

# GOD'S GOOD NEWS FOR WOMEN, AND GENDER ISSUES

**Beulah Herbert**

## **Introduction**

The bible is a primary source for a view of God's good news for women. So we begin with the biblical view.

God's good news was given to both men and women (Gen. 3:14, 15; 12:3; Exo. 3:8; Mk. 1:14, 15; Acts 2: 1-4). The promise of the saviour, the election of a people of God, the preaching of the kingdom of God, the new era of the Holy Spirit and the church, and the life of the community of the redeemed with the vision of the New Heaven and New Earth, belong to both men and women.

Beginning from the historical width of the bible, women have been recipients, retellers and bearers of God's good news and also displayers of faith in the family, church and society. The church through the ages has included women in whatever way and measure that could be. The Protestant Reformation gave greater impetus for women. The modern missionary movement since the eighteenth century has included women. To give a broad sweep, the wives of the missionaries and later single women missionaries formed a large part of the hosts that spread around the globe to bear the good news.<sup>1</sup> The so-called bible women played a key role in being recipients, retellers and bearers of God's good news for women. Women in secluded *zenana*<sup>2</sup> became recipients of God's good news.

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<sup>1</sup> C.B. Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1961),193; for an account of the personal narrative of bible women in China, see Vanessa Wood, 'The Part Played by Chinese Women in the Formation of an Indigenous Church in China: Insights from the Archive of Myfanwy Wood, LMS Missionary', *Women's History Review* 17:4 (Sep. 2008), 599-602; for more information about women missionaries and bible women see the other articles in the same volume.

<sup>2</sup> *Zenana* is the secluded place where the women of the family lived and when women had no freedom to move out, the women missionaries and bible women went into the women to teach them the bible, health, hygiene, basic education. Another example of women receiving the gospel is the Secret Christian of Sivakasi in Tamil Nadu, India. These women of orthodox Hindu families could not openly profess their faith in Christ and hence the name. Many of them have suffered for their hidden faith. The woman teacher would go mostly when the men had gone for work. Bibles were hidden in the storage container for rice.

A hundred years ago the women's suffragette movement was in full swing, and their argument for women's rights had great effect in establishing the legal status of women. But, as we consider the world today, we would find the role of women in many societies far from equal to that of men, far from the biblical one of being 'all one in Christ Jesus'. In many societies, in many Christian societies, despite their enormous strengths and maternal instincts, women are oppressed, over worked, abused and given subservient roles in societies. Even in Christian cultures women are often undervalued, indeed in some cases the church itself reinforces the traditional, cultural dominance of men and allows, encourages, women to be considered as second class citizens to be 'used' at their husband's pleasure.

This issue of gender is an enormous one, too large to be tackled fully here, but examples from recent research, in Asia and in Africa, highlight some of the issues that the church needs to address if its mission is to be holistic.

The first examples consider research done among Tamil Christian Women in south India (Herbert, 2008). This showed women as recipients of the gospel, as retellers of the gospel, as bearers of the gospel, as displayers of faith, as participants in the church and in house groups, and raises specific issues pertaining to gender issues.

### **Women Recipients of the Gospel**

From the earliest days women were central recipients of the gospel. Numerous stories are typified by Hamsa's father's grandmother, who was converted by Ringeltaube of the London Missionary Society (LMS), in the Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu, southern India, in the beginning of the nineteenth century. She was one sister with sixteen brothers in the extreme south of India. They lived in houses that formed a circle with a temple for the snake god, the family god, in the middle. Two children of two of the brothers were affected by diarrhoea and were vomiting blood. Their efforts to appease the snake god were of no avail. Then Ringeltaube visited them and prayed, kneeling beside the beds. Not only were the children healed, but the next morning two snakes were also found dead in front of the temple. The brothers, recognising that the snakes were powerless in the presence of Jesus Christ, took two other live snakes, tied them in unbleached new cloth, strangled them and demolished the temple. They vowed to follow Jesus and became Christians, through the influence of these faithful women.<sup>3</sup>

