

Law, Religion and Reconciliation in Africa



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19 THE NEXUS BETWEEN GENDER JUSTICE, RECONCILIATION, ECCLESIAL ENCULTURATION, BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Linda Naicker¹

INTRODUCTION

There exists an intricate web of connection between gender inequality, the interpretation of religious texts, socio-religious culture and male hegemony in South Africa that impedes the pursuit of gender justice and reconciliation. This chapter addresses the ways in which ecclesial enculturation and biblical interpretation intersect with male hegemony to disenfranchise women and curtail the advancement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Paying particular attention to SDG 5, which targets gender equality, the multifaceted nexus between gender justice and reconciliation, ecclesial enculturation, biblical interpretation and male hegemony are explored through the lenses of inculturation hermeneutics² and African Women's Theology.³ I use the term "ecclesial enculturation" to encapsulate the ways in which local churches foster socio-cultural and socio-religious environments that perpetuate various forms of social inequality, predominantly against women. I argue that the perpetuation of said oppression against women is achieved through the entrenchment of male hegemony and patriarchal conceptions of women within ecclesial settings. I maintain that it is imperative that we recognise how these socio-ecclesial characteristics act as formidable barriers to achieving gender justice and gender reconciliation in South Africa and by extension, the attainment of the SDGs.

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- 1 Research Scholar, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa.
 - 2 Inculturation hermeneutics is a contextual hermeneutic methodology that takes seriously the interpretations of the Bible by communities and individuals based on their own social-cultural contexts. Ukpong JS. 2002. "Inculturation Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation", in Walter D and Ulrich L (eds). *The Bible in a World Context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 17-32.
 - 3 The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was conceptualised in 1988 under the leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye at the offices of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland. The objective of the Circle was and is to explore to and conceptualise African Women's Theology and conduct research. The Circle was launched in Ghana in 1989. The Circle's key interest is women in church and society. The Circle is an African conception concerned with issues that affect African women and all oppressed people in Africa. Theological reflections done by members of the Circle is known as African Women's Theology. See Fiedler R. 2010. *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians: History and Theology (1989-2007)*. PhD Dissertation. University of the Free State.

Gender justice is the attainment of full equality and equity between women and men across all facets of life.⁴ This equates to women actively participating in the formulation and shaping of policies, structures and decisions that significantly impact their lives and broader society. Gender inequality is the insidious discrimination faced by individuals and groups based on their sex or gender. Women, non-binary individuals and transgender people often bear the brunt of gender inequality, experiencing violence, abuse and unequal treatment across all dimensions of life.⁵ William Keepin and Cynthia Brix, co-founders of Gender Equity and Reconciliation International, affirm that true gender justice and reconciliation takes place when women and men jointly confront the personal, social and cross-cultural origins of gender oppression, discrimination and marginalisation.⁶ The aims of this collective endeavour, they argue, is mutual understanding and healing.

Given the gendered nature of socio-cultural and socio-ecclesial oppression, I contend that patriarchal ecclesial enculturation is the bedrock and substantial conduit that fosters gender inequality. In tandem with my assertion, scholars have long argued that patriarchal subjugation, particularly the subjugation of women, is by and large facilitated through patriarchal biblical interpretation that underpins contemporary societal roles and norms.⁷ These interpretations are driven by specific readings and renderings of biblical texts and contributes significantly to the manifold and intersecting forms of discrimination, oppression and marginalisation of women. Resultantly, these readings and renderings obstruct progress towards achieving the SDGs set forth by the United Nations. If the SDGs are to be attained by the projected date of 2030, then addressing these issues is imperative towards advancing gender justice and gender reconciliation. In the ensuing sections, I analyse the gendered disparities present in South Africa and elucidate how patriarchal ecclesial enculturation, propagated through patriarchal biblical interpretation and male hegemony, infringes upon the fundamental human rights of women and impedes their developmental trajectory. This examination will underscore the pressing need for alternative modes of biblical interpretation and ecclesial culture that fosters the pursuit of gender justice, reconciliation and the attainment of the United Nations SDGs.

4 As defined by Oxfam. 2022. "Gender Justice and Women's Rights".

5 Oxfam, "Gender Justice and Women's Rights".

6 Keepin W and Brix C. 2022. *Gender Equity and Reconciliation: Thirty Years of Healing the most Ancient Wound in the Human Family*. Chino Valley, AZ: Hohm Press.

