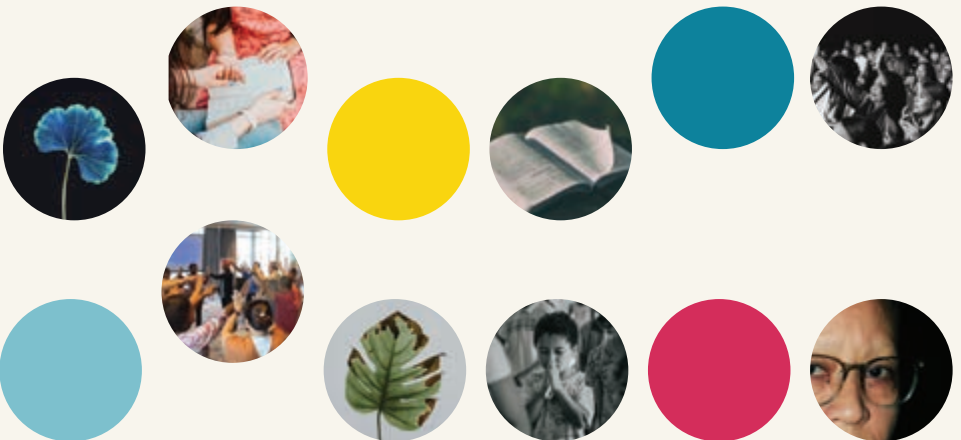


Unsilenced Faith



Asian Theological Responses to
Gender Violence and Inequality



Edited By **Bonnie Miriam Jacob**

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Tearfund & TRACI



UNSILENCED FAITH: ASIAN THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO GENDER VIOLENCE AND INEQUALITY

Editor: Bonnie Miriam Jacob

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ISBN: 978-1-916507-88-3

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Cover design and typesetting: Daya Elizabeth Varaprasad

Published by:

Tearfund
100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE

and

Theological Research and Communication Institute (TRACI)
E-537, Greater Kailash-II, New Delhi - 110048

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Endorsements

Two thousand years ago, Paul had declared that in Jesus there was neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave or free. This tore across the social fabric of many societies historically. Starting from the Greco-Roman cultures that viewed slaves as a 'living tool' in Aristotle's terrible phrase, many societies have advanced to a degree that discrimination based on race, class and gender is deemed to be wrong, if not totally eradicated.

Ironically, it is in the churches, particularly in Asia, where the old legacies of traditional culture and colonial theologies persist, that the ideology of female subordination continues to hold women down.

This book is a witness to the struggle of women in Asia to break free from the dominance of theologies and traditions that treat them as chattel or at best 'katulong' or assistant helpers to the men. They have challenged interpretations of biblical narratives that have been institutionalised and have kept them submerged and below radar screen at the underside of redemptive history. Now their faces are surfacing and their voices are rising from the silence.

Let Asia and the whole earth hear their voice.

Dr. Melba P. Maggay

Founder and President

Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture (ISACC), Philippines

A provocative edited collection that drags into the light the deeply-disturbing, systemic injustices that have violated women and girls for centuries, in societies at large and in churches, throughout our diverse cultures in Asia. Presented by voices from the ground, Unsilenced

Faith, though necessarily unsettling, also offers hope; it challenges the Church to return to her call to do justice through a faithful rereading of the Word and courageous engagement with the world. A must-read for pastors, church leaders, and seminary students.

Ivor Poobalan PhD

Senior Lecturer

Colombo Theological Seminary, Sri Lanka

As Chairman of the Asian Evangelical Alliance, I am pleased to recommend *Unsilenced Faith: Asian Theological Responses to Gender Violence and Inequality* to the global Body of Christ.

This volume is an important contribution to Asian Christian scholarship. It speaks with honesty and theological depth about the realities of gender inequality and violence that have often been hidden within our communities.

This work is both timely and relevant. Drawing from the lived experiences of practitioners and scholars across Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Uzbekistan, it connects theology with real-life pastoral challenges. The contributors call for deep, lasting change rooted in a biblical vision, offering a clear and faithful understanding of equality that speaks to diverse Asian contexts.

I believe *Unsilenced Faith* is a valuable resource for transformation. It offers helpful guidance for theological education, supports pastors in creating safe and caring spaces, and encourages the Church to break the silence around these issues.

I commend this book to church leaders, theologians, and all believers. It will help guide the Church toward true justice, reflecting the radical equality modelled by Jesus Christ in our families, ministries, and society.

Godfrey Yogarajah

Chairman, Asian Evangelical Alliance

This compilation of contributions refuses to look away from the wounds the church has too often ignored. It calls for the church to be a safe space for those in situations of vulnerability and exclusion. Through short, concise chapters, the book navigates Scripture, culture, and lived realities; addressing misinterpretation, leadership, violence, and the urgent call for justice across Asia. It addresses the complexities of Gender Based Violence in an easy to grasp approach. This is essential reading for church leaders, theologians, practitioners, activists, and survivors who seek a faith that speaks up, heals and restores. As you read and wrestle with its content, I pray it will reshape how we demonstrate justice and dignity and be a voice that breaks the silence.

Roshan Mendis

Global Director

Micah Global

I thank God for this much-needed resource for the Church across Asia. Unsilenced Faith challenges us to re-examine entrenched views regarding the value and place of women in church and society; views stemming from biblical interpretations heavily influenced by patriarchal norms. The theological perspectives bring together powerful biblical texts of all time, blended with today's lived experiences of women around us. Every chapter challenges us, personally and communally to reflect on our own attitudes that perpetuate the silencing of victims in our faith communities. Unsilenced Faith moves us from cerebral theology to practical action. Honouring God's heart and design for men and women demands that we break the silence and acknowledge this muted cancer that disfigures God's image in women and men, destroying families in its wake. Unsilenced Faith is a clear prophetic voice to the church in Asia calling her once more to become "co-healers with him, co-creators with him of safe spaces" for all.

Dileeni Abraham

Adjunct Faculty, Counselling

Colombo Theological Seminary

Foreword

We are living in a moment that demands both deep introspection and courageous action. Across Asia, the church finds itself at a pivotal intersection of faith, culture, and social justice. The question is no longer if the church should address gender inequality and violence, but how it will lead the way in restoring the dignity and wholeness God intended for all people.

This volume, *Unsilenced Faith: Asian Theological Responses to Gender Violence and Inequality*, arrives as a timely and vital resource. It is a collection of voices rising from the diverse contexts of Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Uzbekistan. These are not distant academic musings; they are urgent theological reflections born from the realities of our communities, from the painful silence surrounding domestic violence to the structural barriers facing women in leadership.

The essays within these pages challenge us to look again at our sacred texts. They invite us to grapple with difficult narratives and entrenched cultural norms, not to turn away in despair, but to uncover the biblical mandate to support the suffering and confront injustice. They call us to re-examine our interpretations of Scripture that have, too often, been used to silence rather than empower, and to rediscover the radical equality modelled by Jesus, who treated women with dignity, respect, and as full partners in the gospel.

At Tearfund, we believe that the church is uniquely positioned to transform the harmful social norms that perpetuate inequality. On a personal level, I am deeply excited to journey through these reflections. I see them not just as a resource for others, but as a mirror for my own life and a guide for the work I lead across the region. I am committed to integrating these insights into our leadership at

Tearfund, ensuring that our culture and programmes are underpinned by the profound theological depth found in these pages.

We are profoundly grateful for this collaboration with theologians and practitioners across the region. It is our hope that this collection resonates with you, challenges you, and ultimately equips you to be an agent of God's *shalom*, a peace that necessitates justice and equality for both men and women. As you read, may you be inspired to envision a church where every member is valued, every voice is heard, and every person is free to flourish as the image-bearer of God they were created to be.

Prabu Deepan

Regional Director for Asia, and Global GBV Leadership

Tearfund

01

Introduction

~ Bonnie Miriam Jacob

Gender inequality is the primary cause for all kinds of violence that women experience at various stages of their lives. Though the world has progressed considerably with regard to gender equality on several fronts by strengthening policies, bringing in legislations and improving budget allocations so as to end violence against women; the fruits of these efforts continue to be elusive to majority of the women across the world. Conventions, goals, policies that promote gender equality have not been translated adequately to transform the lives of women and girls all over the world. Compliance in terms of thorough implementation is the essential need of the hour to usher in equality. This simultaneously begs the question as to how Christians and the church are contributing to end violence against women.

In its declaration on the elimination of violence against women United Nations defined violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”¹ Violence against women also takes on several forms. It involves “physical, sexual or psychological violence perpetrated by an intimate partner or someone other than a partner – including other family members, friends, authority figures, acquaintances or strangers. It also includes femicide, including

1. General Assembly resolution 48/104. *Declaration on the elimination of violence against women. Forty-eighth session of the General Assembly, 20 December 1993.* New York (NY): United Nations; 1993 (A/RES/48/104; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-againstwomen>).

murders with so called honour given as the justification, and trafficking of women.”² Global statistics reveal that, 31.6% of women aged 15–49 years and 30.4% of women aged 15 years and older have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a current or former husband or male intimate partner, or to sexual violence from someone who is not a current or former husband or intimate partner, or to both forms of violence at least once since the age of 15 years.³ This amounts to a third of women in the world. Translated into absolute numbers it suggests that, about 840 million women who were aged 15 years or older in 2023 had been subjected to one or both of these forms of violence at least once in their lifetime.⁴ In a modern world that boasts of advancement in every sphere there is no respite for women from violence. The relentless efforts of many women’s rights activists, international agencies and countries have resulted in 1529 legislative measures across 191 countries to address violence against women and girls.⁵ While this is highly appreciable, the struggle to rid the world of violence has to be taken forward till all women and girls are safe and can live free from fear of abuse or violence.

Violence against women in Christian families and fellowships is not unknown. Here again violence takes on different forms. The very act of discriminating women and depriving them of their legitimate rights is not something that can be taken lightly because that forms the base on which the superstructure of all other abusive behaviour is condoned or ignored among Christians and in the church as several chapters in this collection highlight. Domestic violence, practice of dowry, sexual abuse, discrimination against widows and preference

2. World Health Organization. *Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2023: global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and non-partner sexual violence against women*. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2025, 2.

3. World Health Organization. *Violence against women*, 45.

4. World Health Organization. *Violence against women*, 45.

5. UN Women, *Global Database on Violence against Women and Girls*, accessed February 2, 2026, <https://data.unwomen.org/global-database-on-violence-against-women>.

for sons are some of the evil that are prevalent among Christians without exception. Our perspectives on gender are, to a large extent, shaped by our faith. The way we interpret the Scripture to limit women has wide- ranging ramifications. Violent behaviour often originates from an understanding of the Scripture that ascribes an inferior status to women. A perspective of gender inequality has gripped the imagination of a large section of Christians, and its impact is far more destructive than what is intended to be. Such a theology of inequality goes on to justify marginalisation, discrimination and violence against women. The reading of the Scripture, the teaching of the word and the general culture that defines the church contribute to this formation. As the world makes efforts towards gender equality and gender justice, we continue to see the church take cover in its interpretation that is alien to the realities of our context. And thus, the church and Christians continue to exist under the stigma of being one of the most regressive religious institutions in the world. Women's concerns then are on the periphery or fail to get any attention because of the lack of space in leadership roles.

Reflections and conversations around gender in the churches and among Christians is essential more than ever before for multiple reasons. Biblical equality that the Scripture validates and promotes is unfortunately drowned in a gender theology that advocates for inequality which inevitably leads to injustice and violence. A theological response is essential to counter the evils that we face. "At a far deeper level than either 'biology' or 'culture,' then, 'sin' helps us explain the ubiquity of violence against women. We are responsible. Patriarchal structures are a product of human choice and attitudes; oppression and brutality are rooted in the power sin exercises in human communities. A Christian theology of sin places accountability for attitudes, culture and actions firmly on human shoulders; we have to own what we create."⁶ It is unfortunate that though Jesus said that you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free, we have for long been twisting the truth to suit certain agendas. Despite being

6. Elaine Storkey, *Scars Across Humanity: Understanding and Overcoming Violence Against Women* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2015), 223.

bearers of the truth that can set us free we are bound by a gender inequality that the culture around promotes, and we are sucked into it and we take great efforts to establish that it is the biblical mandate on gender. The truth that surrounds the creation of men and women equally in the image of God is mired in a lot of patriarchal beliefs and practices. So, Christianity appears just as regressive and inclined to perpetrate gender discrimination which is far from the biblical truth. The need of the hour is to engage critically with the issues of gender that is of significant to our world. It is also pertinent to examine these issues against the truth of the Scripture. In doing so, we also need to honestly unravel as to why our precious Christian faith that liberates and releases, often seen as being among the most regressive religions with regard to gender. We hold on to certain passages from Paul's letter to build our entire theology of gender. "New Testament scholars commonly acknowledge that, far from reinforcing the patriarchy of his age, Paul advocates dismantling those barriers which privilege some and penalise others. His urge is for Christians to recognise the freedom from cultural bondage that true faith brings, and experience unity and equality in the body of Christ."⁷ In fact, Scripture documents several instances of women as leaders and models of engagement which far outnumber the passages that are used to silence and limit women. We have not adequately thought through this at all. The complicity of the church in endorsing it is well-known and unfortunate. We need to develop an understanding of Scripture that does not condone violence and injustice.

In an online course⁸ on 'gender and biblical equality' many participants found it liberating to actually study the biblical perspective on gender. Some of them had been on the verge of leaving their faith on account of the duplicity of the church's gender position. The understanding and practice of gender seemed like a main barrier in enabling them to continue in their faith. The ethics and morality of gender discrimination

7. Storkey, *Scars Across Humanity*, 221.

8. Online course on 'Gender and Biblical Equality' conducted annually by Theological Research and Communication Institute (TRACI), New Delhi.

did not match the liberating message of the gospel. “Disrespect or violation of women undermines the fundamental values of the gospel. Yet, where it occurs, it calls for repentance and change, not an abandonment of faith.”⁹ And truth cannot be silenced but needs to be declared without fear. ‘Unsilenced Faith’ is an effort in this direction to highlight theological responses to gender violence and inequality from Asia.

This volume brings together a collection of chapters that revisit our theology on gender in the light of sexual and gender-based violence. The challenges that women in Asia face are many and there are multiple layers of discrimination and exclusion that they navigate on an everyday basis. Cutting across the cultural differences that Asia has, one persistent refrain in these chapters is for the equality of women. These chapters are expressions from the heart of men and women longing for biblical equality. A few texts from the Scripture feature predominantly in this volume which is indicative of the extent to which these texts have been the cause of the gender inequality that persists in many of the societies these writers represent. Some passages of sexual abuse highlighted repeatedly in various chapters points to the fact that it deeply resonates with the people who are concerned with gender issues. It is a reflection of the unified cry to end violence against women and girls. Those examples from the Scripture are reviewed for their redemptive and liberating power highlighting the glaring incompatibility of patriarchy rather than reinforcing discrimination or abuse. It is a true testament to the desire for equality and its significance for our times.

Amar Pandey in his chapter ‘Biblical Basis for (Gender) Equality’ highlights that most cultures of the world have influenced the way the church interprets many biblical texts. Consequently, a dominant patriarchal lens has ‘diminished the essence and role of women.’ Critiquing the phenomenon the author argues that God created men and women as equals and that he uses them equally for his purposes without any discrimination. Such an understanding is of critical

9. Storkey, *Scars Across Humanity*, 216.

significance for the church and its ministry. The Scripture documents numerous examples of men and women being used for similar roles, be it prophets, judges, disciples, leaders or teachers. Men and women working together, can accomplish more when they complement and complete each other for the sake of the Kingdom. The proposition that gender equality ‘reflects the equality and unity of the persons of the Trinity’ helps support each other and enables everyone to rightfully use the gifts that God has blessed each one with.

The chapter ‘Problematic Gendered Interpretations of the Scriptures’ by Wong Chor-Fong (Hazel) exposes some of the common misinterpretations which are the root cause of gender inequality. Using several real-life examples that underscore the perceptions that people hold because of wrong interpretations, she urges the readers to acknowledge their fallacy. The author lists out some of the core truths in the Bible and some wrong interpretations that are prevalent and juxtaposes them with the right interpretations. There is an urgent need to raise awareness and have more conversations among believers to address faulty positions and interpretations of the Scripture. Questioning what has been established is essential to chalk out an alternate path. We have to embrace afresh the central truth of the Scripture to ‘reflect the nature of our God and free us from being subjugated and from subjugating others.’

Highlighting that certain passages from Scripture form the basis for those who oppose leadership for women and relegate them to marginal roles, Nikolay Nalitov challenges this position in his chapter ‘Revisiting Our Understanding of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 and the Role of Women in the Church.’ He introduces Jesus method of interpreting Scripture in response to a question on divorce in Matthew 19 as an appropriate model of interpretation. This particularly must be used to interpret I Timothy 2: 19-25 to draw an understanding that is faithful to the word. Paul’s instruction to Timothy in the letter is not meant to be a universal binding for all time but rather specific to the Ephesian church in which Timothy is ministering. A detailed study of the particular context reveals it as an effort towards empowering women by educating them. Right through history, women have served

faithfully despite the efforts to limit them.

In the chapter ‘Gender Equality: The Church in Dialogue with the “World”’ Ruth Surenthiraraj explores the relationship between word and the world with regard to gender and sexuality. She gently appeals to the Church to carefully listen to the word and the world particularly on gender concerns so as to effectively be witnesses of Christ. Drawing from Jesus’ sermon on the mount that calls the church to be salt of the earth and light of the world, she posits that it is commissioned to do so in the areas of gender equality. So, it is imperative to consider that ‘our calling is primarily to be in association with the world that we can impact.’ We need to examine our positions especially on gender and ‘model our behaviour on the radical equality God envisions as part of his good and just Kingdom.’

Kang Sergey Konstantinovish in his chapter ‘The Future of the Church and Women’s Leadership: From Tradition to the Theology of Equality’ draws our attention to the exclusion of women from the ministry, which is diametrically opposed to the message of equality and justice that gospel promotes. Reflecting from the Scripture and factoring the cultural context, Sergey reiterates that “women’s leadership is not a concession to cultural trends, but a return to the Gospel understanding of freedom, equality and dignity of every person as bearing the image of God.” He also raises the concern of single mothers and how they are viewed and treated in the body of Christ. Sergey calls for a return to the church’s vocation of truly caring for the vulnerable in their midst. Women’s leadership in the Church does not have to be viewed as a scramble for power but as a measure of obedience to God’s word of gender equality.

Nant Hnin Hnin Aye (Snow Aye) in the chapter entitled ‘Oppression or Tradition? How Patriarchal Norms Shape Gender Inequality in the Context of Churches in Myanmar’ underlines the hold of patriarchal culture in the church that embraces tradition without questioning it. So women are largely excluded and alienated in the ecclesial community. The church must consider both theological and practical measures to address gender inequality. To that end, Nant Hnin suggests that ‘there must be a re-examination of biblical texts in their historical

and cultural contexts.’ She enunciates that churches should actively support and mentor women leaders, and ‘Christian communities in Myanmar must engage in honest dialogue about the difference between cultural tradition and scriptural truth.’ The church in Myanmar needs to reflect the teachings of Christ that promote gender equality and liberate everyone from the ‘inherited biases in favour of God’s greater vision for His people—male and female, serving together in love and truth.’

Mitaly Malakar urges the church to recognise the fact that depriving women of legitimate opportunities is also a form of violence. In her chapter ‘Gender Equality: Biblical Mandate for the Church to Rise and Lead,’ she calls upon women to break free from peripheral roles and reclaim ‘the biblical vision of women as Spirit-filled leaders, pastors, teachers, and evangelists.’ In places where women are pastors, they are not given the right to conduct baptisms, celebrate the Eucharist, conduct funerals, and such others functions which are deemed fit to be carried out only by men. This chapter establishes that right through the Scripture, women do have an honoured place and Jesus called all men and women equally to ministry. Mitaly constrains Church to lead with courage,’ ‘women rise with confidence’ so that ‘the world can see Christ through our equality, our love, and our obedience to God’s Word.’

Doreen A. Benavidez’s chapter on ‘Re-emergence of Women as Leaders in the Religious Context: A Clash of Cultures in the Philippines’ is a delineation of the history of the position of women in the Philippine from the pre-colonial times. This chapter underlines that women were highly regarded prior to the arrival of the Spaniards and the Americans. However, with Western Christianity women were given limited roles and not positions equal to men. Interestingly, the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements later paved the way for the re-emergence of women leadership. This chapter also highlights the impressive role of indigenous women leaders from the Mangyan tribes. This chapter is a call to rediscover a true Filipino identity and ‘redeem what is best in the culture so as to better reach the Filipinos with the message of Christ and be His disciples.’ For the author, ‘Filipino women’s leadership is not an innovation inspired by modern feminism but a recovery of ancestral

wisdom’ that was suppressed by colonial rulers.

The chapter on ‘Introducing Gender Studies in Theological Seminary Curriculums: Addressing Gender Concerns in Sri Lanka’ by Mano Emmanuel highlights the need for data and context to shape curriculums in seminaries. The fact that many of the male students will go into pastoral ministry where the majority of their congregations will be female should shape the curriculum. Engendering theological education ‘would give students a space to discuss issues faced by women in life and ministry,’ it would alert students to the ways in which culture has taken precedence over a scriptural understanding of God’s design for men and women,’ ‘it will affirm the contribution of women to family, church and society both now and in history’ and ‘it would equip students who enter pastoral ministry to better understand and serve women in their congregation.’ In this way, the seminaries can nurture leaders who ‘will build healthy churches and model healthy relationships.’

The chapter by Joy Pring-Faraz, ‘From the Terrors of Dismemberment to a Theology of *Re-membering*: Confronting Gender-Based Violence in Judges 19 and Today’s Society,’ juxtaposes Judges 19 and the Chop-Chop Lady incident as parallel texts to understand where biblical violence and modern gender-based violence (GBV) intersect. The Church and theological education need to approach these incidents with ‘justice, compassion, and transformative action’ not with ‘abstraction or silence.’ The biblical narrative urges the church to ‘confront the enduring structures that perpetuate sexual exploitation and gender-based violence.’

The author moves the reader from dis-membering to *Re-membering* as a form of deliberate resistance which can bring healing, restoration, and gives value and dignity to those who have experienced violence and injustice. ‘*Re-membering* is a sacred work that can piece the truth together, to sanctify the wounds of the victims and declare that Christ is present amidst of humanity’s terrors and woes.’

The chapter by Ira Desiawanti Mangililo on ‘Breaking the Silence: The Church’s Response to Violence against Women in Indonesia’ powerfully narrates the tragic story of Pastor Florensy Selvin Gaspersz

to highlight the harsh reality of violence against women in Indonesia. Domestic violence, forced marriage and female slavery are some forms of violence which are closely linked to factors such as poverty, low education, oppressive traditions such as marriage by capture and remnants of the feudal system seen in the enslavement of *Ata* women. The author connects the story of Tamar in the Bible to the experience of women in traditional societies today. Staying silent is not an option for God's people and as a 'Prophetic Voice the church must rebuke cultural practices or traditions that legitimise violence against women.' The church must educate congregations about gender equality, accompany victims through pastoral care and challenge cultural practices and be a safe space for victims.

Mary Luna Bela in her chapter entitled, 'Abused and Abandoned: Lessons from Tamar's Life for the Church in Bangladesh' presents a detailed analysis of the biblical story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 and compares it to the present day experience of women where they continue to suffer mostly in silence because society has failed them on multiple counts. This chapter unfolds the various facets of Tamar's story to draw lessons about justice, compassion and the responsibility to break silence. In serving women who are abused and abandoned this chapter highlights several practical measures. It also underscores that it is necessary to create greater awareness, stand with the victims, feel their pain and collaborate with religious institutions and human rights organisations to address it and ensure care for the survivors. For the author, violence against women is a violation of God's justice and the church must ensure that justice is done.

The South Indian Christian community claims to be progressive on several counts but the regression that marks the practice of dowry affects the community even today. Dowry is a social evil that denigrates women, commodifies her and perpetrates abuse and violence. In their chapter, 'Bloody Oaths: A Theological Response to Dowry,' Joann Rachel Cherian and John Thuppayath present a sociologically informed theological critique of dowry. Detailing the bane of dowry, they narrate how dowry shapes the lives of women. Right from their birth girls are seen as economic burdens to their

families because of the heavy burden of dowry resulting in high levels of female infanticide and sex-selective abortion in India. The church is complicit with its silence and may also be guilty in perpetuating the abuses so endemic to the dowry system. Dowry is 'antithetical to the vision of the church' and ought to be rejected outright by churches.

The chapter on 'Gender-Based Violence and Widows in Himachal Pradesh: A Call for the Church to Care' by Sanjay Kumar examines the challenges faced by widows in Himachal Pradesh. The violence experienced by the widows in Himachal is but a reflection of the larger gender reality that marks most of the communities in India. The author interviewed several Christian widows from various parts of Himachal to understand the situation they encounter on an everyday basis. In addition to the pain of losing their spouse, widows are discriminated on multiple fronts. There is social stigma attached to widowhood and they are counted as inauspicious or a bad omen in the society and excluded from most happy occasions. While the society treats widows in a certain way, the church can make a difference in their lives emulating the heart of God who has a special place for the widows as revealed in his word.

'Reimagining Gender Theology: Tearfund Asia's Engagement to Confront Sexual and Gender-Based Violence' the chapter by Emil Jon Soriano and Evangeline Ekanayake details Tearfund's efforts to tackle Sexual and Gender-Based Violence that plagues all sectors of society from different Church traditions and even in families. Tearfund has developed a holistic, evidence-based response focusing on engaging men and boys as part of the solution. This chapter uses three case studies from the Scripture, Amnon and Tamar, Jephthah's Daughter and the Levite's Concubine to highlight the entrenched nature of patriarchy and unequal power that results in violence and injustice. If churches have to become 'agents of healing and justice, they must actively re-imagine their theologies and transform their relational practices.' Addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence is an integral part of the church's mission to reflect God's character and participate in the restoration of all things. The church must choose to courageously act and not remain silent.

Evangeline Ekanayake and Emil Jon Soriano in 'Church as A Safe Space: Engaging with the Stories No One Wants to Hear' document painful stories of abuse, injustice and trauma. They desire to present these stories as a 'sacred duty: to amplify the voices of the marginalised, to encourage critical self-reflection within our faith communities and to motivate courageous action. Our goal is to transform places of Christian worship into spaces where gender justice, safety and healing are nurtured and sustained.' They urge the churches to 're-imagine their theologies and transform their relational practices' so that they can be agents of healing and justice. The need would therefore be to 'engage in deep, systemic change rooted in a life-giving biblical vision.' The church must strive to be 'co-healers with him, co-creators with him of safe spaces, of just systems, of restorative community, of new ways of relating.'

Bonnie Miriam Jacob in her chapter 'Rizpah: A Model of Resistance' unpacks the story of Rizpah from 2 Samuel 21: 1-14, a marginal character to draw lessons for our times of gender inequality and injustice. Rizpah's silent protest powerfully challenges a King and his kingdom to take corrective actions. What emerges from this narrative is 'God's unchanging nature and the consistency of God's character.' Many women today can identify with Rizpah's predicament, and her silent resistance is a powerful model for these women who are voiceless, powerless and deprived of their legitimate rights. While our issues with gender inequalities and violence may differ greatly from Rizpah's cause, it is the strength of her resistance that spurs our own struggles and beckons us to constantly review situations and explore possible actions. God's unshakeable commitment towards justice and his disposition to the vulnerable and the disadvantaged transcends any favouritism.

All of these chapters bring for us a reading of the Scripture that is deeply rooted in the gender realities of our context. They call us to a response that is shaped by God's word to make a difference and bring about transformation. The Scripture confronts our attitudes, perspectives and behaviour and urges us to consider afresh God's heart for the brokenness that engulfs our world on account of gender-

based violence. The contributors to this book collectively demonstrate the urgent need to flood the church with a theology that promotes equality and is in line with God's heart for justice for all of humanity. The truth of Biblical equality needs to be reiterated constantly so that it captures the imagination of the church and navigates it to a path of gender justice. Amidst the many challenges that are still to be tackled to make the world a safe place for women and girls is the pertinent need to have a right theology that will inform our perspectives and practices shaping us as a people of God. Our faith that cannot be silenced is our anchor as we press on towards an equal world.

I am grateful to all the contributors of this volume for writing the chapters, it has been a joy to work with authors from across Asia. The interactions and learnings from them will always be treasured. On behalf of TRACI, I would like to thank Tearfund Asia team for initiating this project and approaching TRACI to partner in this endeavour. I appreciate the constant support of Emil Jonathan L. Soriano from Tearfund. The support of the leadership team and the staff at TRACI during the course of this entire project is highly appreciated. Grateful to Remya for her timely help in proofreading the draft. Varaprasad, my husband and Arpith and Daya my children have supported me right through and particularly in the last stages in editing and proofreading this book.

It is our prayer and deep desire that the core articulation of this book would inspire and influence the church across Asia and beyond to embrace gender equality as affirmed by the Scripture and strive to usher in a violence-free and safe world for everyone. An 'Unsilenced Faith' will continue to confront gender violence and inequality within the families, churches and out in the world towards God's shalom being a reality in our world.

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02

Biblical Basis for (Gender) Equality

~ Amar Pandey

Introduction

The Bible has come to us from the Israelite community as God's chosen people. This community was largely patriarchal (cf. biblical genealogies normally mention only the fathers, not the mothers). For instance, Jewish men were instructed to praise God every day for three blessings, namely, for not making them a gentile, a woman, or a boor/slave.¹ Most cultures across the world have been, and still are, patriarchal. For example, in most nations/societies, the wife moves into the husband's house after marriage, the wife takes the surname of the husband, the children are given the father's surname, the husband/father is considered the head of the family, etc. In Nepal, after the wedding, what was the woman's *ghar* (home) so far becomes her *maitighar* (maternal home), and her husband's home now becomes her *ghar*. Although an extreme example, there is a traditional saying in Nepal, which is still heard, but thankfully much less than in previous generations, namely, *khutta bhae jutta kati kati* ("There is no lack of shoes if you have feet"). This saying is often used to mean, like shoes, a man can gather/change wives at will. How much more can women be degraded? The dominant patriarchal disposition in most cultures of the world has largely influenced the church to interpret many biblical texts from a patriarchal lens, thus diminishing the essence and role of the women. However, the Bible is clear that God views both men and women as equals. This essay conducts a basic survey of the Bible, showing that God created both men and women equally, and he uses

1. Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary: Tractate Menahot*, rev. ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 230 §1.66.

them without partiality for his purposes. The equality of genders has profound implications for the church and its ministry.

1. Men, Women, and the Image of God

In Nepal, Christians often joke by asking men the question, “Where is your rib?” This is an inquiry about a person’s wife, but it is used more to tease a single man about who/where his future wife may be. Of course, the question is based on the Bible (see Genesis 2:21–22). However, at times it may also intentionally or unintentionally diminish a woman/wife into a mere rib of her husband, thus seeing women as almost a by-product of the real creation of God in his own image, namely, men. In other words, a woman is considered a lesser creation than man, created to be a “mere helper” (Genesis 2:18, 20). Like most Asian societies and other societies across the world, Nepali society is also traditionally patriarchal, and this contributes to such an understanding of the Bible and the status of men vis-à-vis women. This is indeed a faulty understanding.

Both man and woman were created in the image of God. It is not true that God created man in his own image, and woman was his afterthought and simply the man’s rib. The Hebrew word commonly translated as “rib” in Genesis 2:21–22 is *tsela*. This word is better translated as “side” than as “rib.”² John Walton states, “God took one of Adam’s sides—likely meaning he cut Adam in half and from one side built the woman.”³ The idea then would be that the woman is the other equal half that completes the man, and vice versa. This means the common English expression “better half” about one’s spouse is closer to the truth. Better or worse, they are surely equal halves. Thus, marriage between a man and a woman as equal halves that complement and complete each other is God’s design from the beginning (Genesis 2:24).

2. See *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, §1924; John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 77–81.

3. Walton, *Lost World of Adam and Eve*, 78.

However, this does not necessarily mean that a single man or woman is incomplete or not a whole person.⁴ The use of the Hebrew *tsela* neither means that the woman is inferior to the man nor that she is simply the man's extension; instead, they are equal.⁵ Moreover, Genesis 1:27 is a poetic parallelism suggesting that both male and female are equally created in the image of God (my translation):

So, God created the humankind in his image.

In the image of God, he created him.

Male and female, he created them.

God created humankind—male and female—in his own image. Both genders are equally God's image bearers. In fact, all human beings are equal irrespective of race, nationality, colour, caste, religion, gender, etc. Therefore, each person has equal dignity.

During the process of creating the cosmos, God repeatedly looks at what he has created and says that it was good (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). In verse 31, after six days of creation, God says it was very good, likely because the creation was now complete. Thus, God's creation was very good. The first time God says "it is not good" is when he sees the man without a suitable companion (Genesis 2:18). Then he makes the woman. The creation was not good until there was a suitable helper for the man, namely, the woman. The two are each other's suitable companions. They are like two sides of the same coin—co-equal. The phrase "a helper suitable" (e.g., New International Version (NIV), New American Standard Bible) is *ezer k^enegdo* in Hebrew (Genesis 2:18, 20). *Ezer* means helper. In today's world, a helper is often understood as having a lower status, e.g., a household helper versus the house owner as the master or mistress. This understanding plays into the idea of the woman being a helper for the man, and hence, inferior to the latter. But *ezer* does not designate a helper that is inferior; the helper could be anybody—an equal or even a superior. In fact, the Bible uses this word to refer to God as our helper (e.g., Exodus

4. Cf. Walton, *Lost World of Adam and Eve*, 80.

5. So also *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, §1924.

18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7; Psalm 33:20). No Christian says that because God is our helper, he is inferior to us. We may then legitimately say that the man is the woman's helper as much as the woman is the helper of man. The compound word *k^enegdo* refers to the idea that the woman is comparable to the man. The English word that best translates the Hebrew *neged* in this context is "counterpart," and *k^enegdo* is best translated as "as his counterpart."⁶ That is, man and woman are each other's counterparts. The counterparts are equals. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon aptly translates *ezer k^enegdo* as "a help *corresponding* to him i.e. equal and adequate to himself."⁷ Thus, neither *ezer* nor *k^enegdo* individually, nor the phrase together (i.e., *ezer k^enegdo*) indicates man as superior to woman.

God gave his image bearers the mandate to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and to take care of his good creation (Genesis 1:26–28).⁸ As equal divine image bearers, both men and women are responsible for fulfilling this mandate. There will be no fruitfulness and multiplication without the two together, and in the absence of this, there are no creation-carers. Men and women are equal partners in the fulfilment of the divine command. In addition to the responsibility for fruitfulness and multiplication and creation care, humanity's creation in the image of God has an ontological reality, namely, they somehow resemble the Triune God. In essence, the three persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are co-equal. Likewise, men and women are created equals. In addition, the three persons of the Trinity live in harmony and unity, working together in unison. Human beings—male and female together—must reflect this harmony and unity as God's image bearers.

6. See *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2:714; *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 9:175.

7. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1906), 617.

8. For a discussion of "subdue" and "rule" as the mandate for creation care, see Amar Pandey, "Imago Dei, Creation Care, and Nepal in 2021," in *Contextualizing Theology and Mission in Nepal: A Festschrift in Honor of Dr. Bal Krishna Sharma*, ed. Becky Summers (Kathmandu: AGSTNP, 2025), 21–23.

2. God's Dealing with Men and Women in the Bible

We see in the Bible, both in the Old Testament (OT) and in the New Testament (NT), that God deals with men and women in similar ways, and he uses them in identical roles and ministries. There are prophets in the OT, such as Jeremiah and Hosea, and in the NT, such as Agabus (Acts 11:27–30). There are prophetesses also in the OT, e.g., Miriam (Exodus 15:20–21), and the NT, e.g., the four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8–9). There are both male judges, e.g., Ehud (Judges 3:12–30) and Gideon (Judges 6–8), and at least a female judge, namely, Deborah (Judges 4–5), who is also called a prophetess (Judges 4:4). In fact, the male warrior Barak refused to go to the battle unless the female judge Deborah accompanies him (Judges 4:6–10). Moreover, Jael, a woman, kills the enemy army leader Sisera, albeit through treachery (Judges 4:17–22). There are wise men in Israel, e.g., Hushai and Ahithophel (2 Samuel 15–17), and there are wise women, e.g., the woman who saved a whole city from Joab's troops (2 Samuel 20:14–22) and foolish Nabal's wise wife Abigail who saved their household from David and his men (1 Samuel 25). Jesus had both male disciples (e.g., Peter and John) and female disciples (e.g., Mark 16:1; Luke 8:1–3; cf. Luke 6:17). There were deacons (Acts 6:1–6; cf. 1 Timothy 3:8–13) and at least a deaconess, namely, Phoebe (Romans 16:1). Although the word *diakonos* may mean simply a servant, the designation in the case of Phoebe most probably refers to the official position of a deacon of the church at Cenchrea.⁹ Moreover, 1 Timothy 3:11 likely refers to female deacons.¹⁰ Apostles include both men (e.g., Bartholomew and Paul) and at least one woman, namely, Junia (Romans 16:7). Although there is a debate about whether it is a woman's name, i.e., Junia (e.g., New

9. See, e.g., Douglas J. Moo, "Romans," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 1157.

10. See, e.g., Linda Belleville, "1 Timothy," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, Accordance electronic ed., vol. 17 (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), under "H. Leadership Credentials for Deacons (3:8–13)"; Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, 1871, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 1996), paragraph 22617.

Revised Standard Version), or it is a man's name, i.e., Junias (e.g., NIV), the overwhelming evidence suggests that the former is the case.¹¹ Some also argue that while it is Junia (not Junias), she is an apostle in a different sense, i.e., a missionary or a messenger of churches, unlike the twelve apostles (and maybe Paul) that were Christ's authoritative representatives.¹² Charles Talbert, however, opines that she was an apostle of Christ rather than an apostle of churches.¹³ N. T. Wright believes that Junia (and Andronicus) may have been witnesses of Christ's resurrection (cf. Acts 1:22; 1 Corinthians 9:1), and there may have been other female apostles such as Mary Magdalene.¹⁴ At times, there may be a bias against women in reading it as Junias instead of Junia. Craig Hill considers the masculine reading of Junias as "a scandalous mistranslation."¹⁵

There were both male and female teachers in the early church, for example, the wife and husband duo of Priscilla and Aquila, who instructed the already learned Apollos (Acts 18:24–26). In fact, the mention of Priscilla before her husband Aquila indicates that she may have been the dominant teacher.¹⁶ On the day of Pentecost, both men and women were filled with the Holy Spirit in the upper room (Acts

11. See, e.g., Charles H. Talbert, *Romans*, ed. R. Scott Nash et al., Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 335; James R. Edwards, *Romans*, ed. W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston, Accordance electronic ed., Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 355; Roger Mohrland, "Romans," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, Accordance electronic ed., vol. 14 (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007), 232–33.

12. E.g., Moo, "Romans," 1157–58; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 739–40.

13. Talbert, *Romans*, 335.

14. N. T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al., vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 762.

15. Craig C. Hill, "Romans," in *The Pauline Epistles*, ed. John Muddiman and John Barton, The Oxford Bible Commentary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 90.

16. So also Talbert, *Romans*, 341.

1:12–14; cf. Acts 2:16–21). The Bible records both men and women experiencing divine/angelic visitation with the communication of a divine message. This happens in the OT, e.g., Gideon (Judges 6) and the childless woman regarding Samson's birth (Judges 13). This also happens in the NT, e.g., childless Zechariah regarding the birth of John the baptiser (Luke 1:11–20) and virgin Mary regarding the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:26–38). Interestingly, in foretelling the birth of Samson, the angel visits the mother-to-be twice rather than the father-to-be (i.e., Manoah) to announce the birth of this future judge and to give the guidelines to the parents on how to raise this child. Manoah only meets the angel on the second visit, and that only after his wife brings him to the angel (Judges 13). This brief survey clearly indicates that God considers men and women as equals and uses them in identical roles and leadership capacities. Therefore, women must not be deprived of any ministerial/leadership role in the church. Interestingly, all four Gospels mention that the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection were women (Matthew 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–11; John 20:1–18). This information is significant in a culture where women were considered inferior to men, and their witness was usually not legally acceptable.¹⁷ God turns the tables around and makes women the first witnesses of the Saviour's resurrection. Thus, he elevates the status of women in the patriarchal Jewish society. Craig Blomberg comments on this resurrection account, "The role of the women also points to the dawning of a new age of equality among women and men in Christ (Galatians 3:28)."¹⁸ How can one still say that women are inferior to men? God uses men and women equally for his purposes.¹⁹

John 3 records Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus (vv. 1–21), which is followed by his encounter with a Samaritan woman in John 4:1–42.²⁰

17. See Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, ed. David S. Dockery, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 426.

18. Blomberg, *Matthew*, 426.

19. See Talbert, *Romans*, 340–42.

20. The two stories are separated by John's testimony about Jesus in John 3:22–36.

These two stories, recorded in close proximity to each other, may be taken as test cases for Jesus considering all men and women as equals. The two individuals are not only of different genders, but they are of contrasting status as well. Nicodemus is of a high status, and the woman is of a low status in several ways. First, Nicodemus is not only a Jew but also a Pharisee (John 3:1), but the woman is a Samaritan. Jews looked down upon Samaritans, and the antipathy between these two groups in Jesus' day is a well-known fact (see John 4:9; 8:48).²¹ Second, Nicodemus is a respectable "teacher of Israel" (John 3:10), but many would consider the woman as one of a questionable character (John 4:16–18), which is the probable reason she goes alone to fetch water at noon, an unlikely hour to draw water. Jesus gives time to both of them without discrimination. Third, both encounter Jesus at unexpected hours, namely, Nicodemus at night and the woman at midday when others would not go to the well to fetch water. Nicodemus likely chooses nighttime to avoid being spotted by other Jewish people.²² Likewise, the woman probably chooses midday to avoid other women fetching water because she may not be welcome at regular hours.²³ Although Jesus gives time to communicate with both of them, the two stories differ in that Nicodemus comes to Jesus, whereas Jesus goes to the woman. That is, Jesus takes the extra mile to reach out to the woman marginalised by society, whereas he simply receives the highly respected Jewish leader who approaches him. When juxtaposed against each other, do these stories not indicate that Jesus considered both men and women as equals? Why would Jesus go after a lowly woman when there were "big guns" of society, such as Nicodemus, approaching him? Moreover, people thronged Jesus wherever he went;

21. See Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 208, 259.

22. See, e.g., J. Ramsey Michaels, *John*, ed. W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston, Accordance electronic ed., *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 55.

23. See, e.g., Grant R. Osborne, "The Gospel of John," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, Accordance electronic ed., vol. 13 (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007), 68.

he did not lack audience (e.g., Matthew 4:25–5:1; Mark 3:7–8; Luke 6:17–19; John 6:2, 24), and yet he went out of his way to minister to a destitute woman. She was (1) a woman, (2) a Samaritan, and (3) of a questionable character in the eyes of many.

One of the key texts in the NT that is used to treat women as inferior to men is Ephesians 5:22, calling women to submit to their husbands. However, this and the following verses must be read along with Ephesians 5:21, which says, “submitting to one another in the fear of Christ” (my translation). Verse 21 is a bridge between the previous section (Ephesians 5:15–20) and the next section (Ephesians 5:22–6:9). The text calls for mutual submission to each other. Galatians 3:28 categorically denies the discrimination between male and female: “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is no male and female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus” (my translation). This is not a new teaching on equality, but it is a reassertion of equality in creation.²⁴ First Timothy 2:11–12 is used by some churches to prevent women from some ministerial and leadership roles, especially involving teaching. However, the text probably does not prohibit women from any responsibility. Linda Belleville argues that the prohibition here is not on women teaching but doing so in a domineering manner; instead, they are required to teach with a calm demeanour.²⁵ Likewise, the prohibition of women speaking in church services, as found in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, is probably not universal. Although Paul appeals to the law (v. 34), there is no OT law to this effect; thus, he may be talking about the social

24. See Gerald L. Borchert, “Galatians,” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, Accordance electronic ed., vol. 14 (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007), 299–300.

25. Belleville, “1 Timothy,” under “F. Women Learners and Teachers (2:11–3:1a).” Moreover, Paul’s instruction here is probably applicable to the Ephesian context he was addressing then rather than it being universal (see Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, ed. W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston, Accordance electronic ed., *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011], 72–73).

norm of the day.²⁶ Moreover, as Craig Keener explains, the prohibition is probably because women were far less educated in that ancient society as compared to men, and the Corinthian women appear to be interrupting church services by speaking or asking uninformed questions during teaching.²⁷ Paul, in the same letter, had earlier permitted women to pray and prophesy in the church (1 Corinthians 11:5).

3. Implications of Gender Equality

Understanding men and women as equals and giving them equal opportunities has several benefits. First, this stance honours the Bible, which presents both as equally created in the image of God. Second, men and women can lift each other's burdens. They are each other's counterparts, thus complementing and completing each other. Third, it provides room for the use of the gifts God has bestowed on both men and women. When women are deprived of some leadership and ministerial roles, their related gifts and abilities are wasted. There are sufficient examples which show that women are no less efficient than men in leadership roles, both in churches and in the wider world. There are many efficient and successful women political leaders (e.g., presidents and prime ministers of nations), business leaders (e.g., entrepreneurs and CEOs of multi-national companies), organisational leaders (e.g., directors of national and international organisations), and church leaders (e.g., senior/lead pastors). The leadership and ministerial abilities do not depend on gender but rather on gifting, training, education, and experience. Acts 2:17–18 mentions both men and women—sons and daughters, men and women slaves—receiving the gifts without discrimination. Churches, organisations, societies, and nations can thrive better when men and women treat each other as equals and work in harmony, rather than working with unhealthy

26. See William Baker, “1 Corinthians,” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, Accordance electronic ed., vol. 15 (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 203, 206–08.

27. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 490–91.

competitiveness or through domination of one or the other. This also reflects the triune God in whose image they are all created. Christians must be at the forefront of understanding this equality because they know that all human beings are created in God's image, of which the world is mostly unaware. Sadly, however, Christians/churches are often the ones that discriminate against women.²⁸ It is high time that all churches recognise the image of God in women, as much as in men, and treat them equally for the glory of God.

Conclusion

Most communities in the world have been, and continue to be, patriarchal. This cultural disposition has caused the church to often interpret some biblical texts with a bias against women. However, the Bible is clear that God created men and women equally in his own image. Woman is not merely man's rib; instead, she is the equal half with man. The two halves together form a complete whole. Moreover, a woman is not man's inferior helper; rather, the two are equal counterparts and each other's helper.

The Bible, both in the OT and the NT, shows that God treats men and women as equals and uses them in identical capacities and leadership roles such as, prophets, judges, deacons, and teachers. Most interestingly, all four evangelists (Gospels) record that women were the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. This is crucial information because the Jewish culture devalued women's witness. God restores equality. We may take Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman (John 3–4) as test cases for Jesus' attitude towards men and women. Jesus treats both the prominent Jew Nicodemus and the lowly Samaritan woman with respect and dignity. In fact, Jesus goes out of his way to meet this woman, whereas Nicodemus comes to him.

Treating men and women as equals has profound implications for the church. Most importantly, it honours God and his word, and it reflects the equality and unity of the persons of the Trinity. Men and

28. Cf. Borchert, "Galatians," 300.

women together, as each other's counterparts, can do much more in the kingdom of God, complementing each other. When women are deprived of some leadership and ministerial roles, their gifts are wasted. The Holy Spirit is poured out on all flesh without discrimination (Acts 2:17-18). We, too, must not discriminate.

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03

Problematic Gendered Interpretations of the Scriptures

~ Wong Chor-Fong (Hazel)

Some people believe that they are exceptional, blessed, chosen, purer, higher, better, and superior. Such self-grandeurs make no sense without the opposite, so that others are lesser, forsaken, impure, inferior, and weak. Hence, discrimination, privileges and hierarchies are rampant among people. In most societies and within their specific contexts, we recognise human relations and human experiences that are dominated by such hierarchical beliefs, institutions, rules, norms and practices. These social structuring systems are referred to as class, race, gender, caste, age, ethnicity, ableism, married and single, educated and uneducated, developed and underdeveloped people and nations and the list goes on.

Many Christians also follow this pattern of the world in their self-perception and in relating to others. Some see themselves as superior as chosen people, decision makers as men, purer as white-skinned, having material richness, being able-bodied and being married with sons as favoured more by God. Often validation is drawn by interpreting the Scriptures without an adequate knowledge of the original ancient contexts and the words used. Meaning is taken out of context, while the specific meaning of the author remains blurred. Problematic interpretation is also a result of imposing assumptions and existing prejudices of those using and translating the Scriptures. Human traditions are uncritically used for interpretation which often protects the established status quo of the powerful, their privileges and control over others. These problematic interpretations contradict the core truths about God's love and righteousness, about human beings as equally created image bearers, fallen, redeemed, called,

given gifts to serve and about how we therefore relate with each other as equals on earth.

This article attempts to expose some of the common interpretations of the Christian Scriptures that have been generating, upholding, reinforcing and perpetuating inequalities between men and women. It aims to raise awareness and discussions among believers. It is hoped that such recognition motivates us to question further and bravely practice that which truly reflects the nature of our God and frees us from being subjugated and from subjugating others. Some real cases are used in this paper for illustrative purposes.

A. Some Problematic Interpretations of the Core Truths of the Faith

Case 1: “What a real blessing to have a son born to this family! Together with the family, we have been praying for a son for so long!” The preacher happily proclaimed that it was a miracle as previous births in the family were only daughters and they were giving up hope. This was expressed as part of a Sunday sermon by a male pastor.

Case 2: “Women deserve to suffer discrimination and bad treatment throughout their life because women sinned first!” These were the feelings and words of a male NGO leader and an elder of a local church, after attending a community group session with poor women and girls who were affected by disaster. The women and girls had shared their experiences as women and how they wished they were born as men to enjoy the privileges and not as women to suffer discrimination.

Case 3: “We pray for more strong men to lead the church!” This is a frequent prayer heard in many churches. While there may be fewer believers who are men in the church but the number of men serving, especially in leadership and preaching roles, are far more than women. In contrast, we do not hear prayers for more strong women to lead the church.

These illustrative cases reflect some significant problematic

presuppositions and misinterpretations of the core truths of the Scriptures about men and women. Let us consider some core truths of our faith and some wrong interpretations that are prevalent.

Core Truths of the Faith	Interpretations and Contemporary Implications
Around Creation “So, God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Genesis 1:27 (New International Version (NIV) 2011). “God blessed them and said to them, ‘be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.’” Genesis 1:28a (NIV 2011).	Understanding • Human beings (women and men) are created by God. • Men and women bear the image of God. • Women and men are equal in their worthiness before God. • Men and women are equal; neither is higher, purer, better or stronger than the other. • The Hebrew term “ezer” (English translation as helper) which was used for the woman in relation to the man in Genesis 2 does not mean higher status of woman even as the term is mostly used to refer to Yahweh as “ezer” to Israel in other parts of the Hebrew Scripture (16 out of 21 times). • God blesses women and men with no distinction. • Men and women are given two purposes and responsibilities: nurture humankind and care for the rest of the created world.

	• Women and men are co-partners in caring for other human beings and taking responsibility of the community, the society, the world and the planet Earth. Misunderstanding • Sons are more blessed than daughters. • Men are the centre and women are the periphery. • Limiting and pushing women and men to only one particular purpose and responsibility: women are responsible inside the home with reproduction roles only and men are responsible for the world outside with production and governing roles only. • Men make decisions and lead while women obey and follow. • Men are representatives of humankind.
About the Fall “He (the serpent) said to the woman, ‘Did God really say, “You (plural) must not eat from any tree in the garden?”’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat fruit from the trees in the	Understanding • Recorded earlier in Genesis 2:16-17, Adam was given related instruction by God directly (NIV 2011). • Adam was present with Eve when the snake tempted Eve as the word “you” used by the snake

garden, but God did say, “You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.” ‘You will not surely die, the serpent said to the woman. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ When the woman saw the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.” Genesis 3:1b-6 (NIV 2011).	was in plural form. • Eve must know about God’s instruction too as she was able to correct the snake. • No record of Adam saying anything to correct the snake nor did he intervene when Eve took the fruit • Both Eve and Adam ate the fruit. • Together both the humans (Adam and Eve) sinned and are responsible for their own fallenness. Misunderstanding • Women deserve to suffer discrimination and suffering as Eve should be blamed for sinning first or that she led Adam to sin. • Men sin less and are passive sinners.
About Redemption “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” Romans 3:23-24	Understanding • We have all gone astray, whether men or women. Because of sin there are divisions, oppressions, exploitation, inequality between women and men and domination among fellow human beings.

(NIV 2011). ‘All of you are God’s children because of your faith in Christ Jesus.... Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman.’ Galatians 3:26, 28 (Contemporary English Bible 1991).	• Now with Christ’s atonement, women and men are equally redeemed and reconciled in Christ and equality between people is restored. • There is no favouritism with God. God does not love the Greek, slave and woman less. • Salvation is for whoever believes. • We are not to follow sinful societies that divide and discriminate people. These structural sins have no meaning, no application and no legitimacy over us. Misunderstanding • Redemption is only given to some.
About Our Life on Earth As Christ is the Living Stone, “you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.” 1 Peter 2:5 (NIV 2011). “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy... Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out	Understanding • Each believer is a living stone of the spiritual church. This means that all believers - women and men, old or young, abled or disabled are included. • Each believer, women or men, girls or boys, abled or differently abled, has a part in the spiritual church. • All believers on earth are called to serve wholeheartedly and to use their gifts received from the Holy Spirit to contribute to the kingdom

my Spirit ...” Joel 2:28-29 (NIV 2011). “In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you...” Romans 12:6 (New Living Translation 1996).	of God without anyone prohibiting them. Misunderstanding • Prohibiting women or any believer from serving in anyway by following human and institutional customs, rules and practices. • Restricting leadership, preaching and pastoral roles to men only. • Ignoring the specific gifts given by the Spirit to the person but only considering the sex of the person in serving.
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B. A Problematic Accumulated Undertone that God is Male

Case 1: During a Sunday class, young believers were asking questions and implications around whether God is the male Father, Jesus as male and whether the Christian God is a male God. At first, there was an air of tense silence as if a pandora box veiled in taboo was being opened.

Firstly, Creator God is beyond human understanding, forms, imaginations and boundaries. God is spirit. God created human beings, male and female. God is neither male nor female. God is not gendered. God is not male.

Secondly, neither is the Creator God, father or mother in the sense as in a human being a father or mother of another human being. A human father or mother is not comparable to God the Creator, nor is procreation comparable with Creation. The analogy of the maternal or paternal closeness of human beings to our mother or father with God the Creator is to help us human beings to comprehend what is possible from our human experiences. As we express this closeness,

sometimes we choose to refer to God as Abba father, in our prayers. This does not mean God is a human father/mother nor a human father/mother a resemblance of God. In a similar vein, and as redeemed beings, we learn that we have become the adopted children (daughters and sons) of God denoting our rebirth and the new life given to us - the created beings.

Thirdly, the most frequent use of the word father to refer to God is found in the Gospels in the New Testament where Jesus emphasised his unique and intimate relationship to God the Father. This has to do with Jesus being the Son of God and appearing in the then and there in Palestine. As Jewish people regarded Abraham as their father and their religious inheritance to being the chosen people, it could be that the early churches would want to make a distinction away from this and use an inclusive expression of God as father and especially for non-Jewish believers.¹

In the Old Testament, the use of the word father to refer to God is infrequent. In fact, there are numerous other references to God in both the Old and New Testaments to express our understanding of the nature of God and of God's relationship with us, such as Yahweh, the Almighty, Saviour, Counsellor, Messiah, Lord God and many more. Each believer would probably have a list of her/his own choice to express feelings towards the God she/he has experienced.

