

# Of the Same Flesh: exploring a theology of gender

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**Mina Devi leads the Information Team in her local area of east India. She works with other women and men to protect their community from disaster risks.**

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Poverty is an outrage against humanity. It robs people of dignity, freedom and hope, of power over their own lives.

Christian Aid has a vision – an end to poverty – and we believe that vision can become a reality. We urge you to join us.

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**actalliance**

Cover: Cyclone Aila destroyed livelihoods in Bangladesh. But Rashida Khatun has received training from our partner on how to cultivate shrimp, so she can support her family again.

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## Executive summary

'Poverty has a woman's face'.<sup>1</sup> In response to this reality, Christian Aid is working for gender justice. The purpose of this report is to provide a theological underpinning for that work, by exploring a theology of gender. Christians believe that our being made 'male and female' is a gift of God, and should be experienced as joy for humankind. When gender becomes a weapon of oppression then something is badly wrong. Theology is a key sphere where gender is explored and the voices of church leaders across the world are powerful in shaping social norms and practices.

The method followed in this report begins with Christian Aid's particular experience of working to overcome poverty. Our testimony is rooted in listening to this experience and reflecting upon it, while continually working to understand it and respond to it. We listen to our partners who are transforming the way in which gender is lived in their communities, and especially to those who are engaging in theology and working with church leaders and communities to do this. This experience is then brought into conversation with the witness of the Scriptures, particularly attending to scriptural texts that encourage a way of living out gender that is counter-cultural and transformative. This in turn leads into a discussion of Christian tradition, particularly where faith has sought and is seeking to reimagine gender as shaped by justice, mutuality and unity. There is a further section considering what we can learn from the thinking of the wider world and how this has been shaped by, as well as shaped, the astonishingly counter-cultural witness of the Christian faith.

The paper returns to a number of themes in the context of different conversations. Recurring topics include the radical nature of the scriptural witness on gender, the insight that human beings may be different yet also 'of the same flesh', and the way in which experience of gender may be shaped by oppression or by justice.



Scenes from the old city in East Jerusalem, when men and women from all three Abrahamic faiths come to worship.

The paper concludes that there is a profound source of hope in Christian theology for gender to be lived with justice and joy. Such a hope has power to change human lives when it is given voice and when it leads to action.

### Acknowledgements:

This report has been written in close and sustained conversation with many of Christian Aid's staff, supporters and partners. It has been through many drafts and owes much to rich conversation with theologians from around the world. Christian Aid's work is always done in partnership and this paper is the work of many hands. I hope that it authentically reflects the passion, commitment and urgency of those conversations and encounters. My aim is that this will truly be the beginning of a theology of gender for all those working and hoping for an end to poverty.

*Susan Durber, Theology Advisor, Christian Aid*

Christian Aid will also publish a small booklet on theology for gender justice, drawing on this document, as a resource for group discussion in local churches.



## Introduction

Christian Aid believes that gender justice means, in part, 'just power relations between women and men in which both are valued equally in society and empowered to pursue their human rights and fundamental freedoms'.<sup>2</sup>

This affirmation, full of hope, is deeply rooted in the faith that inspires and underpins our work. This paper seeks to make explicit the theological framework that supports our hope for gender justice.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the confidence that all human beings are loved by God and the imperative that we should love our neighbours, all our neighbours, with a joyful and generous heart. There is also the belief and trust that God made us 'male and female' and that this is a gift of God's good creation. We know that it is good for human flourishing that there is difference and diversity in the human community, and that life is good and holy when difference can be celebrated and lived bravely.

It is a scandal then that our being gendered is so often experienced not as joy, but as a place of oppression. When it becomes a source of oppression and fear, this is a distortion of God's intention for creation. From machismo cultures that skew masculinity, to the striking evidence of the poverty and exclusion of women, there is a sense that the world is not as it should be in relation to gender. This is the common tragedy of humankind, but it is also the particular pain of the most poor and vulnerable.

A theology of gender needs to find the wisdom to support a way of understanding and living our being male and female that can celebrate the difference, that inspires justice and joy, and resists the distortion of gender difference into a means of oppression. Difference should be a source of life for us all, a source of maturity and humility. It should be a place to find the unity within humankind that can overcome separation and find joy in the 'other'.

To reflect before God on gender then is to think about what it means that we are male and female. It is to ask what it would mean to experience our being gendered as gift rather than danger, a source of life and hope rather than oppression or fear, as something to be received gratefully from God, rather than experienced as a source of strife. It is to ask what it would mean for this to be a reality for *all* people. From there, it is to ask how our practice should change, in the light of what experience, reflection and faith reveal.

Christian Aid's partners in the global South speak with a particularly clear voice about the importance of working for gender justice. Those voices are echoed back by voices in the global North who see that, in every place and community, gender justice is still far away. This is an issue for all of us, wherever we are in the world.

Of course, gender is not one thing, experienced everywhere in the same way. A white woman living in Europe will not have the same experience or insight as a black woman living in a Latin American favela. Those who suffer most from oppression because of their gender are often also oppressed because of their ethnicity or socio-economic location.<sup>3</sup> We cannot pretend that theological thinking on gender will start in the same place, for all women or for all men. Privilege, for example, when we have it, will always distort our thinking and require the seeking, with humility, of the wisdom of others. Gender intersects with many other aspects of identity through which we experience our lives.<sup>4</sup> Gender itself is controversial almost everywhere and there might be good reasons for refusing to think theologically about gender without reflecting on other inequalities too.



Truphena Ireri,  
a farmer supported  
by one of our partners,  
worshipping with  
her church in Kenya.

## Gender and poverty

The experiences of Christian Aid demonstrate that, despite the challenges, it is vital to pause to think theologically about gender, and to do that as a global community in partnership. Listening to the experiences of the people around us in the world, we have to ask, 'Why is it that gender is one of the most powerful determinants of poverty?' This is the starting point for our theology: our particular experience of working to overcome poverty.<sup>5</sup> However complex the causes of poverty, it is very plain that gender is a core factor and that this needs explaining and changing. When a source of joy has become instead a source of poverty and exclusion, we need to understand how this has happened and to change it.

The figures are simple, and shocking. Women comprise half of the world's population and yet the majority of those living in absolute poverty today. In South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, more than 80% of women work in vulnerable employment. Globally, time spent on unpaid care work by women can be more than 10 times that of men. Women are only just under 22% of the world's parliamentarians, though they as much as men are subject to the decisions that parliaments make. 35% of women from around the world experience sexual violence or violence perpetrated by a partner.<sup>6</sup> At every level, from the household to the global stage, in politics and in personal life, in economics and in health, in culture and in decision making, people of one gender are poorer, disadvantaged and less powerful than another. Christian Aid's strategy document, *Partnership for Change*, tells us that,

**'Women and girls are consistently discriminated against and exploited in economic activity at every level, from local to global.'**<sup>7</sup>

Theological reflection often begins with a cry of grief as an honest response to pain, and it is here that a theology of gender begins. Faith will always go on to reach for transformation and hope, but it starts with the reality of human experience. As people witness or experience the traumas and outrages of gender inequality, they bear witness to the world about the need for change. Injustice manifests itself in gender-based violence, female genital cutting, the vulnerability of women in the face of disasters and emergencies as well as in the birthing of children, the powerlessness of women to protect themselves against sickness, infection, injury and economic poverty and the silence of women as they are under-represented in politics and decision making.

As we face those realities, we know that nothing less than a transformation is needed and we call on the Church around the globe to search for wisdom about gender. We call out for a newly imagined masculinity as much as for the liberation of women, for a radical renewal of what it means to be male and female in our world today. We strive for a thoughtful and prayerful theological wisdom about being men and women together in community, family and nation, and for changes to the ways in which all of us act and practice our lives together.

