical perspectives on the issue of single womanhood. Space does not allow for going into any exegetical detail of these texts,<sup>23</sup> and this

22 As can be seen in the recently established Widows and Single Parents Fellowship, specifically to address the needs of these groups of people.

23 For a detailed perspective on the biblical teaching with regard to singleness from the creation narratives, the historical narratives of the Old Testament, the prophets, Jesus' teaching and ministry to Paul, cf. Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*.

is not the purpose of this section. It may, however, serve to stimulate discourse on singlehood and to direct it to some texts that may serve to offer some guidance, or to reconsider those which are sometimes used as proof texts against the “unnatural nature of singlehood”.

## **The Bible and single womanhood**

As with human dignity and marriage, singleness in the Bible is in places regarded as a gift from God. Over the centuries, Christians had two very different views of being single. For some, celibacy and virginity were more holy than being married. For others, marriage was more holy than singleness and singleness was considered the inferior state. Neither offers a balanced view of the biblical perspective.

Sermons that do not look at the whole Bible create a sense that the Bible is contradictory. For instance, in Genesis 2:18 we read: “It is not good for a man to be alone.” If preachers preach only from this text, it would automatically create uneasiness towards singles, but this would contradict 1 Corinthians 7:1 which says: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” Some sermons condemn singleness and illustrate that single people should look for suitable mates. It was good for Adam and others to have companions, but it was also good for Jesus and Paul to be single.<sup>24</sup>

For the purposes of this essay, we shall briefly stop at two texts: One where Jesus speaks of marriage, divorce and the single life (Matt 19:3-12), and the other “that has shown up again and again in theological discussions about marriage and singleness”, 1 Corinthians 7,<sup>25</sup> which is a passage that lends itself to further clarification and discussion.

In Matthew 19:11-12, Jesus speaks of marriage and divorce in light of a question by the Pharisees on whether divorce is allowed according to Moses, and Jesus’ disciples then ask whether it is perhaps not better to not get married at all. Jesus is quoted as having said that not everyone is meant to end up being married. In verse 11 Jesus tells his disciples: “Only those people who have been given the gift of staying single can accept this teaching” (CEV). The reference to “those people who ... can accept this teaching” may refer to “people who have been given the ability to understand this teaching,” and these may then be those who are mentioned as examples in v. 12, i.e., those who cannot or wish to not marry “because of birth defects or because of what someone has done to their bodies. Others stay single for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (CEV). It is clear

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<sup>24</sup> Baloyi, “Pastoral Care”, 739-740.

<sup>25</sup> Bennett, “Imposter Happiness”, 24.

from Jesus' remark that being single is not an abomination, that there are totally legitimate reasons for staying single, just as there are for getting married. If this is the case, we should perhaps again reconsider cultural perspectives that outright reject the possibility of remaining single or see it as an inferior state.

The apostle Paul, talking on issues of marriage, also states that it is good for some Christians to remain single. Paul speaks in the context of marriage – whether it is good to marry or not. Whereas most orthodox Jews of the first century were opposed to celibacy and regarded marriage as a duty, there were some ascetics at Corinth who advocated celibacy and wanted Paul to make it obligatory. Paul responds to this in 1 Corinthians 7.<sup>26</sup>

Importantly, Paul also states that single life is a gift and as such it may be embraced, just as married life should be embraced by the married. Both have their place:

I wish that all of you were single like me, but God has given different gifts to each of us. Here is my advice for people who have never been married and for widows. You should stay single, just as I am. But if you do not have enough self-control, then go ahead and get married. After all, it is better to marry than to burn with desire (1 Corinthians 7:7-10).

Something else is important here: The second conclusion that we can draw from this passage is that, even though marriage is a blessing, it has its own challenges which may hinder one's desire to serve as a Christian or to do one's work as a Christian effectively. Paul also makes it clear that married life brings additional worries and temptations.

### **Challenges and recommendations**

One of the many challenges with which we have to deal as a church is to address the stereotype or illusion that all single people live a sexually immoral life. It is sad that in many communities in Africa singleness is associated with immorality, while in many Western societies single women are often seen as more conservative – again a gross generalisation. The church has the responsibility to make its members aware of, and sensitive to, various valid reasons why people may be single – also that some may *choose* (as an act of resistance) to remain single in the light of so many abusive marital relationships. Practically we know that there is more to being single than simply coming up with the idea that they have some sort of defect which makes them undesirable as a spouse.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Laney, "Paul and the Permanence", 283.

The church needs a prophetic stance on the rich yet complex issue of being human – be it single or married, accepting the many socio-cultural challenges related to it. In the final instance, the church has a responsibility and a mandate to teach God’s word of liberating love and healing to *all* people, including single people.

There are several dimensions to take into consideration when looking at the issue of single womanhood. The church has to address in a prophetic way dehumanising cultural stereotypes associated with single womanhood. For that, the church would need to revisit its theological and biblical foundations. The Bible teaches that God’s original plan was for people to get married as male and female, and to fill the earth, and that there is nothing wrong with this. But also that: “... God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” Gen. 1:27 (NIV). According to Baloyi,

... (t)he very first point of departure in counselling single people is to accept them as images of God. The reason for this is that since these people have been stigmatised and marginalised and their image tarnished, they first need to be made aware that they were created in the image of God, irrespective of what they are. This can help to open up their willingness to discuss all issues that surround their single life.<sup>27</sup>

The church should also enlighten the youth on the challenges of both the paths of marriage *and* singlehood, to whatever God calls them. Neither is easy; both require dedication, but both may be fulfilling.

In cases where people have the discernment and inner conviction to remain single, the church needs to set up structures for those people for psychosocial and spiritual support. We invite the church and its institutions of theological training to seriously consider the following:

- ♦ Youth grouping must be age-appropriate, e.g., adolescents (14-19 year olds); those of a marriageable age (20 – 34 year olds); older single groups (35+ year olds). According to Koons and Anthony,<sup>28</sup> “besides inviting singles to participate in all its regular programmes, a local church can help by developing specific support groups that will enrich their lives and strengthen them for meeting their unique challenges.”
- ♦ Ministers have to be trained in such a way that they accept the diversity of gifts within their congregations.

“In churches where women are ordained to take particular responsibilities in the church, the church leadership must not discriminate against single women. Rather, selection of these women must take place according to the gifts and

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<sup>27</sup> Baloyi, “Pastoral Care”, 736.

<sup>28</sup> Koons & Anthony, *Single Adult Passages*, 134.

needs of the church. In other words, single women must also be allowed to take leadership roles just like all other women”.<sup>29</sup>

- ♦ They should learn to affirm the importance of each person, irrespective of their status. It should be emphasised to prospective church leaders that marital status does not determine godliness, but that it is one’s relationship with God that matters.
- ♦ Furthermore, discussions, Bible studies and “(s)ermons and biblical teaching on singleness would be of ultimate importance, so that believers would have a nuanced and accountable understanding of the subject. It is through these workshops that the church leadership will be able to also teach the entire congregation to know that social conversations about partners may be experienced as stigmatising and marginalising by singles.”<sup>30</sup>
- ♦ It was seen that quite a number of girls shy away from marriage as a result of experiences where they had grown up seeing their mothers, sisters, aunts, et cetera, abused physically, sexually, psychologically, verbally or emotionally. Women should be advised to discern – through a thorough study of God’s Word – God’s calling to singleness as opposed to bitterness.
- ♦ Finally, there are those whose singleness is clouded by poverty and a lack of economic resources. The church’s responsibility is not to watch the poor and hungry singles perish, but as Koons and Anthony say:

A final requirement for the church towards the singles is to provide economic assistance to the best of its ability. The early church was known for its generosity towards those in financial need. Although the universal church can hardly eliminate the need for all state and federally funded programs local congregation can assist single [persons] ... in practical ways such as ... subsidising housing or grocery needs.<sup>31</sup>

We end this essay as we have started: Singleness is a gift from God. As such, it is neither superior nor inferior to any other status. *The way in which people look at any gift is the key to enjoying and celebrating it.* What is of crucial importance is that we deliberately *decide* and *choose* to enjoy every gift as a blessing from the Creator of life. In the words of Richard Reichenbach:

We as a church need to help people discover their gifts. If indeed there are many gifts, including the gift of singleness, then we should not assume that a person must marry to be fulfilled. Personal fulfilment can occur outside marriage... Personal fulfilment comes through using God’s gift for the purpose for which he

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29 Baloyi, “Pastoral Care”, 739.

30 Reynolds, *The Single Woman*, 123.

31 Koons and Anthony, *Single Adult Passages*, 134.

gave it. Singleness is not less than God's best, but is God's best for those called to a distinctive task."<sup>32</sup>

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32 Reichenbach, "The Gift of Singleness", 5.

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### Questions for further reflection

- ♦ What do you honestly think about single (adult) women in your community?
- ♦ How does your culture view people who never got married, who are divorced, and who lost their spouses through death? What differences exist regarding single *women* and single *men*?
- ♦ What are the reasons why women do not marry in your community?
- ♦ In what ways does your denomination or congregation support single people?
- ♦ How can we promote biblical teaching and challenge the socialisation of our cultures where people have looked down on single people? Think of practical examples.





## FROM PATRIARCHY TO PARTICIPATORY FREEDOM?

The transformative potential of the Ephesians  
household code in view of changing  
gender roles in Kenyan families

*Lydia Mwaniki (Kenya) & Elna Mouton (South Africa)*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

While investigating many sad instances of power abuse on our continent, we ask ourselves: *Where* and *how* may people be formed who would look at our world through the eyes of Jesus of Nazareth? Since *household* serves as a primary space for nurturing human relations through the ages, we regard Christian families as powerful social networks where (grand)parents and children (may) learn to live according to the values of Scripture. Within the context of the book, this essay explores the dynamic of early Christian households and their continuing invitation to families (in Africa) today. We shall focus on complex challenges posed to faith communities by changing gender roles in Kenyan families, while allowing the household code of Ephesians 5:21-6:9 to serve as a case study for ongoing discussion on human dignity in church and society.

This is, however, easier said than done. Since the New Testament originated from within patriarchal societies, deeply influenced by the hierarchical structures of the Roman Empire, Christian families today are challenged to *re-read* these texts as products of their time, and to ask what they were supposed to *do* to their (first)

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1 Lydia M. Mwaniki holds a PhD in New Testament from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa). She currently teaches New Testament and Gender Studies at St. Paul's University, Kenya. She is an ordained minister in the Anglican Church of Kenya, Diocese of Nairobi. Elna Mouton is professor of New Testament in, and former dean of, the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

audiences. We believe that the early Christians' witness about Jesus continues to invite families to be transformed into safe space where *all* members – young and old, female and male – are regarded as equally worthy and important, and where each person's voice is welcomed. We envision Christian families as a life-giving, justice-seeking, community-creating space where hierarchies crumble, where the core value of equal dignity flourishes, and where open and healing conversation takes place. A major challenge for such conversation is how the household codes in the New Testament may be *re*-interpreted today – even against their own patriarchal rhetoric and abusive histories of interpretation.

We shall start by looking at the changing picture of (Christian) families in Kenya, and then go to the ancient canonised text of Ephesians to see if and how it may help us regarding the many challenges that families in Africa face today.

## **Gender status and roles in present-day Kenyan families**

### **Precolonial Kenyan family structure and gender roles**

The traditional (precolonial) family structure and status of men and women cut across most ethnic groups in Kenya, with minor variations. It will be impossible to discuss details of each of the forty-two ethnic groups in their precolonial Kenyan contexts here. We therefore limit ourselves to the Kikuyu precolonial community of Central Kenya, since they form the largest ethnic group in Kenya.<sup>2</sup> According to tradition, the Kikuyu originally had a matriarchal governance system that was later overthrown by men and replaced with a strictly patrilineal and patriarchal system.<sup>3</sup> Since almost nothing is known about the matriarchal government, we shall concentrate on gender roles and status in a typical Kikuyu patriarchal family, which exists to date. We first look at Kikuyu family institutions in general.

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2 The Kikuyu ethnic group covers a huge territorial expanse. While they can be found throughout Kenya and also in Uganda and Tanzania, they are concentrated in Central Kenya, which is their traditional homeland. According to history, their origin is not certain but it is believed that they constitute part of the Thagicu speakers who migrated into Eastern and Southern Africa between 1200-1600 CE. Apart from this historical account, they also have more popular myths of their sacred origins (cf. Bottignole, *Kikuyu Traditional Culture*, 30). For more theories on Kikuyu origins and settlement, see Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 24; Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu*; Strayer, *The Making of Mission Communities*, 3; Mashada Forums, "Pre-colonial History"; Jenkins, *The Kikuyu of Kenya*.

3 Bottignole, *Kikuyu Traditional Culture*, 30.

### ***Kikuyu family institutions (Family, clan, age-set affiliations)***

The Kikuyu family institution is a strong bond of communal relations governed by family, clan and age-set affiliations, forming a huge social network.

#### ♦ **A Kikuyu family**

The family (*mbari* or *nyomba*) was the smallest socio-political unit organised under the patrilineal system. It consisted of all those who were related by blood, including the husband, his wife/wives, children, and their (great-)grandchildren. All these lived together in a homestead. Each family was multifunctional. It was regarded as a complete social, economic, political and religious unit. Every family group formed a family council (*ndundu ya mucii*) with the father as the head. According to Kenyatta,<sup>4</sup> “(t)he father is the supreme ruler of the homestead. He is the owner of practically everything ... He is respected and obeyed by all the members.”<sup>5</sup>

After the death of the father, his authority and property are passed not to his wife/wives but to the elder son of the first wife, who is regarded as a *muramati* (trustee).<sup>6</sup> In this case, sexual status transcends age status especially in matters of inheritance, because Kikuyu women do not inherit property, neither do they have legal independence or individuality. This hierarchical relationship was and is still maintained in the wider social context of the clan.