### **Women Retellers of the Gospel**

Women recipients of the gospel also become retellers of the life-transforming Good News. In the Indian sub-continent until the early 1970s Indian indigenous

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<sup>3</sup> Beulah Herbert, 'Tamil Christian Women at the Turn of the Millennium: Mission Initiatives and Gender Practice', *Women's History Review* 17:4 (Sep. 2008), 616-17.

mission agencies did not generally recruit single Indian women missionaries for cross cultural evangelistic work. But at present every agency recruits single women missionaries.<sup>4</sup> These women have done amazing work, particularly in the areas of evangelism of women and children and also in bible translation to languages and dialects that have not yet been written down.

A particular feature of women retellers of the Good News is itinerary preachers. As early as the nineteenth century the daughter of Thanjai Vedanayagam Sastriar, a Tamil Christian poet, writer and evangelist, was an itinerary preacher both in Tamil and English. She went to Colombo to preach the gospel also through music. Not all women are itinerant preachers. But as it may be seen from the experience of Tamil Christian women, they bring specific gifts and inroads to a community when they are involved in the evangelistic efforts of the church, teaching in the Sunday school and vacation bible school and undertaking their own evangelistic enterprises such as having women's house groups and neighbourhood Sunday classes.

### Women Bearers of the Gospel

Women who receive and retell the Good News also bear the gospel in various ways, as seen particularly through their involvement in the life and ministry of the church. A study of the literature shows that women have distinctive feminine issues, the meeting of which emphasises the value of observing Sunday teaching throughout all of the week's activities. Activities such as sharing stories of inner peace and contentment achieved through their involvement in the church or religious activities, making the point that they do their bit humbly, without the need to make tall claims, ennobling women's involvement in community and church based on biblical examples, highlighting the benefits, drawing the contrasts, and boldly claiming a right to be involved, which have led to reports of powerful and active transformation as a result of their active and distinct engagement.

In the research into Tamil women's self-perception of their roles, considering the issue of women preaching and teaching, there are narratives of God's approval in justifying women's preaching and teaching, including claims of personal approval and eulogising. The issue of women's role in church administration, though, is described through a spectrum of responses such as disapproval and approval, from vehement protestation against their involvement to others advocating their contribution as valuable.

Similarly the question of women's ordination also drew very varied responses. Some disapproved, seemingly for the reason of personal objection. Some others brought out arguments concerning pollution, conflict with the supposed role of women, psychological and religious obstacles, and their own

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Thambusamy and Beulah Herbert, 'Women and Gender Issues in Christian Missions in India', in Roger E. Hedlund and Paul Joshua Backiaraj (eds.), *Missiology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: South Asian Perspectives* (Delhi: ISPCK/MIIS, 2004), 588-90.

interpretation of Paul's sayings. Others were ambivalent in their opinion. And some approved it, claiming God's approval of the fitness of all to serve in this role regardless of gender. Using biblical texts and rational argument to illustrate the evidence of basic talent, and explaining their theological understanding of scripture, by illustrating God's call to women in this area and the effects of guidance and training, all as arguments in favour.<sup>5</sup>

### Women Displayers of Faith

A significant aspect of God's good news for women is the way their faith is displayed in all areas of life. A significant contribution to female empowerment comes from the way the women point to 'faith' being a crucial factor in their lives – in moulding and enabling them, and then carrying them through life, despite a variety of personal and family challenges. Mispah, one of those who have chosen singleness, pointed to faith as the most important ingredient of her spinster life. Jeya, separated from her abusive husband, testified that it is faith and God's grace that have seen her and her two sons through the hard times. Chandramathy was married at the age of fifteen to a widower cousin with small children. She stated that through all the ups and downs of financial loss, sickness and death of her husband, it was faith and prayer that brought her through.