## Gender and faith

Exploring the theology of gender is also important because theologians and church leaders have key voices in shaping the way that gender is understood, experienced and lived out in communities across the world. The Bible says that God made humankind in God's image, male and female,<sup>8</sup> and Christians affirm the equality of men and women in God's sight. This means that every community or culture shaped by Christian theology, with an understanding of the unique and inestimable dignity of each human being, should be one in which women and men live alongside one another in peaceful and just relationship.<sup>9</sup>

But many will testify to the ways in which Christian faith is sometimes used not to challenge or to address injustice, but rather to justify and even to support it. If inequality in all its forms is actually the main blockage to eliminating poverty, this is one way in which inequality turns out to be embedded deeply in many cultures and places, and sometimes even with the blessing of the faith community. In Malawi the Anglican Church joined a campaign to end gender based violence with 16 days of activism, but even as it did so its leaders mourned the church's silence on issues associated with gender.<sup>10</sup> Alice P. Tuyizere, in her work on gender and development, reflects with sadness that,

**'Most religious teachings have encouraged maintenance of traditional male and female roles.'**<sup>11</sup>

When the Church has spoken out, it has not always been to end the suffering of women; indeed sometimes to reinforce it, by urging women to endure how things are, while their insight, gifts and strengths are ignored. Even the marking of the difference between male and female has at times become a way of making acceptable and normal a way in which one gender has power over the other. Sometimes the relationships between men and women are being formed and maintained, not by *gospel* values, but by the values of cultures and traditions that should be challenged by the gospel. It is the tragedy of the Church that we have sometimes become captive to a reality in which gender is a place of oppression rather than a source of joy and unity. This is why theological reflection on gender is a pressing priority.

We believe that the Christian faith holds at its heart a vision for righteous and joyful justice among humankind, one in which men and women may flourish and live in peace with one another. A theology of gender, facing honestly the realities and horrors of injustice in our world today, needs to find again the heart of our faith in God, who beckons us to rediscover the truly human identity for which we were created.

## Method and framework

This section sets out the way in which a theology of gender will be explored, framing a theological underpinning for Christian Aid's work towards gender justice.

In seeking wisdom for action, Christians have traditionally turned to the leading of the Holy Spirit sought through prayer, to the Scriptures, to the traditions of the church, and to their own experiences in the world. At their best Christians listen to each other, seeking a depth of wisdom on even the most difficult questions. Some Christians will hold one source of insight to be more important than others, and some will work hard at holding all of them together, so that each can test, interpret and support the others.

In the same spirit, this paper draws on a number of sources for reflection and seeks to bring them into fruitful conversation with one another. These sources are Christian Aid's particular experience of working to overcome poverty, the Scriptures which provide the foundation of Christian faith, the traditions of the Church over generations and the thoughtful reflection of the world around us. Each of these sources, and the ways we might best use them, is given brief introduction in this methodology.

### Christian Aid's particular experience

A key source of theological reflection for Christian Aid must be the experience of our work in many different contexts around the world, and with many partners and churches. The lived out experience and testimony of those who tell of their suffering, of their frustration, of their powerlessness, as well as their hope, has what might be called a 'strong objectivity'.<sup>12</sup> These voices are not only testimonies to suffering but also witnesses to truth and knowledge. Theology has to be responsive to these cries.

Those who are currently finding ways to address poverty that is grounded in gender injustice are also an important well of wisdom; they open up a variety of possibilities for bringing about change. For Christian Aid it is this experience of responding to suffering, and engaging in advocacy and campaigning with our partners that gives us a voice with which to speak. We know that we do not yet have enough answers or enough evidence about how things can change, but we are learning from this experience, and we cannot keep silent.

We have learned, for example, that it is not only systems and structures, but also relationships and attitudes that need to change. We can only really set men and women free from poverty by changing and reshaping the social norms and discourses that have brought us to the present reality. So pushing for changed legislation, expanding access to education and health services, tackling impunity from violence and increasing participation in governance are vital things to do. But our partners also tell us that without changes within the household and the family, and without looking closely at the language of faith, which often shapes cultural and family values, we will not make a difference to those who are most affected by poverty.

The voices of those who are oppressed, and who are activists for change, are those that need to shape and form our theology. It is these voices that give Christian Aid a particular testimony and authority to speak.



## The Scriptures

Christians are at one in turning to the Bible for inspiration and wisdom. There are, and have always been, important debates about how the Scriptures should properly be read, but Christians are united in believing that our theology should be grounded in Scripture.

As Christians have read the Scriptures over centuries, we have learned of the need to ask of any text how it came to be written, what situation it was addressing and what message its author wanted to carry to a particular community and place. It is important to ask how the words, metaphors, and narratives of different texts speak, and how different genres work their meaning in the world. No reading is ever impartial or without interests, and the reading of any text can serve the interests of the rulers of a society or of its poorest and most vulnerable. It is important to give particular attention to the interpretations and reflections that come from those who are oppressed or marginalised from the theological community. As we read the Scriptures as part of the global Church, as different emphases, reading styles and interpretations are shared, we are all reshaped as readers, and our eyes are opened to what we couldn't see from where we stand.

Reading the Scriptures demands of us the best of our critical faculties, but also asks that we open ourselves to be willing to receive new wisdom. We trust that biblical texts will be places of blessing, even though we may need to wrestle hard. We discover that some texts inspire horror, weeping and lament, as they testify to the ways in which relationships between women and men are often so marked by sin and suffering. Some texts simply seem alien and strange. And some recall us to the most challenging themes of the gospel and leave us asking how we might live in response to them now.

We need to make sure that our reading is wise, that we know why we are reading and what we seek, and that we handle texts responsibly, seeking to find blessing in interpretations that will delve deep, so that a true and life-giving wisdom might emerge. If we are to find here the very word of God, then we need to be sure that our reading is open, brave and searching.

One way to search for the heart of the Scriptures, providing an interpretative key, is to ask which parts offer something strikingly different to the way that things tend to be in the world we know (that default world we all inhabit) and therefore which parts offer us a glimpse of a transformed, more blessed and more hopeful world.<sup>13</sup> We need to pay special attention to those Scriptures that help us 'not [to] be conformed to this world, but be transformed... so that you may discern what is the will of God.'<sup>14</sup>



Raquel Catalani and Daniel Souza work together with one of our partners in Brazil. Motivated by faith, they tackle gender discrimination, homophobia and violence with young people.

## Christian tradition

Christians have never ceased, from the earliest days of the Church, to reflect on how we are made and formed as human beings, and how we are to live in the world as male and female. It is far from true that radical thinking about gender is only a recent phenomenon and specific to the Western or Northern world. In fact, it has characterised Christian communities from the beginning, as they developed and found their voice in the parts of the world we now know as the Middle East, northern Africa and Asia.

Throughout history Christians have re-imagined and reframed gendered life in striking ways. These have ranged from monastic single gender communities to those who anticipate that a renewed humanity will be somehow androgynous.<sup>15</sup> In some branches of the Church, it has meant the opening up of all ministry to women,<sup>16</sup> in other traditions a richly symbolic language full of gendered images and metaphors,<sup>17</sup> and in others still, the experience of the Holy Spirit speaking through women.<sup>18</sup> We need to find the places where the Church has been most faithful in witnessing to the radical heart of the Gospel by helping us to think in new ways about how our being made male and female should be understood and lived.

It is true that the Church has contributed to ways of understanding gender that have been profoundly unjust and oppressive. The Church has sometimes colluded with, and been seduced by, contexts and cultures in which the oppression of women by men has become normative, despite the fact that this is not what Christian faith demands. This means that a key task for the Church is to reclaim from our own roots a tradition in which gender may be a source of joy for all, and redeemed in justice.

## The wider world

The kind of thinking and reflection that takes place beyond the world of the Church can also offer a substantial resource to theology, and should not be excluded from the conversation. As we engage with thoughtful human beings from many areas of life, and with a wide variety of experiences, we learn from the skill of others who are as challenged by the real pain and scandal of gender injustice as we are.

Since the whole world belongs to God, there is no part of it from which we should be shy of seeking wisdom and insight, even while we test and weigh such insights. We need all the help we can gather in understanding how it is that, despite so much hope and vision for good relationships between men and women among all our communities, there remains so much pain and injustice.

A theology of gender needs to draw on all of these resources as it seeks to find a way of putting into words the hope that we share for humankind. We also need to bring these sources of wisdom into conversation with each other, as we seek the heart of the good news for us all. Theological reflection from today's contexts needs always to be in dialogue with the prayerful thinking of Christians over the centuries, just as scholars and specialists need to be challenged by the lived experience of grass roots practitioners who can speak from the front line. Heart and mind need to learn from each other's wisdom, just as cool reason needs to be warmed by a passion for justice. Our reading of the Scriptures will come through the lens of our experience, but will also, in turn, shape our practice in response to that experience.