#### ♦ **Kikuyu clan system**

A clan was composed of several family units (*mbari*) who bore the same clan name. They believe to have descended from the same ancestor who is traced as far back as seventy or eighty generations.<sup>7</sup> Each clan had a *mbari* council that governed it.<sup>8</sup> The council was composed of “all initiated males who had attained elder

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4 Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 9.

5 The father had almost autonomous authority, to which his wife would respond even when he coughed (cf. oral interviews in Mwaniki, “The Impact of the Church”, 17). The husband’s authority could be exercised through wife beating, following Kikuyu belief that a woman could not be submissive enough to her husband without being beaten. In most cases, nobody could come to her rescue, *tondu muthuri ni gwathana arathana gwake* (“because the husband is exercising his authority in his home” – cf. oral interviews in Mwaniki, “The impact of the Church”, 17).

6 Cf. Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 2. This is true to the Kikuyu saying, *muciara kana ga kahii no ta muciaru muthuriwe*, literally meaning “giving birth to a baby boy is like giving birth to one’s own husband.” This saying implies that the authority a male child has in the home is similar to that of his father, especially in the absence of the latter.

7 Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 1.

8 Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu*, 115.

status”.<sup>9</sup> Women were never elected as members of the *mbari* council, neither were they consulted when major decisions affecting the clans were made.<sup>10</sup> They were seen as lacking in leadership qualities such as wisdom, command of respect and impartiality.<sup>11</sup>

#### ♦ **Kikuyu age-sets**

An age-set (*riika*) comprised of all those who were circumcised at the same time. Every Kikuyu male or female belonged to a particular age-set. Age-sets brought cohesion in the tribe even more than the family or clan did. They cut across lineage and territorial groupings.<sup>12</sup> Male age-sets were divided into several groups which formed *jama ya ita* (a council of warriors) under the leadership of *muthamaki wa riika* (president of age-set). This council was concerned with raiding expeditions and defence.<sup>13</sup> Although every woman belonged to a particular age-group, none of them joined the warrior group, which was preserved for men.

#### ***Socioeconomic organisation in traditional Kikuyu families***

The Kikuyu were mainly farmers who grew various types of crops and also reared animals. Women were in charge of food production, storage and marketing. After storing enough food to last until the next season, every wife with the consent of her husband was free to market or distribute the surplus in any way she wanted, since she was “the managing director of the food supply”.<sup>14</sup> As opposed to other sectors such as the political sector, women were greatly empowered in the economic sector. Nevertheless, they did not own or inherit the land they tilled. After a husband’s death, land was not passed to his wife but to the male children.<sup>15</sup>

#### ***Traditional religious organisation in Kikuyu families***

Each family was considered a religious unit, with the father as “the key personality”.<sup>16</sup> God was not approached by an individual, either by way of worship

9 Cf. Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu*, 115-116. The leader was called a *muramati* (guardian). His duty was to be a spokesperson in the affairs of the *mbari*. He also ensured smooth running of the *mbari* and convened *mbari* councils when appropriate.

10 Mwaniki, “The Impact of the Church”, 18.

11 Kabira & Nzioki, *Celebrating Women’s Resistance*, 4-12.

12 Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu*, 116.

13 Cf. Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu*, 121,124; Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 205.

14 Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 62.

15 Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 29-31.

16 Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 235, 240.

or sacrifice, except in a family or community context in the presence of a “father” who could even be a great-grandfather. In the community, men were involved in leading public prayers as elders and offering sacrifices.<sup>17</sup> Both men and women participated in religious activities as spiritual leaders, healers, diviners, mediums, herbalists, prophetesses and medicine persons.<sup>18</sup> Women’s participation in religious organisation, however, was restricted by rituals of purity. Only elderly women of past child-bearing age were allowed to participate and were regarded as “ritual males” rather than “ritual females”. Furthermore, their roles were supernaturally endowed and hence did not stem from women’s positions in society.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Traditional labour division in Kikuyu families***

Among other distinctions between male and female, Kikuyu families traditionally had clearly defined gender roles in terms of their (home) economy. According to Presley,<sup>20</sup> labour division in Kikuyu families was traditionally arranged in terms of the following gender roles:<sup>21</sup>

<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Heavy work in the homestead building, e.g., cutting wood and doing frame work: fences and granaries, cutting drains, making roads and bridges	Cutting and carrying grass for thatching houses and plastering
Guarding homesteads at night	All house work: cooking, carrying water, washing, fetching firewood, carrying loads
Cultivating: clearing, cutting and pruning big trees, breaking virgin soil, pruning bananas	Preparing ground for sowing, weeding, pruning
Harvesting: cutting and burning stalks, spreading ashes	Harvesting crops
Hunting	Grinding maize plants and millet
Wood carving, blacksmithing, beekeeping	Making pottery, weaving baskets
Preparing skins	Dressmaking
Slaughtering and distributing meat	Pounding sugarcane for beer
Warfare, legal and ritual duties	Overseeing women’s social life
	Taking care of children

17 Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 242-244; Mwaniki, “The Impact of the Church”, 24.

18 Mwaura, “Women’s Healing Roles”, 253-269.

19 Cf. Mwaura, “Women in Kenya”, 81.

20 Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, 15.

21 Cf. Cagnolo, *The Kikuyu*; Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*; Bottignole, *Kikuyu Traditional Culture*, 32.

Apart from these home and field duties, both men and women were involved in trading, usually by barter. Women normally bartered cereals and vegetables while men traded with domestic animals such as cows, goats and sheep.

Observations that may be drawn from these roles are that both men and women had a share in agricultural work for family upkeep. Men's duties required greater strength and were more dangerous and life-risking, e.g., hunting, night-watching and going to war. On the other hand, women were involved both in agricultural work and housework. A critical evaluation of these roles reveals, however, that women were overworked. While most of men's work was only seasonal or periodic, women's roles involved a daily routine that could not be interrupted, such as childcare, drawing water and firewood, daily grinding and cooking. Thus, on top of her bigger share of agricultural work, carrying both heavy and light loads and trade, the domestic roles of a woman covered the whole of her lifespan. Furthermore, while most of men's roles ended at sunset, a woman continued with a different schedule of domestic duties until bedtime. Thus, women spent more hours working on a daily basis than men did. Roles related to warfare, legal disputes and ritual suggest that women were denied participation in the public domain where major decisions were made. Nevertheless, as indicated above, Kikuyu women were exposed to the outside world through trade.

Gender roles and status were instilled in many ways, for example, through childhood education,<sup>22</sup> and rites of passage (circumcision and marriage), through which men and women were properly initiated into masculinity and femininity.

In sum, we have observed that, although a woman enjoyed some privileges in a traditional Kikuyu family, females were generally regarded as subordinated to males in all institutions. Men were socially constructed to be leaders and owners of the family property. The fact that males acquired a higher status after circumcision by joining one council after another as well as a warrior group, reveals that even the youngest adult male had a higher status than his mother. Through marriage, and in particular through the payment of bridewealth, a wife was handed over from the ownership of her father to that of her husband. The husband, as head of the family, had almost autonomous authority to which his wife had to submit. This

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22 Children were socialised into their roles through apprenticeship. Girls helped their mothers to look after the siblings, fetch water and firewood, helping with cooking and cleaning. Boys were trained to take up men's roles as hunters, cattle herders, warriors, and were also involved in political activities such as governing the society. Another form of education was through role play in which children acted out these gender roles, Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 101.

position of a Kikuyu husband is analogous to the position of the *pater familias* in the Roman family, as we shall see later.

### **The encounter between Kenyan family structure and CMS missionaries**

The work of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Kenya was begun in Mombasa in 1844 by Dr Ludwig Kraph. He was later joined by other CMS missionaries. At the beginning of the twentieth century, after an unsuccessful mission in Mombasa, the missionaries settled in the Kenya Highlands among the Kikuyu, subsequent to the colonial occupation of Central Kenya. In 1955, bishops Obadiah Kariuki and Festo Olang' were consecrated as the first Kenyan bishops.

It is not possible to give a generalised and monolithic description of how the CMS affected gender roles and status in Kenyan families, since they played an ambivalent role, especially with regard to the role and status of woman. On the one hand, the CMS served as an agent of women's liberation; yet, on the other hand, it was a catalyst of their subordination. The missionaries made every effort, for instance, to liberate women from some of the dehumanising aspects of African (Kikuyu) culture, such as female circumcision, dowry, levirate marriages and wife inheritance, among others.<sup>23</sup> The missionaries, however, reinforced and maintained the already existing patriarchal order both in the missionary culture and in Kikuyu families, *inter alia* in the following ways:

#### ***Theology of gender***

The missionary theology of gender was representative of perceptions of gender in the Church of England, characterised by the Victorian ideology of womanhood and continued literal appropriation of gender-biased biblical texts in the history of Christian tradition. Kenyans thus received the gospel as a divine sanction as Pauline texts in particular were used to bolster subjection of women in the already existing precolonial Kenyan patriarchal structures.

#### ***Church leadership***

The CMS missionaries did not allow women to participate fully in the church beyond their traditional roles of nurturing. They introduced a male dominated leadership in the church with its colonial tendencies.

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23 Mwaniki, *God's Image or Man's Glory?*.



*Gender-biased curriculum and teaching materials in church schools*<sup>24</sup>

Up to the early 1950s, the missionaries were not keen to impart academic skills to women. According to the weekly timetable for Kabete Girls' Boarding Primary School in 1942, the subjects taught included needlework, housewifery, cooking, laundry, housecraft, baby welfare and First Aid.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the boys' curriculum was formal and covered reading in Kikuyu and Kiswahili languages, arithmetic, nature study, geography, colloquial English reading, history, grammar and agriculture or manual training.<sup>26</sup>

The Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK), initiated by the CMS, has made tremendous efforts to empower women, for example by offering them levels of theological training equal to that of men, opportunities for further studies, and ordaining them to priesthood. A few ordained women are holding top decision-making positions in the church today, such as Provincial Secretary, archdeacons, provosts (in charge of cathedrals), while some have been honoured as Canons. In these ways, the ACK shows *resistance* to its predecessors with regard to the status of women in the church. Nevertheless, the structure of the ACK remains firmly hierarchical, with men holding most of the top positions. It is evident that so far there has been no woman bishop in the entire Diocese. In August 2012, the first woman who offered herself as a candidate for the vacancy in ACK Kirinyaga Diocese (who happens to be one of the authors of this essay) had her nomination

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24 Referring to the *Safari English Course* (Book 1 for Std V learners, 8-9,14-15), Ngumi, A Critical Analysis, 249, observes that an exercise titled "What are they doing?," portrayed females as "sweeping the floor, working in the fields, sewing, cooking and ironing, while males are in school, eating, resting, reading, playing a game and running. Another exercise, titled 'What do they do every day?,' portrays similar stereotypes, adding that women go shopping and men go to work as tailors, barbers and shopkeepers."

25 KNA Mss/61/348 *Kabete Girl's School 1941-1943*, cf. similar curriculum at Alliance Girls and other girls' schools in Kanogo, "Mission Impact on Women", 181. These subjects were taught by women teachers because, according to E. N. Brown, women "were better able to tackle (them) than men teachers" (from Brown's report on the Elementary Teacher Training for Girls in Kabete in 1942 – KNA Mss/61/348 *Kabete Girl's School 1941-1943*).

26 Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, 100-101; KNA Mss/61/341 *CMS 1939-1940*. This missionary attitude towards women's education reflected the situation in Victorian England in nineteenth century Britain, where conservative educationists, whose roots were in the eighteenth century, argued that it was inappropriate for women to receive equal education with men because of their intellectual inability and different social duties. In Kenya, there was also the widespread fear, both in the church and society, that education would threaten women's sense of domestic duty, Mwaniki, *God's Image or Man's Glory?*, 142. This was an influence of the Victorian ideals of female domesticity as well (cf. Gill, *Women and the Church of England*, 40,41). Nevertheless, since Kenya's independence both sexes are exposed to the same curriculum on all levels of education. On the whole, the CMS did not do much to abolish gendered hierarchies in Kenyan families and the church.

papers sabotaged even before she could face the interviewing panel. The attempt was a big threat to the church hierarchy.

In sum, it seems that what the church did regarding gender roles and status was done according to biblical texts, albeit a simple handing down and applying of the so-called household codes, which in many cases seem to have been in accordance with, and even strengthening, the existing cultural gender roles at the time. This “ordered” structure is, however, facing serious challenges in Kikuyu (as well as in many other Kenyan) families today because of changing gender roles and status, creating a big dilemma especially regarding the status of men in the family. One may thus ask: Is the Kikuyu family still patriarchal today? If not, what does this say of the earlier use of New Testament texts to “reinforce” the system and its continued use regarding contemporary Kikuyu (or other) gendered family roles? These are the questions we turn to in the next section.