Ester, an orphan, was brought up by a Christian family but later left to fend for herself. "Though I was an orphan my husband never treats me as one. If it had not been for God's grace, my relatives would have left me nowhere and I would not have been in such a good state with a caring family." On the other hand, special involvement in music has given empowerment to Geethakumari and Bharathamani. They are both part of the Christian Cultural Academy, which has concerts to raise funds for *Utavum Carangkal*. Bharathi says, "Singing God's song makes my hair stand on end. I want to use for God the gift God has given me."<sup>6</sup>

### Women Participants in the Church

The participation of women in the life of the church may be seen in the following example of the Kodambakkam church.

Since the beginnings of Kodambakkam church in 1956, the women of the congregation have been actively participating in its life in at least six ways – in the Women's Fellowship and its outreach efforts; Christian outreach efforts among local college students and working women living in a private hostel; a bible study for women on Wednesday evenings; fasting prayer for women every fourth Friday; support for polio victims in Kanchipuram hospital; and

<sup>5</sup> Beulah Herbert, *Self Perception of Tamil Christian Women: Narrative Analysis of Gender Practice*, Part II (VDM Verlag Dr. Muller, Mauritius, 2010), 106-7.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert, *Self Perception of Tamil Christian Women*, 117-18.

various sales to raise funds for church building and several mission enterprises. Apart from these activities, the women of the church and several young girls participate actively in regular programmes open to both sexes – village evangelism every third Sunday; visits to the Home for the Aged every second Sunday; weekly Friday evening bible study; prayer for cross-cultural mission work led by the Indian Missionary Society on the first day of the month and for the Friends' Missionary Prayer Band on Thursdays; as well as all-night prayer for both men and women every fifth Friday.

The one-third membership allocation for women on the pastorate committee has been maintained. In fact, they more than fill that requirement, because one committee place is set aside for the representative from the Sunday school, and this is invariably a woman, since the majority of the Sunday school teachers are female. These female committee members actively participate in the pastorate committee's discussions, administration, counting of the collection and various such duties. Other women are zealous in reading the lesson, collecting the offertory and carrying forward the communion elements. Some women are involved in preaching not only in this church but also elsewhere, while a few have been active in the Madras Bible League, Apostolic Christian Assembly and the Evangelical Church of India.

### **Women in House Groups**

In Tamil Nadu another significant feature of female church life is the house groups conducted by some of the women and their outreach efforts. At the time of writing, there were five such women's house groups. The oldest, which has been going on for more than 40 years, is Saguna's which takes place on Tuesday afternoons; one of its special features is learning memory verses. On the first Friday afternoon of the month there is fasting prayer. The women come 'with fasting', having missed their lunch, and after extended prayer for the past and new months, there is a high tea (not a simple snack or a full meal, but sumptuous food) provided. The others met as follows: in Heera's house on Monday afternoons; Bina's house on Tuesday morning; Jeba's house on Wednesday afternoons; and Swarna's house on Friday afternoons, a group which was started only in 2001. When the fieldwork began in 1999, there was another Friday afternoon group in existence, meeting in Viji's house, which was in abeyance in 2001, as she had just moved house. Thus women could presumably find a suitable group to attend, with the choice of any weekday but Thursday.

The women's house group gatherings consist of singing, sharing of the word (biblical message) and prayer for various needs, including the nation and mission work. Quite often special speakers are invited. At the end a high tea or meal is served. Saguna, Heera and Jeba have a day-long retreat once a year. Some of the women attend more than one of these groups. Jeba has a ministry of house-visiting and prayer among non-Christian women. Her daughter Hepsibah wants to have a prayer ministry career when she grows up. Several

young girls have indicated a desire for a service-oriented career that will help in mission by giving opportunities for showing by word and deed the love and compassion of Jesus Christ.