Case 2: "The King James Version and the pre-2011 New International Versions each include more than 1,000 occurrences of the words 'man' and 'men' which are not found in the Greek New Testament."²

This study reveals how the word 'man' or 'men' made 'woman' or 'women' disappear in many English translated bible versions and reinforces the centrality and image of men as the representative of

1. Linda Gehman Peachey, *Created Equal: Women and Men in the Image of God* (Akron, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Central Committee, 2009), 17.

2. Jeff Miller, "7 Places Where Gender Inclusive Bible Translation Really Matters: Part I," *Christians for Biblical Equality* (blog), April 25, 2016, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/7-places-where-gender-inclusive-bible-translation-really-matters-part-1/>.

humankind. Yet God created humankind in His own image, men and women. The cumulative effect of this translation's fallacy is huge in creating, perpetuating and policing a patriarchal worldview and its practices in societies and in believers' communities.

When the Scriptures are translated through a patriarchal human lens about men and women, we see how readers can be misled. Here I am referring to one example from Miller. Reading 2 Peter 1:21 from the KJV and the NIV pre-2011 edition, both translations include "man/men" twice, although they were absent in the Greek text. The word used was *anthropos* (human or person), a non-gendered word that was translated into a gendered word as man or men. The NIV pre-2011 edition reads, "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Compare this with the Contemporary English Bible translation. It reads, "No prophecy ever came by human will. Instead, men and women led by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." The former translation has been intentionally or unintentionally used to support the tradition and practice of denying women prophets and their ministries. The latter translation restores the original meanings and allows the surfacing of Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Anna, Phillip's daughters and others as worthy and legitimate.³

Gender exclusive translations generate and justify gender hierarchy, gender bias, and discrimination in interpreting the related Scriptures. Although bible versions in other languages might differ in this problem, believers need to be guarded against the gendered words and additions in the translated versions they rely on and in the teachings they hear. We must be guided by the core truths of our faith in reading and listening.

Case 3: A sister sent a message to a church prayer organiser. It was about praying for all the young people taking a national university entry examination that month. The sister suggested the use of a gender inclusive term as the list had the names of both girls and boys

3. Miller, "7 Places Where Gender Inclusive Bible Translation Really Matters: Part I."

instead of using a masculine collective term. Immediately the brother wrote that it was common knowledge and customary practice to use the masculine term to refer to all and that instigated change was unwarranted.

Words do matter. When a gender exclusive word acquires common usage status and becomes authoritative, its gender undertone is socialised and enshrined to be part of a gender order of the time. Efforts to bring gender inclusive words and expressions are often treated with a range of belittling responses, furious hostility, labelling and dismissal from the established. Given the dominance of gender hierarchy, any effort to be gender inclusive and gender sensitive to allow the practice of biblical equality of women and men among believers deserve serious respect, recognition and collective action. It is the responsibility of everyone to bring transformative changes.

Indeed we do sometimes say God is neither male nor female, yet for too long what we read, hear, speak and practice has been dominated by a God with a male image, language and reference. We need to face this inconsistency squarely. Otherwise, the cumulative undertone will continue to lead us further away from the Truth.

C. Problematic interpretations of Humanhood into Biological Sex Pre-Determined Womanhood and Manhood

Firstly, from observations of human societies, we see how biological sex differences are interpreted by cultures into what it means to be a good woman, to be a real man and how they should relate. As if prescribed by biological sex, comprehensive gender ideologies with evaluations, stereotypical womanhood and manhood, norms and behaviours governing their life chances and relationships are developed. From birth, a baby is introduced to a set of gender expectations and socialisation to fit into the group that she/he is born into.

Uncritically, we also bring these mainstream gender assumptions

and cultures into believers' communities and into our interpretation of the Scriptures. Humanhood and diversity of unique individuals are dismissed as men and women are coerced/obliged, consciously or unconsciously, into 'the man box' and 'the woman box.' Meanwhile, hierarchical (male-centred) rules and practices govern the relationships of women and men.

Some common examples in the dichotomised gender boxes among believers include real men lead as they are strong and powerful, good women submit as they are gentle and weak; men protect women and women are to be protected by men; women are dependent on men to make all major decisions as they know little while men know the big picture and are better; wives are to submit even to the extent of bearing domestic abuse patiently, to follow the suffering Christ's example of sacrifice to save sinners; husbands are to be responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of their wives and children; men are constantly tempted sexually by women and cannot be trusted to be responsible for their sexual impulses, and women are sexual tempters and their sexuality needs to be strictly supervised and regulated. Men and women cannot be left alone with each other except if they are in marital relationship. The list goes on.

Stereotypical womanhood and manhood or the box for women and the box for men set up expectations that are illusive, resulting in extreme pressure on men and women on the one hand, and pretence, deception and hypocrisy on the other. When a real man is expected to be the sole pillar and provider of the family, community and society, and crying is discouraged; or when a good woman is expected to remain ignorant and vulnerable and only subordination is allowed, the freedom to be their true selves is denied for man and woman. None can live to the full potential given by God, and in the demands of the real world, gender stereotypical men and women have slim chances of success. They struggle furiously and live distorted lives. All of humanity suffers.

Letting biological sex be the source of imaging the human person and human relationships is misplaced. None of the core truths of our faith focus on the biological sex of the human person.

Secondly, while learning from Christ, we must focus on Jesus the human person and not Jesus the male man. As a revolutionary example in practice, Jesus' attitude and behaviour were not constrained by gender bias, rules, or gender stereotypes of the time. Jesus faced criticism, but he did not conform to the gender status quo. The Scriptures recorded how Jesus pointed out the better choice that was above the gender orders of the day, that teaching Mary, and Mary choosing to learn from Jesus was more precious than dogmatically following the restrictions on women to gender roles, behaviour and space. It is not part of God's purpose and will for women. Likewise, the possibility of the significant conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman would not have happened if both followed the gender and culture hierarchical orders and practices of their day.

God's perfect will for us, women and men, are not the gender boxes. It is about humanhood, persons God created, who shared God's image, sinned, were redeemed and now as new people, serve with calling and gifts from God. And in the resurrection, we will join Christ Jesus as a new being.

D. The Destiny and Completeness of a Woman is in Being Married and Giving Birth to a Son

Case 1: "A woman's lot is making the right decision to get married and marrying at the desirable age. Now at 44, she is asking me to find a match for her!" said an upset married female pastor.

Case 2: These are the overwhelming acclaims and sentiments from guests after attending a wedding ceremony of a 60-year-old bride, "Finally, her wait is over!" and "Now her life is complete!"

When an adult group of believers come together for the first time, their introduction never fails to proudly cover their married status and children. Often brothers joke casually about having only one wife. Very few, if any, among those who do not mention this subject will say that they are single, even fewer would say that they are comfortably, happily and proudly single. Not surprisingly, these silent

ones are mostly women believers (as most believing communities have more women than men). This demonstration of having happy marriages and offsprings, especially sons, and the silences in contrast speak volumes of a long perpetuating hegemonic gender culture on marriage. It sees the worthiness, or the sole purpose of life, or the blessedness of a woman only in being a wife and a mother especially of a son. Hence a woman who is not married is viewed as incomplete, worthless, inferior and without God's blessings. She is also a problematic deviant and a challenge. If she has passed her desirable young age to marry, she is a problem.

Although men are also expected and pressurised to get married, it is accepted that he has many purposes and roles in life and is not restricted to that of a husband or the family. He bears no responsibility of not having sons and he can marry at any time and with a young woman as he pleases. This is a long perpetuating human-made gender culture on marriage that believers and communities still consciously or unconsciously believe, educate and coerce others to conform.

The most famous examples of singleness in the Scriptures are Jesus and probably Paul too, although some contestations of the latter exist. The view taken here is that Paul is most likely a celibate as reflected in 1 Corinthians 7:7 and there is no mention of him being married in other parts of the Scriptures. Being married is not a must-follow destiny. There are those called by God to be single. There are those who have made the choice to be single so as to use their God-given gifts and capabilities to serve God and missions without distracted obligations. There are those who do not want to marry non-believers. There are those who do not want to conform to the gender discriminatory cultures of marriage institutions and arrangements. There are those who want to take on their unique roles and purposes to live the fullness of life given to them by God.

"You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage. They will be like the angels in heaven." Matthew 22: 29-30 (NIV 2011). Marital status is not our eternal identity or being. The truth

is, being single or married, with sons or without sons, God loves each of us without distinction. We are all equally valued and pleasing in God's eyes. When a decision, whether to be married or not, becomes an evaluation-free choice of the person concerned, many harmful marriage related institutions and practices such as dowry or bride price will grow weaker and a fairer evaluation and allocation of life chances and resources for daughters and sons might be more possible.

E. Problematic Interpretations of Paul's Words and Actions

Too often while interpreting some gender specific instructions of Paul's words in his letters to the early churches, a worldly hierarchical gender lens is taken and restrictions on women's roles in churches are justified. Yet in Paul's writings, there are powerful gender equality stances and praises for women serving in different roles and ministries alongside of him. How do we understand this contradiction in interpreting Paul's words and actions?

Firstly, a traditional Jewish prayer recited by men daily praised the Lord for not making them as gentiles, slaves or women. This sharply reflected the hierarchical religious, economic, social and political contexts of their worldview and world. Believing in, and treating, people as equals were not the ethos and practice of their time. It is extremely important to note then that Paul's writing was in stark contrast to this prayer. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.' This statement is consistent with the core truths of our faith, that human beings are equally created, sinned, redeemed, given calling and gifts to serve God and others. All human beings are equal.

Secondly, action speaks louder than words. The last chapter of Romans is revealing. Paul greeted and praised his co-workers. Among the twenty-seven persons mentioned, 10 were women. Phoebe was a deacon, Priscilla along with Aquila worked with Paul and risked their necks for his life, Priscilla also taught Apollos, Mary who worked very hard among believers, Junia who was imprisoned with Paul and

was prominent among the apostles, Tryphena and Tryphosa who were workers in the Lord, Persis who has worked hard in the Lord, Julia, Rufus' Mother and Nereus' sister (Romans 16:1-15). From Paul's praises and testimonies of these women, we know that they were continuously active in the early churches, alongside Paul and other church leaders, and they served in all roles and positions.

Thirdly, how then can we interpret Paul's other writing as crude commands for women's total submission to men and silencing of women, and that women cannot lead, teach and preach. Learning the contextual realities of Paul's time would help us to understand what he was writing for and to interpret his words closer to his intended meaning. Christianity was a new faith with new believers under the hostile Roman Judean political, social and religious regimes and the young churches with diverse people were facing various needs and many challenges specific to them. These would include establishing church orders and desirable behaviours, countering societal and folk religious malpractices, being sensitive to avoid direct confrontations with hostile eyes around, holding on to the core truths of the faith and of mutual love, fairness and justice in treating each other and more. Paul was trying to meet these challenges and needs.⁴

Two thousand years later as we read Paul's work in its contexts, we need to understand his teachings in the totality of our faith and of our God and follow God's heart.

Conclusion

This article has explored some glaring misinterpretations and practices of the Scriptures that have been generating, legitimising, maintaining and perpetuating the fallen human systems that govern people, with a specific focus on what it means to be women and men. We need to examine and critically question our value systems, which have been taken for granted, and practices to remove self- grandeurs and

4. Peachey, *Created Equal: Women and Men in the Image of God*, 21-22.

inequality blindness. The crux is always to return to the core truths of the faith:

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world...” Ephesians 2:1. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is- God’s good, pleasing and perfect will.” Romans 12:2 (NIV 2011). “What is good and what the Lord requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6:8 (Common English Bible- CEB).

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04

Revisiting Our Understanding of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 and the Role of Women in the Church

~ Nikolay Nalitov

I. The Problematic Question

I came to a sincere faith in Christ as my personal Saviour and Lord when I was 17 years old. During my teenage years, my mother took me to an evangelical church where the congregation adhered to very strict rules regarding interpersonal relationships within the community. In that church, women were not allowed to serve as teachers, preachers, leaders, or overseers. Their roles were limited to singing in the choir, helping with housekeeping, or serving in children's ministry. Men and women sat in separate rows during worship services. I absorbed this culture, became its devoted follower, and actively defended it. God had to do significant work in my heart to transform this perspective. Today, I joyfully serve in a church led by a Pastor who is a woman.

Over the past few decades, I have had the opportunity to meet and build friendships with pastors from various churches and denominations. Throughout more than thirty years of ministry, I have witnessed many debates across churches and countries regarding the role of women in ministry. Some believers fully embrace the idea of women holding leadership positions within the church—as office administrators, preachers, teachers, and even pastors. However, others firmly believe that women should only serve in the kitchen, in the worship team, or in children's ministry under close male supervision. For them, the thought of a woman preaching or teaching in church is simply unimaginable.

This viewpoint is often based on certain passages from Scripture such as 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, 1 Timothy 2:9–15, and Titus 2:4–5. The most detailed among these is 1 Timothy 2:9–15.

9 I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes,

10 but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.

12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.

13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve.

14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.

15 But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety

In this passage, one can observe that a godly woman is defined by several specific characteristics:

- She displays modesty in her choice of clothing and adornment.
- She engages in good works.
- She learns in silence.
- She submits to her husband.
- She bears and raises children.

A woman is expected to conform to these standards, and her salvation is closely linked to childbearing, and yet, even this is not presented as a guarantee. For a woman—as for any man—faith, love, and holiness are also necessary for salvation. At first glance, the text might seem to portray women as second-class citizens, suggesting that the highest calling for a woman is to live quietly, bear and raise children, behave decently, and remain silent.

According to the passage, these stringent requirements are justified by two reasons:

- The man was created before the woman.
- The woman was the first to sin.

These points raise some key questions:

1. Are these universal requirements for all women in all churches at all times, or are they specific to the Ephesian church where Timothy was serving at that time?
2. What kind of salvation is being discussed here—eternal salvation, or deliverance from something else?
3. Is there dignity and value for women in the church?

II. An Appropriate Methodology

In order to provide convincing answers to these questions, we must turn to a method of interpretation that carries true authority. One approach is what Jesus Himself used when responding to a particularly challenging question about divorce. This episode is found in the nineteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?”

4 “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’

5 and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’?

6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

7 “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

8 Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.”

As we can see, Jesus was asked a very complex question. It is important to note that the Pharisees were not questioning whether divorce was permissible, that was already taken for granted. The debate centred around the grounds for divorce. At the time, theological thought on this issue was divided between two rabbinical schools—the school of Rabbi Shammai and the school of Rabbi Hillel. One held that divorce was only permissible in the case of sexual immorality, while the other maintained that a man could divorce his wife for virtually any reason. This debate is well-documented in many sources—for example, in Sholem Lugov’s *Likutei Sichot*.¹

As we can observe, Jesus did not give a conventional or expected response to their question. His answer was profoundly countercultural and theologically deep.

4 He answered, “Haven’t you read that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’

5 and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?’

6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Let us turn our attention to the phrase “**in the beginning.**” What exactly is meant by this? Is it an answer to the question “when?” or “where?” Given that this expression is used twice in the same passage, it is unlikely to refer to some abstract or undefined “beginning.” Rather, it points to something that would have been clearly understood by Jesus’ opponents.

We know that the first book of the Bible opens with the Hebrew word **בְּרֵשִׁית** (*bereshit*) —“**In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.**” The entire text of the Bible begins with this word, and the book itself is traditionally titled *Bereshit* in Hebrew. In the Septuagint — the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures — this word appears as *Ev*

1. Sholem Lugov, “Three Opinions on Divorce and Serving the Almighty,” *Likutei Sichot* 4 (January 9, 2012): 1121–1123, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://moshiach.ru/torah/49/7743.html>.

αρχῇ (*en archē*), which carries the meaning “in the beginning,” “from the origin,” or “from the foundation.” This same expression is found in the Greek text of the Gospel of Matthew and is used consistently throughout the Bible to direct the reader’s attention back to the book of Genesis. Thus, in answering “*where?*” the phrase “in the beginning” refers to the first book of the Torah. In answering “*when?*” it points to the time before the Fall.

This gave Jesus the authority to conclude His response with a definitive and powerful statement: “**What God has joined together, let no one separate.**” With these words, Jesus rejects the legitimacy of any divorce between husband and wife. To support such a radical position, the Lord metaphorically takes His opponents “by the hand” and leads them back to the Garden of Eden, to the period before humanity’s fall into sin. It is in the garden that God first united a man and a woman in marriage — “**a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.**” In that world, divorce was not part of the plan. Jesus made it clear to the Pharisees that from the very beginning, God did not intend for marriage to be dissolved.

The Pharisees countered this argument with what they believed to be an irrefutable point: “**Moses commanded...**” They invoked the authority of Moses, who for them — as well as for all their fellow Jews — represented the ultimate interpreter and lawgiver.

It is at this moment that Jesus offers a critical explanation as to *why* Moses permitted divorce:

8 Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.”

In this passage, we must pay special attention to the word σκληροκαρδίαν (*sclerokardian*) — translated as *hardness of heart*. In Scripture, this term is used rarely and always in reference to stubborn unbelief. If we were to paraphrase Jesus’ statement, His answer might be rendered this way:

Moses permitted divorce not because it was good or acceptable, but because people lacked the inner emotional and spiritual resources to live according to the Creator’s original design.

What Moses allowed was not part of God's initial intention. Moses recognised that he could not prevent his contemporaries from divorcing, so he was compelled to outline a procedure and provide regulations in order to reduce harm and alleviate suffering. This is precisely what Jesus explained to the Pharisees.

In other words, by saying “**from the beginning,**” Jesus directs His opponents back to the time when God created the world and everything in it. In that world, there was no Moses with his laws and ordinances. That uncorrupted world—untainted by sin—serves as the standard for family life and the ultimate argument in theological discussions.

At that moment, Jesus' reasoning and position were not accepted. Even His own disciples began to question the very meaning of marriage. And yet, centuries later, the Church worldwide no longer blesses a divorce. Today, few even recall that Moses permitted it. Jesus succeeded in reshaping a long-standing theological tradition. His argument, grounded in God's original design, has become one of the most authoritative teachings in the Church. We observe that Jesus' main point in His dialogue with the Pharisees was the Creator's original intent. The question then arises: are we permitted to use this line of reasoning today? It seems to me that we certainly are.

Admittedly, on many issues we are unable to appeal to God's original design due to the limitations of our knowledge concerning the pre-fall world. However, there are topics for which the first chapters of Genesis provide clear and foundational answers. One such topic is the role of women in the Church and in society.

III. Two Propositions and Counterpoints

Returning to the passage from the First Epistle to Timothy, we see that the apostle Paul grounds his argument in the early chapters of Genesis. From chapter two, he references the order of creation —man first, then woman—and from chapter three, he highlights the order of the Fall — woman sinned first. This forms the two main propositions: “Man was created first, therefore he is more important and has the right

to dominate” and “Woman sinned first and therefore is more guilty.” According to Paul, this reasoning gives the man a sense of superiority and the right to dominate, while it imposes on the woman a greater sense of guilt.

Instead of debating the apostle’s position, let us take a broader look at the Old Testament texts and reflect more deeply on these two claims.

A. Man was created first, therefore he is more important and has the right to dominate.

There are four counterpoints in the first two chapters of Genesis that challenge this proposition:

i. God pronounced creation “very good” only after both man and woman were created.

Although the order of the creation of man and woman is described in chapter two, we must not overlook the information found in chapter one. The first chapter of Genesis tells the story of how God created our world—everything visible and invisible—including the first man and woman, on the sixth day of creation. This chapter ends with the following statement:

31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

We see that the sixth day, like the days before it, ends with God expressing His delight in creation — **it was very good**. In chapter two, we are given more details about how God created man and woman. Indeed, in chapter two we see that man was created first (Gen. 2:7), and only later the woman was created (Gen. 2:21–22). However, between these two events, there is a very remarkable verse:

18 The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

It is evident that on the sixth day, after the creation of man, God’s initial evaluation of creation was not satisfactory. God said: **“It is not good...”** Moreover, in that very verse, we find what must still be done to correct this “not good”—a woman must be created. From this

perspective, we cannot speak of any superiority of man over woman, because God praised His creation only after the creation process of humanity was complete—that is, after the woman was created.

ii. Similarity in the terms “man” and “woman.”

In Genesis chapter 2, we find the description of how the man was created:

7 Then the Lord God formed a man אָדָם (*Adam*) from the dust of the ground אֲדָמָה (*adamA*) and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

In this verse, the man is referred to by the word *Adam*. In the same verse, there is a similar word — *adamA*, which is translated as “*the dust of the ground*.” These two words share the same root, meaning that man came from the earth and is part of it, a continuation of it. That is why he was intended to care for the land, to preserve it and cultivate it. The entire context points to the fact that the creation of man was for the earth: “...there was no man to cultivate the ground... And the Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Gen. 2:5,15). So, is man for the earth, or is the earth for man? The text is quite direct — man’s (*Adam*) life depends on the earth (*adamA*), but the earth is also dependent on him.

This idea echoes the words the man spoke when he first saw the woman, in the form of a poetic exclamation:

23 The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ אִשָּׁה (*Ishah*) for she was taken out of man.” אִישׁ (*Ish*).

She was called *Ishah* because she was taken out of *Ish*. This naming also reflects a principle. In his song, the man expressed admiration and gratitude to God. Moreover, he acknowledged that the woman came from himself, that she is part of him and a continuation of him, and that they are mutually dependent on one another. This is the meaning behind the similarity in the terms “*man*” (*Ish*) and “*woman*” (*Ishah*). Understanding this makes it impossible to place the man

above the woman or consider man to be more important.

iii. A Helper, but not an Apprentice.

In the opening chapters of Genesis, the woman is given several designations. One of them is “*helper*.” As mentioned earlier, the creation of man alone was not sufficient for God to pronounce His creation as “very good.” Something essential was missing — a helper.

18 ...It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him...

In our language, a “helper” is often understood as a second-tier worker. In other words, there is a master who performs the main task, and there is a helper who assists. If the helper refuses to help, the work still gets done—because it is the master who is doing it, but in the Holy Scriptures, the Hebrew word עֲזָרָה (*ezer*), meaning “helper,” is used several times, and in most cases it refers to God as the helper. For example: “The God of my father was *my help*...” (Exodus 18:4) “May He send you *help* from the sanctuary...” (Psalm 20:2) “O God, come quickly to *help* me. You are my *help* and my deliverer...” (Psalm 70:5), and several others. In all these passages, when God is called a helper, it is clear that they cannot manage on their own — because they are not the master. The primary work is done by the “helper,” who is the Lord God. From this perspective, we begin to understand the significance of the role assigned to the woman as a helper. She is not a subordinate assistant working under a master, but at the very least, a co-worker and partner in all things.

iv. Both the man and the woman are called “human.”

Man and woman were created together, intended to be together, and are one whole. This is God’s original design. Confirmation of this idea can be found in the first and fifth chapters of the book of Genesis:

Genesis 1:27 And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (KJV)

Genesis 5:1-2 This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him; male and female created he them, and blessed them, and called their

name Adam, in the day when they were created. (KJV)

From these passages, it follows that the term “*man*” (or “*human*”) refers to the union of male and female, not to each of them individually. This is exactly how God intended it — no more, no less.

What conclusion can we draw from this reasoning? Based on these arguments, there is no foundation for claiming that man is superior to woman—or vice versa. Yes, the woman was created after the man, but first, the creation of man was not the climax or pinnacle of creation; and second, there is nothing in the text to suggest that one is more important than the other. They are equal in value, complement one another and enrich one another. Therefore, we cannot say that woman is a second-class human being. Man is not more important than woman, and woman is not more important than man. They have different roles and functions, they are distinct from one another, but they are interdependent. Understanding this brings harmony to relationships and strengthens the marriage bond. It also makes society richer and more just.

B. The woman sinned first and therefore bears more guilt.

The second argument made by the apostle Paul is rooted in chapter three of the book of Genesis:

6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

The chapter begins with a dialogue between the serpent and the woman. He asks her a question, she responds, and then gives in to persuasion. This conversation ends with the woman eating the forbidden fruit, giving it to her husband, and he eats it as well. Formally, she ate the forbidden fruit first, tempted her husband, and led him into the Fall—and for that reason, she is considered guiltier than man. However, the text contains several counterarguments:

i. God gave the command not to eat from the tree to Adam.

It was specifically to the man that God said:

16 And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden;

17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

This occurred before the woman was created. Therefore, the responsibility for disobeying God’s command ultimately lies with the man. The woman may have invited him to disobey, but he agreed of his own volition. Even today, conflicts between people can only escalate when all parties involved choose to participate. This suggests that the man’s guilt in the Fall is just as significant as the woman’s.

ii. They acted together, not sequentially.

If we read the entire chapter, we find a sequence of actions performed *together* by the man and the woman:

- a. They ate the forbidden fruit.
- b. They realised they were naked and made garments for themselves.
- c. They heard the voice of God and hid.
- d. They tried to justify themselves and shifted the blame to others.
- e. They received judgment from God.
- f. They were clothed by God.

One might argue that one of them ate the fruit before the other. However, they simultaneously realised their nakedness and made garments together (Genesis 3:7). This is striking, because if the woman had eaten first, logically she should have become aware of her nakedness before the man but the text does not reflect this. They recognised their condition together. Next, they *together* heard the voice of God and *together* hid from Him (Genesis 3:8). God addressed both, and they responded in the same manner—by shifting the blame (Genesis 3:12–13) and both received judgment (Genesis 3:16–19). And at the end of the chapter, both were clothed in garments of skin and expelled from the garden. This means that they acted in unison and were judged in unison.

iii. The punishment of the woman is equivalent to that of the man.

If one were to claim that the woman bears greater guilt, one might expect a harsher punishment but this is not what the text reveals. Both received consequences from God tailored to their respective natures: the man (*Adam*) was condemned to toil the earth (*adamA*) with great labour, and the woman (*Isha*) was destined to desire to rise above the man (*Ish*), though she would never succeed. These punishments are parallel in structure and meaning. They reflect the disruption of harmony, not the establishment of hierarchy.

IV. The Woman in the Church of Ephesus

Thus, there is no clear or indisputable evidence in the Genesis text to suggest that the woman bears greater responsibility for the Fall. She is guilty—but no more than the man. Our study of the first three chapters of Genesis shows that man has no superiority over woman, and that woman is not more culpable than man in the matter of sin. So why, then, does the apostle Paul reference these arguments in his epistle? Is it possible that he had not read the Genesis account for himself and instead relied on biased interpretations from others? Or is he intentionally teaching Timothy to use the biblical narrative as a strategic tool to achieve specific goals?

Once again, let us revisit the passage from 1 Timothy chapter 2.

9 I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes,

10 but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.

12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.

13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve.

14 And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.

15 But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

From the text, we see that the apostle Paul believes that a woman should:

- Demonstrate modesty in her choice of clothing and adornments.
- Do good works.
- Learn quietly.
- Obey her husband.
- Bear and raise children.

To begin with it is important to understand not only to whom this passage was directly addressed, but also for whom these instructions were ultimately intended.

We know that the recipient of the text was Timothy—Paul’s disciple, his faithful companion in ministry and a trusted bearer of apostolic teaching. At the time, Timothy was living in Ephesus, a city that served as the epicentre of the cult of the goddess Artemis, known to the Romans as Diana. Towering over the city was the magnificent temple of Artemis—one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World—and the daily life of its inhabitants was steeped in this religious tradition. Artemis was both a fierce virgin and a mother goddess, believed to bring fertility to the earth, animals, and humans. Furthermore, Artemis of Ephesus was regarded as the protector of the Amazons—warrior women who rejected male authority. As a result, the cult of Artemis was structured around female religious leadership: the priests of her temple were exclusively women, who orchestrated elaborate ceremonies and prohibited male involvement.

Ephesus, therefore, was saturated with a worldview and philosophy in which women dominated every sphere of life. In that cultural context, being a woman in itself was seen as a justification for authority.

Within the Church, however, a different model of relationships was

to be established—one that did not presume superiority based on gender. Aware of the context in which Timothy was ministering, the apostle Paul offers practical counsel to help him restore order within the congregation. On the one hand, Paul's instructions place certain limits on women; on the other hand, they encourage and empower them to occupy a dignified place in the church community.

Take note of the imperative in verse 11: **“a woman should learn...”** With this statement, Paul sets a clear goal: to ensure that women have the opportunity to be educated. Education, not gender, is what provides the legitimate foundation for leadership in the Church—for both women and men. In this way, Paul seeks to preempt potential conflict between men and women in the congregation by addressing the root issue: ignorance. His message is clear — *“A woman must learn.”* And the responsibility for implementing this falls on Timothy. It was up to him to create favourable conditions for the instruction of women. Specifically, he was to:

- Demonstrate that learning (education, knowledge and wisdom) is the only valid basis for leadership in the Church, rather than gender identity.
- Redirect women's attention away from traditional societal preoccupations—such as elaborate hairstyles, jewellery, and fashionable clothing—toward inner beauty, expressed through good works.
- Prevent unnecessary disputes and debates about gender roles.
- Establish his own authority as a male teacher and spiritual leader within the Ephesian church.
- Encourage women to embrace motherhood and the calling to raise children.

V. The Reason for the Apostle's Argumentation

Why then does Paul use Adam and Eve as an example of argument? Couldn't it have been enough to limit himself to the imperative: A

woman, like a man, must study to be able to serve in the church?
There are two possible answers to this question:

- A. The apostle Paul may be emphasising the following idea: in the Garden of Eden, Eve was deceived because she had not been taught, whereas Adam sinned knowingly and deliberately. This correlates strongly with the imperative, **“Let a woman learn...”** In other words, Paul seems to be saying: look what can happen when a woman is denied education and opportunities for personal growth. The apostle uses a similar rhetorical device in 1 Corinthians 11:3, where he compares the entire Church—both men and women—to Eve.
- B. At first glance, Paul’s reference to Adam and Eve appears to lend logical weight to his argument, thereby preemptively silencing opposition and objections to the order he is seeking to establish within the church.

So, in response to the question, *“Why does the apostle ground his instructions in the example of Adam and Eve?”* — we might answer in the same way Jesus once explained Moses’ concession: *“Because of the hardness of your hearts... but it was not so from the beginning.”* In other words, Paul might be saying: **“In order to compel women to sit and learn in submission, rather than to argue with the teacher, I use the example of Eve—emphasising that she was created second but sinned first.”** In the specific context of Ephesus, in the cultural setting of antiquity, these words were timely and relevant. Undoubtedly, they helped Timothy create a healthy and respectful dynamic between men and women within the church.

VI. Conclusions

Now, after this study of the Genesis text and Paul’s letter to Timothy, we are equipped to answer the questions raised at the beginning:

- A. ***Are these universal requirements for all women in all churches and at all times—or are they specific to the Ephesian church where Timothy was ministering?***

A careful study of the context in which this epistle was written, along with an understanding of the apostle's objectives, leads us to conclude that these are not universal, timeless commands for all women in every church. Rather, Paul's goal in this passage was to help Timothy create a favourable environment in the Ephesian church for the legitimate development of women in ministry. This interpretation is further supported by Paul's greetings and commendations of female co-labourers in other letters:

- In the church at Rome (Romans 16), he honours Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Julia, and the sister of Nereus.
- In the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 11:5), Paul acknowledges women who pray and prophesy.
- In the Galatian church (Galatians 3:28), he affirms that "*there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

B. *What kind of salvation is Paul referring to - eternal salvation, or some other form of deliverance?*

A literal reading of the text might lead one to believe that eternal salvation is inaccessible to women who have not borne children. This, of course, would be absurd. Paul is clearly not referring to salvation in the eternal sense. More likely, he is speaking of a form of deliverance—from loneliness, the influence of false teachers, divisions, gossip, and above all, from the desire for domination. After all, only a woman can conceive and give birth. This is part of her unique calling of deliverance from the dangers of childbirth and could also be understood as a kind of salvation. Paul encourages women to remember this calling and to cultivate inner spiritual strength. In other words, to return to the Edenic ideal - where the woman has no desire to rule over the man. This, Paul suggests, is the true form of salvation.

C. *Is there a place of honour for women in the Church?*

The entirety of Paul's First Epistle to Timothy is designed to provide guidance for establishing the Church of Christ in a particular city, at a specific time, and under unique circumstances. Within that framework, Paul offers women the necessary guidance to legitimise their place

within the community. The very fact that this letter was widely disseminated in the early Christian world and eventually canonised speaks to its constructive and transformative impact. Across different eras of church history, and still today, countless remarkable women serve faithfully in ministry, affirming through their dedication the legitimacy of their calling.

Indeed, a place of honour in the Church is open to any woman, just as it is to any man. What matters most is that every servant of God, regardless of gender, can echo the words of the apostle Paul:

“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service” (1 Timothy 1:12).

I hope this study will help many local churches reconsider their views on the possibility of women taking a worthy place in the ranks of church ministers and will give women the opportunity to realise their potential and be useful, both in society and in the church.

In addition, I will be glad if this study provides an impetus to further study the texts of Holy Scripture and search for answers to difficult questions regarding gender equality in the church and the society.

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05

Gender Equality: The Church in Dialogue with the 'World'

~ Ruth Surenthiraraj

I have always wondered what we mean when we say that the church must be separate from or different from the world. When I was younger, I thought it meant that I was not allowed to do anything that the world does. We needed to dress differently, talk differently, think differently. But as I grew older, this understanding appeared rather simplistic and unhelpful. Was I expected to be different simply for the sake of being different? More importantly, was there not an overlap in culture, behaviour and lifestyles between both the church and the world?

These questions were particularly and painfully apparent to me when I began to notice that women were being treated the same way both within and outside of the church. When I was growing up, there were not many church leaders who were women. Even though they were some of the most devout Christians I had seen, I noticed that women seemed to take a backseat in most things within the church – they would be asked to teach Sunday school but not be allowed to preach, they could lead worship and host home groups, but Bible studies and important 'theological' matters were left to the men. More disturbingly, domestic violence and sexual harassment of women were topics that you could not discuss in our homes or workplaces. The church was also silent on whether these practices were acceptable to God. As a young woman who was exposed to violence and harassment, I had to wonder if women were indeed valuable to God and the Church.

Life has changed significantly for both the church and the world over the last couple of decades. There are new theories and theologies that

keep cropping up and we have been forced to confront some of those ideas. In this short essay, I would like to share some of my thoughts on what I have come to understand as the relationship between the world and the church, particularly in relation to the concerns of gender and sexuality. My aim is to invite the church (all of us as one body) to listen humbly to both the world and the Word in order to become better witnesses to Christ, especially when it comes to valuing women as equal and precious co-workers in the Kingdom of God.

What is the Church’s Call in Relation to the World?

The metaphor of salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16) points to the most fundamental aim of the church as the body of Christ. While the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) sets a clear call for believers to bring the good news to all people, the Sermon on the Mount offers us counsel for how to carry out that call effectively. The author of Matthew compiles Jesus’ teachings into a densely packed three chapters that help us understand the reality of the Kingdom of God. The Beatitudes set the tone by envisioning what an alternate ‘kingdom’ might look like – one where the norms and the rules of our current systems are challenged in surprising ways. Nestled amid this, and many other ideas on an alternate kingdom, lie the two metaphors that are to guide the church in the world.

Jesus’ disciples are told that they are “the salt of the earth”¹ (Matthew 5:13) and “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). What is most striking about these two metaphors is that they are intrinsically related to *the earth or the world*. The metaphors carry meaning only when they are placed within the context of living in the world. We, the church, cannot be the salt and light unless we are situated in the world and engaged in the messiness of living every day. Salt kept apart from unseasoned food, and light hidden away from the darkness, are of no use. So, our calling is primarily to be in association

1. I will use the New International Version translation of the Bible for quotations unless otherwise indicated.

with the world that we need to impact.

Salt is used both for the flavouring of food and for the prevention of its decay. In a Mediterranean climate, the flavour of salt would have added to the uniqueness of the cuisine and preserved meat and fish from degrading under the extreme heat. Jesus' disciples are to work towards preventing the decaying effects of sin and fallenness, while slowly permeating the fallen world with the values of his alternate kingdom.

Similarly, light allows us to locate and identify things clearly, unearths details that the darkness blurs, and assists us in distinguishing between shadow and substance. From ancient to modern times, light has also been an important regulator of our days – for many of us living in the Asian continent, sunrise still signals the start of a working day, and sunset often indicates that our bodies are close to needing their routine rest. Jesus' disciples are to be the light that clarifies obscurity and uncovers the hidden, bringing order and truth into places where things are disorderly or hidden.

In both metaphors, however, Jesus warns of the real possibility of salt and light losing their distinguishing characteristics. They are expected to retain their essence if they are to be of use. Yet, when Jesus applies these metaphors to his disciples, what does he think is the essence of his disciples?

The answer is found in the surrounding text that details the characteristics of those to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs: those who are broken and not in control (Matthew 5:3-6); those who build right relationships with others (Matthew 5:6-7, 9); those who are undiverted in their commitment to fostering the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:8, 10-11); those who recognise that outward gestures do not impact the formation of their character or essence (Matthew 6:1-18). In fact, Jesus explicitly states that he comes to “fill full”² the Torah by calling his people further into alignment with the heart of a holy

2. Bible Project Scholarship Team, “What is the Sermon on the Mount? Jesus Teaches about the Good Life,” Bible Project, December 7, 2023, <https://bibleproject.com/articles/what-is-the-sermon-on-the-mount/>.

God (Matthew 5:17-20).

It is worth pausing awhile to reflect on how this applies to gender concerns within the church. If the Kingdom of God is set to subvert the existing power relationships (Matthew 5:3-7), then we need to ask who is most impacted and suppressed by hierarchies in church. Perhaps it is women who have the gift of teaching and are denied the place to do it because the Church is too suspicious or inflexible to allow it. Perhaps it refers to single men and women who are not in full time ministry and are often left out of church events because they do not have families of their own. Perhaps it refers to men who do not fit into the typical mould of a 'real' man and are viewed as 'too weak' to be on decision-making bodies at church. These are the powerless to whom the kingdom will belong, according to Jesus. He invites us to see that the dismantling of unequal relationships, and exploitative and exclusionary practices should be at the heart of how his disciples should respond to the good news.

The Church's Current Engagement with the World

The modern church faces two temptations when we try to live as people of salt and light in a world that needs redemption. The first temptation is to draw a hard line between the church as a sacred or spiritual realm and everything else as belonging to the world, the secular realm. This I will refer to as the sacred-secular divide. The second temptation is to uncritically (and often unknowingly) take on the cultural practices or biases of our societies. Both temptations are subtle and can severely endanger the invitation to participate with God in his ongoing redemptive work, so we must be aware of how they may come about.

Temptation to Divide the Sacred from the Secular

The need to maintain a distinction between the sacred and the secular stems from a genuine desire to honour the holiness of our God. If the people of God are not distinct from the societies in which they live, how can we honour a holy God who calls us to live distinctly

and righteously? Unfortunately, the rather simplistic solution we often reach is to draw a clear demarcation between 'holy' things and everything else that does not fit there. Taken to its logical end, this view equates anything to do with the church, mission or ministry as 'holy' and therefore good. On the other hand, anything that takes place outside of the church's gambit is viewed as 'irrelevant' or 'sinful' solely because they are 'of the world.' For instance, spending our time on anything to do with ministry is viewed as a good thing even if we are exhausted and in need of recuperation. Spending time on work, however, is of marginal importance.

The problem with this divide is that the church is not completely holy and the world is not entirely unredeemable. In the Old Testament, we see the nation of Israel being called to reflect God's holiness by living according to strict and culturally distinct principles (think of the special mention of the foreigner, the widow and the orphan³ – three very marginalised groups in ancient Near Eastern societies; or the limits placed on both cultivation⁴ and ownership⁵ of land as well as limits on debt structures⁶). However, Israel is not perfect, as is evidenced by the prophets' words.⁷ And Jesus' sermon on the mount is set against this repeated failure of Israel when he critiques the legalistic and self-righteous manner in which rituals of holiness are carried out.⁸ The problem was that Israel and her religious leaders had fallen into the same temptation we face today. They assumed that everything done within the gambit of the temple or religious life was holy and thereby, anything or anyone outside of that circuit was naturally unholy.

3. Exodus 22:21-24.

4. Leviticus 25:1-7.

5. Leviticus 25:13-17, 23-28.

6. Leviticus 25:35-39.

7. See, for instance, Isaiah 1:10-17, Jeremiah 4:1-4, Hosea 4:1-3, and Amos 5:11-15.

8. Matthew 6:1-18 focus on three holy and worshipful acts – giving to the needy, praying, and fasting – which have now been perverted because they are done in order to attract the praise of people rather than humble oneself before a holy God.

However, Jesus upsets this assumption by recognising that (1) holiness needs to permeate every act of living and (2) some gentiles were meeting standards of faith that God's own people did not. In the first instance, Jesus invites his listeners to understand the reasoning at the heart of the Law instead of being content with carrying out a prescriptive and limited act (Matthew 5: 21-48). The invitation is to live with a mind and heart shaped by the values of the kingdom. Yet, he goes even further to prove that Israel fails to reflect the fullness of a holy God's image. In two instances, Jesus praises the faith of gentiles who seek him out: a Canaanite woman whose daughter was delivered from demon possession⁹ and a Roman centurion whose servant was healed of his illness.¹⁰ Both instances show their willingness to humble themselves because of the intensity of their faith, something which Jesus is quick to value. In both instances, Israel's assumption that they are holy simply because they follow legalistic rules of holiness is upturned and challenged by Jesus.

Temptation to Adopt Practices that are Unbiblical

We develop a further blind spot when we attempt to maintain the sacred-secular divide. When we assume that everything associated with the church and mission are holy, we become blinded to some deeply unbiblical practices that enter the church through our fallen human natures.

One way in which this happens is when a practice starts out with good intentions but then crystallises over time to become the only acceptable way of doing something (this is what social scientists would call social conventions or norms). Many of our liturgical traditions tend to fall into this category. None of us are surprised when generations within our church disagree on the 'best' form of worship – the older folk have certain expectations of how praise and prayer must be carried out and the youth have different ideas. Often, both of those

9. Matthew 15:21-28.

10. Luke 7:1-10.

expectations are grounded in sound interpretations of Scripture¹¹ – so the actual problem arises only when one or the other camp claims that their way is better and therefore should be the *only* expression of praise or prayer. In fact, this kind of inflexibility is what Jesus challenges when he talks of prayer in Matthew 6: 5-6. Jesus says, “when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen”¹² in order to challenge what had become a part of Jewish cultural norms around prayer – an expectation that ‘good’ prayer should be performed so that people could see. Jesus does not mean that public prayer is sinful: if so, none of us should be praying out loud in our churches or in any public space at all. Instead, he is challenging the notion that public prayer is the *only acceptable* form of prayer. He is questioning a practice that started out with good intentions but has now crystallised into a performative and ego-boosting convention that does not allow for other forms of prayer to be recognised as equally valid. While the church should indeed form its own set of liturgical conventions, those conventions should not hinder us from being receptive to the moving of the Spirit as he attempts to keep us faithful to the Word. In fact, we risk becoming ‘unbiblical’ in our church conventions when we lose sight of the scriptural ‘why’ behind each practice.

Returning to gender concerns, the ordination of female clergy is one of the most contentious issues that the Asian church faces. We have inherited church traditions that always placed the male over the female, and therefore, we are resistant to changing those traditions despite knowing that before God, women and men are wholly equal. The very essence of the Trinity allows us to see that the three persons of the Godhead can be co-equal in status and yet distinct in their characteristics, without having to resort to a hierarchy of power.

11. I am not saying that every form of praise or prayer is always valid – that is a rather dangerous assumption to make, especially if such forms of praise or prayer do not seem to have any sound scriptural basis for their claims. Instead, I am referring to disagreements that arise when both parties have established acceptable biblical foundations for the claims they make.

12. Matthew 6:6.

This is the model on which we should be re-imagining relationships between men and women in the Church, but women clergy are often denied equality within church structures. Jesus' critique of Pharisaic hypocrisy should challenge us too to test if our church conventions are actually scripturally acceptable. Another way that the sacred-secular divide blinds us is that it does not allow us to notice when the church has adopted cultural practices that do not match the spirit of the gospel or the Word. For instance, a lot of small churches feel very insecure when they see their parishioners leaving for bigger churches. If left unchecked, this insecurity leads to pastors becoming more possessive of their parishioners, critiquing other churches and their leaders in a biased and ungenerous manner. This fallen behaviour stems from what we have imbibed from our secular cultures that push competitiveness as a marker for excellence. Competition is the fundamental assumption on which our markets run, and we accept this uncritically because every algorithm and lifestyle choice around us repeatedly tell us that competitiveness and the drive to succeed at any cost are admirable values to live by. When the church uncritically accepts this competitive spirit, it blinds us to the generosity of Christ and the collaborative nature of the Trinity which should be guiding principles for our relationships with people and other church traditions. Instead, we are caught up in the game of numbers and comparison that does not foster a sense of oneness in working towards the expansion of the kingdom of God.

Church history also highlights just how much we take for granted the ways in which we are socialised to think lesser of women. Even great thinkers in church history – Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, John Knox, and Martin Luther, to name a few, were not immune to the weakness of caving in to the cultural norms of their time in interpreting women's role in church and society.¹³ So, cultural patterns of thinking (ideologies) can subtly permeate the church because the church is an institution that is not immune to the fallenness of

13. Andrew Bartlett, "Lessons from History: How Culture can Distort the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Co-workers and Co-leaders: Women and Men Partnering for God's Work* (2nd ed.), eds. Amanda Jackson and Peirong Lin (Bonn: World Evangelical Alliance, 2023), 75-88.

humankind and creation. This requires us, then, to humbly accept that there can be sinful and unbiblical cultural practices forming within the church that should be identified and weeded out if we are to be faithful to our calling to be the salt that preserves the good and the light that uncovers the unsavoury.

Why the Church Should Listen to the World

The embeddedness of the church’s mission means that we are not as detached from the world as we think we are. An overwhelming majority of those attending church spend most of their working week in secular workplaces that have no direct attachment to the church. And this allows us to live out the message of the kingdom in full view of those who do not subscribe to our beliefs. In fact, this is the way that most people will be attracted to Christ and his gospel – through the insignificant interactions they will have with believers working faithfully as witnesses to Jesus. However, these relations cannot only include unidirectional communications – the church and believers talking of Christ to the ‘world.’ If we accept that this universe was created by God, then we should also accept that the world still mirrors the goodness of its Creator despite its fallen and sinful nature, much like the Church herself. And an inherently good creation “is pregnant with the meanings and purposes given creation by God,”¹⁴ inviting the Church to discover those meanings. Therefore, the act of listening well becomes an essential part of Christian life if we are to minister effectively in our respective contexts and realities.

Listening: A Scriptural and Moral Posture

Listening is a symbol for the posture of attunement we adopt towards God and his creation.¹⁵ It is something that defines God’s expectation of his people: it is the spoken Word of God that creates, and creation is brought into being through the responsive act of listening to God’s

14. Luke Bretherton, *A Primer in Christian Ethics: Christ and the Struggle to Live Well* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 13.

15. Bretherton, *A Primer in Christian Ethics*, 21-25.

voice. Listening, therefore, is neither a passive nor an unimportant act. Directed towards God, listening is an indication of our submission to him, an appropriate response to the Creator and sustainer of life; directed towards our fellow humans and wider creation, it signals our acknowledgment of *their* value as co-creatures inhabiting the created world. At a personal level, listening to the world around me helps me discern and celebrate the vestiges of God's goodness that push through the evil of human fallenness. It also keeps me from assuming that I have nothing to learn from other co-creatures and creation.

When the Church is humble enough to truly listen well to both society and the created universe, we find ourselves in a posture of humility towards those who do not subscribe to our understanding of the world. In fact, humility is the essence of the Gospel – a God who chose to establish his redemption plan through incarnation in a fallen world that was not ready to accept him. A humble and open posture of listening is also an active one. We are not simply absorbing everything the world has to say. Sometimes, what we hear is not easy to accept or digest – critique against the Church is often harsh and unrelenting. However, hearing critique forces us to reflect on our role as witnesses to a perfect God. Are we good enough? Have we failed? Is there something we can do better? It is this soul-searching that sends us back to the Word – this time, not to read into the Word what we already find comfortable, but to ask truthfully what it is that characterises God, and how we, as his Church, might reflect him better.

The weaving of rugs, carpets, mats or cloth is a well-known and familiar occurrence in our corner of the world. In fact, you might even find different forms and traditions of weaving within the same country in Asia, a testament to how diverse our people groups are. The process of weaving is arduous although mechanisation has certainly eased the process to some extent. At first, the pattern that emerges does not seem to have much coherence: it seems random and disconnected until the woven product has been completed in full. Only then does a unique pattern emerge, a recreation of an idea in the weaver's/ designer's mind. I think of the analogy of weaving when I think of studying the Bible. The Word already contains many intricate patterns

and interdependently woven threads. When we come to it with our questions and concerns, it is possible for us to pick only one thread and see if it answers our question. However, listening to the Word in true humility requires us to understand the whole scope of the biblical narrative in order to construct even a partial understanding of the God behind the masterpiece. This is exactly how a true posture of listening can enrich our lives: when we learn to listen with humility to the critique society offers us, we also come back to the Word with a renewed humility to discover what the Scriptures might offer in the light of our new or changing circumstance. This, in turn, enables the Church to renew the relevance of its function as the salt and light of the world. We challenge our need to escape criticism and instead become a Church that is deeply engaged in and thoughtful about the ever-evolving realities that surround us. So, when society states that the Church is an oppressive structure perpetuating the subjugation of women, we may need to listen and engage in order to understand why such claims are being made. It is far easier to shroud our customs in mystery and refuse to engage. However, we are not being a reflexive Church if we are unable to humbly welcome critique in order to know if we are in line with the Word.

Christianity's Influence in the Shaping of Modern Ideologies

I have noticed that the Church, in its haste to distinguish itself from the secular world, often adopts outwardly opposing stances to modern ideologies. For the Asian Church, this posture is further complicated by what we see as Western-dominated views making their way into our societies and churches. So, when society around us seems to welcome certain ideologies, we the Church (rightly or wrongly) adopt a position against that ideology because we perceive it to be threatening to our way of existence thus far. It is also sad to say that some churches swing completely in the opposite direction, welcoming anything that seems to be distinctive simply because it is new. Neither of those reactions is faithful to our calling as people of the Word, but my primary concern in this article is to deal with the first reaction in some limited way. In fact, if we take the time to listen and engage with the foundations of some of these ideologies that disturb us, we may find

that they are initially rooted in deeply Christian thought that developed over centuries of careful study of the Word.

For instance, modern society is shot through with language about rights and freedoms. This expanding framework of rights has allowed for the recognition of many culturally and historically marginalised groups of people – those who belong to minority groups, those who live with disability, those who live below the poverty line, those who are born female etc. These groups of people have been either historically ignored or actively silenced in the past but are able to represent their own interests with some degree of success due to the increasing importance given to individual human rights. The framework of rights also allows us to understand the rights of a citizenry. Employee rights and civil rights are crucial in ensuring that the individual in a community or society is oppressed neither by exploitative structures of employment nor by a repressive state apparatus. As Nicholas Wolterstorff observes, however, rights-talk can sometimes encourage a hyperfocus on one's entitlements to the detriment of others' claims.¹⁶ This extreme form of individual entitlement clashes fundamentally with Asian cultures that tend to prioritise the collective or communal claim (unfortunately, often restrictively so). So, while unchecked individualism should be challenged by the Church, this does not mean that every cause that uses rights-talk should be summarily dismissed. In essence, rights are inherently social in nature: they only gain meaning when viewed within a social relationship of myself in relation with the other, a "normative bond ... in the form of the other bearing a legitimate claim on me as to how I treat her."¹⁷

According to Wolterstorff, then, it is *self-preoccupation* that is the problem – our human capacity to be hyper-focused on only our own interests and preferences. Self-preoccupation utilises the language of rights in some instances to push its own self-oriented agenda, but this does not mean that the language of rights is bad, irredeemable,

16. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 3.

17. Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 4.

or ineffective in and of itself.¹⁸ It offers us language to recognise the individual within the collective, acknowledging the value that is attached to both our individual as well as our collective identities. What is most fascinating to me in Wolterstorff’s book is how he challenges the historical assumptions around the concept of rights. He argues *against* the popular assumption that rights were a by-product of thinking during the Enlightenment or the late Middle Ages but links it back through the Church fathers to the New and Old Testaments of the Bible. At its essence, he argues that despite the distortions of its modern forms, the concept of rights can be traced back to God’s relationship with humanity and therefore, has an essentially and undeniably Christian heritage.

Tracing these lineages and heritages in modern concepts is important to the Church because we must learn to recognise what is part of our Christian and church history. So, ensuring that language rights are upheld in our worship services or enabling better gender and ethnic representation in our church teams are not things we do to appease a demanding society. We respect the right of individuals and marginalised groups because we want to reflect the care of a God who gave of his very self in order to redeem his creation. And in doing so, we understand that we are not rewriting the Bible – instead, we are allowing the Word to truly reshape our modern assumptions, sifting every ‘cultural’ practice against the permanence of God’s character as it has been revealed to us.

Let me pause here to talk of feminism: the call for the equality of men and women but also a much maligned and perplexing set of principles. I would argue that feminism is fundamentally aligned with biblical values. When Paul declares that “there is neither ... male nor female, for you are all one in Christ” (Galatians 3:28), he refers to a restored vision of equal relationships modelled on the Trinity. And this is the essence of feminism too. It seeks to revert forms of oppression that are based on unequal relationships between sexes, arguing for equality between men and women. It seeks to create a world in which there

18. Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 6-7.

is no place for sexual or sex-based exploitation and oppression. While we, as the Church, can look forward to the final restoration of our relationships in the new Kingdom, feminist critique reminds us that we have much work to do while working towards the establishment of God's good rule.

The World may be more 'Christian' than the Church

There is no sugarcoating this truth, unfortunately. If we are humbly listening to both Scripture and society while trying to understand our responses in the light of the Church's history, we will reach the sad truth that the Church is often the greatest flouter of God's Word and his principles. In fact, secular institutions reflect the image of God much better in some instances than the church which is called to that purpose.

One example of this can be seen clearly in the reporting and handling of issues such as harassment or abuse. Regardless of the form of abuse, most secular institutions attempt to have policies in place to handle such issues in a fair and just manner. Victims have a chance at reporting such behaviour, and there is a recognition that such behaviour cannot be tolerated within institutions. However, the church often uses its hierarchical structure to further oppress victims of sexual and psychological abuse, preferring to maintain its clean image over addressing issues of justice. Sadly, such incidents are too widespread in our local churches for us to deny the truth of this matter. What I am trying to say is that both the Church and the secular world are equally fallen. However, secular institutions (in some distorted and partial way at least) seem to reflect God's strong affinity for the vulnerable through their adherence to regulatory and policy frameworks. The Church, on the other hand, despite ample evidence in the Bible that shows God to be on the side of the oppressed, seems resistant to hear victims of abuse and deal with leaders who might be perpetuating such abuse.

The prophet's role in the Old Testament reminds us that God had a channel by which Israelite leaders were kept in check: the prophets would hold both leaders and people accountable, particularly in

their treatment of the poor and marginalised. Even at a personal level, justice was important to God: Nathan was sent to David with an elaborate tale of a poor man's sheep in order to point out that David had overstepped by raping Uriah's wife and then having Uriah killed on the battlefield so that David could cover up his covetous behaviour.¹⁹ David repents as soon as he realises what he has done to displease God, but he still has to face the consequences of his actions (he loses the first child Bathsheba bears him) before God offers him reconciliation and redemption (the birth of Solomon).