7 See Moder A. 2019. "Women, Personhood, and the Male God: A Feminist Critique of Patriarchal Concepts of God in View of Domestic Abuse", *Feminist Theology* 28(1):85-103; Baloyi E. 2008. *Patriarchal Structures, A Hinderance to Women's Rights*, PhD Diss, University of Pretoria.

Dube M. 2006. "Postcolonial Feminist Interpretations of the Bible: A South African Perspective and Comment", *Scriptura* 92:280-291.

INCULTURATION HERMENEUTICS AND AFRICAN WOMEN'S THEOLOGY

Methodologically, this chapter employs the inculturation hermeneutics approach as put forward by African biblical scholar, Justin Ukpong to analyse how ecclesial enculturation and biblical interpretation impedes gender justice and gender reconciliation.⁸ The chapter also employs African Women's Theology as a lens to analyse the embedded nature of oppression of African woman and to put forward alternative ways of being church and society that will advance the attainment of the United Nations SDGs.

Ukpong notes that the focus of African biblical interpretation must be extracting theological meaning of a text as it relates to contemporary contexts.⁹ Ukpong elucidates that the purpose should always be to establish a connection between faith and everyday existence, fostering a dedication to both individual and societal transformation.¹⁰ This approach involves analysis of religious texts and traditions within the specific cultural and social contexts in which the text is read and interpreted. With reference to Ukpong's work, Madipoane Masenya, scholar of Old Testament studies, argues that inculturation hermeneutics demands astute awareness and critical analysis of context which enables an awareness of the influences that affect readings of biblical texts in order to enable positive interpretations of texts and facilitates a deeper understanding of the use of the text in contemporary societies.¹¹ Masenya goes on to say that the inculturation hermeneutics approach is significant for African interpreters of the Bible because it seeks connection between African situational realities and the Christian faith. Ukpong corroborates this assertion by observing that the interpreter should be committed to the Christian faith.¹² Moreover, the interpreter must be committed to interpreting and analysing the biblical text within its proper context. In this chapter, I use inculturation hermeneutics to demonstrate how ecclesial enculturation and biblical interpretation in South Africa intersect with male hegemony to disenfranchise women and curb their growth and development, thereby impeding the realisation of the United Nations SDGs.

As a form of liberation theology, African Women's Theology is concerned to address the various forms of oppression that exist in African societies, with particular focus on how societal oppressions impinge on the growth, development and well-being

8 Ukpong JS. 1995. "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Hermeneutics", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 19:3-14; Ukpong JS. 2000. "Developments in Biblical interpretation in Africa: Historical and hermeneutical directions", in West GO and Dube MW (eds). *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, trajectories and trends*. Leiden: Brill, 11-28.

9 Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes", 8.

10 Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical interpretation in Africa", 24.

11 Masenya M. 2004. "How Worthy is the Woman of Worth? Reading Proverbs 31: 10-31 in African-South Africa", *Bible and Theology in Africa* 4:78.

12 Ukpong, "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes".

of African women.¹³ African women theologians do communal theology in which shared experiences of oppression are empirically addressed and academically reflected upon. Within African Women's Theology, the interconnectedness of life is valued, and hope and empowerment are offered to women and men navigating tenuous situations on the African continent.¹⁴ As a liberation theology, African Women's Theology discerns how multiple layers of oppression emerge because of the hegemonic configuration of societies. Furthermore, it enters into dialogue with those forces of oppression and domination and challenges the hegemonies that exist for the purpose of emancipation of women.¹⁵

Within African Women's Theology, the experiences of African women are central as they reinterpret the Bible with a specific commitment to addressing contextual issues, such as women's health, issues of justice, exploitation and poverty, along with the structural and systemic forces that present a challenge to the development trajectory of African women in all spheres of life.¹⁶ The aim of their reflections, theologizing and reinterpretations of the Christian Bible is to reform patriarchal and hegemonic forms of societal and ecclesial practices.¹⁷ I adopt African Women's Theology as an appropriate lens in this study, for the examination of ecclesial enculturation and patriarchal biblical interpretation within the context of male hegemony and women's social, cultural, economic and political disenfranchisement that acts as barrier to the attainment of the United Nations SDGs.