Outreach efforts are a special feature of Saguna's group. In the past she had led a day-long evangelistic venture of tract distribution and evangelism by visiting houses in any random area. By 2001, she had changed the pattern to concentrate on just one area, a nearby poorer locality, Rajapillai Thottam. Two young women workers of the COME (Christian Outreach for Mission and Evangelism) ministry visit the houses in that locality all day long on Wednesdays. In the evening they conduct a bible class for children while Saguna teaches teenagers and visits more houses. On Thursday afternoons Saguna visits nearby Nallankuppam to conduct a house group for the women in that poorer locality.

Jeyavathy, who is actively involved in the outreach efforts of the Women's Fellowship and the house group in Bina's house, has a 'Sunday school' in her home for women and children of the neighbourhood on Saturday afternoons. She is also a Jesus Calls evangelist.

### Women and Gender Issues

God's good news for women transforms their whole life and gender issues are also addressed by the prophetic voice of the gospel. In a variety of ways and in myriad issues God's good news has changed the life of women. However there is a long way to go to see the abundant life promised by Jesus himself. So we consider the following gender issues that have been and need to be addressed by God's good news.

#### *Female Child*

The issue of the female child comprises of many other issues such as preference for a male child, female foeticide, female infanticide, child marriage, discrimination in treatment, health and education, teenage pregnancy and child labour. Some studies and academic feminist discourse found in text books discuss these issues.

Ujvala Rajadhyaksha and Swati Smita discuss gender inegalitarian culture and the low status accorded to women.<sup>8</sup> Niranjana Pant's book deals with issues about a girl child.<sup>9</sup> Sarada Natarajan also has her study in a book form about female infanticide in Tamil Nadu.<sup>10</sup> K. S. Sunanda's title of her book is

<sup>7</sup> Herbert, *Self Perception of Tamil Christian Women*, 115-16.

<sup>8</sup> Ujvala Rajadhyaksha and Swati Smita, 'Tracing a Timeline for Work and Family Research in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 24-30, 2004, 1674.

<sup>9</sup> Niranjana Pant, *Status of Girl Child and Women in India* (New Delhi: APH Publishing, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Sarada Natarajan, *Watering the Neighbour's Plant: Media Perspectives on Female Infanticide in Tamil Nadu* (Chennai: M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, 1997).

provocative.<sup>11</sup> A girl child is not valued or welcomed. She is disposed of either before or after birth by the use of female feticide or female infanticide.<sup>12</sup> In many situations the girl child is discriminated against by not being given proper nutrition, health care, education and opportunities for holistic development. The causes for imbalance are both economic and social. She is considered a burden and a liability.<sup>13</sup> She is vulnerable and looked upon as a threat to the sexual purity and morality of men. She is to be married off as soon as possible. She is perceived as a temptress and a seductress. She is attributed impurity and pollution. Further there is no problem in the minds of sexists to use her as a piece of convenience. This devaluing of a girl child that leads to discrimination and abuse is an issue responded to by the members of the focus groups.<sup>14</sup>

However, the responses of the women of Kodambakkam church taken for the field work of the study of self perception of Tamil Christian women are quite different. The narrators themselves, women (adults grown up from being girl children!) construct stories of positive valuing of a girl child. Some would go even further and hold that girls are better.

Some stories are responses to the issue of female infanticide and feticide.<sup>15</sup> Everyone is against it. It may be asked whether anyone would be for it. It has been explained [with economic and other social reasons], why some communities and some parents would resort to female infanticide and female feticide. Jeyavathy, Mariam, Saral, Swarna and Jeyam construct stories of outright condemnation rooting their narratives in God's work and biblical theology. It is God who gives the child and it is not right for humans to destroy what God gives. Amar and Gem bemoan the practices of female infanticide and feticide. They narrate stories with their perception of how it may be avoided by finding ways of making a girl child useful and beneficial.<sup>16</sup>

These responses show how God's good news has been for women in applying that good news in various areas of life. Many governmental, non-governmental and faith based organisations raise awareness about the issues of the girl child and work out remedial measures. Abandoned children are given homes. Ms. Jeyalalitha, the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu set up a program 'Cradle' to find place in children's homes for abandoned girl babies. Sex determination and selection, abortion, child marriage are banned. Some agencies offer to take care of the child born of teenage pregnancy without the

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<sup>11</sup> K.S. Sunanda, *Girl Child Born to Die in Killing Fields?* (Madras: Alternative for India Development, 1995), cited in Herbert, *Self Perception*, Part II, 114.