Sadly, in churches where abuse has taken place, we do not see this cycle of justice preserved: those who can hold church leaders responsible do not speak up for the victim and justice; very rarely do the church leaders acknowledge their sin; and if they do, then they are immediately 'forgiven' and allowed to continue in their positions of power, having to experience no consequence of their sinful actions. My choice to talk about abuse is not a random decision. Women in our churches are often vulnerable to the sinful behaviour of powerful male church leaders – although there are also men who are impacted by this same behaviour. And when the church is satisfied to turn a blind eye towards gender-based violence and abuse, we are failing colossally in our calling to reflect a just God.

How the Church *should* Respond to the Secular World

The question that remains is how *should* the Church respond faithfully and fittingly to the concerns of gender impacting our lives? In this section, I will focus on a few ideologies that are usually ignored or resisted by the Church but that have fundamentally changed how the world views and responds to issues of gender.

Feminism: Grappling with the Changing Roles of Women

Western feminist interventions in shaping modern culture have had an undeniable effect on societies around the world. Most of

19. 2 Samuel 11:1 – 12:25 narrates the whole incident including David's sin, Nathan's rebuke, David's repentance as well as the consequence of David's sin.

our institutions lean heavily on Western models of hierarchy and organisation (thanks largely to globalisation), and feminist theory has positively shaped these institutions to meaningfully address the concern of female representation and participation in public life and work. However, a distortion of rights language has muddled the waters, painting the movement as poorly disguised misandry. In return, there has been an influx of media personalities whose focus has been to tout hypermasculinity and traditional feminine roles as the solution to feminism.

The Church in the Eastern part of the globe has the same problems with slightly different trajectories, in my opinion. The family unit is important in our part of the world and individualism (in its Western form) has been generally resisted strongly. As a result, women – especially those in the Church – are often viewed solely as carers and nurturers, but nothing more. Women with a gift of teaching are rarely seen in our pulpits but are expected to play the roles of counsellors and carers if the parish requires them to do so. Often, the pastor's wife performs so much of the unacknowledged emotional labour that comes with pastoring a church. Women's voices are rarely acknowledged in the biggest decisions in our churches. So, we are suspicious when women want to be ordained or want to be on governing and decision-making bodies. Those women are often assumed to have 'unchristian' or 'unbiblical' ideas about their roles in the church.

Feminist thinking offers the Church a critical lens in this regard. As black feminist and cultural critic bell hooks argues, feminism seeks to end sexism and sexist exploitation or oppression.²⁰ In this view of feminism, sexist or gender-biased thinking shapes our societies and our institutions, colluding in the marginalisation of women (particularly those who are working class and non-white). So, we cannot simply say that men are the problem because patriarchal (or male-biased) thinking can shape how women, men and children view the world, and

20. Bartlett, "Lessons from History," 76.

it can shape how our institutions value people and people groups. This view of feminism also argues that we need to confront our own sexist thinking if we want to further feminist ideals of equality.

I would argue that such a view is more helpful than harmful to the Church. Firstly, it helps us understand that sexist thinking can so easily permeate our cultural and institutional thinking by devaluing the worth of a group of people. As Bartlett observes, it even allows Christian thinkers such as Calvin to claim that government by women “has always been regarded by all wise persons as a monstrous thing”²¹ despite scriptural evidence which indicates that God values women and men equally, across all the roles they are called to fulfil. If great biblical scholars were impacted so strongly by their cultures despite studying the Word of God so thoroughly, the modern Church will also need to safeguard against such assumptions. Therefore, acknowledging the value of women as a collective group of co-workers in God’s kingdom is important.

Secondly, critical feminist perspectives also force the Church to acknowledge the layered discrimination that impacts women of minority ethnic groups or women of the working classes. For instance, if the women leaders in our churches are all from richer or middle-class families who lead a generally comfortable lifestyle, we are creating a church that erases the struggles and realities of women from other backgrounds. Often, our church cultures will also hinder such women from playing a meaningful part in decision-making, with only certain types of women being visibly in positions of leadership.

While these critiques sound dire, I believe they make us more faithful to Christian mission. They force us to confront how we conveniently ignore the radical equality of the Old Testament and the gospels. God’s yearning for a redeemed creation requires us to repent of our hierarchical and biased thinking, of our sidelining or devaluing of people groups.

21. Bartlett, “Lessons from History,” 76.

Femininities and Masculinities: Celebrating Multiplicity in the Church

Another influential strand of feminist thinking is the acknowledgment that there can be multiple expressions of femininity and masculinity. Often, our cultures privilege only certain expressions of masculinity or femininity. For example, the ideal or 'real' man is physically and mentally strong; he does not concede to emotions but is rational; he provides for his family and parish; and he is expected to make decisions, regardless of whether he is qualified or trained to do so. Similarly, women are expected to be gentle and sensitive; they are expected to take up duties of care and nurturing; they are viewed as emotional and therefore irrational and are thereby disqualified from making decisions.

However, much like feminist thinking, the Bible offers us multiple expressions of what is masculine and feminine. David, probably the most iconic figure in Israel's history was a brave warrior king but was also formed in the desert, a dreamer and a lover of God. Gideon was not a natural born leader: he had to have multiple proofs that God was on his side. Elijah almost gave up on life and his calling because he was afraid of Jezebel. Samuel was a failed father because his sons were not deemed fit to lead the country. These are not the brash and assertive men who are culturally valued. They are broken, doubtful, and do not comfortably fit our stereotype of a 'real man.' On the other hand, Deborah has to accompany Barak on his mission to lend him moral support. Rahab and Rebecca are shrewd women who work to their advantage: the former outwits the men of Jericho to secure her family's safety, and the latter ensures that her second son receives the blessing promised to him. These women, too, do not fit our comfortable notions of softspoken and gentle females.

Yet, we often uphold stereotypical roles for women (and men) in the Asian Church. Men are given more cerebral roles while women manage emotions, regardless of how qualified either party is to fulfil the demands of those roles. We expect married women to balance duties of care at their homes – both children and elderly parents – but we also expect them to contribute fully at children's ministry in the church. We

do not like or know how to tolerate single men and women because they upset our cultural expectations that everyone will belong to a family unit. We do not embrace those who are struggling with either divorce or sexuality because they are simply expected to figure things out for themselves. We do not like outspoken women, and we do not like submissive men: they are both uncomfortable reminders that men and women do not belong in strict moulds.

The feminist movement, however, has managed to challenge the Church by holding space for these multiple realities and expressions. They have lovingly acknowledged the individual realities that shape people's lives and decisions and bravely fought for the freedom to bring that acknowledgement into public spaces. Should our churches not be the ultimate spaces for people to be genuinely loved and held? Should we not reflect better a Saviour who has loved us enough to die for the redemption of his creation? And this should mean that everyone who walks into our churches, regardless of whether they fit stereotypes or not, should feel like they belong in the Kingdom of God.

Concluding Thoughts

I return to the thoughts with which I started: what does it mean for the Church to be faithful to a radical and eternally relevant gospel? The answer is easier said than lived. It requires us not only to be humble and attentive in the face of cultural criticism but also to weigh that criticism against the Scriptures. It demands that we examine the cultural baggage that distorts our reading and interpretation of God's Word. And it compels us to model our behaviour on the radical equality God envisions as part of his good and just Kingdom. If we are truly captured by the scope and vision of the good news, then our radically altered gender relations will reflect the harmonious co-equality of the Triune God we serve.

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06

The Church and Women's Leadership: From Tradition to the Theology of Equality

~ Kang Sergey Konstantinovish

In contemporary societies, issues of equality and social justice are increasingly becoming the subject of debate, not only in the secular sphere but also in religious communities. One of the key aspects of this discussion is the participation of women in church life, especially in its leadership structures. Although Christian tradition has for centuries given women an important role in spiritual, educational, and social spheres, in most church contexts they remain on the periphery. It is important that this issue be discussed openly, without the fear of criticism, either from individuals or from various church denominations. Why does this need to be discussed critically? Why does this issue require attention and open conversation even today, despite many books and articles having been written and hundreds, or even thousands, of opinions having been expressed? Such a focus is needed and the risk it involves is justified because a faith that opens itself up to criticism and a Church that is not afraid of the truth and its high standards deserve respect and recognition not only from believing Christians, but also from the non-believing world.

In recent decades there has been a heated debate on gender equality in the Evangelical churches, during which people have learned to accept criticism. In many Christian communities, this has led to doubts about the role of women leaders and their admission to ministry. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that women in many countries are more active in community life, despite traditional restrictions on ministry.

This article attempts, through social and theological positions, to reiterate that justice is not only an ethical category but also a fundamental part of the Christian Church. The basis for proclaiming freedom of conscience, rights, dignity, and responsibilities of human beings, including women, is the biblical teaching about humans as created in the image and likeness of God (Imago Dei), as ontologically free beings.¹ This poses a challenge for communities to consider how church structures can become spaces of acceptance and support for women leaders.

1. THE ESSENCE OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Christian leadership is not about power over people but about serving them. Christ said, “Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43). Many Christians are well aware of this truth. However, few practice it in real life. In many cases, as an active pastor, I must state the fact that it is women’s leadership that vividly expresses this truth. It manifests itself through care, guidance, sacrifice, and attention to the needs of others. A woman leader leads not by power, but by service and not by coercion and manipulation, but by inspiration. Women who lead ministries, churches, and missions become a living reflection of Christ’s pastoral heart.

A familiar story from Mark 14 is of a woman who came to Jesus and on her arrival expressed her love in quite an unexpected way from the perspective of the patriarchal culture of the time. No one knows her name, her story, or her motives. Although anonymous, she nevertheless performs a significant and extravagant act. She brought an extract of precious myrrh, which was considered a family treasure, passed down from generation to generation and probably sold in times of hardship. Mark records that the woman did not simply open the jar carefully and sparingly anoint Jesus’ head with drops of the precious perfume. She broke the vessel, depriving herself of the opportunity

1. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), chap. 6, Kindle.

to use the rest for any other purpose, and poured all its contents on the head of Jesus who was reclining at the table. For some of those present, the woman's gesture was nothing more than a wasteful expenditure of a large sum of money, exceeding a man's annual income. She did absolutely everything she could. If there was anything else she could have done, she would have done it. The significance of the woman's action lay not in the high cost of her sacrifice, but in the amazing prophetic symbolism, sacrificial service, and timeliness and meaning of this action personally for Jesus. By anointing Jesus' body in advance, she prepared Him for burial. By her actions, she prepares Him for His chosen destiny and helps Him fulfil His mission. Her actions are not only extravagant, but also historically significant. Jesus affirms: "Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her" (Mark 14:9).² Many people performed worthy deeds in Jesus' ministry but only the woman who poured perfume on His head received such praise. The significance of this episode is not in the person, but in the action. People will preach not about her as a person, but about the great example of her service. This is a remarkable example of women's ministry, worthy of imitation. Scripture shows that God has repeatedly raised women to positions of leadership. Deborah was a judge of Israel and a spiritual mentor to the people. Priscilla instructed Apollos, helping him to understand the way of the Lord more accurately.³ Junia is named an apostle,⁴ and Phoebe is named a deaconess and helper of many. These examples confirm that women's leadership is not a novelty of our time, but part of God's plan from the beginning.⁵

2. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 115-116.

3. Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chap. 3, Kindle.

4. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), chap. 2, Kindle.

5. Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009), chap. 2, Kindle.

Women leaders often bring several qualities to leadership that help the Church become more like Christ:

- The ability to foster unity - female leaders often build bridges rather than walls, creating an atmosphere of cooperation.
- Humility and sacrifice – a strength evident in many women leaders is a willingness to give themselves for others.
- Empathy and sensitivity – women have the ability to see and hear those who remain in the shadows. This is particularly evident in the case of special people who may make up a large part of our communities, especially single mothers. The next section deals with this theme in detail. These qualities do not make women “better” than men but show a unique complementarity necessary for the harmonious development of Christ’s Church.⁶

2. CARE AND ACCEPTANCE OF SINGLE MOTHERS

In the post-Soviet Islamic republics, Christian communities face challenges related to the cultural, religious and social contexts. One of the most vulnerable groups within Christian communities is single mothers. Their situation raises important questions about the role of the Church, its mission of mercy and its witness to society.⁷

In our communities, a significant part of a woman’s identity is still linked to her family status. A married woman is perceived as socially secure, while a single or divorced woman often faces condemnation, suspicion, or even stigmatisation. In the post-Soviet space, this pressure is exacerbated by economic hardship, a weak social support system, and traditional views on the “proper” role of women. Added to this is the possible position of “second wife,” which demeans a woman in any community and even among relatives. A woman left

6. Denise Muir Kjesbo and Stanley J. Grenz, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (IVP Academic, 1995), chap. 5, Kindle.

7. Dorothy C. Thompson, *Single Mothers and the Church: Social Exclusion and Spiritual Needs* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017).

alone with children is often forced to work several jobs, face financial instability and at the same time experience spiritual thirst and a need for community.

It is precisely in such difficult conditions that Christian churches in Islamic republics often find themselves in a complex situation. On the one hand, we preach mercy, acceptance, support, and unity; on the other, we are subjected to denominational rules and customs as well as the cultural norms of a society in which a single mother is viewed with suspicion or even as “inferior.” This is a direct legacy of patriarchal thinking, not the Gospel. Some single mothers report that in some communities they lack support and acceptance and feel marginalised even from church life. Their children may face mistrust or neglect, especially if the father is absent not only physically but also legally.

However, it is often single mothers who become models of steadfastness and deep faith. Their lives are a daily ministry to their children, work, prayer, and seeking God's presence. Many of them take on important roles in churches: serving in ministries of mercy, mentoring young people, and participating in intercessory prayer. Their experience of pain and overcoming adversity makes them particularly sensitive to the needs of others who may be in similar situations. Churches in the post-Soviet space are called to become a spiritual home for these women. Ecclesiology teaches that the Church is not only an institution but also a spiritual family (Ephesians 2:19). This means that single mothers and their children should find a place in the community where they are accepted, loved and supported. The Bible affirms that a person's status in the church is determined not by their marital status, but by their belonging to Christ (Galatians 3:28).

The practical dimension of care can be expressed in the following ways:

- Emotional and spiritual support - by organising mutual support groups for single mothers and personal mentoring by mature sisters in Christ.
- Material and social assistance - by creating a church support fund for families in crisis. Assistance with housing, clothing, and food.

Support in education and employment.

- Mandatory integration into ministry. Involving single mothers in church ministry, worship services, and various projects.
- Recognising their leadership potential and providing opportunities to serve in areas where they can bear spiritual fruit.

This is only a small part of what local churches can do. It is important to remember that accepting single mothers and their children is not an act of social loyalty and charity but a manifestation of the very essence of the Gospel, in which God accepts everyone, heals their wounds, forgives them and gives them new hope. A church that cares for and accepts single mothers becomes a living testimony of God's love and justice. Caring for them is not a secondary ministry but an expression of the central mission of the Church: "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Accepting, caring for, and supporting single mothers is a practical manifestation of the Gospel, a path to healing not only individual lives but also the entire church community.

Single mothers in the churches of the post-Soviet Islamic republics are not a "weak link" in the community of believers but a source of strength, faith, and inspiration. Their presence is a challenge to rethink the church's attitude toward the vulnerable and marginalised. A church that opens its doors to these women becomes closer to the heart of Christ, who said, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). By accepting single mothers as full sisters and ministers, the Church not only strengthens itself from within, but also reveals to society the light of the Gospel—a light that destroys prejudice and opens the way to true freedom in Christ.⁸

8. Bill Gaultiere, "Women as Pastors, Elders, and Leaders in Bible-Based Churches," *Soul Shepherding*, accessed August 10, 2025. <https://www.soulshepherding.org/women-pastors-elders-leaders-bible-based-christian-churches/>.

3. LACK OF SPACE FOR WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

In Jürgen Moltmann's words, "The church should be a sign of the future kingdom of God," where equality and freedom become the norm.⁹ One of the most obvious problems is the structural limitation of women's participation in leadership. In many denominations, women are not allowed to enter the priesthood or other forms of leadership ministry, such as preaching, pastoring and even membership in church councils. This limitation is often explained by tradition, theological views or a certain understanding of the role of women in church history. However, in modern times, this situation raises questions about justice and equality in the body of Christ, which, according to the Apostle Paul, "is neither male nor female" (Galatians 3:28). This truth was supported by Martin Luther, who proclaimed the "priesthood of all believers," teaching that men and women are equal before God and free to follow their God-given calling. This teaching gave a new meaning to work and family life, raising them to a spiritually significant level. As a result of the Reformation, women were given opportunities to study and participate in the ministry.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the church hierarchy remained predominantly male dominated. It is known that many reformers such as John Calvin expanded general education but women were not allowed at the highest levels of training for ministry. Thus, until the 20th century, most Protestant denominations restricted pastoral and church leadership to men. It is only in recent decades that many communities have begun to rethink these norms.¹¹

This raises the direct question as to why several men today, whom people are willing to follow voluntarily refuse to take positions of

9. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977), 197-198.

10. Karin Spiecker Stetina, "What the Reformation Did and Didn't Do for Women," *The Good Book Blog*, Talbot School of Theology Faculty Blog, Biola University, accessed August 10, 2025, <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2017/what-the-reformation-did-and-didn-t-do-for-women>.

11. Stetina, "What the Reformation."

leadership and, are finding reasons not to become leaders or are afraid to take on responsibility? The Book of Judges, or more precisely the parable of the trees told by Jotham in chapter 9, will help us answer this question. Unfortunately, we will not be able to examine that in the context of this chapter, but we will focus on the prophetic meanings of this parable. I believe that this parable can be applied to leadership, although anyone who reads this passage from the Bible will find several other important lessons.¹²

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel never lacked leaders, but at the same time, there was always an urgent need for leaders who would think not of themselves but of the people, who would live according to the needs of the people, who would be true servants of the people (Jeremiah 23:1-4). There has always been a need for a strong (spiritually) and godly leader in Israel. Such leaders have always been in short supply. The parable of the trees is a kind of prophetic warning. In a strict contextual reading, it is addressed to the inhabitants of Shechem, but prophetically it can be addressed to all of us, in various areas of our lives. Once upon a time, the trees decided to choose and anoint a king from among themselves. The first tree they asked to be their leader was the olive tree. However, the olive tree considered that it was already useful to the trees because it produced very valuable oil with which kings and the sick were anointed and did not want to give up its useful work to wander among the trees (Judges 9:10). Then the trees turned to the fig tree and offered to become their leader, but the fig tree, being useful in that it produced sweet fruit (figs) that brought pleasure to people, did not want to give up its sweetness (Judges 9:11). Having been refused by the fig tree and the olive tree, the trees turned to the vine with the same proposal. The vine was also very useful, for it produced juice that gladdened the hearts of “gods and men,” and did not want to give up its craft (Judges 9:12-13). After the refusal of their useful brethren, the trees turned to the barren thornbush. The thornbush not only willingly agreed to the proposal, but also burst out with impossible promises at first, saying, “Come, rest

12. Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), chap. 8, Kindle.

in my shade” (nothing can grow in the shade), and then followed with a threat, saying, “If not fire will come out of the thornbush and burn” (Judges 9:15). While the other trees refused leadership because they already provided a certain benefit, the thornbush, being barren and useless, agreed and began to promise and threaten things it did not have. A logical question arises: what could all this mean? Leadership is more than just being good, responsible, and useful. In fact, leadership is the courage to take on the “burden of responsibility” not only for what we do, but also for others and what they do. It is not only the ability and courage to take the right and necessary step at the right time but also the courage to live with the consequences of that decision, especially when the consequences of our decision are not what we expect or anticipate. In our context if men are not going to do it, then give women the opportunity and space to lead. We must allow worthy women leaders to take our positions or the “thornbush” will lead.¹³

On the one hand, it poses a penetrating prophetic question to all those (especially men) who are already useful in some way, who have found their niche in life and responsibly occupy it: is this the limit of their capabilities? On the other hand, this parable is a prophetic warning to those who have not dared and refused to think further and dream bigger. It warns that if they do not dare, or at least give this opportunity to women, then those whose daring is destructive and whose ambitions and desires are perverted will take over. After such people rule, there will be ruin and chaos. The church may lose the enormous potential inherent in women's leadership, spiritual gifts, and experience. Furthermore, ignoring women's needs and treating them unjustly contradicts the very Gospel message of love, mercy, and justice.

Historically, Protestantism has combined the thesis of ontological equality of the sexes while maintaining the institutional dominance of men. The Reformation gave women more status but did not dismantle the patriarchal structures of the Church. Many women's

13. Walzer, *In God's Shadow*, chap. 8.

monasteries were closed, which reduced educational opportunities for women, and none of the major Protestant denominations immediately made women equal in worship. In summary, we can say that the Reformation partially reduced the gender hierarchy but the fundamental system of restrictions remained. Moreover, today we see spiritual apathy among men, who no longer want to take on anything “extra” beyond what they already do. Women, on the contrary, are ready, willing, and eager to serve in various areas of the church leadership. Their dedication is inspiring and instills confidence for the future of the Church.¹⁴

4. THEOLOGICAL ALTERNATIVE: EQUALITY AND JUSTICE IN LEADERSHIP.

What could be the alternative? Some theologians and church practitioners suggest the need for revising traditional roles and opening new forms of ministry and leadership for women. This is not simply a matter of “allowing” women to participate in certain ministries but a deeper challenge—building a theology of equality. This perspective is based on biblical evidence:

- The image of God as the foundation of dignity (Genesis 1:27), affirms the creation of man and woman in the image of God, without mentioning the superiority of one sex over the other. Here we see ontological equality—the equal value and purpose of the sexes. And a misunderstanding of justice as a key category of the Kingdom of God.¹⁵
- A prophetic vision of justice (Deuteronomy 10:18, Isaiah 1:17) links righteousness with the protection of vulnerable groups. Women, like other marginalised groups in society, are included in God's call for justice.
- Proclaiming the Gospel as radical equality (Acts 1:8, 14; 2:4). At

14. Spiecker, “What the Reformation Did.”

15. Walzer, *In God's Shadow*, chap. 3.

Pentecost, Christ made women and men equal when all were baptised with the Holy Spirit for the sake of witnessing to Christ. Therefore, everyone who can speak should witness to Christ.

- The Church as a community of mutual service (1 Corinthians 12). The model of the Body of Christ assumes that every member, regardless of gender, plays an irreplaceable role. Excluding women from ministry and leadership not only violates justice but also impoverishes the Church spiritually. Christ breaks down dividing walls, including barriers between men and women. Justice in the church is not informal equality, but the restoration of God's plan for partnership and mutual support.¹⁶
- Practical implications of the theological alternative would require a rethinking of church leadership. Women's access to pastoral ministry in churches needs to be expanded. Women ministers involved in pastoral ministry have a profound impact on people in churches.¹⁷ They shape the spiritual climate, pass on the faith and lay the foundation for future generations in churches. For young women, this means an increase in their self-esteem and value in any community.¹⁸ For young men, it means respect and the right attitude towards women as equals. This is how a healthy and mature society is built, where Christ is the Centre, not cultural prejudices and patriarchal foundations.

Conclusion

An analysis of the issue of women's leadership in contemporary churches shows that this topic remains complex and multifaceted. The

16. Craig S. Keener, Paul, *Women and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), chap.3 and 4, Kindle.

17. Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper One, 1995), chap. 6, Kindle

18. Kjesbo and Grenz, *Women in the Church*, chap. 8.

lack of an inclusive understanding is related not only to theological traditions but also to the socio-cultural heritage of the region, where patriarchal models continue to exert a strong influence. Nevertheless, contemporary practice shows that women's ministry is no longer a marginal phenomenon but plays an important and recognised role in the life of communities.

Women's leadership in the Church cannot be seen as a quest for power or an attempt to imitate secular structures. Its essence lies in our obedience to God's calling, a willingness to serve, and a shared responsibility for the spiritual formation of the community. Where women have the opportunity to use their gifts, the Church becomes more whole, harmonious, and capable of responding to the challenges of the modern world.

Recognising women's leadership is not a concession to cultural trends, but a return to the Gospel understanding of freedom, equality, and dignity of every person as bearing the image of God. When women and men serve together, the Church reveals to the world the true image of Christ's leadership—a leadership of love, sacrifice, and unity.

In my humble opinion, women's leadership in the Church has tremendous potential to contribute to its growth. However, this requires not only theological reform, but also a transformation of all church practices. Thus, the future of the churches in the post-Soviet space largely depends on how well they are able to overcome the legacy of exclusion and distrust of women's ministry. The integration of women's leadership not only opens up new opportunities for church life but also makes the Church a space where every voice is heard, every gift is sought after, and Christ is reflected in the fullness of His Body.

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07

Oppression or Tradition? How Patriarchal Norms Shape Gender Inequality in the Context of Churches in Myanmar

~ Nant Hnin Hnin Aye (Snow Aye)

Introduction

Myanmar is a Southeast Asian nation rich in cultural heritage and religious diversity. It is a country with 135 different ethnic groups and multicultural practices. Buddhism is a state religion and Christianity, Islam, and other religions are minority religions. Churches play a significant role in the spiritual, social, and educational lives of their communities. However, beneath the surface of vibrant worship and missionary zeal lies a deeply embedded gender disparity. The question that arises is whether this inequality is the result of biblical tradition or a reflection of patriarchal cultural oppression? This article explores the ways in which patriarchal norms shape gender inequality in the church context in Myanmar, examining the interplay between tradition and oppression, and proposing pathways toward a more inclusive ecclesial community.

Defining Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Religious Contexts

Patriarchy, broadly defined, is a social system in which men hold primary power and dominate roles of political leadership, moral authority, and social privilege. In religious contexts, patriarchal norms often manifest as male-dominated leadership structures, exclusive theological interpretations, and gendered expectations for

participation and behaviour. Within the traditional Christian churches in Myanmar, these patterns are not merely cultural but are often sacralised through specific interpretations of the Scripture, especially in the New Testament “Household Codes.” This creates a dynamic where gender inequality is not only tolerated but justified as divinely-ordained in their interpretations.¹ Therefore, the need for reinterpretation of the concept of gender inequality in the tradition of Christian interpretation in Myanmar is the imperative task.

Historical and Cultural Roots of Patriarchy in Myanmar

The society in Myanmar has two sides: one side is rich in natural resources and access to power and privileges but on the other side the vulnerable and marginalised groups experience injustice and discrimination in the social, political and religious spheres. As Myanmar has been deeply embedded in the patriarchal and hierarchical culture, so, the church is also influenced by it. The Church, without criticising the cultural teachings that discriminate women, sadly, accepts them as cultural norms. Though I am educated and work as a lecturer in the Anglican Bible college, I am always in the second class to speak during social and religious settings. The role of women is limited and the opportunities for women are akin to the crumbs from the table of male leadership. Women are taught to be silent, only to speak and laugh softly, and to walk slowly, as virtuous feminine norms. Women are marginalised and rejected for leadership roles. As a result, many women internalise these ideas and think that they are physically, psychologically, and spiritually inferior to men. Majority of women uncritically accept males’ supremacy and females’ inferiority at home, in religious and academic spheres, and in the larger social community. The majority of women accept that they are of a lower status across all spheres of life and believe in their inferiority to men as natural.

1. Eh Tar Gay, “*Authority and Submission in Some New Testament letters: Postcolonial Feminist Reading from Myanmar*” (PhD diss., The University of Birmingham, 2011), 6-7.

Myanmar's traditional gender norms are rooted in both Buddhist and ethnic cultural values, which have historically positioned women as caretakers and moral supporters rather than public leaders. Buddhist culture is rooted in patriarchy and hierarchy. Women are created as a lesser form of men in the oral tradition. Myanmar's culture is based on the ideology of holiness of male, "*phon*," which is linked to a power and authority symbol. Men are holy and only a holy human (only man) can be a son of Buddha. Burmese religion and cultural teachings also influence the rejection of women ordination and the leadership role of women in public space, because women have no "*phon*." The ministry formation of missionaries justified the superiority of male in society and religion which caused women to be inferior to men in every space.²

Some cultural practices limit the human rights of women. For example, women could not enter a certain area to offer flowers or water at holy place (to the Buddha statue) in the pagoda. So, women need assistance of men to make this offering. Likewise, in some rural areas of the church, women sit in one side and men sit on the other side. Then, during the eucharist time, men take communion first and only after that are the women given communion. These cultural practices defy the very definition of equality, dignity and protection of human rights.

Patriarchy and hierarchical culture

With the advent of Western missionary work in the 19th and 20th centuries, Christian churches adopted many hierarchical models from their sending countries. Ironically, while Western missionaries introduced the gospel and education to many women, they also imposed gender-biased ecclesial structures that mirrored the male-dominated church systems of the West. For example, the role of men in the Church enables them to receive ordination and only priests are

2. Aye New, "Women's Exodus in Myanmar," in *Theology under the Bo Tree : Contextual Theologies in Myanmar Vol.1*, eds. Samuel Ngun Ling and Daniel K. Zau Nan (Yangon: MIT, 2014), 165-179.

allowed to preach and teach the Bible, while the role of women is only to 'teach' in women's group and Sunday School.

During the colonial and postcolonial periods, Christian communities often aligned themselves with broader societal structures, reinforcing rather than challenging existing patriarchy. Male leadership in churches became an ideal norm, with women largely relegated to supportive roles in women's fellowships, choirs, Sunday school teaching and in the kitchen.

Manifestations of Patriarchal Norms in Churches in Myanmar

In practice, patriarchal norms in churches in Myanmar are evident in leadership selection, worship practices, and organisational hierarchies. Leadership roles such as pastors, elders, or bishops are predominantly held by men. Even in denominations that allow women to preach or teach, there is often an unspoken bias against women in authoritative roles. Men include women in Boards or in management committees so as to balance gender representation, but not willingly, nor out of respect, nor out of the desire for gender equality. Women's voices in decision-making are limited and their contributions are often viewed as secondary or supplementary. Women are marginalised in the church although the church claims to practice egalitarianism.

Testimonies from Christian women in various regions of Myanmar reveal recurring themes: exclusion from leadership, lack of mentorship opportunities, and theological justifications for their marginalisation. Women often express frustration at being trained in theology or ministry, only to be barred from pastoral roles due to their gender. In many Christian denominations, women are still not ordained. Even in some denominations that allow ordination of women, there are certain rules, such as age limitation, more criteria to fulfil than men. In some denominations, female theological graduates are assigned to children's ministry, women's ministry or administrative roles, regardless of their gifting or calling.

The sacred texts of Christian religion and gender issues

In the Church tradition, sacred texts are often interpreted and used as tools to justify gender discrimination, or as a proof-text for limiting the ministry of women in the church. Misinterpretation of the texts by male religious leaders pushes women to subordinate positions or deem them as second class members in society by reinforcing the supremacy of men in the church. Key passages frequently cited to justify male-only leadership include 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, which call for women to remain silent or not to assume authority over men. However, these verses, when removed from their cultural and literary contexts, can lead to misinterpretation. Scholars have pointed out that Paul's letters addressed specific issues in particular churches and that his apparent restrictions were not universal commands.

Galatians 3:28 offers a counterpoint: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This verse suggests a theological foundation for equality in Christ that transcends cultural, social and gender boundaries. Furthermore, the early church included female leaders such as Phoebe (Romans 16:1), Junia (Romans 16:7), and Priscilla (Acts 18:26), who played significant roles in ministry and teaching.

Hermeneutics, the discipline of biblical interpretation, plays a critical role in how Scripture is applied in church contexts. A patriarchal hermeneutic tends to reinforce male authority, while an egalitarian hermeneutic seeks to honour the inclusive spirit of the gospel. In Myanmar, the lack of access to theological education and resources for women contributes to the perpetuation of patriarchal interpretations.

Consequences of Gender Inequality in the Church

The marginalisation of women in the church has far-reaching consequences. Spiritually, it stifles the development and use of God-given gifts among half of the church population. It communicates a distorted image of God's justice and inclusivity, particularly to younger generations who are increasingly sensitive to issues of gender equity.

Socially and emotionally, gender inequality in the church contributes to a culture of silence and subordination. Women may feel discouraged due to the lack of opportunities after pursuing theological education or leadership training. In some cases, it even leads to psychological harm when women are told their value is limited to their roles as wives, mothers, or caregivers. Though women and men graduate with the same degree from the Bible school, once they graduate all the men can join the ordination programme, but women can only join the catechist training. Even some Christian communities encourage graduate women to become a priest's wife and to support their husband's ministry. Traditionally, the older generation accepts that is also some kind of ministry for the women in the Christian community. The tradition is so strong about submission to male leadership which they interpret as a virtue of Christian woman. Therefore, some Christian women believe that the theology of self-sacrifice and obedience are the ideals that they are taught to live for.

Gender notions are highly ignored both in colonial-era and current times as the male dominated ministry and hierarchical culture works in perfect collaboration with colonial modality. Women are in a subaltern category because they are suppressed by the dual domination of the patriarchal and hierarchical system in the social and religious spheres. Colonialism provided the opportunity for many women to be educated and privileged in the church community with a ministry role among women's group compared to other religions in Myanmar. However, women were voiceless and excluded from the position of leadership and authority during the formation of Christianity in Myanmar.

The exclusion of women from leadership and ordination ministry could be linked to the psychological inferiority of men which makes them feel that women will take over their positions or women are better in the pastoral ministry than men. Women have to try harder than their male counterparts in the ministry in proving themselves to be qualified. This deprives the church of diverse perspectives essential for effective ministry. In an increasingly complex world, churches that embrace gender diversity are better positioned to address issues such as poverty, domestic violence, and youth engagement.

Sexism and Gender in Myanmar Today

There is a proverb in Myanmar that says, “suffering in the present life is the failure of the work of deeds or merits from the past.” This influences the worldview of people in Myanmar who never think of, or link suffering to an unjust system. The opinion that current life’s situation is the result or consequence of the past life, never critiques or questions whether people’s struggles are a result of an oppressive system. Even some Christian preachers acknowledge Myanmar’s cultural symbols, norms, and beliefs, and sometimes even quote it in their preaching, linking it with the pre-existence of human sin. In addition, ‘sin’ is always related to Eve and to women generally in traditional Christian beliefs.³ For example, the four women in Matthew’s genealogy are recognised as sinners because of their sinful status in the Hebrew Bible tradition whereas some traditions reinterpret them as an instrument of God’s salvation, and the role model of faithful women.⁴ Christian women in Myanmar experience psychological and physical trauma as a result of the patriarchal culture and system, both from the church internally and from the external culture.

An historical example is seen in events during World War II. In the history of Myanmar, outrage against local women during the Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945 is unimaginable. Despite bringing a large number of women from Korean and Chinese backgrounds, a small number of Burmese women were also forced into the role of ‘comfort women’ for the Japanese troops’ recreation.⁵ During that time, Anglican women were accused of being British allies and executed by Japanese troops for professing faith, and for their actions

3. Anna May Say Pa, “Because of Eve: Reading Genesis 2 and 3 from Feminist Perspectives,” *Engagement* 5 (2005): 31-36.

4. See discussion in Baby Parambi, *The Discipleship of the Women in the Gospel According to Matthew: An Exegetical Theological Study of Matthew 27:51b-56, 57-61 and 28:1-10* (Rome : Gregorian University Press, 2003), 63-73.

5. Donald M. Seekins, “Japanese Occupation,” in *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*, ed. Donald M. Seekins (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2006), 231.

of rejecting the Japanese occupation, especially opposing the use of women for sexual pleasure. By comparing women and male priest prisoners during that time, male prisoners who were 'Christian priests' were released because of their status but women were executed. However, people easily forgot, and never commemorated, the Anglican women's martyrdom in the church. This is a sad truth. Women sacrificing their lives during the Japanese occupation were Christ-like in their martyrdom. They were faithful heroes who resisted evil power. The barbaric action of Japanese troops taking Burmese women as 'comfort women' was stopped by the heroic actions of these women who stood up against it, resulting in only a few Burmese women being taken. Owing to their sacrifices, many Burmese women were saved from a hell-like place – the 'comfort women's camp.' Although they had no status in the community like male Christian priests, they were heroes for the community, even if patriarchy had pushed them to the margins.

Women's lives are broken. Suffering always accompanies women and that their status is linked with sinfulness is a major discrimination in Myanmar's tradition and church tradition. The concept that females can pollute male institutions is very much infused in the male's psychological mindset in Myanmar.⁶ The majority of male institutions accept that women are culturally and theologically considered to be the weaker sex, women's access to ordination and leadership levels in equal partnership with male priests will not be possible as men themselves are worried that women's participation in ordained institutions will bring in undesirable "feminised" models of the church.⁷

6. Ma Mi Mi Kaing, *The World of Burmese Family* (London: Zed Press, 1984), 71.

7. The Anglican church in Myanmar is one of the male led institutional groups among Christian denominations. Although Myanmar Baptist convention practices women ordination, the final decision is made by the local council with limitations based on women's marital status and age. Not every ethnic churches agrees on women's ordination yet. However, some independent churches and Pentecostal churches in Myanmar are more open to women's ordination and they have no doctrinal issues in ordaining women. See, Pau Lian Mang, "The Church in Myanmar and Women ordination," in *Theology Under the Bo Tree: Contextual Theologies in Myanmar*, ed. Thomas Cung Bik (Yangon, Myanmar: MIT, 2017), 224-226.

In rural churches, the practice of subordinated womanhood is stronger than in urban churches where men and women sit separately in the churches, men receive communion first, traditions and customs always give priority to men, even young or old, in the first place. The leaders of the church do not initiate any dialogue within the Anglican tradition in Myanmar where the impact of cultural practices may be practised in a more inclusive way. Some Anglican bishops publicly announced that a woman can reach certain positions at the leadership level if she is qualified but could not participate in ordination. However, she has to submit to and be obedient to the bishop's authority if she wants to pursue ministry work in a leadership position.⁸ The concept of sexism in Myanmar's Anglican church relates to the discrimination against women's rights, the neglecting of equal opportunity which have been exploited by the dominant male leaders.

Surprisingly, religious scriptures are invoked in support of women's second class citizenship. Some bible passages reveal many discriminatory customs which are linked to the hierarchical culture of the community of the time which degrades women and extols the myth of male superiority and female inferiority.⁹ The practice of male hierarchical structure in religious institutions is deeply entrenched in the culture of Myanmar. The traditional beliefs of a man's power, glory, holiness (*phon*) and a woman's impurity are the primal basis for a religious hierarchical structure. Therefore, women are excluded and marginalised from the religious and cultural spheres. Women's full participation in religious sacred places and ceremonies including ordination, preaching, and serving at the communion are restricted in many faith traditions. Such practices institutionalise gender hierarchy

8. Though some bishops disagree about this undocumented traditional norm, they are silent because it does not count as a male problem. It is seen as a women's issue and is not a concern for the patriarchal institution.

9. Women are treated as man's property (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:17-21; Genesis 18:12); laws on inheritance (Numbers 27:1-11); man's right to divorce (Deuteronomy 21:1); law of ritual purity (Leviticus 12:1-5, 15-19ff); women confined to home (1Samuel 1:23-24; 2:19; Proverbs 18:6-20); women's head covering (1Corinthians 11:2-16); women's silence in the church (1Corinthians 14:26-40).

and normalise unequal power dynamics.

Patriarchal institutionalised religious groups also practice the authority of the religious leader in the hierarchical structure. The practice of the three-fold ministry structure of deacon, priest and bishop in Myanmar strongly colludes with males' hierarchical domination, and excludes women's participation in the ministry. The role of the religious leader is of a superior status as he has authority and power to change and create law and order in the community. Aye Nwe also critiques that the concept of *phon* (power, glory, holiness) in male status is a source of oppression of women in Christian community.¹⁰

Most of the women theological educators agree on the major impact of Myanmar's cultural norms in Myanmar's Christian interpretation and the imperative need of reconstruction from a women's liberation perspective. Thus, exploitation and discrimination on gender and sexism that intersect with cultural traditions of *phon* and defilement contribute to the oppression of women's ministry in the Anglican church in Myanmar.

Pathways Toward Diakonia in the ministry

Addressing gender inequality in the church requires both theological and practical shifts. There is also need to change the way Christians conceptualise the superiority of male image in the Bible that reinforce the hierarchy and patriarchy. First, there must be a re-examination of biblical texts in their historical and cultural contexts. Seminaries and Bible schools should include courses on gender studies in biblical theology and practical areas highlighting the roles of women in Scripture and church history. Theological education is the backbone of the Christian community. It provides the Christian community with spiritual direction and an understanding of faith. It continues to engage the socio-cultural challenges and to edify the formation of

10. Aye Nwe, "Gender Hierarchy in Myanmar," in *Theology Under the Bo Tree: Contextual Theologies in Myanmar Vol. 2*, ed. Thomas Cung Bik (Yangon, Myanmar: MIT, 2017), 244, 249.

Christian living. Therefore, theological education is a vital platform for the concept and understanding of Diakonia (service) in gender equality.

Building upon this foundation, seminarians should also develop a deeper comprehension of **gender balance** and **gender justice**. Gender balance refers to the equitable inclusion of both men and women in theological reflection, leadership, and ministry, ensuring that both perspectives are valued in the interpretive process. Gender justice, on the other hand, moves beyond mere inclusion toward the transformation of unjust structures and attitudes that perpetuate gender-based inequality within the church and society. Ultimately, this process should lead to **gender empowerment**, wherein both men and women are equipped and encouraged to participate fully and equally in the life and mission of the Church. Empowerment from a theological standpoint involves affirming the imago Dei (the image of God) in every human being, emphasising that both male and female share equally in divine dignity, calling, and purpose.

Therefore, theological education must intentionally integrate gender studies into biblical hermeneutics, systematic theology, and pastoral formation. Such integration not only enriches students' interpretive competence but also contributes to the development of a more inclusive and just Christian community that reflects the gospel's liberating message for all people.

Second, churches should actively support and mentor women leaders. Concerted efforts are required towards gender inclusion. This includes creating spaces for women to preach, teach, and participate in decision-making processes. Denominational traditions must be revisited to ensure that they reflect a commitment to biblical equality. Women are active agents of Diakonia services in the Church in most of the crucial diaconal services of visitation to the sick, compassionate ministry, missional activities, and evangelism trips. Women play not only a major role in fundraising for these activities, but also actively participate in all these programmes in Myanmar. Women are the backbone of the Church. Women are like Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is not merely helping Jesus' ministry but participating in God's mission.

Third, Christian communities in Myanmar must engage in honest dialogue about the difference between cultural tradition and scriptural truth. While honouring cultural heritage is important, it should not come at the expense of biblical justice. Churches can play a prophetic role in challenging societal norms that oppress women.

Finally, international partnerships can provide training, resources, and encouragement for women in ministry. Exchange programmes, scholarships, and global networks can amplify the voices of Myanmar's female theologians and pastors.

Diakonia and Gender Equality in the New Testament

The New Testament demonstrates that diakonia—a concept encompassing service, ministry, and mission—is fundamentally inclusive and Spirit-empowered. Contrary to later ecclesial restrictions that often-confined leadership to men, the earliest Christian communities recognised both women and men as participants in the ministry of the gospel. Several key passages reveal the theological grounding for gender equality in diakonia.

In Acts 2:18, Peter cites Joel's eschatological promise to explain the Pentecostal event: "Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit... and they will prophesy." Prophecy, a central form of proclamation in early Christianity, is extended universally. The Spirit thus removes gender distinctions as determinative of ministerial authority.¹¹ The early Christian community thereby embodied a radical departure from patriarchal cultural norms, an early practice of the prophetic role of women in the church at Pentecost.

This inclusivity is further evident in Acts 1:14, which depicts the disciples "all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus." The mention of women situates them within the formative prayer life of the community,

11. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 79–80.

demonstrating that female participation was constitutive rather than peripheral to the emerging ecclesia.¹² In Acts 1:16, the Greek term *adelphoi* could be translated to 120 numbers of brothers and sisters according to the context of the text. These 120 *adelphoi* profess the good news on the Pentecost day, which Peter has mentioned also included women in his preaching. The book of Acts maintains the equality among the remaining followers of Jesus and the Twelve to refer to the larger body of believers, “the church.” In the body of Jesus Christ, women were engaged in the ministry of the early church and presented as leaders in their communities. Moreover, women serve as exemplars of faithful discipleship. Women are performing things that disciples are expected to do. Their actions align with the priorities of the ministry of the early church community (Acts 2:42-47).

The second example is in the case of Lydia, in Acts 16:11–15, 40 which illustrates women’s diaconal agency in mission. As a prosperous merchant, Lydia not only embraced the gospel but also provided hospitality, making her home the locus of the Philippian church.¹³ Her leadership underscores the multifaceted nature of diakonia, which included spiritual witness, economic patronage, and social influence. Acts records Lydia in terms of her social and religious status, because it is not common for a woman at that time to have a professional occupation outside the home. Moreover, Acts invites the readers to see the connection between Lydia’s faith and action towards the good news of Jesus by her subsequent actions toward Paul and his coworkers. Lydia responds quickly and takes action to Paul’s request, “come and help,” the sense of urgency. Therefore, the manner of listening and responding to the calling are the signs of discipleship.

Finally, Romans 16:1–10 provides explicit recognition of women in ecclesial offices. Paul commends Phoebe as a diakonos of the church in Cenchrea (v.1), indicating an official ministerial role rather than a

12. Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 116.

13. Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 297–301.

generic act of service.¹⁴ Priscilla, frequently named before her husband Aquila, is recognised as a teacher of Apollos (v.3; cf. Acts 18:26). Junias is described as “outstanding among the apostles” (v.7), a phrase long debated but now widely affirmed as evidence of female apostolic authority.¹⁵ Other women—Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis—are acknowledged as fellow labourers (*kopiō*) in the Lord, a term Paul applies to his own apostolic labour (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:10).

Romans 16:1 serves as a compelling affirmation of women’s roles in ministry: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae.” This verse affirms that women held leadership positions in the early church, setting a precedent that cannot be ignored. Paul acknowledged the work of Phoebe when she carried the letter of Paul to the Roman church which became one of the important letters in the Bible. The Apostle Paul entrusted Phoebe and she did valuable work, much of which could never have been done effectively by a man. For example, John Mark refused to join Paul and Paul was unhappy about Mark leaving him (Acts 13:13, 15:37-40). Church leaders today argue so much about whether or not women should be given the same ministry as men. They should read carefully and re-examine how Paul appreciated, praised and recorded the work of Phoebe in the Bible.

Together, these texts articulate a theology of diakonia that transcends gender. Service in the early church was Spirit-given, had ecclesial recognition, and was missionally oriented. The inclusion of women as deacons, apostles, teachers, and patrons indicates that gender equality was not incidental, but integral to the New Testament vision of ministry.

Theologically, this paradigm challenges contemporary ecclesial structures that marginalise women. To recover the New Testament understanding of diakonia is to affirm that the Spirit equips both men and women without distinction, calling the church to an inclusive

14. Peter Lampe, “The Roman Christians of Romans 16,” in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 216–230.

15. Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 68–85.

practice of ministry that is faithful to its origins.

Conclusion

The question of whether patriarchal norms in Myanmar's churches are based on oppression or tradition is complex. While some practices may be rooted in cultural tradition, they often function as forms of oppression when they limit women's full participation in the life of the church. Scriptures, when rightly interpreted, does not support gender-based exclusion but calls for unity, justice, and the full use of every believer's gifts.

Moving forward, the church in Myanmar has an opportunity to rediscover its identity as a community that reflects the inclusive and liberating message of Jesus Christ. This requires courage, humility, and a willingness to let go of inherited biases in favour of God's greater vision for His people—male and female, serving together in love and truth.

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08

Gender Equality: Biblical Mandate for the Church to Rise and Lead

~ Mitaly Malakar

Begum is a Christian convert whose life bears powerful testimony to God's redeeming grace. I first met her at a shelter home, where she came to share her story to encourage the rescued girls to adopt a better way of life. At the age of seven, she received a Bible from her neighbour. As she grew older, she married and became the mother of two daughters. Tragically, after the death of her husband, severe hardship and vulnerability led her into a brothel, where she was forced to live as a sex worker. During those dark and painful years, the Bible became her constant companion a source of light, comfort, and hope amid suffering. With great courage and faith, Rokeya Begum eventually left the brothel, bringing her two young grandsons with her. Later, she and her grandsons accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

I met her again sometime later, not in a shelter, but in her own home, where a house church service was taking place. There was a significant change in her life. I once saw her as one of the most vulnerable human beings, who has now become a minister of the Gospel and her grandson is helping us in the ministry. Her life stands as a powerful example of transformation, showing how God can restore, heal, and use anyone for His glory, regardless of their past.

The transformation in Rokeya Begum's life did not happen by her effort alone; the people around her played a vital role in this journey. They accepted her just as Jesus accepted women of questionable character, offering grace rather than judgment. Through their love and support, she was encouraged to rebuild her life. They accepted her testimony

as a powerful tool for life transformation, and the community actively attended and invited other people like me to join the home church services held in her house.

There are many women like her waiting to serve the Lord, looking for a welcoming heart and opportunity. But they are mostly detained in the box of the word 'FEMALE' limiting their opportunities in every way. Gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation and forced marriage, continues to affect Christian women and girls all over the world. But we also fail to recognise that not giving enough opportunity for women is also violence. It is not enough just to treat the women in a proper manner. Even within the Christian community, equality remains a struggle. Many churches and families limit women's opportunities in the church, ministry, or leadership positions.

What is the Situation in Bangladesh?

Bangladesh is no different from other countries; unfortunately, Christian women are subjected to inequality in their families, society, and churches. Women are neglected and have been told that they are not allowed to teach, preach and lead. There might be a general perception that the Bangladeshi Christian community is in a good position to care for women. However, the reality is that the women do not enjoy equality whether it is in the Church, Christian society or in the family.

Gender inequality in the Church and amongst members

In most churches, women's participation is restricted to singing in the choir, making announcements, teaching children, or preparing food for fellowship. This is a far cry from the biblical vision of women as Spirit-filled leaders, pastors, teachers, and evangelists. In family and ministry, women are often seen as weaker than men.

Women's contributions to ministry are vital, and recognising their God-given calling strengthens the entire church. Yet, in many denominations, women are still viewed only as lay members. Most churches never allow women to be pastors, preachers or leaders.

Although some denominations accept women as nuns or even as licensed or ordained pastors, they often do not encourage them to take on meaningful roles such as preaching/teaching in the church, being part of mission work, or taking up leadership positions. Additionally, very few pastors preach about women's empowerment from the Bible to inspire and uplift the church. Many also avoid preaching about abuse against women and children, fearing it may offend members and reduce attendance.

Even when women serve faithfully, neither the church nor society offers proper recognition to female pastors. Although they perform pastoral work, they are rarely acknowledged simply as "pastors"; instead, they are labeled 'female pastors' as if the title carries less value. Mostly, women pastors do not get opportunities to perform baptisms, administer the Lord's Supper, conduct funerals, and fulfill other pastoral responsibilities. If they do, they often face significant obstacles from believers. Female pastors are rarely given the respect and honour they truly deserve. At times, they are presented as symbolic figures to suggest that gender inequality has been addressed. Yet, many women in ministry continue to face the same negligence and lack of recognition as before.

Also, a pastor's wife always serves alongside her husband, but she is often not welcomed to preach or included in decision-making meetings for the church. Is the pastor expected to care for the flock alone? Does his wife also not play a significant role in nurturing and guiding the sheep?

If the Church does not proclaim this truth, who will? If the Church cannot model healthy masculinity and respect for women, how can we expect communities to change?

Female inequality in homes and communities

As human beings created in God's own image, every woman and girl deserves equal respect and opportunity to participate in family decisions, financial freedom, and support to serve and develop her full potential. However, many families fail to recognise that women already carry a heavy burden by managing both household responsibilities and

professional work. In many homes, domestic work is still viewed as a woman's sole responsibility, and women are often not given the time or space to pursue their personal interests or passions. Many women have a sincere desire to serve the Lord, yet they often receive little or no support from their families to manage their time for ministry. What they often need is understanding, shared responsibility, appreciative words, and practical support. To have someone willing to help carry some of their load so they can have time to rest, reflect, and nurture their personal well-being. With this support, women can also freely offer their God-given talents in service to the Lord and the community.

The truth of God's Word cannot be denied but it calls for an approach with open hearts and open minds, setting aside patriarchal cultural norms and allowing the Holy Spirit to speak clearly and to guide the Church into God's intended purpose. The question, that we cannot avoid, is whether we are trapped in traditional customs or are we willing to be set free by the truth of God's Word.

The Biblical Truth about Women in Ministry

The question of women in ministry is not just about a social role or gender equality; it is about faithfulness to God's calling and leading of the Holy Spirit. Was inequality in providing opportunities for men and women, intended by God in creation? Or are we shaping our practices by our own nature and desire, or are these inequalities simply the consequence of sin? The Scripture clearly shows that God did not plan inequality for women. He created all of creation with a purpose. If we can understand the truth of creation, we can easily find out the role of women in our ministry. God is all-knowing; He knows the past, present, and future. He knew what would happen in the Garden of Eden and throughout history, yet He still created women equal in dignity and likeness, bearing His own image and endowed with understanding and purpose.

A journey through the Bible can help us discover God's design for women, beginning at creation and continuing through the Old and New Testaments and the mission of Jesus. It is important that we

open our heart to understand and encourage women in our families, ministries, and churches.

Women are created equal to men

God created men and women with equal ability to teach, preach and lead. *“Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”* Genesis 1:26-27 (NIV). These two verses clearly state that both male and female were created in the image of God, indicating equal value and dignity. God formed male and female equally in goodness, dignity, and worth, set them apart from the rest of creation and endowed them with unique gifts. Men are not given more of God’s likeness, nor are women given less.

God described clearly His purpose and instructions for humankind using the plural pronoun “them” several times. He said, “Let them rule” (Genesis 1:26). “God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over ... every living creature” (Genesis 1:28). God spoke to both the man and the woman. Producing children, being fruitful, takes the man and woman acting together. Both male and female were told to rule and take dominion over the earth in a shared way. Both were called to develop their gifts to do God’s work on earth. God created them equal in being and equal in function. And God saw that “it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). They had equality and mutuality in working as a team.

God created man and woman equal: in unity as one body; in mutuality to work together; spiritually to reflect God’s character; in responsibility to rule over the Earth; and in intimacy without shame with each other. Rick Warren writes that “God never wastes anything. He would not give your abilities, interests, talents, gifts, personality, and life experiences unless he intended to use them for his glory. By identifying and understanding these factors you can

discover God's will for your life.”¹

The propriety of women in the eyes of the Lord

Many societies still see women primarily as helpers for men, limiting their roles. This view ignores women's full potential and individuality, hindering true equality and the recognition of women as independent and capable.

God reveals His great love and purpose for women from the very beginning of creation. In Genesis 2, Scripture unfolds God's intentional design. After placing the first man in the garden, the Lord declared, “*It is not good for the man to be alone*” (Genesis 2:18). Though Adam named every living creature, “*no suitable helper was found for him*” (Genesis 2:20), for none were like him or equal to him. Then God said, “*I will make a helper suitable for him*” (Genesis 2:18). The Hebrew word **ezer** used for ‘helper’ does not imply inferiority or subordination. Throughout the Old Testament, **ezer** is most often used to describe God Himself as the helper and deliverer of His people (Psalm 121:1–2). The word ‘ezer’ actually can indicate a superior and most often refers to **God himself as our helper** (Psalm 121). The Hebrew dictionary says that ‘ezer’ is predominantly used in reference to Israel's God. Thirteen times it declares God's ‘ability to save and deliver.’ Six times it is linked with ‘shield,’ referring to ‘divine protection afforded to Israel.’²

While Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defined ‘woman’ as ‘an adult female human being,’ the Bible gives a deeper meaning of Women. Adam called the woman as Eve. The name **Eve** comes from the Hebrew name חַוָּה (**Chavah or Havah**), **Havah** means “living” or “life-giver” (Genesis 3:20), and **Chavah** means “to live” or “to breathe.” This connection emphasises her role as the source of life. She is called this because she is “the mother of all living,” signifying Eve's role as a divine gift and blessing from God to humanity.

1. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), chap.30, Kindle.

2. Deborah M. Gill and Barbara Cavaness, *God's Women Then and Now* (Springfield, MO: Grace and Truth, 2004), 37.

After the fall, while there were consequences, God also blessed women with a purpose to serve in an important role in the path of salvation. This reveals that the woman was created not as a lesser being, but as a strong and equal partner with dignity, purpose and value. God designed women to stand alongside men to fulfill His great mission on earth.

Jesus called all men and women equally to ministry

If there is anyone that has the authority to define the place of women in ministry it should be Jesus Christ because he is the Word of God, the divine truth Himself. In the first century Jewish culture women were not allowed to testify in court, they did not have right to study the Torah under Rabbis and their voice had no value in religious or legal matters. But Jesus openly taught women and welcomed them as disciples which is evident in the gospels.

The interaction of Jesus with the Samaritan woman not only broke the social taboos by speaking to her but he engaged her in the longest theological conversation recorded in the gospels. He first explicitly revealed himself as the Messiah to her. The Samaritan woman ran into the town and proclaimed the Good News and she became the first evangelist. Jesus Himself provided her the opportunity to preach the truth.

Mary of Bethany was affirmed by Jesus for choosing to sit at His feet and learn. This incident reveals that Jesus welcomed women to learn under a rabbi and was not opposed to it. Traditionally, sitting at His feet should be reserved for male disciples (Luke 10:38-42). The matter goes deeper when Martha objected, Jesus said Mary has chosen what is better.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna not only supported Jesus's ministry but travelled with Jesus demonstrating their active and equal participation in His work (Luke 8:1-3). Most powerfully, Jesus honoured women as the first witnesses of His resurrection and commissioned them to preach the resurrection to the male disciples, before anyone else had the courage to believe it. (Matthew 28:1-10; John 20:17-18).

The Great Commission of Jesus in Matthew 28:18–20 declares:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” This command is a universal call to all believers, without any gender distinction. Jesus did not limit this mission to men alone but empowered both women and men to go, preach the gospel, make disciples, baptise, teach, and lead in His name.

All of these actions indicate that for Jesus women were not secondary in God’s kingdom but chosen and appointed to teach, preach and lead. At times women were even prioritised over men as disciples, witnesses, and partners in God’s redemptive mission.

The Holy Spirit Empowers All, Men and Women, both Equally

Throughout Scripture, women are clearly included in God’s redemptive mission. On the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed the fulfilment of God’s promise: *“I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy”* (Acts 2:17), affirming that women are equally anointed to speak and proclaim God’s word.

In Ephesians 4:1, Paul speaking to the entire body of Christ says *live a life worthy of the calling* - of ministry they have received from Christ. As the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given equally, in the same way Christ Himself gave various ministry roles apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers to equip His people for works of service and to build the Church (Ephesians 4:11-12). According to Paul, there is no gender distinction in who is equipped for ministry.

Joel’s prophecy further reiterates this foundational understanding when Peter on the day of Pentecost cites from Joel 2: 28-32 in Acts 2:17-18. It declares that in the last days, God will pour out His Spirit on “all people,” including “sons and daughters” and “servants, both men and women,” empowering them to prophesy. Furthermore, the New

Testament describes that the distribution of spiritual gifts is according to His will, regardless of gender.

Acts 2:1–4 says, *“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”* On the day of Pentecost, the Bible records that both men and women who were in the upper room were filled with the Holy Spirit. About 120 believers were baptised in the Holy Spirit, spoke in tongues, and prophesied, while those listening could understand them in their own languages (Acts 2:5–11). God did not see any difference nor discriminate between men and women, but they were all gifted and used for God’s glory. This event emphasises that God’s empowering presence and gifts are for everyone, regardless of gender. If God Himself does not withhold spiritual gifts from women, why should the Church?

A careful journey through the scripture makes it clear that the body of Christ must recognise, equip, and release women into every area of ministry. Gender equality is not a secular agenda. It is a biblical mandate. When men and women serve side by side, empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Church reflects the fullness of God’s image and advances His Kingdom with greater strength and unity.

The Apostle Paul highlights the spiritual equality of all believers in Galatians 3:28, stating, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This Scripture directly challenges gender-based limitations, affirming that in Christ, men and women are equal in value and calling. Through baptism, believers are united with Christ, breaking down all social, ethnic, and gender divisions.

Biblical Examples of God’s Calling on Women

When people were in crises God called women not as a second option or because men failed but because God chose women. When we look at the Old Testament where patriarchal norms dominated every layer of family, religion, and government, we find surprising and deeply instructive truths about women’s role and agency. God placed several women in significant spiritual and civic leadership positions. Why did

God choose women when often their voice is not recognised?

Throughout Scripture, women are seen as having an honoured place with direct access to God. In the Bible, the role of the prophet was the highest spiritual office—carrying more divine authority than even the priesthood. Prophets served as people who corrected and instructed priests, confronting spiritual corruption, denouncing injustice, and calling the people back to God (Isaiah 1:10–17; Jeremiah 7; Amos 5). Prophets appointed kings, foretold judgment, and challenged ungodly practices. While most prophets were men in a male centered culture still God also chose and valued women to carry this mantle of authority.

A few key examples are given below to help illustrate God's calling upon women and how He works through them to fulfill His purposes.

Deborah (*Judges 4 & 5*) – was a not only a prophetess but a judge and a warrior, she had both spiritual and civic authority over Israel. She spoke for God and when the time came for Israel to be delivered from oppression, Deborah did not stand behind a man. She led and men followed her instructions because they recognised that the hand of God was upon her. We need to understand from Deborah's story that she did not just have power, but she had spiritual authority. She was an example when such a role was nearly unheard of about women. All this happened because God called and appointed her.

Miriam (*Exodus 15:20*) – A prophetess who was not on the sidelines but stood beside her brothers and led Israel in times of deliverance and exile. She led Israel with songs and prophetic visions. She led worship after their deliverance from Egypt and it was the first evidence of worshipping God through songs that we experience in our everyday life.

Esther (*Esther 4:16*) – Esther's leadership facilitated the entire Jewish community coming together in obedience and faith (*Esther 4:17*). Esther's willingness to risk her life and unite her people was crucial for the nation's survival, showing the power of communal spiritual action under Godly leadership.

Anna, the Prophetess: A Woman of Faith who declared the good news. Anna recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah, praised God, and

spoke about Him to others who were waiting for the Messiah (Luke 2:38). It's the first evidence in the gospel of preaching about Jesus to others. Her prophetic role affirms that God uses faithful women to proclaim His redemptive plan.

Junia in the New Testament was an Apostle. If a women can serve as an apostle, why not as pastor, teacher or leader? Paul writes, *"Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was"* (Romans 16:7). Junia was a woman recognised as an apostle by Paul, and early church fathers. John Chrysostom, Origen, and Jerome, confirmed her significant leadership in the early church. Paul's commendation of Junia shows that he **affirmed women in leadership roles**, even at the highest level of missionary work, highlighting that God calls both men and women to serve in ministry.

In the early churches, women played crucial roles in spreading the Christian faith, with Paul openly supporting and affirming their ministry. **Phoebe** is commended as a deaconess and trusted leader who delivered Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 16:1-2). **Priscilla**, alongside **Aquila**, taught Apollos and helped guide others in understanding Scripture (Acts 18:26; Romans 16:3). Paul also recognised **Euodia and Syntyche** for their labour in the gospel and urged the church to support them (Philippians 4:2-3). **Lydia**, the first European convert, demonstrated leadership and hospitality by opening her home for worship (Acts 16:14-15, 40), as did **Nympha**, who hosted a house church (Colossians 4:15). Additionally, **Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis** were praised for their hard work in the Lord (Romans 16:12). Together, these examples show that women were essential to the mission, leadership, and growth of the early church.

What can the Church do now?

The pastor of the world's largest church, David Yonggi Cho advises churches to let women become spiritual leaders. He says, "Don't be afraid to empower women. If you ever train the women, and delegate your ministry to them, they will become tremendous messengers for

the Lord.”³ Most leaders at Cho’s Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, are women. In 2000, the congregation numbered 700,000. The church was divided into 50,000 cell groups and about 47,000 of the cell leaders were women. Also, 400 of the church’s 600 associate pastors are women. “In ministry they are equal with men,” Pastor Cho told church leaders at a conference in Italy. “They are licensed. They are ordained. They became (deacons) and elders.” The ministry of William and Catherine Booth, founders of the Salvation Army also reflect the significant role of women in ministry. William once declared, “*My best men are women.*”⁴

Billy Graham in his Message on “Women as a pastor” said that ‘God sees the hearts not the gender, leadership in God’s kingdom is not about who speaks louder or stand taller, its about who listens the closest and obeys the deepest. So whether women can pastor today or not we must first be honest about the past. God has already spoken through women. He has already led through them, if we ignore that, we are not just missing women but we’re dismissing the sovereignty of God.’

Both men and women, as “new creations,” are called first of all to the ministry of reconciliation as “Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:14-21). Every Christian is to be used by God to win souls, make disciples, and build the body of Christ. We believe that it is God’s will for our day that the Church be blessed by its prophesying daughters.⁵ The Church today is called to lead by example and restore God’s original design of equality between men and women. Churches should teach biblical truth about equality and empower women in leadership and ministry. The Church should recognise, train, and release women into pastoral, teaching, preaching, administrative, and evangelistic roles. When women and men lead on equal footing, the Church becomes complete, healthy, and effective.

3. Gill and Cavaness *God’s Women*, 177.

4. Gill and Cavaness *God’s Women*, 177.

5. Gill and Cavaness *God’s Women*, 191.

As followers of Christ, we can no longer remain silent or passive. God created men and women to stand side by side equal in dignity, equal in calling, and equal in purpose. God's plan has always been for His sons and daughters to serve Him together.

The time has come for us to repent of our past negligence, restore biblical truth and walk courageously in God's vision for His people. The Church must lead the way because a Church that empowers women reflects the heart of Jesus Himself.

The Church should proclaim that Jesus was not bound by cultural norms rather he was concerned about the truth. The truth is that in the kingdom of God, spiritual authority is not received based on gender but it is about calling, obedience and faith. Jesus empowered women to speak, to learn, to teach and to lead the body of Christ Jesus. They must be willing to follow His example.

Let the Church lead with courage. Let women rise with confidence. And let the world see Christ through our equality, our love, and our obedience to God's Word.

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Re-emergence of Women as Leaders in the Religious Context: A Clash of Cultures in the Philippines

~ Doreen A. Benavidez

Introduction

Women had leadership opportunities equal to men in the pre-Spanish Filipino society. The native woman of the Philippine islands did not hold a subjugated role, rather she was a leader equal to men leaders before the Spanish colonisers came. She also occupied a significant position in the religious practice of the community as a *babaylan* (woman priest). The pre-colonial people in the Philippine islands cannot generally be described as a patriarchal society because of their very high regard for women (mothers and women leaders). Masculine superiority and patriarchal subjugation of women was brought into the psyche of the people in the Philippines by the Spaniards, and later by the Americans (both from the West). When Western Christianity came as Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, women were given limited roles in the religious practice. They were not allowed to have leadership positions in churches. Some allowed women to have leadership roles but not in positions equal to those occupied by men.

However, the coming of the Pentecostal (1920's) and Charismatic Movement (1960's) in the Philippines paved the way for women leadership to re-emerge in the Filipino religious context. Though both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches remained resistant to the idea of women having leadership roles equal to men (priest, pastor, evangelist, deacon, elder, Bible teacher), Pentecostal and Charismatic churches have women pastors, evangelists, deacons, elders, Bible teachers, and in most congregations, women have equal leadership

opportunities with men.

This paper presents a description of the pre-colonial view of women in leadership, particularly in the Philippine religious context and traces how Western biases impinged upon Filipino religiosity that discriminated against women in relation to their religious roles. Also, this paper explains how and why the Pentecostal and Charismatic movement was instrumental in the re-emergence of women leadership in the religious context: first, the understanding and experience of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movement of the empowering of the Holy Spirit for both men and women; second, the compatibility of the Pentecostal and Charismatic views on women and the Filipino religious consciousness. This paper will also present the case of the indigenous women leaders from the Mangyan tribes.

I. Pre-Colonial Balance: Women in Positions of Power and Spiritual Authority

Tracing the historical causes of the current discrimination of women in the Philippine religious context, this paper reveals how Western biases, impinged upon both by the Catholic Church and Protestant Church, were carried over to the present generation.

Restricting women from leadership has much to do with the religious and cultural impositions made by Spain and the United States during their 333 and 48 years respectively of intrusions into Philippine affairs. The pre-colonial Filipina knew her worth and held her own views, and was in every respect, equal to man. It will be explored in this paper how the Filipina was bound and gagged by the colonisers.

A. The Biblical Creation Account and the Philippine Creation Myth

While many ancient creation myths often reflect hierarchical or patriarchal cosmologies, the biblical creation account provides a foundational theological vision of human equality that stands in sharp contrast to the hierarchical tendencies of ancient Near Eastern mythologies. In Genesis 1:26–27, both man and woman are created in

the *imago Dei* – in the image and likeness of God. This shared divine image signifies that both sexes participate equally in the dignity, moral responsibility, and relational capacity reflective of their Creator. The divine command to “have dominion” over the earth (Genesis 1:28) was given to both, underscoring a partnership of co-regency rather than domination or subordination.

The Filipino creation myth of *Malakas at Maganda* describes equality where a bamboo is pecked by a stork and splits into two revealing a fully grown man, *Malakas* (“strong,” the male identity), and woman, *Maganda* (“beautiful,” the female identity).¹ Both *Malakas* and *Maganda* were created at the same time, different from the Biblical story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:18-25 where in most English translations, the woman is formed from the rib taken from Adam, created to be his companion. Although the woman is formed second and from the man’s side in the Genesis 2 account, this act does not imply inferiority but relational correspondence. The Hebrew phrase ‘ezer kenegdo (“a helper suitable for him,” Genesis 2:18) has often been misread as implying subordination. However, the term ‘ezer is used elsewhere referring to God as Israel’s helper (Psalm 33:20), signifying strength and partnership rather than inferiority. The woman therefore, is presented as the man’s equal counterpart, sharing his nature and vocation.

The Philippine creation myth depicts both man and woman fully-formed at the same time. This myth demonstrates the absence of gender precedence from the pre-colonial mind, for it claims that man and woman emerged simultaneously from the same source. They shared not only a birthplace but they are both human representatives of the male-female *Bathalang Maykapal*, the supreme god.² Reflected in the Philippine creation myth, *Maganda* is portrayed as an equal of *Malakas* and her creation is independent from man.

The story of *Malakas* and *Maganda* hints at the pre-colonial status

1. Jaime A. Belita, C.M., *The Way of Greater Self: Constructing a Theology Around a Filipino Mythos* (Manila: DLSU Press, 1991), 36.

2. Anne-Marie Hilsdon, *Madonnas and Martyrs: Militarism and Violence in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1995), 34.

of women in the Philippines, which was relatively high. The image of Maganda emerging as an equal partner, not a subordinate, reflects a cultural memory where the relationship between man and woman was more balanced and collaborative.

B. The Pre-Christian Status of the Filipina

According to Mananzan, “pre-colonial women enjoyed the same privileges, rights, and opportunities as did men.”³ Women’s voices were equally heard, socially accepted, and recognised in their own right. Mananzan points out that husbands and wives were equal, and wives were treated as companions, not slaves.⁴ Women were not required to give up her name upon marriage; on the contrary, among the Tagalogs, if the woman was particularly notable, it was customary for her husband to take on her name so he could share in her prestige.⁵ In the pre-colonial period, besides working in the fields, women could engage in trade and were reputed to be more reliable negotiators as well as better managers than the men.⁶ In this period, women were recognised for their wisdom and intellect.

Back then, power was divided among three specialists in a *barangay*⁷: the *datu*,⁸ who oversees economics, military, and politics; the *panday*,⁹ who was the technical expert responsible for tools, jewelries, and

3. Mary John Mananzan, “The Precolonial Filipina,” in *Kasaysayan: The Story of the Filipino People*, vol. 2, ed. Fr. Gabriel S. Casal, et al. (Manila: Asia Publ. Co., 1998), 194.

4. Mananzan, 194.

5. Mananzan, 194.

6. Hilsdon, 36.

7. In the Philippines, a small territorial and administrative district forming the most local level of government.

8. A *datu* is a ruler during the precolonial Philippines. He governed his territories, led his soldiers to war, commanded his armadas at seas, protected his villages from enemies, and settled disputes among his people.

9. The *panday* can be associated with metalworking but may also refer to carpenters who are knowledgeable in making boats or houses. They are always male, with their skills passed down by apprenticeship.

weapons; and the *babaylan*, priests and priestesses who performed rituals and offered sacrifices to appease *Bathala*, the transcendent god, to gain favour or secure healing. While both men and women could become *babaylans*,¹⁰ also called *catalonas*,¹¹ the women were generally considered more effective intercessors “because they were ‘more emotional’ and prone to hear ‘calls.’”¹² Here, the voices of women were preferred by the people to represent them before *Bathala*. The *babaylan* was a ‘powerful’ and influential position held by women in pre-colonial society. These women were revered as priestesses, poets or leaders in the spiritual and cultural lives of the people.¹³ They played important roles in the animistic religion. These women were recognised as skillful intermediaries between the people and *Bathala*.

In the pre-colonial period, the criterion for leadership for men and women was not gender but performance (and lineage). The ones who were skilled were recognised and the abilities of pre-colonial Filipinas qualified them to occupy the premier social and religious positions in

10. Salazar discloses that *babaylan* is a Visayan (ethnic group in the Philippines) term for the movers, mostly women, in the spiritual and ritualistic lives of the people in the pre-Hispanic era of the Philippines. They are called *catalonan* in the Tagalog-speaking regions. See Zues Salazar, “The Babaylan in Philippine History,” in *Women’s Role in Philippine History: Selected Essays*, University Center for Women’s Studies, trans. Proserpina Domingo Tapales (Diliman, Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1996), 209-222.

11. The office went to those with the best ability to deal with the devil. See John H. Schumacher, S.J., *Readings in Church History* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979), 14.

12. Hilsdon, 33.

13. Zues Salazar, “The Babaylan in Philippine History,” in *Women’s Role in Philippine History: Selected Essays*, University Center for Women’s Studies, trans. Proserpina Domingo Tapales (Diliman, Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1996), 209-222; Perla Paredes Daly, “Pagbabalikloob, Cyberactivism and Art, Babaylan Provocations and Creative Responses” in *Back from the Crocodile’s Belly: Philippine Babaylan Studies and the Struggle for Indigenous Memory*, eds. Lily Mendoza and Leny Mendoza Estrobel (Santa Rosa, CA: Center for Babaylan Studies), 2013; Mangahas, Fe B. and Jenny R. Llaguno, *Centennial Crossings: Readings on Babaylan Feminism in the Philippines* (Quezon City: C & E Publishing), 2006.

their time. Women held power and were leaders. With their specialised knowledge and skills as spiritual leaders, philosophers, and healers of their communities, the *babaylans* equaled the prestige given to the *datu* or the rulers of the pre-colonial Philippines. The *babaylan* was also a political adviser to the *datu*. Every move that a *datu* planned to make should be first consulted with the *babaylan*. The *babaylans* were recognised as the most powerful and respected group in the society because of their immense connection with *Bathala* and the spirits (*anitos*). The *babaylans* were highly respected leaders, playing roles that were central to the well-being and spiritual life of their people. Their influence was derived from their direct connection to the divine and their essential community function, not from political or military coercion.

The equilibrium of pre-colonial society, however, would soon be shattered by the colonial encounter, which replaced relational authority between men and women, with hierarchical domination.

II. Colonial Rupture: Patriarchy and the Erasure of Indigenous Women Leadership

A. The Status of the Filipina under the Catholics

Prior to the Spanish rule in the 16th century, men and women in most societies across the Philippine archipelago held equal status on account of bilateral kinship.¹⁴ However, 333 years of Spanish colonial rule and its Catholic influence left a strong patriarchal legacy in the Philippines. According to Mananzan, when the Spanish colonisers arrived in the Philippines in the early 16th century, they considered the gender situation shocking.¹⁵ Even if they recognised the excellence of the indigenous woman, they immediately moved to change the Filipina into the Spanish ideal woman.¹⁶ When the Spaniards conquered

14. Ramona S. Tirona, "The Filipino Woman: What She is and What She is not," *Philippine Herald* 1, no. 2 (December 1920): 3-7.

15. Mananzan, 195.

16. Mananzan, 195.

the Philippines, they stripped the women of the privileges they used to have with the use of the sword and in the name of the Cross.

Spain was appalled with the paganism in the newly discovered islands. The Spanish missionaries perceived the *babaylans* as their great enemy. It is believed that the *babaylans* were punished and imprisoned for practicing religion that was not Roman Catholic. The male chieftains and warriors who cooperated with Spain were given positions in the new colonial order. The Spanish administration often sought to work with local male chieftains (*datus*), incorporating them into the colonial system of taxation and governance. This created a new, male-dominated power structure that was loyal to the colonial state. In the new colonial order, the Spanish culture imposed a male-dominated hierarchy relegating women to the background. A new colonial government was established with power centered under Spanish men. Because conversion was a primary goal, it led to the systematic demonisation of native beliefs – indigenous rituals were suppressed, and *Babaylans* were persecuted as heretics. The Spanish colonial project, driven by the cross and the sword, viewed the *Babaylan* as the primary obstacle to its success. Because the *Babaylan* was the spiritual leader of the community, eliminating their influence was essential for conversion to Catholicism and for establishing colonial control.

This colonial framework actively dismantled the sources of the *Babaylan's* influence and the social equilibrium that allowed women to hold such prominent positions in the society. We can see a gradual assumption of power within a new colonial system that exclusively empowered men. The *babaylans* lost their positions. Most of the *babaylans* opted to stay in the mountains. They were the ones who resisted and preserved indigenous beliefs. Mangahas and Llaguno state that the worldview of these women “clashed with that of the Christian and the colonisers’ Western viewpoint.”¹⁷

Many *Babaylans* became the heart and soul of resistance against Spanish rule. While open revolts were crushed, the spiritual power and

17. Fe B. Mangahas and Jenny R. Llaguno, *Centennial Crossings*, 34.

traditions of the *Babaylan* did not completely disappear. They found ways to survive, often by adapting and hiding within the very system that sought to destroy them. To avoid persecution, they adapted their healing rituals. Indigenous chants and invocations were replaced with Latin prayers and appeals to Catholic saints. Women continued to act as *albularyo*,¹⁸ midwives, ritual singers, and local organisers. Even when the *babaylan* was demonised, her functions – mediating life and spirit – were absorbed into Catholic devotions to the Virgin Mary, Marian processions, and women’s confraternities.

The Spaniards made it their chief priority to bring the *indios*¹⁹ to the cross, and they would do whatever means necessary. The Spanish leadership dismantled the pre-colonial notion of womanhood and suppressed the voice of women. The Filipina was immediately enrolled into the missionary school where she learned the domestic arts and social graces that softened her ‘rough edges.’²⁰ The Catholic Church reinforced this silent campaign against women through its “ecclesiastical patriarchy,” which not only disallowed women from participating in church activities, except in worship, but also barred them from teaching the Scripture and its proper interpretation.²¹

The Spaniards were so successful in creating a Maria Clara²² image of a woman in the Filipino psyche. As a result, the natives changed their view of a woman from the independent, assertive, courageous helpmate of pre-colonial Philippines, to the gracious, meek, withdrawing, gentlewoman of Spain. The ideal image of the Filipino woman became voiceless, one of passivity, submissiveness, obedience, and chastity.²³

18. Traditional Filipino folk doctor.

19. Filipino natives.

20. Mananzan, 195.

21. Hilsdon, 37.

22. Maria Clara is a character from the famous novel “Noli Me Tangere (Touch Me Not)” written by Jose Rizal. For Filipinos, they view Maria Clara as the epitome of purity and innocence.

23. Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 58.

Women were expected to be meek, timid and subservient. These traits were idealised in the patriarchal social structure.

B. The Status of the Filipina under the Protestants

The Maria Clara type of a woman was the type of woman the Americans met when they took over the reins of the Philippines in 1898. She fits right in with the 19th century model of wife and motherhood that had emerged late in American fundamentalism. While the Spanish had focused on destroying the *Babaylan's* spiritual authority and demonising indigenous women leaders as *bruhas* (witches); the Americans, in a more subtle form of control, sought to *educate* ordinary women into a specific and domesticated role.

Where Spanish Catholic colonisers had spent centuries systematically dismantling the *Babaylan's* spiritual authority and imposing strict Catholic gender ideals, the Americans in their half a century presence had brought in further changes in the Philippines. Under the American regime, most Filipinos were given a chance to go to school and pursue self-development. During this time, women were allowed to study and establish themselves and lead in professional fields. The American colonial project identified education as its primary tool for reshaping Filipino society. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of this period is how colonial authorities conceptualised the Filipina's role. The Americans sought to *construct* a new kind of Filipina—one who would serve as the conduit for modern, scientific, American-style domesticity.

However, it is not the same in the religious context especially in the Protestant church. In the Protestant church, the door remained closed for women leadership because of their theological position based on the understanding of Titus 2:1-6, 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, 1 Corinthians 14:33-35, 1 Timothy 2:11-12, and Ephesians 5:21-27. During this time, in the broader society, women struggled to re-establish themselves and gain freedom, and in the Protestant church they were silenced and without a voice. They were barred from leadership and were expected to just support the various male-led church activities. As time passed, the participation of women grew and evolved into complementarity. Today, women are allowed to participate as support

to male leadership. As long as these women remain subordinate to the leadership of men, they are allowed to be involved in the life of the church.

Education under American rule, entrenched Western patriarchal models, emphasising domestic femininity and public male authority. Women came under the headship of men both at home and in the church.

III. Re-Emergence and Contemporary Renewal

A. The Coming of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements

The birth of Pentecostalism was associated with a woman. On January 1, 1901 in Topeka, Kansas, Charles Parham, the director of the Bethel Bible School laid hands on one of the students, Agnes Ozman, praying that she might be filled with the Holy Spirit. This started a worldwide Pentecostal revival. The revival in Topeka, Kansas and Azusa Street tore down the walls of hostility between men and women, clergy and laity, literate and non-literate. Women responded to the call of God in their lives as pastors, evangelists and missionaries.

The African American preacher William Joseph Seymour brought the Apostolic Faith Movement to Los Angeles in 1906. His Azusa Street Mission quickly became known as an interracial congregation led by an African American pastor, with capable women and men providing leadership and outreach. The “Mission was even ridiculed on the front page of the Los Angeles Evening News, July 23, 1906, for violating Paul’s command in 1 Corinthians 14:34 regarding the silence of women.”²⁴ Early Pentecostals understood 1 Corinthians 14:34 as having a specific historical and cultural context, not as a global directive. They were much more captivated by the promise made in

24. Cecil M. Robeck Jr, “Women in the Pentecostal Movement,” *Fuller Studio*, accessed September 27, 2024, <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/women-in-the-pentecostal-movement/#::~:~:text=The%20Mission%20was%20even%20ridiculed,not%20as%20a%20global%20directive.>

Joel 2:28–29 that in the “last days” God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh, including men, women, old, young, free, and slave alike. When Peter referred to Joel 2:28–29 on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:17–18, Pentecostals found justification for both women and men to become proclaimers of the gospel. This position was strengthened by appeals to 1 Corinthians 12:11 indicating that the Holy Spirit determines individual giftedness and Galatians 3:28 pointing toward gender equality within the church. Pastor Seymour welcomed women into the Azusa Street pulpit, provided credentials to women and men, and sent them out as missionaries and church planters. Women in early Pentecostalism have important leadership roles in ministry. Many pioneers of Pentecostalism were Spirit-filled women. There were a number of favourable factors of women leadership positions among Pentecostals. Women were encouraged to lead bible studies, preach and teach publicly.

When the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movement arrived in the Philippines, the ministries of women were very much welcomed. In Alcoran’s study, the ministry of women was not seen as a threat by the different communities because they were women but the women ministers were received well. Montgomery’s study of the Philippine Foursquare Church found that women preachers aided the church’s growth.²⁵ The Pentecostal Movement in its early years had women who were selflessly and faithfully serving God in the ministry. Many of these “*pastoras*” were going into remote areas without any promise of support; these women lived with local folk, ministered to them and built churches.²⁶

These women ministers contributed to the growth of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movement in the Philippines. Finally, the voices of women re-emerged in the religious context.

25. Jim Montgomery, *New Testament Fire in the Philippines* (Manila: Church Growth Research in the Philippines, 1972), 55.

26. Doreen G. Alcoran, “A History of the Church of God in Northern Luzon, Philippines from 1947-1985: Its Origin and Development” (ThM Thesis, Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, 2003), 102.

B. Indigenous Filipino Women Leaders: The Case of the Mangyans in the Philippines

In the case of the Alangan Mangyan tribes, before colonisation their society followed paternalistic ideologies.²⁷ While women were considered essential contributors to the community's survival, formal political and magico-religious leadership positions were exclusively reserved for men.²⁸ Women were excluded from becoming a *kuyay* (nominal head of a local group), or *tanongan* (judge of a region), and were excluded from the right of holding political office.²⁹ During public meetings, known as *usap*, women were usually represented by a male relative, such as her father, or brother, as she was prohibited from speaking herself.³⁰ If a woman attempted to speak out and voice her opinion in a public meeting, she was often disregarded, overlooked, or ridiculed.³¹ In addition, the Alangan men (Oriental Mindoro side) often conducted public meetings in Tagalog, where it was men who usually spoke. This further reinforces the inaccessibility of leadership.³² These practices were supported by the view that men were thought to be levelheaded and diplomatic compared to women who were thought of being overly emotional. Men were generally perceived as more competent when it came to matters of diplomacy and disputes.³³

Despite their lack of formal authority, Alangan women were still able to exert their influence in the community.³⁴ They had almost equal status

27. Jurg Helbling, "Power and Kinship: The Relations of Power Between Age Groups and Sexes Among Alangan Mangyan of Northeastern Mindoro," in *Human Relations and Social Developments: Anthropological Thoughts on Social Dynamics*, ed. Masao Nishimura (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 2014) 53, 63, 64.

28. Helbling, "Power and Kinship," 60, 61, 66

29. Helbling, 60, 75.

30. Helbling, 60, 71.

31. Helbling, 60, 70.

32. Helbling, 60, 74.

33. Helbling, 66, 69, 75.

34. Helbling, 72, 73.

in matters of labour, Alangan women contributed roughly equally to household production.³⁵ It has been observed that in their practice of Kaingin that men make holes in the ground with bamboo poles and women follow closely to drop rice grains in the created holes.³⁶ In domestic settings, mothers have a say in marriage arrangements for their daughters but final decisions on domestic disputes such as adultery and divorce are presided over by the community elders.³⁷

Although women were prohibited from participating in public discussions, women built social networks such as work groups where they exchanged opinions regarding community matters. There were also rare cases where women governed their husbands, although this was considered emasculating and the husbands were mocked by other males in their community.³⁸

The Hanunoo tribe, on the other hand, has records of women being leaders in the magico-religious sphere and eventually taking up political positions. Unlike the Alangan tribe, the women of the Hanunoo exercised significant authority in ritual and juridical domains.³⁹

While both men and women participate in their swidden farming practices, women were generally responsible for the planting of root crops.⁴⁰ There were also specific jobs exclusive to women, such as the making of clothes (this entails cultivating cotton, spinning, dyeing, and weaving).⁴¹ Women were only prohibited from participating in these

35. Helbling, 61, 62, 75

36. Edgar G. Javier, *The Mangyans: Progress Through Christian Community Building* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1987), 30.

37. Masao Nishimura, ed., *Human Relations and Social Developments: Anthropological Thoughts on Social Dynamics* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 2014) 57.

38. Helbling, 72, 73.

39. Masaru Miyamoto, *The Hanunoo-Mangyan: Society, Religion and Law among a Mountain People of Mindoro Island, Philippines* (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 1988), 64, 153.

40. Miyamoto, *The Hanunoo-Mangyan*, 31.

41. Miyamoto, 29.

roles during pregnancy. Pregnant women were subject to several restrictions such as being forbidden from making knots, weaving, or nailing, as these acts are believed to make delivery difficult. In addition, they were prohibited from working in the swidden until a month has passed from childbirth.⁴²

Although men often occupy the leadership positions, these roles were not restricted by sex. Hanunoo women can gain influence and assume leadership positions in different capacities. There are recorded examples of women becoming judges (*Huwis* or *Talaghūsay*), such as Wili of Panaytayan.⁴³ They become judges based on their mental aptitude and knowledge of Mangyan laws.⁴⁴ They can also become the formal magico-religious leader responsible for performing the Swidden farming rites. This sacred position is passed down monolineally through kinship regardless of sex.⁴⁵

The Spaniards arrived in Mindoro in April of 1570 and Missionary activities in Mindoro began shortly after Spanish control was established.⁴⁶ Jesuit missionary records show efforts as early as 1626.⁴⁷ These efforts were largely unsuccessful due to significant obstacles and opposition from both the Mangyans and the lowlanders.⁴⁸ The Spanish colonisers hispanised lowland Christians, but drove the pagan people (Mangyans) inland into the interior of

42. Miyamoto, 33, 34.

43. Miyamoto, 154.

44. Miyamoto, 151, 153.

45. Miyamoto, 64-65.

46. Antoon Postma, "St. Ecequiel Moreno y Diaz and His Unknown Letters from Mindoro," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 22, no. 4 (December 1994): 282; Antoon Postma, "Mindoro Missions Revisited," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (December 1977): 254.

47. Edgar G. Javier, *The Mangyans: Progress through Christian Community Building* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1987), 59; Antoon Postma, "Mindoro Missions Revisited," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (December 1977): 256.

48. Javier, 61-62.

the island.⁴⁹

When the Americans came after the Spaniards, interest in the Mangyans was amplified and Mangyan contact with the outside world increased.⁵⁰ After WWII, a huge uptick in full-time missionary work was observed as organisations from both Catholic and Protestant churches sought to evangelise the Mangyan Indigenous People (IP) group.⁵¹ Missionary work among the Hanunoo tribes was started by OMF (Overseas Missionary Group) and the Mangyan Bible School was eventually established.⁵² The OMF work became Mangyan Tribal Church Association (MTCA), the Samahan ng mga Pantribong Iglesiyang Ebanghelika ng Mangyan (SPEIM), which is under the Alliance of Bible Christian Communities of the Philippines (ABCCOP). These church organisations do not allow women to be pastors. Protestant missionaries employed a clean sweep method and challenged pagan customs they deemed contrary to Christian teachings. They established a new class of local leaders, mostly men who worked closely with missionaries.⁵³

The presence of Catholic and Protestant missionaries influenced Mangyan culture and had an impact on how women and traditional authority were viewed.⁵⁴ In Alangan settlements, lowland missionaries reinforced the established patriarchal system by reiterating the authority of older men by taking firm stand on issues traditionally handled by male leaders and taking up the paternalistic role of providing financial assistance and medical aid.⁵⁵

49. Postma, “Mindoro Missions Revisited,” 254; Elijah Jesse M. Pine and Romel A. Daya, “Reconstructing Meanings of the ‘Discriminated Mangyan’: Towards an Emancipatory Educational Framework,” *Philippine Journal of Development Communication* 9, no. 2(2021): 128.

50. Javier, 48.

51. Javier, 63.

52. Javier, 65-66.

53. Javier, 65-66.

54. Helbling, “Power,” 74.

55. Helbling, “Power and Kinship,” 74.

Social institutions such as the church, schools, and the government shape a society where men dominate the public sphere, both in economy and politics. These external institutions have been observed as primary drivers in the shift of women's customary equality to a state of domesticity and dependency on men. The perpetuated patriarchal ideals shifted women's roles more into the private sphere where they are relegated to domestic work. In the eyes of external institutions, they are reduced to their reproductive value, which is regarded less important than the labour of men.⁵⁶

Despite the reinforcement of certain hierarchies, evangelisation introduced ideals that fostered social integration. Christianity introduced the Biblical ideals that distinctions should not exist between people based on religious, social, or sexual differences.⁵⁷ Missionary sisters have helped young women gain more autonomy in their marriage decisions and provide an external counterbalance to exert familial pressure. In acculturated settlements, women attain higher formal education than men. They know how to read, write, and calculate, which allowed them to take on the responsibility of marketing the cash crops in provincial capitals, and are entrusted with storing family funds. Despite this, men still control when and where the money is spent.⁵⁸

The impact of Christianity on the social roles of Mangyan women can be seen as a double-edged sword as it steered Mangyan culture toward a more Western style of domestic dependency and reinforced patriarchy, but it also provided them with the educational tools and spiritual values that helped them assert their identity and agency and seek more significant participation in their communities.⁵⁹

56. Aleli B. Bawagan, "Cultural Reproduction of Gender Division of Labor in Iraya Mangyan Communities: Implications to Community Development Practice," *CSWCD Development Journal* 1, no.1 (2008): 100-102.

57. Javier, Chapter III.

58. Helbling, 74.

59. Aleli B. Bawagan, "Cultural Reproduction," 100; Helbling, "Power and Kinship," 74; Javier, Edgar G. *The Mangyans*, 81.

In today's world, we can see the evolution of the roles of Mangyans take a positive turn where women now take a more active role in leadership not only at home but also in their communities. In Pentecostal communities, we see this shift led by pastor's wives and female church members.⁶⁰

At the Saleng Leadership Institute, a bible school for the Mangyan tribes, women students are being trained to be pastors (religious leaders) and church planters, thereby becoming pillars of their communities. The women are encouraged to lead projects and initiatives that benefit their communities. Traditional patriarchal ideals in other churches are being replaced by a more egalitarian system. Drawing from Jose de Mesa⁶¹ and other Filipino indigenous theologians, leadership can be reimagined as participation in *kapwa*—the relational self that serves rather than dominates. The endurance of this principle reflects a deep cultural memory that outlasts imposed systems. The Filipino worldview, grounded in *kapwa* (relational selfhood) and *pakikipagkapwa-tao* (communal harmony), naturally resists absolute patriarchal domination. These indigenous ethics preserved the symbolic value of balance and complementarity, ensuring that the principle of female authority—though muted—remained latent within cultural consciousness. Western ecclesial and academic models of leadership often privilege hierarchy. Indigenous perspectives, by contrast, prioritise community, reciprocity, and spiritual integration.⁶²

It is important to realise that supporting the women's cause as it pertains to ecclesiology is not about power, nor is it anti-male.⁶³ It is

60. Charis Abigail Benavidez, "*Indigenous Filipino Women Leaders: The Case of the Mangyans in the Philippines*," (unpublished manuscript, 2026).

61. De Mesa defines *kapwa* with the stress on the sameness and not the "one who is different from me." He also notes how the word *kapwa* also alludes to Filipino terms that do not make a distinction between a brother or a sister (*kapatid*), or *siya* (he or she). Jose de Mesa, *Why Theology is Not Far Away from Home* (Manila: De la Salle University, 2003), 147.

62. Benavidez, "*Indigenous Filipino*," (unpublished manuscript).

63. Chung, 27.

about the greater participation of women, that their voices be heard, in the leadership and direction of the church.⁶⁴

IV. Pentecostal Theological View on Women in Ministry

Women in ministry is not a Feminist agenda. It is God's agenda. The statement means that advocating for the role of women in ministry should not be equated with the feminist political movement. Because the people advocating for the role of women in ministry based their position on purely biblical and theological interpretation and a belief in women's spiritual calling. Women ministers are present through 2,000 years of Christian history. The Pentecostal Movement has had women Pastors, evangelists, missionaries, ministers etc. since the 1800s. These women have contributed to the health of the church.

We can view Acts 1 and 2 as a model or pattern for women in ministry within Pentecostal theology. The paradigm is built on the biblical text itself. For a Pentecostal, the events of Acts 1 and 2 are not just a historical story but they are the definitive blueprint for the Church's life and mission. Acts 1:8 provides the commission that the empowerment of Acts 2 was designed to fulfill. Together, they form a complete argument. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8). To understand this as a paradigm, we have to ask: To whom was Jesus speaking? Acts 1:13-14 tells us that after the ascension, the apostles returned to Jerusalem and went to the upper room, where they were staying. It explicitly says: "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."

The Holy Spirit is poured out on 120 disciples (Acts 1:14-16), both men and women, and the command to be witnesses was not given to the eleven alone, but to the entire community of believers who were

64. Augustina Lumentut, "Towards Greater Participation and Contributions of Women in Asian Churches," *Asian Journal of Theology*, 1 (April 1987): 206-207.

present, which the text specifically highlights included women. The women present were commissioned by Jesus to be His witnesses. They were part of the core group that Jesus entrusted with the mission (Acts 1:14-16). Peter in his sermon quotes prophet Joel: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy... Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.” (Acts 2:17-18, quoting Joel 2:28-29). The Spirit was not given for private edification alone, but for the public proclamation of the Gospel. Prophecy is closely linked to publicly speaking forth God’s message. If women were included in the commission to be witnesses (Acts 1:14-16), and if they were present and filled with the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), therefore they are called to fulfill their commission for public witness.

Viewing Acts 1:8 as a paradigm challenges any theology that would sideline women from the task of being witnesses to Jesus. It repositions women to the very center of the Church’s mission from the beginning. In the Philippine culture, the *huling habilin*, the last word of a beloved person leaving is deemed sacred and has to be fulfilled. When Jesus commissioned everybody on the Mount of Olives just before His Ascension (Acts 1:8), and empowered everybody in the Upper Room for such commission (Acts 2:1-4), everybody knew that the command to be witnesses has to be fulfilled.

In summary, Acts 1:8 as a paradigm, establishes that the call to be a witness is given to the entire believing community, including women. It sets the stage for the Spirit’s empowerment in Acts 2, which then enables them to fulfill that call. This creates a seamless biblical foundation for the full and equal participation of women in the Church’s mission. It provides a clear, biblical, and historically grounded foundation for affirming women’s leadership as a core expression of Pentecostal identity, not a concession to modern culture.

Though the letters written by Paul were responses to specific contexts, a lot of the teaching that sidelines women today are drawn from those letters. Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, is not prohibiting all women from speaking in all churches and all the time. This was a temporary

restriction because of the disorder happening during worship in the Corinthian church. The prohibition is because of a specific situation-disorderly worship in the Corinthian church. It cannot be used as a blanket prohibition to all women everywhere who are called, gifted, and qualified from exercising church ministry which includes public speaking-teaching and preaching (speaking to both men and women). Silencing the women in the church is silencing half (and more) of the church.

We also see Paul honoured and valued his female co-workers and there is no evidence that he silenced or limited these women. There are the eighteen (18) women mentioned in Paul's letters, plus Lydia. Apphia (Philemon 1:2), Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11), Claudia (2 Timothy 4:21), Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5); Euodia (Philippians 4:2-3), Julia (Romans 16:15), Junia (Romans 16:7 NIV), Lois (2 Timothy 1:5), Mary (Romans 16:6), Nereus' sister (Romans 16:15), Nympha (Colossians 4:15), Persis (Romans 16:12), Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2 NIV), Priscilla (Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19 cf Acts 18:1-3, 18-19, 26), Rufus' mother (Romans 16:13), Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3), Tryphena (Romans 16:12), Tryphosa (Romans 16:12). Lydia is mentioned in Acts 16:13-15, 40. Some early churches were hosted and led by women and this makes the interpretation that women were not permitted to speak in church meetings unlikely.

V. A Pathway Forward: Reclamation Through Pentecostal Experience

Here is how women in the Philippines can continue to reclaim their position of leadership in the church.

1. In Acts 2 the Spirit poured out on "all flesh." This is not a Western import but the foundational event of the Church. When women lead, prophesy and teach, they are not "rebellious" but fulfilling what God has always intended.
2. Acknowledge that pre-colonial Philippines honoured women as spiritual leaders. The Spirit's work among the Mangyan women is

not a foreign imposition but a fulfillment of what their ancestors knew: women mediate the divine.

The re-emergence of women leadership in the Philippine church through their Pentecostal experience is not a future hope—it is a present reality. To be Filipino and Christian is to honour the leadership of women. The roots are there—in the precolonial women religious leaders, in the early Pentecostal pioneers, in the indigenous women who celebrate their own cultural identity through leading in the churches in their communities.

Leadership choices must be based on performance and not gender. This is nothing new to Filipinos (pre-Christian Philippines), for performance has long been the main criterion in society.

Filipino leadership must also be aware of the reasons for the loss of egalitarianism within their churches (because of the influence of the colonisers and Western theology) and also challenge misguided beliefs of the traditional indigenous worldview that support the supremacy of the male. The church must be ready to challenge the dominance of Eurocentric theological frameworks and reclaim the Filipino religious imagination as a legitimate locus of theological reflection. The task now is to recognise, celebrate, and release what the Spirit has already been doing among them.

Conclusion

The involvement of women in the Christian church in the Philippines is undeniable. They are found at all levels of church life. Though women are given managerial responsibilities and granted access to theological education, the following questions when answered with honesty can chart a new course of action.

1. What actual power do they have to chart the course of their denominations?
2. What real status do they have in church leadership?
3. How are women in the Church using their leadership to reach out to

the voiceless women in society?

It is important to realise that supporting the women's cause as it pertains to ecclesiology is not about power, nor is it anti-male.⁶⁵ It is about the greater participation of women that their voices be heard in the leadership and direction of the church. As stated, it is not that women are disallowed from serving in church but that they are not granted full participation in its activities and are not recognised as true leaders.⁶⁶

The re-emergence of women's leadership is not a reinvention but a remembrance – a recovery of the original equilibrium that once sustained the Philippine's social and spiritual life. It affirms that Filipino women's leadership is not an innovation inspired by modern feminism but a recovery of ancestral wisdom suppressed by colonial history. Filipino women's leadership today – whether in indigenous communities, the church, or social movements – draws from a deeply rooted paradigm of stewardship and relational harmony (*kapwa*). It insists that leadership is not ownership of power but restoration of balance – a lesson urgently needed in patriarchal modern systems. Recovering these paradigms fosters an inclusive approach to governance, ministry, and education.

As stated in the paper, colonialism introduced a rupture in the Philippine indigenous gender relations by imposing patriarchal hierarchies foreign to the archipelago's pre-colonial social fabric. Spanish evangelisation and American bureaucratisation redefined leadership as masculine, clerical, and hierarchical. Women have been discriminated against from leadership by Western biases introduced more than five hundred years ago, which still have their effects on Filipino women today. These biases must be demolished so that the Filipino Church may rediscover what it means to be truly Filipino and redeem what is best in the culture so as to better reach the Filipinos with the message of Christ and be His disciples.

65. Chung, 27.

66. Lumentut, "Towards Greater," 206-207.

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10

Introducing Gender Studies in Theological Seminary Curriculums: Addressing Gender Concerns in Sri Lanka

~ Mano Emmanuel

The Context

In many ways Sri Lanka displays a high view of women. Sri Lanka produced the first woman Prime Minister in the world in 1960. Currently, we have a female Prime Minister and in the public sector, women hold influential positions. They are doctors, CEOs, lawyers, principals of schools, university professors, and so on. Women make up around 52% of the population and a rising number of households are women-led.¹ Women hold 10% of the seats in Parliament, a significant increase under the new government, but still quite a small percentage.² Although no statistics are available, experience suggests that the church has a similar demographic.

However, gender-based violence is not uncommon in homes and in the society. Even in Christian homes, churches and organisations, women face discrimination and violence which is often ignored or explained away. In some cases, it is perhaps not overt discrimination but an ignorance of the challenges that women face which leads to women

1. Department of Census and Statistics, “Table 1.7: Estimated mid-year female population by province and district,” accessed October 6, 2025, <https://www.statistics.gov.lk/GenderStatistics/StaticInformation/Population#gsc.tab=0>.

2. World Bank Gender Data Portal, “Sri Lanka: Gender Landscape Brief,” accessed October 6, 2025, <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/sri-lanka>.

being overburdened and unheard. The underlying attitudes which are more culturally conditioned than shaped by biblical principles are not being addressed.

Sri Lanka has a patriarchal culture, and this worldview often persists within the church. Historian Judith Bennett explains patriarchy as having three main meanings in English:³

1. Male ecclesiastical leaders, such as the patriarch (archbishop of Constantinople) in Greek Orthodoxy.
2. Legal power of male household heads (fathers/husbands).
3. A society that promotes male authority and female submission.

What we are addressing here is the third meaning. Patriarchy, as a system, where male authority and female submission is assumed, has been a common cultural trend throughout history. This has led some Christians to assume that it must reflect God's ordained way of ordering society. It attributes certain ideal characteristics to men, such as authority, leadership and aggressiveness, while women are expected to display dependence, passivity and compliance, and to be nurturing.⁴ Theologically, patriarchy has shaped our view of God and human relationships.⁵

Interpreting the Scripture through a patriarchal lens results in Christianising patriarchal values. Thus, though women may be encouraged to engage in many kinds of ministries, they face challenges that go unnoticed by their predominantly male leaders and counterparts. For example, many women who work outside the home will be expected to bear all the household responsibilities which might mean rising at dawn to cook for the family, travelling by overcrowded

3. Judith Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 55, cited in in Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2021), 13.

4. Samuel Oluwatosin Oklanawon, "Galatians 3:28: A Vision for Partnership," in *Co-Workers and Co-Leaders*, ed. by Amanda Jackson and Peirong Lin (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2021), 36.

5. Barr, *Making*, 36.

public transport to work, returning to cook, clean and take care of children. Husbands, and even wives, might accept this as the way things should be. Women may be recognised as pastors by their church but find that in meetings, their opinion is ignored, while the same opinion voiced by their husbands is received with appreciation. Single women face even greater challenges. They are expected to be free from family encumbrances and so be able to give more time to ministry. Yet the fact that they may be looking after elderly relatives, are vulnerable when travelling alone or late at night or struggling with loneliness is often overlooked. Single women are considered unlucky by local religions⁶ and even in the churches, they often do not find emotional or spiritual support since they do not ‘fit’ the culture’s view of an ideal woman.

In Colombo Theological Seminary (CTS), around 50% of the student body is female. However, the data does not overtly inform the shape or content of the curriculum. The fact that many of the male students will go into pastoral ministry where the majority of their congregation will be female also does not have a major impact on the curriculum. Benign neglect perhaps best describes the way many seminaries approach the issue of engendering the theological curriculum. It is assumed that both men and women are learning all they need to learn in the traditional curriculum. What would be the advantages of intentionally addressing gender issues in the curriculum? Firstly, it would give students a space to discuss issues faced by women in life and ministry. Secondly, it would alert students to the ways in which culture has taken precedence over a scriptural understanding of God’s design for men and women. Thirdly, it will affirm the contribution of women to family, church and society both now and in history. And fourthly, it would equip students who enter pastoral ministry to better understand and serve the women in their congregation.

Recently, a graduate of the Seminary was invited to co-teach a subject with me. When asked what she was interested in, she suggested a new elective examining the Biblical teaching on women. When the course

6. For example, single, divorced or widowed women are not allowed to participate in certain wedding rituals.

was advertised, the turnout was poor. Among the few students who had registered, all were women. There could have been many reasons for the lack of interest. Most students are part-time and the timing of the course on a weekday morning might have meant some interested students could not attend. However, the women who did attend were unanimous in asserting their opinion that the course ought to be made compulsory. In most theological colleges, making a subject like this a core course is not easy with all the competing demands. In some countries, like Indonesia, state accreditation would demand that gender studies be included in the curriculum, but that is not the case in Sri Lanka. What if, in a traditional curriculum there is no room for a core subject called gender studies? And even if it were, is this sufficient to address the challenges facing female students preparing for ministry? Dr Beverly Haddad addressing the issue within a traditional male dominated system suggests that theological education should be “engendered.”⁷

To our advantage, theological education is relatively young in Sri Lanka and there are no fixed templates for the curriculum. Added to that, the Asia Theological Association, our accrediting body, is extremely flexible and encourages creative models of theological education. This gives us the opportunity to go beyond a core course on gender. Instead, what would be less disruptive (in some ways) and more holistic would be what is proposed in this paper.

1. Seminary Curriculum Should Intentionally Address Gender

Many undergraduate theology degrees include the following streams or subjects: culture, biblical studies, hermeneutics, theology (including applied theology), church history, mission and ministry. We propose that the curriculum is engendered by intentionally incorporating elements that address gaps in students’ learning about gender.

7. Beverly Haddad, “Engendering Theological Education for Transformation,” *Journal of Theology for South Africa*, 116 (July 2003): 65.

1.1 Addressing Culture

It is normal in most curricula to teach students to describe and analyse their culture. Within this subject, seminaries could ensure that a culture's view of women is explored and evaluated biblically. It is also important to explain to students the part that culture plays in our interpretation of the Scripture. Students often do not realise the presuppositions that we bring to Scripture. They assume, especially as evangelicals, that God bypasses the lenses we have formed through our cultural presuppositions, church traditions, upbringing and experiences and speaks his words onto a *tabula rasa* (Latin Word for 'blank slate'). Sri Lankan culture is patriarchal, and the local religions uphold the traditional role of women as wives and mothers.

It is apparent from conversations in class that this view is the predominant view among both male and female students. It has been taken for granted that this is the biblical view reinforced by popular preachers and teachers. Some well known proponents are John Piper and Wayne Grudem. Their Centre for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood disseminate these ideas. Sri Lankan Christians often learn their theology from and give uncritical allegiance to popular teachers like these.

In Sri Lanka, the patriarchal ideology is experienced by women in various ways, especially but not limited to rural areas. If a woman is assaulted by her husband and goes to the police, she will be told to go back to her husband. It is considered a 'family matter,' not a criminal one. Even in the church, women facing domestic violence often find that they are blamed or told to forgive and submit. Many women hold full-time jobs outside their homes, but are still often expected to do all the domestic work and take care of her children. Women who are given pastoral roles may find that, in practice, they are not called 'pastors' while male counterparts are. They may not rise to hold positions in governing bodies and are sometimes considered 'too emotional' to make sensible decisions. Even well-intentioned male colleagues may not realise that women's voices are not heard even if there is a token woman on a board.

What has been sad to note is that often women do not support other women and are quick to judge and condemn their sisters. Women may internalise these attitudes and feel a sense of inferiority or diffidence, even when no one is actively discouraging them. In one of my classes on women in the Bible, a female student said she felt encouraged and empowered to follow her calling. What had held her back was not male disapproval but her own sense of unworthiness.

As Christians we want to affirm that there is beauty and goodness in all cultures. Sometimes Sri Lankan Christians have been wholly negative about their own culture, but we also recognise that all cultures are fallen, and it takes wisdom to discern what to affirm and what to discard.

1.2 Biblical Studies and Hermeneutics

Other regular subjects within a traditional curriculum include biblical interpretation, biblical books, and the doctrine of Scripture. Within any or all of these, seminaries can ensure that students learn about the process of translation and the potential biases contained within them. Many of the controversies over the role and value of women are shaped by different translations and ways in which commentators, predominantly male, have explained key texts. Take for example Genesis 1, where the word ‘helper’ has been explained as someone whose role is to help the man in his calling. John Piper writes “God teaches us that the woman is a man’s helper in the sense of a loyal and suitable assistant in the life of the garden.”⁸ Many women do not know that the word ‘helper’ is not necessarily a subservient role.