WOMEN AND THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals were launched in 2015 by 193 governments of the world as Agenda 2030 for the world. These are: (1) no poverty, (2) zero hunger, (3) good health and well-being, (4) quality education, (5) gender equality, (6) clean water and sanitation, (7) affordable and clean energy, (8) decent work and economic growth, (9) industry, innovation and infrastructure, (10) reducing inequality, (11) sustainable cities and communities, (12) responsible consumption and production, (13) climate action, (14) life below water, (15) life on the land, (16) peace, justice and strong institutions and (17) partnerships to achieve the goals.¹⁸

13 Tarus D. 2014. "Theology of Social Transformation in the Theological Works of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians", *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 33(1):4.

14 Oduyoye M. 2001. "Introducing African Women's Theology: Introductions in Feminist Theology", Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press.

15 Naicker L. 2021. *Food, Sex and Text: Exploring Survival Sex in the Context of Food Insecurity Through Communal Readings of the Book of Ruth*, PhD Diss, University of the Western Cape, 10.

16 Oduyoye M. 2001. "The story of a circle", *The Ecumenical Review* 53(1):97-100. Phiri I. 2009. *Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education (1989-2008)*. Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 15.

17 Oduyoye, "The story of a circle", 97-100.

18 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2023. "The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and

The United Nations SDGs are a roadmap for world progress that is sustainable and inclusive, taking into account all of humanity in the quest for all forms of freedoms. United Nations Women affirms that fulfilling the right to gender equality is crucial in meeting some of the most urgent challenges of our time such as economic crisis, lack of health care, climate change, violence against women and escalating conflicts worldwide.¹⁹ Moreover, women are most affected by the problems listed above and, significantly, it is women themselves who possess innovative leadership ideas and are the bearers of solutions to those problems. United Nations Women elucidates that it is gender discrimination that holds women back and in so doing, holds back world progress.²⁰ United Nations Women further notes that women's empowerment and emancipation is key to each of the 17 goals put forward and that ensuring the rights of women and girls across each of these goals is imperative if justice and inclusion, economies that work for all and sustaining healthy shared environment now and for future generations is to be realised.²¹ I concur with United Nations Women and maintain that achieving SDG 5, namely, gender equality, as a cross-cutting issue, is the platform upon which achieving almost all the other goals rest. Furthermore, I maintain that injustices against women in South Africa are rampant across all spheres of life and present significant barriers to the attainment of the United Nations SDGs.

GENDER INJUSTICE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Historically, under colonialism and apartheid, South Africa was a patriarchal society and women were the most economically disadvantaged and marginalised. Moreover, the oppression of Black, low-income women, living on the fringes of society, was and is particularly prevalent. Theologian Isabella Ras for example, posits that the oppression of women in South Africa is historic and continues unabated in the present democratic era.²² Ras further argues that Black women's bodies were and are broken through oppression in a myriad of ways.²³ At the heart of said oppression, continues Ras, is women's struggle for survival as structural oppression and racial capitalism inflict untold emotional, mental and psychological harm, entrenching poverty and destitution. These experiences of oppression perpetually deny Black women wholeness and the full human experience.

Race and gender-based socio-economic inequalities persist in the new democratic dispensation, favouring male access to and control of the economy and all spheres of social life. Men control the means of production and women are often relegated

Planet," 10 July.

19 United Nations Women. 2023. "Women and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)".

20 UN Women, "Women and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)".

21 UN Women, "Women and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)".

22 Ras F. 2017. "Broken bodies and present ghosts: Ubuntu and African Women's Theology", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(3):1-7.

23 Ras, "Broken bodies and present ghosts", 5.

to the domestic and informal economy spheres, entrenching women's poverty and inequality.²⁴ Gender insensitive legislation in the country fails to protect women and cements women's subordinate roles. For example, such legislation does not adequately take into consideration women's inheritance rights and South Africa's property rights legislation does not fully and holistically provide for women's meaningful access to property. Moreover, national plans and policies do not adequately reflect gender disparity awareness at district and local levels of governance. This, coupled with an uneven work burden, further marginalises and discriminates against women, placing them at the very bottom of the rung in terms of growth and development. Moreover, women function in multiple roles, both paid and unpaid, while men often fail to share family responsibility roles. In addition, women's participation in leadership and management roles in the workforce and at the level of policymaking and management, as well as in domestic matters, is disproportionately less than that of men. To add fuel to the fire, the mindset that men are heads of the work environment and households creates situations in which men exercise power and control over women in decision making and the use and dissemination of resources.²⁵ This level of gendered structural and systemic inequalities severely impinges on the health and well-being of women, particularly women living on the margins of society. Poverty and inequality impede women's and girls' access to education, decent housing, water and sanitation, proper infrastructure and a host of other factors necessary for a healthy, productive life to a far greater extent than they do men's access. It is in this context that I bring gender equity, patriarchal ecclesial enculturation, patriarchal biblical interpretation and male hegemony into dialogue with the United Nations SDGs, in particular, SDG 5.