<sup>12</sup> Batra and Dangwal note that because of desire for a male child the female foetus is aborted. G.S. Batra and R.C. Dangwal, *Globalisation and Liberalisation: New Developments* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 2000), 115.

<sup>13</sup> Batra and Dangwal, *Globalisation and Liberalisation*, 107.

<sup>14</sup> Herbert, *Self Perception*, Part II, 114-17.

<sup>15</sup> See Vibhuti Patel, 'Sex Determination and Sex Preselection Tests: Abuse of Advanced Technology', in Rehana Ghadially (ed.), *Women in Indian Society: A Reader* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1988), 178-185.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert, *Self Perception*, Part II, 127-28.

teenager having to resort to abortion. However, the prophetic voice of God's good news has to be sounded more adequately and appropriately.

### *Widowhood and sati*

In south Asia particularly, a widow is nobody.<sup>17</sup> "It may be noted that widowhood brings about much deprivation."<sup>18</sup> "This is stated in the study of Alka Ranjan that widowhood brings about severe social, economic and cultural deprivations."<sup>19</sup> Tamil Christian women's discussion of widowhood brought out responses of positive compassion recognising the difficulties and needs of widows. The contrast between the different treatments of widows in different communities is brought out. While angry disapproval of mean or ill-treatment is displayed, the biblical pattern of God's concern and care for the widow is also highlighted. The positive value of freedom and opportunity for greater service is also recognised. Single status is accepted. Any victimisation or faulting or accusing or denigration is disapproved with defence of the position of the single ones.<sup>20</sup>

God's good news for the widowed women is that God cares for them and has a place for them among the people of God. Though *sati*, widow burning, is banned it is found that it is not completely removed. Stringent action has to be taken and total abolition of *sati* will become a reality only when God's good news is real for the widow.

### *Single parenthood*

This issue, just as some other issues presented in some of the following sections, may not be considered as a gender issue. But, as shown below, because women are socially and economically more vulnerable and weaker, it becomes a significant gender issue. The issue of single parenthood was also discussed in the focus groups. The term 'single parenthood' was used to cover any type of single parenthood, the parent being a single person unmarried, married, separated, divorced or deserted, or a widow or a widower. The narrators in their story construction did not make a fine distinction among these categories. They focused mainly on a parent having to carry on life single-handedly.<sup>21</sup> All the narrators who construct their stories about single parenthood have spoken about divorcees. They construct their perceptions of defence

<sup>17</sup> See Nagamani Rao, 'Widowhood', in J.B. Tellis-Nayak (ed.), *Indian Women: Then And Now. Situation, Efforts, Profiles* (Indore: Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra), 83-86.

<sup>18</sup> This is supported by Fay Fransella and Kay Frost, *On Being a Woman: A Review of Research on How Women see Themselves* (London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1977), 114.

<sup>19</sup> Alka Ranjan, 'Determinants of Well-Being among Widows: An Exploratory Study in Varanasi', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Oct 27, 2001, 4088.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert, *Self Perception*, Part II, 206-7.

<sup>21</sup> Herbert, *Self Perception*, Part II, 176.

against victimisation and advocacy to help. They bring in assertions, claims, religious or biblical points to construct their perceptions. No single narrator has any negative perception or accusation. In their perception, single parenthood has to be responded to with compassion and help. This is different from the dire situation, victimisation and helplessness of the single women, including divorcees portrayed in N. S. Krishnakumari's book.<sup>22 23</sup>

