

These nine essays challenge our understanding of the Bible and compel us to rethink how theology should be applied in the context of the human condition. They confront the reality of everyday life, from the status of patriarchy, gender equality and egalitarianism, to mobility and employment, human trafficking and modern day slavery, to social security, land rights and the displacement of the urban poor, to community participation in decision-making and development, and to the appropriate origins, foundations and norms in the advocacy for and promotion of human rights values. In the quest to speak truth to power, what should be the proper role of Christian counter-culture in the engagement amongst Scripture, human rights, justice, fairness and political systems? Be prepared for an upending of conventional views, an upsetting of traditional values, and an unseating from our comfort zones.

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Where Human Rights & Biblical Justice Meet is a wonderful, stirring and challenging collection of essays. The contributors take Biblical teaching thousands of years old and really wrestle with it and apply it to very real, raw and live current situations of injustice and human rights abuses in our world today. They find challenge, wisdom, hope and power for us as the church/Christians seek to shine God's truth and life and bring change into some of the world's darkest situations of injustice.

Paul Cook

Head of Advocacy, Tearfund UK

These essays provide a firsthand insight into a wide range of human rights issues from Nepal to Indonesia. They would be a useful resource to anyone looking to respond, to complex problems that nations face, with God's heart and wisdom.

Tehmina Arora

General Secretary, Christian Legal Association of India

BOOKS IN THIS SERIES

Where Spirituality & Justice Meet:
Spiritual Formation & Integral Missions

WHERE HUMAN RIGHTS & BIBLICAL JUSTICE MEET

Imago Dei & Integral Mission

EDITED BY STEVE BRADBURY



EASTERN
COLLEGE AUSTRALIA

GRACEWORKS

WHERE HUMAN RIGHTS & BIBLICAL JUSTICE MEET: Imago Dei & Integral Mission

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WHERE HUMAN RIGHTS & BIBLICAL JUSTICE MEET

Imago Dei & Integral Mission



EDITED BY STEVE BRADBURY

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INTRODUCTION

Steve Bradbury



Many years ago I had the good fortune to spend several days in a remote rural community on the banks of a majestic river in south-west Bangladesh—a place so rich in natural beauty, yet home to so many people beleaguered by economic poverty. An encounter with one of them left an indelible impression on me.

I had been invited to a meeting of participants in a women’s empowerment programme, and I sat and listened as they told me of their efforts to create a better future for themselves and their children. They then asked me to tell them a little about myself, and after briefly doing so I invited questions. Now, over 20 years later, I can’t recall any of the questions except for one. A young mother looked me in the eye and asked: “How come you are so rich and we are so poor?”

The development practitioners who had worked so hard to encourage these women to set up the group in the first place were thrilled by the question. (But *they* didn’t have to answer it!) To explain their excitement they told me that until recently, that young woman wouldn’t have been able to look me directly in the eye, let alone ask such a direct and confronting question.

At one level, the answer was (and still is) an utterly simple one. “It is an accident of our birth,” I replied. “You were born a woman into a poor rural Bangladeshi family. I was born a son into a middle-class family that migrated from Britain to New Zealand.”

However, behind that answer lay a far more complex history: of power and exploitation, of opportunity and choice for some, and the near absence of opportunity and choice for others. It is the story of how injustice denies vast numbers of people the chance to live fulfilling and abundant lives.

In his brilliant book *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, Nicholas Wolterstorff describes the manner in which the British used their superior weapons to take control of the region of which Bangladesh is now part, and proceeded to systematically destroy its economy and social structure. He writes:

The British wanted from Bengal a cheap, competition-free source of raw materials and a monopolistic market for their own manufactured goods, and they got what they wanted. In the process they pushed Bangladesh decisively into the pit of underdevelopment.¹

Any reasonable answer to the question posed to me by that young Bangladeshi woman would have included the complexities of history; of how, in the absence of constraints on the powerful, the weak are exploited and oppressed.