8. John Piper and Wayne Grudem eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2006), 87.

See also The Danvers Statement produced by The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). This statement was prepared by several evangelical leaders including Piper and Grudem at the CBMW meeting in Danvers, Massachusetts in December 1987. It was first published in final form by the CBMW in Wheaton, Illinois in November of 1988. The Danvers Statement summarises the need for the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) and serves as an overview of their core beliefs.

<https://cbmw.org/about/the-danvers-statement/>.

In practice this means that it is often assumed that in marriage, it is the husband's calling that is important. A wife is meant to support her husband and not expect that her calling should also be considered. Modern commentators point out that the word *ezer kenegdo* explains how the woman is like Adam (unlike the animals) and that *ezer* is also translated as 'ally.' A failure to see this may cause women to assume God has no call on her life and encourage her to abdicate responsibility for her own discipleship.

Another example of how a translation can be misleading is when the woman in Proverbs 31:6 *khayil* is called a 'virtuous' woman or a woman 'of noble character' in many translations whereas the same word when used of a man is translated as 'valiant.' (Judges 1:6, where this description of Gideon is translated as 'mighty warrior' (NIV) or 'mighty man of valour' (ESV). When the word is applied to men, it is translated as brave or valorous, but when it refers to women, it is translated as 'good,' 'noble' or 'virtuous.' "This is hardly careful translation."⁹

The common translation upholds the patriarchal view that the woman is the guardian of society's morals and achieves honour through virtue. Interestingly, students tell me that Proverbs 31, instead of liberating women by showing how multi-faceted her role is, has become a burden. Women are being told that they ought to be doing everything that the "ideal wife" is doing.

The texts written by Paul regarding women being silent in the church and not being allowed to teach, should be addressed. Students should be given the chance to see how and why differing opinions have given rise to different views on women in ministry. In our Sri Lankan context, certain controversies and theologies have been imported into the church from other countries. The divide over egalitarianism and complementarianism need not be a cause for division in the church in South Asia. Rather students should be encouraged to grapple with biblical texts and emerge with a conviction born of the Holy Spirit and "rightly handling the word of truth."

9. Lynne Smith, *Women, Worth and Scripture* (Bangalore, India: SAIACS Press, 2005), 33.

Another amendment to the way the curriculum is taught will be to intentionally include commentaries written by women so that students learn to both recognise and value female scholarship as well as gain a different perspective on biblical interpretation.

1.3 *Systematic Theology*

In systematic theology subjects, along with using textbooks authored by female theologians, students should also be taught about the contributions that women have made to theology over the centuries. It is also worthwhile to expose students to the writings of patristic theologians to show the influence of respected theologians on biblical interpretation, and how they were influenced by their own culture. In a worldview shaped by Greek philosophers like Aristotle, Tertullian would write:

“And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil’s gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die...”¹⁰

Ambrose of Milan writes, “In fact, even though the man was created outside Paradise (i.e., in an inferior place), he is found to be superior, while woman, though created in a better place (i.e., inside Paradise) is found inferior.”¹¹

Augustine, converting to Christianity after a profligate life wrote about the temptation in Eden: “That a man endowed with a spiritual mind could have believed this is astonishing. And just because it is impossible to believe it, woman was given to man, woman who was of small intelligence and who perhaps still lives more in accordance with

10. Tertullian, “On the Apparel of Women,” accessed October 16, 2025, https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian27.html#google_vignette.

11. St. Ambrose, “On Paradise,” accessed October 16, 2025, <https://www2.iath.virginia.edu/anderson/commentaries/Amb.html>.

the promptings of the inferior flesh than by the superior reason.”¹²

The post Nicene writings doubting that a woman could really be the image of God says:

“when I was treating of the nature of the human mind, that the woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that the whole substance may be one image; but when she is referred separately to her quality of *help-meet*, which regards the woman herself alone, then she is not the image of God; but as regards the man alone, he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman too is joined with him in one.”¹³

Understanding how the early church shifted from the New Testament’s inclusion of women as fellow workers to those relegated to the role of evil, weak temptress, and those who are even less than the image of God is important.¹⁴ We do not often take note of how famous theologians we admire had a skewed view of women, often shaped by their own culture or current philosophies. For example, Calvin, while accepting that God might occasionally, and for his purposes raise up a Deborah or Esther says of woman that she:

“..who by nature (that is, by the ordinary law of God) is formed to obey; for *γυναικοκρατία* (the government of women) has always been regarded by all wise persons as a monstrous thing; and, therefore, so to speak, it will be a mingling of heaven and earth, if women usurp the right to teach. Accordingly, he bids them be

12. Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis* cited by Judy Wu Dominick “How Some of the Early Church Fathers’ Views on Women Affect us Today” *Life Reconsidered – Judy Wu Dominick* (blog), accessed September 9, 2025, <https://lifereconsidered.com/2020/02/12/how-some-of-the-early-church-fathers-views-on-women-affect-us-today/>.

13. New Advent, “On the Trinity (Book XII),” *From Philip Schaff ed., From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 3.*, trans. Arthur West Haddan, accessed September 9, 2025, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130112.htm>.

14. See Judy Wu Dominick “How Some of the Early Church Fathers’ Views on Women Affect us Today” *Life Reconsidered – Judy Wu Dominick* (blog), accessed September 9, 2025, <https://lifereconsidered.com/2020/02/12/how-some-of-the-early-church-fathers-views-on-women-affect-us-today/>.

“quiet,” that is, keep within their own rank. *For Adam was first created* He assigns two reasons why women ought to be subject to men; because not only did God enact this law at the beginning, but he also inflicted it as a punishment on the woman.”¹⁵

Within systematic theology, there are important topics which can incorporate a corrective to faulty anthropology. The character of God will include the feminine attributes of God, while preserving the appropriateness of calling God “Father.” As we have already discussed, what it means to be the image of God will include the dignity and worth of women. In Pneumatology, the bestowing of the Spirit and spiritual gifts will make it clear that gifts are not gender-based and therefore, an argument can be made that ministry too has to be seen in that context.

2. The Hidden Curriculum

Whatever is taught in the formal curriculum, must be reinforced by the hidden curriculum of the school. Schools should ensure female representation at all levels of employment including the board or council. Female lecturers should be equally represented on the faculty. It must be seen that the contribution of women is fully incorporated into the ethos of our Seminary. It is too easy to have a token woman being appointed to various boards to satisfy the principle of inclusion. Of course, this may sometimes be genuinely difficult in the case of faculty since in some regions of the world, like Sri Lanka, women are only recently beginning to be given the space to study up till the post graduate level. Colombo Theological Seminary now has several women faculty as well as women in Management and in the Council.

We must not underestimate the impact on female students of seeing women in leadership and teaching positions. Students and younger women faculty have mentioned that they were motivated to train

15. John Calvin, *Commentary on Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1999) Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom43.iii.iv.iv.html>.

and to teach after seeing a woman faculty member in what they had considered an exclusively male domain. Male students too may have an opportunity to see women in a different light and benefit from female role models.

When women are appointed to lectureships, it has been common to restrict them to non-theology subjects.¹⁶ While the restriction may not be intentional, women too tend to see their role as counsellors and children's workers. One suspects that there is a general feeling that theology is purely academic, and that ministry has no need of it.

Something else that both male and female students ought to see modelled is the relationship of mutual respect and service between men and women in ministry. There must be opportunities for students to observe the relationship between male and female colleagues. This might be in informal settings, or in deliberately planned teaching moments. For example, a male and female lecturer may co-teach a class or co-lead a student group or committee.

Mentoring of emerging women leaders by other women in leadership is important. However, in situations where the existing leadership is predominantly male, emerging female leaders may not find the mentors they need. Most male leaders tend not to invest their time mentoring women leaders. This is partly a culturally driven phenomenon, with the strict separation of the sexes for propriety's sake. Given the fact that most leaders and faculty members have been male, it has meant that emerging female leaders have lacked

16. Linda Naicker, "The Role of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Engendering Theological Higher Education in Africa," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 50, no. 2 (2024): 8.

Linda Naicker cites the work of Dr. Phiri who found in her research among Seminaries in Africa, that women were seldom appointed to teach theology. In her article she traces the impact of 'The Circle of African Women Theologians,' whose objective is to provide mentoring and advocacy for women theologians. The Centre has provided resources, advice and support to women, to challenge Seminaries to appoint women theologians, to create curricula that address contextual issues and provide mentoring for emerging scholars. The setting up of such an organisation for South Asia would also be beneficial to women theologians in the region.

mentoring from those men who could have helped them grow as leaders and faculty.

3. Informal (and formal) Groups for Women

Some schools set up informal groups for women students and faculty. Lewis mentions that in a Seminary in Jamaica, women students, faculty and faculty wives met together for mutual encouragement.¹⁷ Recently, our Seminary invited female students and faculty for an informal meeting. The number that attended was not high, but that was partly since it had never been done before and the students were unsure of what to expect. The feedback received from the students was very positive. They said that they would like such a gathering at least twice a term. They wanted to discuss the issues they faced, such as how to balance the roles of ministry with family. An interesting and unexpected comment from a participant was that she felt that even if an issue being discussed was not personal, female students preferred to ask questions of and speak to a female faculty member. Some raised the question of childcare and asked if the Seminary would consider providing such a service to students. It is our intention to try and meet once a week and grow this group so that female students and faculty, and perhaps faculty wives could have times of fellowship and mutual enrichment.

While informal groups meeting within the Seminary will encourage and help mentor female students, perhaps there also needs to be a move to encourage women to hold conferences and seminars at which women speakers address gender related issues. Very often women's conferences tend to emphasise certain aspects of the Christian life, such as prayer, but neglect deep theological reflection. Women students need to be heard and mentored to be credible scholars.

17. Marjorie Lewis, "Mainstreaming Gender in theological Education," *The Ecumenical Review* 71, no. 4 (October 2019): 545-551, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12459>.

4. Male Gender Champions

While women leaders may be better suited to some aspects of engendering the curriculum, it is important to have male gender champions who will both lead by example and teach in a way that shows their full support for the Seminary's intentional effort to address gender issues.

One school in the Philippines noticed that there was a high attrition rate among female students. They found that many women gave up on their studies because they were unable to balance their studies with the load they were expected to carry at home. The school decided to request husbands to accompany their wives to their application interviews. At the interview, the husband was challenged to recognise the cost of making the decision that the wife would study. It would require the husband to take on extra household chores to support his wife. The school noticed that the attrition rate decreased.

It is encouraging to see many couples studying together at our seminary and many wives being encouraged to study by their families. It is also encouraging to see more women faculty join us and to see the respect and collegiality within the community.

Challenges to Change

The suggestions made in this paper do not call for major changes in the traditional curriculum. It merely argues that seminaries need to intentionally address their context factoring the issues raised by the reality of the experience of women in the church.

What could be difficult is to persuade the leadership that this is a legitimate issue to highlight. Many well-meaning male leaders might feel that Christian men have the right attitude already and do not need any further teaching. Some might feel that in a world that is increasingly focused on rights, where there is an increasing distrust of marriage, and a rise in divorces even within the church, that we need to re-emphasise the role of women as wives and mothers. And of course, in seminaries which rely on many visiting faculty, it is hard to

ensure that the ethos we are trying to cultivate is being passed on.

Conclusion

For some Christians, any effort at singling out women for attention or empowerment is seen as unbiblical or even dangerous. The word “feminism” is assumed to be purely secular and dangerous. In such an environment, seminaries need to be wise as well as bold in addressing gender issues. We need to educate our students about God’s design for them as men and women as individuals, spouses, friends and colleagues. We do not want to drive a wedge between male and female students nor do we want women to cultivate a victim mentality. We do not want women students to seek independence from their brothers. Instead, we want to see both men and women deeply rooted in Scripture, listening to the Holy Spirit, able to analyse and critique their cultures and presuppositions. We want our students both men and women, to be leaders who will build healthy churches and model healthy relationships. This we must do by teaching with intentionality, by modelling what we teach and by celebrating the fact that God created us in his image, male and female.

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11

From the Terrors of Dismemberment to a Theology of Re-membering: Confronting Gender-Based Violence in Judges 19 and Today's Society

~ Marie Joy Pring-Faraz

I recall the chilling whispers about a chop-chop lady when I was a young girl growing up in the Philippines. Hearing the news about her body being found, piece by piece, brought shock too dreadful for a juvenile mind to comprehend. The name of the victim was Elsa Castillo—brutally killed by her lover, her body was mutilated and dumped like trash in a remote province to conceal the crime. I remember the visceral fear I felt; I came to terms with my own vulnerability as a woman and how precarious one's feelings of safety can be. Such was my initial exposure to gender-based violence, a piercing fear etched in a Filipino generation's memory.

Later in life, I had a different kind of disorienting dilemma—a theological one. As I was nearing the end of the book of Judges, I was appalled to discover a gruesome echo of Elsa Castillo's tale in chapter 19. A nameless concubine was raped and mutilated, her body parts sent to the twelve tribes of Israel. How could such brutality be recorded in the Scripture? The terror that I felt was not simply at the act itself, but at the silence thereafter. No grief. No justice. It was simply dismemberment and dismay.

This essay examines where biblical violence and modern gender-based violence (GBV) intersect, and it does so by employing Judges 19 and the Chop-Chop Lady as parallel texts. The call is made to

the Church and theological education to meet these narratives—not with abstraction or silence, but with justice, compassion, and transformative action.

Exploring the World of the Dismembered Concubine of Judges 19

The world of Judges 19 represents a fragmented social order—there was no king and people gave in to the temptations and demands of expediency.¹ The lack of good governance and central authority led to coercive discretion of tribe elders and the self-preservation of leaders. Under such conditions, the righteous decrees that ought to have protected the weakest and the least in the society are co-opted. The recurring refrain, “everyone did what was right in his own eyes,” is a hermeneutical principle for the book of Judges—it is a world where moral arbiters are absent and fissures in norms lead to undermining of the life and dignity of the poor and powerless.²

The society in Judges 19 is deeply patriarchal. Here, a woman’s personhood is defined by masculine power and is negotiated through kinship and marriage arrangements.³ Family and civic relationships were ruled by honour codes and kin obligations which tend to privilege male prestige over the welfare and integrity of women.⁴ Even hospitality and covenant duties are left open to inversion when the self-interest of the community or fear of violent retaliation

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 33–45.

2. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1–28.

3. Women in the Ancient Near East consistently emerge as dependents, objects of barter, or characters whose status is assured by fathers, husbands, or heads of households and not by independent legal status. See Carol Meyers, “Women, Children, and the Law in the Ancient Near East,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 46, no. 4 (1983): 234–45.

4. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Women in the Biblical World,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2159–76.

predominates over duty to protect lives.⁵

The concubine in Judges 19 lived in the historical matrix where moral corruption, and deep roots of patriarchy meet. In this world, women and girls become vulnerable and dispensable. The grotesque violence of the concubine's story is not a random exception but is an inherent product of structural conditions that use women as tokens of honour and negotiating pawns for male security. Reading this narrative in the light of its social and political context reveals how the coalescence of gendered norms and ethical disintegration lead to abhorrent atrocities.

The systemic gender-based violence which resulted in the ghastly demise of the Judges 19 concubine also reveals a series of betrayal committed against her. The first betrayal was by her father and the Levite. It is ambiguous why the concubine departed from the Levite's home to the house of her father. Whether because of infidelity or abuse, what is clear is that there is a rupture in the relationship between the Levite and the concubine. Her departure is not simply because of moral failure; it was an act of female defiance and resistance in a male-dominated world.⁶ Her father entrusted her once more to the Levite who sought her as though retrieving a possession rather than seeking reconciliation.⁷ The concubine was betrayed a second time by those who should have been offering her hospitality and safety in Gibeah. She was brought out to appease the men who threatened sexual violence and was left defenceless to their fatal abuse.⁸

All throughout the narrative, the concubine is inaudible—her silence in the reportage of events further highlights the dehumanisation and lack of agency of women in such a world. Her violated and mutilated body, which in the end was used to call the attention of Israel, is

5. Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), xx–xxiv. Hospitality rituals often intended to ensure the safety of strangers and social reciprocity.

6. Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 65–66.

7. Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 66–67.

8. Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 67–70.

still an act of objectification. As the tribes received their share of the dismembered parts of the concubine, they were confronted with their social malady, as well as the distressing shame that befell them.

God is also conspicuously silent in the text, as though God is identifying with the voiceless concubine.⁹ The divine silence in Judges 19 does not mean the absence or neutrality of God in the face of the abuse faced by the concubine, but rather it should be seen as divine solidarity with the victim. When everyone did what was right in their own eyes, the covenant to obey God as well as to look after the welfare of the vulnerable in the society was abandoned. Hence, God's silence is an indictment against the people and the system that brutally ended the life of the concubine: from the Levite who treated her as a commodity, to the towns people of Gibeah for their violence against their guest, and to all of Israel for their communal complicity and overall moral failure.

This indictment is made more profound when placed in contrast with Israel's own heritage of justice, righteousness and wisdom which are typically illustrated as feminine figures.¹⁰ The brutal act against the concubine is a violation of her body and personhood, as well as a symbolic attack on the feminine visage of justice itself. Her dismembered body becomes a gruesome mirror of the violence that Israel has done to their covenant with God. This text of terror does not call for quick answers or conciliating theological formulations. The rhetorical indictment that is the silence of God in solidarity with the silenced concubine calls the readers to come to terms with the horror of the story. To sit with the text's atrociousness is to rouse outrage, to yearn for a day of reckoning and to desire transformation.

9. Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 29-72.

10. Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 94-99. Tribble writes about how biblical metaphors tend to feminine abstract theological ideas such as justice. She purports that these feminine personifications confront patriarchal interpretations and encourage further reflection on God's agency through feminine imagery.

Engaging the World of the Broken Victims Today

The concubine's narrative hauntingly echoes the lived experiences of the vulnerable ones today whose bodies are commodified, silenced, and exploited for financial gains. Learning from the biblical narrative, the church must confront the enduring structures that perpetuate sexual exploitation and gender-based violence that continue to plague victims in the Philippines and across Asia.

Gender-based violence in the Philippines and wider Asian contexts is intricately entangled with systemic disparities—poverty, economic desperation, as well as human trafficking in the streets or online are the scaffoldings upon which exploitation stands. In underprivileged communities, the lack of access to education, decent work, and legal protection makes women and children susceptible to exploitation and abuse.¹¹ Trafficking syndicates target displaced households, offering income or migration that ends up in forced labour or sexual exploitation.¹²

The faces of feminisation of poverty in Asia are that of the domestic workers, bar girls, and trafficked children whose bodies have been commodified for economic and financial reasons.¹³ The objectification of the concubine, even the host's daughter in Judges 19 is echoed in today's society: women and children are put in harm's way and are rendered disposable. The voicelessness of the women in the world of Judges 19 is reflective of the voicelessness of the exploited, whose narratives are often dismissed, distorted by cultural stigma, and delayed by institutional neglect. Many victims of sexual exploitation face substantial obstacles to disclosure, limited access to justice and

11. World Bank, *Philippines Gender-Based Violence Policy and Institutional Mapping Report*, 2021, <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e1575832e43d4030373f9a616975364f-0070062021/original/Philippines-Gender-Based-Violence-Policy-and-Institutional-Mapping-Report.pdf>.

12. UN Women Asia-Pacific, *Take Five Philippines: Cultural Stereotypes and Beliefs*, 2024, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/stories/take-five/2024/09/take-five-philippines-cultural-stereotypes-and-beliefs>.

13. UN Women Asia-Pacific, *Take Five Philippines*.

compensation claims, as well as inadequate support for recovery and reintegration into the society after the abuse.¹⁴

Culturally, shame, silence, and male honour are powerful drivers in maintaining GBV in the Filipino and Asian contexts. Justice follows the preservation of the family's honour in most communities, and survivors are coerced into silence to keep scandal at bay. The Filipino cultural value, *hiya*, means dignity and moral restraint. However, *hiya* may also be co-opted to produce feelings of “shame,” and it is used to hold back disclosure and protect the abusers.¹⁵ Victim blaming, such as being responsible for tempting the perpetrator and disrupting the peace of the family and community because of speaking up about the abuse, reinforces a culture of impunity.

The latest report of UN Women, flags and emphasises how cultural stereotypes of male entitlement and female submission continue to obstruct efforts toward gender equality.¹⁶ Such ways of thinking are perpetuated through the media, religious traditions, and even education, wherein agency and protest are seen as disruptors of harmony while silence and obedience are preferred and rewarded. Gender-based violence is both interpersonal and a systemic pattern of control fueled by cultural norms and narratives that mirror the moral breakdown of Judges 19.

The story of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19 is not a thing of the past in ancient Israel—it echoes in the world even today, where women are still being sacrificed to save men's honour or to keep the veneer of peace in families and communities. Whether it is silencing domestic violence victims or the victims of slavery and sex trafficking, the weak are seen as disposable. The narratives of contemporary gender-based violence continue to reflect humanity's moral failure—institutions neglect to

14. ECPAT International, INTERPOL, and UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, *Disrupting Harm in the Philippines: Evidence on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse* (2022), <https://ecpat.org/resource/disrupting-harm-philippines>.

15. Mina Roces, *Women, Power, and Kinship Politics in Post-War Philippines* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 87–89.

16. UN Women Asia-Pacific, *Take Five Philippines*.

protect, communities value image over integrity, and women's bodies are sacrificed for the protection and pleasure of the powerful. The theological indictment in Judges 19, the unsettling silence of God, is a prophetic judgment not just for the community from antiquity, but for our modern societies as well, against the normalisation of violence through cultural, legal, and economic complicity.¹⁷

The Chop-Chop Ladies and the Broken Mirror Syndrome

The mutilated bodies of the concubine in Judges 19 and Elsa Castillo are a mirror held up to the fractured souls of gender-based violence victims today. Just as their bodies were dismembered and such acts provoked moral reckoning, victims are also left with a broken view of self, bearing the weight of betrayal, silence, and systemic neglect in their abused minds and bodies.

Broken Mirror Syndrome is a metaphorical concept applied to capture the psychological and emotional disintegration that results in individuals who have been subjected to serious trauma, especially victims of gender-based violence.¹⁸ With the background of introspective psychology, this syndrome was coined to denote the broken image of self, more like looking at one's identity through a fractured mirror whose reflection is twisted, inadequate, and agonising to observe. The broken mirror syndrome explains the way trauma shatters identity, distorts self-esteem, and appears as dissociation, shame, and bodily alienation. Gender-based violence victims feel a sense of themselves being fragmented, and they find it arduous to reconcile painful experiences with inherent dignity.¹⁹

17. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40–46.

18. Domina Petric, "The Broken Mirror Syndrome vs. Constructive Self-Criticism," *ResearchGate*, 2018, 1-3. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326082213_The_broken_mirror_syndrome_vs_constructive_self-criticism.

19. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 102–104.

There are multiple symptoms that encompass the broken mirror syndrome.²⁰ For one, the victims internalise the negative emotions and the words of their abusers. This leads to self-sabotaging criticism and a diminished perspective of one's self. Victims of gender-based violence also go through overwhelming feelings of terror, embarrassment, anxiety, and rage. These negative emotions often manifest in the victims' bodies too, from dermatological symptoms to tension, headaches and indigestion, etc. Even worse, victims of gender-based violence are vulnerable to dissociation or psychological splitting to cope with the pain and trauma, causing internal dissonance that may endure for years.²¹ The victims feel detached from their bodies and their memories—this increases their predisposition to external influence and further abuse. The trauma from the abuse experienced by the victims erodes their integrity and the ability to build non-abusive and trusting relationships.

The broken mirror syndrome is not clinical but a poetic frame for understanding the victims' lived experience. It embodies the inner dismemberment that reflects the outer violence: loss of voice, agency, and coherence. Victims might contend with self-blame, relational mistrust, and spiritual disorientation, sensing as if their reflection does not belong to them anymore. The concubine, Elsa Castillo, and so many more nameless women constitute a chorus of fragmented selves—each testifying to a world that is still learning to see them as whole, each calling us to respond with compassion and justice.

A Call toward a Theology of Re-membering for the Dismembered and Broken

Re-membering in biblical imagination is not passive, but is a part of God's faithful commitment to His people. When God *re-members* as in Genesis 8:1 or Exodus 2:24, it is a movement towards justice, restoration, and relationship. To *re-member* is to reinstate dignity,

20. Petric, "The Broken Mirror Syndrome," 1-3.

21. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 105-107.

reconstitute what has been broken by betrayal and sin. Similarly, at the Last Supper, Jesus instructs, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). This is not merely memorial—it is sacramental reconstitution. The Eucharist is the Church’s physical expression of remembering the fractured body of Christ, which paradoxically becomes a place of healing, unity, and resurrection. In this holy act, the Church is invited to *re-member* not just Christ but all who have had their bodies broken by injustice and violence.

A study conducted with survivors of online abuse and exploitation of children yielded the results that restoration of human dignity, having a voice to share their story, and being given the agency to participate in their respective case management meetings mattered most to the participants.²² One of the children, barely 18 years old, mentioned that after having a sense of belonging in the shelter and receiving care and counseling from the social workers, psychologists, and pastors, she had a new self-perception. *Dito po kasi may kumakausap sa amin, nailalabas namin yung mga hinanakit namin...natuturuan din po kaming mag-pray dito...kung dati po parang ang gulo-gulo ng buhay ko, pakiramdam ko po nabubuo na po ang puso ko paunti-unti* (Someone talks to us here, we can vent our grievances... we also learned how to pray here... if before my life feels like a mess, it feels like my heart is slowly coming together).²³ The experience of this young lady directly contrasts the Broken Mirror Syndrome—as she regained her dignity, voice, and agency, she started to feel whole again.

Re-membering is a deliberate act in resistance to dis-membering. While emotional and psychological fractures, voicelessness, and separation happen during dis-membering, membering is more than accommodation. Membering entails complete inclusion. Membering is the inclusion of the whole without any distinction or hierarchy. With the broken body of Christ in the communion feast, re-membering is

22. Marie Joy D. Pring et al., *Key Factors That Constitute an Effective Assessment Center for OSEC Victim-Survivors in the Philippines* (Taytay, Rizal: Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, Department of Research, 2020), 92-100.

23. Pring et al., *Key Factors That Constitute an Effective Assessment Center*, 96.

a celebration and not a thing of shame. In this re-membering act in the Eucharist sacrament, one is not identified by trauma but by the inherent value and dignity of one's body and spirit.

Healing from gender-based violence must go beyond psychological intervention—it also demands “re-membering.” Re-member is more than just passively bearing in mind the violation and injustice faced by the victims—it also involves taking a moral stance. This means to hold the victims faithfully, refusing to have their suffering and narratives erased by the passing of time or by the institutions and powerful individuals who wish them to be neglected and forgotten. To re-member is to stand in solidarity with their pursuit of justice and even seeking for it on their behalf if need be. When one re-members, one resists the denial and abstraction of the abuse and violence that the victims went through.

To forget is to perpetuate injustice and the cycle of violence—it erases the dignity of the victims; it protects the perpetrators and the system that benefits them; it denies accountability and communal responsibility; and worst, it silences the prophetic witness of good people. Without re-membering and reclaiming of truth, healing will not be possible. Re-membering asserts that all victims—the concubine, Elsa Castillo, and countless unnamed women—are not statistics or shadows, but real individuals who once lived—they were daughters, people of sacred worth, bearers of God's own divine imprint.

Re-membering also speaks of restoration, to bring together what violence has so mercilessly torn-apart. To re-member is to bring dignity, voice, and agency to the victims. Unlike the *dis-membering* of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19 and Elsa Castillo that brought about anger, *re-membering* opens a path to justice via lament, reclaiming the truth in the narratives of abuse, and setting in place restorative practices.

The theology of *re-membering* has lament and solidarity as pastoral expressions. The poetry and psalms biblical genre teaches God's people that lament is a prophetic act. *Re-membering* names the wounds, holds the broken narratives of survivors with respect, and makes sacred space for grief and truth. *Re-membering* aligns with

trauma theory: recovery necessitates bringing together fragmented memory, reclaiming agency, and restoration of trust. Pastoral care needs to be embodied, slow, and justice-oriented—assisting survivors in re-narrating their lives without shame, and without being retraumatised by abstraction or silence.

Communal lament is necessary for the theology of *re-membering*. It involves collectively identifying the acts of injustice committed against the victims, and opening up a space where a community may collectively grieve what was lost and seek ways to honour the offended. Communities of faith, especially Christian communities, must be places of *re-membering*. They should be people with whom victims feel safe to be around—not re-traumatising them or adding insult to the wounds. The church must be a people who can extend trauma-informed pastoral care, conduct liturgies that acknowledge the terror and the agony of the victims, and stand in advocacy to confront institutional neglect of justice and care for the weak. More than being punitive, justice is about restoration. Theological *re-membering* demands that all scars be places of godliness, all silences be calls to tell the story, and all broken selves be possibilities for resurrection.

Each act of violence is a desecration of the *imago Dei*. *Re-membering* is a theological protest at this desecration. It is the Church's refusal to permit the image of God being defiled without response. It insists that survivors are not shadows—they are sacred stories, bearers of divine worth, whose dignity must be restored and honoured. It is the Church's act of refusing to forget and covering up systems of impunity. It brings to a halt cultural assumptions, institutional indifference, and theological distortions that cause harm. The Church has to be a society of *re-membering*—where brokenness is welcomed and held compassionately, and where each scar in the body and in the soul becomes a place wherein Christ, the wounded Lord, builds solidarity and brings healing to the victims.

Theological education must also be engaged and be at the forefront of critical reflection and transformational practice toward the theology of *re-membering* for the broken. Gender-based violence continues

to occur across cultures and institutions, even in seminaries and churches. Leaders and teachers in theological institutions have a sacred mandate: to train leaders who handle the Word of Truth masterfully and humbly live out its challenge to justice and mercy. Gender justice must be incorporated in the curriculum of biblical studies, theology, and ethics as a central theological commitment. There need to be holistic programmes that integrate theology, psychology, and advocacy. These courses must teach gender equality, subvert patriarchal norms, and equip ministers with trauma-informed care and prophetic courage.

Judges 19 should no longer be read as a text of terror to be shunned. It should be used as a pedagogical tool—eliciting empathy, moral seriousness, and theological depth. When students read the concubine’s narrative alongside modern tales such as Elsa Castillo’s, they start to notice the continuity of violence and the need for theological resistance. This text becomes a warning and a clarion call to protect the vulnerable in the society. Even more, seminaries and theological institutions must be safe places where gender-based violence is never tolerated. Allegations of power abuse, sexual propositioning, innuendos, and harassment must be dealt with immediately, transparently, and decisively. Victims of gender-based violence must also be met with grace and trauma-informed care—they must be re-membered and reintegrated to the faith community with respect for their stories and dignity.

Judges 19 discloses a king-less world—a splintered world where moral breakdown results in the gruesome dismemberment of the weak. It is a world of silence, complicity, and desecrated dignity. But king-less we are no more. We have Christ, our cruciform King, who does not rule through domination but through solidarity. He suffers with those who suffer. He does not forsake the violated—He carries their wounds in His own body.

From Brokenness to Shalom: Re-membering Christ the Wounded Lord

The cross is our model. In Christ, there is power in weakness, strength in suffering, and life in death. Dismemberment is not the final word. All that was broken will be made whole, the scattered will be gathered with forgiveness and grace. As God's people respond to the call of cruciform living, the church becomes a place and presence of healing, teaching a theology that restores, and nurturing a society that does not accept the sacrificing of daughters (and sons!) in exchange for temporary relief and pretend peace.

Justice is our mission. The church and theological institutions need to confront violence, not with abstraction but action. Just as the soul is precious, so is the body—and any assault to the body is to be renounced and resisted. The church at large must speak for righteousness, not with platitudes but with prophetic determination. And God's people must be a sanctuary of shalom—a sanctuary where survivors are heard, seen, and held; where shattered mirrors are fixed; and where every dismembered narrative is re-membered with grace.

Finally, Christ is our blessed assurance. It is imperative to re-member that just as the concubine in Judges 19 was killed to appease the godless folks of Gibeah, and Elsa Castillo was murdered to appease the worries of her jilted lover, Christ Jesus too was sentenced to death to appease the crowd that cried for his crucifixion. Even today, *re-membering* is a sacred work for Christ's followers—to piece the truth together, to sanctify the wounds of the victims, and to declare that even now, in the midst of humanity's terrors and woes, Christ is present and His saving grace is at work. Resurrection is possible; restoration is assured.

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12

Breaking the Silence: The Church's Response to Violence against Women in Indonesia

~ Ira Desiawanti Mangililo

Introduction

In 2014, I was given the opportunity to mentor a young woman while she was writing her thesis. Her name was Florensye Selvin Gaspersz, and her thesis was titled “Soekarno’s Thoughts on Justice and Freedom for Women from the Perspective of Susan Moller Okin’s Theory of Justice.”¹ When I asked what motivated Flo, as she is usually called, to write a thesis on this topic, Flo replied that the reason was deeply personal. It stemmed from her concern about the injustice experienced by Indonesian women in both the domestic and public spheres. Furthermore, Flo shared that a close family member of hers had suffered at the hands of her husband, experiencing domestic violence in the form of physical, psychological/emotional and economic abuse. Due to the intense pressure, her family member died. Therefore, Flo felt the need to instil values of justice, starting within the family. She hoped that no other woman would experience what her family member had experienced. After completing her thesis, Flo returned to her hometown, was ordained as a pastor and served in East Luang, Moluccas. She got married and had a child. We never communicated thereafter.

However, on March 29, 2023, I was shocked by the news about Flo. Flo was found dead, hanging from a rope, leading to suspicions of

1. I am telling this story here without hiding her real name because this news had become a trending topic at the time this incident occurred.

suicide. This case then became a hot topic because it was considered unnatural. According to reports, Flo was suspected of experiencing domestic violence at the hands of her own husband. She had experienced physical and psychological violence since January 2023, which had impacted her ministry as a pastor. A few days before her death, she had been involved in an argument with her husband over a birthday present for her child. A few days later, her husband attended a congregation member's wedding and consumed alcohol. This frightened Flo because her husband often physically abused her when he returned home drunk. She took her child to seek refuge with a close relative, whom she considered her own parent. The next day, her husband came to where Flo was staying and caused a commotion by confronting her. He punched and slapped her on both cheeks and forehead, drawing a crowd. The church leadership's response upon hearing about Flo's experience was to send a Letter of Withdrawal of Service, sent by the Church District (classis) Secretary via *WhatsApp*. The reason was that Pastor Flo experienced violence from her husband in front of the congregation. Upon receiving this letter, Flo was devastated. She forwarded the letter to her husband and mother-in-law to show them the consequences of her husband's actions. The letter of withdrawal was also read during the congregation's Sunday service on the following day, leaving Flo deeply ashamed, as she told her mother-in-law and several pastor friends. Flo then locked herself at home. Flo's *WhatsApp* messages to her husband resulted in her husband responding through text messages and voice notes cursing, insulting, and threatening her and her child. On the last day before her death, March 28, 2023, Flo was still communicating with the Classis Chair and Secretary to ask for directions regarding preparations for the Confirmation of Faith for a number of church members. She also went to church to prepare for it. After that, Flo returned home in the evening. Her last message via *WhatsApp* was sent at 10:36 PM, and the following day she was declared dead.

As told by the Friends of Flo Alliance (ASA FLO), a group consisting of individuals and institutions of various faiths, churches/denominations, generations, ethnicities, and other backgrounds in Indonesia and abroad who united to fight for justice for Flo, the violence experienced

by Flo has had a significant impact on her ministry as a pastor. The first impact appeared in January 2023. The violence perpetrated by her husband against Flo prompted the East Moluccas Luang Church District to issue a Letter of Withdrawal of Service as a disciplinary measure against the pastor due to problems within her household. The contents prohibited Flo from carrying out special ministry responsibilities as a pastor, namely Sunday Worship and the Sacrament of Holy Communion in early 2023. Domestic violence was carried out again by the husband against Flo in March 2023, and this time it was witnessed by people. These events culminated in the issuance of a second Letter of Withdrawal of Service for Flo before her death.

Pastor Flo's tragic story opens our eyes to the harsh reality of violence against women in Indonesia, where women are often victims not only within the domestic sphere but also within the social, cultural, and religious systems that should provide protection. Data from the National Commission on Violence Against Women (2025) shows that the rate of violence against women and children in Indonesia has increased by approximately 9.77%.² In this context, the church holds a unique and strategic position. As a religious institution with significant influence in the social and spiritual life of Indonesian society, the church is expected to be a transformative agent, championing life and justice. However, in many cases, such as the case of Rev. Flo mentioned above, the church chooses to remain silent or even reproduces the patriarchal culture that perpetuates violence. Therefore, it is crucial to discuss how the church can play an active role in breaking down the culture of silence—and responding to violence against women theologically and practically.

I. Violence against Women in the Indonesian Context

Violence against women is an act committed against someone

2. National Commission on Violence Against Women, *Organizing Data, Sharpening Direction: Reflections on Documentation and Trends in Cases of Violence Against Women 2024* (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 2024), accessed June 20, 2025, <https://khportal.bappenas.go.id/en/knowledge/detail/292>.

solely because she is a woman, which results in suffering whether physical, psychological or sexual, including threats, coercion and arbitrary deprivation of rights, whether committed in the private or public sphere.³ Here, violence against women does not follow a clear sequence or a fixed cycle. It's like a tornado that gathers strength and draws people into its vortex. As a result, women are left hurt, confused, and suffering, sometimes even permanently disoriented.⁴ From a feminist perspective, violence against women is equated with gender-based violence.⁵ Due to the fact that the violence that has occurred against women has often been caused by unequal gender relations, where women occupy a subordinate position below the position of more powerful men.⁶

Various factors contribute to violence against women, including societal, environmental, relationship, and individual factors, each of which has a variety of underlying causes that can directly or indirectly lead to violence against women. In the Indonesian context, there are at least two main root causes of violence against women: 1) patriarchal ideology and gender bias; 2) exploitative development mechanisms.⁷ The concept of patriarchy refers to a particular sociopolitical system in which a father, due to his position within the household, can dominate members of his extended family network and control economic production. The relationship (position and role) between women and men in the structure of social life is asymmetrical. As a result, discrimination or marginalisation

3. United Nations. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. (New York: UN Department of Public Information, 1996), par.113–115, 73–74.

4. The Lutheran World Federation Department for Mission and Development Women in Church and Society, *Churches Say “No” to Violence against Women: Action Plan for the Churches* (Switzerland: The Lutheran World Federation, 2002), 10.

5. Bambang Rudi Harnoko, “Di Balik Tindak Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan (trans. Behind Acts of Violence against Women),” *MUWAZAH: Journal of Gender Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 181.

6. Ani Purwanti, *Kekerasan Berbasis Gender* (trans. Gender-Based Violence) (Yogyakarta: Bildung, 2020), 32.

7. A. Afandi, “Bentuk-bentuk Perilaku Bias Gender (trans. Forms of Gender Bias Behavior),” *Lentera: Journal of Gender and Children Studies* 1, no. 1 (2019): 12-19.

of women occurs in various areas of life. This patriarchal system gradually leads to a biased understanding of the positions and roles of men and women in society. This biased understanding is termed gender bias.⁸

This gender bias is a factor that contributes to the justification of violence against women. This is due to a societal understanding that tends to assume gender traits are inherent human traits. The assumption that women are weak is used as a basis for treating them arbitrarily in the form of violent acts such as domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, trafficking of women, sexual exploitation, etc.

Recent violence in Indonesian society, including against women, is seen as a result of social inequality. There is no guarantee that everyone in society can access development equally and determine the life of the nation. This is clearly evident in the division of positions and roles between men and women in the nation's development process. In general, men are often assigned lucrative positions in the productive public sector, while also wielding greater, sometimes absolute, power over their families. Conversely, many women are relegated to the domestic sector, considered less productive, and marginalised. Consequently, women's issues are only considered public issues when they threaten national productivity and growth. Therefore, violence against women is often seen solely as a women's issue, rather than a broader societal problem.

Furthermore, the 2025 National Commission on Violence Against Women's Report on Violence Against Women shows that the majority of women experiencing violence are from lower social strata. Women working as domestic workers and migrant workers, for example, experience criminalisation, physical violence, and sexual harassment in the workplace, even leading to death and becoming victims of human trafficking.⁹ They have limited resources, both in terms of material and knowledge which result in most women living in poverty being unaware

8. M.A. Kholik and A. Wibowo, "Penerapan Teori Tujuan Pemidanaan dalam Perkara Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan: Studi Putusan Hakim (trans. Application of the Theory of the Purpose of Punishment in Cases of Violence against Women: A Study of Judges' Decisions)," *Jurnal Hukum IUS QUIA IUSTUM* 23, no.23 (April 2016): 186-205.

9. National Commission on Violence Against Women, *Organizing Data*," 5-6.

of their rights and less able to express themselves as individuals who have the right to be treated equally with men. If we look deeper, the main cause of the unfair position and role between men and women is the existence of patriarchy that has been embedded in the structure of society due to the existing social culture. This injustice can be seen in various aspects, such as the process of marginalisation or economic impoverishment, subordination in the political arena, the creation of negative stereotypes and labelling, violence, heavier and longer workloads, and the spread of gender role ideology. These various forms of injustice are interconnected and form an unbroken cycle. For example, women's economic marginalisation is often caused by certain inherent stereotypes, which then contribute to their subordination and violence against them. This then becomes part of the socialisation of women's beliefs, ideologies and views.¹⁰

II. Cases of Violence Against Women in Indonesia

Based on the nature of violence against women in Indonesia, the types of violence, and the causal factors, I will discuss three cases of violence that still occur against women in Indonesia. These forms of violence are domestic violence, forced marriage, and female slavery.

1. Domestic violence

Domestic violence encompasses all forms of violence against individuals, especially women, that can result in physical, sexual, or psychological suffering or pain, including domestic neglect.¹¹ This also includes threats of violence, coercion, or illegal deprivation of liberty within the family. Domestic violence in Indonesia is still considered

10. Muhammad Jadi, "Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan di Indonesia: Pemicu dan Alternatif Penanganan (trans. Violence against Women in Indonesia: Triggers and Alternative Management)," *Afiasi: Jurnal Kesehatan Masyarakat* 6, no. 2 (2021): 115-16.

11. M. Jannah and MA Tohari, "Analisis Deskriptif Penyebab Kekerasan dalam Rumah Tangga terhadap Perempuan (trans. Descriptive Analysis of the Causes of Domestic Violence against Women)," *TERANG: Jurnal Kajian Ilmu Sosial, Politik dan Hukum* 1, no. 1 (2024): 247-248.

commonplace and a necessary part of life. As a result, many women who are victims of violence are reluctant to report their experiences, considering it a family shame that should be kept private. This situation is like an iceberg, where cases revealed publicly represent only a small fraction of the total number of domestic violence cases against women that remain unrevealed.

The problem of domestic violence is often linked to societal views, where men are considered more dominant and have a higher status than women.¹² Men are the ones who have power over their households and hold control, both financially, physically, and sexually.¹³ In her research on patriarchal societies like Ghana, Stiles-Ocran argues that male control at home is essential, particularly regarding the protection of his family and the education of children. A man is expected to provide for his household, being the primary breadwinner. Therefore, a man's inability to father a child, provide for his home, and discipline his wife and children undermines his masculinity and status in both private and public life. Consequently, he is less respected and is scorned by his wife and the society. Consequently, men may feel overburdened in their efforts to meet these expectations, leading to feelings of shame. This shame is then projected onto their wives through various forms of violence.¹⁴

Poverty and women's concern for their children's well-being are among the contributing factors to domestic violence. Poverty makes women vulnerable and prevents them from making decisions regarding their well-being and freedom, as well as that of their children. It's not surprising that many women choose to stay with their abusive partners due to the lack of support they receive. This creates a dependency syndrome that is detrimental to women and reinforces the link between poverty and domestic violence.¹⁵

12. Jannah and Tohari, "Analisis Deskriptif," 247-248.

13. Elorm Stiles-Ocran, "Women's Stolen Voices in Marriage in Ghana: The Role of Gender, Culture, and Religion in Intimate Partner Violence," *Diaconia* 12, no. 2 (2022): 182.

14. Stiles-Ocran, "Women's Stolen," 183.

15. Stiles-Ocran, "Women's Stolen," 183.

The impact of violence against wives includes: experiencing physical pain, mental stress, decreased self-confidence and self-esteem, feeling helpless, dependence on the abusive husband, experiencing post-traumatic stress, falling into depression, and thoughts of ending one's life.¹⁶

Furthermore, domestic violence is not just about gender inequality. It often occurs due to a lack of communication, a lack of harmony, economic problems, an inability to control emotions, difficulty finding solutions to household problems, and the influence of alcohol and drugs.

2. Capture Marriage

The Sumba community located in the East Nusa Tenggara region has several types of marriages, which were inherited and is still practiced. Capture marriage (*wenda mawine*) has now become a very important topic since it sparked much discussion and rejection from various groups. Capture marriages often occur in public spaces such as traditional markets, traditional festivals, on the street, at home, or even in gardens. Capture marriages can be carried out by a man, assisted by several associates, who kidnap or capture the woman they intend to marry. When a woman is captured to be a wife, the victim of the capture marriage will not be helped by the local community because they believe such acts are normal and common in their society or are part of a common custom.¹⁷

Once 'kidnapped,' women victims of capture marriage are subjected to extremely harsh treatment. They are pulled, grabbed, and forcibly taken to the perpetrator's home. As victims, women often experience physical abuse, including sexual touching, by the kidnappers. Once

16. Agung B. Santoso, "Kekerasan dalam Rumah Tangga (KDRT) terhadap Perempuan: Perspektif Pekerjaan Sosial (trans. Domestic Violence (DV) against Women: A Social Work Perspective)," *KOMUNITAS: Jurnal Pengembangan Masyarakat Islam* 10, no. 1 (2019): 49-50.

17. Rambu Maramba, Safrin Salam, Rambu Indah, and Pajaru Lumbu, "Piti Marangangu (Kawin Tangkap) dalam Perspektif Hukum (trans. Capture Marriage in Legal Perspective)," *Jurnal Ilmu Hukum, Perundang-undangan dan Pranata Sosial* 7, no. 1 (2022): 51.

in the man's home, they are immediately put in a room with the perpetrator and pressured to accept the proposal. In some situations, the perpetrators often rape the victims to force them to agree to the proposal. This practice turns women into objects of negotiation or targets, rather than free individuals. Victims also suffer sexual, physical, mental, social, and spiritual harm.¹⁸

Indonesian law prohibits kidnapping, but in the Sumbanese cultural context, marriage by capture is considered a formal means of marriage. This has caused confusion among the Sumbanese community and law enforcement in the region. The tradition of marriage by capture should be stopped since it clearly oppresses women and demonstrates male dominance over them.¹⁹

3. Female Slavery

The formal serfdom system is no longer widely practiced in modern Indonesia, as the state has implemented the principle of equality and rejected caste-based discrimination. However, in one region in Indonesia, particularly in East Nusa Tenggara, serfdom is still practiced in Sumba. Sumbanese people are classified into three groups: *Maramba*—lords, kings, and landowners; *Kabihu*—free people, commoners; and *Ata*—slaves, purchased slaves, and servants.²⁰ As the lowest class in the social structure, the *Ata* are considered part of the *Maramba's* assets. They reside in the *Maramba's* home as servants. The *Ata* perform unpaid tasks for the *Maramba* family, including household chores like cooking, cleaning, washing, and other productive activities such as farming, gardening, weaving, and so on; and in some cases, even becoming sexual partners for their masters.²¹

18. Herman, et. al, "Adat Kawin Tangkap (Perkawinan Paksa) sebagai Tindak Pidana Kekerasan Seksual (trans. The Custom of Arrest Marriage (Forced Marriage) as a Criminal Act of Sexual Violence)," *Halu Oleo* 5, no. 1 (2023): 2.

19. Dewi, "Tradisi Kawin," 113.

20. Oe K. Kapita, *Sumba di dalam Jangkaun Jaman* (trans. Sumba within the Reach of Time) (Jakarta: BPK GM, 1976), 40.

21. Siti Barokah, "Ethnographic Investigation of Master-Slave Relations in Sumba, Indonesia" (Master's Thesis, International Institute of Social Studies, The Netherlands, 2016), 16.

One example of sexual violence experienced by these women is narrated by an Ata woman named Mayila (pseudonym). She recounted that at the age of 15, her master forced her into sexual intercourse. Her master freely fulfilled his sexual desires, which resulted in an unwanted pregnancy. Mayila experienced deep trauma and, in her powerlessness, felt that no one cared about her situation. Her master continued to live his life without guilt, while the surrounding community considered what he did normal and natural. Her master's wife also shared a similar opinion, viewing the Ata woman as her husband's sexual object. In fact, the birth of a slave's baby was considered good news by her master, as it would increase the number of slaves he owned. She was subjected to church discipline, being barred from Holy Communion until she confessed her sins before the congregation for becoming pregnant out of wedlock. The church did not listen to her, but instead advised her not to repeat her mistake of becoming pregnant before marriage and to properly care for and educate her child according to the teachings of God's Word. During her confession, according to the established church procedure, Mayila had to stand before the congregation and admit all her wrongdoings and promise to live a life of repentance. She wept during the confession process. She also carried her child to be baptised. Her master was also present during the confession process. Shortly after her child's second birthday, she experienced further sexual abuse by her master. She was raped and became pregnant for the second time. When her master's wife learned of the incident, she became angry with Mayila and defended her husband. In her confusion, Mayila felt her life was meaningless and attempted to end it by drinking poison. Although she survived, her suffering continued. She endured the pregnancy in silence, feeling deeply ashamed and worthless.²²

22. This story was told by Mayila to Pastor Trince Dondu during a Bible-bringing activity. This story along with several other stories of Ata women. See Trince B. Dondu, "Suara yang Tak Bersuara: Suara Kaum Ata (Hamba) (trans. Voices of the Voiceless: Voices of the Ata (Servant) People)," in *Suara yang Tak Bersuara: Refleksi Kritis Suara Perempuan Penyintas Kekerasan* (trans. *Voices of the Voiceless: Critical Reflections on the Voices of Women Survivors of Violence*), edited by Irene Umbu Lolo, Ana Maeri, and Aprissa Taranau (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2024), 82-83.

Based on the above story, it is clear that one of the main causes of sexual violence and other forms of violence against *Ata* women is the existence of power dynamics that influence the lives of perpetrators and victims alike. We also see the role of the church in perpetuating this system of slavery by siding with the perpetrator and ignoring the rights of the female victim to justice and equality in her life. In the following discussion, I will talk about the church's stance and what the church should do regarding the issue of violence against women.

III. The Church's Role in Breaking the Silence

Violence against women often does not occur in isolation. It is closely linked to factors such as poverty, low education, oppressive traditions (the practice of marriage by capture in Sumba), and remnants of the feudal system (the enslavement of *Ata* women). All of this forms a network that makes it increasingly difficult for victims to access protection and justice. Amidst this reality, the church exists not only as a religious institution but also as a social and moral community trusted by the rest of the community. Therefore, the church's attitude and role in responding to violence against women is crucial: whether the church will be part of the solution or part of the problem.

Unfortunately, history shows that the church's stance on this issue has not always been on the side of the victims. In many cases, the church has tended to remain silent or even directly or indirectly support the patriarchal culture that perpetuates violence. This is evident in the church's view that often portrays women as the source of sin, thus legitimising their status as second-class citizens.²³ Furthermore, the church often focuses more on protecting the institution's reputation than on advocating for the victims who suffer. Thus, the church which should be a place of protection, instead becomes a place that deepens

23. Rainy Hutabarat and Sylvana Apituley, *Memecah Kebisuan: Agama Mendengar Suara Perempuan Korban Kekerasan demi Keadilan* (trans. *Breaking the Silence: Religion Listens to the Voices of Women Victims of Violence for Justice*) (Jakarta: National Commission on Violence Against Women, 2009), 77-80.

the victims' wounds.

Furthermore, reflecting on the cases of Pastor Flo and Mayila, the Ata woman, we learn that violence against women is not only a matter of personal relationships between husband and wife, but also concerns the social and religious structures that perpetuate it. When the church chooses to remain silent or responds incorrectly, it contributes to reinforcing the patriarchal culture that oppresses women. This situation demands deep reflection: how can the church change its perspective and practices so that it truly exists as a sign of the liberating Kingdom of God? Here, the church has a crucial and prophetic role in breaking the silence on the issue of violence. This means that the church needs to speak openly about violence, call it what it is, and acknowledge it as sin before God.²⁴ More than that, the prophetic role of the church is not only related to breaking the silence regarding violence, but also providing education for prevention.²⁵

In Indonesia, the issue of violence against women has become a topic of open discussion among women in Indonesian church communities, particularly among members of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia. Some churches have begun to make it a key item on their agendas. From hosting special events like women's services, to services for groups like mothers and women church leaders, to community activities like family worship and congregational guidance, discussions and research on violence against women have now been integrated.²⁶ Furthermore, churches have made varying levels of progress in addressing violence against women. Some churches, both local and regional, consider eliminating violence as a permanent programme, funded by the church, and have Crisis Centres or Service Centres. Several synods already operate service centres called "Houses of Reconciliation" or "Houses of Hope." These include the Pasundan Christian Church (GKP), the Evangelical Christian Church

24. Weavers: Women in Theological Education, *The Church and Violence Against Women* (Fiji: The Weavers/SPATS, 2006), 44.

25. Weavers: Women in Theological Education, *The Church and Violence*, 44.

26. Hutabarat and Apituley, *Memecah Kebisuan*, 16-17.

(GKE) in Kalimantan, the Sangir Talaud Evangelical Church (GMIST), the Indonesian Christian Church in Papua, the Karo Batak Protestant Church (GBKP) in Kabanjahe, the Simalungun Protestant Church (GKPS) in Pematangsiantar, and the Timor Evangelical Church in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara. However, many other churches are only just beginning to understand and address the elimination of violence against women, some making it a temporary program, while others consider it a regular programme.²⁷

In their discussion, Hutabarat and Apituley stated that crisis service centres can be a benchmark for churches' concern for women victims of violence. However, an important indicator that cannot be ignored is the churches' "theology," which is then developed through liturgy, confessions of faith, teachings, and church organisation, followed by educational programmes on gender equality and justice, and the development of church communities as anti-violence communities.²⁸ In this paper, I use the story of Tamar found in 2 Samuel 13:1-22 as a theological foundation that can be used as a basis for restoring life and realising justice.

IV. Text Analysis: 2 Samuel 13:1–22

The story of Amnon and Tamar begins with Amnon, David' son, falling in love with his beautiful half-sister, Tamar. However, this "love" turned into an obsession that led to violence. Amnon feigned illness and asked Tamar to come and care for him. Using deceit, he forced Tamar to sleep with him. Tamar tried to refuse, even reminding him of the prohibitions of Israelite law:

"No, my brother, do not force me, for no such thing should be done in Israel. Do not do this disgraceful thing! And I, where could I take my shame? And as for you, you would be like one of the fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you." (2 Samuel 13:12-13).

