

# Through men, by men, for men: Christianity and the quest for gender equality



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## overview

This *perspective* looks at how the Christian faith sustains gender inequality both inside and outside the church, and it highlights the contradiction between the liberating message of the Bible and the oppressive praxis of the life of the church.

## keywords

Christian, Bible, gender equality, men

## Introduction

The purpose of this *perspective* is to reflect on the role played by the Christian faith in the sustenance of gender inequality both inside and outside the church. The views are offered as partisan reflections of an African male.

The need to reflect on the role the Christian faith plays in the interface between gender, culture and rights is necessitated by two key factors. Firstly, because there are many women who profess and practise the faith, thus keeping the church alive in many respects despite real experiences of exclusion, marginalisation, discrimination and subordination, the quest for answers needs to continue. Secondly, the national quest for gender equality is not just a secular-political issue confined to public spaces, with other spaces, such as religion, declared sacred grounds where no-one dare tread except the 'holy' ones.

The central theme running through this *perspective* is that of how we should understand, even if it is just partly, the contradiction between the liberating message of the Bible and the oppressive praxis of the life of the church.

## Context

While women form the majority in the churches, they remain largely excluded from

policy formulation and decision-making. There are few exceptions, but even in such cases, the norm is that women become leaders by virtue of their being married to pastors. In charismatic churches, the pastors' wives somehow become pastors in their own right. In other places, they become imposed leaders of women in the church due to their marital status.

While some churches ordain women, it remains of concern that to date only one 'mainline' church, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, has a woman bishop, Bishop Purity Malinga. Thus women do not rise above certain levels of service. It should worry us that the biggest and oldest mainline church, the Catholic Church, does not ordain women to this day.

Women remain, by and large, absent from the Bible and history of the church. At best, they appear as silent voices, supporting actors in the story of the Bible. This is true from Sarah to Deborah to Elizabeth. Even Mary, the mother of Jesus, has to lose her child's ancestry to that of her husband: Jesus the son of Joseph... the son of David.

## Why is this so?

There are a number of dominant discourses as to why women remain secondary in the life and teachings of the church.

Firstly, in the kyriarchal community that the

church is, men occupy the position of head. The message is that they were created first to be the head (cf Genesis 2:21-22). Because they are the head, it is they with whom God communicates (cf 1 Corinthians 11) so that women – at least those who have men in their lives – should not hear or be heard in the church. Thus the effort to submit to the Lordship of God in heaven, became for women a case of submitting to men! Secondly, the writing and interpretation of the biblical texts was a preserve of men. In the patriarchal society that produced the Bible, men's own contexts and realities informed their understanding and interpretation of the message of God. This reality has become part of the tradition of the church and men continue to dominate the task of mediating and interpreting the message of the faith.

Arguably, the reason that men, in the main, continue to visit injustices upon women and resist gender equality, is a result, to a degree, of the way they were socialised. The church has and continues to play a major role in this.

Accepting that men are created superior to women and have a divinely ordained right to be their leaders, remains a core teaching sustaining patriarchy. At best, women are condemned to perpetual dependency, with men becoming their benevolent masters. At worst, men use the power bestowed upon them by such teachings to do whatever they want to do to women and for women.

Resistance to change and transformation is led by men. Without offering much evidence, it can be argued that such resistance is based on men fearing the loss of their privileged positions in the life and power systems of society. For men, the oppressive (to women) teachings and practices are maintained in the church to protect the interests of men, accumulated over the centuries, using varying texts, traditions and interpretations thereof.

## Going forward

How then can we go forward? The fact that women continue to hold onto the faith dictates that faith cannot simply be disregarded nor can its value be discounted.

Discourse on transformation towards gender equality must seek to identify the agency of women believers who manage to traverse the convoluted path of believing in the saving power of God, mediated through the often oppressing institution of the church that is seen through their own exclusion and marginalisation. This discourse should not be dominated by men, as is the case with theology traditionally. Women should be given the space to hear God without male mediators, to interpret sacred texts from their own experiences and to formulate their own responses to new realities.

The discourse must also seek to retrieve past and present contributions of women in the history and life of the church and give these due recognition.

This is not a call for a selective reading of the Bible by women alone, but is a call for an inclusive reading where women are regarded as rightful members of the community. As a communion, the church must embrace and affirm all its constituent parts in its heritage, worship and proclamation.

But this should not just be an internal discourse among fellow believers. Society should broadly seek to subject the teachings, practices and value systems of religious institutions to some common good and egalitarianism.

The right to believe and practise religion should not be allowed to trample on basic human rights. Extra care should be taken that institutions of society are not used as obstacles towards serving the common good.

The worth of religious values to the broader society should not only be determined by religion's own intrinsic claims, but by how these claims help to make the lives of people better.

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