We who are not economically poor might shy away from such disturbing realities, but the Bible doesn't. Consider these words from Job 24:1–12 (MSG):

But if Judgment Day isn't hidden from the Almighty,
 why are we kept in the dark?
 There are people out there getting by with murder—
 stealing and lying and cheating.
 They rip off the poor
 and exploit the unfortunate,
 Push the helpless into the ditch,
 bully the weak so that they fear for their lives.

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983) 98.

The poor, like stray dogs and cats,
scavenge for food in back alleys.
They sort through the garbage of the rich,
eke out survival on handouts.
Homeless, they shiver through cold nights on the street;
they've no place to lay their heads.
Exposed to the weather, wet and frozen,
they huddle in makeshift shelters.
Nursing mothers have their babies snatched from them;
the infants of the poor are kidnapped and sold.
They go about patched and threadbare;
even the hard workers go hungry.
No matter how backbreaking their labor,
they can never make ends meet.
People are dying right and left, groaning in torment.
The wretched cry out for help
and God does nothing, acts like nothing's wrong!

Job is considered to be one of the earliest-written books in the Bible, but this description of both the circumstances of the economically poor and politically weak, and their primary causes, is as valid today as it was then. Lack of food, hopelessly inadequate shelter and housing, exploited workers being paid totally unjust wages, shortened lives, trafficked children—what a despicable litany of human suffering. And, it would seem, made all the worse by the apparent absence and silence of God.

What does Jesus think about the grief and suffering of the poor and marginalised?

And what would Jesus have us be and do in response to the grievous injustices of poverty? These are **sacred questions**, and at the very moment in which he publicly announced and defined the purpose of his mission Jesus said something of immense relevance to them:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given

to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16–21)

In times past, and perhaps in some church contexts still today, it has been common to hear these words of Jesus spiritualised in such a way as to ignore or even deny their significance to the ongoing tragedy of poverty and oppression. But to do this is to ignore something both intriguing and profound that Jesus did with Isaiah 61:1–2a as he read it out loud in Nazareth’s synagogue. He slipped in some crucial words from Isaiah 58:6 “...to let the oppressed go free”.

Why? Why were these extra words inserted?

David Bosch, one of the most eminent missiologists of the twentieth century, offers a compelling explanation. He argues that it was done in order to emphasise something “which was apparently not sufficiently clearly expressed in Isaiah 61. The phrase ‘to let the oppressed go free’ has a distinctly social profile in Isaiah 58. It stands in the context of prophetic criticism of social discrepancies in Judah, of the exploitation of the poor by the rich.”²

The Luke 4 passage tells us that Jesus was profoundly concerned about the physical and material well-being of those who were oppressed and exploited. It tells us that justice and mercy and material well-being—in the here and now—are integral to the good news he proclaimed. Jesus’ stories of the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the wedding feast, the great

2 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission 20th Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011) 102.

banquet, the workers in the vineyard, the persistent widow and the callous judge, the rich man and Lazarus, the sheep & the goats—all proclaim God’s heart for the oppressed and those in great need.

So many of Jesus’ encounters and actions demonstrated this Divine concern: his engagement with Zacchaeus, the healing of the haemorrhaging woman, the rescue of the woman caught in adultery, his compassion towards the woman at the well in Samaria, his feeding of the hungry, his condemnation of pharisaic hypocrisy...the list goes on and on.

Jesus’ actions and teaching are the greatest testimony of all to a core biblical truth that “the equality and intrinsic worth of all human beings” derives from the fact that “they are created in the image of God.”³ This is the foundation of human rights.

Each chapter in this book explores the implications of this truth for Christian mission, and each chapter started life as an essay written by its author in the pursuit of their Master of Transformational Development (MTD) at Eastern College Australia.⁴ The authors all write out of their experience as transformational development practitioners—and they bring into the “academic space” of research and writing the lived experience and passion of vocation.

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3 Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology & the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008) 101.