27. Hutabarat and Apituley, *Memecah Kebisuan*, 17.

28. Hutabarat and Apituley, *Memecah Kebisuan*, 20-21.

L. Juliana Claassens notes that in Tamar's response, we can see how she initially calls Amnon "my brother" to remind him that the sexual act he is about to perform is incestuous. She then refers to the trauma she is about to experience by using the official term for rape ('al t̄a 'nnēnī) to explain the offense that would be committed. Next, she goes on to recount the traumatic event by passing moral judgment on Amnon's intentions, calling his actions "stupid" or "senseless" (nəbalā), and added that the act was a great shame in Israel. Tamar also asked Amnon to consider the consequences of the violent act on herself ("Where will I carry my shame?") and on him as the perpetrator. Repeating the term "foolishness," she had previously used to describe the rape, Tamar warned Amnon that he would be among the fools (hannəbalīm) in Israel. When all her efforts failed, Tamar proposed a practical step: to ask their father's permission so that they could both maintain their honour.²⁹ However, Tamar's voice was ignored, thus showing that her resistance proved futile because Amnon raped her, and soon afterward he hated her more than he had loved her at first (v. 15). However, Tamar's argument to Amnon shows that she had a voice and she used it to save her honour and reveal the true meaning of Amnon's actions and character as one of the fools who brought shame on Israel.³⁰

Furthermore, this narrative reveals a glaring power imbalance. Tamar was not only physically coerced but also socially silenced. After being raped, she had no scope to speak out. Even her brother, Absalom, told Tamar to be quiet: "Be quiet, my sister; he is your brother; do not take it personally" (v. 20). Absalom's use of family language to silence Tamar was intended to protect the family's dignity or avoid stigmatisation.³¹

29. L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Trauma and Recovery: A New Hermeneutical Framework for the Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13), in *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*, edited by Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 185-86.

30. Claassens, "Trauma and Recovery," 186.

31. Seyram B. Amenyedzi, "An Afrocentric Reflection in the Rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13," in *African Womanhood and the Feminist Agenda*, ed. Maxwell CC Musingafi and Chipo Hungwe (Hershey, Pennsylvania: IGI Global, 2024), 130.

Ultimately, Tamar remained a “lonely” woman in Absalom’s house (v. 20). The Hebrew word used here, *shomem*, means “desolate, ruined, abandoned”—a tragic depiction of the silence and destruction of women’s dignity in the patriarchal system of ancient Israel.³²

Furthermore, this text not only records the act of violence but also the silence of the social structures that should have defended Tamar. David, their father and king, was angry (v. 21) but took no action. Thus, this narrative demonstrates how patriarchal culture operates: allowing perpetrators to go unpunished, while victims live in trauma and silence.

V. Women and Silence in Patriarchal Culture

Patriarchal cultures in the Bible and in traditional societies tend to view women as the property of men, whether fathers, husbands, or brothers. In the context of ancient Israelite law, rape was often viewed as a violation of a man’s rights (father or husband), rather than primarily a violation of a woman’s body and dignity. As a result, women’s voices were barely heard. Tamar is a concrete example of a silenced woman. She spoke with reason and morality, yet her voice was ignored by Amnon. Afterward, she was forced into silence by Absalom, and David did not seek justice for her. Tamar’s silence is the silence of women throughout history—a voice suppressed, silenced by tradition and institutions.

In this regard, Tamar’s story parallels the reality of women experiencing domestic violence in modern households. Many victims are forced to remain silent to protect the “family’s good name” or the “church’s good name.” Similarly, the practice of capture marriage in Sumba: women are silenced by customs that prioritise group honour over individual voice. Ata women, who live in slavery and exploitation, also represent a vivid example of women’s voices being silenced by social and economic structures. All of these practices demonstrate the continuity of a patriarchal culture that refuses to hear women’s voices.

32. Claassens, “Trauma and Recovery,” 181.

VI. Theological Efforts to Break the Silence

Although the text of 2 Samuel 13 records Tamar's silence, a theological-feminist reading can actually break that silence.³³ First, it is important to emphasise that Tamar's voice remains present in the text. She speaks out against Amnon's actions, reminds him of Israel's law, and pleads for her safety. Thus, despite its neglect, the text itself contains Tamar's prophetic voice, which must be rediscovered by contemporary readers. Second, this story must be read as a critique of patriarchal structures. The narrative shows the destruction of David's family as a result of condoning sexual violence. Therefore, this text is not intended to justify patriarchal culture, but rather to expose its destructive impact. Third, from a pastoral theological perspective, this story demands that the church be a voice for the silenced. If Tamar was forced into silence by her family, then the church today must break the silence by listening to, believing, and advocating for the victim. The church must reject cultural practices that normalise violence, whether in the form of domestic violence, forced marriage, the exploitation of women, or other forms of violence against women. Thus, a critical reading of Tamar's story opens up theological space for solidarity with women victims of violence. Here, Tamar's cry in 2 Samuel 13:12—"For such things are not done in Israel"—is not merely the personal cry of a woman seeking to defend her dignity, but rather a prophetic call reminding Israel of the identity, ethics, and values that should be lived out by God's people. Tamar affirms that harassment, rape, and all forms of violence against women are acts contrary to Israel's law, culture, and faith as God's people.

If this call is read in the context of churches in Indonesia, then there are a number of important things that are to be highlighted:

1. The identity of the church as the holy people of God

The church is called to be a community distinct from the world's practices that condone violence. Tamar's call challenges the church

33. D. M. Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry: Re-reading and Ancient Text in the Midst of a Contemporary Pandemic," *Deel 45, Nommer 2 (Supplementum 2004)*: 316.

in Indonesia to ask: does the church truly maintain its holiness and identity if it remains silent about violence against women? If the church remains silent, it betrays its identity as the people of God.

2. Enforcement of ethics and laws that protect women

Tamar pointed out that these incidents of violence are not merely “personal issues,” but rather social and religious violations. The Church in Indonesia must not simply relegate the issue of violence to the legal realm of the state, but must actively advocate for justice and the implementation of laws that protect women and oversee their implementation.

3. Prophetic Voice

The church is called to rebuke cultural practices or traditions that legitimise violence against women—for example, forced marriage, discrimination, or the justification of domestic violence. Like Tamar, the church must have the courage to say: “This must not happen among God’s people.”

4. Education and formation of the congregation

Tamar’s call emphasised that violence is abnormal and should not be allowed to become a habit. The Church in Indonesia needs to promote faith education, preaching, catechism, and family values that instil an awareness of human dignity, equal relationships, and nonviolence.

5. Solidarity with the victims

Tamar was left alone after experiencing violence—a stark illustration of how victims often lack support. The Church in Indonesia must be a safe space that accompanies victims: providing counselling, legal aid, and pastoral care that heals, rather than blaming them.

6. Transformation of church power

Tamar’s cry calls on the church to correct its own internal practices. Violence sometimes occurs within the church, even by leaders. The church must not protect perpetrators in the name of protecting its reputation but must uphold truth and justice. Therefore, Tamar’s call

is not merely a cry from the past but a prophetic call for churches in Indonesia to uphold their identity as God's people who reject violence, defend women's dignity and bring justice to their lives together.

Conclusion

The discussion in this paper reveals the harsh reality of violence against women in Indonesia focusing on domestic violence, forced marriage, and female slavery. Tragic cases such as those experienced by Pastor Florensy Selvin Gaspersz and the *Ata* women demonstrate how this violence is not only a matter of personal relationships but is also rooted in social, cultural, economic, and even religious systems that remain patriarchal. Data from the National Commission on Violence Against Women shows that gender-based violence has been increasing year after year, proving that this problem is structural and requires serious attention from all sections of the society.

In this context, the church holds a strategic and prophetic position. The church is called not only to preach love but also to make it a concrete presence in defending women's dignity, rejecting violence, and breaking the culture of silence that has perpetuated suffering. A theological-feminist reading of Tamar's story in 2 Samuel 13:1–22 shows that the victim's voice must be lifted up as a prophetic call to uphold justice, reject violence, and build equal relationships between women and men. Tamar's cry, "for such things were not done in Israel," serves as a reminder for churches in Indonesia not to betray their identity as holy communities but to boldly say: violence against women must not be tolerated.

Therefore, the church must affirm itself as a safe space for victims, educate congregations about gender equality, accompany victims through pastoral care, and boldly challenge cultural practices and internal church structures that legitimise violence. In this way, the church truly becomes a sign of God's Kingdom, bringing justice, liberation, and restoration. Only with this attitude can the church

become an agent of transformation that breaks the chain of violence and builds a dignified life together for all, especially women who have been victims.

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13

Abused and Abandoned: Lessons from Tamar's Life for the Church in Bangladesh

~ Mary Luna Bela

1. Introduction

About a year and a half ago, in a quiet corner of our community, a gathering was scheduled. It was not a celebration, nor a festival—it was an arbitration session. At the centre of it all stood Maria (pseudonym), a 17-year-old domestic helper whose life had already been marked by hardship. Maria's employer coerced her into a physical relationship and Maria became pregnant. When the truth surfaced, the community elders gathered to decide her fate. The verdict was swift – Maria would be given 30,000 Bangladeshi Taka. That was all, no punishment for the employer. The employer and his family refused to accept Maria or her unborn child. Her own family, under the weight of social disgrace and fearing conflict, accepted the money, though it felt more like a price placed on Maria's dignity than compensation. Justice was exchanged for currency, and Maria's voice was buried beneath the fear of shame.

A second incident occurred in early 2025 involving Soma (pseudonym), a 15-year-old schoolgirl in the 10th grade. Her family suddenly discovered that she was pregnant, but Soma did not reveal how it happened—whether through a consensual relationship or coercion. Suspicion fell on male relatives within her joint family, many of whom are known to consume intoxicating homemade alcohol. Out of fear of social shame, her family concealed the matter and sent Soma to a monastery, hiding her away from neighbours and society.

These two stories are not isolated. They symbolise the silent suffering of women within Bangladesh's Christian community. In Maria's case, justice was reduced to money, and in Soma's case, the family, instead of giving her shelter, hid her away from society's eyes. Both incidents expose a society where women, even though victims, are silenced beneath the weight of family honour, religious quietude, and rigid social norms.

This reality echoes the biblical story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13. Tamar, a woman of royal lineage, was violated by her half-brother Amnon. The silence of the palace, the indifference of her father King David, and the weakness of societal structures stifled her voice. Tamar longed to protest, but her language of resistance was lost in the corridors of power. Her story mirrors the plight of many Bangladeshi women today, who, despite being victims of abuse, are forced into silence in the hope of avoiding shame or conflict.

Tamar's story teaches us that religious traditions, social customs, and family structures often fail to stand by women. It raises pressing questions: Why is a woman's dignity repeatedly trampled? Why is justice exchanged for money? Why do families fail to support women? To restore women's dignity, the society must think anew—prioritising justice and family support above all else.

Silence is never a solution; it only makes injustice permanent. The stories of Maria and Soma reveal the harsh realities of society, women's suffering and shame that cannot be resolved with money. Yet when women's voices are truly heard, their experiences understood, and their realities acknowledged, the chains of silence can be broken, enabling them to live with dignity.

2. What does Tamar's Story Symbolise?

In 2 Samuel 13, Tamar's story stands as one of the most poignant and disturbing narratives in the Scripture. Princess Tamar was subjected to sexual violence by her brother Amnon, yet the outcome was not justice but silence. Her experience symbolises a recurring social reality in which victims—especially women—are met, not with protection

or accountability, but with injustice and abandonment. Tamar's story is not merely an isolated historical incident; it represents a pattern of silence and complicity with wrongdoing that continues to manifest in churches and communities across Bangladesh today. Her suffering holds up a mirror to society, exposing the persistent presence of sexual violence and the culture of silence that allows it to endure.

The narrative makes clear that King David's response was one of inaction. As Phyllis Trible observes in *Texts of Terror*, "The prince has duped the king; the princess must suffer the consequences."¹ David's silence calls into question his responsibility both as king and as father. Silence in the face of injustice is never neutral; it is a form of complicity with violence. Upon failing to act decisively, David abandoned his God-ordained mandate to uphold justice and protect the vulnerable. Tamar's story powerfully reveals that when those in positions of authority refuse to confront wrongdoing, the suffering of the powerless is intensified. Silence does not resolve injustice—it deepens it.

3. The Role of Absalom

Absalom, Tamar's full brother, was the only family member who acknowledged her suffering. In the aftermath of the assault, he brought Tamar into his own household, offering her shelter while their father, King David, remained silent. Yet Absalom's response was deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, he provided protection; on the other, he instructed Tamar to remain silent. This imposed silence further suppressed her voice and intensified her isolation, reinforcing the injustice she had already endured.

In time, Absalom avenged Tamar by killing Amnon. However, this act of personal revenge neither restored Tamar's dignity nor established true justice. Instead, it perpetuated a cycle of violence, replacing accountability with bloodshed and deepening the brokenness within the family and the kingdom.

1. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), chap. 4, EPUB.

Absalom's role symbolically reveals three sobering truths: families may offer refuge while simultaneously demanding silence; when institutions fail to uphold justice, individuals may resort to violence that cannot heal or resolve injustice; and silence ultimately gives birth to violence, allowing revenge to take the place of justice. In this way, Absalom stands in contrast to David—not as one who remains inactive, but as one who acts destructively rather than redemptively. Together, their responses demonstrate how Tamar was left without true justice, protection, or restoration.

4. Tamar was Objectified and Abandoned

Tamar's tragedy becomes even more profound when we see Tamar reduced to a mere object. Phyllis Tribble notes that, "In obeying David, Tamar has become the object of sight."² At her (Tamar) father's (David) command, she went to Amnon's house to prepare food in Amnon's sight (2 Samuel 13: 5,6,8). In that act of obedience, she was transformed into a figure to be looked at rather than a person with agency. His observation reveals how her autonomy was taken away, leaving her vulnerable and powerless. Her family, who should have been her refuge, instead remained silent, a silence that signalled complicity. Tamar was abandoned not only by her father and her brother Absalom, but also by the very structures that were meant to protect her.

In both ancient and modern contexts, this silence does not heal wounds but deepens them, turning victims into symbols of shame rather than as agents of dignity.

5. Bangladesh in the Modern Context

Tamar's silence is not confined to the biblical era; it still echoes in modern society as well. In Bangladesh, women suffer abuse within families, in institutions, and within social structures. Many incidents

2. Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, chap. 4.

remain unreported, concealed to protect reputation, class or power. Victims, like Tamar, endure humiliation, isolation, and the absence of justice. Sexual violence is an act of domination, hatred, and abuse of power. “Violence in turn discloses hatred, the underside of lust.”³

Statistics make this reality even clearer. In January and February of 2025 alone, 294 Bangladeshi women and children were subjected to violence, including 96 cases of rape.⁴ Justice after rape is rare—many cases are never filed, or court proceedings drag on for years. The *UNFPA 2024 Survey* reveals that 75.9% of Bangladeshi women have experienced violence at some point in their lives, with rates exceeding 80% in some regions. Domestic violence has emerged as the most common crime recorded by police.

The situation of Christian women is even more dire. They face double marginalisation—both as women and as members of a religious minority. *Reports from Human Rights Watch (2025)*⁵ and the *United Nations*⁶ highlight that minority women encounter additional barriers to justice, and impunity is even more severe in their cases. Although Bangladesh has laws against violence toward women and children, weak enforcement leaves them vulnerable. NGOs such as Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK),⁷ Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust

3. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror*, chap. 4.

4. Deutsche Welle, “294 women abused in Bangladesh in two months, 96 raped,” *The Daily Ittefaq*, March 10, 2025, accessed October 20, 2025, <https://www.ittefaq.com.bd/722648>.

5. Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2025: Bangladesh,” in *World Report 2025: Events of 2024* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2025), accessed October 20, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/bangladesh>.

6. Gwyn Lewis, “Combating Violence Against Women and Adolescent Girls in Bangladesh,” *United Nations Bangladesh* March 8, 2025, accessed October 20, 2025 <https://bangladesh.un.org/en/290481-combating-violence-against-women-and-adolescent-girls-bangladesh>.

7. ASK (Ain o Salish Kendra - A legal aid and human rights organisation in Bangladesh): This is a non-governmental human rights and legal aid organisation. It was established in 1986. It works to protect the rights of women, workers, and children, and to combat human rights violations. <https://www.askbd.org>.

(BLAST),⁸ and Christian Aid Bangladesh⁹ provide support, but their activities are limited, and many reports remain hidden.

Tamar's story is not confined to Israel's royal family. Across ages and cultures, the silence surrounding such events has perpetuated injustice. Tamar's suffering resonates globally, reminding us that silencing victims is a recurring pattern in human society. As believers and communities, we must break the silence and stand beside those who suffer from injustice. To remain silent is to sustain the violence, which we must firmly oppose. Tamar's cry resonates terrifyingly among women in today's Bangladesh, where victims especially minority women are silenced by fear, stigma, and institutional injustice.

Tamar's suffering symbolises the terrible cost of silence, and her story calls us to awareness and action. Modern society must learn from her narrative so that victims are no longer abandoned or silenced. Justice must replace silence, and communities must become places of refuge, not of indifference. We cannot ignore Tamar's cry in our own time. In the light of her story, we can pledge justice, compassion, and the breaking of silence for Tamar-like victims, for the women of Bangladesh, and for all victims across the world and we can take effective action.

6. Lessons for Bangladeshi believers

The account of Tamar is not only a personal story of injustice but also a mirror reflecting failures of leadership, family responsibility, and communal accountability. For believers in Bangladesh, Tamar's story

8. BLAST (Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust): Established in 1993. It is one of the largest legal aid organisations in Bangladesh. It provides court representation, legal advice, and public interest litigation for the poor and marginalised communities. <https://grassrootsjusticenetwork.org/>.

9. Christian Aid Bangladesh: Began working in Bangladesh in 1972 after the Liberation War. It is an international development organisation. It works on climate change, disaster risk management, livelihood development, and the rights of women and marginalised groups. <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/>.

carries urgent lessons about justice, compassion, and the responsibility to break silence. These lessons become even more pressing when we consider the alarming statistics on violence against women in Bangladesh today.

6.1 *Standing Beside the Victim*

Often, victims are blamed, which becomes a “second wound.” Many in society are unaware of this reality, and even when they are aware, they still place victims on trial through questioning and suspicion. From Tamar’s story, however, we learn that condemnation is never the right response but compassion is. Comforting victims and standing with them is not optional; it is a biblical command. Shana Clemens West laments, “Some biblical texts are rarely read, and never read on Sundays. Tamar’s rape story is one such text... and yet this text... holds the potential to create a safe and sacred space where women can express and acknowledge their experiences of sexual (and other forms of) abuse.”¹⁰ Statistics confirm the significance of this lesson. BLAST states that it is urgent to stop victim-blaming in cases of violence against women and children in the country, because social attitudes often blame the victim.¹¹

Sociologists have explained that the root causes of victim-blaming are patriarchal mindset, ignorance, fear, and an imbalance of social power. For example, a woman’s clothing or behaviour is blamed, while the perpetrator’s responsibility is evaded. This blame often makes victims afraid to come forward, which becomes a major obstacle to justice and rehabilitation. This deepens the victims’ psychological trauma. Ensuring empathy, support, and justice for the survivors is the way to

10. Shana Clemence, “From Divinely Equal to Violently Oppressed: Brutality Against Women in the Bible,” *AWE (A Woman’s Experience)* 9, Article, 33 (2022): 158, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe/vol9/iss1/33/>.

See also Gerald O. West, Beverle Haddad, and Maureen H. Moyo, *The Stigma of Violence: Biblical Perspectives on Sexual Violence* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004).

11. Blast Report, “Demand to stop victim blaming and attitude towards victims,” accessed October 23, 2025, <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/11gu8uumcy>.

solve the problem.

6.2 The Power of Open Discussion

Shana Clemens West's observation reminds us that Tamar's story, though painful, can be transformed when spoken aloud. Reading Tamar's story together has fostered anti-abuse and life-giving practices, showing that scripture can be reclaimed as a source of healing rather than used as a tool for silence. This insight aligns with international reports that emphasise the need for open dialogue.

This call is especially important for churches in Bangladesh. In a society where experiences of abuse are often hidden in silence, the church can become a prophetic voice. Churches can create safe environments where victims speak out without fear and are believed, ensuring transparency and accountability so that abuse is not ignored. In this way, leadership and community take responsibility together, interpreting biblical teaching in ways that promote justice, compassion, and protection for the vulnerable. Through practice, open discussion becomes more than conversation — it becomes a spiritual discipline. It builds resistance to abuse, dismantles harmful power structures, allows victims to reclaim their dignity, and teaches communities to stand together against violence.

Ultimately, open discussion paves the way not only for confronting abuse but also for building a culture of truthfulness and hope. When churches in Bangladesh choose this path, they join a global movement of faith communities who stand for courage instead of silence, healing instead of harm, and life instead of oppression. In this way, Tamar's painful story becomes a catalyst for transformation, reminding us that even brokenness can give birth to new life when shared in the light of community and faith.

6.3 Responsibility of Leadership

Leadership is never neutral: when leaders fail to act responsibly, they indirectly permit wrongdoing to thrive. This is a sobering reminder for families, churches, and society in Bangladesh that responsible leadership is not optional—it is essential to prevent cycles of violence and mistrust.

In the Bangladeshi context, the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act was designed to protect vulnerable groups and ensure justice. However, weak implementation, corruption, and delays in the judicial system undermine its effectiveness. Laws without enforcement become hollow promises, leaving victims unprotected and perpetrators emboldened. Justice delayed is indeed justice denied, and the absence of accountability perpetuates generational trauma.

Civil society organisations such as ASK, BLAST, and Christian Aid Bangladesh provide critical support through legal aid, advocacy, and awareness programmes. However, their reach is limited compared to the scale of the problem. Without strong leadership at the national, community, and family levels, these efforts remain fragmented. Responsible leadership requires not only passing laws but also ensuring their fair and consistent application, empowering institutions, and protecting the dignity of every individual.

True leadership is measured not by titles but by courage, the courage to confront injustice, to protect the vulnerable, and to uphold accountability even when it is costly. Families need parents who lead with integrity, churches need pastors who model justice and compassion, and society needs political leaders who prioritise the common good over personal gain. When leadership fails, violence festers; when leadership acts responsibly, peace and justice can flourish.

6.4 Making Supportive Communities

Believers should build caring communities where women and survivors of abuse feel safe to share their struggles without fear or judgment. This is both a spiritual responsibility and a social need, because true faith is shown through real acts of love and justice.

The TBS News 2025¹² report highlights a sharp increase in violence against women compared to previous years, driven by impunity, weak

12. UNB, “Violence against women in first half of 2025 shows sharp increase over previous 2 years,” *The Business Standard*, July 17, 2025, accessed October 25, 2025, [https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/crime/Violence against women in first half of 2025 shows sharp increase over previous 2 years](https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/crime/Violence%20against%20women%20in%20first%20half%20of%202025%20shows%20sharp%20increase%20over%20previous%202%20years).

justice systems, and cultural silence. In such a context, churches must rise above complacency and embody Christ's compassion, offering both spiritual comfort and practical support to survivors. Compassion must be more than words—it must be expressed through safe spaces, listening hearts, and concrete action.

Showing compassion in a community can look like this: Creating safe groups where survivors can share freely. Teaching church leaders and members how to notice abuse and respond kindly. Working with local groups to give counselling, legal help, and shelter. Speaking up against harmful traditions and supporting stronger protection for women. Reminding everyone that staying silent about abuse goes against the gospel's call to protect the weak.

When churches embrace this mission, they become sanctuaries of healing rather than places of silence. They remind survivors that their dignity is affirmed by God, and that their voices matter. Compassionate communities do not merely comfort, they empower, restore, and transform. Tamar's story is a timeless call to action. For Bangladeshi believers, the lesson is clear: justice, compassion, and social awareness must guide our response to abuse. Silence must be broken, victims must be respected, and leaders must act responsibly. In doing so, the church can embody Christ's love and become a place of refuge and healing for the oppressed.

7. The Situation of Bangladeshi Christian Women

7.1 Double Marginalisation

Christian women in Bangladesh live under the weight of two overlapping forms of marginalisation. As women in a patriarchal society, they face the same restrictions and inequalities that most Bangladeshi women endure – limited autonomy, expectations of silence, and the constant pressure to protect family honour. Yet as members of a religious minority, they also carry the burden of exclusion and suspicion from the wider community. This dual struggle often leaves them vulnerable to domestic violence, psychological

abuse, and economic exploitation. Many suffer quietly, unable to speak out because of fear—fear of family backlash, fear of social stigma, and fear of being further ostracised. The cultural belief that women must “bear it” for the sake of family reputation continues to silence their voices. For Christian women, who already experience exclusion as minorities, the barriers to justice are even greater.

7.2 Lack of Institutional Support

The church, which should be a refuge, often fails to provide the support these women desperately need. In many cases, family problems are dismissed as private matters, unworthy of public attention or intervention. When women seek help, they may find themselves doubly isolated - ignored by society and overlooked by their faith community. This absence of institutional support deepens their despair, leaving them without access to legal remedies or psychological care.

7.3 Religious and Moral Dimensions

The Scripture speaks powerfully against the misuse of power and the neglect of the vulnerable. The story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is a stark reminder of how sexual violence, followed by isolation and neglect, represents not only a human failure but also a moral and spiritual sin. Other passages, such as Leviticus 19:9–10, Isaiah 58:6–7, and Luke 17:1–2, emphasise God’s defence of the weak and His judgment against those who exploit others.

Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune and Rabbi Cindy G. Enger capture this truth when they write: “Our culture does not treat violence against women as a serious issue. Yet declaring such violence unacceptable aligns with the image of God... where God stands beside the weak and vulnerable.”¹³ This message resonates deeply in Bangladesh, where low literacy rates and limited religious education often leave women even more exposed to abuse.

13. Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune and Rabbi Cindy G. Enger, *Violence Against Women and the Role of Religion* (Applied Research Forum, National Electronic Network on Violence Against Women, March 2005), 6.

7.4 Education and Awareness: A New Dimension

While laws and NGO efforts are crucial, long-term change requires education and awareness. Studies show that communities with higher literacy rates experience lower levels of violence. Promoting education among Christian women, integrating messages of equality into religious teaching, and raising awareness about women's rights are essential steps toward breaking the cycle of silence and abuse.

8. What Are the Adverse Effects?

8.1 Psychological Consequences

When family support is absent, the individual's mental health begins to deteriorate. Restlessness, depression, and anxiety gradually take hold, eroding confidence and self-belief. Over time, the person starts doubting her abilities, which weakens their resilience and capacity to cope with everyday challenges. Research by Chandan et al. (2019)¹⁴ and Tohan et al. (2025)¹⁵ has shown that women who are victims of domestic violence are significantly more likely to suffer from depression, highlighting how fragile emotional stability becomes without family care.

8.2 Loss of Dignity and Social Status

Family support is not only emotional but also a safeguard for dignity. When this foundation collapses, a woman's respect in society diminishes, leaving her vulnerable to judgment and isolation. In Bangladesh, many women report feeling socially excluded when family ties weaken, reflecting how dignity erodes in the absence of protection. The metaphor of a tree with weak roots captures this reality vividly:

14. Chandan Joht Singh et al., "Female Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence and Risk of Depression, Anxiety and Serious Mental Illness," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 217, no. 4 (2019): 562–567, <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2019.124>.

15. Mortuja Mahamud Tohan et al., "Marital Control, Domestic Violence Justification, and Mental Health: A Study of Married Women in Bangladesh," *BMC Psychiatry* 25, 886 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-025-07133->.

no matter how tall or strong the tree appears, it will eventually collapse if its roots are damaged. Similarly, without family support, the individual's social standing cannot endure.

9. The Role of Religion

Religion often plays a dual role in the lives of abused women. On the one hand, religious texts and teachings can provide comfort, healing, and a path toward safety. On the other hand they can demonise the widows. As Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune and Rabbi Cindy G. Enger observe, “religion also can be misused to excuse or condone abusive behaviour.”¹⁶ This tension is visible among Christian women in Bangladesh, where supportive interpretations of Scripture can empower survivors, but incorrect interpretations may legitimise abuse or pressure women to remain silent. In many cases, religious leaders encourage forgiveness and patience rather than condemning violence, which leaves women trapped between faith and fear. Unless compassionate stories, such as Tamar's from 2 Samuel 13, are emphasised, religion fails to serve as a true source of support.

9.1 Social Pressure and Isolation

Within the small Christian communities, social pressure often discourages women from speaking out against abuse. Fear of shame and rejection silences their voices, making achievements in education, work, or personal milestones feel meaningless. This isolation strips victims of recognition and belonging, leaving them to navigate life with diminished self-worth. According to the *United Nations Statistics Division*, in most countries, less than 40% of women who experience violence seek help of any sort, and of those, fewer than 10% report it to the police,¹⁷ a statistic that reflects how deeply social pressure

16. Marie M. Fortune and Cindy G. Enger, *Violence Against Women and the Role of Religion* (Harrisburg, PA: VAWnet, The National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women, March 2005), 2.

17. United Nations Statistics Division, *Violence Against Women* (New York: United Nations, 2015).

prevents survivors from accessing justice or protection.

9.2 Long-Term Risks

The absence of family cooperation and justice has lasting consequences. Women lose their freedom to make decisions, becoming increasingly vulnerable to oppression and exploitation. Their social status declines, and their sense of identity weakens. Over time, this psychological crisis can escalate into suicidal thoughts, a tragic outcome that highlights the urgency of family support.

In Bangladesh, suicide rates among women are closely linked to domestic violence and lack of family protection, showing how the erosion of dignity and security can end in irreversible loss. In this context, the study *Family and Suicide in Bangladesh: A Review of Risk Factors* (2023)¹⁸ notes that physical and sexual violence, family disharmony and marital discord are identified as major contributing factors to suicide among women.

10. Call to Action

Violence against women must be recognised not only as a social issue but as a violation of God's justice. Christian families have a responsibility to stand beside abused women, to support them, and to ensure that justice is done. Church leaders must take a more active role in addressing violence, listening to women's voices, and creating safe spaces where survivors can find refuge. Awareness campaigns within the Christian community are urgently needed to break the silence and empower women to speak out. As believers and conscious citizens, we carry responsibilities that extend beyond our personal lives and family to that of the society and congregation. By taking thoughtful steps against violence and injustice, we can nurture a healthier environment where dignity and compassion prevail.

18. Urme, S. A., M. S. Islam and N. M. R. A. Chowdhury, (2023). Family and suicide in Bangladesh. In S. M. Y. Arafat & M. M. Khan (Eds.), *Suicide in Bangladesh: Epidemiology, risk factors, and prevention* (pp. 87–96). Springer Nature Switzerland AG. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-0289-7_6.

National and international statistics make it clear: women in Bangladesh, especially Christian women, are in a deplorable situation. The time has come for the Christian community to take bold steps so that no woman is left to endure violence alone.

10.1 Collaboration between Faith and Advocacy

In Bangladesh, Christian women often face the painful dilemma of choosing between their religious identity and their personal safety. This tension results in denial of support from the church and deep isolation. Rev. Dr. Marie M. Fortune and Rabbi Cindy G. Enger remind us that “No woman should ever be forced to choose between safety and her religious community or tradition.”¹⁹ Their words highlight the agency of women to decide and fight for justice. To address this, religious institutions and human rights organisations must work hand in hand. Such collaboration ensures survivors receive consistent care while perpetrators are held accountable. In practice, this means churches should not only offer spiritual counsel but also connect women to shelters, legal aid, and advocacy groups.

10.2 Awareness and Compassion in the Church

The Christian community has a vital role in raising awareness. Many victims remain silent due to shame, fear, or misinterpretation of religious teachings. Churches can counter this silence by creating compassionate spaces where mental health and abuse can be discussed openly. Awareness campaigns, sermons, and workshops led by Christian leaders can encourage women to seek help without fear of judgment. When the church becomes a place of encouragement rather than stigma, women in danger no longer feel alone.

10.3 Family as the First Line of Support

Beyond the church, the family must become a safe haven. Open conversations about mental health and emotional struggles allow members to stand by one another. Families that cultivate compassion and knowledge can respond quickly when someone is in danger. In this

19. Fortune and Enger, *Violence Against Women*, 7.

way, the family becomes the first circle of protection, ensuring that no member suffers in silence.

10.4 Healing through Scripture and Shared Experience

Shana Clemence, describes how African Christian women draw strength from biblical stories like Tamar's.²⁰ Similarly, Bangladeshi Christian women can find resilience in the narratives of Tamar, Hagar, Martha, and Mary. These stories offer solidarity and hope, reminding survivors that their pain is not isolated. Prayer, hymns, and group Bible study circles can deepen this spiritual connection. When women gather to reflect on scripture, they not only rediscover their faith but also build sisterhood, learning to stand by one another in shared strength.

10.5 Building Support Structures

Practical assistance is as important as spiritual healing. Churches and Christian organisations can establish counselling services, shelters, and support groups. These spaces provide both emotional and material aid, helping women regain self-worth and confidence. Biblical counselling offers guidance for navigating real-life complexities while grounding survivors in faith. For this to succeed, church leaders must embrace flexibility and compassion. By listening attentively, offering counsel rooted in the Scripture, and fostering support groups, they transform the church into a reliable centre of safety and revival.

10.6 Towards Recovery and Empowerment

Through coordinated efforts, between advocacy groups, families, and faith communities, Bangladeshi Christian women can find pathways to recovery. Spiritual reading, compassionate leadership, and community-based support together create an environment where survivors reclaim dignity and strength. In this way, the church becomes not only a spiritual sanctuary but also a beacon of justice and healing.

20. Shana Clemence, "From Divinely Equal to Violently Oppressed: Brutality Against Women in the Bible," *AWE (A Woman's Experience)* 9, no. 33 (2022): 159.

11. Conclusion

The above discussion offers some key lessons for the church and society in general and the church and society in Bangladesh in particular. We can envision every Christian family in Bangladesh becoming a place of care, safety, and dignity for women. No father will respond with silence like David, no brother will act with violence like Amnon or Absalom, and no relative will manipulate or enable abuse like Jonadab. No family will treat a Tamar with injustice, worthlessness, or neglect. Instead, every person—created in the image of God—will be received with respect, honour, and love.

While reflecting on Shana Clemence’s article, *“From Divinely Equal to Violently Oppressed,”* I was particularly struck by the Ujamaa Centre’s probing question: *“What will you do now after this Bible study?”* Asked within a safe and supportive environment, this question empowered women to share their stories and to develop concrete action plans for healing—something Tamar was never afforded during her crisis. It moves biblical reflection beyond interpretation toward transformation.

Women in Bangladesh can draw inspiration from this approach by creating safe spaces for listening and lament, establishing counseling and mental health support, and fostering empowerment through art, writing, and theatre. Churches and faith-based institutions can stand with the survivors by raising awareness, breaking silence, and opening pathways to healing through storytelling and communal care. Together, these steps can reveal a new horizon of healing, strength, and solidarity—so that no woman in Bangladesh ever has to feel like Tamar again.

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Bloody Oaths: A Theological Response to Dowry

~ Joann Rachel Cherian and John Thuppayath

Growing up,¹ I never really understood why my mother cautioned my father before significant economic decisions in this way: “*randu penpillera ullathenn orma venam*” (‘You must remember that we have two daughters!’). What an odd caution! Especially when I was young, I did not see much difference in the expenditure between raising girls and boys. It was only when I was much older that I figured out that this was the near-universal Malayali² anxiety about ‘marrying off’ daughters with a good dowry.³

Many Christian communities across Asia operate in cultures where marriage customs expose women to extreme vulnerability, economic instability, abuse, and violence. In this paper, we offer a sociologically informed theological critique of dowry, particularly as practiced in South India, as an example of such a custom.

1. In this para, Joann Rachel Cherian is recounting her personal experience.

2. People who speak Malayalam and trace their origins to Kerala, a southern state in India.

3. The phrase ‘marrying off’ corresponds to the colloquial Malayalam phrase ‘kettichu viduka’ which is applied exclusively to women; see Susan Viswanathan, *The Christians of Kerala: History, Belief and Ritual Among the Yakoba* (Oxford University Press, 1999), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195647990.001.0001>. It refers to the act of marrying and sending off a daughter to a husband’s house, since patrilocality is the conventional custom in most South Indian families.

I. A Sociological Review of Dowry in South India

The ‘gift’ of money, property or valuable security (as dowry is popularly known today) from the bride’s family to the groom or his family at the time of marriage is a deeply internalised custom in India despite having been outlawed in 1961. The dowry does not remain with the bride but is transferred to the bridegroom’s family. Though many still disguise dowry as a woman’s ‘share’ in her inheritance,⁴ the woman exercises no right over this dowry after her marriage: it is under the control of her husband’s family. It is considered shameful for a woman’s family not to give a dowry, and the husband’s family often harass the bride until they receive it. Dowry deaths have become commonplace in both rural and urban India. In 2023, Bangalore, arguably India’s top tech-metropolis, reported the highest number of dowry-related cases in India - 1013 cases in just one year. Given how underreported dowry harassment and domestic violence in India generally are, this is a staggering figure. The southern state of Kerala, which boasts of high literacy and claims to have eradicated ‘extreme poverty,’ has also been unable to combat dowry harassment. In most cases, the problem of dowry sadly comes to light only after a death has occurred.⁵ Dowry murders are a significant

4. Amali Philips, “Stridhanam: Rethinking Dowry, Inheritance and Women’s Resistance among the Syrian Christians of Kerala,” *Anthropologica* 45, no. 2 (2003): 252.

5. For select cases, see Express News Service, “Kerala: Husband, Mother-in-Law Sentenced to Life for Starving Woman to Death over Dowry,” *The New Indian Express* (Kollam), April 29, 2025, Online Edition, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2025/Apr/29/kerala-husband-mother-in-law-sentenced-to-life-for-starving-woman-to-death-over-dowry/>, Minaxi Sajeew, “Uthra’s Murder in Kerala yet Again Shows Why Divorce Is Better than Giving in to Dowry,” *The News Minute*, May 27, 2020, Online Edition, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/uthras-murder-kerala-yet-again-shows-why-divorce-better-giving-dowry-125391>, and TNM Staff, “Husband and Mother-in-Law Arrested in Suspected Dowry Death, Second in a Week in TN,” *The News Minute*, July 2, 2025, Online Edition, Husband and mother-in-law arrested in suspected dowry death, second in a week in TN.

problem in South India,⁶ and Christians are not exempt.⁷

As Srinivasan, Kodoth and others note, dowry was initially restricted to ‘higher’ caste Brahmins and Syrian Christians in South India but gradually came to be adopted by the rest of the population as well.⁸ This is largely because a sizable dowry came to be associated with high socio-economic status of the family. It was aided by the practice of hypergamy, wherein many families wanted to elevate their social status by marrying their daughters into ‘better’ families. The rise of education in South India, surprisingly, has led to a rise in dowry transactions rather than a questioning of the practice.⁹

The families of women give dowries when their daughters are married and receive dowries when their sons are married. One reasoning is that men are expected to provide dowries for their sisters, which is an excuse as to why they do not refuse dowry at their own weddings. Dowry is thus a patriarchal system sustained by a complex network of giving and taking. This is premised upon the worth attached to a man and a woman based on their birth, education, employment, socio-economic background and overall ‘marriageability.’ Philips

6. For details, see National Crime Records Bureau. *District-wise Crime Against Women – 2022*. New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India, 2022. Accessed 25 November 2025. <https://www.ncrb.gov.in/crime-in-india-additional-table?year=2022&category=District+Wise+Reports>.

7. See the news report in Sandhya Grace, “Dowry Death: Shymol’s Husband Injured, Autopsy Reveals Torture, Say Police,” *Onmanorama*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.onmanorama.com/news/kerala/2024/01/31/dowry-death-shymol-husband-injuries-autopsy.html>.

8. Sharada Srinivasan, “Daughters or Dowries? The Changing Nature of Dowry Practices in South India,” *World Development* 33, no. 4 (2005): 593–615, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2004.12.003>. and Praveena Kodoth, *Producing a Rationale for Dowry? Gender in the Negotiation of Exchange at Marriage in Kerala, South India*, Working Paper no. 16 (Asia Research Centre (ARC) - London School of Economics & Political Science, 2006), 23, <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/25193/1/ARCWorkingPaper16PraveenaKODOTH2006.pdf>.

9. Gaurav Chiplunkar and Jeffrey Weaver, *Marriage Markets and the Rise of Dowry in India*, no. 16135, IZA Discussion Paper Series (IZA – Institute of Labor Economics, 2023), 3, <https://docs.iza.org/dp16135.pdf>.

details the elaborate process of ‘status-matching’ between families that accompanies the final decisions on dowry settlements.¹⁰ ‘Marriageability’ can include factors varying from skin colour and physical health to whether the bride/groom has a job abroad. Osella and Osella in their study of masculinity in Kerala, observe that the value of a young man is determined based on the dowry he can command in the marriage market.¹¹ The practice commodifies and objectifies both men and women, and drags entire families into debt.¹² However, the inability to pay a sufficient dowry, accompanied by human greed that makes families demand more, undeniably most often results in violence and abuse against women. Violence turns out to be an effective bargaining instrument in extorting more dowry from the woman’s family.¹³

Kodoth argues that placing conjugality at the centre of women’s interests and identities has led to a reinforcement of dowry practices, because societally a woman’s identity is legitimised through marriage. In order to avoid the shame of an unmarried daughter, families will pay any price to ensure that she is matched with a groom.¹⁴ Honour, education and expectation play a role in reinforcing dowry in South India. The eagerness to showcase the status of the family is what motivates many brides’ families to throw lavish weddings (often beyond their means), as well as to furnish the new couple with a large dowry. Indian families are consumed by the necessity of getting their

10. Philips, “Stridhanam: Rethinking Dowry,” 252.

11. Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella, *Men and Masculinities in South India* (Anthem Press, 2006), 85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gsmzbv>.

12. For more, see the Malayalam lecture at J Devika, “ഇരുപത്തിയൊന്നാം നൂറ്റാണ്ടിലെ മലയാളി കുടുംബം (t. ‘The 21st-century Malayali Family’),” paper presented at VKS ശാസ്ത്ര സാംസ്കാരികോത്സവം (t. *VKS Science and Cultural Festival*), VKS ശാസ്ത്ര സാംസ്കാരികോത്സവം (t. *VKS Science and Cultural Festival*), October 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58hCEMMYV0c>.

13. Francis Bloch and Vijayendra Rao, *Terror as a Bargaining Instrument: A Case Study of Dowry Violence in Rural India*, no. 2347, Policy Research Working Papers (World Bank, 2000), <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-2347>.

14. Kodoth, *Producing a Rationale for Dowry? Gender*,” 17.

daughters 'married off' and preparing for it economically as much as they can in advance.¹⁵ Such preparations often begin right from the time a girl is born, making itself known in the family's savings, economic decisions, loans and choice of educational trajectories for their daughters.¹⁶ Men in India are also not exempt from heavy expectations. To show themselves as eligible for marriage, they must prove that they can provide for a wife, and subsequently for their children - therefore, education and jobs are the primary concerns of young men. Part of providing for your family includes being able to send your daughter into marriage with a good dowry.

The dark side of dowry is also visible in how many fathers hope that a good dowry will ensure their daughter's security in her new home. Plainly put, they are paying for a smooth life for their daughters in their patrilocal homes, because the insufficiency of dowry has led to fates as cruel as harassment and death for many women in South India. Many women undergo a lifetime of abuse and harassment from their husbands' families since they did not bring enough dowry.¹⁷ Kinship obligations owing to a woman's role as a daughter who must not bring shame upon her own family, as a wife who cannot dishonour her husband or his family, and often as a mother with children whose futures are at stake, prevent women from being able to resist this kind of abuse. The nature of marriage in South India is such that once a woman has been married off from her home, it is shameful for her to

15. Many Malayalam movies (*Ohm Shanthi Oshaana*, *Ustad Hotel*) open with a scene where a father paces the corridor outside a labour ward and is disappointed by the news that their newborn is a daughter. The birth of boys is welcomed because they will carry on the family name and inherit their wealth, but a baby girl is a sign of lifelong drain on the family's resources, and a liability until the time she is married. As a country that has had a high number of female foeticides, the shadow of dowry extends from birth to death, casting a pall over every baby girl born, and looming over her and her family well beyond her marriage - either in the shape of debt or harassment.

16. Srinivasan, "Daughters or Dowries?" 595.

17. Varsha Ramakrishnan, "A Broken Promise: Dowry Violence In India," *Pulitzer Center*, October 2013, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/broken-promise-dowry-violence-india>.

return. In this situation, many women feel that they have no options outside of marriage. Caught in the stranglehold created by the mesh of societal expectations, many women commit suicide to escape the cycle of abuse.

Yet, dowry shapes the lives of women long before marriage. Right from their birth girls are seen as economic burdens to their families because of the impending dowry. This, in large part, explains the high levels of female infanticide and sex-selective abortion in India. Even when a family does not go to such an extent, female children are nevertheless considered as economic liabilities who create anxiety, debt, and social shame for their families. Dowry plays an outsized role in the way that girls are socially valued in India.

Christianity in South India, rather than questioning this dehumanising practice of dowry, has co-opted the practice. Before dowry was outlawed, many churches received a cut of the dowry when the marriage was finalised in a practice called *pasaram*.¹⁸ Although this seems to have ended with the *Dowry Prohibition Act 1961*, there are still few overt condemnations of the practice from the pulpit. With their silence on the issue, the church lets dowry negotiations proceed unchecked, blesses weddings that thrive upon this economy, and tacitly perpetuates the abuses so endemic to the dowry system. In this situation, it is crucial to ask whether the Bible allows for a practice that holds sway over so many lives, and reflect theologically on how we can acknowledge and rectify our complicity in this social evil.

II. A Theological Response to Dowry

We believe that there are theological grounds to believe that dowry practices constitute a social evil that ought to be rejected outright by churches. There are at least three reasons why:

18. Elizabeth Chacko, “Marriage, Development, and the Status of Women in Kerala, India,” *Gender and Development* 11, no. 2 (2003): 56.; for the present status of *pasaram*, see footnote in Kochurani Abraham, *Persisting Patriarchy: Intersectionalities, Negotiations, Subversions* (Springer International Publishing, 2019), 135, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21488-3>.

- (a) Dowry, as practiced in South India, impairs the consent that is required of a valid marriage.
- (b) Dowry treats persons as transferable commodity. This notion is inconsistent with a theological understanding of human beings as fundamentally unownable by anyone, except God.
- (c) Dowry generates fundamental social evils and unjust social relations. If we believe that any agent or institution that generates social evils and unjust social relations should be rejected, then dowry must be rejected as well.

(a) Dowry and Marital Consent

Marriage is one of the most important decisions one can make. However, the dowry system strongly influences who one could marry - based on their education, background, caste, and so on. In many cases, because of dowry, both men and women are pressured to marry certain people - or prevented from marrying someone they like. Simply put, dowry embeds pressure, fear, and harassment into the very process of marriage.

In classical Christian teaching on marriage, it was understood that *proper* consent between the bride and the groom formed the bedrock of every marriage. The great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, for example, outlines that without free and mutual consent, there can be no 'valid' marriage.¹⁹ No one, he says, can be pressured into marriage. According to him, anyone who is forced to 'consent' to a marriage through fear has been robbed of their right to give their 'inward consent' to it.²⁰ In a society rife with dowry, it is important to relook at Aquinas' reminder of what marriage is:

"Matrimony signifies the union of Christ with the Church, which union is according to the liberty of love. Therefore, it cannot be the

19. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Brothers, 1911-1925), Suppl., q. 45, a. 1, New Advent, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/5047.htm>.

20. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl., q. 45, a. 4.

result of compulsory consent.”²¹

By ‘compulsory consent,’ Aquinas means consent that has been coerced in some way. If, instead of the logic of this ‘liberty of love,’ someone marries through pressure and fear, then there has been no true ‘inward consent’ so necessary for the constitution of a valid marriage. Aquinas does not spare even parents from this pressurising or fear-mongering.²² According to him, a parent ought not arrange a marriage bypassing, or trivialising, their children’s consent.²³ Dowry practices, simply put, impair the ability of a prospective bride to truly and intentionally consent to choosing a groom, or vice versa. When dowry coerces people to marry one rather than another, it becomes a practice that must be urgently re-examined by the church.

The passage in the Bible which, above all, speaks of the vital importance of consent in marriage lies in a question posed to Rebekah, before she decides to marry Isaac. Even after receiving multiple signs from God that shows them that God intends for this marriage to happen, her family turns to Rebekah and asks:

““Will you go with this man?”

“I will go,” she said.”

(Genesis 24:58)

It is important that Rebekah consents to going with Eliezer. Jewish tradition interprets this verse as indicative proof that no one can force a woman to marry without her consent.²⁴ The narrative shows that, even after clear divine ‘confirmations,’ Rebekah’s consent is still necessary for the marriage to go through.

21. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl., q. 47, a. 3.

22. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl., q. 47, a. 6.

23. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl., q. 47, a. 6.

24. See the commentary of the medieval Jewish authority Rashi on Gen 24:57-58. An older Jewish legal text, the *Bereshit Rabbah*, interprets this text as Rebekah (rightly) giving consent to a marriage that her family disapproves of (*Ber. Rab.* 60:12).

(b) Dowry and Commodification

In his sermons addressing the issue of slavery, the Cappadocian church father St. Gregory of Nyssa makes clear why the commodification of human beings amounts to blaspheming their Creator.²⁵ He argues that practices like slavery shift the belongingness of human beings from God to other human beings. “By dividing the human species in two with ‘slavery’ and ‘ownership,’” he writes, “you have caused it to be enslaved to itself, and to be the owner of itself.” Slavery, according to Gregory, gives the blasphemous impression that humans do not belong to God. Instead, humans treat each other as property.

While slavery introduces ownership by an exchange of money for a person, in dowry, both money and ‘goods’ flow in the same direction. This is because, especially in mainstream Indian society, women are considered liabilities - they incur costs, and so when exchanging them - the exchange itself must be incentivised, i.e., the men who receive the woman must be given payment to take her. The costs that a woman supposedly incurs for the family are mixed up with incorrect notions of ‘care’ for the vulnerable. The *Manusmṛiti*, a Hindu legal text, describes women as requiring protection throughout their life by their fathers, husbands and sons - and therefore unfit for independence.²⁶

25. Roger Pearse, “A Fuller Extract from Gregory of Nyssa on the Evils of Slavery,” *Roger Pearse: Thoughts on Antiquity, Patristics, Information Access, and More*, January 24, 2019, <https://www.roger-pearse.com/weblog/2019/01/24/a-fuller-extract-from-gregory-of-nyssa-on-the-evils-of-slavery/>. For more on St. Gregory and slavery, see David Bentley Hart, “The ‘Whole Humanity’: Gregory of Nyssa’s Critique of Slavery in Light of His Eschatology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 1 (2001): 51–69, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930600051188>. as well as Clifton Huffmaster, “Slavery as a Foil: Gregory of Nyssa’s In Ecclesiasten Homiliae IV,” *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 5, no. 1 (2019): 77–93.

26. Manusmṛiti (with the commentary of Medhātithi), trans. Ganganatha Jha, “Chapter 9, Verse 3: ‘Her father protects ... a woman is never fit for independence,’” *Wisdomlib*, last modified March 21, 2018, <https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/manusmriti-with-the-commentary-of-medhatithi/d/doc201361.html>.

This further replicates the ‘men must earn and provide’ norm.²⁷ Many fathers, often mistakenly, believe that they are providing for their daughter and safeguarding her interests by giving a large dowry. From experience it is observed that dowry shifts the worth of the woman from herself to the wealth she brings. Moreover, Indian cultures associate protection with authority, and therefore under the guise of protection, many women remain under the indisputable authority of their male relatives.

Within such a framework, the exchange of money in dowry implies, in practice, the transfer of ownership of the woman - the father transfers ownership to the husband.²⁸ Citing Matthew 16:26, St. Gregory also points out the impossibility of assigning a monetary value to a person: “what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” Both slavery and dowry, however, seek to achieve exactly this - by putting a price on the woman who is given and the man who receives her. Dowry estimates both men and women and assigns economic value to their worth. For St. Gregory, to put price tags on people is to treat them as objects, and not as image-bearers. Churches that support such a practice, or stand by silently while it plagues the lives of many, contest God’s role as Creator of all human beings.

(c) Dowry and Structural Evil

Dowry, as practiced in India, routinely results in exploitation, physical and emotional abuse, extortion, and damaged social relations. If a social arrangement consistently and reliably extorts people, oppresses the poor, allows for violence against women, leading up to even murder, should Christians ever participate in such a system?

The Old Testament prophets consistently speak out when the body of Israel bleeds with the scars of structural evil. In Micah, God speaks unrelentingly to those who partake in social injustice:

27. The Manusmṛti also codifies *stridhana* as a practice, but describes it as the exclusive property of a woman, given to her upon marriage, over which she exercises inalienable rights.

28. This can also be observed in popular traditions like the father’s ‘giving away’ of the bride to her new husband.

“Woe to those who plan iniquity,
to those who plot evil on their beds!
At morning’s light they carry it out
because it is in their power to do it.
They covet fields and seize them,
and houses, and take them.
They defraud people of their homes,
they rob them of their inheritance”

(Micah 2:1-2)

We have no further details as to why people went about acting unjustly, but we are told about the effects it brought: it is something that those with relatively more power inflict on those with relatively lesser power. It is something through which they can ransack and plunder other people’s property and wealth, evict them from their own homes, and strip them of their inheritance. Sounds familiar? In the dowry system, the groom’s family ‘covets’ the wealth of the bride’s family and, often through harassment and force, has the social sanction to pressurise and ‘seize’ their wealth.

One might argue that as long as people voluntarily choose to give dowry, then there can be no issue with it. Think of the nature of certain structural evils which exist with the full consent of nearly-everyone involved. Think, for instance, of the pornography industry. If there is consensus on any moral issue across the whole range of Christendom, it is the moral impermissibility of pornography: it objectifies people (mostly women), it perpetuates abuse, but nearly everyone involved (producer, performer, and consumer) enters into it *consensually* at a contractual level. Even if, on paper, all parties enter the industry voluntarily, the mere fact that they all consent to it does *not* make it any more acceptable. Similarly, given the enormous amount of social evils that dowry generates - especially in India - the consent of parties who sign up for it has no bearing on its moral acceptability.

So, if Christians have a moral responsibility to combat dowry, the

question that naturally follows is: how must we go about it?

III. Common Objections to Anti-Dowry Reforms

It is not enough to simply ban dowry. Though dowry has been illegal in India since 1961 the practice has only increased and not decreased in the half century since then. As the church, we need to deal head-on with the underlying cultural and theological ‘scripts’ that perpetuate dowry, and for this we turn to some common objections that crop up when the church attempts to combat the practice. We will then furnish theological responses to each of them.

Objection #1: “It’s shameful for us if our daughters are unmarried.”

Such an argument is sometimes applied to unmarried men as well, but it is an unmarried woman who often draws societal scorn and attention to her family. From a young age, girls are raised with the expectation that they must, and will marry, i.e., as Kodoth puts it, with the expectation of a stable monogamous conjugality. This is partly explained by the idolatry of marriage in the contemporary society. For most people in the church, to be single after a certain age (mid-late 20s) is a source of great shame and social rejection. Our ideas of what constitutes a normal Christian life entails being married as a *minimum* requirement of what it means to be a good Christian. In other words, unless God specifically calls you towards singleness, you, as a Christian, are expected to be married.

Note that this is in complete contrast to what the New Testament explicitly teaches. While it is true that Paul has plenty of lofty things to say about marriage (Ephesians 5:21-33), in 1 Corinthians 7 he makes it quite clear that he thinks the default destiny of a normal Christian is singleness (just as he was), *not* marriage (1 Corinthians 7:6-9). Within this, he construes marriage, as something that he concedes, as permissible only because of the difficulty of overcoming sexual temptation (see 1 Corinthians 7:2, 6). Observe too that this aligns perfectly with Jesus’ normative vision for the ‘normal’ Christian.