## **Changing gender status and roles in present-day Kenyan families**

### *Overall status of men in Kenya today*

In present-day Kenya, the structure of traditional Kenyan families still resembles the hierarchical structure reflected by the New Testament household codes. Traditionally, in many Kenyan families, the relationship between husband and wife was hierarchical, with the husband holding a superior position. Some of the roles that defined a man’s position as the “head” were being the breadwinner, providing security to his family and community as a warrior, clearing the bush and breaking virgin soil, being the sole decision-maker, and socialising the boy child into manhood.

However, even though the hierarchical structure of Kikuyu families remained the same, the traditional roles of males have changed considerably with the rise of socioeconomic changes in the twentieth century, increasing economic demands on the family. A man’s position as the head, which is pegged to his ability to provide for the family, has been challenged radically.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, due to unemployment and/

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27 A study carried out by Margrethe Silberschmidt among the Kisii of Kenya and in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, titled “Changing Gender Roles and Male Disempowerment in Rural and Urban East Africa”, reveals a conflict between the patriarchal structures of male headship in the family and his current disempowerment due to his inability to be a breadwinner. She states: “Patriarchal structures and stereotyped notions of gender hide the increasing disempowerment of men in East Africa. Socio-economic change has left men with a patriarchal ideology bereft of its legitimizing activities. Unemployment or low incomes prevent men from fulfilling their male roles as heads of households and breadwinners. Women’s roles and responsibilities have increased. This affects men’s social identity and self-esteem. Multi-partnered sexual relationships and sexually

or low income, the inability to be breadwinners as demanded by patriarchy has left some men with the traditional status as “heads of their households”, but without the traditional accompanying tasks that it entailed. Besides, men’s traditional roles, *inter alia* of clearing the bush, going to war, and protecting the family, are no longer valid today with the scarcity of land in Kenya and the employment of security guards and a police force, thus creating an identity crisis for men.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Overall status of women in Kenya today***

Traditionally, gender divisions regarding labour confined women to the private sphere with the double role of production and reproduction as both farm and home managers. These private roles were less valued than the public roles of their husbands. Currently, the traditional demands on a woman for caring and co-providing for her family have increased – in many cases to the point of being the only provider for her family. As a result of the increasing high cost of living, sometimes with little or no substantial family support from their husbands, among other factors, women in Kenya, like elsewhere in Africa, are actively involved in economic pursuits mostly concentrated in the informal sector, including agriculture, trade, food processing, weaving and other forms of small scale businesses. The overall status of women in Africa, which includes that of Kenyan women, is well captured by the United Nations website:

African women are guardians of their children’s welfare and have explicit responsibility to provide for them materially. They are the household managers, providing food, nutrition, water, health, education, and family planning to an extent greater than elsewhere in the developing world. This places heavy burdens on them, despite developments such as improved agriculture technology, availability of contraception, and changes in women’s socioeconomic status, which one might think would have made their lives easier. In fact, it would be fair to say that *their workload has increased with the changing economic and social situation in Africa. Women’s economic capabilities, and in particular their ability to manage family welfare, are being threatened...* (emphasis added).<sup>29</sup>

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aggressive behavior seem to strengthen male identity and masculinity. Initiatives to improve sexual and reproductive health are based on stereotyped and static understanding of gender roles and relations...”

28 This invalidity is creating another growing culture, namely that of idleness among young men, especially in rural Kenya. Recent research conducted by Lucy Njuguna in Nyeri County (Central Kenya) among “out of school” young men (aged 18–35), revealed that they spend most of the time idling at the shopping centres, leaving their undone roles to be done either by their wives or parents, Njuguna, An Assessment. Ironically, such a man still regards himself as the “head” of his family.

29 United Nations, “Overall Status of Women in Africa”.

Nevertheless, Kenya, like many other countries in Africa (such as Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Gambia, Malawi, South Africa), has developed skill acquisition programmes and loan schemes for informal sector workers through which women benefit substantially. Women are also increasingly joining the formal sector of the economy (especially the public sector). There is an increasing number of women and girls at higher levels of education and enrolling in technical courses. This results in the elevation of women to various positions and professions originally dominated by men. It has also led to self-employment and economic independence among women. In many households wives have now become co-breadwinners with their husbands or are even the sole breadwinners, particularly where the men are absentee fathers and husbands.

Does this transition of gender roles and status still leave the husband as the “head” of the family and the wife as his subject despite the former’s inability to be the breadwinner? This question will be briefly explored from a postcolonial perspective here. In sum, the above-mentioned transition leaves no clear definition of gender roles and status in the family. Unfortunately, while the man still retains his headship position psychologically, current processes of socialisation have not factored in these changes.

### ***Transition of gender roles in Kenya from a postcolonial perspective***

Put simply, postcolonial theory addresses the complex relations of domination and subordination between the colonisers and the colonised peoples by first analysing how the colonisers constructed the images of the colonised, and secondly by studying how the colonised in return deconstructed these images in their endeavour to articulate their identity, self-worth, and empowerment.<sup>30</sup> This theory may therefore be most fitting to examine not only the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, but the relationship of domination and subjection between husband and wife in Kenya, amid changing gender roles and status within an unbending patriarchal system. Some of the postcolonial features that will be of use in this section (and the rest of the essay) are *mimicry*, *resistance* and *hybridity*.

#### **♦ Colonial mimicry/resistance versus the behaviour of Kenyan women**

According to Stephen Moore, *mimicry* is the posture “in which the colonized heeds the colonizer’s peremptory injunction to imitation, but in a manner that constantly threatens to teeter over into mockery.”<sup>31</sup>

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30 Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 11.

31 Stephen Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 88.

The feature of imitation is evident among Kenyan women in the transition period of gender roles and status. Traditionally, as we have seen, the headship position of a man in the family was pegged to specific roles, mainly to his responsibilities as breadwinner. Patriarchy has also often confused (male) headship with dominant authority and violence. In the current transition, women have often become the sole breadwinners in many families. This transition psychologically and physically leads them to take over as heads. In this position, they ironically often apply the same measures of violence to their husbands, in line with the patriarchal definition of headship that they have “inherited”. Several cases of women battering their husbands have been reported in the media, especially in the Nyeri area. Therefore, patriarchal forms of socialisation, which traditionally favour men, have turned against them and are oppressive to them.

Another level of colonial mimicry is the use of the master’s tools by the subaltern as a way of enhancing the subaltern’s identity or evolving a hybrid identity. In this sense, it is a form of *resistance*. Women (the subaltern) have portrayed aspects of mimicry as a form of resistance by using the colonial/patriarchal tool of education and other forms of empowerment against the patriarchal structures. With Kenyan independence, women have accessed equal education with men including equal access to information technology. Through education, women have become equal competitors with men in the job market. Education thus serves as a tool for women to fight back the master of patriarchy.

#### ♦ **Hybridity**

According to Homi K Bhabha, *hybridity* is “a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once”.<sup>32</sup> It is also referred to as the “third space”.<sup>33</sup> Hybridity results from the colonisers’ call to imitation of their superior culture. Since the colonised cannot imitate fully, an in-between space is left which creates hybridity, manifesting itself in ambivalence. Sugirtharajah states: It is a place where “one is equally committed to and disturbed by the colonized and the colonizing cultures.”<sup>34</sup>

The transition of gender roles and status almost creates two distinct cultural periods or paradigms – the traditional phase and the current one.<sup>35</sup> This hybrid

32 Quoted by Punt, “Postcolonial Biblical Criticism in South Africa”, 59-81.

33 Quoted by Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 249.

34 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 249.

35 As mentioned, the transition has left no clear gender identity in the family because the methods of socialisation have not factored in the transition. It has no doubt resulted in a hybrid, “in between”

situation consequently creates a dilemma for both men and women. If headship is pegged on the ability to provide for the family, what is the status of a man if he does not provide? He is obviously thrown into a serious identity crisis. Likewise, when women become breadwinners, they imitate men's positions of headship, yet under the constraints of the prevailing patriarchal system into which they have been socialised. The dilemma then is: What is the status of the wife who has become the sole breadwinner and decision-maker in the family?

This identity crisis is creating confusion and violence in the family as the man often tries to assert his position in a situation where the wife as the (sole) provider cannot accept an inferior position any longer. Some men have opted to engage in extramarital relationships with women who are more economically challenged than their own wives, in order to maintain their positions of headship. Some women have also gone out of marriages to live independent lives. The reversal of gender roles has thus become a huge challenge to hegemonic masculinities. Postcolonial theory seems to be a powerful tool to challenge such binary oppositions en route to the establishment of relationships of mutual interdependence.

In sum, the traditional hierarchical family structure has created more problems in marital relationships in Kenyan families and does not serve as a model of the intended peaceful coexistence in the family. Can the household codes in the New Testament offer a solution to Kenyan families today, and if so, *how*? It is to this question that we now turn.

## Family and household in the first-century Mediterranean world

### Jewish, Greek and Roman families and households

At the most basic level of kinship in the ancient Mediterranean world was the *household (oikos)*.<sup>36</sup> It was an important constituent structure in Jewish communities,

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space with regard to husbands and wives. This trend has been well captured in Silberschmidt's research findings: "(E)ven if men are benefitting from patriarchal structures, a majority is caught in a *paradoxical and frustrating situation* where their male roles are seriously being undermined. On the one hand, men are the acknowledged heads of households, and they have the formal authority. On the other, lack of employment or low/insufficient income prevents men from fulfilling their expected roles as men, husbands, and in particular as providers..." (emphasis added), Silberschmidt, "Changing Gender Roles", 5.

36 For discussions of Israelite/Judean, Greek and Roman families and households, cf. Garnsey & Saller, *The Roman Empire*, 126-147; Hanson, "Kinship", 73-79; Moxnes, "What is family?"; Balch & Osiek, *Early Christian Families in Context*; and Punt, "'All in the Family?'" Hanson, "Kinship", 66, explains: "At the most general level, kinship has two basic social functions: group formation and inheritance. But group formation has a variety of dimensions: production (work and food), reproduction

the Greek *polis* as well as the Roman empire, and a primary context where relationships of power, protection, submission, honour and duty were to be properly shaped if a city was to flourish morally.<sup>37</sup> The ancient notion of *household* was much broader than the family in modern societies, including not only immediate relatives but also slaves, freedmen, and hired workers.<sup>38</sup> As such, it was “a unit of identity, solidarity, and status”.<sup>39</sup>

The structure of the *oikos* – in both the Greek *polis* and Roman empire – was patriarchal (i.e., essentially hierarchical) in nature, with paternal responsibility and rule as legitimate rule over free citizens while the submission of women was taken for granted.<sup>40</sup>

## Core values underlying the functioning of ancient households

### *Honour and shame*

Since family honour is at stake in every public interaction, it is important to understand the content and function of honour and shame as core values in the social life of first-century Mediterranean societies. “Honor is fundamentally the public recognition of one’s social standing”.<sup>41</sup> Adrian Thatcher (with reference to Don Browning et al.), states that

...(t)he key to understanding the claimed achievements of the earliest Christianity in relation to issues of family and gender is said to be the “honor-shame codes” of the ancient world with which the gospel engaged. “For a man to avoid shame and for a woman to keep her shame, men had to protect, control, guide, and circumscribe the lives of their women so that their private space would not be

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and child rearing, protection, worship, sociality/belonging, patronage, and play.” Inheritance from one’s family includes the inheritance of status (in the form of ascribed honour) – one of the most important aspects of ancient Mediterranean culture. In first-century Mediterranean societies, individual or collective honour was firstly *ascribed*, that is, obtained passively through birth (kinship, genealogy), family connections (marriage), or endowment, and secondly *acquired* – that is, actively sought and achieved in terms of qualifications and personal success.

37 Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality*, 38-39; cf. Osiek & MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, 119-123; De Wet, “The Deutero-Pauline and Petrine *Haustafeln*”, 399-405.

38 Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 75-76.

39 Hanson, “Kinship”, 66.

40 Cf. Osiek & MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, 1-15, 118-143); Schottroff, *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters*, 69-118; and Dudley, “Submit Yourselves to One Another”, 26-39, among others, for a social history of the everyday life of women in the first-century Mediterranean world. Functionally, most women were treated as property of their fathers or husbands. The lives of women were further typically determined by all kinds of codes such as purity-, debt- and household codes (cf. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God*, 156-158).

41 Moxnes, “Honor and Shame”, 20, cf. 19-40; Malina & Neyrey, “Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts”.

dishonored. Such an ethic celebrated the virtues of active dominance for males and passive conformity for females.”<sup>42</sup>

### ***Patriarchal “order” and the well-being of society***

During the so-called *classical* period in the history of ethics, the communal lifestyle of the Greeks represented a society where all aspects of life were integrated. People lived in a moral world which they took for granted from their childhood. Since the fifth century BCE, critical ethical reflection in the philosophical sense of the word occurred for the first time.<sup>43</sup> For Aristotle, probably the best known among the philosophers, ethics has to do with the *telos* of human life, the highest good for humans and the best way for them to arrange their common life so as to achieve that good. The good life is to develop the virtues, the moral skills that would enable people to be good citizens, i.e., to know their place in a stratified society, to serve its purpose and to live according to its rules, expectations, and interests.<sup>44</sup>

From the Greek household structure developed contemporary Hellenistic discussions “concerning the household”.<sup>45</sup> This seems to have had significant influence also on the Roman household. Sarah Tanzer mentions three criteria that seem to define the nature of households in Roman society: “a hierarchical order-obedience structure, economic dependency, and marriage.”<sup>46</sup> The household (*domus* or *familia*) was composed of all those who were legally under the power and control, authority or paternal patronage (*patria potestas*) of the patriarchal male head (*pater familias*). “(T)his could include children, even adult sons, slaves, freedpersons, and ‘clients’,” as well as “the spouses of all these persons”.<sup>47</sup>

### ***The notion of “order” in (post-)Pauline communities***

The notion of “order” in the family was crucial for the running of the Empire. This seems to have been maintained to some degree also in the Pauline congregations. In this regard it may be argued that Paul, in his construction of gender hierarchy

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42 Adrian Thatcher, *Theology and Families*, 34.