We will need faith language vivid enough to challenge the ways in which men and women have been forced to live with oppression and injustice: strong enough that we can let go of harmful understandings of humankind; imaginative enough to set before us a vision of God's justice. The language of faith is the language of the Church, of the people, not the property only of church leaders or specialist theologians. There are many who can testify that the theology that forms human beings at their very core is no abstract and distant tongue. Whatever our explorations and our conclusions, they must be judged by their power to give bread to the hungry, to set the oppressed free, to bring justice to the abused and to restore to all human beings a sense of the gift and joy of gender.



**Fatmata Tucker from Gbap, Sierra Leone, and long-time Christian Aid supporter Llinos Roberts. Our partner's work in Gbap tackles the exclusion of women and young people from decision making.**





Gyanti Devi was one of thousands who marched towards Delhi, India, in the hope of getting her land in Bihar back.



# 1.

## A theology that responds to life: Christian Aid's experience

Many of the projects and programmes in which Christian Aid and our partners are involved reveal both the depth of the challenges in relation to gender and also something of how situations can be changed.

The following examples illustrate the spectrum of Christian Aid projects that have a strong gender focus, and the wide range of problems that those projects address.

### Gender-based violence

- In Egypt, our partner Bless, a part of the Coptic Orthodox Church, works with faith leaders to address the problem of female genital cutting, endemic in many Egyptian communities.
- We work with Rev Phumzile Mabizela from South Africa. She encourages many communities and churches to engage with 'Thursdays in Black', an international movement that makes visible the reality of gender-based violence and to challenge it. She recognises that tackling harmful theology is important if the world is to be changed, and that the Scriptures have sometimes been used to justify violence against women, encouraging women to be uncomplaining. She speaks out with a strong voice to make it clear that faith is distorted when it is recruited to support an abuse of power.
- In Iraq, our partner Asuda runs a shelter for women and does legal and advocacy work to support women who are at risk of violence. Some face being attacked and potentially killed by their own families if it is believed they have acted against a strict code of 'honour'.

### Legal and cultural exclusion

- Child marriage disrupts the education of young women, jeopardises their health and limits their opportunities. Through work with the Afghan Women's Network, we have been involved in a successful challenge to the Afghan government's attempts to make child marriage legal.
- In Zambia, we work with the Zambia National Women's Lobby. We support the 'I Care About Her' campaign, working with men and boys to educate them on women's rights and supporting women as they claim them. Our partners tell us, very clearly and effectively, that if women do not understand or claim their legal rights and participate fully in society, they are not able to participate in the development process either.
- In Sierra Leone, we work through local partner Action Plus to help women claim the maintenance payments that absent husbands should be making, and to raise awareness of the gender rights enshrined in Sierra Leone's law.
- In India, we work with partner Ekal Nari Sangthan (Strong Women Alone), to help single women, often very young widows or women who have chosen to remain unmarried. Such women are subject to significant discrimination and often violent abuse. They can be pressurised by family and community to stay indoors, out of sight, and to wear only dark clothes. They cannot easily access government benefits and are ostracised and alone. Through Strong Women Alone, they are offered an alternative 'family', and some find the courage and dignity to cast off their dark clothes and to wear colours again.

### **Lack of skills and economic opportunity**

- The YMCA Women's Training Programme in the occupied Palestinian territory and Christian Communities for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) are two of our partners in very different parts of the world. They both support women to become farmers or to run businesses, to develop agricultural or craft skills and to find sources of credit as well as collectives and co-operatives for trading. They both work on a local and often small scale, and they bring transforming changes to women's lives.
- We have worked with the Centre for Agricultural Development (CEDAP) in Peru, who work by training women in confidence as well as in farming techniques, so that they are able to take part not only in physical work, but also in decision making.
- The Afghan Women's Education Centre supports women, including those who have been in jail for such crimes as 'running away from home', often from a forced marriage. It helps them to challenge the law, and also to remake their lives.

Our partners testify that when women are enabled to lift themselves out of poverty, the whole community changes for the better. But they also tell us how very hard it can be to shift the ways in which gender is understood and lived, because social norms are so deeply embedded. Sometimes, though the work place or the political space is transformed, the sphere of the home remains unchanged.

Faith is often a strong part of what shapes the meaning and understanding of gender, and thus faith, and its theological underpinning, must be part of the discussion and the practice of change. It will be helpful to focus on two projects in particular, both of which demonstrate how theology is vital to the task of challenging injustice and seeking renewal.

### **Renewing the household and family**

In Sierra Leone, Christian Aid partners have recently been developing and running a series of workshops on being a 'gender model family'. They work on the basis that the family is the basic unit for achieving social transformation. Through the workshops, families achieve real change. From being a household in which work and tasks (from cooking to fetching water, to going to market and handling the money) are assigned and differentiated along specific gendered lines, they become one in which tasks, including decision making, are shared. Families testify that they gain respect from their neighbours and that they can plan together for a better future.

Some participants who took part in the programme in 2013 commented afterwards that through the gender model family project, they had discovered that 'God did not make men to be better than women. That is human creation and it is wrong.'<sup>19</sup> The course material demonstrates, in very practical ways, the impacts of the traditionally gendered division of labour. When they are confined to very different roles, men and women are isolated from one another, causing stress and hardship and, at worst, frustration and violence.

Many programmes have worked to address gender through legislation and change to provision of services, or by working with women's groups, but the gender model families project tackles understanding and values within the whole family unit itself. It works with the understanding that gendered relationships and roles are learnt within the family and that this must be a key place to bring about change. Men are encouraged to become champions of a new kind of masculinity. Men and women are encouraged to see each other in a relationship of shared and mutual power and dignity, where each may flourish. Instead of there being two opposite poles within the family, unity and equality are built.

The programme is unafraid to use biblical and theological language to affirm this transformative approach. It demonstrates that an attention to the language of faith can be part of transforming practice and bringing justice.



A section of a mural showing the domestic violence that takes place in inner city communities in Jamaica.



## Challenging violence

In many places in the world gender-based violence is a serious problem. Brazil is one country where the problem seems endemic and intractable. Recent research has shown that every 24 seconds a woman is beaten by a partner or ex-partner and thousands of women are killed in this way each year.<sup>20</sup> Despite improvement in public policy and law, the reality is that gender-based violence is firmly rooted in a certain kind of machismo culture. The majority of victims are also poor, young and black, demonstrating how gender intersects with other forms of inequality.

In response to this reality, the Anglican Church in Brazil has decided to tackle the problem both by addressing what makes violence possible and also by tackling the stigma associated with it for sufferers. The Anglican Service of Diakonia and Development (SADD), one of our partners, has developed a course to be used in local churches for the prevention and tackling of gender-based violence against women.<sup>21</sup>

The course booklet describes gender-based violence as a sin against humanity, and also, significantly, recognises that a faith community can commit violence against women both by doing nothing about it when it occurs, and by legitimising interpretations of Scripture which support it. The message is that violence against women is a consequence of a culture that expresses its belief in 'natural' differences between the sexes in terms of gender inequality. Acknowledging the presence of stories in the Bible that portray violence against women, including the trading and stealing of women and sexual violence within the family, it urges that these should be interpreted with care so that they cannot ever be used to condone such actions today, but rather to challenge them.

The course celebrates the ways in which church communities can be safe havens and therapeutic communities for those who have suffered violence, while insisting that there is much more than this that the Church could and indeed should do. At the heart of the Christian faith is the message that God became a human being, as one of us, and that Jesus himself, a man of his own culture, lived among women in a strikingly different way from the default behaviour of his own times.

The material speaks forthrightly and with great passion about the call upon Christian communities to model a new way of being male and female and to address the present injustice in a particular context, while also using the theological resources of the Christian faith to do that. It is particularly significant that this course, like

the project in Sierra Leone, recognises that *theological* language and understanding is vital in changing gender relationships. It exhibits a confidence that theology can be part of promoting real change. It seeks to address a problem in a particular context and to overcome the ways in which cultures often separate men and women from one another and stand them in opposition. For example, within the worship material that comes with the course is this affirmation: 'I believe in the tenderness of men, in the strength of women, in the wisdom of youth and children.'<sup>22</sup>

When the separation, the difference, between men and women is the focus of all thinking on gender, it can lead to harmful stereotypes. The course material suggests that, when men and women relate to each other as polar opposites, it is a distortion of their true nature as part of a shared humanity. So the unity of men and women is affirmed, emphasising what they can share rather than what might separate them.