PATRIARCHAL ECCLESIAL ENCULTURATION

Unequivocally, gender inequality and injustice are heightened by the idealisation of the notion of male headship, male authority and male supremacy. In constructing the model woman as subordinate, dutiful, docile and submissive to men, and constructing the model man as a strong and innovative leader, head of the household, head of the Church, head of the economy and head of all the affairs of the state, ecclesial enculturation cements patriarchal authority and domination over women. Jakobsh (2012: 1) argues that sexist patriarchal norms and standards are ingrained in the collective awareness of society to the extent that they remain mostly imperceptible.²⁶ Clearly, the very structure of social organisation has been crafted by men, catering to and upholding male interests and affects women negatively on every level of societal arrangements. Abrahams and Smith note

24 Lesetedi G. 2018. "A theoretical perspective on women and poverty in Botswana", *Journal of International Women's Studies* 19(5):193.

25 Kruger T. 2017. Msunduzi Municipality Strategy for Economic Empowerment. SIVEST South Africa. Pietermaritzburg: Government of Pietermaritzburg, Msunduzi Municipality.

26 Jakobsh DR (ed). 2004. "Barriers to Women's Leadership." *Encyclopedia of Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 77-81.

that structural disadvantage affects women in violent ways and perpetuates their suffering.²⁷ Moreover, women are the most unfairly marginalised of people, often making their very bodies sites of struggle. Jakobsh points out that most upper positions in bureaucracies, whether government, or corporate, are held by men. The influence, authority, prestige and privilege those in positions of power hold are dependent on the subordinate and secondary positions of women and has serious consequences for women's leadership. I suggest that through patriarchal ecclesial enculturation, the Church is both guilty and complicit in enforcing patriarchal class and gender hierarchies that lead to the disenfranchisement of women in both church and society.

Around 95% of South Africans declare religious affiliation and 86% of South Africans pledge allegiance to the Christian faith.²⁸ It is therefore not surprising that ecclesial influences shape the social reality of adherents and social arrangements of society. In many instances, the culture within local congregations creates, sustains and maintains patriarchy through the promotion of male hegemony and the domination of women as the natural order of things. The normalisation of this level of male hegemony and female subordination has devastating effects on the development of women as self-determining agents and equal partners in church and society. Chitando articulates that, "without responding to women's experiences and needs, there can be no development... [because] meaningful and transforming development only occurs when women have their lives transformed."²⁹ Yet the Church is often described as a place where patriarchal oppression of women reigns supreme. Wood contends that the Church maintains and perpetuates patriarchal oppression of women through faith traditions and the endorsement of certain societal structures and systems.³⁰ Women are often excluded from independent and leadership activities within the Church when the Church's role ought to be to act as guardian against women oppression. Wood therefore concludes that the Church has failed because it does not uphold women's equal rights in church and society.

African womanist theologian Musa Wenkosi Dube points out that even in Jesus's day, when women were denied economic, leadership, decision-making and legal power based on their gender, Jesus' teachings and actions were transformational for women.³¹ Dube elucidates that Jesus took up the fight for gender justice, as is

27 Abrahams M and Smith J. 2020. Household affordability index: Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, Springbok, Pietermaritzburg. Pietermaritzburg: Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group.

28 Statistics South Africa. 2016. General Household Survey.

29 Chitando E. 2020. "The Bible as a Resource for Development in Africa: Ten Considerations for Liberating Readings", in Chitando E, Gunda MR and Togarasei L (eds). *Religion and Development in Africa*. Bamberg: University of Bamberg, 410.

30 Wood J. 2019. "Gender inequality: The Problem of Harmful, Patriarchal, Traditional and Cultural Gender Practices in the Church", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 75(1):2-7.