### *Dowry*

Kanakalatha Mukund<sup>24</sup> shows how women's property rights have changed over time, resulting in inequality and discrimination when women lost much of their property rights. She also discusses how the value of a woman has been eroded as the practice of *sridhanam*<sup>25</sup> has degenerated to dowry. *Sridhanam* was originally the jewellery, things and property the parents of the bride gave her for her own use, especially in communities in which the married daughter had no claim to the ancestral or parental property. This has degenerated into a dowry that is demanded and received by the parents of the bridegroom, with no claim for the daughter for the use of or authority over the dowry.<sup>26</sup> The practice of dowry, being the cash given by the parents of the bride to the parents of the bridegroom, is prevalent in many communities especially in south India. Many of the Tamil Christians also follow this custom. Many do not approve of this. The members of the focus group respond to this issue in various ways. Shashi Jain notes that even the educated have accepted dowry as part of the system.<sup>27 28</sup> Whatever explanation may be given, the practice of dowry demeans the person. The practice of bride price has also degenerated and become demeaning. So God's good news has to be applied to this area too. The Indian Government legally prohibits the practice of dowry. But it is not strictly applied. One way of combating this evil practice is for God's people to take a stand against this. This is seen among some of the people of God.

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<sup>22</sup> N.S. Krishnakumari, *Status of Single Women in India* (New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> Herbert, *Self Perception*, Part II, 183.

<sup>24</sup> Kanakalatha Mukund, 'Women's Property Rights in South India: A Review', *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 29, 1999, 1352-58.

<sup>25</sup> *Sridhanam* is the gift in cash or kind or both given to the woman by her parents when she is married.

<sup>26</sup> Herbert, *Self Perception*, Part II, 114-15.

<sup>27</sup> Shashi Jain, *Status and Role Perception of Middle Class Women* (New Delhi: Puja Publishers, 1988), 99. Caplan notes that the Brahmins take dowry, Patricia Caplan, *Class and Gender in India* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985), 45.

<sup>28</sup> Herbert, *Self Perception*, Part II, 141.

### *Domestic violence*

Domestic violence is mentioned separately though it may be considered as one form of violence against women. There is awareness-raising by various agencies in the area of domestic violence. There are efforts taken to raise awareness also as seen from the article of Nisha Srivastava. This is based on the collection of stories about the efforts of Vanagana, a women's group in Uttar Pradesh. This group organised a campaign for awareness of domestic violence by putting on a street play based on a real life incident and having a discussion.<sup>29</sup> Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj note that there is growing violence against women such as rape, wife beating, family violence, dowry deaths and prostitution. They also note that these women are considered as victims to be saved or as objects of welfare and not as equal participants. Domestic violence brings out two types of response. One is that of laying the burden at the feet of the woman, requiring her to be patient and not provocative, and to keep the peace of the house while resorting to counselling and praying. The other view displays outright disapproval and condemnation of any type of domestic violence, physical, emotional and psychological.<sup>30</sup> Given the facts that both men and women have been created by God in God's image and likeness, and that both are offered new life by the saving work of Jesus Christ, any type of domestic violence is out of place. It is not justified by the reconciling work of Jesus Christ.

### *Sex work*

Sex work includes commercial sex work, call girls and the *devadasi* system of temple prostitution. The issue of sex work also draws a variety of responses. For some there is a positive acceptance with the recognition to help the sex workers come out of their situation. The causal reasons, such as being forced into it because of deception, lack of love in the family, and economic need are also pointed out. However, positive attitudes of compassion and understanding are displayed. Some show disapproval, probably of sex work and not the sex worker. Biblical examples of compassion and forgiveness are upheld.<sup>31</sup>

Quite a few government, non-government and faith based agencies are working for the betterment of the life of the commercial sex workers. In Asia it is found that women are forced into sex work. Apart from the effort to liberate them from the sex work, there is an effort taken to care for their health and hygiene, teach them income generation work, and take care of their children.

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<sup>29</sup> Nisha Srivastava, 'Exposing Violence against Women', *EPW* 34 (6 Feb., 1999), 453-54. Neetha has studied women domestics in Delhi. She has examined the role of the women in migration, job search and social networking. However she has also discovered social control by males, patriarchal relations and wife beating. N. Neetha, 'Making of Female Breadwinners', *EPW* (April 24-30, 2004), 1681-88.