The experiences of projects like these powerfully demonstrate the tragedy that gender so often drives people into poverty, that it is a cause of suffering and profound injustice. Our first response can only be to weep for girls denied education, young women driven into early marriage, those who are cut or enslaved, and those who are denied access to their rights in law. As project after project repeatedly testifies that gender has become a means of oppression, the only first response must be to grieve that this is so.

This experience also reveals how the language of faith is often key, shaping women's and men's expectations of who they are and should be. They show how language and stories from Scriptures and faith traditions shape meaning and reality, sometimes in ways that are far from life-giving or holy. They reveal too how hope is possible, how change can happen. It is the poor and oppressed of the world who must speak into our theology, for they have a particular and strong objectivity which needs to be heard.

Having engaged with the realities these projects unfold, we turn to the Scriptures knowing that we need to read with a new and deeper sense of urgency, asking questions about how to find ways to live out our being male and female that resist injustice and create joy.

## 2. Searching the Scriptures for the heart of faith

When we turn to the Scriptures with the experience to which our partners can testify still burning within us, then we will find that the texts come alive in new ways, and that our eagerness to understand them is also renewed.

We find, in the Scriptures, many texts that echo the text of our own experience and remind us of how injustice between men and women, gender-based violence and the oppression of women are by no means new phenomena. We find stories that now seem both more familiar and more shocking, stories that stand out from the page in particular ways. There are stories of rape, violence and abuse,<sup>23</sup> stories that portray women only as objects of sexual desire or as the property of men,<sup>24</sup> and there are stories in which it is evident that women are particularly vulnerable to poverty and exclusion.<sup>25</sup> The Scriptures do not hide these realities from us and they echo profoundly and painfully the real terror of women's lives today.

There are also texts in Scripture for which it is clear that the implied reader is male, as though women are not even included in the experience of reading.<sup>26</sup> There are texts in which the author urges the silence or submission of women, texts that are still quoted today by those who would silence women, for any number of reasons.<sup>27</sup> There are texts that define masculinity by physical strength, dominance and 'power over', and texts in which even abusive men become the leaders of the people.<sup>28</sup>

Turning to the Scriptures to shape a theology is not a straightforward process and interpretation should never be simplistic and naive. We need to read with care and

learn how to become interpreters who can find the blessing within, behind or even sometimes apparently against the grain of the text. It is important, for example, that narratives and moral codes from the Scriptures that have been used to affirm, support or encourage injustice or violence need to be wisely and clearly read, so that oppression is not re-inscribed but rather challenged.

There may be stories that help us simply by bringing into the light what we are often ashamed to name. The Scriptures give us stories around which to gather to lament and sorrow for what is still sometimes the reality of our lives. These stories may be for us 'texts of terror',<sup>29</sup> texts that reveal and witness to the horror of human experience. These are texts that do not allow us to pretend that all is well and keep us from the dangerous naivety that is blind to all but the good.

Texts such as those that urge women to be quiet or submissive also need to be interpreted with care, as they echo the cultures in which they were composed, and reveal something of the tragedy of a humankind divided at its heart.

Among this variety of texts and stories are important passages that offer a very different hope indeed for the relationship between male and female before God. These are radical and transformative texts, standing out from the cultures in which they were written and with power enough to astonish and transform today's readers. The key is to judge the narratives and instructions that throw up difficulties for us by the light of these other parts of Scripture – those that, rather than reflecting these 'default' ways in which human beings live out gender, say something startlingly different and challenging. These are the texts that can offer us a renewed imagination and a new hope.

## Creation stories

Found at the beginning of the book of Genesis, the stories of creation have had an enormous influence on how Christians have lived and experienced gender, and still have more to reveal today. They need to be read with attention both to the contexts in which they were framed, and to the contexts in which they are read today. They carry with them a huge weight and history of interpretation, but in essence, they convey a simple theological message, in the light of which so much of the way we live together as men and women stands judged, challenged and re-shaped. It is therefore well worth spending time with these portions of Scripture and reflecting on them with care.<sup>30</sup>

A verse often cited as significant for a theology of gender is Genesis 1:27:

**‘So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’**

This verse comes near the end of the first recorded of two accounts of creation in the book of Genesis. It offers a picture of humankind being created as the last part of God’s creation, and, most significantly, not simply ‘after its own kind’ or like itself, but made in the image of God.

What this ‘being in the image of God’ precisely implies is not explained. This verse should perhaps be read in the context of those many verses in the Old Testament that stress to us that God cannot be looked at, nor can we know what God looks like.<sup>31</sup> It is striking that it is both male and female together who are described as being ‘in the image of God’, so that no one human being can be this ‘image’ alone – there is a ready-made protection against idolatry. But it is astonishingly difficult for those who read this verse often, and for whom it has become almost a kind of slogan, to feel today quite the force and ground-shaking impact that it must have had in its original context.

There were societies in the ancient Near East, like the Babylonians, who believed that not all that exists was

good, and that some things that existed were actually bad. There were cultures that believed that different gods had made different parts of creation or that some parts of creation were made by malevolent beings, and not by a good god at all. Against that background, this verse, which seems now almost blandly obvious to us, was profoundly significant. This whole account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis emphasises right from the beginning that God made everything, and that it was *all* good. God made the light, and God made the darkness too. God made the land, and God made the water. And, significantly in terms of a theology of gender, God made male and female, and *both* are good.

There were also cultures in the ancient world, like the Mesopotamians, the Egyptians and even the Romans, who believed that human beings could be made in the image of God. But most often they believed that perhaps the King, the Pharaoh or the Emperor might have that privilege. Men might be considered to be shadows of the King, and even slaves might be shadows of free men, but women were not mentioned at all.<sup>32</sup> Seen in the light of that context, this verse from Genesis is very far from being a slogan of the obvious. To say, so long ago, that male and female were together in the image of God and were blessed by God, was to say something all but unthinkable. It was to say that male and female, though different, have something very profound in common, and that what they have in common, even as they are different, is so good that they can, together, image God. It was to say that God created male and female in this way and that it is good. This was such an unusual and astonishing idea for the ancient world, and perhaps still sometimes today, that its full significance is hard to grasp.

Sometimes being alert to that context has the effect of switching on a light so that we suddenly see a text more clearly. In only the opening chapter of the Bible there is something we have barely begun to take seriously even now, and that would certainly have sounded really astonishing at the time of telling and writing. This verse offers us a warning that the default reading of gender



relations with which human beings tend to live is seriously flawed if it has forgotten the basic common creation of male and female in the image of God, and the equality of male and female in being mirrors of God.

The second account of creation, the one often presented as the story of Adam and Eve, has a similarly significant message. This story has sometimes been used to suggest that God made male people first, and so woman has a secondary status as derived from a pre-eminent man. It has been employed to apportion blame to the woman (and so to women) for the way human life must be lived in struggle and pain. Through it, essential and differentiated roles have been assigned to women and men. This story has assumed a dominant place throughout Christian tradition in interpreting how women and men relate to one another, but its most radical message has often been covered over or ignored.

In Genesis 2 we read how the Lord God formed a human being from the dust of the ground and breathed into his (or better at this stage, 'its') nostrils the breath of life.<sup>33</sup> Then, further on in the story, we read that God decided it was not good for the creature to be alone. When the human being could not find anyone from among the animals or the birds to be a companion, God took one of the creature's ribs and made another human being and they were 'one flesh'.

What is much clearer in the original Hebrew language in which this story is written, is that the first creature that God made was simply an 'earthling' (this is what Adam means in Hebrew, a creature from the earth). It is only when the second creature is made, when the first one is divided to make two, that new words for 'man' and 'woman' are used. In our translations we can easily assume that this story suggests that God first made a man, and then made a woman, out of the man. But in fact something different is being revealed, a creation of one creature who then becomes two.

