



FAITH MOVEMENT FOR GENDER JUSTICE

## Eastern Africa Faith Leaders' Symposium on Gender Justice

Desmond Tutu Centre, Nairobi. 23-24 November 2015

Presentation by Revd Terrie Robinson, Co-Chair,  
Inception Group for the Side by Side Movement for  
Gender Justice

First of all congratulations to Jane and Eliud and the entire planning group for this Regional Workshop of East Africa. And thank you for asking me to join you. I'm really thrilled to be here.

Side by Side, the Faith Movement for Gender Justice is a movement of hope. And seeing you gathered here for this Regional Workshop for East Africa strengthens that hope. You have been willing to set aside precious time, some of you have travelled long distances; you have brought your bright energy here because you share with Side by Side the desire to see, to experience and to practise just relationships between women and men, girls and boys – in our nations, in our communities, in our homes.

This Workshop will help us to network, to share our experience, to learn new things, to build our capacity so that we are better equipped to work for the transformation needed in order for just relationships to become a reality.

### **Why Side by Side: Faith Movement for Gender Justice**

So how and why did Side by Side emerge with all its audacious hope and its determination to gather faithful people to the task of transformation for gender justice?

In March this year representatives from about seventeen international Churches, ecumenical networks and mission and development agencies met near London in the UK to look at the theological imperative for gender justice and we decided that since we share a vision of equal power relations between women and men, and since we could travel further in our efforts for gender justice if we travelled together, then we should begin working towards a joint commitment and an action plan for moving forward together.

[slide]An international Inception Group was formed to get things moving [and I co-chair that Inception Group]. And things have been moving along. More faith-based organisations have become involved in the Movement. A website is being built so that we can communicate more effectively and gather resources in one place. And we have a brand new logo that's going to look like this. You can see that the logo features two candles, side by side. They represent light which is such a strong symbol of our faith. They represent women and men working side by side, all of us working side by side in a movement for gender justice.

As time goes by we are hoping to work side by side with leaders and organisations of other faith traditions who also want to do something about gender justice. So we think it's a good logo and we hope you like it.

One of the priorities of Side by Side is to encourage and to build the capacity of church leaders to take a lead in mobilising their communities to tackle gender injustice. This Regional Workshop for East Africa is the second of a series of Regional and National Workshops that we're planning over the next two or three years. The first Regional Workshop was for Latin America and the Caribbean last month. The next ones, we hope, will be for Southern Africa and for Europe. And so on. As yet, there is no region in the world that has got gender equality right.

### **Scripture and theological reflection**

Theological reflection on gender is going to be an essential part of Side by Side's activities. How important it was for Phyllis to get this Workshop off to a good start with our Bible study this morning.

We need to reflect theologically on gender and ground our work for gender justice in Scripture because we need to be able to show that gender justice is all part of the human flourishing that God wants for us – God's daughters, God's sons.

In Scripture, the story of God and humankind is a story of relationship, and longing for relationship: God's costly seeking of relationship with us; our seeking of relationship with God; our relationship with one another. And the quality of our relationship with one another is not seen as somehow disconnected from the quality of our relationship with God. Walking humbly with God is spoken in the same breath as doing justice and loving kindness.

From ancient times, there has been a profound belief that 'God created humankind in the divine image ... male and female he created them. And yet women and men have become trapped in distorted mythologies around power. We have to take some responsibility for that.

Religious people have quite a history of perpetuating oppressive attitudes towards women. We have allowed the misuse of Scripture and the traditions of our faith to feed into a theology which devalues women; which perpetuates silence around violence and other injustices against women, which sees women as inferior beings whose word isn't worth very much and who are not fit for authoritative roles.

We can't let that go on. In a spirit of repentance and in faith, it's time for us to look at Scripture again and reclaim its positive and often subversive nature – reclaim it, preach it, teach it and embody it - so that we, as people of faith, are never known as the ones who held gender justice back.

This is what the theologian Susan Durber says in Christian Aid's theology of gender 'Of One Flesh':

[slide] "To reflect before God on gender ... 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."

That's a great place to start.