4 See <https://www.eastern.edu.au/courses/master-transformational-development>

GENDER INJUSTICE IN INDIA AND THE INDIAN CHURCH

Julie Bellingham



Discrimination against women and girls in India is widespread. Stories centring on rape, trafficking, dowry deaths, and child marriage often gain international media attention and reinforce India's reputation as being an unsafe place for women. One such story to hit world news headlines occurred in December 2012, when a 23-year-old student was gang-raped by six men on a moving bus and died 13 days later as a result of the injuries sustained during the incident. The comments made by one of the accused in a BBC documentary of the rape, titled *India's Daughter* (2015), reveal the accused's strong opinions in regards to the expected behaviour of women. He stated that, "Boys and girls are not equal. Housework and housekeeping is for girls, not roaming in bars and discos at night" (Udwin). He placed the responsibility of the rape with the victim, "A decent girl won't roam around at nine o'clock at night. A girl is far more responsible for rape than a boy" (Udwin, 2015b). He argued that her defensive actions made the situation worse, "She shouldn't fight back. She should just be silent and allow the rape" (Udwin, 2015b).

After surveying the extent of gender violence in India, this paper examines two of the underlying causes behind this phenomenon: the patriarchal system and the practice of dowry. The low status of women, in combination with the prevalence of gender violence, poses a challenge for the Indian church. If the church wishes to be a prophetic voice in this context, it must denounce gender violence, offer a biblical model of male-female relationships, and promote counter-cultural communities characterised by justice and righteousness. Adopting a biblical alternative vision of gender relationships requires that we recognise that both males and females are made in the image of God; they have equal worth and deserve equal opportunity to exercise their God-given abilities. I write this essay as a person of a different ethnicity, who lives in India. While this limits my understanding of the context and influences my perspective, my hope is that it may also give additional objectivity.

Gender Violence

Violence towards women in India occurs throughout the life course and begins in the womb with female foeticide and infanticide (Barik, 2014). Although it is illegal to do prenatal testing to determine gender, 12 million girls have been aborted over the last three decades (Barik, 2014:4–5). During childhood, girls are more likely than boys to experience neglect and under-nourishment, be denied education, and be married before they reach the age of 18 (Varkey, 2014). In both childhood and adulthood, females are vulnerable to rape, sexual harassment, abduction, trafficking, forced prostitution, domestic servitude and dowry death (National Crime Records Bureau, 2017). In 2016, India's rate of reported rape cases was 6.3 per 100,000 people. Although this number is not high by global standards, it has been claimed that 99 percent of incidents of violence towards women go unreported (Bhattacharya, 2018; Bandyopadhyay, 2018). Furthermore, as in the case mentioned above, the female is often blamed for sexual abuse (Barik, 2014). For many women, domestic violence is so commonplace that they do not expect anything different in their marriage and do not

attempt to escape until the abuse becomes “utterly inhuman” (Nayak, 2017; Kudchedkar, 2013:9).

Obviously not all men in India express such sexist attitudes and neither are all women abused by their husbands or close relatives. Some women in India have exercised their freedom and have gained leadership positions in the corporate and public sectors (Koshy, 2007). Some have also managed to draw attention to the prevalence of sexual abuse by sharing their stories as part of the #MeToo campaign. However, leadership opportunity is not typical of the experience of the majority of Indian women, especially those from disadvantaged castes and those from rural areas (John, 2017). The experience of women in India differs significantly depending on their ethnicity, caste or class, age, religion, where they are located within the country, whether they are from an urban or a rural background, and whether their family is modern or traditional.

Gender-based violence is not unique to India. Many women in other countries can also tell stories of violence and abuse by men. However, when India’s record is compared with many other countries it performs poorly and the situation is not improving (Livne, 2015). In 2018, India was ranked as the most dangerous country to be female, ahead of Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Pakistan, by the Thomson Reuters Foundation global poll of gender experts. While the government has been reluctant to accept the findings of this poll, the United Nations Gender Development Index 2017 also confirmed the vulnerability of women in India, placing India in the fifth and lowest category (United Nations Development Programme, 2016:210–213). In addition, India performed poorly in *The Global Gender Gap Report 2018* ranking 108 out of 149 countries.