31 Dube M. 2003. "The Prophetic Method in the New Testament", in Dube M (ed). *HIV/AIDS and the Curriculum: Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes*. Geneva:

evidenced in his friendship with women in John 11. Women were encouraged to follow Jesus as exhibited in Luke 8:1-3. Furthermore, in Mark 5:24-34, Jesus allows the unclean bleeding woman to touch him, thereby making a profound statement that the laws of cleanliness are oppressive to women and should not be endorsed in the Church. In John 3:39-42 and John 20:11, Jesus affirms the leadership roles that women should hold in sending women out to preach the gospel. Moreover, Jesus asserts that the law should and must protect both women and men. Dube continues that the actions of Jesus demonstrate that even though there were gender divisions during His time, Jesus brought a new realisation and a new way of being for His disciples to accept and to follow.³² Chitando and Chirongoma aver that religion and culture, through social engineering, have consistently depicted men as leader across diverse cultures.³³ Moreover, men have more power over women and children, even though some men have more power than others. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that male biology is what privileges them and affords them ultimate benefits within the patriarchal system. Based on Jesus's words and actions, however, it cannot be denied that women are equal to men and should be given the same status in both church and society.

Patriarchy is presented as God endorsed, in the spiritual, physical and social realms of existence, maintaining the understanding that males are mandated by God to dominate and females are mandated by God to be subordinate to male power and control. In this way, ecclesial enculturation facilitates the structural and systemic oppression of women in church and society. This level of androcentric and hegemonic masculinities position men as heads of households, controllers of the economy and dominators of all created things, thereby facilitating and perpetuating female poverty and oppression. Women are led to believe that it is their duty to be docile and dependent on men for their spiritual, material and emotional needs, creating a culture of dependency that inhibits the growth and development of women.

PATRIARCHAL BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Feminist biblical scholar Miranda Pillay argues that the challenges of our times require coordinated responses from all levels of society.³⁴ Moreover, that kyriocentric and androcentric biblical interpretations must be reformed.³⁵ Addressing and reforming interpretations that promote kyriarchy and androcentrism is essential because such interpretations validate and sustain the subjugation of women and the oppression of marginalised communities. Pillay goes on to say that the primary

World Council of Churches Publications, 52.

32 Dube, "The Prophetic Method in the New Testament", 53.

33 Chitando E and Chirongoma S. 2012. *Redemptive Masculinities: Men, HIV and Religion*. Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 6.

34 Pillay M. 2005. "Luke 7:36-50: See This Woman? Towards a Theology of Gender Equality in the Context of HIV and AIDS", *Scriptura* 89:441-442.

35 Pillay, "Luke 7:36-50: See This Woman?", 443-444.

source of such a realisation – the Bible – in itself has been characterised as a patriarchal book and has been construed to support the supremacy of males.³⁶ In my analysis, what Pillay is arguing is that there is an urgent need for the Church to work holistically towards a shift in power dynamics that subjugate, marginalise and exert control over women. The Church has the capacity and responsibility to make a noteworthy contribution as a faith community, striving to be an institution where guiding principles include complementarity and equality in relationships. I contend that alternative readings and interpretations of the Bible are vital and necessary for the development of a theology of equality and egalitarianism because the Christian Church plays a role in shaping South African society. Since the Bible has been co-opted as a foundation for gender discrimination, slavery, racism, sexism and various other forms of oppression, South African women continue to suffer the discriminatory effects of apartheid and gender power relations, causing extreme vulnerability.

A notable human rights activist and womanist theologian, Kenyan-born Musimbi Kanyoro asserts that the dignity of women is often assaulted through biblical interpretation because interpreters often fail to take into consideration the exploitation of women and its embeddedness in gender injustice and gender inequality.³⁷ Ghanaian Methodist theologian, womanist scholar and founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues that the subordination of women is alive in the churches, yet the Church is supposed to be a place where all people across social barriers, should experience reciprocity, mutual respect, support and protection.³⁸ Elsewhere, Oduyoye appropriately asserts that issues of structured oppression of women are not key concepts in ecclesial biblical interpretation.³⁹

Dube contends that theological engagement with gendered oppression must acknowledge how patriarchy created men's claim to power and supremacy over women.⁴⁰ Scholars frequently contend that the covert ways in which the Church is complicit in the oppression of women must be viewed in light of the manner in which churches interpret biblical texts and how such texts create a platform for skewed gender imbalances.⁴¹ For example, Genesis Chapter 1 is often used to affirm the superiority of men and positions women as subordinate to men,

36 Pillay, "Luke 7:36-50: See This Woman?", 443.

37 Kanyoro M. 2002. *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective*. London: Sheffield Academic Press, 80.

38 Oduyoye M. 1995. *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. New York: Orbis Books, 182.

39 Oduyoye M. 2001. "Introducing African Women's Theology: Introductions in Feminist Theology", Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press.