Side by Side's ambition is enormous! Because the positive empowerment of women and the positive empowerment of men to live and work in just relationship requires nothing less than a

transformation of individuals, and a transformation of cultures, and a transformation of all our communities. It means looking through the eyes of girls who are valued by their families and communities as less than boys. It means looking through the eyes of women whose voices and contributions and needs have been marginalised, or the billion women in our world who have experienced sexual or gender-based violence. It means looking through the eyes of men and boys who find the burden of social stereotypes imposed upon them to be crushing.

[slide]This is Side by Side's working definition of gender justice:

Gender justice refers to: ...a world where everybody, women and men, boy and girls are valued equally; are able to share equitably in the distribution of power, knowledge and resources; and are free from cultural and interpersonal systems of privilege and oppression, and from violence and repression, based on gender."

This is what we're looking for and the good news is that we're not starting from ground zero. A huge amount has already been achieved and we must allow that to encourage us.

[slide]A number of international instruments have helped.

[slide]Since 1979 we have had CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

[slide]In 1995 the Beijing Platform for Action flagged up 12 key areas of concern where urgent action was needed to ensure greater equality between women and men, girls and boys. It's been an important benchmark and accelerator of progress.

[slide]During the 15-year time span of the Millennium Development Goals, significant and substantial progress has been made in meeting many of them. There have been improvements in healthcare and health. We're told that the number of people living in extreme poverty has halved... But it has to be said that progress has been uneven, particularly for women and girls.

- Significantly more girls have been enrolled in primary school, but at secondary level too many girls are falling away.
- Globally, women still enter the labour market on an unequal basis to men, even after accounting for educational background and skills.
- Women suffer heavily from the consequences of war and conflict – just a few years ago, Major General Patrick Cammaert, who used to be the commander of the UN Peacekeeping Operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo famously said, "It is now more dangerous to be a woman than to be a soldier in modern conflict". But in recent years women have comprised fewer than 4 per cent of signatories to peace agreements and less than 10 per cent of negotiators at peace tables.<sup>1</sup>
- A growing body of evidence has shown that women are disproportionately affected by climate change, largely because women make up the majority of the world's economically poor; they do most of the agricultural work in some parts of the world; they often bear more responsibility for household food security and for harvesting water and fuel for day to day survival. Post-disaster, women are usually at higher risk of being placed in unsafe, overcrowded shelters because of

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<sup>1</sup> 1992 to 2011. Source: UN Women

their lack of assets. When there are cyclones, floods, and other disasters that require mobility, cultural constraints on women's movements may hinder their timely escape, or their access to shelter or their access to health care.<sup>2</sup>

- Every day that passes, 38,000 girls are coerced into marriage.<sup>3</sup>
- Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the second highest cause of death for 15-19 year-old girls globally.<sup>4</sup>
- Women make up two-thirds of the world's human trafficking victims.<sup>5</sup>
- Worldwide, 35 per cent of women have experienced either physical and/or sexual violence.<sup>6</sup>
- Female genital mutilation (FGM) affects more than 125 million girls and women alive today.<sup>7</sup>
- Globally, about 5,000 so-called honour killings of women are perpetrated by family members each year.<sup>8</sup>
- There has been considerable progress in the numbers of women involved in national governance but just three countries have an even ratio of women and men in parliament.<sup>9</sup>

Now we are entering the era of the Sustainable Development Goals, the SDGs, which are binding on all our countries.

[slide]We have SDG 5 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' as a stand-alone goal and this time it has a more searching group of indicators for success. It includes targets to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, including trafficking, and to eliminate all harmful practices such as early or forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

So where do faith communities fit in with all this? Our nations have signed on to all manner of conventions and protocols. 139 national constitutions now include guarantees of gender equality. In 150 countries women now have equal rights to own property. Many countries have National Action Plans for tackling sexual and gender-based domestic violence.

The thing is, people have to catch up with all those things. In our communities, changes to gendered social norms have lagged behind changes to national legislation and the signing on to international protocols and conventions. It is still the case that customary law and old habits and entrenched harmful attitudes frequently predominate over state laws. Protocols, conventions, legislation are only worth something if there is political will, if there is awareness and transformation in our cities and towns and in our remote rural areas, in our villages and in our homes.