THE CAUSES OF GENDER VIOLENCE

Violence towards women in India can be linked to a myriad of factors, including, but not limited to, gender inequality, poverty, economic stress, cultural and religious traditions, powerlessness, the caste system, lack of

implementation of laws, and ideas around masculinity (Udwin, 2015a; Lahiri, 2008). Law enforcement agencies are also culpable and have been accused of failure to carry out full investigations, failure to capture evidence, lack of urgency in investigating cases, and even raping women in their custody (Dubey, 2018). However, if gender violence was to be attributed to a few main causes, the patriarchal system and the practice of dowry would be key factors. In Priyanka Dubey's report on rape in India, she sums up the issue of gender violence, "Patriarchy is the nucleus of this problem and all other factors contributing to violence against women manifest themselves around it" (2018:viii).

Innately Patriarchal

Indian society and culture has been described as "innately patriarchal" (Vadalia, 2013). Patriarchy can be defined as the social system where male members of a society tend to assume and dominate positions of power, believing that the male is the head of the family or organisation (Varghese, 2013). These patriarchal values have established a clear division of roles in the Indian home and in Indian society, which effectively restrict the role, influence and opportunities of women. In many families, in workplaces, in religious settings, and in society, men enjoy authority, power and privilege (Bhattacharya, 2013). The man is considered to be the undisputed 'head of family' and he is likely to be the bread-winner, take charge of finances and in some cases do the 'outside work', such as shopping (Bhattacharya, 2013). Women are expected to submit to and serve their husbands. Some women do not have the freedom to pursue employment but find their role is limited to domestic duties and the raising of children (Livne, 2015:13).

Patriarchal values are taught to children from an early age. In childhood, girls are taught to be submissive and obedient, to conform to dress and behaviour codes, to stay at home as much as possible, to make personal sacrifices and to be tolerant and virtuous (Bhattacharya, 2013; Varghese & Jacob, 2017). Many consider formal education unnecessary for female children or they consider the education of daughters to be of a

lower priority than the education of sons (Koshy, 2007). Single women are unlikely to live on their own, but instead live in the family home under the care of the father until they are married and then become the responsibility of their husband. They are taught to be subservient to their husbands and are expected to put the needs of the family before their own needs. Generally speaking, the patriarchal system in India sees that women are disempowered, dependent on their husbands or their families, and unable to exercise freedom in the full span of activities that make up their daily lives.

The patriarchal system draws its legitimacy from religious and cultural beliefs and practices (Bhattacharya, 2013). Despite the fact that in the Hindu religious tradition people worship female goddesses, “women at the ground level share no such glorified status” (Arya, 2013:35). There is a strong cultural tradition sanctioned by some religious texts of treating one’s husband as god (Mondol, 2014:10–11; John, 2017). Additionally, according to the Laws of Manu, one of the most authoritative of the books of the Hindu code, women are expected to live in submission to male authority, “In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons. A woman must never be independent” (Arora, 2007:212). While women can make important contributions to Hindu religious life, they hold no religious authority (Arora, 2007). In contrast, a son carries forward the family name, performs burial rites, and inherits ancestral property (Arora, 2007). Unfortunately, when a woman receives a beating from her husband it is believed to be her misfortune, or her karma (Bhattacharya, 2013).

The Dowry System

The dowry system also contributes towards a culture of violence against women. Dowry is the traditional social practice whereby the bride’s family gives cash, goods or property to the groom’s family on their marriage. Despite the fact that dowry is prohibited, and has been since 1961, it maintains a significant presence in contemporary India amongst both

disadvantaged and high-caste groups (Sharma, 2014). When the dowry is considered by the groom and his family to be inadequate, the bride's life can be made miserable (Varghese, 2013; John, 2017). In some cases, an inadequate dowry has led to violence towards women, humiliation, burning of the bride or suicide. In 2015, 21 women per day were either burnt alive or forced to commit suicide as a result of an inadequate dowry (according to The National Crime Records Bureau, Nigam, 2017).