40 Dube Z. 2016. "The African Women Theologians' contribution towards the discussion about alternative masculinities", *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37(2):2.

41 Tonono S. 2018. "The Christian Church and Intimate Partner Violence: Patriarchy, Gains and Opportunities", National Research Symposium. Pretoria: University of Pretoria, Department of Social Development.

as ordained by God. Ephesians Chapter 5 is often used as the spiritual basis to confirm the headship of men within the home. The stories of Ruth and Esther are used to conceptualise what is perceived to be the model Christian woman, with often devastating effects on women as they become entrapped in pockets of abuse within their own homes and in all areas of social life. Church historian Siybaulela Tonono states that “the problem of a strongly patriarchal church must be seen in its proper context, a strongly patriarchal society.”⁴² The stench of patriarchy, argues Tonono, permeates the pews in a similar manner that it does society at large. In South Africa, patriarchal ideals that relegate women to subordinate positions continue to be a reality with devastating consequences for their economic status, health and well-being, presenting an enormous barrier to the attainment of the United Nations SDGs.

Biblical scholar and chair of the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice, University of the Western Cape, Sarojini Nadar, implores us to employ criticality when analysing a biblical text, noting that interpretation is always located, motivated and ideological.⁴³ Following Ukpong’s inculturation hermeneutics,⁴⁴ Masenya exhorts us to take seriously the significance of faith elements in the life of an African woman and her encounter with the Bible.⁴⁵ For the churchgoing African woman, asserts Masenya, the Bible is not merely a source of scholarly debates; rather, it is revered as the Word of God with the power to bring about transformation and address diverse situations through the exercising of faith in Jesus Christ.⁴⁶ The African woman’s faith in Christ is the foremost reason why the Bible is such an important book to her. Ukpong asserts that biblical interpretation in general is exemplified by an inclination to construct a connection between the biblical text that is being interpreted and the context in which the text is read.⁴⁷ Importantly, both scholars and communities of faith read the Bible for personal and social transformation.⁴⁸ Ukpong argues that in the reading process of a biblical text, there is connection and collaboration between the reader, the text and the context which results in active participation in meaning making based on the readers lived

42 Tonono, “The Christian Church and Intimate Partner Violence: Patriarchy, Gainsand Opportunities”, 6.

43 Nadar S. 2009. “Beyond the ‘ordinary reader’ and the ‘invisible intellectual’: Shifting Contextual Bible Study from Liberation Discourse to Liberation Pedagogy”, *Old Testament Essays* 22(2):395.

44 Ukpong, “Rereading the Bible with African Eyes”,

45 Masenya M. 2004. *How Worthy is the Woman of Worth? Reading Proverbs 31: 10-31 in African-South Africa*, 207.

46 Masenya, *How Worthy is the Woman of Worth?*

47 Ukpong JS. 2000. “Developments in Biblical interpretation in Africa: Historical and hermeneutical directions”, in West GO and Dube MW (eds). *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, trajectories and trends*. Leiden: Brill, 11.

48 Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical interpretation in Africa”, 24.

reality and the structural and systemic factors that result in specific social concerns and issues.⁴⁹

Gender inequality in South Africa continues unabated and as African womanist theologian Teresa Okure notes, hierarchies of exploitation which are religious, cultural, economic, political and social, contribute significantly to women's poverty and oppression.⁵⁰ African womanist theologians, in their search for meaning and full inclusivity of all people, approach biblical interpretation from the perspective of both women and men, making for an inclusive approach to biblical interpretation that is in search of inclusive meaning in Christian sacred texts. Miranda Pillay notes that even though the Bible has often been interpreted as a patriarchal book, in Africa, it also functions as a source of insight and hope and has deep potential to impact communities in a way that is gender-affirming.⁵¹ Pillay goes on to say that the Bible is the main source from which Jesus Christ's vision for all freedoms for all people can be determined and realised. It is the way in which we read the ancient document that has the potential to bring either redemption or condemnation.⁵² African women theologians emphasise the historical dominance of predominantly male scholars in the occupation of biblical translation and interpretation, noting that male scholars have often infused patriarchal perspectives into the texts. African womanist theologians actively contest traditional male, individualistic, hierarchical and competitive methods of biblical interpretation. Instead, they advocate for inclusive and solidarity-based approaches, aligning their interpretations with a commitment to women and all oppressed individuals. Encouraging both men and women to revisit ancient texts, African women theologians seek to unveil the liberative potential inherent in biblical texts for all people.⁵³

