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Generally speaking, the EFSA Institute attempts to promote consensus between different sectors, interest groups and stakeholders on the challenges and problems facing our society. It strives to play a facilitating role by providing a platform for public debate, even of controversial issues.

Both in its structure and function there is a dialectic tension between an academic (research-based) approach and the need to address specific needs of the church and other religious communities. This tension is embedded in the main issues facing the churches in our society. In a general sense the EFSA Institute tries to focus public attention (and the attention of the church or academic institutions) on specific problems in society.

Currently, the focus is on the following priorities.

Firstly, the development role of the church and other religious communities: the eradication of poverty in South Africa; the role of religious networks in community development, in social and welfare services; and the development of community and youth leadership.

Secondly, the healing and reconciliatory role of the church and other religious communities: this includes a project on the role of women in the healing of our violent society; the mobilisation of the church and religious communities against crime and violence; and the breaking down of stereotypes (racism) in our society.

Thirdly, the formation of values in the strengthening of a moral society by the church and other religious communities: the promotion of moral values such as honesty; support for the weak; respect for life and human rights.

Fourthly, the development of youth and community leadership: special courses for the development of leadership skills among our youth have been developed and are presented to support the building of a new society.

It is also significant that the EFSA Institute acts as Secretariat to the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD), which is a Principal Recipient of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in South Africa. It is also a partner of Johns Hopkins Health and Education in South Africa (JHHESA – a USAID funded programme). It currently serves as the national secretariat of the religious sector – for the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC).

These priorities cannot be separated from one another, since many of the complex social issues are interrelated.

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INTRODUCTION

Continuing the NetACT journey

This collection of essays continues the journey on which NetACT (Network for African Congregational Theology) set out fifteen years ago, and which eventually culminated in the publication of *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew? Addressing Gender Inequality in Africa* in 2012 (Stellenbosch: SUN PRSS).

NetACT was formed in Nairobi, Kenya, in February 2000, with a vision to develop transformational leadership in Africa through theological education that would meet the dire needs of congregations (in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition in sub-Saharan Africa) in bold and prophetic ways. At that stage the topic most discussed on the continent was that of HIV and AIDS, and already during its first meeting the network of theological institutions minuted the following: “If we want to address the issue of HIV and AIDS effectively and faithfully, we will have to move from denial to truth-telling.” In order to achieve this goal, members committed themselves to an ever-deepening process of trust building – through personal friendship and working together on various projects. In the first formulation of its identity, NetACT declared that it “aims at assisting participating institutions to develop congregational theology and leadership. It seeks to achieve this aim (*inter alia*) through addressing the HIV and AIDS problem, especially by providing the theological, moral and spiritual undergirding to curb this pandemic.”

This led to an ensuing “journey in discernment” for NetACT, during which it was realised that *ad hoc* attempts to address the encompassing and complex issues related to the pandemic would not necessarily lead to “a change in attitudes and deeply ingrained cultural assumptions”. In the process, the network agreed to focus on curriculum development in theological education, and started to present workshops in Kenya, Malawi, Angola and Nigeria. Various publications resulted from these consultations, which *inter alia* contributed to the fundamental awareness that women are especially vulnerable to the disease, and that “very little in the

African AIDS scenario would change if gender equality is not attained.”

Therefore, ways had to be sought to engage students in discussions not only about health and gender, but also about the gender imbalance in leadership in church and society, “aiming at raising awareness, encouraging critical analysis and acquainting students with theological insights from African women’s perspectives.”