Together the patriarchal system and the practice of dowry have "sanctioned an institutionalized system of male domination at many levels of Indian culture" (Varghese, 2013:41). The patriarchal system has established a hierarchical structure in India that has created inequality between men and women, and caused women to be regarded as inferior (Varghese, 2013). By placing men in authority over women, the patriarchal system has seen women become subordinate objects in a man's world. This is compounded by the practice of dowry, which has seen girls come to be associated with financial loss, while having a son is associated with financial gain (Barik, 2014). In an interview for *India's Daughter*, Sheila Dixit, Delhi Chief Minister (1998–2013) noted that, "Many of our people grow up thinking that a girl is less important than a boy" (Udwin, 2015b). Boys learn early in childhood that their needs have preference over those of their sisters. What then follows from this is the assumption that "because she is less important you can do what you like with her" (Sheila Dixit in Udwin, 2015b). Pal describes this as the socialisation of violence against women (Pal, 2016). For some women, the system of patriarchy and the practice of dowry has restricted their role in the home and society, for other women, they have been treated as commodities, slaves and liabilities in their own family (Pushpa Lalitha, 2017:81).

These perceptions of women are widely held. The director of the *India's Daughter* documentary, Leslee Udwin, stated that "the horrifying details of the rape had led me to expect deranged monsters. Psychopaths. The truth was far more chilling. These were ordinary, apparently normal and certainly unremarkable men" (2015a). A similar statement was made by Madhumita Pandey, who interviewed 100 rapists in India for

her doctoral thesis (including the accused mentioned above), “I was convinced these men are monsters. But when you talk to them, you realize these are not extraordinary men, they are really ordinary. What they’ve done is because of upbringing and thought process” (Doshi, 2017). The educated and wealthy are also known to hold such views; the defence lawyer to the accused mentioned above, AP Singh, said that if his daughter had “disgraced herself” by doing such things that he would “put petrol on her and set her alight” in front of his entire family (Udwin, 2015a). These comments reveal a deeply entrenched patriarchal mind-set in India, which treats women as subordinate and places them in an extremely vulnerable position.

THE SITUATION IN THE INDIAN CHURCH

The subordinate status of women and the pervasiveness of gender abuse poses a challenge for the Indian church. Does the church in India mirror society or has it been able to foster a counter narrative that recognises the dignity and worth of both women and men? Do women have the freedom in the church setting to pursue their calling and offer their gifts for the well-being of the community?

Women in the Family

Gender-based violence is prevalent in Christian families in India. Thomas Varghese’s 2013 study to ascertain the level, type and seriousness of abuse faced by women from their husbands in Christian families in India, found that Christian women are equally victims of gender-based violence. His study of 100 Christian women from nine denominations revealed that 92 percent of the respondents had experienced some form of abuse—psychological, verbal, physical, sexual, financial or social (Varghese, 2013:112). In Bonnie Jacob’s recent study, “Gender Perceptions in the Churches and the Experiences of Women: A Case Study of Christians in Delhi”, she found that approximately 20 percent to 30 percent of the 547 respondents were facing abuse at home and a further 20 percent were

not categorical in stating whether they had been abused (Jacob, 2017:3). Manasseh's study of 80 middle- and upper-middle-class women revealed that 100 percent of the women had been hit or slapped and 50 percent had been beaten (Manasseh, 2007:192). Others have also confirmed that domestic abuse is commonplace in Christian homes (Mondol, 2014; Kumar, 2017; Koshy 2017; Wood, 2007). Varghese concludes that the church needs to be different, but "most of the time we are not different from others. Sometimes, we are worse than non-Christians" (Varghese, 2013:118).

The Indian Christian community practices what is called complementarianism. Complementarians do not doubt that women are equal spiritually and ontologically, but believe that the Bible requires different roles of women and men. Similar to patriarchal beliefs evident in the wider society, the husband is created to be the head of the family and the wife is expected to submit and assume a supportive role. According to complementarians, this ordering of the family is justified from scripture that refers to husbands as the 'head of the wife' and instructs wives to be subject and submissive (Eph. 5:21–6:9; 1 Cor. 11:3–16; Tit. 2:5; Col. 3:18 and 1 Pet. 3:1–7). Typically, in conservative Indian Christian households, the man retains full control over his wife and she is expected to come under his authority and respect his decisions (Varghese, 2013:69–70). When the wife is disobedient or fails to meet her husband's expectations, it is considered to be the husband's role and right as the head of the family to discipline his wife in whatever manner is deemed appropriate (Varghese, 2013; Kumar, 2017). Often, if a woman is beaten by her husband she is believed by those around her to have deserved it (Kumar, 2017). Women that have sought help from friends, relatives or pastors have been told to accept the situation, return to the husband and to remain silent (Wood, 2007:239; Barik, 2014:6). It is hard to determine the exact extent of abuse in Christian homes because many deny its existence, are too ashamed to admit it, fear the reaction of their husband, fear financial insecurity, or perceive it to be a private matter (Barik, 2014). Consequently, Christian women adopt the "Silent

