

## **Talking gender and liberation: Conversation towards a generous Christian social ethic of gender**

As believers work through the implications of their faith for their own ethical responses to the salient issues of our times, we each weave together lines of thought, our experiences and our prayerful consideration to construct our own stance. This is work no one can do for us, however much we read or debate there is not a ready made off the shelf solution that will make total sense. Our own stance, as it is formed, can then be shared with others and contribute to their own thinking. This is particularly important if we have a perspective or experience that has been previously overlooked or excluded.

This article then models a process of inner conversation to make explicit that process for one particular Christian woman, at the invitation of the editors. The article is structured as a dialogue, with questions and responses that might help you formulate your own stance, noting what resonates or jars for you. As well as showing the workings of an emerging theology, the dialogue draws on voices from a wide range of sources and seeks to deliberately cite women and writers of colour throughout.

### **Tell us a bit about yourself and your interest in this issue?**

I'm probably a cliché of what is sometimes referred to as 'white feminism' – British, middle-aged, middle class, straight married mother of two. I'm a lay Anglican, and not exactly a minority profile in the average Church setting. The other institutional space I regularly navigate is higher education, in my work as an Associate Professor in the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Warwick.

I moved into higher education teaching having worked in a Careers Advice for many years, and now I teach and supervise students who are working in career development alongside their studies. My own research considers the role of vocation and calling within working lives, bringing together secularised and theological understandings of calling. Within that, I am researching Christian women's experiences and perspectives as my starting point – a corrective to the typical pattern of knowledge creation of researching on and with men before considering whether things are different for women!

So my interest in gender issues is personal, as a woman, and professional. In my teaching I see gender as a key concept in career development. Only by exploring this will we start to understand why women's greatly increased participation in the workforce has not led to anything like equal access to the most powerful positions at the top of organisations, and why this does not seem to be simply a question of time.

Theologically, this leads me to integrate my own understanding of gender within the wider framework of my faith – how it sits alongside the rest of my beliefs, and beyond that what all those beliefs mean for how I live out my faith.

### **What does gender mean to you?**

Firstly, to distinguish it from sex, it's not so much about my biology but is more about the way women and men move through and interact with social spaces. I find it helpful to think about my place in the world as linked systems, each with components which mutually influence one another. At an individual level my gender is part of my personhood along with my physical and psychological

characteristics. Within my social contexts, all these components come together to interact with those around me, and on a grander scale, my position within the wider world at this time.

This means I am less interested in considering whether there are hard-wired sex differences such as women being better than men at multi-tasking but worse at reading maps. Gender is constructed rather than an outworking of essential sex differences which defines men and women as 'equal but different' and therefore best operating in complement to one another in fixed roles. Instead, men and women have learned to be different. The wider world, however, has been organised by men in positions of power in ways they consolidate that power – what we might call 'patriarchy'.

That word 'power' is significant here and is used in lots of ways besides gender, reflecting its unequal distribution and use in oppressions. We will come back to that later.

### **And how does that mean you see God?**

Firstly, I'd reject any idea of God as male! As is often said, I hold God to be 'beyond gender'. However, in a patriarchal context the ways humanity has learned to use gender as we move through the world has led to systematic denial of the full humanity of women, codified through use of scripture and development of doctrine.

So I see it as a constant balance between emphasising common humanity, with both men and women made in the image of God, and recognising where full humanity has been denied to some, by others.

### **And scripture?**

In considering scripture I find myself repeatedly returning to questions about who wrote the text and who they wrote it for. I see any given narrative of an event is partial and offers the perspective of the narrator, just as any interpretation or translation is partial. The selection of accounts which were canonically endorsed was socially situated too. The texts we draw on today are loaded with the political and social context in which they were written. As we invite the Holy Spirit to speak to us today through them, this needs careful consideration.

Other texts can help us too. Reading the novel 'The Wild Girl' by Michele Roberts at the age of 19, was pivotal for me in underlining my understanding of how standpoint determines what is left in and what is left out. The book offers a fictionalised account of power struggles in the early Church, particularly between Mary Magdalene and Peter, and the fuss that greeted Dan Brown's later novel 'The Da Vinci Code' with its suggestion that a pregnant Mary Magdalene reached France, when Roberts depicted that twenty years earlier, shows how women's perspectives are so easily forgotten and lost.