<sup>30</sup> Herbert, *Self Perception*, Part II, 207.

<sup>31</sup> Herbert, *Self Perception*, Part II, 208.

Sex work includes both young girls and boys. While God's good news is to help them come out of this work, God's people who look for a new heaven and new earth have to address the systemic evil, and pray and work for the routing out of this systemic evil. A lot has still to be done to work out practical ways in which former sex workers may truly become members of the people of God, the redeemed community, celebrating the abundant life Jesus Christ gives.

### *HIV and AIDS*

Why is the issue of HIV and AIDS a gender issue? As in the case of many other similar issues, HIV and AIDS becomes a gender issue because women are affected more. For no reason on their part, women are infected by a sex partner or a mother. This becomes quite important particularly in the case of sex workers and their children. Women in non-western and not-developed countries become more vulnerable. If the man, the bread winner, wastes or dies of AIDS, the destitute woman faces numerous challenges for survival of herself and her family. In these countries where those who live below the poverty line are numerous, an epidemic such as HIV and AIDS devastates those, especially those who struggle without education, employment and life skills. Vast effort is undertaken on behalf of those affected by HIV and AIDS. But this is not enough. Awareness, prevention, medical help, care, support and long term strategic planning and action are necessary. Women are particularly vulnerable in those societies where men demand 'their sexual rights', whenever and however they want, and thus transfer the HIV/AIDS that they have to their wives. However, it is imperative that God's good news becomes real for these persons. By not merely announcing forgiveness of sin, but also including them in the community of God's redeemed, true dignity, respect, love and care will be shown.

### *Practices such as female foot binding and female circumcision*

There are practices such as foot binding in the Far East Asia and female circumcision in some African tribal cultures. These show the underlying attitude and notion that women are commodities and sex objects. Just as *sati* has been banned in India, these have been banned. However, these practices have not completely disappeared. God's good news for women needs to critique and challenge any practice that diminishes the personhood and true humanity of people. In south India the 'upper cloth' controversy, fighting for the right of the lower caste women to wear blouses to cover the upper portion of their bodies, was a significant one. The work of Dhonavur Fellowship in rescuing abandoned children and *devadasis* and the forming of orders of widows are also noteworthy.<sup>32</sup> At present indigenous Indian missions are also

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<sup>32</sup> Thambusamy and Herbert, 'Women and Gender Issues', 587-89.

following the lead in providing habits of proper clothing to the tribals who are not used to clothing. Thus God's good news becomes concretised for women.

### *Violence against women*

This topic is huge. Apart from the ones dealt with already, there are numerous issues such as rape, pornography, media violence, militarism, globalisation, sex tourism, surrogate mother or hired womb, family planning methods, infertility clinics, unethical development projects, caste, unethical biotechnological methods and so on. It may be questioned how some of these issues are gender issues. Women are more vulnerable. A friend said that it was a pain to go to the infertility clinic and finally she refused. After 11 years the couple with prayer had the opportunity of having a girl child. At the time of writing, the Indian media focuses on a German couple who are not able to take home the twins they have had hiring an Indian womb. Globalisation and development displace populations and, in societies that make the woman responsible for domestic duties, fetching firewood, water and essential commodities becomes a struggle for women. Militarism not only produces atrocities in the armed forces but also kills the male soldiers, leaving women widows most affected. It is imperative that God's good news becomes real in the lives of those affected by these issues.

### *Environmental issues*

God's creation is good and the humans are to take care of it. If we hope for a new heaven and new earth we should live in such a way that the present world is not destroyed by our greed and irresponsible use of the resources God has provided. Once again the question may arise how environmental issues become gender issues. It has been explained how women are more vulnerable. When there is depletion of essential resources and natural catastrophes caused or aggravated by human input, women suffer and struggle more. Water scarcity – who walks miles to bring home water? Pollution – who is responsible for house cleaning and taking care of those who fall sick? Lack of nutritional food – who takes care? This is also a vast subject. But when and how will God's good news sound its clarion call of prophetic voice?