From the perspective of women's emancipation, the text must encourage people to move from despair to hope, from bondage to freedom and from destitution to sufficiently. Pillay argues that the Gospel of Luke, for example, when read from the perspective of African women theologians, acknowledges the liberative potential inherent in the text and the special place Luke accords to women.⁵⁴ Luke challenges the way men in his time see women and the way women in his time see themselves. In Luke 1, Luke gives a public voice to Elizabeth, who was shamed into silence by cultural expectations that elevated motherhood as the primary source of esteem. In moving Elizabeth into the public space and silencing Zachariah, her husband, until he publicly admits to aligning with his wife's choices, Luke foregrounds women's agency. Pillay notes that Luke's approach is different to Matthew's in the Gospel of Matthew, where Matthew gives centre stage to men. In Luke's Gospel, he speaks of

49 Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical interpretation in Africa", 17.

50 Okure T. 1993. "Feminist interpretations in Africa", in Schüssler-Fiorenza E (ed). *Searching the Scriptures. Volume 1: A Feminist Introduction*. New York: Crossroad, 77.

51 Pillay, "Luke 7:36-50: See This Woman?", 445, 446.

52 Pillay, "Luke 7:36-50: See This Woman?", 446.

53 Pillay, "Luke 7:36-50: See This Woman?", 446.

54 Pillay, "Luke 7:36-50: See This Woman?", 447.

an angel visiting Mary, an unwed mother who *consents* to dealing with pregnancy and childbirth, ignoring social convention.⁵⁵ Luke also gives prominence to the women who followed Jesus such as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and others. Moreover, in a culture where women were prohibited from studying with men, Luke writes about Mary, who sat at Jesus' feet and learned. Luke mentions other women, though not by name, like the widow of Nain, the one who anoints Jesus's feet, the woman with the issue of blood, the daughter of Jairus, the crippled woman, the poor widow who offered coins to Jesus despite her destitution and the woman who celebrates with neighbours after finding her lost coin. In these examples, posits Pillay, Luke challenges male hierarchy and acknowledges not only agency of women but their fortitude and ingenuity in the context of social marginalisation. In so doing, Luke demonstrates Jesus's stance regarding women, as one who elevates the visibility of women by openly confirming their credibility and dignity.⁵⁶

INTEGRATING ECCLESIAL ENCULTURATION, BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT

In an article on the Bible as resource for development in Africa, theologian Ezra Chitando notes that liberating readings of the Bible that promote development and growth is indeed possible.⁵⁷ Chitando confirms that ecclesial culture and biblical interpretation often oppress women and acts as a barrier to their development and growth.⁵⁸ Ecclesial culture and biblical interpretation, affirms Chitando, should encapsulate issues of development. Furthermore, ecclesial culture and biblical interpretation should be approached holistically and should be aimed at the betterment of the lives of individuals, families, communities, nations and the continent. Chitando avers that development should not be seen as an exclusively economic enterprise, but should be approached with the aim of addressing the social, cultural, political, environmental and other perspectives. Development must be people-centred, considering the health, well-being and quality of life of people. Chitando goes on to say that it is patriarchy that reduces women to subservient and subordinate roles in society and that the development of African women must be taken seriously for development in Africa to be realised.⁵⁹ The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians advocates for the Church to address its prevalent patriarchal foundations. This is essential to reshape the Church into an effective channel for the Gospel of Jesus Christ that embraces women with the

55 Pillay, "Luke 7:36-50: See This Woman?", 447.

56 Pillay, "Luke 7:36-50: See This Woman?", 448.

57 Chitando, "The Bible as a Resource for Development in Africa", 403.

58 Togarasei L. 2008. "Fighting HIV & AIDS with the Bible: Towards HIV & AIDS Biblical Criticism", in Chitando E (ed). *Mainstreaming HIV in Theology and Religious Studies: Experiences and Explorations*. Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications; United Nations. 2018. *Making Every Woman and Girl Count: Implementation Phase*. (ed) Jennifer Ross J (ed). New York: UN Women.