The very significant thing about this passage for a theology of gender is the way in which the relationship between the now differentiated 'man' and 'woman' is described. The earthling needs to find relationship and someone to heal loneliness. None of the creatures already made will do. So God makes the earthling into two, and yet two who are so completely of the same being that the earth creature can say, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'.<sup>34</sup> The message of the story is not that woman was derived from man or that woman is secondary, or even really that woman is so 'different' from man. What the text wants the reader to understand is that woman and man, female and male, are more *like* each other than they are *different*, or at least that the joy and wonder of their difference is in fact rooted in their being of the same flesh. They have a deep and essential unity with one another, being from the same source. They have

something like common ground, the kind of unity that gives them a deep-rooted equality of dignity and worth.

This is a radically different reading from the one that has become commonplace, but it is hugely significant. We might want to ask how a text that was written with one message could now carry a meaning almost opposite in force. But more important is to read this text anew into our own worlds and to let the depth of its message resound. This is a message that our world needs to hear now, as much or perhaps even more than the first readers or hearers.

In the light of this story, any man who is violent towards a woman should know that he is beating 'flesh of my flesh'. Any employer who pays a woman less than a man needs to hear that, in God's sight, the woman is 'bone of my bones'. Any society that cuts, abuses, discriminates against or disenfranchises women needs to hear that women are made of the same stuff as men, and that the way in which they relate to one another is to be shaped by that fundamental, God-given identity and equality.

The saying about male and female being 'one flesh' has often been taken to refer to the act of sexual union, but this Genesis passage is not primarily built on that connection. The connection between male and female, the profound connection that they share, is about how they are *made* of the same stuff. It is not sexual intercourse that makes one out of two, but we are one already, fundamentally, from our creation, because we are of the same flesh. Another way of saying this is to say that our oneness is more true than our 'twoness'.

People of faith have continued to tell such stories, about the oneness, the 'of the same flesh-ness', of male and female, because the human tendency seems to be instead to accentuate the 'twoness' between male and female that manifests itself in one having power over the other. While 'twoness' is part of who we are, we need to find ways of celebrating it that are not about one having power over the other, and enable us to live out our profound 'oneness' in equality and justice.

Although these counter-cultural scriptural stories are read as though they support a default view of gender relations, in fact they bear a reading that offers a transformation of our understanding of gender. Our relating to one another as male and female is one way in which we may find unity of being and equality *within* difference. Experience reveals that it is this way of reading these stories that is so needed today. It is a gift to find that these stories, once told and shaped in cultures where gender had become just as tragically misshapen as it is today, can speak their message again. Here is gender difference described as the source of joy, of the ending of loneliness, while male and female are affirmed as 'of the same flesh'.

## Jesus and gender justice

A further source of reflection on gender, just as radical and transformative as those key texts in the book of Genesis, comes in Jesus himself. The Gospels bear witness to a Jesus who lived out an alternative masculinity, and related to women in ways that absolutely embodied the joy and justice of our creation as 'male and female', both in the image of God.

Jesus lived in a context in which human beings exercised power over others in a multitude of ways. He belonged to a people who were subject to imperial rule and Roman laws held sway over Palestinian people. Culturally Greek cities lay very close to Palestinian peasant villages. Divisions ran deep between Gentile and Jew, between Jew and Samaritan, between slaves and owners, between ruling Romans and subject peoples. There were multiple causes of discrimination, oppression and injustice, and many intersecting identities. A Graeco-Roman woman would have had more power and status than a Palestinian male peasant farmer, but in each particular culture it was the case that men held power over women.

We see this reflected in the Gospel narratives, in which women are often unnamed, are silent and voiceless, or cast either as wives or prostitutes. The chief actors in the Gospel stories are male, Jesus' inner circle of closest disciples are male and the stories of Jesus are acted out and recorded against a cultural background in which men speak, teach, and own land, while women are placed in the domestic sphere and have lives shaped by their sexual or mothering roles.



Chus and Domenica are brother and sister. Domenica's husband, who provided for the family, was murdered on the streets of El Salvador, and the family received protection and support from one of our partners

But Jesus subverted and challenged the 'default' gender narrative. It is clear in the Gospels that Jesus often seems to go to the places where women are.<sup>35</sup> There are women among his closest friends<sup>36</sup> and he speaks to women in public even though this was seen as improper behaviour. He acknowledges that women can be prophetic,<sup>37</sup> and encourages Mary, the sister of Martha, to listen to his teaching in a way traditionally reserved for male disciples.<sup>38</sup> He teaches parables in which women serve as metaphors for God,<sup>39</sup> he heals women and gives them dignity,<sup>40</sup> and it is women who are the first witnesses to the resurrection, even though the testimony of women would not have carried weight in the ancient world.<sup>41</sup>

There are many examples of Gospel stories that speak of Jesus as a man who does not accept, and indeed transgresses, the accepted gender norms. There is even a tradition in which a woman persuades Jesus that his own mission should go beyond 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel',<sup>42</sup> a memory that, remarkably, was preserved by the Gospel writers despite the fact that it could be construed as critical of Jesus. There are no stories of Jesus supporting the way of understanding gender that has become dominant in a world of gender injustice. There are, however, stories suggesting that, as far as Jesus is concerned, women are 'flesh of my flesh'. If the world told women to be silent, it's Jesus who entrusts them with the task of proclaiming the resurrection.

Jesus also emerges from the pages of the Gospels as a remarkable kind of man, subverting traditional understandings of masculinity. He weeps, for his friends and for his community. He rejects the path of retaliative violence. After he is betrayed he is neither assertive nor vocal, but silent, passive and yet unafraid. He dies the death of a slave, and, as Paul memorably put it in his letter to the Philippians, he 'did not grasp at equality with God'.<sup>43</sup>

In John's Gospel, Pilate says to the people as Jesus is presented to them for mockery, 'Here is the man!'<sup>44</sup> The words are laced with irony, for Jesus, beaten and whipped, captured and mocked, looks so little like an icon of manliness. But the Gospel writer wants the reader to understand that Jesus is indeed the first example of a new humanity. Part of this is a renewal of what it means to be male and female. He is a champion of a redeemed understanding of gender, a new humanity. If any of us need new 'gender models', if gender justice can only come as masculinity is itself renewed, if boys and men need to rediscover gender as something personally challenging and transforming, then Jesus is 'the man'.

## The New Testament

In the writings of the early Christians we see the very new Church seeking to make sense of a new way of thinking about gender. In some passages, the writers call women and men to behave in traditionally modest or ordered ways in terms of being male and female.<sup>45</sup> There are both passages in which we read the kinds of things we would expect people to say about gender in the ancient world (that women should not teach, for example), and also passages that are strikingly different.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he writes, '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' (Galatians 3:28). This is one example of how the early Christians recognised that in Jesus, something very new had begun to happen in the world, something that meant that the old ways of being in relation to one another were transformed. It should not be surprising that such a radical verse was and is not easy to interpret or to live by. But whatever it implies in specific terms (and there is room for interpretation here, just as it is not entirely clear what Paul thought Christians ought actually to do in response to the continued reality of slavery), it is clear that the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ led to a profound reappraisal of what it means that we are male and female. The first Christians clearly believed that the old ways in which gender marked, divided and oppressed human beings were overcome in Christ.

In the New Testament, both men and women are described as being members of the body of Christ.<sup>46</sup> This is a striking image that, when explored deeply, might challenge the straightforward masculinity we ascribe to Christ.<sup>47</sup> According to the New Testament, there is a new humanity because women may also be described as part of the body of Christ.

## A counter-cultural vision

Exploration of the Scriptures reveals a diversity of texts, some of which reflect the often terrifying and unjust reality that is gender injustice today. But standing out from this backdrop are these remarkable texts that offer a transformed way of understanding gender relations. What these extraordinarily counter-cultural texts have in common is the conviction that our being male and female should not be a way to divide the human community so that some oppress others. The Christian tradition offers the hope and promise that male and female are both made in the image of God, are of one flesh and that we are 'one in Christ'. This tradition celebrates the difference of male and female, but not the kind of difference that leads to a hierarchy of power and the oppression of some. It celebrates our being 'one' in the sense of having the same fundamental being and value, as the foundation of our unity.