I find it useful to bring forth the women who are named in scripture and inviting women to consider these stories alongside their own experience. Let's make sure we remember Anna as well as Simeon in the Lukan narrative of the presentation in the temple. Let's notice where women like Lydia, Dorcas and Phoebe are named and imaginatively consider their experiences. But we also need to reinterpret them. I find Schussler Fiorenza's (1984) fourfold hermeneutic of suspicion, remembrance, proclamation and actualisation helpful here. For example, take Martha and Mary. Martha is often presented as a woman juggling many domestic duties, taken for granted by the wider group. This in itself can be a powerful encounter, and I can certainly identify with it, but it

remains problematic in both the writer's and then interpreters' spin on Jesus's response. Beginning with 'suspicion' we can realise the assumptions that have been made over time about Martha's role being domestic. In fact the word 'diakona' used for her 'service' could well refer to work outside the home. The doing/being dynamic represented by Mary and Martha can then be reconsidered in relation to ministry, or work in the public sphere.

### **And the Church?**

Like many a social institution, I see the church as having worked into its DNA an unequal, dualistic theology of gender that depicts woman as embodied (as opposed to man as 'head'), sexual, powerless, instinctively caring and nurturing. This is why we have so many instances where women's ministry is denied or is under developed. In my own Church, we have traditionally higher attendance participation of women than men, and roughly equal numbers now going forward to train for ministry. However, patterns relating to age and mode of training mean that women are unlikely to progress to the most influential positions or to lead the largest churches at the same rate as men. It is easy to point to this being a time limited problem: women have only been ordained as priests for 25 years and appointed as bishops for 5. However, the gendered theologies and patterns set in place through history and which have led to the current situation where those who do not accept women's priesthood as valid are still entitled to 'mutual flourishing' seem to me to point to a deeply embedded pattern that will need more transformative action to lead to real change.

### **So, you'd call yourself a feminist then?**

I've no problem in calling myself a feminist and exploring feminist ideas to develop my thinking, praying and living. But it is a complex term. It is often defined as the pursuance of equality between men and women, but that seems under ambitious to me. A levelling up of women and men won't address other forms of inequality and oppression and I would argue for something more transformative.

Feminisms are diverse, too, and have evolved in 'waves'. Early waves such as the suffrage movement looked for women to participate in established structures. More radical forms of feminism see the oppression of women as fundamental, cutting across other forms associated with race and class and look for revolutionary responses. Material feminism focuses on the economic systems' oppressions, whereas cultural feminism is associated with generalisations about all women sharing gendered characteristics. We have feminisms that focus on individual freedoms and eco-feminism which links treatment of women with patriarchal dominance over the earth's resources.

Returning to the 'systems' idea I mentioned earlier, though, if we are all constructed through an interplay of individual and social components, then it stands to reasons that generalisations about women inherent in many of these feminisms must be open to challenge.

One principle challenge is that feminism centres the experiences of privileged, white, western women. That black women's experiences are not represented by feminism led to the development of the term 'womanist'. Alice Walker wrote 'Womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender', and womanist thought is much more than 'black feminism', described by Wilda Gafney as a 'richer, deeper, liberative paradigm'.

A helpful way of considering these problems with feminisms is to look at how aspects of identity 'intersect'. Legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw, 1991) to

convey some of this overlapping of forms of oppression. So, I'm probably most comfortable with the label 'intersectional feminist'.

### What do you mean by 'intersectional'?

The intersection metaphor of road junctions on our path through life allows us to consider the unique circumstances of each individual, in context. With each individual's unique circumstances as central, this is then mediated through aspects of personal identity (changeable and unchangeable), then forms of discrimination such as racism, homophobia or sexism, which in turn are held in place by forces which compound and maintain that discrimination such as socio-economic structures, colonisation and globalisation. This is portrayed by the Canadian Research Institute for Advancement of Women (CRIAOW/ICREF) wheel of intersectionality in fig 1. (Jayakumar, 2017).