When his disciples balk at the standards to which Jesus raises the nature of Christian marriage, his own disciples say to him: “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry” (Matthew 19:10). Far from correcting them, Jesus doubles down on their suggestion:

“Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

(Matthew 19:11-12)

By evoking the imagery of those who voluntarily choose to become eunuchs for the kingdom of God, Jesus is articulating a vision of voluntary celibacy, virtually unheard of in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Among the Greeks and the Romans, celibacy was not the lofty virtue. By contrast, Stoic authors such as Musonius Rufus thought that celibacy was a violation of natural duty and the natural design of the human body to reproduce. To refuse to marry, according to him, was a refusal of the natural responsibilities given to people. Plutarch, too, thinks that refusing to marry was a failure in one’s civic duty to their society. Even the fabled Aristotle thought that the one who avoided marriage, and reproduction, endangered the *polis*. Within this context, Jesus’ and (later) Paul’s commendation of celibacy and singleness as a normal choice for a Christian is (embarrassingly) radical. It is from this normalisation or normativisation of celibacy that the distinctly Christian movement of ascetic orders would emerge in the first few centuries of the church. This premium placed on ascetic life would endure well into the medieval age. Like all things, however, some truths could be distorted into half-truths, and this was the case with celibacy too. Though it was born into a society that demonised celibacy, Christendom became an institution that demonised marriage instead. The Protestant reformation worked to counter this latter distortion but, in so doing, it overcorrected to a church that demonised celibacy (again) - thus returning the Christian church to an ethic about marriage being virtually indistinguishable from the one that Jesus and

Paul sought to liberate it from.

This brief sketch of history teaches us that the church once again needs to recover a healthy, theologically rigorous and orthodox understanding of celibacy and singleness as ideal (not shameful) states for a human being to be in as well. Especially in an Indian society that idolises marriage like few other societies on earth, it is especially critical for churches to recover this ancient Christian tradition on the virtues of singlehood - so that congregants do not feel the societal pressure to 'just get married' when they come of the right age and, instead, come to believe that the church is a safe space where they can be comfortable in their singleness, unless, of course, they decide to get married themselves.

Objection #2: "If I don't take dowry, I won't have money to marry off my sisters."

This oft-cited argument is inseparable from the pervasiveness of the institution of dowry. The reason one family thinks that they can't help but give dowry for their daughters is that they believe that no one will marry their daughters if they choose not to do it.

Why is this the case? Are there not enough Christian men who can insist that they will not take dowry? The trouble is that Christians have not yet imagined the church as a community that is a radically different social order distinct from the cultural practices of the world. The idea that to marry off a sister (or a daughter) you cannot help but stockpile money for dowry is rendered moot, if the concept of *receiving* dowry is as alien to the Indian church as stealing or murder (for example).

If (as this paper argues) dowry, and the other evils stemming from it, are to be rejected as a whole by the Indian church, then the church needs to consider an *institutional* response to dowry and not just leave it to the discretion of their individual congregants. They do the same, for example, in the case of extramarital affairs. Very few churches in India, for example, would leave the choice of whether to engage in such affairs to the individual congregant. Engage in this, and you are out of the church. There is, in a sense, a zero-tolerance policy. One way

that Christians across history have formalised institutional responses to social issues particular to their locale is through collective oaths. For instance, in the early centuries of the church, many Christians, in their pacifist approach to theology, would make oaths not to serve in the military. In so doing, Christians formed themselves as a radically different social order that was uniquely opposed to violence (in their interpretation). Similarly, churches should wield the significant power that they possess over marriage and insist that they cannot preside over marital proposals that intend to make monetary exchanges that constitute dowry. Any suspicion of negotiation, agreement of price, and any indication of monetary exchange will have to result in the church leadership refusing to even start reading out the wedding banns - something that is essential to register Christian marriages lawfully.

Many churches in India, for instance, refuse to conduct marriages for much less - for example, the dress worn by the bride, the denominational background of either the bride or the groom, and so on. The church, in other words, already possesses significant social capital and institutional authority to shape the nature, or the very possibility, of marriage between two Christians in India. The only other variable that needs to be investigated, then, is whether the church thinks that dowry is actually wrong. If it does, as this paper manifestly thinks it is, then it *must* wield its power to enforce it in its congregations.

Objection #3: “If we don’t give a good dowry for our daughter, then she might be mistreated in her new family.”

This objection points to two tragic realities in the underbelly of the Indian society that the church has refused to deal with comprehensively: (a) the reality of domestic violence in Indian Christian families and, (b) the reality that the overwhelming majority of new wives have to move in to their husbands’ homes and, thus, become subject to the whims and fancies to their new parents-in-law.

First, the church needs to be a place that tangibly demonstrates that it has a zero-tolerance towards physical and sexual abuse. In pastoral practice, thinking that divorce is impermissible in each and every case

imaginable, all that many churches do is counsel patience and long-suffering to the victim. Churches in India do not consistently exercise biblical discipline on abusers: the New Testament has plenty to speak about intervening in the lives of sinful people, even taking on the tool of excommunication (Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5).

Another way that Christian churches can immediately become spaces of non-tolerance for abuse is by committing to be transparent to local statutory authorities about cases of abuse that come to its attention. In this way, Christians will know that the church is not a place that can hush up or quietly tolerate abuse in the name of Christian suffering. Another tool that churches need to seriously consider is whether physical abuse constitutes grounds for divorce. Though there is disagreement about Christians on this issue, churches need to be aware that there is a long Christian (especially Protestant) tradition that widens the scope of the permissibility of divorce to cases of physical abuse. While divorce is displeasing to God since God's plan for marriage is that it be lifelong and monogamous but by abusing his spouse, a man has already violated the sacred marriage covenant. In this case, it is not divorce that ruptures the covenant, but violence.

Another issue that severely pressures new couples and endangers the lives of brides in India is the fact that, overwhelmingly, daughters are expected to move into their husbands' families and, thus, subject themselves to the domination and control of their new parents-in-law. In Genesis 2, by contrast, the man is expected to *leave* his father's house - the Hebrew *'azab* is stronger, it often connotes 'abandonment' (Genesis 2:24). Patriarchy was the norm in Ancient Near Eastern households: fathers had unilateral control over their wives, sons, daughters, and, also, their spouses. Within this context, Genesis 2 makes it clear that the biblical vision for marriage is such that the new couple is expected to become a new unit by themselves - becoming 'one flesh.' In Indian Christian churches, however, because of the predominance of patrilocal arrangements, sons rarely 'leave' their father's house in any meaningful way and, as such, are impeded from becoming 'one flesh' with their wife, because of the way that many

parents-in-law try to domineer over their daughters-in-law.

IV. An Action Plan for Churches to Combat Dowry

Too often, the Indian Church artificially creates a wedge between belief and practice, between church and family, and between the pulpit and the dinner table. Our thinking is too bifurcated between our 'Christian' and 'real' lives. We might believe - after reading this paper, for instance - that dowry is wrong, but, when the time comes, we will still cave in to custom.

If we are serious about combatting this, we need to get practical. Here we outline some concrete steps that can be taken by churches in India to combat the practice of dowry in their congregations, based on the common objections to the practice that we have seen above:

- The first category needs to be related with biblical teaching in a host of key areas:
 - A proper positive reappraisal of singleness and celibacy as *normal* end goals for Christians to counter the pervasive idolatry of marriage in India.
 - A proper theological reorientation of the duty owed to one's family - this is to counter many Indian children ignoring their own moral duty just because 'they want to obey their parents.'
 - More sermons that articulate the evils of dowry.
 - More sermons that articulate the sinfulness of emotional and physical abuse.
- The second category concerns institutional changes that churches need to implement at the level of governance structure and leadership decisions.
 - A zero-tolerance policy for dowry exchanges at the level of the leadership that usually conducts marriages
- The third category involves zero-tolerance policy for spousal abuse
 - emotional, physical, and economic abuse, with clear procedures

for pastoral intervention, accountability, and cooperation with civil authorities where necessary.

- Refuse to solemnise marriages where there is credible evidence of dowry exchange, even when it is socially costly for the church.

In short, the church must not just passively co-opt whatever is fashionable in society but must take active institutional steps to combat dowry. It must first be willing to deepen its theological critique of dowry from the pulpit and then boldly take steps against sanctioning weddings which involve dowries. Unless this happens, things will not change in India.

Conclusion

Given their significant involvement in matchmaking, proposal vetting, and conducting weddings, churches in South India cannot plead ignorance regarding the question of dowry. In a society where arranged marriages (perhaps in a less formalised way than previous years) dominate, churches and their elders quite often have the final say in whether a marriage alliance can be finalised in their community. Besides the entrenched casteism in South Indian churches that comes to the fore when marriage proposals are considered, the Manorama Classifieds page is invariably filled with ‘Syrian Christians’ seeking ‘Syrian Christian’ matches (For context, Syrian Christian is not a denomination in itself - it refers also to those who converted to non-Syrian denominations from the traditional ‘upper’ caste community.²⁹) The search for ‘a suitable family’ is often code for a matching of socio-economic backgrounds; a direct disobedience of the apostle James’ command that discrimination based on wealth was not to be practised within the church of Christ (James 2:2-4). The practice of dowry is thus antithetical to the vision of the church as a community of brothers and sisters who love and care for each other, regardless of economic

29. For more on Syrian Christians or Saint Thomas Christians, see Abraham, *Persisting Patriarchy*, as well as Sonja Thomas, *Privileged Minorities: Syrian Christianity, Gender, and Minority Rights in Postcolonial India*, Global South Asia (University of Washington Press, 2018).

power. As for the problems that dowry harassment brings about to various degrees in the ensuing marriage, Christians seem oddly silent. Those who are quick to oppose divorce as unbiblical seem to gloss over the rest of the verse in Malachi 2:16 - “For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel, and covering one’s garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless.” God finds spousal violence intolerable. However, studies have shown that this does not deter domestic violence in Indian Christian families.³⁰ God’s hatred of violence often seems to take a backseat to what many Christians see as the more important question of divorce. Mental and physical abuse, related to dowry and otherwise, are often suppressed and the women suffering from it are advised to be patient and take the relationship forward. Not only does the church lack power to do anything concrete to prevent violence in these instances, but it also actively puts women in unsafe positions by accepting practices like dowry and turning a blind eye on the marital problems that it entails.

Malachi is clear about the sacred nature of the marriage covenant: “Because the Lord was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant” Malachi 2:14. Is a holy covenant of this sort to be profaned by the exchange of money and the threat of violence? This same passage affirms the equality of men and women in creation and before their Creator: “Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his” the prophet proclaims in Malachi 2:15. This flies in the face of patriarchal conceptions of the woman as property, either of her father or her husband. God claims the woman as his own, and consequently any other assertion of ownership over her is a challenge to God’s authority. Theologically speaking, the practice of dowry is not only abominable in the sight of God but also denigrates and hurts His creation. It is well past time for the Christian community in South India to resist and abhor this practice and call for its abolition, within the church, but also in wider society.

30. A. Lozaanba Khumbah and Bonnie Miriam Jacob, *Violence Against Women in Indian Christian Families: An Inquiry Into the Response of the Church* (New Delhi: Theological Research and Communication Institute (TRACI), 2023).

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Gender-Based Violence and Widows in Himachal Pradesh: A Call for the Church to Care

~ Sanjay Kumar

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is defined as violence directed against a person because of their gender, or violence that affects persons of a particular gender excessively. The present issues around gender and GBV are a matter of serious concern. Christian culture includes some of the cultural practices which have developed over the centuries around the religion of Christianity. There are dissimilarities in the presentation of Christian beliefs in different cultures and traditions. Outside of the Western world, Christianity has had an impact on various cultures across the world, such as in Africa, the Near East, Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent.¹

Christian women in India, particularly in Himachal Pradesh (North Western Part of India), face cultural challenges related to their faith and gender, often experiencing a double burden of social and religious pressures. These challenges include limited mobility, restrictions on attending church or engaging in public life, and sometimes even violence or harassment. Additionally, questions of ordination and leadership roles within the church, alongside the expectation of women to be the 'heart of the family,' contribute to these difficulties. In this article I would like to highlight the challenges faced by widows in Himachal Pradesh.

1. Michael D. Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2012), 81.

Many widows tend to struggle financially, making it difficult to get by. The struggle becomes intensified when they have to raise children alone. Finally, widows often feel that they are alone in their sorrows. It can be difficult for them to talk about their loss when no support system is available. GBV has intensified the disgraceful and miserable condition of many widows in India. The 2015 *Global Widows Report* indicates that 18% of Indian widows face some deprivation and 24% of them felt the incomprehensible rebuke of being a widow.²

According to the 2011 *Census*, there are 46,457,516 widows in India,³ of which 73,273 widows are in Himachal Pradesh. The reality of widowhood is multilayered, characterised by loss, trauma, and often societal challenges. While widows may face financial instability, social isolation, gender-based violence and discrimination; many also have options with flexibility, reworking, and the development of new strengths and purposes. A widow grieves the loss of her spouse but adjusts to her new reality. With the passage of time, she finds greater confidence to face her new life. To understand the complex realities of the widows in Himachal, I interviewed several Christian widows from various parts of Himachal namely, Sushma Kumari, Rekha Devi, Geeta Devi, Rekha Avasthi, Kamla Devi, Ajjudhya, Rano, Sheela, Geeta and Raj Sunny. What follows is a summary of their experience.

Sushma lost her husband when she was just 21 years old and her son was 16 months old. Her husband was working in the electricity department at Sangla, District Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh. One day he left home early in the morning and never returned. Sushma is now 59 years old and has lived for close to forty years without knowing what really happened to her husband. Sushma struggles with the family and relatives ever since she became a widow. For 10 years she was not allowed to work by her in-laws. In between, her mother-in-law asked her to move out of the family home and stay on her own. One

2. Mohan Kishore and B.S. Yamuna, "Exploring Vulnerabilities of Disaster-Induced Widows," *Journal of ASIAN Behavioural Studies* 6, no. 18 (January/April 2021): 35–45, accessed July 19, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.21834/jabs.v6i18.382>.

3. Risto F. Harma, *World Widows Report 2015: A Humanitarian Emergency* (London, Delhi and New York: The Loomba Foundation, October 2015), 135.

room was given to her and some fields to cultivate for her survival. Sushma started to work in other homes and even in their fields, but her income from them was meagre and largely depended on the mercy of those who employed her. In 1997, she started to work as a peon in a private school and after 10 years of her widowhood she was able to claim her husband's job in 2001. Sushma was not given any land to construct a house. And even the land registry is not in her name, till today. Relatives and family members have threatened, insulted, discriminated and rejected her on various occasions. She retired in 2025 and lives in a small, rented house and as a single woman her life continues to be full of struggles.

Ajjudhya is another widow who has been struggling. She has been a widow for twenty-eight years and has faced family rejection and discrimination. She has not been given any share in the property, and neither was there any economic help from either side of her family. The only economic help she received was from the Himachal Government through the widow pension, which provided her just Rs.300 per month. Being an uneducated lady, Ajjudhya suffered a lot and the main source of her income was from cutting grass for animals and working in other homes.

Rekha Devi lost her husband in 1994 and later became a believer in Christ. She gets her husband's pension, and she is not struggling economically. She has faced a lot of rejection from her family and relatives. Rekha was often excluded from family functions and events. She raised her son and daughter with many struggles, and by God's grace her children have excelled in life. Her daughter has completed her Ph.D. in agricultural studies, and her son works in a private school.

The experiences of these widows cannot be truly captured in words to express all that they have gone through in life, but they let us into their life of pain and hurt, with hardly anyone to support them and their closest family members deserting them in their times of desperation and dire needs. The stories of widows across religions, across India and the world are no different. The violence they experience for things beyond their control accompany them for a lifetime.

1. Gender-Based Discrimination

According to a UN Women study, women in India are still relegated to a status of the ‘unwanted insiders.’ They often face a ‘triple burden,’ in the form of stigma associated with widowhood, severe constraints on access to resources, and sexual vulnerability, which makes them one of the most marginalised and vulnerable communities in this region. This is a stark contrast to their male counterparts, who are not subject to similar socio-economic exclusion within households and society at large.

1.1 Cultural Discrimination of Widows

Widows are entirely isolated and left on their own, without any support. They are frequently scoffed at as being inauspicious or a bad omen in the society. During any happy occasion, such as weddings, childbirths, or house-warming the widows are excluded from these ceremonial social events. This social ostracisation causes much pain and is further intensified by mental as well as physical harassment.

Widows living without any male family members are frightened of sexual abuse and violence. Though in many instances of drunken men knocking on their doors at night or of men physically harassing them, they are reluctant to go to the police station and file a complaint against the wrongdoers because they fear the consequences. Widows who pursue courts for justice risk physical and psychological violence because they have challenged society’s patriarchal norms.

1.2 Discrimination from Family and Relatives

Widows often face discrimination from their families and relatives. Most of the times they are asked to step aside, even on special occasions in the family. They are expected not to come in front of a newly wedded couple and during other happy occasions. Discrimination can include being denied inheritance rights, being subjected to abuse, and facing social isolation. These issues are often rooted in patriarchal traditions, customary laws, and religious beliefs. Loneliness is perhaps the biggest challenge for widows. They feel that no one understands what they are going through and that everyone

is too busy with their own lives with no time to reach out to them. This makes it even more difficult to cope with the sadness and grief of losing their spouses.

1.3 Discrimination on the basis of Education

Widows often face significant educational challenges, including limited access to education, job opportunities, and social support systems. Financial constraints, lack of skills, and societal stigma can further hinder their educational pursuits and their ability to support their children's education. Many widows, especially in rural areas, lack adequate education, job skills, and resources to support themselves and their families. A majority of the widows that I interviewed are uneducated and only some have passed primary school, middle school or higher secondary school. Hence, it is difficult for them to get good jobs for their survival.

1.4 Discrimination in Financial Matters

Widows often face significant economic hardships after their husband's death, primarily due to the loss of the main breadwinner and potential challenges in accessing financial resources and employment opportunities. This can lead to poverty, limited access to education and healthcare, and a difficulty in providing for themselves and their children. Widows face barriers to employment, including discrimination based on gender, age, and social status. This may limit their ability to secure stable and well-paying jobs. The financial crisis of widows is not limited to specific regions or cultures; it's a global issue affecting millions of women. It takes a lot of time to get help from social safety provisions, pensions, and other financial support programmes. Sometimes it takes years to get a job and financial help from NGOs. For example, Sushma for 10 years struggled before she could get her husband's job. Many nights she slept without food. It was hard for her to send her son to school. She was totally dependent on people's mercy for any help and daily sustenance. During my conversation with Sushma she said, "When I was young, I had nothing to eat, but now I have enough but I cannot eat, because my health doesn't permit me to have many food items."

1.4.1 Lack of Job Opportunities

Most of the widows had many struggles because there were not many job opportunities in their days. During my interactions, several older widows narrated the ordeal they face in securing a job with many not finding one. Even in the labour market they were paid only half of their wages because of their gender. At present, in Himachal Pradesh, women's participation in the workforce is significantly higher than the national average, with a greater proportion of women in rural areas compared to urban areas. While women are heavily involved in agriculture and farm-related activities, there is an occupational discrimination, with women less represented in off-farm and technical jobs.

1.4.2 Business Challenges

There are some widows who are businesswomen in Himachal though not many. Often in family businesses and enterprises, if the husband dies, the widowed wife would often be tasked with continuing the business and being the sole owner of the enterprise along with handling other responsibilities including taking care of the children. In the case of Ajjudhya her husband was a blacksmith and had his own business but being a woman, it was very difficult for her to continue her husband's business.

1.4.3 Discrimination in Industrial Work

Most of the widows in Himachal are unskilled or uneducated, making it is difficult for them to get a good job in any factory. Some young widows, however, are well educated and professionally trained and therefore, they can earn well. The largest industrial area in Himachal Pradesh is Baddi, known as the "Pharma Valley of India." It is located on the border of Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Haryana and is a major hub for pharmaceutical manufacturing. Additionally, Baddi hosts other industries like textiles, engineering, and electronics. Such industries offer jobs for widows in roles like production line work, quality control, and warehouse management. Widows can also find employment in supermarkets, department stores, and other retail outlets as sales associates, cashiers, or retail assistants. Restaurants,

hotels, and other hospitality establishments offer opportunities as waitresses, hosts, or kitchen staff. However, as they work, many women are often molested, raped or discriminated. They keep silent because if they report the case they would be in danger of losing their job and therefore, discrimination continues in our society.

1.5 Property Related Issues

In India, Christian property rights are primarily governed by the Indian Succession Act, 1925. This Act ensures equal rights for both testamentary and intestate succession, including spouses, children, and other heirs. It outlines how property is distributed, both when a will is present (testamentary) and when it is not (intestate). The Act also considers different categories of heirs, like spouses, lineal descendants, and kindred, when determining property distribution. “It is often the case that Indian women are not aware of many areas of legislation and action. The dissemination of information regarding new legislations are extremely varied and patchy. Illiteracy and exclusionary social practices further exacerbate this isolation from the processes of state organisations.”⁴

Sushma and Geeta, two widows I interacted with are still facing property related issues. When advised to take up the land registry related issue they were a bit scared of further losing whatever they had. Geeta is staying with her brother while Sushma stays in a rented house and according to them if they take any legal help, they will lose their shelter and become totally homeless.”

2. Journey to the New Faith

A widow's journey to the Christian faith includes experiencing God's support, finding hope and purpose through faith, and developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This journey can be reinforced by the support and empathy of other believers, particularly from the model of the early church's tradition of care for widows. The church is

4. S. M. Rai, *The Gender Politics of Development* (London: Zed Books, 2008), 57.

well poised to transform a widow's situation from that of grief and fear to one of peace, resilience, and continued service.

2.1 Experiencing God's Love

Widows have experienced God's love by discovering assurance in the biblical promises of His continuous care and protection, and by seeking comfort and practical support from the church community. Scripture repeatedly highlights God as a defender of widows, a provider, and the one who honours and appreciates them. The church is called to care for widows, and through this, the widows are to receive support, friendship, and financial aid, which are practical manifestations of God's love.⁵

2.2 Discovering a New Normal Life

Widows have to discover a new common life in the Christian faith by finding hope in God's continuing love, seeking community with other believers for support and healing, and embracing a transformed sense of purpose through spiritual growth and service, all of which helps widows strengthen their identity in Christ beyond their role as widows. The Bible talks of comfort and guidance for the weeping. The example of early Christians who supported widows can encourage modern congregations to create a welcoming and supportive atmosphere for them.

2.3 Personal Transformation

In the Christian faith, a widow's personal transformation involves finding a deeper association with God and serving Him with more freedom, frequently showcased by characters like the prophetess Anna. This transformation highlights finding strength in Christ, concentrating on faith, hope, and love, and engaging in good works like loving for others. While acknowledging the pain of loss, a widow's faith-based journey is about moving forward with purpose, seeking joy in serving God and others, and allowing her faith to define her identity.

5. Julie Barrier, "How to Love the Widows Among You," *Preach It Teach It* (blog), May 14, 2021, accessed July 19, 2025, <https://preachitteachit.org/articles/how-to-love-the-widows-among-you/amp/>.

2.4 Community Support

Community support for widows includes the church and individual believers providing emotional, spiritual, and practical assistance to meet their needs, reflecting biblical commands to care for the helpless. This support includes offering friendship and a listening ear, providing financial resources for necessities, helping with practical tasks like household maintenance, and advocating for their rights. The church community is important in creating a culture of compassion, adding widows into church life through events and activities, and involving them with resources such as Widows Association.⁶

2.5 Finding a New Ministry

A widow's ministry offers a community for spiritual, emotional, and practical support following the loss of a husband, offering a loving and supportive space for connection and help. These ministries frequently support, with biblical principles of caring for widows in their distress and actively seek to provide help and support to those in need. Some communities have organisations that offer support and programmes for widows, which can serve as a form of ministry. The purpose of these ministries is to provide a loving and supportive space where widows can find strength and encouragement. Biblical passages stress the importance of helping widows, and several ministries translate this into practical acts of assistance and care.

3. Church Initiatives for Widows

Churches in Himachal Pradesh, like many religious organisations, frequently deliver support to widows through various programmes. These include financial assistance, material aid like sewing machines or livestock, and emotional support through counseling and community building. Several churches have initiatives focused on empowering

6. Elisabeth Bloechl, "The Biblical Imperative to Care for Widows," *Modern Reformation* (blog), April 18, 2022, accessed July 19, 2025, <https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/articles/the-biblical-imperative-to-care-for-widows>.

widows, helping them find income-generating opportunities and improve their quality of life.

3.1 Believers Church

Believers Church has organised community development programmes, distributed sewing machines and mosquito nets, and provided livelihood options by providing them with goats to earn some income.

3.2 Diocese of Amritsar Church of North India (CNI)

Among the objectives of Diocese of Amritsar CNI is the focus to empower women to stand against domestic and societal atrocities, as well as against the deprivation of their equal rights. Working towards a society in which everybody has a right to live, which implies the right to food, water, decent environment, education, medical care and shelter. The Churches that come under the Diocese of Amritsar CNI take care of their widows by providing job opportunities for them in their schools, colleges and hospitals.

3.3 Christian Institution's Helps for Widows

Most of the Churches in Himachal do not have a special project for the widows but at an individual level they try to help them by providing different kinds of support which includes, provision of jobs in Christian schools, hospitals, hostels, Bible schools etc. and on the other hand the Church members and sometimes the Churches take care of the educational expenses of the widow's children, provide medical support and help during children's marriage. Support for children's education is often one of the first expenditures to be cut on the death of a breadwinner, particularly in poor or large families. Children are often put to work to make up for lost income. To be effective in keeping children in school, grants must cover all direct and indirect costs and a family income subsidy may also be necessary depending on the degree of poverty.

4. Government Initiative for Widows

The Himachal government is paying serious attention towards the

upliftment of women in the society with education, funds for widows and poor women, strict punishments against female infanticide, etc. The result of all these initiatives by Himachal government towards the growth of women in society has made Himachal top the list among all the other states in terms of women empowerment. There are several special schemes to assist widows:

- Monthly Pension Scheme for Widows is a regular source of income for widows.
- BPL Yojna for Widows, where families with an income below a certain threshold are classified as Below Poverty Line (BPL) and provided with ration, and financial assistance at the time of their daughters' marriage.
- House Construction Plan for Widows aims to provide financial grants for the construction of houses for economically weak widows and single women.
- The Widows Re-Marriage Plan, contrary to the traditional approach, encourages widows to remarry by providing some economic incentive for the same. Widows can also avail several other schemes which assist poorer sections of the society, such as children education support and employment guarantee for a minimum of 100 days.

5. Widows in the Scripture

The Scripture highlights God's constant care and concern for widows. God understands their helpless situation and recognises that they need to be safeguarded and supported. Biblical texts emphasise the responsibility of both the community and the family to care for widows, seeing it as a reflection of God's character and a vital aspect of true religion.

5.1 God's Justice and Protection for Widows

Deuteronomy 10:18 says that God "executes justice for the orphan and the widows and shows His love for the alien by giving them food and

clothing.” The themes of God’s justice and protection are associated with the difficulty of widows (Exodus 22:22-24; Deuteronomy 24:17; 27:19). The Book of Job has much to say about ensuring appropriate care and concern for widows. As Job was suffering criticism from his supposed “friends,” he recounted how he reached out to the widows as a personal defence of his religiousness or “bond of devotion to God” in Job 29:13. Caring is seen as something that God values and appreciates. This stands in contrast to how society views and sets aside widows including within the Church.

The Old Testament is filled with affirmations of God’s justice on behalf of widows (Psalm 68:5; Isaiah 1:17; 1:23). As God assures the widows of His justice and protection, He also urges the widows to trust Him as a mark of true faith (Jeremiah 49:11; 1Timothy 5:5). Further the spiritual and ethical unrighteousness of Israel in the Old Testament was noticeable by the absence of regard they had for the widows (Ezekiel 22:7; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5).

God displays his protection and justice for widows so that His people will also mirror the same level of concern for them. Human self-interest frequently inspires acts of kindness or “charity.” In other words, sometimes when people characteristically do good deeds for others, there is often a hidden motive of receiving some sort of reward or favour in return. However, as God’s children, our acts of kindness and compassion must not be driven by self-interest but rather to show the love of God.

5.2 Jesus’ Apprehensions for Widows

Lord Jesus Christ also talked about widows. His teachings and engagement with widows also laid the foundation for the teaching about widows that we find in the rest of the New Testament. In the first three Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus admonishes the Pharisees for their hypocrisy not only in their approach and attitude toward widows, but also in their manipulation of the Scripture (Matthew 23:14; Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47). Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus includes women like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, who were either widows or had widowhood associated with their stories. Their

inclusion in Jesus's lineage emphasises God's inclusion of marginalised people, including widows, into the kingdom of heaven (Genesis 38:15; Matthew 1:3, 1:5, 1:6; 2 Samuel 11:22-26). The Scripture validates their identity and worth as individuals. The inauspiciousness associated with including widows in our modern-day happy settings is instructively missing in the Scripture.

How can we overlook the miracle of the raising the dead son of the widow from Nain in Luke 7:11-17? Jesus' deep compassion for this woman is evident in his remark to her in verse 13, "When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, "Do not weep"." Jesus then brought her son back to life, demonstrating His power over life and death. As Jesus uses many examples to communicate His teachings, widows find a significant mention. The parable of not giving up in prayer uses the example of a persistent widow making her appeal for justice to an unjust judge in Luke 18. The widow begs her case to the dishonest judge. Though he has no concern for her on a personal level, yet because of her persistence and his aggravation towards her, the judge grants her the request. Jesus then closes the parable with these words in Luke 18:7-8 "will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Jesus highlights the ability of the widow to draw attention to her needs through her persistence which is a model for how we approach in prayer.

Another illustration of how the focus is on widows is when Jesus Christ, in the famous model on giving, uses the example of the widow who gave all she had in Luke 21:1-3, "And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. And He saw a poor widow putting in two small copper coins. And He said, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them." The One who came to give His life used the example of a widow to illustrate the heart and attitude we must have toward God. We understand Jesus and his expectations further through the example of the faithful and sacrificial widow.

5.3 Early Church and Widows

The early church followed the path of Jesus in the importance the widows had in the early church. One of the first major pastoral crises in the church was between the Jewish and Grecian widows in Acts. Therefore, the Apostles were encouraged to demand the church to select seven men, no doubt the forerunners for the Deacon ministry, to support the widows who were suffering. The Apostles knew that caring for widows was a litmus test for the church regarding its ministry and spiritual health.

Acts 9:39-41 details the death of Dorcas, and how she was dear to the widows of the early church. God used Peter to bring her back to life and it was also the context for confirmation of the Apostle Peter's apostolic identification. Again, God included widows in a major turning point in redemptive history which, in this case, provided proof of the power of Jesus Christ, through the Spirit, working in the early apostolic Church in Acts.

In 1 Timothy 5, there are instructions for the church's ministry for widows. Taking care of widows is a powerful indicator of Christlikeness in a local Church. On the other hand, unlike the early Church, the twenty-first century Church is busy with very little time for people to slow down adequately to make sure every widow is heard, cared for, or maybe learns from the widow what she has learned from God in terms of His protection, providential care, and strengthening through difficult times. The ministry for widows cannot be neglected. Ministry for widows can teach Christians much about how to demonstrate the love and compassion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The gender-based violence experienced by the widows in Himachal is but a reflection of the larger gender reality that plagues most of the communities in India. The complex situation of the widows make their lives difficult but assistance from various sources have eased their journey to some extent. Many of the widows are pensioners, have

family support and property as well, but there are some widows who do not have either and are completely dependent on their relatives' grace of provision. Churches in Himachal have taken some sort of action to help these widows. The government of Himachal have launched various schemes for the widows, but the processing takes a considerable time and sometimes it is hard for the uneducated widows to access them.

The church must take an active role to help Himachali widows and expand the scope of how they are currently assisted. It would be helpful to offer legal advice on inheritance, case management, and reconciliation, developing a range of livelihood support services, business training, stock control, basic accounting, market analysis, providing micro businesses with loans and grants, assistance in establishing cooperatives, technical support for farming such as crop planning (including soil management), animal husbandry, management, marketing, shipping to market and finding out market prices. Training on types of business suited to the local economy is also necessary. Special emphasis should be placed on skills training, including basic literacy and numeracy skills which many widows lack, as well as business management skills in combination with funding through business loans or grants.

Even though Himachal Pradesh shows promising trends for women's empowerment and has high scores on gender equality guides, cultural norms continue to propagate gender-based violence through deep seated discrimination, manifesting as domestic violence, early marriage, and imbalanced participation in public and private lives. While acknowledging the progress, we need to simultaneously highlight and challenge the discriminatory beliefs and practices. Sustained political commitment, sufficient resource allocation, and broad public engagement are crucial for attaining sustainable coexistence and removing gender-based violence and ensuring women and particularly the widows can live free from fear and violence. While the government and society plan and strategise to ease the burden of the widows, the church cannot turn its face away from widows. The Church's warm and loving embrace of widows should be a model for the rest of the world, but such a state is still a faraway dream.

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16

Reimagining Gender Theology: Tearfund Asia's Engagement to Confront Sexual and Gender- Based Violence

~ Emil Jonathan L. Soriano and Evangeline Ekanayake

Introduction

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) is not merely a distant societal issue but a critical and urgent issue that Evangelical churches must confront today. Headlines increasingly reveal a shocking catalogue of abuse of power across all sectors of society, and the Church is no exception. No theological tradition—be it Catholic, liberal, conservative, or charismatic evangelical—has proven immune to abusers who exploit positions of power and trust.¹ This crisis matters profoundly because it strikes at the heart of the Church's witness and its calling to be a place of safety, refuge, and justice.² SGBV prevention is a critical imperative for societal well-being and justice, and speaking openly about it shatters the silence that protects perpetrators and isolates victims. When the home, which should be a place of safety, becomes a site of violence and hostility due to unequal power relations, the very foundations of community are broken. Sadly, the Church itself has often been a place where victims are silenced, abusers are shielded, and the institution's reputation is prioritised over

1. David McIlroy, "Abuse within Evangelical Churches and Organisations Addressing the vulnerabilities." *Cambridge Papers: Towards a Biblical Mind* 34, no.1 (March 2025): 1, <https://www.cambridgepapers.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/CP-Mar25-Abuse-and-evangelicals.pdf>.

2. McIlroy, "Abuse within Evangelical," 4.

the well-being of the vulnerable.³ Therefore, addressing SGBV is not just a social responsibility but a theological mandate, essential for the Church to authentically reflect God's heart for justice and for the flourishing of all people, especially the most vulnerable.

The scale of this “global epidemic,” as the World Health Organisation (WHO) calls it, is staggering. **Globally, one in every three women and girls will experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime**, which equates to roughly one billion people today.⁴ In India for example, data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) reveals that 33.3% of ever-married women aged 15-49 have experienced emotional, physical, or sexual abuse from their spouses.⁵ The rate among Christian families is only marginally lower at 33.1%.⁶ In Asia and the Pacific, violence by a current or former intimate partner is a harsh reality for many, with rates as high as 34.7% in some countries.⁷

This violence is not random; it is rooted in systemic gender inequality. In patriarchal societies, men are often considered the primary authority figures, holding dominant roles in the home, community, and institutions. This power imbalance leaves women vulnerable to abuse and discrimination. Women are frequently treated as inferior, second-class citizens, with their skills, experiences, and lives undervalued. They may be denied equal access to resources, education, healthcare, and opportunities for work or leadership. When women are poor, this discrimination is compounded, leaving them with fewer resources to

3. McIlroy, “Abuse within Evangelical,” 3.

4. UN Women, *Global Database on Violence against Women and Girls*, accessed October 2, 2025, <https://data.unwomen.org/global-database-on-violence-against-women>.

5. Lozaanba A. Khumbah and Bonnie Miriam Jacob, *Violence Against Women in Indian Christian Families: An Inquiry into the Response of the Church*, (New Delhi, Theological Research and Communications Institute, 2023), 3.

6. Khumbah and Jacob, *Violence Against Women*, 3.

7. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and UN Women, *Charting New Paths for Gender Equality and Empowerment: Asia-Pacific Regional Report on Beijing+30 Review*. (Bangkok: United Nations, 2024), 97, <https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/9789211067033>.

cope and making them more susceptible to exploitation. Even within Christian families, patriarchal values persist, leading to differential socialisation where boys are raised with little responsibility while girls are taught to defer to male authority.⁸ This inequality is not just a social problem; it is a distortion of God's created order and a profound injustice that the Church is called to confront.

What is equally disturbing is the resurgence of toxic masculinity. The rise of right-wing populism around the globe has reinforced the dominance of male power. In an article published in *International Articles Review*, the study highlights the centrality of misogyny in legitimating the political goals and regimes of a set of leaders in contemporary democracies: Trump, Modi, Bolsonaro, Duterte, and Erdogan.⁹ These leaders were electorally legitimated and demonstrably misogynist. The study shows how masculinity, misogyny, and gender norms more broadly intersect with political legitimacy.¹⁰ The existing work tells us that the contemporary leaders who claim—often successfully in electoral terms—to be “strongmen” are part of a tradition; they emulate each other, and they have toxic/regressive effects in terms of gender equality outcomes.¹¹

Moreover, these powerful men are being backed by wealthy men and popular social media influencers. Elon Musk, a staunch supporter of Trump during his campaign tweeted about “*masculinity's comeback*.”¹² Mark Zuckerberg, another young billionaire who owns one of the

8. Prabu Deepan, *Transforming Masculinities: A Training Manual for Gender Champions*, (Teddington: Tearfund, 2017), 4.

9. Nitasha Kaul, “The Misogyny of Authoritarians in Contemporary Democracies,” *International Studies Review* 23, no. 4 (December 2021), 1620, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab028>.

10. Kaul, “The Misogyny,” 1619.

11. Kaul, “The Misogyny,” 1622.

12. FP Staff, “‘Masculinity is back’: Elon Musk says 2025 looks good as ‘Trump won, Trudeau resigned and Starmer got exposed,’” *Firstpost*, January 7, 2025, accessed October 2, 2025, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/masculinity-is-back-musk-says-2025-looks-good-as-trump-won-trudeau-resigned-and-starmer-got-exposed-13850581.html>.

largest social media platforms now called Meta (Facebook), was once heard saying in one of his interviews in a podcast by Joe Rogan, talking about how it's important that corporate culture gets back to "*masculine energy*."¹³

Such powerful men put the blame on "*feminism*" and "DEI" (Diversity, Equality, Inclusion) values as the cause of having "*weak men*" in leadership positions. There has been a tremendous pushback against DEI values and agitating men towards strong aggression. Many famous online influencers have been peddling this rhetoric and have become increasingly prominent, buoyed by the resurgence of far-right ideology.¹⁴

Additionally, many in the conservative religious circles are reinforcing such ideology and giving them a theological justification of male dominance within the church. Christians in these circles use the Bible and weaponise it to subjugate women and affirm patriarchy.

This paper seeks to engage that mindset and that theological framework and will try to wrestle with Scripture to address such inequality in gender power dynamics with the hope to bring clarity to what the Scripture points to in terms of justice, righteousness and reconciled gender relationship.

Section 1: Tearfund's Commitment to Gender Justice in Asia

Tearfund, a Christian relief and development agency, is deeply committed to ending poverty and challenging injustice, a mission rooted in the Christian faith's call to restore broken relationships—with God, self, others, and the environment. This commitment naturally extends to promoting gender equality and confronting gender

13. AFP, "Return of the Alpha Male: Why Toxic Masculinity is Gaining Prominence," *Gulf News*, March 20, 2025, accessed October 20, 2025, <https://gulfnews.com/world/return-of-the-alpha-male-why-toxic-masculinity-is-gaining-prominence-1.500066770>.

14. AFP, "Return of the Alpha."

injustice. Recognising that SGBV is a critical barrier to sustainable development and a violation of human rights, Tearfund has developed a holistic, evidence-based response focusing on engaging men and boys as part of the solution.¹⁵

A Personal resolve born of pain

Tearfund's engagement with SGBV issues was born out of a vision of Tearfund's Asia Regional Director, Prabu Deepan. His vision and advocacy is very much personal and stems out of his experience. Prabu recalls for us his journey:

"The journey of Transforming Masculinities (TM) began long before it had a name; it began in my own childhood. Witnessing my father's violence towards my mother, I made a promise to myself at a young age: I would not be a man like him. That was my starting point, a personal resolve born from pain.

Professionally, the path became clearer in 2013 when Tearfund began listening exercises with survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Their message was powerful and consistent: to truly end the violence, we had to bring men and boys into the conversation. The real turning point, however, came during a focus group discussion when a participant asked, "How can I become something I've never seen?"

*That question crystallised everything. We weren't just fighting against harmful norms; we needed to offer a positive alternative. This led us to the core of the TM approach: exploring **Jesus Christ as the ultimate role model** for a masculinity rooted in compassion, service, and equality, not dominance.*

From this, TM was born, not as a rigid curriculum but as a personal and communal journey of transformation for everyone involved. It's a journey I am still on, and one that invites all of us to unlearn harmful behaviour and co-create a world free from violence, where everyone can flourish with dignity."¹⁶

15. See Tearfund's Training Manual: Prabu Deepan, *Transforming Masculinities: A Training Manual for Gender Champions* (Teddington: Tearfund, 2017).

16. Prabu's testimony that he used to openly share in Transforming Masculinities training.

In Asia, Tearfund has significantly expanded its efforts to address SGBV. A key initiative is the **Transforming Masculinities** programme, an evidence-based approach designed to transform harmful gender norms and promote positive masculinities and gender equality.¹⁷ This approach is founded on the understanding that SGBV is a gender issue, not just a women's issue, and that engaging men and boys—who are statistically the majority of perpetrators—is crucial for prevention. The programme works at multiple levels:

1. **Engaging Faith Leaders:** Tearfund works with national, provincial, and community-level faith leaders, who are predominantly male, to gain their support and leadership for the process. While faith leaders and certain interpretations of Scripture can reinforce harmful patriarchal norms, they can also be powerful agents for change.
2. **Training Gender Champions:** Community faith leaders select key men and women to be trained as 'Gender Champions.' These volunteers facilitate community dialogues and lead change regarding gender norms and SGBV within their own communities.
3. **Community Dialogues:** Gender Champions lead small groups of men and women in weekly discussions over six weeks. These dialogues create safe spaces for participants to reflect on SGBV, gender roles, power dynamics, and faith. The initial five weeks are conducted in single-sex groups, allowing for open conversation, before the groups come together in the final week.

This process is built on key principles of **personal transformation, dialogue, accountability, and community ownership**. It aims not to directly challenge existing gender roles but to question the unequal values assigned to them and to promote positive models of being men and women. Through these interventions, Tearfund's vision is to see men and boys become allies and role models, promoting a lifestyle of positive masculinities and gender equality, which will significantly improve relationships, families, and the well-being of the entire community. Hundreds of Gender Champions across Asia have now been trained, empowering church leaders and pastors to

17. Deepan, *Transforming Masculinities*.

advocate for gender justice.

Section 2: Theological Issues and the Subjugation of Women

The persistence of SGBV within Christian communities is often fueled by harmful theologies that create and reinforce unjust social structures. Throughout church history, patriarchal interpretations of Scripture have relegated women to an inferior status. Theologians like Tertullian explicitly blamed women for the fall, labelling them “the devil’s gateway” and asserting that God’s punishment “weighs down” upon the entire sex.¹⁸ This line of thought, which views patriarchy and male rule as divinely ordained, has persisted, leading to teachings that legitimise male domination and female submission.

Such theological norms directly contribute to violence against women. Passages concerning headship and submission (e.g., Ephesians 5) are frequently misinterpreted to justify a husband’s control and discipline over his wife, creating a culture where abuse is tolerated or even sanctioned. Many women, lay members, and counsellors report that Christian teaching on marriage often implies wives are subordinate to their husbands. This is dangerously reinforced when pastors advise abused women to “be more prayerful,” “endure suffering,” or “submit to [their] husband more.” By spiritualising suffering and failing to hold abusers accountable, the church becomes complicit, creating an environment where abusers feel safe and victims are silenced. The problem is compounded by a male-centric leadership structure where “women’s issues” are not seen as problems for the church as a whole, leading to a systemic blindness to the reality of domestic violence.

18. Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum* (On the Apparel of Women), Book I:1-2, quoted in Owusu-Gyamfi, C. and Daniel Dei, “Tertullian’s moral theology on women and the accusation of misogyny,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (2022): 1, <https://verbumeteclesia.org.za/index.php/ve/article/view/2384>.

A. *The Anatomy of Sexual-Gender Based Violence in the Scripture*

Before we begin to read and interpret Scripture, we must acknowledge and keep in mind a crucial caveat. The original texts were written by men within a deeply patriarchal society.¹⁹ Similarly, majority of the biblical translation and commentaries used by the global church have also emerged from within a patriarchal framework—one that inherently assumes male superiority.²⁰ This historical context has significantly influenced not only the specific words we read in the Bible, but also the texts and interpretations that have been prioritised throughout the church's history.²¹ Nevertheless, one of the ways that the Bible addresses issues of justice for women is to tell their stories. The Bible tells it as it is—with all the gory and disturbing stories.²²

There's much in the Scripture that showcase women's roles and leadership, but I would like to use the narrative in Samuel and Judges as case studies to show how violence and injustice against women is fundamentally rooted in deeply entrenched systems rooted in patriarchal culture, male-dominated power, and the profound subjugation and objectification of women.

I. Foundational Context: Patriarchy and Unequal Power

Sexual and gender-based violence in these narratives is rooted in systemic patriarchal structures.

- **Male-Dominated Power:** Men are consistently regarded as the primary authority figures, holding dominant positions in the home, community, and formal institutions. This pervasive power imbalance leaves women **highly vulnerable** to exploitation and abuse, even

19. Elaine Storkey, *Women in a Patriarchal World: Twenty-five empowering stories from the Bible* (London: SPCK, 2020), xiv.

20. Storkey, *Women in a Patriarchal*, xiv.

21. Storkey, *Women in a Patriarchal*, xiv.

22. Athena E. Gorospe with Charles Ringma, *Judges: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, Asia Commentary Series (London: Langham Global Library, 2016), 8.

within the supposed safety of their own homes.²³

- **Female Subjugation and Inferior Status:** Women are often treated as inferior, with their skills, experiences, and lives routinely undervalued.²⁴ Harmful cultural and theological interpretations reinforce these patriarchal norms and rigid gender roles, subordinating women and often reducing them to **extensions or possessions of men**. This status inherently lends itself to abuse.²⁵

Root Cause of Violence: Inequality in power and status is identified as one of the root causes of SGBV. Male violence is frequently used as a tool to reinforce dominance and control over women’s lives.²⁶

II. Case Study: Amnon and Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-22)

This narrative starkly illustrates the use of **royal privilege, deceit, and physical force** to commit sexual assault, followed by systemic failures by patriarchal figures to seek justice.

Element of SGBV	Expression of Patriarchal Culture and Male Power	Female Subjugation
The Setup and Act of Violence	Amnon, the King’s son, exploited his royal status and male authority over his sister Tamar, a virgin (v.1). He used	Tamar’s subordinate position required her to comply with the instructions to serve Amnon, leaving her vulnerable to

23. Deepan, *Transforming Masculinities*.

24. See the treatise of Ronald W. Pierce and Mary L.Conway, “The Treatment of Women Under the Mosaic Law,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural and Practical Perspectives*, eds. Ronald W. Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2021), 150-151.

25. Tearfund’s Internal Document, *Reflecting the Image of the Triune God: A Theology of Gender for Tearfund* (Teddington: Tearfund, 2021), 2.

26. Deepan, *Transforming Masculinities*.

	manipulative counsel (from Jonadab) to deceive King David into sending Tamar to his private chamber to serve him (v. 3-5). Amnon then used his superior physical strength to forcibly rape her, because he was “stronger than she” (v. 10-14).	exploitation. She suffered the double trauma of the rape and the ensuing devastating loss of dignity and public disgrace (v. 19-20).
Post-Violence Rejection and Inaction	Immediately after the violation, Amnon exhibited extreme loathing for Tamar and ordered her removal (v.15). King David, upon hearing the news, became furious but failed to punish Amnon because he loved him as his firstborn, demonstrating a prioritisation of paternal sentiment over justice (v.21). This moral paralysis allowed the abuse to remain unaccounted for.	Tamar was reduced to a “ desolate woman ” (v. 20). Her brother Absalom, instead of helping her seek justice, told her to “ Be quiet for now ” and “do not take this to heart,” effectively silencing the victim and preventing accountability (v. 20).

III. Case Study: Jephthah’s Daughter (Judges 11:34-40)

This story reveals how **male self-interest and public reputation** dictated the fate of a dependent female, culminating in her sacrifice.

Element of SGBV	Expression of Patriarchal Culture and Male Power	Female Subjugation
The Vow and Sacrifice	Jephthah, driven by his personal desire to secure his position and prevent social rejection, made an unnecessary vow to offer the first person from his house as a burnt offering (v. 30). This act was made despite having already received the Spirit of the Lord for victory (v. 32).	The daughter remains nameless throughout the narrative, signifying her status as subordinate and an “extension of her father’s identity” (v.34). Her destiny was wholly determined by her father, the male head of the household, whose word was law. ²⁷
Blame and Loss of Agency	Upon realising the consequence of his vow, Jephthah blamed his daughter for his grief, stating, “You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me” (v. 35). He saw only his loss, refusing to acknowledge his responsibility.	In systems where the male head is not accountable, the victim is often told she is at fault and may subsequently internalise this blame. ²⁸ The daughter initially thought only of her father’s loss (v. 36).

27. Athena E. Gorospe with Charles Ringma, *Judges: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*, Asia Commentary Series (London: Langham Global Library, 2016), 159.

28. Gorospe with Ringma, *Judges: A Pastoral*, 161.

Element of SGBV	Expression of Patriarchal Culture and Male Power	Female Subjugation
Limited Agency	Her fatal fate was sealed by the male decision (v. 39).	Even when facing her tragic fate, Jephthah’s daughter exercised limited agency by requesting and receiving two months to “bewail her virginity” with her companions before the vow was fulfilled (v. 36-37). ²⁹

IV. Case Study: The Levite’s Concubine (Judges 19:1-20:7)

This account is the most shocking illustration of **systemic objectification, male complicity, and extreme violence** against a female figure.

Element of SGBV	Expression of Patriarchal Culture and Male Power	Female Subjugation
The Woman’s Status	The woman was a concubine (<i>pilegesh</i>), viewed as a sexual partner rather than a full wife (v.1).	As an economic or sexual possession, her wishes were sidelined, and her voice was silenced throughout

²⁹ Gorospe with Ringma, *Judges: A Pastoral*, 163.

	Her anonymity emphasises her lack of voice and powerlessness .	the narrative. ³⁰ The lack of voice and powerlessness is a situation that inherently lends itself to abuse.
The Sacrifice and Gang Rape	When the mob demanded to rape the male guest, the host offered his own virgin daughter and the concubine as substitutes. The host’s instruction to “Debase them” explicitly granted permission for sexual humiliation of the women (v. 24). This act prioritised male honour (saving the Levite from the disgrace of being “feminised”) over the welfare of the women (v. 22). ³¹ The Levite then seized his concubine and threw her out to the waiting mob, showing cruel indifference (v. 25).	The women were treated as disposable objects whose rape was considered a “less abominable scenario” than the potential humiliation of the men. ³² The concubine was “wantonly raped... and abused... until morning” (v.25-26).

30. Gorospe with Ringma, *Judges: A Pastoral*, 244.

31. Gorospe with Ringma, *Judges: A Pastoral*, 256.

32. Gorospe with Ringma, *Judges: A Pastoral*, 256.

Post-Mortem Objectification	The Levite found her collapsed and dying (or dead) at the door. He callously ordered her to “Get up; let’s go” and then loaded her onto the donkey “like a piece of unwanted baggage” (v. 25). Upon reaching home, he cut her body into twelve pieces using a butcher’s knife (<i>maakeleth</i>) (v. 26-29).	Her body was treated with complete disregard, like cattle, serving as an instrument for the Levite to vindicate his lost honour and shame those who had disgraced him.
Manipulation of Justice	The Levite subsequently lied to the assembly, asserting that the citizens of Gibeah intended to kill <i>him</i> and only then raped <i>his concubine until she died</i>, thereby omitting his own responsibility and manipulating the facts to focus on his own dishonour (v. 30). This deception successfully mobilised the fragmented tribes for war against Benjamin (20: 1-7).	Her life and death were fully exploited to serve the Levite’s vengeful male agenda, confirming that her ultimate value lay entirely in her status as his possession.

V. Mechanisms of Subjugation and Complicity

These acts of violence are sustained not only by direct perpetrators but also by the pervasive nature of the wider patriarchal system:

- **Complicity of Bystanders and Institutions:** Injustice results from the fault of the **whole system**, not just individual actors. The violence inflicted on the Levite's concubine was enabled by the indifference of Gibeah's citizens who offered no hospitality, the host's selective hospitality (prioritising male honour), and the Levite's calculated cruelty. Men who are not violent often **fail to intervene**, acting as silent "observers" and contributing to impunity.
- **Theological Reinforcement of Subjugation:** Historically, certain theological interpretations have reinforced male domination such as misinterpretations of the wife's submission (Ephesians 5). This teaching can lead victims to stop defending themselves and suffer in silence, believing that being quiet is "being spiritual." When pastors advise abused women to "endure the suffering" or "submit to [their] husband more," this reinforces the abusive actions as justified and attributes blame to the victim.
- **Restoring Agency as Justice:** The recurring issue of women's **lack of voice and powerlessness** must be confronted. True justice requires confronting these systemic failures and actively working to **restore agency** to women, empowering them to make their own decisions and voice their concerns without interference. This is essential because abuse stems from the power imbalance where men make decisions for women, leading to harm.

B. Redeeming Life-giving Theologies of Gender

However, a life-giving theology offers a powerful alternative, promoting the fullness and wholeness of life for all. This begins not with the fall in Genesis 3 but with the vision of *shalom* in Genesis 1.

1. **Reflecting the Image of the Triune God:** The foundation of human identity is that **all human beings—male and female—are made equally in the image of the triune God**. This image is both personal and relational; we are created for communion with God, one

another, and creation. God transcends gender, encompassing both female and male characteristics in the biblical text. The Holy Spirit (*Ruah*) is even represented by a feminine noun in the Old Testament. Being created in the image of the Trinity means men and women are different but equal in power and worth, intended for partnership.³³

2. **A Mandate of Shared Stewardship:** In the creation story, the mandate to care for the world was given to men and women alike. They were to be co-stewards with God, governing *together*.³⁴ God's original intention (*telos*) was the flourishing of all life, with humanity working alongside the creator to nurture it. Inequality and patriarchy are not part of God's original design but are a result of the fall and the collapse of *shalom*. Adam's act of "naming" Eve, a political act asserting dominance, occurred *after* the fall.³⁵
3. **Redemption in Christ Restores Equality:** Christ's redemptive work breaks the curse of the fall and restores God's plan of equality.³⁶ Jesus himself acted counter-culturally, affirming women's spiritual capacity, engaging with them in public, and making them the first witnesses to the resurrection.³⁷ In Christ, the dividing walls of hostility are broken down. As Galatians 3:28 proclaims, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This new humanity, birthed by God, allows women to legitimately hold leadership positions, as demonstrated by Paul's commendation of female leaders like Junia, Phoebe, and Lydia.³⁸

33. Tearfund's Internal Document, *Reflecting the Image of the Triune God*, 4.

34. Tearfund's Internal Document, *Reflecting the Image of the Triune God*, 5-6.

35. Tearfund's Internal Document, *Reflecting the Image of the Triune God*, 5.

36. Tearfund's Internal Document, *Reflecting the Image of the Triune God*, 5.

37. Tearfund's Internal Document, *Reflecting the Image of the Triune God*, 5.

38. For a more complete treatise see Linda L. Belleville, "Women Leaders in the Bible," in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural and Practical Perspectives*, eds. Ronald W. Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2021), 207-243.