43 This does not mean that people elsewhere did not live with ethical consciousness. The Hebrew Scriptures (OT), for example, witness to appropriate ways of living in a covenantal relationship with YHWH, the God of Israel, for centuries BCE. On the African continent, in particular, values and virtues were deeply entrenched in people’s (oral) cultures, customs and rituals, from the very beginning. Cf. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 24–31.

44 Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians*, 32–38; Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality*, 40.

45 Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 254.

46 Tanzer, “Ephesians”, 328.

47 Tanzer, “Ephesians”, 328.



(e.g., 1 Cor 11:3; 14:33–40), followed the same concept of the Greek philosophers and regarded the family a microcosm of the church, or the church a macrocosm of the family. For Paul, the family hierarchy was crucial for order in his churches, which he organised as families.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, the exclusion of women from the public roles of preaching and teaching in the church, as well as from ordination to priesthood, was sanctioned by *The Council of Nicaea* (325 CE), *The Council of Chalcedon* (451 CE), and the *Apostolic Constitution* of the fourth century CE.<sup>49</sup> The Council of Chalcedon, for instance, stated:

Thus, we do not permit women to teach in the Church, but only pray and listen to those who teach. Indeed, even our Teacher himself, the Lord Jesus Christ, who sent us the twelve to teach the people and the nations, nowhere did he send out women for preaching...<sup>50</sup>

Through the history of biblical interpretation, the passages where Jesus sent out women as his witnesses were often submerged,<sup>51</sup> and the theology and ideology of male headship and female subjection preserved as law. This *status quo* persisted in the church during the medieval period through the Reformation to nineteenth-century missionary Christianity, which often reinforced existing patriarchal cultural structures, especially in Africa.<sup>52</sup>

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48 The notion of “order” in church and society has, however, often been terribly skewed in the history of NT interpretation. Whatever the circumstances implied by 1 Cor 11:3 and 14:33–40, its strong wording detrimentally affected how the more liberating aspects of Paul’s statements about women were received through the ages (cf. Bassler, “1 Corinthians”, 418; as well as Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 11:11–12). Consequently, women were silenced and marginalised in numerous explicit and subtle ways. The early church fathers, for example, used Eve’s participation in the fall to reinforce the hierarchical order and to silence women in the church (cf. Mwaniki, *God’s Image or Man’s Glory?*, 99–124. John Chrysostom (349–407), Bishop of Constantinople, Eastern capital of the Roman Empire, held that a woman was subjected to an inferior state as a result of her role in the original sin. He interpreted Gen 3:16 in his *Discourse 4* as follows, thus claiming to speak on behalf of God: “God said in effect to Eve, ‘I made you equal in honour. You did not use your authority well, so consign yourself to a state of subordination. You have not borne your liberty, so accept servitude. Since you do not know how to rule – as you showed in your experiment with the business of life – henceforth be among the governed and acknowledge your husband as lord’”(quoted by Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 43).

49 Cf. Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 196; Massey, *Women in the Church*, 83; MacHaffie, *Readings in Her Story*, 18–19).

50 Quoted by Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 179.

51 Cf. 1 Cor 15:3–8 (a pivotal chapter in 1 Cor) where the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, according to the gospels, are conspicuously omitted.

52 Mwaniki, *God’s Image or Man’s Glory?*, 109–119, 158–159.

**“Order” embodied in household codes and engendered roles**

Reference to household codes, as embodiment of ancient household values and practices, occurs in the New Testament in the so-called Deutero-Pauline, Pastoral and Catholic Letters (Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-6:9; 1 Tim 2:8-15; 5:1-2; 6:1-2; Titus 2:1-3:8; and 1 Pet 2:13-3:7). The basic form of the codes consists of “three pairs of reciprocal exhortations addressing the relationship between wife and husband, children and father, slaves and masters. In each case, the socially subordinate first member of the pair is exhorted to obedience to the superordinate second.”<sup>53</sup>

In an important article in *New Testament Studies*, Margaret MacDonald takes stock of household code discourse until the beginning of the twenty-first century. Since the 1980s, she argues, New Testament scholars generally accept that the “household code” material found in the New Testament had its origins (mainly) in discussions on “household management” among philosophers and moralists from Aristotle onward.<sup>54</sup> Aristotle believed that a good and healthy society depended on the orderly functioning of the household. Ancient household codes were therefore meant to structure the functioning of the different members of the household in terms of roles and duties that would enable them to be good, moral citizens. In terms of their form and function, ancient Greek household codes thus typically represent the hierarchical relations among family members in the classical period.

It is significant that “real advances in the study of the *Haustafeln* were made ... as scholars moved beyond basic discussions of literary structure and historical context to acknowledge the impact of particular social locations.”<sup>55</sup> Household code discourse was for instance of central interest in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s ground-breaking work *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, first published in 1983. Schüssler Fiorenza’s argument concerning the introduction of patriarchy into the New Testament via the ancient household

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53 Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 253. MacDonald, “Beyond Identification”, 67-74, 84-90, has indicated, however, that thorough knowledge of families in the Roman world has revealed that the (multiple) identities and circumstances of the recipients of household codes were often more complicated than what their seemingly clear-cut categories may suggest. “(T)here is a need for greater nuance with respect to the function of the codes in community life to allow for more complexity and even contradiction based on the variety of actors and perspectives that shaped NT communities and texts,” MacDonald, “Beyond Identification”, 72.

54 MacDonald, “Beyond Identification”, 65-74. David L. Balch, “Household Codes”, and others argued against an earlier generation of scholars who were convinced that the codes were borrowed from the Stoics and Hellenistic Judaism.

55 MacDonald, “Beyond Identification”, 74.

code continues to be highly influential in feminist theological discourse.<sup>56</sup> It fundamentally critiques and challenges the ways in which Western culture and theology have generated an anthropological dualism by adopting ancient household rules as model for the state.<sup>57</sup> Feminist theology is thus committed not only to subvert the devastating effects of these choices, but also to uncover its political roots in the patriarchal household of antiquity.<sup>58</sup>

Feminist readings of the codes further revealed that they, rather than representing a definitive break with earlier patterns, “appear to actualize or articulate conventional arrangements in house–church communities that probably were always present in the Pauline churches alongside challenges to traditional structures.”<sup>59</sup> The significance and impact of the household codes thus appear to be culturally complex, “representing a type of inter–cultural exchange between the emerging early Christian ethos and the values and ethics of the broader society.”<sup>60</sup>

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56 Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 251–259.

57 Cf. Balch, “Household Codes”, 35.

58 In subsequent publications, Schüssler Fiorenza continues to remind professional guilds and faith communities of *what is at stake in the interpretation of the household codes*, and works out a process and method that would empower women to read “against the grain” of the patriarchal rhetoric of the Bible, Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 7. She argues that the domination of such language “is not simply a matter of patriarchal, gender–based dualism but of more comprehensive, interlocking, hierarchically ordered structures of domination, evident in a variety of oppressions, such as racism, poverty, heterosexism and colonialism,” Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 10; cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision*.

59 MacDonald, “Beyond Identification”, 78. Since it is very difficult to know how the audiences of the NT codes would have heard them, it is probably best to assume that “despite their often devastating legacies, in their own day these texts did not necessarily lead to any immediately dramatic changes in the lives of women and other subordinate members,” MacDonald, “Beyond Identification”, 78.

60 MacDonald, “Beyond Identification”, 81; cf. 84–90. More recent postcolonial readings of the NT codes challenged long–held views on their implied function; cf. MacDonald, “Beyond Identification”, 79–84; Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*. The usefulness of these theories for exploring early Christianity within the context of Empire lies on various levels, *inter alia* in “how the colonized themselves made use of and went beyond many of those strategies in order to articulate their identity, self–worth, and empowerment,” Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 11. This has encouraged scholars “to understand how early church groups opposed elements of the dominant imperial culture and essentially lived the experience of the colonized and displaced, while at the same time expressing an ethos in ways that appeared to call upon the strategies of dominion of the imperial order,” MacDonald, “Beyond Identification”, 80. In the process, the notions of “hybridity” and “mimicry” have proven to be especially helpful as they represent the resistant response of colonised people to the often devastating reception histories of these texts; cf. Mwaniki, “Unveiling Paul”. “Colonial mimicry results when the colonizer’s culture is imposed on the colonized and the latter is lured or coerced into internalizing and replicating it.” “Hybridity”, on the other hand, is not “a simple synthesis or syncretic fusion

## From patriarchy to participatory freedom via Ephesians 5:21-6:9?

### Early Christian families/households

The concept of *household* is reinterpreted in the New Testament in a variety of contexts.<sup>61</sup> It forms the basic cell of the Christian movement and its nucleus is often an existing household. “(T)he synoptic Gospels contain several sayings and episodes where Jesus relativizes biological ties in favor of the new family that is established in the Reign of God. ‘Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’ (Mark 3:35).”<sup>62</sup> Members of the (post-)Pauline groups speak of themselves as *family*, using rhetoric of kinship and affection, of belonging, blessing and mutuality: God is their Father, they are God’s children, sisters and brothers in *God’s new household* (cf. Eph 2:19-22). They use special familial terms not only to refer to themselves but also to distinguish themselves from “outsiders”.<sup>63</sup>

Since the household has through the ages been regarded as a/the primary context for moral formation and the affirmation of identity, our vision for present-day (Christian) households in Kenya and the rest of Africa is that they create safe space for nurturing primary relationships, for naming/sharing daily experiences, for strengthening a sense of belonging and solidarity, for remembering God’s faithfulness and their ultimate dependence on God, for learning to see through Jesus’ eyes, for developing a lifestyle of what we would like to call *participatory freedom*. We thus envision an environment where biblical texts are read responsibly and embodied wisely, and where household leaders are properly equipped for this task.

However, since the household code material of the New Testament produced such abusive histories of interpretation via the misogyny (hatred of women) of church fathers and theologians through the centuries, such a vision will have to entail a simple (workable), yet profound exegetical and hermeneutical process. Our concern here is not to defend either the Bible or God, but the people (particularly in Africa) who are still marginalised, oppressed and brutalised because of the

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of two originally discrete cultures but rather ... an in-between space ... in which cultures are themselves simultaneously constituted and deconstructed” (Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 110-111, with reference to Bhabha and Derrida). These notions take the experience of previously disowned groups seriously, responding critically and sensitively to their varied sense of loss – particularly by asking what perspectives on God and humanity would be appropriate *now*.

61 Cf. Sanders, “The Family in the Bible”, 121-128; Osiek & MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*.

62 Thatcher, *Theology and Families*, 32.

63 Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 75-80.

(often) unquestioned patriarchal assumptions through which the Ephesians code is interpreted.<sup>64</sup> Our proposal for reading it in view of the formation of present-day “households of character” therefore wishes to take this challenge seriously. It entails three interrelated yet distinguishable dimensions.

First, the implied rhetorical effect of Ephesians 5:21–33 will be explored within the *unique literary thrust and coherence* of the epistle itself. Second, brief attention will be given to a *sociocultural construction* of ancient household codes, as probable reality to which the Ephesians code refers and which it seems to reconfigure. Third, since feminist and postcolonial readings challenged household code discourse towards ultimately enquiring about the *implied rhetorical effect* of such material in the New Testament, we will attempt to account for this aspect of Ephesians 5:21–33 in view of the dynamic yet complex process of reinterpretation reflected by it.

### **Transformative potential of Ephesians 5:21–6:9 for present-day (Christian) households?**

#### *Literary aspects*

Ephesians is generally divided into four major sections, namely, the opening (Eph 1:1–2), a first and second main section (Eph 1:3–3:21 and 4:1–6:20 respectively), and the ending (Eph 6:21–24). Both the greetings at the beginning and the farewell wishes at the end contain the powerful blessing of *charis* and *eirēnē*, summarising the document’s view on humanity as one of wholeness in relation to God and fellow-believers (Eph 1:6–7; 2:5–8, 14–17; 3:2, 7–8; 4:3; 6:15). The eulogy of Ephesians 1:3–14 announces the thrust of the epistle as a celebration of God’s gracious blessings towards all people *in Christ* (in language similar to how Roman emperors were venerated publically).

The second main section consists primarily of paraenetic elements directed at the church. These are interwoven with theological and christological motivations, and are intrinsically linked to, and informed by, the first main section. The structural and semantic coherence between the two main sections is indicated by several conjunctions and particles in Ephesians 4:1, 17, 25 and 5:15, which indicate the particular sections they introduce as direct and logical consequences of what was said before. The essence of Ephesians 1–3 (a radically new humanity in relation to Christ and fellow-believers) is thus explicated in terms of a life worthy of their calling (Eph 4:1).

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64 Cf. Mollenkott, “Emancipative Elements”, 51, 56.