This awareness lead to decisions at the NetACT Board meetings of 2011 (Limuru, Kenya) and 2012 (Worcester, South Africa) to include extended gender workshops, with (mostly male) principals and/or board members of the NetACT institutions present. A significant step was, however, taken by inviting a female staff or church members from each constituency to attend these two workshops in order to enable all members, male and female, to critically discuss engendering theological education together. It has been a rich and rewarding yet often complex and emotionally intense journey. The editors thus gratefully and proudly present this volume, *Living with Dignity: African Perspectives on Gender Equality*, as the fruit of these two workshops and, at the same time, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to those institutions without whose support these workshops would never have realised: the Presbyterian Church (PC)USA, Christian Reformed World Missions, Gereformeerde Zendingsbond (GZA), the Fondation Pour l’Aide Au Protestantisme Réformé (FAP), the Stellenbosch University Hope Project, the Commission for Witness of the Dutch Reformed Church Western and Southern Cape and the National Institute for the Deaf in South Africa. This publication reflects the contributors’ passionate yearning to see every person on the continent flourish in the presence of a living God who identified with humanity by becoming flesh (John 1:14) so that all would have life in abundance (John 10:10).

**Transformative potential of a (theological) curriculum**

By addressing gender equality as a fundamental expression of human dignity and justice on our continent, this collage of nineteen essays is meant to serve as a concrete alternative to aspects of gender inequality identified in the first volume, *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew?* Its format is particularly devised for use in the classroom, and for critical-constructive group engagement (with themes and questions for discussion at the end of each essay). It is our sincere prayer that it will also be used in imaginative ways by clergy and in congregations as a necessary part of adult learning programmes.

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5 Mombo & Joziasse, “From the Pew to the Pulpit”, 183.
The book is divided into seven major sections. In the introductory part, *Gender Equality: An Issue of Faith and Dignity*, the two essays by Nico Koopman and Florence Matsveru/Simon Gillham set important biblical and theological parameters for the project as a whole. In view of the relation between the Triune God of the Bible and humankind, Koopman unequivocally argues for the equal dignity of men and women. This dignity, he continues, is expressed by the unity of God’s people, also between men and women – a unity in diversity. In order to assist local churches in their quest to faithfully embody this unity, he proposes a commitment to gender freedom and justice as two interdependent quests. He concludes by stating: “Where the unity in diversity of women and men is betrayed, there the ecclesiastical confession of the unity in diversity of all God’s children is betrayed.” In their contribution, “In God’s Image: A Biblical-Theological Survey of the Dignity of Women and Men”, Matsveru and Gillham give a broad yet nuanced overview of the relation between God and humankind in the light of diverse scriptural witnesses throughout the history of salvation. They ultimately challenge their audience by emphasising Jesus Christ as God’s truthful redemption from gender-based violence and oppression, and as the truest expression of human dignity. Christian men and women should therefore take the lead in sharing God’s light with a dark world by respecting all who have been made in the image of God.

The second section, *Gender Equality: A Question of Culture*, consists of three essays dealing with the rich yet sensitive issue of culture and gender. In her contribution, Petria Theron states that culture, well-meant as it may be, often seems to be an obstacle in the realisation of gender equality, with the effect that people, especially women, neither reach their full potential nor experience their inherent dignity as people created in the image of God. She reminds the church in sub-Saharan Africa about its key role in bringing about sociocultural transformation, and proposes the concept *Imago Dei* and the example of Jesus Christ as powerful indicators in the church’s quest for gender justice and equality. Edwin Zulu subsequently looks at cultural practices from a male perspective. While he affirms the important and formative role of cultural practices (such as ritual, religion, and entertainment) in African communities, he radically challenges (Christian) men to use their unique position (of power and authority) by taking the lead in reforming or removing enslaving and life-threatening practices, and to reclaim gender justice, liberation and dignity for all. Jonathan Iorkighir then investigates the complex relation between gender, culture and witchcraft in African communities. Acknowledging that witchcraft is a pervasive force in the psyche of African people,
due to the belief in and fear of supernatural forces beyond human control, he examines the influence of witchcraft (and particularly its dangerous relation to gender-stereotyping) in African churches and communities. The essay concludes by challenging the church to remain truthful to its discerning role, by proclaiming the eternal power of Jesus Christ over all forces as comforting news to all people.