Approach” or the “Acceptance Approach”, accepting domestic violence as a part of life (Manasseh, 2007:195).

Women’s Role in the Church

This gender division of roles is also evident in the church. In many churches, the role of women is confined to teaching Sunday School, teaching at women’s meetings, preaching on “Women’s Sunday” and being part of the worship team. It has been noted that in most Protestant denominations, church is a predominantly male-led experience, “there are either no women in leadership positions or their presence is negligible” (Arora, 2007:214).

The stage in front was where the musicians, the preachers and their translators, and the elder who made announcements all took their turns. All were male. That was the way it was, and I never thought to ask why it should not be otherwise. (Havilah Dharamraj, 2017:70)

Male headship has been applied to the leadership of the church and consequently many Indian churches are led by male pastors, vicars and clergymen. Those that argue that only men can lead and preach (whether it be as a pastor, elder, deacon and in some cases worship leader) often point to 1 Timothy 2:8–15, which states that “no woman to teach or have authority over a man” and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 where Paul says women “are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate” (also refer to 1 Tim. 3:1–12). It is often not an issue that is much discussed, possibly due to its contentious nature, but also likely because it is commonly accepted as the way things are done. In *How I Changed my Mind about Women in Leadership* (2017), Nengzakhup recalled the ordination of women was a “non-issue”, he never saw a woman preaching and “nobody even asked why” (2017:187). It is no surprise that Jacob’s study (2017) found that over 60 percent of the 547 women interviewed stated that they have felt restricted because of their gender.

The church has failed to see its formative role in determining and preserving how its members understand gender, described by Jacob as

“gender shaping” (Jacob, 2017). Jacob’s study (2017) found that not many pastors perceived gender shaping to be crucial to Christian faith, therefore there was no intentionality about including this topic in their teaching or sermons. In *How I Changed my Mind about Women and Leadership*, John Kumar stated that as a child, if he had heard teaching from the pulpit against domestic violence, then he “would have known what to think” about the violence he observed in his family’s home, but instead he felt troubled and confused (Kumar, 2017:25–27). Varghese’s study (2013) revealed that the majority of clergymen and the church knowingly or unknowingly turns a blind eye to the abuse occurring in Christian families, believing it to be negligible, insignificant or unimportant (2003:3, 43). A likely side-effect of males filling teaching roles in the church is that there is an “unconscious bias” that fails to draw attention to the issues around gender, and consequently, further entrenches an environment that is prejudicial to women (Koshy, 2007:165).

More recently, some church denominations have permitted, or at least not forbidden, women to train in seminary and the ordination of women pastors. The Church of South India, in particular, has accepted women in leadership positions for the last 70 years. In 2013, it appointed Pushpa Lalitha as Bishop of the Nandyal Diocese, making Lalitha the first woman to be appointed as a bishop in the Church of South India. But while it may seem that some churches approve of women in leadership, being ordained has not necessarily guaranteed these women opportunities to preach or pastor a church (Cherian, 2017; Dutta, 2017:55). Sucheta Nayak, Registrar and a faculty lecturer at Mission India Theological Seminary in Nagpur, stated

Often, even when I thought I was capable of doing something, I did not get a chance just because I am a woman. I had completed Bible study degrees, and my church could have been a platform for me to grow in faith and ministry experience, but they did not give me one chance to preach, not even until today (Nayak, 2017:179).

Jacob's study discovered that although a number of churches expressed egalitarian beliefs there was still a major gap between their stated policies and the actual opportunities that were given to women (Jacob, 2017:2).