This is where we come in as people of faith. Because we are in every community. Because people listen to faith leaders. Because we are in a great position to be challenging harmful cultural norms and practices. We can teach life-bringing alternatives and we can model different ways of dealing with one another. We can be the transformation we long to see.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, In some areas of India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, more than 80 per cent of those killed by the 2004 tsunami were women

<sup>3</sup> Plan International, 2014

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organisation, 2014

<sup>5</sup> UNODC

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organisation, 2014

<sup>7</sup> World Health Organisation, 2014

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Population Fund

<sup>9</sup> UN Women, 2015

This is all our work. Seeking gender justice isn't "women's work". We need to correct that paradigm. Men and women need to work for this in a spirit of partnership and mutuality. In fact, it's by working together that we actually model the outcome we long to see.

One of the present realities in our Churches and in other faith traditions is that most faith leaders are men. We might say that the low representation of women at leadership level leaves a predominantly male leadership with a particular responsibility for standing in solidarity with women.

It's so good to see so many men participating in this workshop. We need male gender champions; brave and faithful men who will be agents of change among their peers and in their communities.

I sincerely hope that this Workshop will inspire and equip you to create opportunities in your own contexts for local church leaders – ordained and lay – to reflect on the challenges and achievements around gender justice and how we as disciples of Jesus Christ can work for transformation. So often, when we provide such opportunities, we find that we are pushing against an open door and outcomes can be really very positive.

Faith leaders have enormous potential to influence their communities. UN agencies and NGOs may come in, run a programme or two, and then leave. But faith leaders remain with their people and have an on-going leadership role and influence. They know their people and they know their local culture, so they are in an authoritative position to question cultural traditions and practices that do harm, that burden or diminish women and girls.

### **Resources to help us**

There is a growing resource of all sorts of different types of material to help us on this journey. Hopefully you have brought some with you. The Side by Side website will be gathering resources – and please do help us with that.

### **The 16 Days of Activism**

A quick word about the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence since they begin in just two days' time. Gender-based violence is one of the most pervasive and damaging manifestations of unequal power relations between men and women.

Most victims of such violence are women and girls but of course men and boys can also be victims of gender-based violence, and stigma is attached to them by society every bit as much as it is to women.

The global cost of gender-based violence - and its impact on development, on economies, on health - is incalculable. Its impact on individual human lives is incalculable. And it's the impact on individual human lives, not numbers and statistics, which demands our attention, our righteous anger, and our urgent action.

Once, when Jesus wanted to explain something to his disciples he put a child among them. So let's put a child among us now.

[slide]This is 14-yr-old Rosina. At the time of this photo being taken, she was working in a South Asian brothel. Like many other young girls in the brothels, she was being given a daily dose of a

steroid drug called Oradexon - the same preparation given to cattle to make them fatter. It makes the girls look older and it also makes them plump and 'attractive to customers'.<sup>10</sup>

This isn't what God wants for his daughters, but for Rosina this was an awful normality. There was no level playing field for Rosina. She was growing up economically, socially and politically powerless. She had no say at all in what was happening to her body or to her life.

The work we are doing, as exhausting as it may sometimes be, is worth it for even one girl who needs liberating into life, or one boy, or one woman, or one man.

So on behalf of Side by Side's Inception Group, I thank you, sincerely thank you, for being here. You are a blessing to the Faith Movement for Gender Justice and my prayer is that during this Workshop the Holy Spirit will strengthen you with fresh energy for the work ahead and for seeking a coordinated approach towards gender justice in your own contexts and in your region. We must make sure this Faith Movement for Gender Justice doesn't grow weary, and more than that, so that it gains momentum and awakens the imagination and commitment of millions. Amen.

23 November 2015

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<sup>10</sup> ActionAid April 2010;  
[www.actionaid.org.uk/102400/a\\_dangerous\\_drug\\_at\\_work\\_in\\_bangladeshi\\_brothels.html](http://www.actionaid.org.uk/102400/a_dangerous_drug_at_work_in_bangladeshi_brothels.html)