In the third section on *Gender Equality: A Challenge to the Church*, three essays concentrate on women’s personal biographies and journeys with the church – in South Africa, Malawi, and Nigeria. Elize Morkel courageously challenges the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa through her story, “Aware and Empowered Responses to Gender Injustice”. By means of psychologist Kaethe Weingarten’s grid which describes people’s responses to the everyday witnessing of violence, four positions are developed from the intersection between awareness and empowerment. She concludes by reiterating two salient points – that gender inequality is constructed as a social hierarchy with devastating effects on the safety of women, and that language plays an important role in sustaining hierarchical structures, with detrimental effects on the mental health and identity of women. In the following essay, Phoebe Chifungo relates the story of women and the CCAP Nkhoma Synod, Malawi, by discussing historical, cultural and theological-biblical factors which contributed to the absence of women in leadership positions in the Nkhoma Synod. In their essay, Dorcas Wéor and Agnes Ntanyi challenge gender prejudice amongst church youths in the Dutch Reformed Church in Nigeria. Through careful statistical data, an overview is given of the many challenges faced by the youth in Nigeria, especially girls.

The fourth section, *Gender Equality: An Issue of Economic Survival and Well-being*, presents four essays from different geographical, cultural and church contexts, focusing on gender justice in Zambia, Kenya and Malawi. Nolipher Moyo first looks at economic justice and the dignity of women in Zambia. With reference to the *Zambian Church Declaration on Gender Injustice and Gender-Based Violence* (2009), she boldly challenges churches to interpret the Bible in ways that would indeed set people free, also economically, and by suggesting practical ways in which churches may address economic injustices towards women. Dorcas Chebet and Beatrice Cherop continue this discussion by describing the tragic interface between gender and poverty in Kenya. After presenting a brave alternative to economic injustice in Africa by rereading Proverbs 31 for the socio-economic justice of women in the Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA), they conclude by stating that equal education for girls and boys remains the most fundamental way of curbing
poverty for women and girls. They plead with the church to identify and challenge unjust systems at all levels of society, such as the unequal distribution of resources and (economic) power. Maggie Madimbo’s essay takes the discussion on gender and education significantly further by arguing that women and men should have equal access to education in general and theological education in particular. She substantiates her plea by referring to the “success story” of the African Bible College in Lilongwe, Malawi, in terms of recruiting both male and female students over the years.

The fifth section, Gender Equality: An Issue of Health and Security, focuses on the serious and pervasive reality of sexual and gender-based violence in Africa, while searching for radical solutions. Lisa le Roux looks at various studies on violence against women (VAW) within the church and seminary, in different African countries and globally. These *inter alia* involve physical abuse (including sexual abuse and rape), emotional or psychological abuse, and economic and political abuse. She identifies various reasons why the church is not addressing VAW (effectively), and explores practical ways in which seminaries and congregations may be motivated to talk about, teach on, and address VAW, particularly through a case study approach. Gertrude Kapuma’s essay on gender-based violence and the church’s response, tragically and ironically confirms that violence targeted at women exists everywhere, even in the places where one would expect security – in homes, among relatives, and in churches. She defines violence as “conduct intended to undermine a person’s humanity, identity and dignity.” Her experience as a minister of a local congregation has made her understand what women are going through, and the lack of support systems in the communities where they live. She briefly looks at cultural understandings of male and female (in Malawi), and at socialisation processes through which perceptions and values are ingrained in people’s psyches. The final section of her essay questions the church’s awareness of, and engagement with, the pain and suffering of numerous violated women, and profoundly challenges the church’s response to it. In the following essay, Ezra Chitando critically-constructively discusses the concept of *ubuntu* in the context of sexual and gender-based violence and HIV in Africa, and the insistence on recovering indigenous values in recent democratic discourse. In response to the question, “Can *ubuntu* empower us to reject violence and embrace peace and justice?”, he argues and concludes that, “if we de-patriarchalise *ubuntu*, it can be deployed to contribute towards detoxifying aggressive masculinities … *ubuntu* may be utilised to assist men to challenge sexual and gender-based violence and embrace
more harmonious ways of being human.” Finally, through telling the stories of different physically challenged people, Mia Lintvelt explores “women with disabilities in Africa” as a phenomenon of multifold discrimination. After discussing attitudes of the church and society towards people with disability, particularly towards women, she searches for biblical perspectives on (causes of) disability. In the process, she unlocks and reinterprets rich biblical resources, and concludes with a powerful section on images of a vulnerable, compassionate, “disabled” God who identifies with people in unconditional love and care.