Mirroring Society

The Indian church in many ways mirrors the patriarchal values and hierarchical structure that are evident in the wider society. There is no sense in the literature that Christian families differ remarkably from the wider Indian society in how their families are structured and in their expected roles. The patriarchal system places women—in both the church and in the wider society—in a vulnerable position, increasing their likelihood of experiencing prejudice, discrimination and abuse. Consequently, neither church nor society is free of violence towards women. Jacob's study (2015) concludes that the “hypothesis of the church being countercultural and a model for the rest of the society could not be sustained in the face of the considerable evidence otherwise” (2015:4). To say this in another way, the church is no exception to the comment that “prejudice towards women is entrenched in Indian culture” (Bhattacharya, 2013:14).

It is not unusual or extraordinary for the church to be influenced by its context, in fact as a cultural institution it is impossible for it not to be. The ever-present challenge for the global church is to discern whether it has adopted the beliefs and values of the local culture to the detriment of its mission and calling. The evidence of gender-based violence and inequality provides an opportunity for the Indian church to reflect on the assumptions it holds about the role of women, and to assess whether its theology and activities are building compassionate and just communities. The church has the task of prophetic ministry, which Walter Brueggemann defines as the task of “nurtur[ing], nourish[ing], and evok[ing] a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us” (Brueggemann, 2001). This requires that the church develops a consciousness of the dominant culture, including an awareness of the beliefs and values underlying common practices, and then to face the difficult task of honestly reflecting on its involvement in those

practices. While the church must criticise and highlight the inadequacies of the dominant culture, it also has the task of imagining a biblical alternative and then energising people towards an alternative vision of the future (Brueggemann, 2001).

TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE

Biblical Egalitarianism

If the church is to offer a prophetic voice, it is vital that the churches reach “a biblical and just theory and theology of the relation of women and men” (Wood, 2007:18). A Biblical egalitarian vision of male-female relationships, which highlights the biblical mandate for equality and the mutual submission of husband and wife, provides a theological foundation for equal rights and opportunities for men and women. Biblical exegesis that supports an egalitarian view of relationships is extensive and, generally speaking, highlights what is culturally relative and what constitutes trans-cultural truth in the scriptures (Howell, 2007:26). A few of the main arguments for a biblical egalitarian view are introduced below.

Both male and female are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27–28) and are therefore equal in essence and being. Eve was described as a suitable helper (*ezer knegdo*) for Adam, a word that is also used to describe God Himself, and therefore cannot mean subordination (Saysell, 2017). This simple truth that both men and women are ontologically equal means that a woman cannot be regarded as inferior simply because she is a woman (Groothuis, 2004). Groothuis states that it is incoherent to argue that women are both ontologically equal *and* permanently, comprehensively and necessarily subordinate (Groothuis, 2004:304). Women are equal in essence and being, and therefore they do not “suffer from a net deficiency of the valuable qualities and inherent capacities distinctively characteristic of human nature and human behaviour” (Groothuis, 2004:307, 308). Women have the ability to participate alongside men in the various distinctively human activities, such as spiritual discernment, high-level cognitive/rational behaviours including decision-making skills, planning

and problem solving (Groothuis, 2004). Equality in being demands that both women and men receive an “equality of consideration” and the opportunity to exercise their God-given abilities and work in their area of calling (Groothuis, 2004).

Jesus was radically different to contemporary rabbis and provides a model of treating women with dignity and respect. Although he had 12 male disciples, he also had women disciples—including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna—who followed Him on his itinerant ministry and were integral to his discipleship team (Luke 8:1–3) (Harris, 2017a). Jesus approved of Mary sitting at his feet, a posture that at the time communicated that one was a disciple of a rabbi, and he commended Mary for her choice (Bailey, 2008). He not only instructed women, but commanded women to go and proclaim the news to the men (Matt. 28:10). Ross summarises Jesus’ relationship with women,

He discussed theology with women (the Samaritan woman at the well), he liberated women from bondage (the women with the issue of blood), he challenged gender bias (the woman caught in adultery), the first people he entrusted himself to after the resurrection were women, he had women among his disciples and was financially supported by them, he selected images and parables to communicate on a deep level with women as much as men (Ross, 2011).

