

Gender justice and injustice

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Gertrude's husband was ailing for about a month before he went to see the doctor. She was concerned about his illness and wanted to know what the doctor said to him. He refused to tell her. She asked around, and tried to get information from his family. Eventually she learned that he had Aids and would die.

Gertrude knew about Aids and how it was transmitted. She was not in a position to refuse her husband sex because it was her duty as his wife. She was scared because she knew that if she had sex with him she also would get Aids and die.

She went to see the pastor's wife to ask her advice. The pastor's wife spoke to the pastor, but he said that Gertrude couldn't disobey her husband. He reminded her about the teaching of the Bible "that the woman must submit to her husband".

Gertrude's life is in her husband's hands. What can she do?

Gender justice – a new concept

Gender justice advances the discussion on how women are seen, how their role in church and society is understood and how to confront injustices against women. It examines power relations between women and men as the basis of gender injustice.

The difference between sex and gender is still a new concept for many Christians and churches. While sex roles are biologically determined, gender roles are socially, historically and culturally constructed. The construction of gender roles determines a person's quality of life, the space she/he occupies in the home, church and society.

Gender roles are not a fact of nature. They can be changed, and often need to be where they are unjust.

The creation story affirms that women and men alike are created in God's image (Gen 1.27). However, we live in broken relationships where women are undervalued and treated as inferior to men. Gender injustice is, like racism, a structural sin that must be acknowledged and eliminated.

The shift from "women" to "gender" signals that the struggle for justice in male-female relationships cannot remain a women's struggle.

Gender justice speaks to the need for men to work in partnership with women in this struggle. Gender justice means recognizing that women and men are created by God, redeemed by Christ, and gifted by the Spirit without distinction or partiality.

Churches have often been silent about gender injustice and women's vulnerability, and have not seriously considered the consequences of this silence. When women are disempowered, the whole society suffers.

Gender and economic justice

Poverty marginalizes women, denying them the right to a decent life. Many factors make women vulnerable to poverty: low levels of education and marketable skills, childcare responsibilities (sometimes at an early age), labour market inequities and the structure of the labour market, migration, marriage breakdown, and the growing number of woman-headed households. Women bear the brunt of the global drive to privatize public goods and services, which places additional responsibilities on them especially in health and education. The lower economic valuation placed on women shows itself dramatically in the practice of female foeticide.¹ About 70% of the world's 1.3 billion absolute poor are women.²

Gender and HIV/Aids

Women are at more risk of contracting HIV/Aids because they have less control over when, where, whether and how sexual relations take place. Economic, social and cultural barriers prevent them from making decisions about their lives because they are mostly dependent on their husbands, partners and families. Violence and abuse against women are acceptable means through which women are controlled and forced to submit to their partners' wishes.

Cultural beliefs and expectations about what it means to be a man often prescribe an oppressive role for men and deprive them of many of God's gifts, such as caring and nurturing. Such pressures prevent men from seeing the value of giving up abusive power over their partners and families and sharing in an equal partnership. Social expectations of what it means to be a "man" also encourage irresponsible sexual behaviour putting men, their partners and families at risk.

"Gender inequality is a key variable in the incidence of HIV/Aids. As gender disparities increase, the epidemic is affecting more and more women who bear the negative consequences of the gender imbalances. And as the epidemic is increasing rapidly, it is also drawing in women who have had only one sex partner. A decade ago women seemed to be on the periphery of the epidemic. Today they are at the centre of concern."³

Gender and violence

Violence against women is based on the belief that gender identity is defined by power relations in which women are inferior to men. This belief translates into social acceptance that certain challenges to male authority must receive an aggressive response. Men believe that they must be able to control the women in their lives as a sign of self-esteem and "maleness". There is a belief within many cultures that "wives must be ruled" and punished for disobedience or for just talking back. One of the most commonly heard excuses for abuse is that it is the woman's fault: "she made me do it; she was looking for it; if only she

hadn't gone there, done that, said that, worn those clothes..." It is often accepted that the woman is the property of the man and what he does with his property is his own business. These perceptions are frequently condoned by the major world religions. In Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam, religious texts are often interpreted to justify male supremacy and the submission of women.

Hundreds of thousands of women have been subjected to rape, humiliation and torture in times of war or conflict. Resistance is often met with additional brutality. Women have even been sliced into pieces in front of family members. Rape is a routine weapon of war, but despite its prevalence, soldiers continue unpunished.