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## **A Christian Response to Gender Abuses**

Increasingly, churches around the world are responding to such unscriptural practices by sound bible study on the role of women, first through pastors and then through local churches. But, it should be reiterated that many churches still reinforce the male domination roles of traditional, tribal cultures and thus miss out on the God-given strengths and qualities of their sisters in Christ. Some still hold a judgemental attitude to those suffering from HIV/AIDS. Some cast them out from the fellowship with the only advice that they should pray for God's

healing and trust that he will heal them, not recognising that God also works through medical and physical means.

To develop gender issues positively, the two genders can be considered separately. Some issues are related to women, their self image and potential, others to men and their attitudes and, often, entrenched practices.

Women have enormous creative instincts, and so many of the best development and relief work is focussed on, and builds upon, women's materialistic instincts. It has been said that "if you educate a boy you educate a man, but if you educate a girl you educate a woman and a family and a community." The scandal of girls' under-education is shameful, to Christians especially.

Many examples of women's leadership could be given. In Kenya some of the best community work is headed up by a woman in the CCS (Church Communities Services) of ACK (the Anglican Church of Kenya). In Zimbabwe, some excellent HIV/AIDS work with a rapidly increasing network of church based projects looking after HIV/AIDS orphans has been done in ZOE (Zimbabwe Orphans Endeavour), and this is lead by a woman. In India, thousands on lives have been transformed in the slum communities of Delhi, by the ASHA community health and development society, founded and headed up by a woman empowering hundreds of local women Community Health Volunteers. And at the local level it is the women who 'naturally' take prime care of the sick, the elderly, the young and the hungry.

Addressing the attitudes, actions and prejudices of men is more difficult, but it is being tackled. It can only be tackled by local male leaders, which means the male leaders of the local churches, as only they will have influence over other local men. One of the most encouraging programmes on changing men's attitudes to gender issues has been developed in Zimbabwe and in Bukina Faso<sup>33</sup> (Marshall 2009, Marshall and Taylor 2006). Their work, developed through Tearfund and their partners, is written up as a case study called 'Gender, HIV, and the Church'. Working with groups of local pastors, bible studies have been developed with a series of activities for workshops in the local churches. These are based around biblical passages outlining God's view of the role of women, and real life case studies of sex and gender incidents. They have been very effective at changing people's attitudes and thus behaviour. The most significant changes reported in both urban and rural area included increased testing for HIV, changed behaviour in both men and women, including a reduction in multiple and concurrent partners, and increased discussion within relationships about love and sexuality. In urban

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<sup>33</sup> This work has been written up in M. Marshall and N. Taylor, 'Tackling HIV and AIDS with faith-based communities: learning from attitudes on gender relations, and sexual rights within local evangelical churches in Bukina Faso, Zimbabwe and South Africa', *Gender and Development* 14:3 (November 2006), and also in Tearfund's publication, *Gender, HIV and the Church: A Case Study*, available from [www.tearfund.org](http://www.tearfund.org).

areas, groups reported increased condom use. Young people said they no longer saw HIV as a death sentence, but spoke of increased hope for the future.

All is based on a biblical perspective of gender which recognises that “we are all unique human beings, and that men and women are both created with equal value, in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27). Gender inequalities and socially-constructed ‘roles’ can restrict both men and women from fully using their skills and talent, and damage relationships between them. They can prevent people from realising their full potential as individuals, and growing as men and women into the fullness of life in Christ. Every individual, males and females of all ages, should be encouraged and enabled to reach their potential and so be able to contribute positively to the home, church and society as a whole. (Marshall 2009).

Such a vision for the role of men and women must be developed if our gospel, our mission, is to be holistic and the kingdom of God expressed in all of God’s creations.