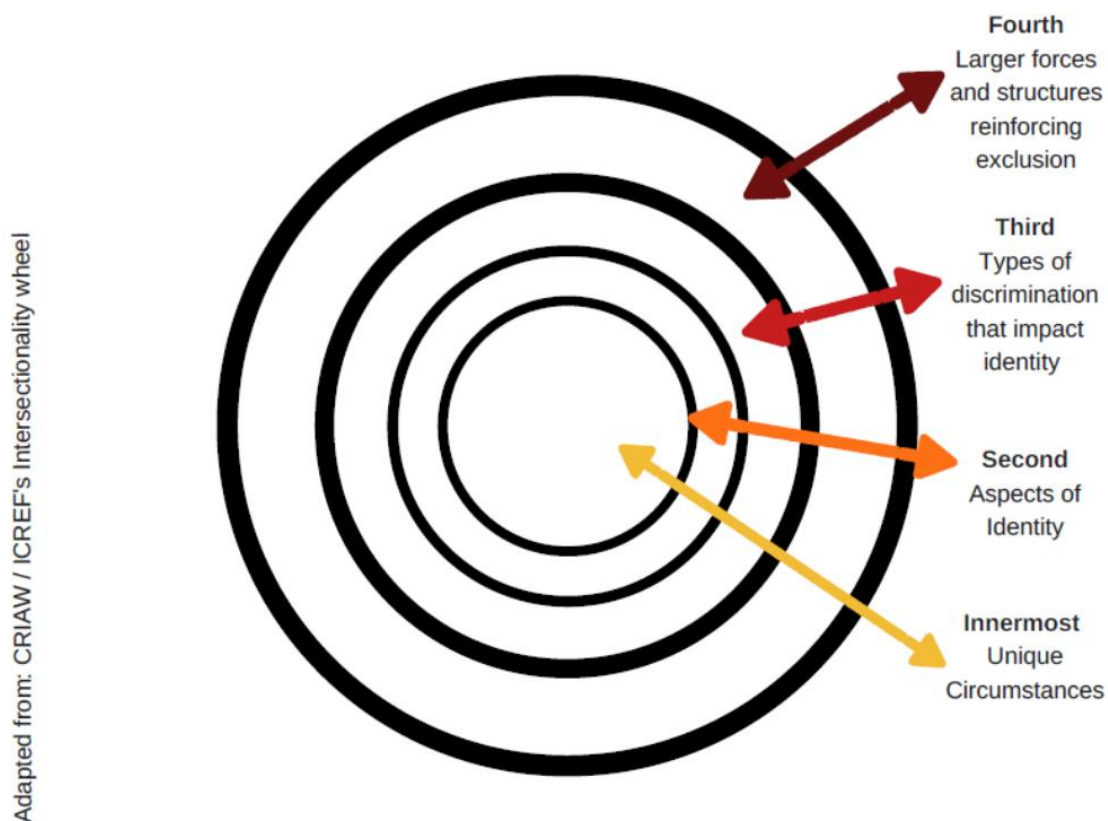


Fig 1: Wheel of Intersectionality (Jayakumar, 2017)

So this calls into question how well different forms of feminism can handle the existence of other forms of oppression and acknowledge the diversity of women's experience. Clearly, women are not the only people who are disadvantaged by unequal social structures, lack of opportunity, discrimination, violence and the myriad ways that the status quo is maintained. Race, sexuality, class, disability and culture are just some of the other forms of oppression we need to consider. These intersect to compound disadvantage.

## **So what does being an intersectional feminist mean for you then?**

What that means for my view of the world then is that is not simply a **patriarchy** (a dualistic system which represses across a number of axes and renders public space male). This is reflected in social structures and construct that limit power to a narrow demographic and has impact beyond gender: indeed Schussler Fiorenza's term 'kyriarchy' or 'rule of the master' reflects other forms of oppression. This in turn shows how the negative impact on women who have multiple disadvantages is greater.

The term 'master' particularly evokes colonial and white dominance over those of other races and particularly the legacy of oppressive regimes such as slavery. Feminism in its development has not until quite recently considered the intersection of race and gender but intersectionality reminds us of how they can compound one another. White women have been criticised for silencing black women within feminism, seeking to speak for all women. It is easy to fall into the trap of 'white feminism', in its worst forms this can look a lot like a middle class hobby, commodified into 'Girl power' sweatshirts.

So being an intersectional feminist reminds me that not all women are battling all forms of oppression and reminds me to 'check my privilege' that comes from being white, educated, cis-gendered, western, middle class, straight and able bodied.

These same principles, that gender is a spectrum rather than a duality, and that not all women experience gender in the same way, can be useful in considering the particular issues for transgender women (women who were assigned male at birth). Recent years have seen increased public awareness of the particular issues for trans women and this has led to some debate about the compatibility of trans inclusion and the aims of feminism. For me, going back to the principles I outlined earlier I want to include trans women as women. Sure, I accept that a trans woman who was socialised as a boy would not have shared some of my formative experiences of girlhood. But neither have I had to negotiate the process of gender transition, and the evidence of suicide and violence for those who have suggests to me that I should be generous and welcoming.

This awareness of intersectionality at its worst can lead to what Roxanne Gay calls the 'Privilege and Oppression Olympics' and leads to difficult and highly charged exchanges. It is sad to see what Robin di Angelo terms 'white fragility' on display when feminists are asked to consider these issues. So one of my preoccupations is how we can become more comfortable having the necessary conversations to bring these tensions into the light. Hence my interest in plundering my own thought processes for this article.

## **How do you see gender and work?**

As I explained, my professional life reflects my interests in women's' working lives and in gender and career development. I have my own experience as a woman with a working life and I also work with women as students, clients and colleagues as well as engaging with literature on women's working lives. So it's pertinent to comment on work in general and women's careers in particular.