In Gujarat, India, during the anti-Muslim pogrom in 2002, many women were battered, raped, burnt and killed. A pregnant woman's abdomen was ripped open and her unborn child torn out, burnt and placed on her stomach. Survivors told how women arrived stark naked at a relief camp for victims. The women could barely walk. One volunteer tells how she had to remove cricket bats from their vaginas, inserted by their rapists as a matter of amusement or sport. When the bats were removed, it was found that their insides were torn.

Churches have not been very prominent in speaking out against violence against women and this struggle still remains primarily a women's struggle.

What can our churches contribute to gender justice?

Women's experiences of Jesus in the gospels are ground-breaking. Jesus draws near to them, befriends them and shares their lives, offering them warmth, tenderness, compassion and understanding, and restoring them to dignity as children of God. The women who go to pay their last respects to Jesus after his crucifixion are the first to receive the good news of his victory over death.

The Bible calls us to see both women and men as full persons and to go beyond traditional stereotypes for God. "In the baptismal formula preserved in Gal 3.28, we see that all the traditional human barriers fall in the community of those baptized into Jesus Christ, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' Women who see this vision of God's reign, the new creation, are drawn by God's future, not confined by a patriarchal past."⁴

Feminist theologians have made a significant contribution to theology by introducing new approaches to biblical interpretation. They have looked to the Bible for liberation perspectives not only for women, but also for all others who are marginalized, for example, because of race, ethnicity, class, caste or age. They have also shed new light on the place of women in the Bible and in church history. Texts about men and women show the intersection of the stories of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal cultures.

Feminist theologians have been concerned about the traditional and at times pejorative perception of women in Christianity. There has been a tendency to

link women with sin and men with spiritual matters. In some cases women have been associated with earthly desires which distract them away from spiritual matters. This has led to unequal treatment, denying women the same opportunities as men.

The re-examination of gender roles within the church has opened up discussion on the structure of the church and the value placed on different ministries and forms of service.

Liberation theology has challenged the church on its relevance to the poor. "The search for a Christian church which is really representative of the poor and shares in their struggles and expectations, their sorrows and hopes, must inevitably include the issue of church order and church structures. The poor feel that church structures are foreign to them."⁵

Similarly, it is argued, women are not properly reflected in the structures of the church. Leadership in all our churches is still primarily the prerogative of men.⁶ In many churches women are still excluded from the ministry of word and sacrament and from other ministries such as elders.⁷ Their role in our congregations is often perceived as an extension of their home life: cleaning and decorating church buildings, teaching Sunday school, preparing and serving meals and snacks, fundraising and charitable work.

Throughout history, women have enriched the church. However, our churches have often failed to embrace the gift of community that is ours in Christ. They have used the institutional power to control worship, the interpretation of scripture and access to leadership roles that subordinate women. Today women still struggle to bring fresh impetus and insight to enrich our churches and to ensure greater participation in church life, especially in decision-making.

If our churches need to confess and repent of their role in sustaining patriarchal structures that suppress women and keep them from fully sharing their God-given gifts, they need also to examine their relationships with society. How can our churches offer life in fullness if they are blind to gender injustices within the communities they serve? Our churches must demonstrate that the Spirit of God is alive and dynamic, sustaining those who struggle for justice and enabling transformation to occur.

Life in fullness for all!

To include women in this "all" is to affirm the vision of restoring and enriching life by breaking down the walls that separate women from men and subordinate one to the other. It is to affirm the church as the people of God, women and men in partnership, called to work together for dignity and genuine community based on love, understanding and right relationships.

Questions

1. How much importance do *a)* your congregation and *b)* your church attach to partnership of women and men?
2. How do *a)* your congregation and *b)* your church address false cultural values and norms in your society that hinder the growth and wellbeing of women and girls?
3. In what ways do the structures and power relations in your congregation or church need to change if women and men are to be equally valued in the people of God?
4. In what ways do the self-understanding and mission of your church need to change if women and men are to be equally valued in your society?
5. What success stories can you tell of breaking the chains of gender injustice and advancing partnership of women and men in your church or society? What more needs to be done?

Notes

1. The killing of girl children before birth.
2. For more on these points, see, for example, Women's Environment and Development Organization, *Economic and Social Justice*, 2001.
3. Unifem, *Gender, HIV and Human Rights*. See also UN Development Fund for Women, *HIV and Human Rights: A Training Manual*, 2000.
4. Jane Dempsey Douglass, "On biblical authority", in *Created in God's Image: From hierarchy to partnership*, ed Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth (Geneva: WARC, 2003).
5. Julio de Santa Ana, *Towards a Church of the Poor* (Geneva: WCC, 1979).
6. A general council in Accra composed exclusively of the moderators or general secretaries of our churches would be largely a male affair.
7. Structured forms of ministry in Alliance churches differ widely from one church to another.