Throughout this section, Christ's *transformative power*, qualified by his humility as *sacrificial love*, serves as ultimate motivation for their new behaviour (Eph 4:32-5:2). Ephesians 5:15-6:9 illustrates the principle of the new life under the influence of the Spirit in terms of the three household relationships: husband and wife, children and parents, slaves and masters. The general introduction of Ephesians 5:15-20 is followed by the household code in Ephesians 5:21-6:9. The Ephesians code substantially expands the code in Colossians 3:18-4:1 and dwells at greatest length on marriage. The present participles following Ephesians 5:18 ("Be filled with the Spirit...") as well as the imperatives in the household code indicate a process of continuous moral formation in accordance with the community's new identity in Christ. The radical example of the indwelling Christ (cf. Eph 4:32; 5:2) and the Spirit (Eph 4:30; 5:18; 6:18) explicitly serve to *transform* these relationships. The recipients were to exhibit the lifestyle of wise people. They were to live as God's newly established people *in Christ* (Eph 2:14-15), healed and reconciled by the power of the triune God's *self-giving* love.<sup>65</sup>

Yet, the hierarchical language of the code comes as a surprise after references to a new humanity, to equally worthy members of God's household (Eph 2:15, 19-22; 4:15-16, 24). There is a certain (creative?) tension between what the code seems to require and what Ephesians proclaims about the cosmos and believers' place *in Christ*. It seems that the author was grappling to appropriate and articulate his soteriological vision of God and the *ekklesia* through the limited patriarchal language available to him. It may thus be easy to idealise or romanticise the language of power in the household code while *either* failing to account for the patriarchal nature of ancient societies *or* capturing the radicality of Jesus' teaching about the reversal of power in the reign of God. The code appears to be more ideologically complex and rather represents a dynamic wrestling, a transitional (hybrid, liminal) *process* where identity had to be negotiated time and again. It is probably "best understood as encoding *both* culturally compliant and culturally resistant elements."<sup>66</sup>

65 Chris de Wet, "The Deutero-Pauline and Petrine *Haustafeln*", 400-412, argues that the NT *Haustafeln* exhibit the typical features of an ancient social contract, and are (re)appropriated in the NT for the sake of group cohesion and identity. "The author of Ephesians implies that the social contract the *haustafeln* represent is based on a larger, authoritative contract – namely the covenant between Christ and the church," De Wet, "The Deutero-Pauline and Petrine *Haustafeln*", 401.

66 MacDonald, "Beyond Identification", 67 – emphasis added. Reconfigured household codes in the NT are typically phrased in patriarchal and hierarchical language, yet often surrounded by God images of impartiality, inclusion, provision, nurturing, protection and/or by Christological motivations, which provide them with a radically new orientation; cf. Balla, *The Child-Parent*

Thus, aware of the complex tension between the patriarchal language of Ephesians 5:21-6:9 and the rest of the document, contemporary readers remain challenged with tricky issues of interpretation. On the one hand, we are invited to reinterpret the passage from the radical theological-rhetorical thrust of the letter. On the other hand, hermeneutically sensitive and suspicious receivers may wonder: Does the language of Ephesians 5:21-6:9 (of mutuality *and* submission) challenge and significantly *re-describe* the conventional connotations and contexts of a hierarchically ordered morality? Does it serve as a prophetic, emancipative vision for the relationship between Christ and the church, and of human dignity as reflection of the God images in the text? Or does it reinforce a cultural-patriarchal pattern of subordination by merely *describing* reality, by (potentially) re-imposing a form of subtle and faith-sanctioned sexist hegemony, and thereby contradicting the received Pauline baptismal tradition of Galatians 3:28? These questions have to be explored further in view of the probable sociocultural and rhetorical contexts of the letter.

### ***Sociocultural aspects***

This section is aimed at addressing the need for a *sociocultural analysis* of ancient households and their codes of conduct. This has briefly been attended to in the previous section. The alternative perspective of the text is only to be appreciated once a probable picture of the world and values of the sociocultural world behind the text become clearer. Through the work of scholars such as Garnsey and Saller;<sup>67</sup> Balch;<sup>68</sup> Osiek and Balch;<sup>69</sup> Moxnes;<sup>70</sup> MacDonald<sup>71</sup> and De Wet<sup>72</sup> we have become aware of the complexities involved in the structure and functioning of ancient households, causing us to refrain from quick conclusions. However, we have also been attracted by the liberative ways in which scholars such as Mollenkott<sup>73</sup> and

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*Relationship*, 165-178; Mouton, *Reading a New Testament Document Ethically*, 71-74; Mouton, "Human dignity". From here "authority" and "submission" are redefined according to the example of Christ. These notions take on altogether different dimensions to that of the power and authority structures of society; cf. Kittredge, *Community and Authority*.

67 Garnsey and Saller, *The Roman Empire*, 126-147.

68 Balch, "Household Codes".

69 Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 5-87.

70 Moxnes, "What is Family?"; *Putting Jesus in His Place*.

71 MacDonald, "Beyond Identification".

72 De Wet, "The Deutero-Pauline and Petrina *Haustafeln*".

73 Mollenkott, "Emancipative Elements".

Osiek and MacDonald<sup>74</sup> read the Ephesians code.<sup>75</sup> In view of the complex, often life-threatening interpretive histories of this text, they opt for a hermeneutic that focuses on alternative perspectives presented by the author, whereby inherited traditions seem to be radically reconfigured.

How does this happen? First of all, the author fundamentally reimagines ancient household ethos from a *christological* perspective. This has (potentially) profound implications. While it remains the case that no precise parallels of the New Testament codes have been found in other traditions,<sup>76</sup> the address to subordinate groups directly rather than via the *paterfamilias* is unusual.<sup>77</sup> Again, by encouraging wives and husbands to submit *to one another*, and masters and slaves to treat *each other* with respect, the Ephesians code modifies the common tendency to make the master of the house responsible for the good order of the entire household. Various scholars draw attention to the fact that Ephesians 5:21 calls for the mutual subjection of each Christian to every other Christian without regard to gender – an element which is significantly new and which seems to govern the whole passage. Moreover, the command to husbands to *love* their wives (Eph 5:25, 28) does not appear in any other contemporary household code.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, while the Ephesians code does not explicitly do away with traditional structures, it introduces radically new attitudes implicitly meant to confront

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74 Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman's Place*, 118–143.

75 They *inter alia* respond to Elizabeth Johnson, “Ephesians”, and Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*. Johnson, “Ephesians”, 430–432, discusses domestic duties in Greco-Roman culture and early Judaism where the household was considered a microcosm of society – the basic social unit which structure ought to reflect the pyramidal structure of the whole society and even the universe. The head of the household was expected to fill the three superior roles of husband, father and master, the performance of each role being prescribed by certain duties and responsibilities. She subsequently reviews the Ephesians author’s complex comparison of the marriage relationship to Christ and the church in Ephesians 5:21–6:9, and concludes that it is a mere reassertion of conventional patriarchal morality. Also for Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 270, the christological modification of the husband’s role “does not have the power, theologically, to transform the patriarchal pattern of the household code, even though this might have been the intention of the author. Instead, Ephesians christologically cements the inferior position of the wife in the marriage relationship.” The horrific history of interpretation of this text, fostering wife abuse and low self-esteem in women, according to Mollenkott, “Emancipative Elements”, 39–43, leaves present-day readers with a situation where the submissive role of women (particularly in marriage relationships) have been overemphasised, and the church’s vision of God, itself and society has been seriously obscured and blurred; cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*; Kittredge, *Community and Authority*; Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 90–93.

76 Osiek, “The Bride of Christ”, 30.

77 Balch, “Household Codes”, 45–47.

78 Gombis, “A Radically New Humanity”, 327.



and subvert exploitative elements of ancient household ethos. In Gombis' words, it is aimed at "counteracting the devastating effects of the powers upon human relationships and in transforming relationships within appropriate hierarchical structures."<sup>79</sup> Underestimating this would expose the code to serious misinterpretation and abuse. As we have seen, it is probably "best understood as encoding both culturally compliant and culturally resistant elements".<sup>80</sup> While it seems to invite its recipients to *identify* with the familiar ethos of their traditional household culture, it also seems to *alienate* them from (life-denying aspects of) that culture by reminding them of their radically alternative orientation in Christ. Is this how the author uses his creative freedom in Christ – by utilising bifocal rhetoric, a strategic compromise between submission and resistance towards developing a social reality where equal dignity, justice and unity would ultimately prevail? If we assume that the life, death and glorification of Jesus Christ is the primary perspective from which the author reinterprets the Graeco-Roman symbolic world, this needs to be emphasised amidst complexities presented by the text. In the process of re-appropriation by later readers, the dynamic yet complex *process* of interpretation embedded in the text remains a guiding principle – more than its "static" *product*.<sup>81</sup>

### ***Rhetorical aspects***

This brings us to the third phase of our analysis concerning the *implied rhetorical effect* of the Ephesians household code. The intended rhetorical effect of the Ephesians epistle is stated frequently and explicitly. Broadly speaking, the recipients are encouraged to live wisely for two reasons: (a) so that the *God who destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the God of peace and wholeness, the God with whom there is no favouritism*, may be acknowledged, worshipped and praised, and (b) so that the church may be edified, built up, strengthened, encouraged (Eph 2:21 and 4:12,16,29).<sup>82</sup>

79 Gombis, "A Radically New Humanity", 324.

80 MacDonald, "Beyond Identification", 67.

81 Mouton, "Reimagining Ancient Household Ethos?", 172-177.

82 Although the implied effect of Ephesians as a whole may be fairly explicit, this is not evident in the case of the household code with its ambivalent connection to the rest of the Letter. This is where postcolonial theories have assisted us significantly in searching for a possible "hidden transcript" in these codes – subtle and perhaps not so subtle motivating signals which would be recognisable only/mainly to insiders in the community, a way of expression typical of oppressed groups (cf. Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:10-20). By reinterpreting well-known symbols for the purpose of affirming their new identity *in Christ*, and with its emphasis on Christ as *lord of the entire cosmos* (Eph 1:21-22; 3:10; 4:8-10; 6:12), Ephesians seems to have a consistent *anti-imperial thrust*. We therefore believe that it is important to reread the Ephesians household code as declaring loyalty

The rhetorical effect of these God images and visions for the church has to be explored against the background of the hierarchical context of the Greco-Roman household codes. In spite of its profound patriarchal roots, the author seems to challenge his audience in various ways to hear the reinterpreted code *against* the cultural grain of its environment. We briefly explore six potentially transformative elements in the Ephesians code.<sup>83</sup>

First and foremost, the inclusive *God images* referred to in the Ephesians household code (and the rest of the epistle) represent a primary principle for a transformative rereading of the code. Rhetorically, these images serve to shape and nurture the identity and ethos (character) of members of the Christian household, while providing its patriarchal language with a radically new orientation. This new identity, embodied in the christological perspective of the code, was to challenge the self-understanding and ethos of the faith communities in Asia Minor to their roots.

Second, the direct *address* to members of all social classes seems to be unusual in terms of ancient household ethos. Contrary to Hellenistic discussions of household management, the Ephesians code addresses all categories of persons concerned according to their new status *in Christ*. “Now wives, children and slaves are given social visibility and therefore personal dignity ... What is more, in each dyad they are addressed first.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, while the “*oikonomia* tradition reflected the contemporary notion that the woman was constitutionally inferior to her husband,”<sup>85</sup> the Ephesians code seems to affirm her status as an equally worthy member of God’s household.

Third, the focus on *mutual* submission (“participatory freedom”) is noteworthy. While thoughts of reciprocity are not entirely unique to Christian household codes,<sup>86</sup> the transforming power of its driving force is namely that it is to be “out of

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to Jesus Christ instead of the Roman Emperor. MacDonald, “Beyond Identification”, 71, finds elements of resistance to the dominant social order in the Ephesians code in the ways in which the *ekklesia* is presented (with reference to purity, fidelity, and unity) – as expression of “the complex negotiations required with respect to group identity in the Roman imperial world which early Christians shared with Jews,” cf. MacDonald, “The Politics of Identity in Ephesians”; Osiek & MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, 123-143.

83 Cf. Mouton, “Reimagining Ancient Household Ethos?”, 178-180.

84 Osiek, “The Bride of Christ”, 30.

85 Gombis, “A Radically New Humanity”, 326.

86 Dudrey, “Submit Yourselves to One Another”, 40-41.

reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21) while being “filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18).<sup>87</sup> The author’s strategy seems to be the “formation of proper relationships within the household as microcosm of the church, just as it was earlier seen as microcosm of the state. The dominance-submission pattern is still there, but it has been radically changed, from treatise on male dominance to exhortation to mutual relationships in Christ”.<sup>88</sup>

Fourth, when it comes to the statement that the wife is to be subject to the husband “in everything” (Eph 5:24), Mollenkott emphasises the *limitations* of this part of the contract, namely that the wife is *only* supposed to be subject to the husband “as the church is subject to Christ,” that is, “in an utterly non-coercive voluntary manner”.<sup>89</sup>

A fifth potentially emancipative element in the Ephesians code is the husband’s proposed self-emptying.<sup>90</sup> The husband is no longer to view his power as absolute, and his wife as his possession, but to love her “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). Again Mollenkott focuses on the *limitations* of the comparison. Instead of the husband’s role being divinised by this analogy, he is compared to Christ “only in Christ’s self-giving, self-humbling capacity”.<sup>91</sup> She concludes by saying that “(t)he model for the Christian husband is Phil. 2.5-8:

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87 Mutual subjection “out of reverence for Christ” in the marriage relation seems to be a logical continuation of the radical ethos of humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love – indicated as embodiment of “a life worthy of their calling” at the beginning of the second main section of the letter (Eph 4:1-3).