59 Chitando, "The Bible as a Resource for Development in Africa", 411.

same enthusiasm and honour as it does men. Interpreting the Bible should and must encompass perspectives that foster women's advancement through critical examination of all forms of violence, corruption, wastefulness and oppression. As Chitando elucidates, in the interpretation of sacred texts, ideas of development must focus on the real person, and the totality of their humanity must be affirmed and acknowledged.⁶⁰ The goal must be the realisation of all forms of freedoms for all so that all live under just and equitable conditions.

The interpretation of sacred texts must endorse and work towards the well-being of all Africans in all aspects of life. The contributions of women in all aspects of life must be valued and acknowledged and prevailing gender ideologies that see women as unequal must be thwarted through the promotion of holistic ecclesial culture and biblical interpretation.⁶¹ In this way, theological engagement will offer hope rather than condemnation, particularly for women navigating life on the margins of society. Ecclesial engagement with biblical texts cannot afford to obscure inherent patriarchal oppression, because this is what leads to women's sustained poverty, deprivation and suffering. Ecclesial engagement with biblical texts must refute societal gender imbalances and take seriously the idea that poverty and inequality of women is contrary to the will of God. Moreover, ecclesial engagement with biblical texts must incorporate advocating for justice, reconciliation and hope in the struggle against the gendered nature of structural and systemic oppression that cements women's poverty and unequal status in the world. In so doing, justice will become an important category in interpretation and gender reconciliation will trigger social and ecclesial actions to address inequity and discrimination. The Church, therefore, has the potential to play a leading role in the social, cultural, economic and political development of women in South Africa and is an important role player in the advancement of the United Nations SDGs.

DRIVING RECONCILIATION AND ATTAINMENT OF THE SDGS

There is undoubtedly a need to transcend oppressive ecclesial cultures and interpretations that hinder women's progress. The potential of liberating biblical interpretation for driving reconciliation and the attainment of the SDGs should not be overlooked. Gender reconciliation in this regard will entail approaches to ecclesial culture and biblical interpretation that unlock holistic development pathways by addressing social, cultural and interpretive barriers that hinder the development of women. As Chitando rightfully claims, what is needed is a comprehensive understanding of development beyond mere economic indicators – a people-centric approach that addresses social, cultural, political and environmental dimensions.⁶² For meaningful reconciliation to take place, biblical interpretation and ecclesial enculturation must be channelled in the direction of the overall well-being and

60 Chitando, "The Bible as a Resource for Development in Africa", 403.

61 Chitando, "The Bible as a Resource for Development in Africa", 411.

62 Chitando, "The Bible as a Resource for Development in Africa", 411.

quality of life for all individuals, families, communities and nations, irrespective of race, class and gender. If the Church is to be a beacon of hope and a catalyst for change, then it must take gender reconciliation seriously through reform of its ecclesial culture and patriarchal biblical interpretations. Gender reconciliation will entail a call to action in which ecclesial engagements and biblical texts become a transformative force against gender imbalances. Through endorsing justice, reconciliation and hope, the Church holds the potential to dismantle systemic oppression that reinforces women's poverty and unequal status. A proactive stance of this nature will align with the broader objectives of the SDGs, creating a synergy that will propel social, cultural, economic and political development for women in South Africa. The dismantling of oppressive ecclesial enculturation and patriarchal biblical interpretation will establish a dynamic platform for dismantling gender-based inequalities and advancing the holistic development of women. This, in turn, will position the Church as a pivotal agent in achieving the United Nations SDGs.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I demonstrated how patterns of domination of women enabled through ecclesial culture, biblical interpretation and male hegemony impede the advancement of the United Nations SDGs. The marginalisation of women through biblical interpretation and ecclesial culture contributes to women's poverty and alienation and has a direct impact on the realisation of the United Nations SDGs. There is therefore an urgent need for reform of hierarchical and patriarchal structures in church and society. In this way, theological engagement will offer hope rather than condemnation, particularly for women navigating life on the fringes of society. The chapter demonstrates that ecclesial engagement with biblical texts cannot afford to obscure inherent patriarchal oppression, because this is what leads to women's sustained poverty, deprivation and suffering. Ecclesial engagement with biblical texts must therefore address societal gender imbalances and take seriously the idea that poverty and inequality of women is contrary to the will of God. Moreover, ecclesial engagement with biblical texts must incorporate advocating for justice, reconciliation and hope in the struggle against the gendered nature of structural and systemic oppression that cements women's poverty and unequal status in the world. In so doing, justice and reconciliation will become important categories in biblical interpretation and gender reconciliation will trigger social and ecclesial actions that support and work towards the realisation of the United Nations SDGs.