Sometimes those who are suffering most because of their gender do not expect the Scriptures to offer them hope. They have heard too many verses used to justify oppression rather than to challenge it. They have encountered theology that brings harm by giving those who discriminate against or hurt others an apparent validation for doing so.

It is tragic beyond measure that the message at the heart of the Scriptures, the word embodied in Jesus himself and experienced by his Church, has been so obscured or skewed. For there really is a vision for gender at the heart of the Scriptures that, if embraced by the churches, will underpin belief and practice that could answer the cries of the oppressed with justice.



Asana Abugre, from Ghana, is a successful business woman. Most women in her country are informal traders with little or no formal education, so Asana is an activist for gender equality and fairer trading.





Children doing their morning exercises at a residential camp in India run by our partner ASTHA, which promotes the education of girls.

### 3.

## The radical witness of the Christian tradition

### A radical tradition from the beginning

Some assume that the story of Christianity's understanding of gender is a straightforward one. They imagine that there has always been a well-established Christian tradition supporting stereotypically defined gender roles and only more recently has a critique of that traditional view developed, derived from modern secular thought and rooted in a discourse of human rights. But this is far from the truth. There has consistently been a thread through Christian faith and practice that is profoundly radical and counter-cultural in its assertions about gender. As we have seen from the Scriptures, Christians have a very long history of wrestling with and reframing the way we live as men and women in relationship before God.

The first Christians believed that Jesus had embodied a new way of understanding gender identity. We can gather, from scriptural and extra-scriptural texts<sup>48</sup> that many of the earliest Christians thought that the old ways of living as men and women had been overcome. This meant either that the distinction between male and female had become irrelevant, or that women were to 'become male' in a newly envisaged kind of androgyny. The second suggestion sounds particularly strange to modern ears, but it was a move sometimes made by marginal religious groups in the ancient world, founded on an understanding that gender relations needed changing.

People believed that a new way of being men and women needed to be found in the light of a new and unique irruption of God into the world. The earliest Christians had women as leaders in their communities.<sup>49</sup> Some communities pushed this further: people abstained from sexual relations, and gender difference was no longer considered decisive or significant.<sup>50</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, we also see examples of Christian communities reasserting that, at least for the time being, women and men needed to behave in traditionally and culturally defined ways. But the idea that the present way of being men and women needed to change was a strong thread through the developing tradition.

### Becoming the faith of the Empire

As the Christian tradition became part of the dominant culture of the Roman Empire, from the time of Constantine, it also became more prone to resort to society's gender norms. There were Christian theologians, even from as early as the second century, who believed that women were inferior and even a source of temptation for men. Tertullian, for example, used language that cannot hide a deep-seated contempt for women.<sup>51</sup> Far from proclaiming the radical equality and unity of men and women, voices like these describe woman as a distortion of man. They use language filled with hatred and fear, language close to violence.

All the while, women continued to be part of the Church and to shape its life for good, though some forgot the fundamental unity, dignity and equality of male and female before God. Much of the story of women's contribution during this period has tragically been lost, and there is a terrible, aching silence in the Church's history. Only a few women, like Macrina, the sister of the Cappadocian fathers, who contributed to the development of the Church's teaching, are remembered. But mostly there is silence, forgetting and obscuring. This is very far from the biblical teaching of 'flesh of my flesh, bone of my bones', both being made in the image of God, and members together of the one body of Christ.

It was firmly embedded in the teaching of influential theologians like Aquinas that the subordination of women was part of God's creation and therefore part of Natural Law. Even while strong and holy women continued to play leading roles in the Church's life and witness (such as Clare, the companion of St Francis and a friend of the poor or Hildegard the theologian), the idea persisted that women were simply something like defective men. This was, at one level, a kind of biological ignorance, but it was also the product of a theology that had forgotten the witness of the Scriptures and of the ministry of Jesus himself, which dignifies both women and men with their essential unity.

The early Christian witness to the radical equality of women and men did not survive long as a strong



discourse. Instead, cultures in which men and women did not live in mutuality and unity took over and gender injustice was reasserted, even in the Christian tradition, as normal and desirable.

## **A voice that could not be silenced**

When the movements that called for the liberation of women in the 18th and 19th centuries emerged, it must have seemed to many that these were entirely secular voices challenging a Christian faith that regarded women's subordination as normal. But as outlined so far, the view that men and women are two natural opposites with particular roles and that men should have authority over women, is not rooted in Scripture, nor in the story of Jesus, nor in the earliest traditions of the Church.

Recent Christian reflection on the theology of gender is not best seen as a reaction to secular movements or ideas, but as a reclaiming of theology that is rooted in the very earliest traditions. When the writers of the creation stories of Genesis said that both male and female are made in God's image and of one flesh, and when the earliest Christians lived as the united body of Christ, they were challenging the cultures around them, just as these ideas still challenge the ones in which we live. They understood that our being male and female can be a source of oppression and injustice, but they knew it foundationally to be God's creation, a source of joy, salvation and renewal.

The early Christian witness to a new understanding of gender is a far more radical challenge to the life of the Church than contemporary secular feminism! To wrestle with this challenge is not a turn from Christian orthodoxy but a new faithfulness to its most profound insights, and is demonstrated well in the work of many contemporary theologians.

One such example is Sarah Coakley. Writing from her own orthodox Christian faith, she encourages us to find through prayer a renewed sense of participating in the life of God, by which we understand ourselves and our relating to each other.<sup>52</sup> She suggests that male and female should neither be fixed as two opposite poles,

nor be abolished and eradicated, but rather transformed. Just as in the mystery of the incarnation the apparently unbridgeable difference between humanity and divinity is 'ambushed' (as she puts it), so the 'twoness' of gender can be bridged and remade as salvific.

Coakley recognises that all the ways in which we practise human life, of which gender is one, have all been distorted. Gender is not a 'fixed' and constant feature of human life and is always open to being redeemed and renewed, just as much as any other way of relating. An important step is to recognise that we cannot do this redeeming alone, but that we need God's help. As with every aspect of our identity, it is gloriously open to the redemption of God, enabling us to be hopeful about where we are headed. She believes profoundly in the potential of gender and relationships to be transformed by God.

Coakley's thinking encourages a reframing of theological debate about gender, suggesting that it may not be simply a matter of choosing between two paths; either seeing exclusively stereotyped difference, or pushing only for an abstract equality. What really matters is how we live joyfully as embodied, and therefore gendered, human beings, open to transformation by the love of the God who created us and who continues to create us. It must be something like this transformation that the writers of Genesis, the first disciples of Jesus, and the earliest members of the Church were seeking to describe and live. And it is this kind of transformation that our experience of the world tells us we need above all.

There is real hope here that within the deepest resources of faith, we might find what we have sometimes missed and always longed for. The urgency and the agony of the world's present experience of gender injustice demands not that we go back to ways we have already known, but that we find new ways of living gender. To think of gender as something that may be redeemed, and become a source of joy, is a profoundly hopeful possibility. It allows us to move beyond the tired and stereotyped debates into which faith groups and secular groups sometimes fall, to find a unity of male and female that allows for fruitful and joyful difference, without that difference being defined by power and injustice.



## 4.

### Faith's reflection on the thinking of the wider world

Just as Christian reflections and positions on gender relations are often beset by stereotype and misunderstanding, so sometimes are the gender discourses of the secular world. As certainly as it would be false to characterise Christian views as being homogeneous and invariably oppressive, so it would be false to neglect the great variety and subtlety of views about gender in the wider world.

One of the striking things about the growing field of gender study is how complex a sphere it is, fraught with argument and uncertainty. It is also notable, however, what respect there is for the mystery and significance of the ways in which we relate to one another as men and women. There is a sense, even within secular disciplines, of walking on holy ground, since this field of enquiry is so important for human life, yet does not always give itself readily to understanding.

### Nature or nurture?

An important discussion is about whether gender, when distinguished from biological sex, is rooted in any way in nature (essentialism), or whether it is entirely a product of how we are taught to perform gender (social constructionism). A very wide variety of views can be found.