88 Osiek, “The Bride of Christ”, 31.

89 Mollenkott, “Emancipative Elements”, 46. In this sense it may be argued that Ephesians 5:21 and 6:9c respectively frame the household code by emphasising its underlying (new) perspective: “Submit to one another *out of reverence for Christ* ... and *there is no favouritism with him*.” It thereby seems to offer a reconfiguring of its patriarchal structure from a christological perspective. From this perspective, the nature of Christ’s power in Ephesians 1:22 and its probable relation to wifely submission in Ephesians 5:22 deserve special attention. It is rhetorically significant that the strategic verb *hupotassō* in Ephesians 1:22 (as part of the faith confession) recurs in its middle form *hupotassomai* in the paraenetical section of the document (Eph 5:21,24). In both instances it is surrounded and nuanced by a context referring to the fullness or wholeness of the body of Christ. The Ephesians author thereby seems to reverse the patriarchal connotation of *hupotassō* (as *imposed* loyalty and obedience) to reflect not only the essence of the emancipative relationship between Christ and the church (in terms of *willing* honour and reverence), but also among the members of the body itself (cf. semantically related terms *fobeomai* in Ephesians 5:33, *hupakouō* in Ephesians 6:1,5 and *timaō* in Ephesians 6:2).

90 Mollenkott, “Emancipative Elements”, 48-50.

91 Mollenkott, “Emancipative Elements”, 42.

Christ's self-emptying of the privileges of divinity, voluntary servanthood, and obedience to God even to the point of death".<sup>92</sup>

This leads to a sixth element that seems to be crucial for a responsible understanding of Ephesians 5, namely, the organic oneness and interdependence between the husband as "head" and the wife as body. Mollenkott argues that the Greek word for head (*kefalē*) refers to "a human head, or to a point of origin such as the head of a stream, or to the chief support such as the head cornerstone of a building."<sup>93</sup> According to her, people have too often "imagined that the headship of the Christian husband means that he is the decision maker who has the right to the final word. But in the Bible, the word 'head' is never connected with intelligence".<sup>94</sup> In fact, for the ancient Hebrews the intellectual powers of humans were believed to be situated in the *heart*. She then concludes: "Careful study of Eph. 5.21-33 would indicate that the word 'head' is being used chiefly in the sense of 'source'. Just as Christ is the source of the church, so the husband who empties himself of patriarchal privilege is the source of the Christian marital structure and, in that sense, the source of the Christian wife".<sup>95</sup>

To underestimate these shifts in the Ephesians household code, would be to violate the theological thrust not only of the code, but of the epistle as a whole.<sup>96</sup>

### **Contemporary households as primary context for moral formation**

The challenge to keep the transformative potential of the Ephesians household code in balance with its paradoxical relation to the rest of the Letter, as well as its life-threatening history of interpretation, remains enormous. What is needed, we believe, is a prophetic hermeneutic that would allow the Christ of the Scriptures (and the Ephesians code) to be God, and God's Spirit to lead communities of faith into more imaginative and inclusive visions for Christian families today. The example of Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnated Son of God, continues to challenge the hierarchical model of family relations transmitted by the patriarchal language

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92 Mollenkott, "Emancipative Elements", 48.

93 Mollenkott, "Emancipative Elements", 50.

94 Mollenkott, "Emancipative Elements", 50.

95 Mollenkott, "Emancipative Elements", 51.

96 Mollenkott, "Emancipative Elements", 56-58.

of New Testament household codes by inviting families into an ethos of radical *freedom and responsibility*.<sup>97</sup>

How should Christian families in Africa then read such scriptures today? How can “households of character” mediate the discernment of an alternative world, a world characterised by God’s radical presence, by God’s victory over death, with expressions of God’s life-giving kingdom versus dominating, abusive expressions of “empire” (often justified by means of these very texts)? How do we respect the Ephesians code as a product of its time and at the same time allow its theological thrust to transform our rhetoric and ethos, so that the integrity of God’s justice-seeking new creation in Christ would be recognised by all? How can Christian believers *reimagine* God’s liberating, healing presence in their personal and collective stories, even in contexts of domestic violence and the life-threatening HIV/Aids pandemic, with overburdened (grand)mothers and absent (grand)fathers?

It is in the ability of Christian families in Kenya and the rest of Africa to *ascribe* honour, authority, and loyalty to whom/whatever we wish. In this sense, we are the architects of our own destiny. *We choose* the gods/idols/God we wish to worship in our pluralistic world. *We choose* to be transformed by the renewing of our mind (Eph 4:23-24). It is *our choice* to see through Jesus’ eyes while boldly reimagining and redirecting our cultures and traditions to the root. We have seen, however, how patriarchal practices in Kikuyu families often inhibit this vision.<sup>98</sup>

The Ephesians household code challenges Christian families in Africa to be transformed into communities of God’s character by *accepting its open-ended rhetorical invitation* to become characters – active participants – in its story, by embracing the new roles that it offers, by living in and embodying the alternative values

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97 During his earthly ministry Jesus reversed and reordered conventional preconceptions of God and humanity by consistently practising an ethos of *love* and *compassion*. The New Testament writers interpreted this reversal in various contexts – not in terms of a new *law* or an ethics of *duty*, but in terms of a new *identity and ethos in relation* to God and creation; cf. Mouton, *Reading a New Testament Document Ethically*, 220-251. In the language of Paul Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics”, people are invited to inhabit the *proposed world* opened up and mediated by these texts.

98 It should be clear that communities of faith are deeply challenged today to facilitate open conversations on the Bible, culture and gender. This would *inter alia* mean that biblical stories which can hardly be regarded as good news for women (such as the rape of Tamar in 2 Sam 13; the rape and brutal murder of the Levite’s wife in Judges 19-21; the silencing of women in 1 Cor 14:34-40 and 1 Tim 2:8-15; and the one-sided subjection of women in Eph 5:21-33) can be used “in memoriam” of women (Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 1-7), in memory of the many women who are victims of gender-based violence. In this way, biblical texts may serve as a *mirror* of society, challenging readers to recognise victims (and perpetrators) in their own societies. At the same time the theological thrust of these texts may serve as a *lens* through which they may be *re-read* prophetically.

and perspectives that it presents. Anything less would confine the God of Jesus to the boundaries of an ancient canonised text in ways contradictory to its own theological thrust. As such, the Ephesians household code serves as an ongoing invitation to critique and resist any form of exploitative power in contemporary as well as ancient empire.

Ultimately, it is the choice of Christian families to give *priority* to the possibilities of God's covenanting love over the broken realities of our lives and the world. The early Christians were overwhelmed by God's presence in the resurrected Jesus and the Spirit, even though they could not understand fully and their (culturally-bound) language probably could not contain the radical consequences thereof. We invite and challenge households on this continent to allow God's life-giving Spirit to surprise us likewise!

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### Questions for further reflection

- ◆ Share with one another what your dominant image of God is at the moment (e.g., father, shepherd, judge), and how your daily life is influenced by it.
- ◆ How did gender relations and values (such as honour/shame, stability, social order) function in the ancient Mediterranean world?
- ◆ What difference was the gospel of Jesus Christ supposed to make in such patriarchal, hierarchical societies?
- ◆ Share with one another how your dominant image of God has been challenged through the reading of this essay.
- ◆ How can our daily images and language (regarding humanity and God) be adapted to be (more) life-giving, welcoming and inclusive?



# GENDER EQUALITY

TOWARDS THE FUTURE



## GENDER EQUALITY

### *A kairos for status confessionis or processus confessionis?*

*Olo Ndukwe<sup>1</sup>*

#### *Introduction*

In 2008, I attended a conference on Security Consciousness organised by the authorities of the Abia State, Nigeria. During the conference, the Transitional Chairperson<sup>2</sup> of Umuahia North Local Government Area (LGA) was denied the right of presenting her guests with the traditional kola nut, a traditional sign of welcoming them, simply because she was a woman. The chairperson was directed to appoint a male accompanying senior officer from the Umuahia LGA to perform the ceremony. Sadly, all her accompanying senior officers were women and hence she was directed to appeal to a neighbouring LGA to do the honours. Ironically, the chairperson of that LGA was also a woman accompanied by senior female officers. In the end the Umuahia LGS chairperson was forced to hire a traditional chief from an entirely different and distant LGA to perform the traditional ceremony. Any protest against this clear gender discrimination was criticised, dismissed and met with accusations of imposing on the “God-fearing people of Nigeria” the principles of the Beijing Conference<sup>3</sup> which are associated with dangerous women’s liberation ideologies. For me, as a theologian, what was especially embarrassing about the situation was that those present who supported

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1 Dr Olo Ndukwe is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria. He is the current Rector of the Hugh Goldie Lay/Theological Training Institution, Arochukwu, Abia State, Nigeria and a research fellow in the Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology of the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

2 An equivalent of “mayor” in the South African context.

3 The Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing China, from 4<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> September, 1995. For details, cf. United Nations, “Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women”.

this treatment of the woman Transitional Chairperson included the head of a Christian seminary as well as pastors of churches and even women. For the majority of those present the occurrence was not unjust, humiliating, or simply rude. They did not see it as unethical or as an obstacle to the meaningful realisation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).<sup>4</sup> According to them, it was definitely not dehumanising or an affront to the human dignity of the women present.<sup>5</sup> It was simply the way things worked, in their view.

### Gender inequality and the silence of the churches

It seems that the response of the representatives of the churches at the meeting referred to above also corresponds to the seemingly lacklustre attitude of churches towards secular attempts to deal decisively with the issue of gender inequality in Africa. With regard to this issue, the church seems far removed of the ideal, in the words of South African theologian Ignatius Swart, being “a facilitator, enabler and catalyst of others’ agendas”.<sup>6</sup> While the United Nations,<sup>7</sup> the World Bank,<sup>8</sup>

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4 The UN’s Millennium Development Goals entail, among others, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and improvement of maternal health. Cf. Oxfam, “What are the Millennium Goals?”.

5 The concept of human dignity has today gained popular currency beyond specialist academic discourse. From its philosophical origins in the writings of Picodella Mirandola, Immanuel Kant and others, it has found its way into our colloquial vocabulary. Appeals to human dignity are an important part of current ethical, legal and political discourses; it appears frequently in national constitutions and UN documents, in newspapers, NGO reports and publications and in human rights discourses. Since World War II, appeals have been made for the recognition of and in the name of human dignity, usually meaning the equal dignity and equal rights of persons. Human dignity is thus also perceived to be one of the foundations of human rights. Cf. Kaufmann et al., *Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization*, 1. In this essay, human dignity is understood with reference to the view of George Kateb, for whom human dignity refers to the equal worth of all human beings, Koteb, *Human Dignity*, ix, x, 1.

6 Swart, “The Third Public”, 217.

7 The UN has set up various structures and mechanisms at national, sub-regional, regional and international levels in pursuit of the goals and vision of the Global and African Platforms for Action for gender equality. In the African context, the elements of the institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women are: policy guidelines and frameworks; organisations, institutions, operating procedures and standards; laws and constitutions. Successes attributed to institutional mechanisms in Africa include improvements in public awareness of the importance of women’s empowerment, credit and income-generating projects that have improved the livelihood of rural and urban poor women, the production of national policy documents and plans of action, progressive laws and policy influence across the government machinery. Cf. UNECA, “Recent Trends for National Mechanisms”, 1.

8 For instance, the World Bank Africa’s Gender Innovation Lab is using impact evaluation to measure how projects are improving the lives of African women. According to Makhtar Diop, World Bank

the African Union (AU),<sup>9</sup> NGOs, civil society, the media and academia seem to try earnestly to engage this thorny issue from anthropological, socio-political and economic perspectives, the efforts of the church seem to be rather lacking. As a matter of fact, while it can be argued that many individual African theologians – including those from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians – have been engaging the issue of unjust gendered relationships on the continent, it remains an embarrassing fact that unresolved gender controversies and the absence of the prophetic voice of churches in Africa continue to question these churches' identity, mission, social ethics and credibility. In fact, in many African churches, as will be seen in other contributions to this volume, the question of ordination of women remains unresolved, if raised at all. In some of these “women’s ordination friendly churches”, access to leadership positions in church hierarchies remains closed to them, even though women are allowed to enter the ministry.

Given the pressing challenge of a myriad of gender injustices to which this essay testifies and the increasing awareness (at least in some circles) of the need for recognition, respect and promotion of the human dignity of *all* persons today, this essay consequently asks whether this may not be one of those occasions that calls for the declaration of a *status confessionis* or at least a *processus confessionis* from the church?

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Vice President for the African Region, “Our commitment to gender equality in Africa is evident in our agenda ... In 2010 ... 70% of our projects were gender informed and that has risen to 94% in 2013. We want to make our programs gender smart and that means using cutting edge research and evidence to do the right thing to achieve gender equality,” World Bank, “Closing the Gender Gap for Women in Africa”.

- 9 For instance, the African Union’s (AU) Directorate for Women, Gender and Development, as well as the Women and Gender Sectorial Cluster Committee as one of ten such committees of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) of the AU, are developments which have given some impetus to work on gender equality and provided commitments that national mechanisms can pursue. Furthermore, the *AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa* (SDGEA), adopted by the Third Ordinary Session of the African Union (AU) Assembly of Heads of State and Government in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in July 2004, was a critical milestone. The *Declaration* is important because it “strengthens African ownership of the gender equality agenda and keeps the issues alive at the highest political level in Africa.” It includes a commitment by countries to report annually on progress towards gender equality and to the Assembly on progress made in the implementation of the Solemn Declaration, as well as on the state of gender equality and gender mainstreaming at national and regional levels. The African Union Women’s Decade (2010–2020) offers another means of holding national mechanisms to account. Cf. “Recent Trends for National Mechanisms”, 7, 8.