This theological reframing is critical. It moves the conversation from justifying subordination to celebrating God's design for mutual, interdependent, and flourishing relationships between men and women.

Section 3: A Way Forward for the Church— Reimagining Theology and Relationships

For Evangelical churches to become agents of healing and justice, they must actively re-imagine their theologies and transform their relational practices. This requires moving beyond simplistic solutions and engaging in deep, systemic change rooted in a life-giving biblical vision.

1. Re-read and Re-preach the Scriptures with Open Eyes

Churches must intentionally revisit their interpretation of Scripture, moving away from patriarchal readings that have caused immense harm.

- **Start with Genesis 1:** Frame theology around God's original vision of *shalom*—wholeness, harmony, and shared stewardship—rather than defaulting to the fall in Genesis 3 as the starting point. This shifts the focus from sin management to participating in God's mission of life in all its fullness.
- **Tell the Whole Story:** The Bible does not shy away from the dark realities of abuse, as seen in the harrowing stories of Tamar (2 Samuel 13), Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11), and the Levite's concubine (Judges 19). Churches need to preach on these "texts of terror" to show God's unequivocal solidarity with victims, expose the sin of abuse, and call out the systems of power that enable it. The story of the Levite's concubine, for example, reveals how a whole system—indifferent citizens, a complicit host, and a self-preserving husband—contributes to injustice.
- **Highlight Models of Transformed Relationships:** Emphasise Jesus as the model for positive masculinities—a leader who served, showed

compassion, defied harmful social norms, and used his power to uplift the marginalised.³⁹ Re-examine passages on marriage such as Ephesians 5, through the lens of mutual submission (Eph. 5:21) and Christ's self-giving love, which calls husbands to give up power and privilege for their wives' well-being, not to demand their submission.⁴⁰

2. Create Safe and Accountable Communities

The church must transform from a place of silence and complicity into a sanctuary for victims and a place of accountability for abusers.

- **Break the Silence:** Pastors and leaders must publicly and regularly address SGBV from the pulpit. This creates awareness, breaks taboos, convicts abusers, and encourages victims to seek help. Preaching on violence is not a “private issue” but an integral part of the church's mission in a broken world.
- **Establish Clear Support and Accountability Structures:** Churches need practical plans to deal with violence. This includes creating support groups for women, training leaders to respond effectively, providing resources like counselling and legal advice, and establishing clear accountability measures for abusers, such as mandatory counselling and barring them from leadership positions.
- **Empower Women's Voices and Leadership:** True gender justice requires structural change. Churches must actively work towards gender equality in leadership and decision-making. When women are involved in leadership, issues that affect them are no longer marginalised but become central to the church's agenda. The stories of biblical women like Achsah and Deborah demonstrate that women are not merely objects of male decisions but are empowered initiators of action for the well-being of their families

39. Deepan, *Transforming Masculinities*.

40. See Lynn H. Cohick, “Loving and Submitting To One Another,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural and Practical Perspectives*, eds. Ronald W. Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2021), 469-479.

and communities. Restoring women's agency is a fundamental act of justice.

3. *Embrace a Holistic Mission of Justice and Restoration*

Ultimately, confronting SGBV is an integral part of the church's mission to reflect God's character and participate in the restoration of all things.

- **Understand Justice as Restorative Action:** Justice (*mishpat*) is about intervening to “put things right” in oppressive situations, while righteousness (*tsedeqah*) involves fulfilling our relational obligations to the most vulnerable. Love never requires us to be less than just. Churches must move beyond a narrow focus on evangelism to embrace a holistic mission that includes solidarity with victims and concrete acts of justice.
- **Promote Mutual Love and Respect:** The core of Christian relationships is mutual love and respect. In a world that devalues women, the church is called to model transformed relationships where all can flourish and realise their God-given potential. This means challenging the “macho” mentality and misogyny prevalent in many cultures.
- **Partner for Systemic Change:** The church cannot tackle this issue alone. It must collaborate with NGOs, counsellors, and public authorities to build networks of support and accountability. By working together, the church can contribute to the creation of a sub-culture of non-violence that subverts the patriarchal order and points towards God's vision of **Abundant Peace**⁴¹—a world where justice flows, relationships are healed and every person can live free from fear and violence.

41. Tearfund's approach is rooted in the belief that the gospel offers good news for all people and all of creation. It presents a refreshed theological foundation for our work, integrating the established framework of 'four broken relationships' with an additional theological concept which we're calling '**Abundant Peace.**' Tearfund's Internal Document by Clark Buys, *Roots and Renewal: Theological Foundations for Tearfund's Work* (Teddington: Tearfund, 2021), 25.

In confronting the uncomfortable truth of SGBV, the church faces a profound choice: to remain silent and complicit, or to courageously step into its calling as a community of healing, justice and restoration. By re-imagining its theology and transforming its relationships, the church can become a powerful witness to the God who “looses the chains of injustice” (Isaiah 58:6) and makes all things new.

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17

Church as a Safe Space: Engaging with the Stories No One Wants to Hear

~ Evangeline Ekanayake and Emil Jonathan L. Soriano

Our beautiful Asia, a continent of vibrant culture, history, and rich diversity also bears a heavy burden. One in every three women in Asia has in her lifetime suffered some form of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). In fact, *The Lancet* report¹ SGBV rates in parts of Asia are up to 19% higher than the global average. This is a crisis rooted in patriarchal structures, economic disparity, and harmful cultural norms that silence victims. The church, embedded in these societies, often reflects these same societal struggles. But these are not mere statistics. They are real life stories of women and girls living around us.

Stories of abuse, injustice, and trauma present a chilling paradox. We are simultaneously drawn to know the truth and repelled by the discomfort it brings. The desire to engage is often checked by the fear of the feelings raised—uncomfortable memories of our own experiences, or the terrifying questions that expose our own potential complicity. At times, we simply choose wilful ignorance, a silence that allows us to forget and deny, rather than confront the disquiet within. But if we are to make our churches places of safety and healing, we need to allow ourselves to see, hear and feel the silent dark realities that sometimes masquerade in some of our whitened sepulchres.

These authentic stories from the Asian church, while shared with

1. Lynnmarie Sardinha et al., “Global, Regional, and National Prevalence Estimates of Physical, Sexual or Both Intimate Partner Violence Against Women In 2018,” *The Lancet* 399, no. 10327 (February 2022): 803-813.

consent, have been altered to protect the identities of the individuals, churches, and communities involved. Names if used are changed, locations left out, all references to denominations, or any identifiable features have been left out or modified to protect identity.² These stories also accurately represent numerous similar accounts across diverse cultural contexts in Asia. We present them as a sacred duty: to amplify the voices of the marginalised, to encourage critical self-reflection within our faith communities, and to motivate courageous action. Our goal is to transform places of Christian worship into spaces where gender justice, safety, and healing are nurtured and sustained throughout future generations.

I. Painful Stories

1. “How could he ever do this? He’s our worship leader!”

Shamima was 19, a beautiful, talented and much-loved member of a church youth group. The group was very close, sharing their lives and supporting each other in prayer often. The worship leader of the group knew that Shamima was struggling and troubled because of her dysfunctional home where there was constant fighting. He would speak to her and comfort her often. She trusted him. So, when he once offered to drop her home after worship practice she accepted. On the way he asked her to share details of her home situation. Talking about home upset her, and he hugged her to comfort her. The hug didn’t seem right but since he was an older married man and a spiritual leader who she looked up to, she told herself that this was probably okay given how kind and comforting he was.

Later that month the group planned to visit a village to meet with the youth of the church there. The worship leader suggested Shamima join him in his car as he was passing her home, he said. On the way while he was driving, she sat next to him, and he started to tell her how

2. Stories have been gleaned and verified through personal conversations and interviews. Survivors’ wellbeing and support in the process have been addressed.

beautiful she was. Then he held her hand and proceeded to touch her and stroke her. Shamima was very confused, shocked and afraid. She didn't know what to say or do at first and he took her shocked silence as license to continue. It was only when he started to kiss her that she shook free and managed to say, "don't do this." As she pulled away, her mind flew to the worship leader's young wife who Shamima knew. "I don't like this" she said, and he stopped groping her and continued the journey as if nothing had happened.

Shamima was shaken badly. Her trust in the leader she looked up to was shattered. So many questions filled her mind and would haunt her for a long time. What was this that had happened? Was it that he loved her? But then what about his wife? Had she done something wrong to tempt him? Was it her fault? What would people say and do if they got to know somehow? If he did this to her, had he also done it to others? Could he do so in the future? Why did God allow this? What did all the worship mean then? On and on the questions haunted her but she didn't tell anyone as he was a much-respected leader, and the chances were that no one would believe her anyway.

He, on the other hand, became cold towards her and in the years to come spoke ill of her giving people bad impressions of her character in subtle ways. *She was unreliable, lacked a steady faith, no wonder her family problems continued, why was Shamima single still, something must be wrong, maybe she was gay...* were little bits of negativity fed to the group about her. This meant that some people pulled away from her, started to doubt her and marginalise her in subtle ways until Shamima finally left the group. He felt safe.

2. "The Reputation of our church should not be tarnished"

Three young people from an urban church (two girls and a young boy) were dedicated members of the outreach ministry team. They would regularly visit the urban poor communities, also called slums, and distribute Christian literature and speak about Jesus to people. The locality was rough and full of crime and deprivation, but they saw the deep pain and suffering of people and felt drawn to share the gospel with those in this deep darkness.

The two girls had recently made some good conversations with a mother and her two daughters who ran a shop in the community. They would talk for hours about their depleting business, financial strain and the violence in the neighbourhood. The young people from the church soon learned that the mother was also brewing illicit liquor to supplement her meagre income and since of late the two daughters were getting drawn into the cybersex trade through young pimps who lured them after school hours. Before long, their conversations led to prayer, and a regular prayer meeting was set up in their home. One or two other women from the neighbourhood also joined mostly out of curiosity as the mother and girls found great relief hearing about a loving forgiving God who called them to a new life. Soon the two daughters from the community decided to stop their associations with the pimps and even the mother started exploring other income generation options instead of liquor brewing.

The community around them saw the changes in this family and felt a looming threat to their lifestyle and decided to put a stop to it. They waited for the 3 young people from the church to visit and surrounded them. They violently threatened the boy using foul language and threatened sexual violence on the girls describing what they would do to them if the girls ever set foot in that neighbourhood again. They vowed to follow them and make their life a misery if they did not stop their activities. The terrified young people rushed away glad to have escaped unharmed.

They immediately contacted their leaders and asked for help and guidance, but the leadership told them to go home and lie low and thank God they escaped. Someone suggested they go to the police because of the threats. But when the elders heard about their intention to go to the police, they said *theirs was a church that had never been seen anywhere near the police or courts and that this would bring disrepute and undue attention to the church*. They advised the young people not to go to the police or give statements for the fear that the thugs would retaliate and attack the church. The church and its leadership washed their hands off the issue of the young people's protection despite the threat of sexual and other violence they faced

just by ministering to people in need. They received no guidance, legal or emotional support. They were only told, “we did not ask you to start prayer meetings in such a neighbourhood, you could have invited them to church.” The young people knew very well that church was not a welcoming place for the rough and vulnerable types they moved among, but it seemed purposeless talking with the leadership. The young people were blamed for what had happened to them and abandoned in their most vulnerable hour. The mother and two daughters from the slum community who had just begun to respond to the gospel and to turn their lives around were also abandoned.

3. 15 years of marital violence, sanctioned by the church?

“You have my permission to tell my story. No one should ever have to endure what I had to, for 15 long years. Please tell my story if it can help a woman be freed from a prison of abuse in her own home and her own marriage with her own church watching and doing nothing. I was silent for so long, partly because I believed them when they said, “Don’t tell anyone, not even your mother and sisters, we will sort it all out for you.” So, I stayed silent. But day after day, month after month, year after year, I faced his torment and torture. Finally, after 15 years I realised that the faith leaders I had confided in, pleaded with, trusted in, would not, perhaps really could not help me, and I reached out to others for help, an utterly broken woman with her broken children. This is my story.

It started even before we were married. He would humiliate me in public, put me down even in front of the church leaders. Even then, everyone saw how he made me feel small and hurt me, but no one said anything. I thought it was normal. We got married.

He first hit me when I was carrying our baby. The reason - I was pregnant and hungry and reminded him to come quickly so we could go and eat together. He flew into a rage and hit me on the head. I immediately told our church leader, he listened but did nothing. As time passed, hitting me became normal for my husband. Any provocation would do. I was beaten if I didn’t have his tea ready on time or If I was tired and wasn’t able to have sex with him. He would humiliate and beat me. He would often strip me naked and force me to have sex even

when I was sleep deprived while nursing our baby. He would regularly hurl insults and abusive language, calling me terrible names in front of our children, beat, strip me and force sex upon me. He would threaten me with a knife and once threw a knife at me. I have had to visit the hospital with bruises and even fractures. But never told the truth.

I can't count the number of times I have called the church leaders in utter despair and told them everything, but to no avail. They only told me to be patient and pray, to forgive and not to tell anyone that they would "sort it out" But not only did this torture continue, so did my husband's active leadership in church. He would do all of these things to me, make the children cry in fear and distress and then we would all have to go and sit in church with him and watch him lead the singing, pray and be the spiritual leader everyone thought he was. My life was on auto pilot. Just going through the motions. I recall pleading with the leadership to intervene, to speak to him, at least for the sake of the children. They kept promising but year after year nothing changed. Except to get worse.

He started to abuse me in foul language and even chased me out of the house. He would throw me out of the car and even stripped me once in front of my daughter and tried to chase me out of the house. That day he only stopped because of my daughter's crying. She was only 7 years old. I can't count the number of times I would have gathered up my children and run to the church leader's house for safety. While they did give us shelter, they never once called out his behaviour, or said it was wrong, never reprimanded him or moved to stop these behaviours, all of which my children witnessed.

I was terrified that the silence of the leaders was normalising his abusive behaviour, and that my children too would learn to believe this was the norm for men and women. I watched each of our children struggle mentally and emotionally. They would scream at him and also scream at me in frustration and battle a mix of emotions, they would fall behind in school, reject the church and drop out of youth groups. One even developed trouble remembering, and learning. I was devastated. This was the only thing worse than his torment, seeing the slow degradation of the physical, mental health and holistic development of my beloved children.

He would often help and support the church leadership generously, he contributed to their needs and projects and was there whenever they needed anything. Then he also stopped giving me money for the household expenses. This is when I was forced to reach out to others for help and this may have been the beginning of breaking my silence. People began to notice. Due to his persistent threats and the admonishing of the church leaders I never spoke about anything I endured. One day, after 15 long years of silently bearing the daily abuse, while praying with my prayer group it was no longer possible for me to hold on to the facade. I broke down and told them something of what he was subjecting me to. They moved quickly to speak to my church leaders, some of them finally took him aside and confronted him, only to be told all manner of lies about me and verbally abused them. Nevertheless, I felt my moment of freedom had finally come.

I was suddenly surrounded with wise, gentle and practical support from prayer group members. They secured safe accommodation, professional counselling support for me and also for my children who were by then badly scared. Then came legal support. All this marked the turning point in my life. I had a long hard road of legal battles, of healing from deep emotional wounds, slow and painful restoration for the children, and yet, I was finally able to leave a life of torment and find a life of safety, dignity, wholeness and healing for my children and myself.

There is not a day when I awake without giving thanks and praise for God's mercy, salvation, healing and grace. I am not done with my story yet.

I have been asking myself a million times why the church leaders allowed this. Now I know. If beating your wife is normal even as an elder in the church, and it happens in your life why would you oppose it? If you were not aware of the law and what constituted a crime and what abuse was how could you respond? I also ask why it had to happen to us. In the early years I asked this question in frustration and pain. Now I ask the same question with hope and determination. I don't know why it happened to me, but I know I'm not going to let it happen to others if my story can help prevent it. If you have journeyed with me thus far in my story, help me re-write the future for many other women like me

*who may be around you.*³

We gratefully acknowledge the boldness and courage of all who agreed for their stories to be retold for our learning. We pray for blessing, healing, restoration and peace upon them all.

4. A Sad Common Tale

There is another category of stories that is often presented in the Christian community. Many have heard this kind of story, but few have been able to do more than wring their hands in despair.

This is the classic account of a bright and capable female employee of a Christian organisation. She starts successfully, is well-regarded, and becomes a favoured associate of one of the organisation's powerful male leaders. Her dedication and skill justify the recognition and privileges she receives.

However, the story takes a dark, insidious turn. The special attention and privileges begin to be accompanied by undue requests or pressure for intimacy, secret indiscretions, and sexual favours. If she succumbs to the senior male leader's demands, she keeps her job but suffers guilt and moral torment. Conversely, if she holds her ground, upholds her principles, or reports the abuse, she almost certainly faces painful and unjust repercussions. In such scenarios, victims have been harassed with punitive workloads, threats, bullying, emotional and verbal abuse, false reports, and vilification that have destroyed friendships, careers, or even personal relationships. In some cases, the profound hypocrisy of the Christian organisation's response has even caused the employee to suffer a spiritual crisis.⁴

Most often, the more powerful male leader is protected by the organisation, while the female employee is eventually compelled to leave her position.

These stories are not isolated incidents but sadly, they are the tip of

3. Transcribed and translated interview with author in January 2026.

4. Jo Kaybryn and Vijaya Nidadavolu, *A Mapping Faith Based Responses to Violence Against Women and Girls in the Asia Pacific Region* (New York: United Nations Population Fund, 2012).

the proverbial iceberg. They represent the realities of many women across Asia and even across the Christian world.

II. Moving beyond stories to the tough question that can bring change

We have journeyed with 4 types of survivors. Their narratives continue. But our discussions and reflections can change many other narratives for women, young people and children around us who may be suffering even right now. In reflecting let us stay aware of the common tendency to blame victims or to label these accounts as exaggerations. Let us explore deeper questions and uncomfortable truths that enable and sustain abuse.

1. Shamima and the Worship Leader

Merely establishing rules such as those governing intimacy in churches and youth groups, is insufficient to prevent abuse. While basic guidelines are necessary, we must go deeper. Simply knowing the rules has never been enough to stop harm. The question, therefore, is: beyond setting better rules, what other proactive measures can be taken to prevent situations like Shamima's from occurring?

Let us notice that Shamima was not only subjected to sexual advances from an older spiritual leader but later she was also the victim of vicious smearing because the leader spread false impressions about her, making people marginalise and grow distant from her. Let us explore the possible results of this kind of abuse on a young girl, who is responsible and what can other women and men do to address this?

What basic processes and awareness and attitudes should be part of the culture of youth groups to enable safety and flourishing? How can we create a healthy youth group culture?

2. "The Reputation of our Church should not be Tarnished"

Who are the vulnerable in this story? What do they need right now in order to be safe and to overcome trauma and continue to flourish?

What is evident from the story about the vulnerability factors of the young people from the church? What should have been done to both balance the call of mission but also the duty of church leaders to care for those who work for its mission?

What is evident about the priorities of the young people who went out and the priorities of the church leadership? How can we help each group understand and respond biblically to each other?

What Scriptures would you use to encourage this church and its leadership to strengthen their protective structures within the church and their duty of care for those in mission.

What knowledge and type of skills do you think will help the young people do missions and still be able to avoid or face threatening situations effectively? Who should enable them to acquire these skills?

How can denominations ensure that their leaders are selected and maintained with utmost care for personal holiness and zero tolerance of crime?

3. “15 years of marital violence, endorsed by the church?”

No woman should suffer these atrocities.

And yet thousands do all around us. What enables this abuse to continue? What can church communities do to prevent it and respond effectively to it?

No child should see their mother brutalised, stripped and thrown out of their home in front of their eyes.

And yet, many children are caught in between abusive parents and are often abused themselves. What enables this abuse to continue? What can church communities do to prevent it and respond effectively to it?

No church leader should be so helpless or ignorant about what domestic violence is or about what he or she must do when confronted with it.

And yet, many church leaders and their spouses feel helpless as they may not have the teaching or training to recognise these as crimes and the confidence to take responsible steps.

Why is there a gap in the knowledge of some faith leaders concerning the definition of abuse, what is a crime, and how to think through the biblical principles that must govern a leader's response to such crimes?

What accountability structures has the church got in place to support leaders to grow their knowledge and to effectively respond in such cases?

No Church leader should fear standing against or speaking against violence simply for fear of losing the financial and moral support of a powerful perpetrator who may be in church leadership.

What needs to be in place to enable courageous and knowledgeable church leaders to confidently address issues of abuse according to both biblical principles and laws of the land?

No man who beats, abuses or brutalises his wife (or anyone for that matter) and hurts and distorts the minds of children should be allowed to hold office in any church, lead worship, and even lead youth groups or be allowed to preach.

No church leader should ever enable violence and crime or be part of the crime by not speaking out against it even when it is between intimate partners.

Who should be responsible for holding faith leaders accountable? What processes can be put in place to ensure leaders have the enabling and support to guide faith communities away from violent crime which distorts God's call to holy living.

4. A Sad Common Tale

Who holds Christian organisations, which operate under Christian values, accountable for their moral obligations, organisational culture and relational dynamics among their diverse stakeholders?

In contexts marked by difficult economic circumstances and competitive job markets, Christian employees may fear punitive repercussions, hindering their willingness to expose injustice or abuse in the workplace. How can Christian organisations and their leadership cultivate an environment that encourages courageous truth-telling

and enforce a strict zero-tolerance policy for sexual and gender-based violence?

While lapses such as financial mismanagement and fraud are often addressed promptly and effectively, issues of injustice or sexual harassment frequently receive less priority, or are even overlooked, unless or until they pose a significant threat to the organisation's reputation. What mechanisms can the wider Christian community and the church employ to hold Christian organisations accountable in these matters?

III. Making Churches as Safe Spaces

“Reimagining Gender Theology: Tearfund Asia’s Engagement to Confront Sexual and Gender-Based Violence” (an article found in this collection of essays) explored the dark reality of SGBV in the Asian churches, and how we might equip ourselves with theological insights on abuse as Asian Christians to respond to this darkness. Here in this section, we offer some practical actions that church communities can explore to recreate our churches as places of safety, healing and restored just relationships.⁵

Reimagining Theology and Relationships

For churches to become agents of healing and justice, they must actively re-imagine their theologies and transform their relational practices. This requires moving beyond simplistic solutions and engaging in deep, systemic change rooted in a life-giving biblical vision.

1. **Re-read and Re-preach the Scriptures with Open Eyes**

- Churches must actively and prayerfully re-examine their interpretation of Scripture, consciously moving beyond established patriarchal (male centred) viewpoints.⁶

5. Anglican Communion, *God’s Justice: Theology and Gender Based Violence* (London: The Anglican Consultative Council 2022).

6. Bonnie Miriam Jacob ed., *Engaging a Gendered World as Christians* (New Delhi: TRACI, 2024).

- In sermons, bible study groups, theological courses offered for leaders and lay leaders, re-examine how male leaders have predominantly interpreted Scripture from a male-centric perspective, often overlooking the experiences, struggles, and perspectives of women and children. This may be challenging to acknowledge and address, given our long histories and traditions. However, a love and commitment to Kingdom values compel our faith communities to reassess ways of thinking and interpreting the Scripture and stop practices that have caused immense harm even lifetimes of pain and trauma across generations.
- Furthermore, teachings and discussions on transformed relationships, based on equality and justice, grounded in Scripture, must permeate all parts of the faith community—including youth groups, Sunday schools, and women’s and men’s fellowships—to fundamentally shape the culture of our faith communities.
- **Start with Genesis 1:** Frame theology around God’s original vision of *shalom*—wholeness, harmony, shared stewardship and equality with which we were created as men and women—rather than defaulting to the fall in Genesis 3 as the starting point. This shifts the focus from sin management to participating in God’s mission of life in all its fullness.
- **Gender Equality in Creation: A Biblical Foundation (Genesis 1:26-27)**
The creation narrative in Genesis 1:26-27 establishes fundamental gender equality. Both men and women are created in God’s image, signifying that they possess equal worth and value, despite their distinct biological make-up.

Historically, the belief and practice of treating women as less valuable than men have been widespread and have been directly linked to the abuse and the silencing of abuse of women. However, this perspective directly contradicts the truth of Scripture and God’s original plan. In Genesis 1:26-27 God said, “*Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...*” 27 *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*”

- **Tell the Whole Story:** The Bible does not shy away from the dark realities of abuse, as seen in the harrowing stories of Tamar (2 Samuel 13), Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11), and the Levite's concubine (Judges 19). Churches need to preach on these "texts of terror" to show God's unequivocal solidarity with victims, expose the sin of abuse, and call out the systems of power that enable it. The story of the Levite's concubine, for example, reveals how a whole system—indifferent citizens, a complicit host, and a self-preserving husband—contribute to injustice and cruel abandonment of a helpless woman to sexual brutality by a gang of men and finally murder.
- **Highlight Jesus as the Model of Transformed Relationships:** Focus on Jesus as the ultimate example of positive masculinity and transformed relationships.⁷
 - Highlight his servant leadership, compassion, and consistent defiance of harmful social norms, particularly evident in his interactions and relationships with women. Jesus' use of power to uplift the marginalised further models transformed relationships.
 - When re-examining passages on marriage, such as Ephesians 5, apply the lens of mutual submission (Eph. 5:21) and Christ's self-giving love. This interpretation calls on husbands to surrender power and privilege for the well-being of their wives, rather than focusing on the demand for the wives' submission.
- **Fostering a church environment that promotes safety, justice, and equality:**
 - **Integrate Theological Guidance on Relationships:** Facilitate church-wide discussions, involving youth and all gender-specific fellowships (men's and women's), to explore and apply theological principles regarding mutual respect and equitable relationships between men and women. This will foster togetherness and the flourishing of all.

7. Sathish Joseph Simon, "Jesus and Women in the Gospels: Partnership in the Redemptive History," in *Engaging the Gendered World as Christians*, ed. Bonnie Miriam Jacob (New Delhi: TRACI, 2024), 25-40.

- **Implement Age-Appropriate Scriptural Teaching in Sunday School:** Ensure the Sunday School curriculum includes lessons on justice, equality, and non-violence. Children must be taught how to treat each other respectfully and appropriately and learn that girls and boys are of equal worth and value, as well as how to identify and respond to abuse (e.g., distinguishing between good and bad touch).

2. Create Safe and Accountable Communities

The church must transform from a place of silence and complicity, judgement and condemnation, into a sanctuary for victims and a place of accountability for abusers, a place where safety and healing are the norm not the exception.

- **Break the Silence**

Pastors and leaders must publicly and regularly address SGBV from the pulpit. This creates awareness, breaks taboos, convicts abusers, and encourages victims to seek help. Sermons must make the congregation aware that violence is not a “private issue” but an integral part of the church’s mission in a broken world.

- Use church newsletters, WhatsApp groups, fellowship times to share information and educate the community on what is abuse, how it affects people’s minds, bodies and spiritual lives and the health of the whole church.
- Guidance for young people and children on how to respond when they see, or experience violence or abuse. This must be part of teaching for the church community.
- Seeking help, whistle blowing in a responsible manner, what to do if you see someone suffering abuse must also be addressed.

- **Establish Clear Support and Accountability Structures**

Churches need practical plans to deal with violence and communicate these plans effectively to everyone in the community. This could include:

- **Accountability for Abusers:** Implement clear accountability

measures for abusers, which must include mandatory counselling and the prohibition of holding any leadership positions within the church.

- **Support and Professional Referral for survivors:**

- Establish support groups or a team of women who can be available to women and girls who have experienced abuse of any sort.
- Train support group leaders to provide ethical, confidential, and well-informed care.
- Equip church leaders to respond effectively to disclosures of abuse, including connecting individuals with appropriate professional services and making external referrals when necessary.
- Set in place a trustworthy, confidential whistle blowing process for anyone who is aggrieved to seek help and encourage women to speak up boldly without fear.
- Provide Essential Resources: Offer resources such as legal advice, counselling, and access to safe accommodation as required.

• **Empower Women's Voices and Leadership**

True gender justice requires structural change. Enable conversations on this topic so that the whole faith community can grow in their understanding of the role of women in leadership and decision making.⁸

- Churches must actively work towards gender equality in leadership and decision-making.

8. Mary Stewart van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace: Women and Men in a Changing World* (Illinois: IVP, 1990).

This is a Christian, academic, and sociological examination of gender roles, arguing that men and women are more alike than different. It challenges rigid, traditional, or “naturally” determined gender roles, instead arguing that nature and nurture mutually influence gender identity and calling for a re-evaluation of biblical views on relationships, work, and family.

- Recognise that when women are involved in leadership, issues that affect them are no longer marginalised but become central to the church's agenda.
- The stories of biblical women like Achsah and Deborah demonstrate that women are not merely objects of male decisions but are empowered initiators of action for the well-being of their families and communities. Restoring women's agency is a fundamental act of justice.
- Include such discussions in youth groups, women's groups and Sunday school teaching
- When family disputes are brought to the leadership, female leaders too must be involved in the deliberations and decisions and help shape the church's response.

3. Embrace a Holistic Mission of Justice and Restoration

Ultimately, confronting Sexual Gender Based Violence is an integral part of the church's mission to reflect God's character and participate in the restoration of all things. For those who will push back saying this is not the role of the church to get involved in "social problems," enable them to encounter the theology of holistic mission.

- **Understand Justice as Restorative Action:** Justice (*mishpat*) is about intervening to "put things right" in oppressive situations, while righteousness (*tsedeqah*) involves fulfilling our relational obligations to the most vulnerable.
 - Love never requires us to be less than just. Churches must honour God's nature of justice and boldly move beyond limiting God's mission to evangelism alone but embrace a holistic mission that includes solidarity with victims and concrete acts of justice.
 - Justice demands that the voices, needs, and pleas of those who suffer most be amplified and prioritised. The dominant narrative must not be solely dictated by the more powerful individuals, those who offer greater assistance to the church, or those with the loudest voices in society.
 - Women must be part of the process of listening to, interpreting

and designing restorative action when dealing with domestic/intimate partner violence within the church community.

- Comforting the hurting is not an optional extra but should be an honoured priority among us who follow a God of mercy and “The God of all comfort” who calls us to the promise of Rev. 21: 4 where in *the new heaven and earth*, “*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*” And so, we are called to comfort, bring relief, show solidarity with victims of injustice as a community making ourselves ready for citizenship in that new heaven and new earth.
- **Amplifying Voices and Ensuring Justice**
 - Justice demands that the experiences and needs of those who suffer the most are centered, amplified, and addressed.
 - The dominant narrative must not be controlled solely by those with more power, who contribute more financially to the church, or who hold greater societal influence.
 - Involving Women in Restorative Action, when addressing domestic or intimate partner violence within the church community.
- **Promote Mutual Love and Respect:**
 - The core of Christian relationships is mutual love and respect. In a world that devalues women, the church is called to model transformed relationships where all can flourish and realise their God-given potential. This means challenging the “macho” mentality and misogyny prevalent in many cultures.
 - **Male leaders** must take the lead in calling out misogyny and patriarchal norms which lead to abuse. Young boys must be led to study the Scriptures and Jesus’ model of manhood.
 - **Women leaders** should foster a culture of non-judgmental, compassionate, and practical support for survivors. This includes: Encouraging honest self-examination among women and girls regarding how they as women might sometimes enable or ignore

abuse, blame victims, judge, condemn, or disempower survivors.

- **Partner for Systemic Change:** The church cannot tackle this issue alone. It must collaborate with relevant NGOs, counsellors, and public authorities to build networks of support and accountability.
 - Invite like-minded professionals from the health, mental health, legal and social work sectors, who share Christian values who can train the church and can enable her to respond appropriately.
 - By working together, the church can contribute to the creation of a sub-culture of non-violence that subverts the patriarchal order and points towards God's vision of **Abundant Peace**⁹—a world where justice flows, relationships are healed, and every person can live free from fear and violence.

Conclusion

We are the church of God, the bride of Christ, and yet we are a bruised and broken bride suffering years of silent abuse and bondage to injustice. 1 Corinthians 12: 26 says, *“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.”* So as long as we have members of the church who suffer abuse, we are part of a wounded and bruised body of Christ.

And yet, we are also the disciples of our master Jesus, who boldly challenged the patriarchal stereotypes of the world, who was gentle with the marginalised, broken and hurting, restoring and strengthening them, but who was tough on unjust and toxic relationship and practices. This is the Master who calls us to cleanse and heal his bride, the church. His call is unmistakable. It is to be co-healers with him, co-creators with him of safe spaces, of just systems, of restorative community, of new ways of relating. We are called to be co-creators of the shalom of God.

9. See Tearfund's Internal Document by Clark Buys, *Roots and Renewal: Theological Foundations for Tearfund's Work* (Teddington: Tearfund, 2021).

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Rizpah: A Model of Resistance

~ Bonnie Miriam Jacob

1. Introduction

Despite the extent of Biblical literacy in our times Rizpah continues to be a character that lies relatively unnoticed and understudied. Tucked away in the book of 2 Samuel is a short account of Rizpah wherein we find that she only acts and does not utter a word. And yet we find King David taking corrective measures in response to Rizpah's silent protest. The narration portrays Rizpah as a resilient woman whose will power, courage and conviction save Israel from famine and drought. Rizpah is Saul's concubine¹ (2 Samuel 3:7) and in other words a wife of secondary status. This paper examines 2 Samuel 21: 1-14 to understand Rizpah and draw lessons for our times.

There was famine in the land for three successive years during the reign of King David. Consequentially David sought God to address the situation. The reason for the famine as the text details is because Saul and his bloodthirsty house killed the Gibeonites. Israelites had sworn to protect the Gibeonites during the time of Joshua (Joshua 9), but Saul had killed them in his zeal for the children of Israel and Judah. The Gibeonites ask for seven men from Saul's descendants to be handed

1. "Rizpah is a secondary or low-status wife, a *pilegesh* (*piylegesh*). The term is usually mistranslated as a "concubine," which denotes a female sexual partner to whom a man has no legal ties. As wives with lower status than primary wives (*isshah/nashiym*) their children were legitimate...." See Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), chap. 7, ePUB. See also Jerald Mall, "2 Samuel," in *South Asia Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Brian Wintle ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 376.

over to them so that they can hang them before the Lord in Gibeah of Saul. David agrees to this request and hands over Armoni and Mephibosheth, the two sons of Rizpah whom she bore to Saul, and the five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul, whom she bore for Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite. David, however, spares Mephibosheth the son of Jonathan the son of Saul. The Gibeonites hang the seven of them on the hill before the Lord. The killings happen in the first days of the beginning of barley harvest.

Rizpah then takes a sackcloth and spreads it for herself on the rock and watches over these dead bodies from the beginning of harvest until the late rains poured on them from heaven. She warded off the birds by day and the beasts by night safeguarding the dead bodies. When David came to know of Rizpah's actions he went and took the bones of Saul, and the bones of Jonathan his son, from the men of Jabesh Gilead who had stolen them from the street of Beth Shan, where the Philistines had hung them up, after the Philistines had struck down Saul in Gilboa. They buried the bones of Saul and Jonathan his son and the seven men who had been hung by the Gibeonites in the country of Benjamin in Zelah, in the tomb of Kish his father, doing everything as commanded by king. And as this story ends it is recorded that, after that God answered the prayer on behalf of the land. There was no rain right after the men were killed but only after the bones of all the men were buried.

2. Interpretating Rizpah's Actions

As one stays long enough in this short section, Rizpah's life actions are deeply instructive. "Readers can enter a story of powerful transformation out of horror, a story of reconciliation and hope. Yet this transformative story is one that can't be seen unless the reader is willing to follow the plot into the depths of rage and despair."² As the story begins, Rizpah does not have a choice on what happens to her

2. Sharon A. Buttry and Daniel L. Buttry, *Daughters of Rizpah: Nonviolence and the Transformation of Trauma* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020), chap. 2, ePUB.

sons. She can only helplessly see them being killed and exposed on a hill. But David as the King and the deciding authority is able to exercise his options when he chooses to spare Jonathan's son Mephibosheth, because of his oath before the Lord between David and Jonathan. Rizpah who is relatively powerless and voiceless from a dethroned royal family must quietly accept what the nation requires from her. "As a political outcast, she could expect no help. As a widow bereft of the protection of husband and sons, and status, she is ostracised. Defiance to David could well mean death."³ Monarchs had absolute power to make decisions without being questioned or opposed. And here David seemingly had the welfare of the nation in view would be a straight reading of this passage. However, there are contending opinions around the sincerity of David's actions from Biblical Scholars.⁴ Additionally, the law in Deuteronomy 24: 16 instructs that, "Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin." So, David's decision and claims of hearing God here come under the scanner. One may also recall that the bodies left exposed does not seem to concur with the requirement in Deuteronomy 21:23 which says, "you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance." This further raises the question as to why their bodies lay exposed. However, our focus here is on Rizpah's solo act. "As an unprotected woman alone with the bodies and single-handedly facing the elements, she is in a dangerous position."⁵ Despite her vulnerable context she is coming against the might of a nation that willfully

3. R. G. Branch, "Rizpah: Activist in Nation-Building. An Analysis of 2 Samuel 21:1-14," *Journal for Semantics* 14. no. 1 (2005): 82.

4. See Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990); Paul Sanders, "God Appeased by Homicide? 2 Samuel 21:1-14 in View of Some Hittite and Assyrian Parallels," in *Violence in the Hebrew Bible: Between Text and Reception*, eds. J. van Ruiten and K. van Bekkum (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2020), 229-268.

5. Branch, "Rizpah: Activist," 82.

chooses its path of action, “The woman David now encounters, albeit again from a distance, is active, assertive, determined, desperate, and morally courageous. Rizpah’s role in the text is secondary compared to that of David, yet her moral persistence makes her witness great.”⁶ Rizpah obviously has nothing more to lose and therefore chooses the path of resistance.

The story has two mothers who have lost their children. Merab seems to accept her fate and does nothing. She also does not have a choice when her five sons are led away to death, nor does she think anything can be done after their death. But Rizpah does not let the death of her sons and their exposure on a hill be the end of their story. “Incidentally, according to many ethnographic and anthropological studies, ritual contexts allow women to enter the domain of male power, previously inaccessible to them, and turn these solemn occasions into public forums for pressing issues.”⁷ Rizpah is a picture of defiance and perseverance. Her helplessness does not limit her or determine the course of her action but her response to the killings “signals both the social significance and communicative efficacy of Rizpah’s watch....”⁸ She is steadfast in her determination and is ready for a prolonged watch. Her watch over the bodies was not a short period by any standards. The period is calculated to about six months because it stretched between the barley harvest and the autumn rains.⁹ “The fact that only bones are left behind and without the intervention of predators suggests a significant length of time for Rizpah’s vigil.”¹⁰ The magnitude of her actions is seen in that she “refuses to let the

6. Branch, “Rizpah: Activist,” 89.

7. Ekaterina E. Kozlova, *Maternal Grief in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), chap. 3, ePUB.

8. Kozlova, *Maternal Grief* chap. 3.

9. Mall, “2 Samuel,” 376.

10. Heather A. McKay, “Making a Difference, Then and Now: The Very Different Lives and Afterlives of Dinah and Rizpah,” in *Making a Difference: Essays on the Bible and Judaism in Honor of Tamara Cohn Eskenazi*, ed. David J.A. Clines, Kent Harold Richards, and Jacob L. Wright (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 238.

murder of her children be forgotten. She is the sole advocate in this lonely vigil, the only one who will not give in to fear.”¹¹ Rizpah powerfully challenges the king by not caring about her life or comfort. She perseveres and will stay as long as it takes for her concern to be addressed, and justice is served. “Rizpah does not speak, weep, wail, upbraid people or the deity. She sends no messengers, courts no favours from David or anyone else. She would have been too lowly, or to be more precise, too socially distanced, a person to address David directly or to confront him in any way; being a woman and mere secondary wife of Saul, recently David’s enemy, would preclude her petitioning him. So while Rizpah was almost, but not quite, ‘offstage’ with respect to David’s court circles, she was ‘centre stage’ on that hillside.”¹² She models resistance in an utterly hopeless situation.

Though her sons cannot be brought back to life, she can definitely ensure their honour and dignity after death. They were supposedly sacrificed to save the whole land from famine, and they definitely deserved better in their death at least. Rizpah was not going to let it pass. Whether she thought the nation will pause to think of it or not she had to do her part. For now, she must guard her dead and give them dignity when the kingdom could not care to do that. “Rizpah’s respectfully defiant yet assertive action of protecting the bodies ultimately rivets a nation. She may well be the supreme expression of maternal loyalty in the biblical text.”¹³ There was going to be no closure for her until the dead bodies of her sons and others received their due. “She is engaged in an act of civil disobedience, standing between the king and the full execution of his sentence. Part of the humiliation of this death was the desecration of the bodies by letting the birds and dogs eat them like carrion.”¹⁴ Rizpah’s act of resistance is unmindful of what the future holds, or the results might be.

As Rizpah mourns her dead in her own way she is also making space

11. Buttry and Buttry, *Daughters of Rizpah*, chap. 5.

12. McKay, “Making a Difference,” 238.

13. Branch, “Rizpah: Activist,” 91.

14. Buttry and Buttry, *Daughters of Rizpah*, chap. 5.

for those responsible to be cognisant of their actions and make restitution even if she has to take on the mighty king. “Rizpah’s action catches the nation’s imagination. David must respond. Her courage causes respect. The nation needs an outlet of expression: national mourning.”¹⁵ David needs Rizpah to remind him of his duty which is to give an honourable burial to the dead of the preceding royal house. This is a question on the nation’s collective consciousness, and the impact was not just a response to the immediate incident but also recollection and restitution of what had been left undone in the past. “Rizpah’s display of her grief is thus helping David to also deal with the community’s failure to adequately mourn the tragedies of the past.”¹⁶ “Rizpah’s deed exhibits an ethical stance that manages to encompass both personal concerns and national interests, a stance strikingly missing from the accounts of David’s mourning. Fusing critical and ethical perspectives, personal and communal interests, Rizpah’s sorrowing watch will be shown to expose David’s dubious ethics in both the royal funerary protocol and covenantal agreements.”¹⁷ In this narration of resistance is a God who orchestrates situations that come as a challenge to authoritarian leadership. God cannot be coopted in schemes that supposedly claim God’s direction. “Her vigil mitigates the dishonourable fate of the Saulide house and counteracts the punitive effect it had on the nation.”¹⁸ The turn in events has to be credited to Rizpah. “Rizpah, by her own public mourning, seems to galvanise a nation to do its own public mourning for its fallen first king. Her action seems to turn the hand of the Lord back from the twin curses of famine and drought.”¹⁹ God responds to the prayer for the land only after the dead are honoured and without Rizpah’s undaunted efforts this would not have happened. David may have

15. Branch, “Rizpah: Activist,” 92.

16. L. Juliana Claassens, “Violence, Mourning, Politics: Rizpah’s Lament in Conversation with Judith Butler,” in *Restorative Readings: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Human Dignity*, eds. Bruce C. Birch, L. Juliana Claassens (United Kingdom: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 31.

17. Kozlova, *Maternal Grief*, chap. 3.

18. Kozlova, *Maternal Grief*, chap. 3.

19. Branch, “Rizpah: Activist,” 75.

claimed God's approval for his actions but God's response does not seem to attest this. God acts only when the silent cries of the vulnerable are assuaged. David's life trajectory reveals a willingness to take the path of restitution and penitent action when alerted of wrong. But what emerges from this narrative and several others instances in the Scripture is God's unchanging nature and the consistency of God's character even when His anointed falters. God's unshakeable commitment towards justice and his disposition to the vulnerable and the disadvantaged transcends any favouritism.

Rizpah maybe a marginal character in the history of the kings of Israel and Judah and therefore might have missed the focus that she would have otherwise received. Flavius Josephus, a Roman-Jewish historian from the first century, in his book, *Jewish Antiquities* entirely omits any reference to Rizpah as he interprets 2 Samuel 21. "In his retelling of the story, Josephus omits all the references to Rizpah and describes David's role as entirely positive... Josephus does not specify the character of this chastisement, but he recounts that it immediately induced God to restore fertility to Israel's territory."²⁰ And yet the biblical account is different. While David's actions are under scrutiny as this story begins, what is appreciable is David's willingness to make restitution when alerted which has been the case even in other instances. He corrects the wrong and God immediately favours the nation with rain. The Scripture does not shy away from presenting the facts as they are and yet it is our selective reading and interpretation that should come under the scanner. How does an honest reading and interpretation of the Scripture omit the lot of the helpless? To promote a certain narrative it is always convenient to skip crucial details which one can think as insignificant or negligible in the story. In fact, "there is no better measure of the truthfulness of the Bible or the measure of responsible, faithful ethics than the attentiveness to the vulnerable" according to Walter Bruggemann.²¹ The reading of

20. Sanders, "God Appeased by Homicide?" 235.

21. Bruce C. Birch and L. Juliana Claassens, *Restorative Readings: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Human Dignity* (United Kingdom: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), xiv.

the Scripture sometimes marginalises a whole lot of characters, their actions their pain their concerns and their achievements. While some gain a dominant position and shape our perspectives and insights others remain on the margins. Every text can be read from multiple angles. Where do we position ourselves when we read this chapter? Is the severity of one reality minimalised over other realities? In the reading of this text the character of Rizpah is often overlooked and David emerges as the hero of this passage. But we need to read the text in solidarity with Rizpah.

In the larger scheme of things, stories like Rizpah's are overlooked. Their realities lie unexamined, unheard, ignored and buried under other priorities every narrative tries to establish. "But as this trickster tale illustrates, resistance stories like these are frequently lost on us because they have often been inserted into a larger literary context which is so completely concerned with male matters that we easily miss the female resistance part."²² In Rizpah we celebrate a strong woman who refused to let a nation overlook her grief or dehumanise her sons. As we step intently into her world, Rizpah's anguish, courage and tenacity are palpable. By her persistence Rizpah challenges the actions everyone takes for granted and thus brings a closure to the painful death of her sons. "In terms of the world, she is powerless. However, observing Rizpah, the secret of power from the margins is affirmed. Her power is in her bold and public cries of grief. Her power matches the depths of pain she has experienced. Where does hope come from in hopeless situations? The power of hope sings out through Rizpah's commands to the birds and dogs to leave her children alone. She may not be able to control the action of a king, but she can shout out from the power of her impassioned grief to the destructive natural forces that threaten the bodies of her sons."²³ Rizpah has no voice in the text. But her act of resistance shouted out loud and it had to be responded to. "She did not merely elicit recognition of her mourning role from David; she prompted the king to lay to rest in the

22. Gerald West, "Reading on the Boundaries: Reading 2 Samuel 21:1-14 With Rizpah," *Scriptura* 63 (1997): 535.

23. Buttry and Buttry, *Daughters of Rizpah*, Introduction.

time-honoured way his erstwhile monarch and mentor, Saul, and his friend Jonathan, on their patrimonial holdings. Through her silent ‘protest,’ particularly by her solidarity with the dead men, she shamed David into appropriate and honourable action.”²⁴ Why are some characters ignored in the Scripture, particularly women? Probably they force us to face uncomfortable truths, and it may not suit the narrative we are trying to promote. Many of their painful stories are ignored and hardly anyone in an average congregation venture to explore their realities and their instruction for our times. Most of our readings are easy and comfortable avoiding the painful and disturbing realities.

3. Rizpah for our times - Addressing Injustices

While addressing gender concerns in our times and pushing the boundaries towards justice and equality, the reality remains that we are confronting entrenched and manipulative patriarchal power structures. Majority of the women across the world are limited in multiple ways. Many of them can identify with Rizpah and her predicament. Her silent resistance is a powerful model for these women who are voiceless, powerless and deprived of their legitimate rights. “Rizpah is an ultimate marginalised person with no power by any of the measurements of society. Yet she acts in a way that transforms everything.”²⁵ Rizpah’s story is a beacon of light that can give strength to our current day women to resist against injustice. And to be able to persist as long as it takes to usher in change. Social change takes time and it can cost you a lot and it probably may not even happen in your lifetime. You may have just initiated it even if you had toiled for long. “Ultimately the restorative potential of Rizpah’s lament is situated in its ability to inspire readers centuries later to continue working for a less violent and more humane world.”²⁶

Why do stories like Rizpah’s not gain prominence? Why are its lessons

24. McKay, “Making a Difference,” 239.

25. Buttry and Buttry, *Daughters of Rizpah*, chap. 5.

26. Claassens, “Violence, Mourning,” 35.

not taught and promoted? Why is her ability to challenge the powerful not instructive to our modern-day struggles? While our issues with gender inequalities and violence may differ greatly from Rizpah's cause, it is the strength of her resistance, that spurs our own struggles and beckons us to constantly review situations and explore possible actions. Resistance can take on different forms and can be for various issues and women have been resisting on several counts and such narration can validate our expressions to challenge gender injustice. On an everyday basis there are simple expressions of resistance against inequalities and expectations to confine to gender stereotypes. As we promote gender consciousness, stories of resistance should enable women to break free from an imagination that actually restrict and inhibit them. As we are well aware, most of these limitations are justified by drawing from the Scripture. Therefore, it is important that we rediscover from the Scripture characters that can reinforce our resolve to challenge and resist.

Several lessons from Rizpah's model of resistance can sustain our efforts today.

- For many a cause you could be the only one standing and standing long enough while others may not care or would not have counted this as a significant issue.
- In resisting violence and injustice, we can look at ways to protest that creates awareness and draws public attention to our cause when it is being thought as a non-issue.
- Resistance may not exactly help you recover what you may have lost but it opens avenues for an engagement that strictures society for its apathy leading to alertness and a fresh new response.
- The message of resistance is never limited but calls out to multiple stakeholders, be it the church, society or the state to respond.
- Solo acts of resistance may be ignored or trivialised, and you may not receive the needed support but it can definitely yield results in its due time and usher in change.
- Resistance demands perseverance and seeks to keep alive the short-

lived public memory of pain and violence. In our modern times, as sound bites roll, memory fades and the cause is forgotten.

- It disallows the easy erasing of the guilt from a society that has looked away.
- Resistance for justice is a cause that God identifies with knowing fully well its pain and trauma. And God's stamp of approval is of greater worth than any other validation.

Several atrocities committed against women and girls are borne silently across the world. Violence includes sexual abuse, domestic violence, forced marriages and dowry, honour crimes, son preference and discrimination against widows, to name a few. The society is collectively responsible for the violence women and girls experience. Church is complicit in this and yet their silent cry goes up to the God of heaven. While times may have changed in terms of gender rights and space to highlight issues, it is also a fact that for many who are experiencing sexual and gender-based violence keeping silent may be the only option that is viable. It is the silence of those who suffer and those around them that cause such incidents to continue unabated. The grip of shame culture around sexual abuse intensifies this silence. Or the fear of the powerful oppressors intimidates them to silence. Breaking out of this bondage of silence is important and we need to help them speak up even when the situation seems impossible and justice remains elusive.

Though Rizpah's resistance is marked by silence, often the very act of speaking up is a form of resistance to entrenched powers and structures that rather prefer you or expect you to stay quiet. Alerting the leaders and demanding a response from them or registering a police complaint and insisting on concrete action by persisting are all acts of resistance. It threatens their position and questions the status quo of the oppressors. It has often been the experience that when women go to register complaints they are looked at with suspicion and there is a refusal to register a case. It is a tough journey and places from where they are meant to receive sympathy and cooperation are the least helpful places. The mindset of those who are meant to protect the people or enforce the law are mostly no different from

that of the oppressors. Systems and practices can be challenged by our simple acts of resistance, particularly when public imagination is alerted for the cause.

In Rizpah's model of resistance lies also the call for Christians and the Church to identify and stand with those who are resisting. Standing with them would mean journeying with them every step of the way. Often issues are not addressed easily or quickly and it may take a very long time. Therefore, we need to be prepared to persist and support them in the long process. To be in solidarity with those who are resisting is also a call to come out of our comfort zones and lend them our support. Most Christians and churches are often the last ones to come out to support causes, or worse still glorify the cause long after the demands are met and the world applauds the resistance. How do we justify our position, then? In such times, we have actually failed the vulnerable and the voiceless. Our call is to "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."²⁷

There are some questions we need to consider in resisting violence. Do we give up when we meet a dead end? Would there be hope even in a hopeless situation? Even for society to acknowledge its lack of responsibility and propriety would be sufficient in the path towards justice. When power justifies actions and responses, will you still take on powers because it does not make sense to you and you cannot accept it as an end. When authority blinds them to the realities of the insignificant and powerless whether within the church or outside, Rizpah's life and action direct the path. If the Church and Christians can take note of oppression within and commit to ushering change, we can model hope to the world around.

A rereading of the Scripture and a commitment to be shaped by an honest exploration of how it instructs us can be our path to change as well. When we examine our own theology of gender, it tends to promote inequality rather than equality. So, at the heart of our complacency in the problems of gender-based violence that plague

27. Proverbs 31: 8,9.

our world is our own biased and faulty understanding of the Scripture. This is evident in the resistance to gender equality or measured provisions and spaces for women to function seemingly indicative of equality but actually is not. These are not simple matters confined to just leadership or positions but have multiple and severe repercussions. Its cascading effects begin with superiority finally ending in cycles of violence against women and girls. Our faulty theological positions in a way guard perpetrators who operate within Christian circles and grant them a kind of impunity. Creating awareness and persisting in changing mindset from right within our fold is important though results may not come easy.

Rizpah is a model for the power of silent protest and of being able to do what is within her capacity to state her concerns and usher in change. She reminds us that “there are resources within biblical studies (and in other resisting communities) which enable us to attempt to track and trace the boundaries of the text in search of her tale of terror and resistance.”²⁸ Rizpah’s experience strengthens our faith in God who is favourably disposed to the cries of the vulnerable. Reading the text differently can empower the women to take charge of their lives, act and demand response from male-led structures that are unmindful of the pain and harm they are causing while they guard male bastions of power under the garb of the Scripture. David’s position in this narrative is questionable while God approves Rizpah for her actions. She continues to shine a glimmer of hope for the powerless from the pages of the Scripture. God looks with favour as modern day Rizpahs take their stand, fearlessly and in faith. They need to be spurred by the reality of the consistency of God’s character as against inconsistency of those in power and authority. Change is possible, and protesting for recognition of wrongs, pushes leaders to act morally and ethically whether within the church or in our societies is something that is validated by God.

28. West, “Reading on the Boundaries,” 535.

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In *Unsilenced Faith*, theologians from across Asia present a compelling collection of essays confronting the twin tragedies of gender violence and inequality. For too long, patriarchal cultures and religious silence have kept abused and marginalised women hidden in the shadows, while misinterpretations of Scripture have often been used to limit women and justify discrimination.

The authors relatably demonstrate that true biblical equality is God's design, highlighting the agency of women as leaders and equals. They offer a contextual-theological counter-narrative aiming to dismantle this destructive culture of silence, on two crucial levels:

- **Empowering women** to step into their potential and experience freedom.
- **Challenging the church** to move past its complicit silence on gender-based violence, encouraging self-reflection to address these critical issues within.

Ultimately, *Unsilenced Faith* is a call to action. It equips believers and emerging leaders reclaim their prophetic voice, transforming the church into a genuine sanctuary of biblical equality, sacred justice, and healing.

A vast uproar—in vivid detail—exposing the unspeakable abuse of women by Christian men. Thankfully, authors include supremely powerful, healing voices from Scripture. For the sake of God's kingdom, read this book, address its contents at all levels especially in contemplating marriage! Ensuring justice for Christian women, families, and churches requires a bold engagement with UNSILENCED FAITH!

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CB Samuel

Theological Advisor, EFICOR