The sixth section, Gender Equality: An Issue of Home and in the Family, aims to relate challenges pertaining to gender equality in Africa to the primary, intimate relations of household and family. In a crucially important discussion, Esther Rutoro investigates the nature and purpose of Genesis 3:16 (“Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you”) in view of desire and rule in traditional (“highly patriarchal”) Shona understandings of marriage. Through telling various stories from within the Zimbabwean context, and through engaging with a wide range of biblical texts and contexts, traditional norms and values pertaining to marriage (with husbands being viewed as superior to wives), as well as the church’s response to these issues are challenged to their root. In an equally important essay, Esther Rutoro and Maggie Madimbo investigate gender equality from the sensitive perspective of single womanhood in the Shona culture. They deliberately assign the status of “a gift from God” to single womanhood, and bring traditional cultural-philosophical orientations in critical and creative discussion with biblical perspectives, thereby inviting the church to prophetically address dehumanising cultural stereotypes associated with singlehood. Lydia Mwaniki and Elna Mouton subsequently wrestle with complex rhetorical challenges involved in assisting (Christian) households to move from patriarchy to “participatory freedom”. Through exploring the transformative potential of the Ephesians household code in view of changing gender roles in Kenyan families, they find an analogy from which to draw wisdom and energy for the dire interpretative task at hand.

In the final section of the book, Gender Equality: Towards the Future, Olo Ndukwe regards the urgent need for gender equality as a kairos for status or processus confessionis in the church. With reference to the Barmen Declaration (1934), the Belhar Confession (1986), the Accra Confession and commitment to (economic) justice and the integrity of creation by the World Council (now Communion) of Reformed Churches (2004), Ndukwe yearns for a prophetic initiative by churches in Africa that would acknowledge that nothing less than the integrity of the gospel of
Jesus Christ is at stake where the dignity of humanity is threatened. He challenges his audience with an open invitation to decide for themselves whether the picture revealed in these essays does not at least deserve a processus (if not status) confessionis…

**EFSA’s vision**

Words fail us to express our deep gratitude towards EFSA, Institute for Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, for sponsoring the completion of this extended writing project. EFSA, a unique network of theological institutions in the Western Cape and the South African Council of Churches Western Cape (SACCWC), strives to play a facilitating role by providing a platform for public debate on challenges facing the South African society, even of controversial issues. It thereby endeavours to focus public attention (and the attention of the church or academic institutions) on specific problems in society. EFSA currently concentrates on various priorities, amongst which is “the healing and reconciliatory role of the church and other religious communities,” including projects on the role of women in the healing of violent societies, and the breaking down of stereotypes (such as sexism and racism) in society. For further information, see their website http://www.efsa-institute.org.za.

**Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians**

In 1989, eleven years before the formation of NetACT, a ground-breaking initiative was taken through the launch of the *Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* in Accra, Ghana, to address issues related to culture and gender. Today, the Circle consists of hundreds of women from across Africa, within various contexts and disciplines, committed to searching for, and publishing on creative alternatives to all forms of power abuse and injustice in African churches and societies, and to gender justice in particular. For the purpose of developing women’s ways of interpreting reality, the Circle considers *storytelling* as a potentially powerful instrument for rereading and reimagining the Bible and culture towards liberating, healing and sense-making practices in churches and societies. In the words of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, doyenne of African Women’s Theologies, “(t)he stories we tell of our hurts and joys are sacred. Telling them makes us vulnerable, but without sharing we cannot build community and solidarity. Our stories are precious paths on which...
we have walked with God and struggled for a passage to full humanity.”

Further, like the Bible and other religious texts, “African cultures remain vibrant and authoritative texts in the lives of women, and they need to be studied, analyzed, and reinterpreted for the creation of a just world and the empowerment of women.”