Many commentators want to re-emphasise and re-radicalise the idea of gender as a product of social construction, to say that there is really nothing essential, but it is only cultural, contextual and particular.<sup>53</sup> Biology is now regarded by some as more fluid than raw fact, so even the sex/gender divide is open to question. There are also those who caution against abandoning all solid ground in gender theory, letting go of any confident certainty. There are others still who question whether even the apparently established distinctions between nature and nurture, essentialism or social constructionism can really stand. And many more voices remind us that not all women and not all men are the same and that gender is experienced in different ways in different contexts around the world. Even if gender is entirely socially constructed, it is not constructed in the same way in every place.<sup>54</sup> There is no one universal experience of being a woman, and to speak simply of 'women's experience' has covered over real differences between the lived experience of women of different ethnicities and locations.

There is a deepening sense that gender is one part of what makes us who we are, as human beings who have multiple and intersecting identities.





Afua Kibundila was abducted by militia men and gang raped in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She's had counselling and attended a women's support group through one of our partners, who also helped her to set up her bread business.



## Sameness or difference?

Some of the theological questions raised so far are also part of a broader debate in thinking on gender. One such discussion is about whether it is better to place emphasis on what men and women share in common or on the distinctiveness of men and women (whether the difference is natural or socially constructed). The first movements for the liberation of women tended to do the former, whereas movements within later waves of debate have tended to emphasise the latter. When the first campaigns on gender sprang up in Europe, for example, they were about claiming the rights that had been championed as universal and yet denied to women (suffrage, property rights, fair wages, legal status). But the achievement of true gender justice could not only be about raising up women to the place where men were (to make them equal with men). Something more radical was needed, more like a new examination of gender relations at every level. That meant a new understanding of the differences between women's and men's lives. So debates became not only about what makes us the same, but what actually shapes difference and how both 'male' and 'female' could be differently understood.

In some parts of our world, there are places in which very fundamental inequalities still need to be addressed, where women still do not have the same legal rights as men, the same access to education or basic services or the same protection from violence. But achieving gender justice goes beyond tackling these symptoms. We need to know more of the distinctive and different knowledge that women and men can provide so that the world can be reshaped in justice. And we need to find ways of transforming human life, so that the difference between male and female, however described, might be a source of joy and celebration, rather than of oppression and suffering.

There is much learning still to be done on how gender identity is formed, on the workings of gender relations, and on how gender is represented and symbolised in different cultures. Faith narratives are a part of each of these and a theology of gender will contribute for good or for ill. We may not want to say that gender can be any shape that a culture makes it, but we will want to make sure that the identities, representation and symbols that we promote are those we believe are most conducive to human life and flourishing.

## Opposite poles or one humanity?

Some secular voices, which have certainly influenced theologians, alert us to the danger of conceiving gender in terms of polar opposites. This tendency to divide the world up into opposing pairs comes primarily from some kinds of Greek philosophy. It is often a dualism in which one has power over the other, and in which the two are forever separated out from one another. This way of thinking has become deeply embedded in our theology, such that we are not often aware of it or of any alternative. The poles of male and female are sometimes described as being 'complementary' and so 'different *but* equal', but this is still a framing of gender that has its origins in the dualism of Greek philosophy.

As long as women and men are described in any way as polar opposites, there cannot be gender justice, because such poles are inevitably defined over against each other. However, it is also important that we do not make 'oneness' simply a means of covering over difference or creating of a kind of bland androgyny, but instead find ways of talking about difference that all human beings could celebrate and that do not make room for inferiority or subordination.

Human life is marked by many kinds of difference and many kinds of complexity. To talk of 'equality' may, in some contexts be a way to promote justice actively in ways that transform society, but sometimes talk of equality (as in 'equal *but* different') can become a way of simply masking inequality with a thin veil. Sometimes ways of speaking about equality and justice in one context do not fit another and experience in one context, or among a particular group of people, does not necessarily translate elsewhere. Women from the global South have rightly protested that women from the rich North cannot speak for them and they have crafted their own language and campaigns. They have resisted being recruited into ways of speaking about gender that, to them, are tainted by privilege and power. In many parts of our world there are multiple forces of oppression in operation and we need to attend carefully to the ways in which these intersect with one another.

Those who think about gender, across the world, in churches, faith communities, universities and legal assemblies, all still struggle with these issues and complexities. Men and women are wrestling today with how to move beyond what have sometimes been presented as the only alternatives; either a kind of 'muting' of gender and a move towards a de-gendered equality or a polarizing of gender as distinct and fixed opposites.



In both secular and faith communities, we find women and men who are seeking a richer, more nuanced and more life-giving celebration of embodied life in which we can relate to one another in justice and freedom. People are hoping for a world in which relationships between women and men are not founded on control or coercion, where violence is no longer endemic as a characteristic of gendered relations, and gender is not any more the most significant determinant of poverty in our world.

This is what a 'new humanity' would be like. Default models of gender relations often lead to oppression, pain and poverty. The old extremes of either biological determinism or social constructionism are not adequate to the urgent task before us. There is no escape from the challenge of negotiating gender, of continuing to ask what are the most urgent questions now, and of refusing to settle for a final answer if our experience is still that many women are poor, powerless and oppressed, because of their gender.

As we bring the complex set of disciplines, arguments and discourses from the secular world into conversation with our other sources of wisdom – the experience of a world scarred deeply by poverty, the Scriptures, and the Christian tradition – some things emerge with greater clarity. The secular discourses are excellent in alerting us to the complexity of the issues before us, to the subtle interplay of many factors in shaping our experience of gender. They expose the illusions that we are sometimes tempted to live with and challenge us to rethink what we thought we knew.

But the experience of gender opened up by Christian Aid's work with our partners, helps us to see that, though there is indeed a great deal of complexity, there is also an urgent and simple need. That need is to find a way of ending the gender injustice that leaves people in poverty. It might be ideas as apparently simple as the stories from Genesis, of how male and female are both created 'in the image of God' and 'of one flesh', that will help us find our feet again within the sands of argument and complexity.



Ernestina de Paz Reyes manages her own business in El Salvador. She first thought she couldn't do it because she's a woman. But she took business training with our partner Aprovehni, and now has high aspirations for both her daughter Jhoseline Gabriella and son Juan Carlos.

## Conclusion

### Of the same flesh: celebrating gender justice

Imagine a place in which the experts in gender theory, the biblical scholars, the doctrinal theologians and the women and men whom Christian Aid knows through our partners, might come together. Whose voices would speak loudest in the conversation? Whose truth should be heard? Who would have power to decide what to do next?

Is it possible that together, in conversation and in partnership, they might find a way to frame a practical theology of gender, a theology that would inspire and empower action in the world? Would the urgency of the task and the pain of so many have such an impact on all their lives that they could do nothing other than find a way to speak of hope?

Theological reflection on the relationships between men and women is never easy. But, some things can unite us as we have the conversation. There is a resounding sense, from Scripture and from the traditions of Christianity, that our being 'male and female' is a gift of God and the root of our dignity, and should be a source of joy. The Christian faith has so often declared that when gender is experienced as a source of suffering and oppression then a new world needs to be imagined and announced. When we see men and women experiencing gender as a determinant of poverty, then something is badly wrong and must be changed.

No-one should be content that a person's gender has such an impact on their chances of experiencing poverty, violence or powerlessness in the world today. Fathers should want their daughters to live good and fulfilled lives, free from hurt. Mothers should be able to expect every support and help as they give birth and nurture life. All of us should hope for a world in which resources are shared fairly so that all may eat, learn, work and live a full span of life, in peace and dignity. Most people in the world

today recognise that there is something distorted about the way we live with and alongside each other as men and women. Many see that there is a problem about our gender differences being expressed in inequality, poverty, oppression and even violence. People of faith are among those who see and experience the problems, and who long to find answers.

Christian Aid, in our work in many countries, has much experience of the way in which gender determines poverty. Our partners share, with pain and frustration, the experiences that distress them and that make all of us long for a changed world. They also share their experience of being able to make a real difference, in some contexts, to the way in which gender is understood, lived and shaped. They bear witness that change is possible such that families begin to share work, power and resources. It is possible to end such painful realities as female genital cutting. Though we are very far from having all the answers, we already sense that it is possible to make profound and lasting changes. Christian Aid's *Partnership for Change* affirms that,

**'...gender equality is critical to development. The empowerment of women transforms societies, as it unlocks the potential of half the world's population.'**<sup>55</sup>

Our partners, in seeking to address poverty, have stressed the vital importance of developing a theology of gender that will be helpful in and addressing the challenges and scandals of poverty and inequality. We need theology that is rooted in the experience and testimony of those who are suffering and that makes a difference to our practice, to how we behave as human beings who are male and female. We need theology that responds faithfully to the most radical traditions of the Christian faith, which we see in Scripture and in the witness of a faithful Church.