*Status confessionis*

According to South African theologian Dirkie Smit,<sup>10</sup> to find an exact and satisfying definition of the term *status confessionis* in dictionaries, encyclopedias, or even systematic theological textbooks is to set oneself up for disappointment. That it is a strong expression applied to a very important issue and in extremely serious situations is true, but exactly what that issue is, or what the suppositions or implications may be, is less obvious. Smit underscores that the expression, first used in the sixteenth century, is in fact not a technical term with a fixed and definite content, but one which must be understood in light of the few occasions in history when it or similar expressions were used.<sup>11</sup>

In the twentieth century, three occasions are identified with the phrase *status confessionis* and all three concerned conflicts in the Christian church. The first was during so-called German Church Struggle (*Kirchenkampf*) in Nazi Germany, when the Confessing Church in Germany was established in opposition to the so-called German Christians, who were loyal to the Third Reich and its anti-Semitic policies. Important figures who opposed these ideologies included some of the most famous twentieth-century Reformed theologians, such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The well-known church document, the *Barmen Declaration* of 1934, was a fruit of the German Church Struggle. Essentially, the Confessing Church argued that church structures and arrangements of church discipline, which are “neutral matters” under normal circumstances and may therefore be handled in several ways, grew to such fundamental importance in the specific situation in which German Christians found themselves at the time that the credibility of the Gospel itself was threatened. Therefore, they were of the opinion that the hour had come in which

10 Smit, “A Status *Confessionis* in South Africa?”, 21.

11 Rauhaus gives some historical background to the use of the term *status confessionis*: After the defeat of the Schmalkaldic League in 1548, the Holy Roman Emperor proclaimed an interim settlement in certain areas of church life in the Protestant territories. This led to controversy among Lutherans as to whether they should yield to the request for this interim settlement of an emperor, or whether to resist even at the price of martyrdom. In opposition to Philip Melancthon, Matthias Flavius Illyricus held that under the given circumstances, the Emperor’s demand of a return to certain rituals (e.g., ecclesiastical robes, keeping Lent) could not be made, even though they concerned areas where Christian freedom (usually) left a choice. Though such rites could, strictly speaking, be tolerated, for Flavius, the imperial demand ran counter to the confession of the truth of the gospel – i.e., to the gospel itself. Protestant believers would further interpret this as a return to papism (and as such a *casus scandali*) and at that occasion Flavius coined the classical principle: *Nihil est adiaphoron in casu confessionis et scandali* (Nothing is irrelevant or neutral in the case of professing the faith and of ignominy), Rauhaus, “Is an Ethical Status Confessionis Possible?”, 1.

they were compelled to confess what they believed to be true to the Gospel, even if the Nazi regime was not once mentioned expressly in the *Declaration*, nor in fact was the term *status confessionis*.

The second occasion in the twentieth century when the expression *status confessionis* (now expressly) featured in church debates concerned the ecumenical rejection of racism. In 1977, in Dares Salaam, Tanzania, the Lutheran World Federation declared a *status confessionis* concerning racism and apartheid and declared that, once again, the situation did not involve mere “neutral matters”, but the essence of the gospel itself. An appeal was made to member churches to express their solidarity with this view. A lively discussion ensued in the global Lutheran community, but in 1982 the (then) World Alliance of Reformed Churches adopted a similar resolution at its meeting in Ottawa.

The third occasion, also in 1982, concerns the issue of nuclear armaments. The *Reformierter Bund*, representing a segment of the predominantly Lutheran German Evangelical Church (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* or EKD), followed the lead of the Hervormde Kerk in the Netherlands and declared a *status confessionis* on not only the use of, but also on the mere possession of nuclear arms. Views regarding this issue, however, differed since the need for such a declaration was not shared by all members of the EKD and the issue remains unresolved.

To Alfred Rauhaus, it seems that the catchphrase *status confessionis* reappeared in the twentieth century. He warns, however, that “(i)t is unclear what the term *status confessionis* is meant to denote today. During the 20th century the term has been used increasingly more imprecisely. For further use this calls for greatest care.”<sup>12</sup> He also shows that the phrase has subsequently been used in view of certain ethical questions, especially within the Reformed persuasion. Echoing the 22<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Seoul, South Korea, Rauhaus stresses that

...(e)very declaration of the *status confessionis* is based on the conviction that the integrity of the gospel is at stake. It is a call from error to truth. It demands from the church a clear and unambiguous decision on the truth of the gospel and identifies the contrary view in doctrine and conduct of life as heretical. The declaring of the *status confessionis* is related to the practice of the church as well as to her teaching. The practice of the church must conform with her doctrine that demands the declaration of the *status confessionis*. The declaring of the *status confessionis* must be directed at a specific situation. It draws error that threatens a

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12 Rauhaus, “Is an Ethical *Status Confessionis* Possible?”, 2.

particular church to light. At the same time the underlying danger of this error endangers the integrity of the preaching of all churches.<sup>13</sup>

The *Barmen Theological Declaration* of 1934 is a good prototype for a declaration of a *status confessionis*, although it does not call itself that. It displays the following characteristics: (a) it is based on biblical foundations; (b) it explicates the official doctrine of the church, while focusing on the controversial matter at hand; and (c) from this the necessary verdicts of condemnation result. The proper authority for declaring the *status confessionis* is the highest court or institution of a church which is the authority for determining the basic confessional testimonial. The *Belhar Confession* is also another historical example.<sup>14</sup> Rauhaus states that while the declaration of a *status confessionis* occurs at a specific time and in a specific situation, it is simultaneously aimed at all churches and calls them to join in with the profession of faith.<sup>15</sup>

According to Smit and Rauhaus, after World War II, a *status confessionis* was mainly proclaimed in connection with issues concerning the ethics of social affairs and was mostly combined with questions regarding the community of churches. A clear and unequivocal decision for the truth of the gospel is demanded from the church that is seen as the agent of the act of confessing and as being in a *status confessionis*, with reference to its practice and teaching. This demand for confession is, however, neither addressed to the church members nor to the institutions. So, who is “the church” that confesses then, and “to whom” is the confession addressed?

Rauhaus maintains that the Barmen Confessing Synod, in its day, clearly indicated who was speaking and who was addressed in these words: “The confessing synod of the German Evangelical Church declares ...”, and “The synod asks all who are concerned to return to the unity of faith, love and hope.” In Rauhaus’ perspective, the true and false church were clearly distinguished in view of the errors of the “German Christians” and the incumbent German church government that caused the break in the unity of the German Evangelical Church. This means that not only individual Christians, but the church (as an organisation/institution)

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13 Rauhaus, “Is an Ethical *Status Confessionis* Possible?”, 1.

14 The *Belhar Confession* has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in Southern Africa. This “outcry of faith” and “call for faithfulness and repentance” was first drafted in 1982 in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) (today reunited with some of its erstwhile sister churches as the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, URCSA) and adopted as an official confession by it in 1986. The confession addresses three key issues of concern at the time, namely, the unity of the church and unity among all people, reconciliation within church and society, and God’s justice.

15 Rauhaus, “Is an Ethical *Status Confessionis* Possible?”, 1.

as a whole is called upon to become a confessing church. The consequence of the proclamation of a *status confessionis* would be that individual Christians should, for example, not own slaves themselves, even though it would be legally permitted, and furthermore should use their voice as citizens to stand up against a law that allows for slavery. It would also imply that the church as an institution would be compelled to oppose such a statute, immediately and publicly, without taking into account any disadvantages or danger to itself. This clarity, says Rauhaus, is often missed when the term *status confessionis* is used today.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, a *status confessionis* can thus be described as an embodied demonstration of a faith-based confession, as a protest against a prevailing ungodly state of affairs in a given context. It grows from the conviction that something which may be neutral under normal circumstances in the sense that it could be done or not without endangering the heart of the gospel, may not be neutral any longer in a situation of confession or a time of confession. According to Smit,

... (u)nder these circumstances, it may suddenly attain such grave importance that it becomes a matter in which the Gospel is indeed threatened ... Strictly speaking, one could say that the expression *status confessionis* means that a Christian, a group of Christians, a church or group of churches are of the opinion that a situation has developed, a moment of truth had dawned in which nothing less than the gospel itself, their most fundamental confession concerning the Christian gospel itself, is at stake, so that they feel compelled to witness and act over this threat.<sup>17</sup>

Being a decision of faith, a *status confessionis* arises from a realisation that the faith community's *raison d'être* is under pressure from the prevailing state of affairs, to the extent that it requires the declaration of a moment of truth for an embodied witness against such ungodly happenings. From the beginning, the people of God in times of crisis have always had a way of confessing to the world, saying: Because of our faith, this is who we are, what we believe, and what we intend to do. As people of goodwill, they seek to discern and embody the *voluntas revelata Dei* (revealed Will of God) as a *fides quarens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) and live out what they believe in more substantive ways. In many cases, ungodly states of affairs would normally only require a prophetic witness stressing a call to conversion in the faith communities. However, such ungodly states of affairs often metamorphose into heresy that can lead to explicit theological legitimisation of evil, false teaching, debased thought patterns that have gained substantive grounds in the church itself, and this may call for confession. Which, as Smit observes, is not

16 Rauhaus, "Is an Ethical *Status Confessionis* Possible?", 3, 6.

17 Smit, "A *Status Confessionis* in South Africa?", 21, 29.

simply an expression of our present perception and insight but an answer to God's Word of revelation.<sup>18</sup>

### *Processus confessionis*

While a *status confessionis* refers to confessing against a prevailing ungodly state of affairs, a *processus confessionis*, according to Rauhaus, in his critique of the 1997 WARC General Council in Debrecen, Hungary, is “a process of increasing perception, clarification and of confessing (*processus confessionis*) regarding [in the case of Debrecen 1997] economic injustice and ecological destruction.”<sup>19</sup> For him, the call for a *processus confessionis* in this case was directed inward, to the member churches of the WARC at all levels.<sup>20</sup> According to the *Accra Confession*,<sup>21</sup> the 1997 WARC General Council in Debrecen, Hungary, called WARC member churches to engage in a committed process of “recognition, education and confession” regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction.<sup>22</sup>

According to Milan Opočenský,

...(t)he declaration of Debrecen speaks about *processus confessionis* because it envisages a longer process of recognition, education and a possible confession in a particular situation. The problems of economy and ecology, which have habitually been discussed within the framework of a noncommittal moral discourse, are now elevated to the level of faith and confession. The term *processus confessionis* indicates a new quality of the question under discussion.<sup>23</sup>

From Opočenský's perspective, the approach includes a call “upon WARC member churches to introduce the necessary programs, resources and practical steps to initiate a *processus confessionis* as a matter of priority.”<sup>24</sup> It would entail special attention to the analysis and understanding of economic processes; the education of church members on economic life and how to develop a lifestyle that rejects

18 Smit, “A *Status Confessionis* in South Africa?”. 32. See also Conradie, “Globalisation, Consumerism and the Call for Status Confessionis”, 53–54

19 Rauhaus, “Is an Ethical *Status Confessionis* Possible?”, 3.

20 Rauhaus, “Is an Ethical *Status Confessionis* Possible?”, 3, 4.

21 The *Accra Confession* was adopted by the delegates of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) 24th General Council in Accra, Ghana (2004), based on the theological conviction that the economic and environmental injustices of today's global economy require the Reformed family to respond as a matter of faith to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The *Accra Confession* calls upon Reformed Christians around the world to protest against injustices in the world as an integral part of their churches' witness and mission. It mentions the concept *processus confessionis*.

22 Cf. World Communion of Reformed Churches, “The Accra Confession”.

23 Presbyterian Outlook, “Reformed Confessions”.

24 Presbyterian Outlook, “Reformed Confessions”.

materialism and consumerism; and work towards the formulation of a confession of beliefs about economic life that would express “justice in the entire household of God”; and action in solidarity with the victims of injustice.<sup>25</sup>

Wilson, commenting from a Reformed commitment to justice, explains a *processus confessionis* as

...(a) process that will lead to an open confession by Reformed Christians that justice is a vital ingredient of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As such commitment to justice has to be seen in the life and witness of every disciple of Jesus Christ. When a Christian congregation or community abandons a total commitment to justice, *de facto*, that congregation or community abandons the gospel itself. In such circumstances, it is the obligation of fellow Christians to alert such a congregation or community to the breach of faith, and call for repentance, and a return to the Gospel truth.<sup>26</sup>

Conradie observes that a *processus confessionis* describes the church’s process of recognition, education, confession and action against injustice. It also speaks about the church’s work against human degradation<sup>27</sup> as a demonstration of Christian concern for the well-being of the neighbour. A *processus confessionis* also represents a discerned *voluntas revelata Dei* and a *quarrens fides intellectum* as well as a *euangelion* (good news) to the victims of society.

In light of Conradie’s observation of a *processus confessionis* as recognition, education, confession and action against injustice, and in light of the overwhelming African experiences of gender injustice referred to in a publication such as this, the following discussion may serve as suggestions for consideration in this regard.