As the Circle celebrates their 25th anniversary this year (2014), we gladly and respectfully dedicate this volume to them, acknowledging their profound and creative role on the continent and internationally. Apart from their impressive publication record since 1989, we particularly honour the Circle for giving a voice to trained as well as “ordinary” women.

In the final analysis, it is our sincere prayer and hope that these two initiatives, the Circle and NetACT, will continue to weave connections and work together in the future – be it from different perspectives and with different styles and emphases – to bring about a new, just and dignified way of living together in every corner, every congregation, every home, every school, every neighbourhood, every workplace on the continent with the warm, welcoming heart.

Elna Mouton (South Africa)
Len Hansen (South Africa)
Gertrude Kapuma (Malawi)
Thomas Togom (Kenya)

December 2014

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Bibliography


GENDER EQUALITY

An issue of faith and dignity
MEN AND WOMEN IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY
Equal in dignity? United in diversity?

Nico Koopman¹

Introduction

This essay first argues in favour of the equal dignity of men and women. A Trinitarian rationale for the equal dignity of men and women is offered. Second, the unity of men and women is portrayed as a unity in diversity. The unity of God’s people is also a unity between men and women. The notion of unity in diversity among men and women is argued for by opting for a so-called strategic essentialist position over against either a purely essentialist/ontological or a purely constructivist position to describe the unity between men and women. In the third part of this essay, some ecclesial imperatives of the notion of equality in dignity are discussed. The commitment to gender freedom and to gender justice (access, inclusion, participation) is discussed as two interdependent quests, which advance the actualisation of dignity for men and women. In the fourth and final part, some challenges for churches are inferred from the notion of unity in diversity. Unity in diversity between men and women is advanced through attempts like the cherished partnership of men and women approaches of international denominational bodies like the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and international ecumenical bodies like the World Council of Churches. It is also advanced through theological discourses like those in feminist and womanist theologies, masculine liberation theology and possibly also public theology. These two sets of attempts offer assistance to local churches in their quest to faithfully confess and embody unity in diversity.

¹ Nico Koopman is professor of Christian Ethics in and Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. He is also director of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology.
Men and women: Equal in dignity

The equality of men and women in dignity can be based in the Trinitarian rationale for dignity that is in an illuminating way offered by the British Barth scholar and Methodist theologian, John Webster.²

Dignity based on God the Creator

Our dignity resides in the loving act of God the Creator who summons us into being. Our dignity is a created dignity. Our vulnerability, as expressed in our creaturely needs, is not in conflict with our created dignity. Our needs reflect our dependence upon God who summoned us into being and who gave life to us, and who fulfils and consummates a life of full glory for us. Human dignity as responsible selfhood, identity across time and creaturely continuity cannot be had remote Deo, i.e., in separation from the Creator’s summons. Dignity does not reside in autonomy and independence, but in this dependence upon God the Creator. The dignity, worth, honour and glory of creatures rest in our calling to live in fellowship and communion with God. Webster states: “God crowns creatures with glory and honour, marking them out as the recipient of his approval, and setting them apart for fellowship with himself. Creation is exaltation; creatures have dignity as they are dignified by God.”³

From this divine foundation of our dignity emanates the theological imperative to acknowledge and respect dignity. To quote Webster again:

Only God the creator can crown with glory and honour; creatures are not competent to ascribe dignity to themselves or to other creatures. Human judgements about dignity can only be repetitions of the divine judgement, acts in which honour is recognised as an indicative and imperative which rests on the divine decision.⁴

Human dignity as created dignity means that we receive our dignity from the Creator. Our dignity is inalienable because it is given by the Creator. It is inalienable because it does not come from humans, but it comes from the Creator. It is inalienable because it is not dependent upon the recognition of dignity by the frail and unreliable hearts, minds and actions of humans, but it is dependent upon the living God. Creaturely dignity as inalienable dignity implies that our

² Cf. Webster, “The Dignity of Creatures”. I have also used this analysis of Webster in a 2010 publication, “Human Dignity”.
³ Webster, “The Dignity of Creatures”, 24.
⁴ Webster, “The Dignity of Creatures”, 24.