Work is a key site for theological consideration representing economic forces of control and oppression as well as a space for agency, creativity and fulfilment. I recognise that the term 'career' has associations for many of particular types of working lives – those in high status occupations or with particular trajectories. I seek to use in a more inclusive way to represent the path through working life of all people.

There is much written about how careers develop, and this is the theoretical base for my professional practice. However, this knowledge is not complete: the career studies literature has been dominated by andro-centric explanations for understanding career decisions and trajectories and women's voices and experiences missing.

There have been recent efforts to address this and consider women's career development as an urgent priority given that, increased educational attainment and participation in the workforce by women has not been matched by equality of status or pay, despite legislation. Women remain under represented in positions of power and gender pay gaps stubbornly persist. Women's work is highly vertically and horizontally segregated, focusing in a narrow range of roles, often with flexible conditions to facilitate caring and corresponding low pay/status and barriers to progression. Reasons and proposed solutions are varied, but often focus on women fixing things themselves, developing different aspirations or 'leaning in' to their ambition, as we were encouraged by Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg in her 2013 book.

Bringing the earlier consideration of gender and feminism to bear on women's career development, it is interesting to reflect on 'care' and work for women. The 'double duty' of responsibilities in the home and at work is a key feature of much discussion of why women might struggle to 'Lean In' to their working lives. When we are considering women and work Richardson and Schaeffer (2013) remind us to look at market work and unpaid care work and relationships in both domains and propose the framing question "How do women construct lives of meaning through work and relationship" (Patton, 2013: 8). Women are co-constructing their lives through market work, unpaid care work, personal relationships and market work relationships and that consideration of women's working lives must explore and embrace all these dimensions.

I've already suggested that women are socialised as carers rather than having an innate ability to be better at both caring work (undervalued and underpaid) and unpaid familial caring. Women's career development is often framed as how can we get women (back) into the workplace and progressing their careers. There is a veneer of privilege about this – after all, being able to stay at home with children has been a luxury of the woman who does not need to earn. Lower down the social pecking order, women always worked, taking shifts and making shared childcare arrangements that enabled this whilst stuck in poor working conditions and unable to progress. For black women, this might have involved considerable family disruption and migration. Womanist theologians in the US point out that for many black women, work was looking after the children of white women rather than their own.

### **How does this relate to your own work in education?**

One of the writers who has been influential for many in my field is Paulo Friere, who coined the idea of 'critical pedagogy' as a model of education with the potential to truly liberate and transform the wider social order. Friere (1968) shares liberation theology's preferential option for the poor and advocates for an educational stance that begins with the development of critical consciousness. He claims that humanity's vocation is to become more fully human and proposes a praxis (both action and reflection) of liberation as a process of humanisation.

Bringing this to my work, it means I have a general interest in work as liberating and transformative for all. This includes women of course, but if the goal of feminism is gender equality then its not

going far enough. Equality assumes an alignment of women and men, yet intersectionality tells us also that not all men are equal. Further, equality denies the prophetic liberating power of the gospel to destabilise existing social order (Reuther, 1984) and usher in a new Earth for all. I have come to see equality as a staging post towards a more transformational reimagining of work, career and beyond. Equality with men ignores the impact of deficient theologies on men, and the restrictive masculinities available to them. Men also face barriers to life in all its fullness.

### **And what is your hope for the future?**

From the threads I have woven together here, there are themes about how identity is formed through mutual interaction and relationship, how binaries and dualisms create opposition and difference and how experience of others must be heard and respected. These themes of **relationality** and **mutuality** are often how feminist theologians conceptualise the Divine. This brings God amongst us, connecting us as interdependent and empowering us to *be* the image of God (Carter Heyward, 1989). For women this can be particularly empowering, seeing woman as source and norm rather than as 'other'.

Within this paradigm, Jesus models relationship and becomes brother and friend rather than objectifying instrument of patriarchy. Fran Porter's reimagining of gender relations in post-Christendom advocates a hermeneutic of friendship (2015), and I find this a valuable model in continuation of Jesus's inclusive community building and in order to avoid any sweeping assumptions about individual men. Fixed definitions of masculinity and femininity are problematic for all. Individual men therefore are affected by patriarchy and are not the enemy.

I think this leaves us in a strong position to develop a liberative social ethic as men and women. Friere distinguishes between activism (unreflective and futile) and action (a praxis combined with reflection). So I am keen to carve out spaces for prayerful and collective reflection on gender and other forms of identity as a necessary basis for transformative action.

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### **Further Reading**

Reni Eddo Lodge. Why I am no Longer Talking to White People about Race.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. We Should all be Feminists

### **Questions**

What conversations do you need to have, with yourself and others, to work through your own stance on feminism and social ethics?

Where do you see power operating along the lines of gender, race and other intersecting identities in your daily life?

Gill Frigerio is an Associate Professor in the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Warwick.