### **A concern for social welfare as an integral theological maxim for the church’s celebration of human dignity**

More serious reflection and theologising on social welfare ministries as characteristics of the church (*nota ecclesia*/mark of the church) will be required. This will acknowledge the churches’ responsibility to exercise political discernment in the pursuit of a preferential option for the poor, oppressed and marginalised – in all societies predominantly women and children. It demands an embodied proclamation as a theological maxim that pays the proper attention to the celebration, promotion and protection of the human dignity of the victims of gender injustice that it deserves. It also affirms as a central concern of the church

25 Presbyterian Outlook, “Reformed Confessions”.

26 Wilson, “*Processus Confessionis*”, 81.

27 Conradie, “Globalisation, Consumerism and the Call for a *Status Confessionis*”, 55-56.

the obligation to overcome distress, exclusion and hatred as well as the obligation to responsible participation in social affairs.

A concern for social welfare as an integral theological maxim for the church's celebration of human dignity also calls churches to a deeper commitment to justice. That is to embody their claims of being graced with the identity, spirituality, function and ethical vision and practices of true humanity. True humanity, as Koopman has shown, is not defined by independence and mere rationality, but is rather defined by a willingness to enter into relationships with others, especially the victims of society. In this interaction with others, in this communion, in this relationship, we find our essence and being.<sup>28</sup>

A concern for social welfare as an integral theological maxim for the church's celebration of human dignity also speaks about advocacy. It represents a theological approach to a preferential option for the victims of gender inequity. This is envisioned in and flows from the mission of God who, in North American missiologist Darrel L. Guder's words, calls and empowers God's people to be a sign, foretaste and instrument of God's new order under the lordship of Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup>

### **Social activism as theological witness**

Social activism calls for theologically rooted action with the intention of affecting social norms in the quest for respecting the sovereignty of God and pleasing God by seeking God's glory. This may take a wide range of forms which include individual or collective efforts, such as persuasive communication by writing letters in newspapers, preferentially patronising businesses, but also political campaigning, grass-root political action, demonstrations, and economic activism such as boycotts or rallies, street marches, strikes or sit-ins. All of these should be aimed at bringing the plight of the victims of gender inequality to the attention of the public and authorities with a view to social, political, economic and environmental change. Social activism in this sense can be described as a theologically rooted vision for the preferential treatment of the poor or solidarity with the poor. This call for social activism consists of intentional efforts to bring about social, political, economic, or environmental change as a theological witness.

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28 Koopman, "Some Theological and Anthropological Perspectives", 183.

29 Guder, "The Church as a Missional Community", 125.

## **Christian pedagogy as a theological-political enterprise**

Christian pedagogy describes human participation in the rhythms of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26), which seeks faithful discipleship in a complex world. It is about Christian education as the ministry which engages and seeks to win disciples from the perspectives of Jesus' commandments to love God and to love one's neighbour. Christian education is a ministry which includes the methods of instruction and discipline intended to enlighten, correct and form the manners and habits of persons, with a view to their engagement with life. Christian pedagogy seeks to form people whose central concern is to transmit a witness of love to the world. A major concern of Christian pedagogy as a theological-political enterprise is to present Christian principles in such a way that they can also bear upon the issue of gender inequality.

This means that Christian pedagogy must present God's preferential option for the poor, suffering, marginalised and victimised through primary, post-primary and tertiary institutional programmes in Africa. The human dignity of the victims yearns for acknowledgement and protection, as does that of all other persons whom God has "engraced" with the *imago Dei*.

## **"Corporate networking" as orthopraxis**

The transformation model for ecclesiology, as Jurgens Hendriks has pointed out, teaches us that the church as part of the human family should be with the people where it hurts (Isa 61: 1; Luke 4:16-19), and wash the feet of others (John 13). Such an ecclesiological vision inspires the church to move from the confines and comfort zones of its theology to venture out as Christ did, disregarding His privileged position to become a servant, humbling Himself, serving and thus showing us the way the Father wants us to live and serve (Phil 1: 5-11). This transformation vision for an ecclesiological model also challenges the church to follow the leadership of Christ who came into this broken world to serve and heal it by carrying the cross and working among the lowest rungs of the societal ladder. In orthopraxis, as Hendriks presents it in the transformation model, the truth or dogma lies in doing what is right.<sup>30</sup> Orthopraxis speaks about right belief that is embodied in right praxis.<sup>31</sup>

Both the church and the wider society, however, are the *loci* for an embodied proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ whose ministry unmasked structurally

30 Hendriks, *Studying Congregations in Africa*, 53-54.

31 Ndukwe, *Celebration of Life*, 84-86.



and culturally based social evils and paved the way for the liberation of victims of those evil structures, social stigmatisation and victimisation, denial of dignity and stereotyping. In a metaphorical sense, the church represents God's unique "entrepreneur" whose social ethics positions its presence as a people serving God and living in the world. The ability to "network" without losing identity in the melting pot of social interactions is one of the most crucial skills of a functional "entrepreneur" of Jesus Christ. This is very significant for the church in Africa, as an entrepreneur of Jesus Christ who struggles to discern and do the will of God as its indispensable "business".

"Corporate networking" should be embraced as a barrier-bridging orthopraxis by the church which can make a *status confessionis* or *processus confessionis* meaningful, even to non-believers. In addition, "corporate networking" as presented above can nuance the church's identity and spirituality as God's unique entrepreneurs to victims of social stigmatisation and victimisation, denial and stereotypes, even outside of the church. In most African experiences, the majority of these victims of society scarcely receive the needed platform to release or contribute their potential towards the development of society. By "corporate networking", the church can also provide them with such a platform where their unique gifts and potential may be acknowledged towards a substantive participation in social affairs in general and the economy in particular, thereby helping to bridge the chasm which separates the poor from the rich.

## Conclusion

In light of what has been written in this volume on the terrible extent and the myriad of manifestations of gender-based inequality, discrimination, violence, suffering, need and the many ways in which all of these deny the dignity of women, does this not lead to just as many questions to Christians and Christian churches on the continent of Africa, if not worldwide? Should they not revisit the question of whether one of the church's central tasks would be to gather human beings in order to remind them, reflect on, empower one another and resolve to go out as representatives of Jesus Christ in order to represent their Lord in the market place of life? Is everybody not expected to become somebody in the kingdom of God, which the church is under divine mandate to embody as a historical reality in the here and now? Are we all not graced with spiritual gifts to contribute generously towards the development of God's world? And is one of the rhetorical rhythms in the challenge to curb the distressing effects of gender inequality not perhaps

the proposition of a *status confessionis*, or at least, a *processus confessionis*? Should the church's theological maxim not be the rediscovery, recovery, restoration and celebration of the battered human dignity of the victims of unjust societal structures, social stigmatisation and victimisation, stereotyping and denial of different kinds?

The church as beneficiary of the gracious *beneficia Christi* (benefits of Christ) cannot afford to be accused of not communicating this same grace to others. When the victims of gender injustice come to the conclusion that the church has by its actions or lack thereof consciously, deliberately and even serenely turned a blind eye to their plight or, even worse, had been the cause of it in certain circumstances, they may with right confront the church with indignation. In fact, the church may be seen to be saliently complicit to persons and structures that breed, enthrone and sustain injustice within social orders; to the evils that it confesses to reject as being contrary to the heart of the gospel.

As the North American Reformed theologian, Cornelius Plantinga, says regarding sin (also as it is found in social structures and cultural practices), it distorts our character, a central feature of our humanity; it corrupts such powerful human capacities as thought, emotion, speech, acts, et cetera, so that they become centres of attack on others or of defection or neglect. At its core, human sin is a violation of the ultimate purpose of human beings, which is to build *shalom* and thus glorify and enjoy God forever. *Shalom* is God's design for creation and redemption; hence sin is blamed for human vandalism of these great realities and therefore an affront to their architect and builder.<sup>32</sup> In no way may the church that is under the mandate of confessing and embodying God's gracious love in word and deed, in ethos, in structures, in practices and policies be part of such violations.<sup>33</sup> This is true for all believers who

...(b)elieve, teach and confess that at the due time of professing the faith, when the enemy seeks to suppress God's Word – the sound doctrine of the Holy Gospel – God's entire communion, yes every Christian man [sic], but especially the ministers of the Word as the superintendents of God's communion are in duty bound to confess frankly and publicly not only by word but also by deed and action, on the strength of the Word of God, the doctrine and what belongs to the faith as a whole ...<sup>34</sup>

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32 Plantinga, *Not the Way it's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, 2, 16, 17.

33 Koopman, "Confessing and Embodying", 38.

34 Rauhaus, "Is An Ethical *Status Confessionis* Possible?", 1.

The church, Nico Koopman<sup>35</sup> argues, is challenged to confess and embody wholeness and fullness and to explicitly communicate and commend its visionary theological enterprises to especially the suffering. To confess and embody are more than merely discerning the implications and imperatives of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. It also includes confessing and embodying concrete cooperation with God to form, inform, reform and represent the church as a community of character. Such an approach embodies a theology of hope as a historical reality.

Henry S. Wilson observes that it is clear from Scripture that the *voluntas revelata Dei* is that human beings live as God's children in an atmosphere of fellowship and relate to the created order in an atmosphere of harmony. When that is not in place, the will of God is discarded and the sovereignty of God not respected. In the Reformed ecclesiological vision, the purpose of mission also includes the struggle to ensure that the value of the reign of God is reflected in an individual's life as well as in the community.

In conclusion, however, there is also the need to note Smit's caution that the recognition of a *status confessionis* must by no means have the overtones of triumphalism, self-assurance, complacency, a show of strength, or any other ulterior motive. It does not have heroic features, but should remind us rather of a moment which is not at the disposal of the people, a moment in which the people do not settle and arrange matters, but as a moment in which *God* disposes and in which *God* imposes an obligation on people, whose speech and action must be cautious, often probing:

A *status confessionis* is no weapon in a private struggle, no "handy stick to hit with" (Noordmans), but the trembling acknowledgement that an hour has struck from on high in which something needs to be said. Such a word of confession is consequently never calculated or planned, but is born, it is bestowed (Barth); in one sense it surprises all those concerned. Whenever this happens, it is of no avail to object that it is not a suitable time or that it has come too soon. Nobody chooses the hour. In a *status confessionis*, says Bonhoeffer, all tactical considerations are abandoned. The apparent certainties, based on loud expressions of one's own viewpoint, he continues, has nothing to do with the assurance of repentance and of the gospel, so that those who have been brought to a new knowledge are standing guilty as well, substituting and interceding next to the misdirected and misled brothers, because they themselves do not live from the confidence of being know-all's or from the complacency of being correct (*Rechthaberei*), but only of the remission of the gospel.<sup>36</sup>

35 Koopman, "Confessing and Embodying", 38.

36 Smit, "A *Status Confessionis* in South Africa?", 33.

This tends to proclaim the necessity of the church's engagement in at least a *processus confessionis*.

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### Questions for further reflection

- ♦ Do you agree that a *status confessionis* or a *processus confessionis* will be necessary to address issues of gender inequality? Discuss.
- ♦ Are you aware of any decisions or declarations made in your specific church or synod that address issues of gender inequality? Discuss.
- ♦ Draw up a list of statements which could be included in a potential declaration of a *status confessionis* or a *processus confessionis* addressing gender issues in Africa.
- ♦ What can we learn from documents published by the United Nations, the World Bank, the African Union and other organisations about addressing the unequal opportunities that women in Africa are facing, and how can we use this information in the church?

By addressing gender equality as a fundamental expression of human dignity and justice on our continent, this collage of ... essays [by 14 women and 6 men], is meant to serve as a concrete alternative to aspects of gender inequality ... Its format is particularly devised for use in the classroom, and for critical-constructive group engagement. It is our sincere prayer that it will also be used in imaginative ways by clergy and in congregations as a necessary part of adult learning programmes.

*Editorial*

The confession of the equality in dignity of women and men offers some concrete mandates and imperatives for churches, both on our continent and elsewhere in the world. The ecclesial imperatives entails that we jointly seek interrelated and interdependent freedom and justice for women and men. The interdependent notions of freedom and justice constitute the two legs of a life of dignity. Without freedom there is no dignity. Without justice there is no dignity.

*Nico Koopman*

One's gender, or gender role, should not determine one's value. All that has been placed in people by God serves God's purposes. The God-ordained human dignity, derived from the concept of the image of God, does not give us room to view one gender as more valuable than the other.

*Simon Gillham & Florence Matsveru*

Cultural practices are vehicles of history and identity ... [and] they are ... powerful symbols. As symbols, however, cultural practices ... are never permanent; they transform and reinvent themselves with time. ... [W]hilst some cultural traditions and practices are good and mean well for the community and should be cherished and respected, others are enslaving and need to be reformed or even abandoned altogether ... the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be a tool that may assist in reforming these cultural practices and in reclaiming (gender) justice, liberation and dignity in African communities.

*Edwin Zulu*

How can Christian believers reimagine God's liberating, healing presence in their personal and collective stories, even in contexts of domestic violence and the life-threatening HIV/Aids pandemic, with overburdened (grand)mothers and absent (grand)fathers? ... Ultimately, it is the choice of Christian families to give *priority* to the possibilities of God's covenanting love over the broken realities of our lives and the world. The early Christians were overwhelmed by God's presence in the resurrected Jesus and the Spirit ... We invite and challenge households on this continent to allow God's life-giving Spirit to surprise us likewise!

*Lydia Mwaniki and Elna Mouton*

*Cover image Angel Wings by L. Ross*



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