The writings of Paul are often used as justification for the subordination of women to men, particularly his statement that the husband is the ‘head’ (*kephalē*) of his wife (Harris, 2017b). Often this verse is read through a contemporary lens; readers place themselves at the centre of the text and interpret the text according to their present-day ideas (Harris, 2017b:8). Dr Harris notes that while the word *kephalē* can mean a literal head on a body and “a being of high status”, it was more often used in biblical times as the “source” or “origin” (Harris, 2017b:8). She notes that a complementarian reading of *kephalē* as a metaphor for leader is inadequate for the following reasons:

Christian women are sustained by Christ; he is the one the woman submits to; he is her leader. The man plays no mediatory role for the woman; indeed, in orthodox theology neither he, nor any human can fulfil what Christ alone does. Women have the same access and accountability to Christ; and her spirituality is not mediated by another human; in Christ alone her hope is found; he is her rock, her strength, her song (Harris, 2017b:10).

Furthermore, to interpret *kephalē* as meaning “authority over” would mean that God has eternal authority over Christ, which borders on heresy (Harris, 2017b:10). Although Christ temporarily gave up equality with the Father when he lived on earth, he remains an equal part of the Trinity (Giles, 2007a). Christ is not eternally subordinate to the Father in function or authority, therefore the permanent subordination of women to men is not justified.

Paul operated within his cultural context. He was a first-century Jewish man who lived in a world that took both slavery and subordination of women for granted. In the book of Ephesians, Paul not only tells women to be subordinate to their husbands but exhorts slaves to obey and respect their masters. In our contemporary society, we no longer see Paul as condoning or endorsing slavery, but rather seeking to keep the peace and promote goodwill in a context where slavery was very firmly established and freedom seemed unattainable (Giles, 2017). By this rationale we should also not take Paul’s exhortation to women to be submissive as “normative for all times and cultures” (Reiher, 2016:44). The exhortations to wives are “simply good practical advice to wives who had no other options” (Giles, 2017). It is also likely that Paul did not want female believers challenging traditional values and in doing so discrediting the word of God (Reiher, 2016:44).

It is also argued that in Timothy 2:8–15 Paul lays a blanket prohibition on all women from teaching men. But this interpretation isolates the scripture from its context (Reiher, 2016). A closer look at the wider picture reveals that the author of 1 and 2 Timothy also speaks of both women and men learning and teaching and describes a situation where the church

was “under attack from false teachers” and women were involved (Reiher, 2016:42). Paul forbids these women from teaching because they had not been properly instructed and need further education in “sound doctrine” (Reiher, 2016). Therefore if this verse is seen in its context then it implies that it was “an exceptional situation” rather than a universal ruling (Reiher, 2016). In Paul’s own ministry he ministered with women and allowed them significant roles in teaching (e.g. Phoebe, Junia, Priscilla, etc.) (Saysell, 2017). In fact, Giles argues that, given the cultural context, the number of women in leadership in the early Pauline churches is “breath-taking” (Giles, 2017).

A wider reading of Paul’s writings and a closer look at the context suggest that Paul was somewhat counter-cultural. In Galatians 3:28 we read, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”. While these distinctions continue to exist, they should not influence how we relate to others in the church (Seysall, 2017). God’s gift of salvation and his call to discipleship are open to all, regardless of gender or ethnicity and socio-economic class. This should transform our relationships with others and encourage us to fight against any form of discrimination (Reiher, 2016:46).

Paul’s view on how husbands and wives should relate to each other was counter-cultural for his context. In 12 instances in this Bible passage “he makes the opportunities, rights and privileges of the man and woman exactly the same” (Giles, 2017). Paul wrote “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does” (1 Cor. 7:4–6). This placed husbands and wives on equal footing and was revolutionary teaching in a patriarchal culture that saw wives as the property of their husbands (Dutta, 2017:53). Paul asked husbands, as well as wives, to “Be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ” (Eph. 5:21). He also subverted patriarchy by exhorting husbands to sacrificially serve their wives, and to love their wives, “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25) (Giles, 2017).