This is not a generalised or abstract discussion, because we know that theology deals in powerful symbols and in words that will shape how community and family life is actually lived, as male and female before God. We have seen how even theological narratives that might affirm humanity as being all 'of the same flesh' have sometimes been used to slice humankind in two, for the oppression and poverty of some. Our theological words can be harmful, but they can also bring good news, gospel truth in every sense. We trust that as we seek this truth, God will give us grace to see what it means to be male and female in ways that will feed the hungry, tend the wounded and lift up the powerless. If gender is somehow 'in God's image', then above all, it must be open to redemption. There is real hope that we can move beyond the talk of 'the opposite' sex or move past tired questions about nature versus nurture, of essence or social construction, as we look for better ways of relating to one another, of living together and of shaping the structures of all our communities.

Christian theology is never shaped in a purely theoretical place where we can speak of 'in principle'. From the teachers of the Early Church, such as Chrysostom and Augustine, who wrote about justice, hunger and empire, to more contemporary theologians who write from their own experiences of poverty, civil rights campaigns, apartheid, and war and peace, theology always has a context and speaks from experience.

The Scriptures and our Christian traditions of theology were all shaped within particular contexts and for the people there as they struggled to live faithful lives in particular times and places. The people who first urged that God made male and female in the image of God were given that wisdom to weave into a particular culture. It was, most likely, a context where such a powerful and

radical insight was deeply needed, and where no-one thought that female too could be 'in the image of God'. Those who first urged that man and woman were 'of the same flesh' must have been writing into and for a time when people were dividing male and female from one another. When Christians spoke of men and women being 'one in Christ' they were speaking theological words that were striking in addressing a way that culture had come to divide humanity unhelpfully and harmfully in two.

It is not hard to see that, in many places among us now, such wisdom needs to be heard again, and heard clearly. This is not a generalised banality about an abstract 'sameness', but a radical celebration of a difference that should be strongly rooted in equality and justice. It focuses on the 'unity of being' that makes a transformed life possible. This is not an ethereal truth in the sense that we can gaze upon it unaffected, because what really matters is the change such theology could produce in the experience of people in our world.

It is grievous that the language of our faith has been conscripted for the oppression of some. It is vital then that we resist such forces and release once more the ways of speaking about gender that we find at the heart of the Christian faith, which we hear even more vividly when we stand in solidarity with those who know gender as a source of suffering today. We can be encouraged that the Christian faith has, from its historical beginnings and from its roots in the most ancient Scriptures, found ways of understanding who we are as women and men that are much more counter-cultural than we usually assume. The tragedy is that they have so often been covered over, twisted or ignored. The time has come to let them speak right into the challenges of today's world, bringing true hope for men and women who are 'of the same flesh'.



# Endnotes

- 1 A slogan found on many protest banners – sometimes written as ‘Poverty *still* has a woman’s face’.
- 2 *Gender Justice for All: Christian Aid’s strategy for achieving just and equitable power relations for men and women*, 2014
- 3 ‘Women are not a homogenous group – inequality exists between women and men, but also between women, particularly in relation to race, ethnicity, class and location (urban and rural).’ Christian Aid’s report *The Scandal of Inequality in Latin America*, 2012
- 4 See the groundbreaking work of Kimberlé Crenshaw on ‘intersectionality’.
- 5 ‘Christian Aid’s analysis of poverty is that at its root it is a lack of power; the power for example, to have your say and be heard, or to know your rights and demand them; the power to have access to essential services or to share fairly in the world’s resources or to live in the security not only of surviving, but also of thriving.’ Executive summary, *Partnership for Change*, 2012, p3
- 6 Statistics come from the United Nations, the World Health Organization and the Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- 7 *Partnership for Change*, Christian Aid, 2012, p22
- 8 Genesis 1:27
- 9 See for example, the excellent report published by the World Communion of Reformed Churches in partnership with the World Council of Churches in 2010, *Created in God’s Image*
- 10 In November 2013.
- 11 *Gender and Development* (Fountain Publishers) 2007, p125
- 12 This phrase comes from the work of Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Cornell University Press) 1991
- 13 A point made powerfully by Rowan Williams at a Christian Aid training event for worship leaders in Cambridge, in September 2013.
- 14 Romans 12:2
- 15 A phenomenon characteristic of some early Gnostic groups, as well as in some much more recent radical and marginal Christian groups.
- 16 Protestant Churches have, in many cases, made all ministries of the Church open to women.
- 17 The Roman Catholic Church has a rich female symbolism evident within its practice of prayer, worship, devotion and service, symbolism often lacking from those Churches which have made it possible for women to enter ministry.
- 18 The Pentecostal Churches have often listened to women’s voices when women have been inspired by the Holy Spirit, and have considered that this anointing overwhelms any social or cultural conventions about women speaking in church.
- 19 Recorded in a blog by Joseph Ayamga, Senior Programme Officer in Sierra Leone, Christian Aid.
- 20 See *Brazilian Women and Gender Research in Public and Private Spaces*, a report by the Perseu Abramo Foundation, 2010
- 21 *The Prevention and Tackling of Gender-based Violence against Women*, SADD, 2013
- 22 *The Prevention and Tackling of Gender-based Violence against Women*, SADD, 2013, p12
- 23 The story of the woman who was raped, murdered and mutilated in Judges 19
- 24 See the story of David, Uriah and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11:2-27
- 25 The parable of the widow and the judge in Luke 18:1-8
- 26 The ten commandments in Exodus 20:4-17
- 27 See 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 and Ephesians 5:22-24
- 28 The story of Judah (and Tamar) in Genesis 38. Judah later became the leader of the people.
- 29 A telling phrase from the work of Phyllis Trible
- 30 The work of Ellen van Wolde has been particularly helpful in enabling contemporary readers to encounter these stories with new eyes. See her book *Stories of the Beginning* (SCM Press) 1996.
- 31 Exodus 33: 20
- 32 See David Clines, ‘Humanity as the Image of God’, in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays (1967-1998)*, vol. 2, (Sheffield Academic Press), 1998, pp449-97
- 33 Genesis 2:7
- 34 Genesis 2:23
- 35 The story of his meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well, a place where women gathered, in John 4:1-29
- 36 Mary and Martha, for example, in Luke 10:38-42 and John 11:1-37
- 37 The woman in Mark 14 who anointed his head as a prophet would anoint a king, and who he said would be remembered.
- 38 Luke 10:38-42
- 39 For example the parable of the yeast in Luke 13:20-21
- 40 The woman with haemorrhages in Mark 5:25-34, and the women was who bent double whom he called ‘daughter of Abraham’ in Luke 13:10-17
- 41 Mark 16:1-8, Matthew 28:1-7, Luke 24:1-9, John 20:11-18
- 42 Mark 7:25-30, Matthew 15:21-28
- 43 Philippians 2:6
- 44 John 19:5
- 45 1 Timothy 2:8-15
- 46 1 Corinthians 12:27
- 47 See Adrian Thatcher, *God, Sex and Gender. An Introduction* (Wiley Blackwell), 2011, chapter 8
- 48 The Gospel of Thomas, for example.
- 49 See the Pauline letters for a sense of how many women were in fact in leading positions in the earliest churches.
- 50 Some Gnostic communities, for example
- 51 In his *Treatise on the Dress of Women*, he refers to women as ‘the devil’s gateway’.
- 52 See her book *God, Sexuality and the Self. An Essay on the Trinity* (Cambridge University Press) 2013
- 53 For an excellent discussion of this issue see Elaine Graham *Making the Difference. Gender, Personhood and Theology* (Mowbray) 1995
- 54 See the work of Musa W. Dube, who has argued that Western feminism has homogenised women, most famously in her book *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Chalice Press) 2000
- 55 *Partnership for Change*, Christian Aid, 2012, p16





Members of the vegetable growers' association in Minova, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.



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