

KEEPING FAITH IN FAITH LEADERS

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Students from the University of the Western Cape (UWC) demanding a drop in university fees.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past 20 years, evidence gathering and advocacy conducted by faith based organisations have facilitated renewed attention to the dynamics and significance of faith and religion on the part of governmental and intergovernmental development organisations. As a result, the importance of the role of faith and faith actors in the achievement of international agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been acknowledged by numerous organisations including UN agencies, the World Bank and governmental entities.

Whilst this demonstrates greater receptivity to the power and significance of faith and religion in social life across contexts, a trend towards polarisation within the literatures on faith and gender persists. Crudely put, faith actors, particularly faith leaders, tend to be seen *either* as the block to gender equality *or* as a 'magic bullet' in its achievement (UN Women n.d.). The work of fostering improved faith literacy across a range of historically secular-minded actors is ongoing. However, the renewed recognition of the importance of faith has opened up tentative new conversations where polarised assumptions can be tested and a deeper, critical engagement in relation to theory and practice can be fostered. Such querying offers the possibility of deeper, nuanced understanding as to the strengths, limitations and capacities of religious actors in local contexts.

In this report we seek to interrogate some of the simplifications that the prevailing climate has fostered in relation to the roles of faith leaders. Specifically, we query a commonly held assumption that faith leaders, with the influence and respect that they command, are able to translate and promote human rights principles about 'gender equality' within their communities. We explore these assumptions through focus groups and interviews with members of the Anglican Students Federation (ASF) at the Universities of the Western Cape and Cape Town.

Based on the experiences of young members of the ASF, we aim to identify what role, if any, faith has played in the construction of gender norms. In particular, we focus on the role of the church in supporting and/or contesting hegemonic gender understandings and the reactions of a number of local churches of differing denominations to gender based violence.

We explore how the churches continue to influence the students' ways of thinking about gender and how movements between the different spaces of church, the city of Cape Town, the parental home and the university allow students to wrestle with hegemonic gender constructions and re-evaluate their own behaviours and practices. The students whose experiences inform this report are all members of a weekly Bible study fellowship group in which resources produced by the Ujamaa centre (Cooper-White, 2007) were being used to facilitate thinking and discussion about gender and power within the church and wider society.

Specific research questions included:

- What messages are the churches communicating in relation to gender and gender norms in different spaces (within their home communities and the university campus) and times (in their childhood and as young adults)?
- How, if at all, do the churches' messages around gender influence members' behaviour?
- What other social or institutional settings influence their constructions of gender norms?
- How is the influence of the church seen in relation to that of other institutions?
- What factors encourage and discourage change in the students' understandings of gender norms?

FINDINGS

The importance of context

The importance of historical and cultural context in relation to gender constructions and responses to calls for greater gender equality are well documented. Student perspectives re-iterated the mutually reinforcing power of the intersections of a patriarchal Christianity with local 'patriarchal culture'. The local context was felt to inform patriarchal interpretations of what might be deemed gender-ambiguous scriptures. 'Proof-texting' was felt to be commonly used to maintain unequal gender relations and faith leaders struggled to address gender based violence or challenge prevailing patriarchal gender norms.

Rural and Urban Distinctiveness

Local micro-contexts promote very different messages around gender. Rural contexts were sometimes associated with 'Biblical literalism' whilst churches attended in urban environments differently configured issues of scripture, culture and gender. Urban churches were found to be lagging behind constitutionally enshrined rights-based inflections. How students negotiate the moral complexities of competing authorities in relation to gender remains an urgent question.

Female leadership

Female leadership was felt to be of critical importance in struggles for gender equity in the church. Primarily such concerns were articulated around the importance of challenging thinking about power by modelling female authority. Secondly, female congregants are more likely to report GBV to a female member of clergy. How and whether women in leadership in the church can use their power to challenge the patriarchal structures of the church remains a contested area.

Students as leaders

The university provides a space where inherited norms, including those relating to gender, can be questioned. The Bible studies were seen as a positive space situated

within the critical atmosphere of the university environment. Bible studies were seen as a key tool in enabling young members to engage analytically with the implications of the dis-junctures between social, legislative, scriptural and cultural authorities in relation to gender and other received norms. Significantly, it was felt that what was experienced within the Bible studies was stimulating conversations and debates in other spheres, indicating, however tentatively, the capacity for wider change. The ability to question proof-texting and Biblical literalism gave the students confidence to try to 'educate' others, particularly in their home communities and contexts, whilst also recognising the acute challenges of being heard by elders.

Theological education for all

Theological education was important in enabling the students to challenge proof-texting. It was also vital in enabling them to voice their frustrations that churches in Cape Town which claimed to be 'gender-equal' were ignoring 'oppressive' texts rather than furnishing congregations with alternative interpretations of such texts. We argue for theological education which enables people - clergy and laity - to relate their faith and the texts of their faith to the texts and contexts of their lives. Policy and programming can usefully acknowledge the wide variety of formal and informal leadership within the church. Ensuring that theological education is available to all enables the laity in particular to challenge theological hierarchies and unhelpful scriptural interpretations, and feel confident about the ways in which they relate the Bible to their own contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research highlight a number of complexities which considerably impact the ability of faith leaders to translate rights-based values into local contexts. Significantly, the interactions between history, religion and culture; the impact of local power hierarchies on the agency of church leaders; an absence of congregation-level theological engagement with 'texts of terror'. Rather than providing easy answers, a number of critical questions for organisations who seek to work with faith leaders emerge:

Implications for policy and programming

- Who do we mean when we talk about faith leaders and faith communities?
- On whose behalf does this leader speak? How can we engage a range of perspectives across different constituent member groups (youth, minorities, older people)?
- What are the opportunities and constraints faced by leaders and group members in different social contexts and across different hierarchies?
- How are those with formal leadership roles engaging and collaborating with others who hold informal authority?
- Who is currently included and excluded from programmes with theological training elements?
- Which Biblical texts are currently included or excluded from programmes with theological training elements?
- Whose Biblical interpretations are given credence in current programming?
- How can new spaces for theological questioning and biblical re-interpretations be created?

Processes which simply aim to import and encourage the adoption of 'pro-gender equality' Biblical interpretations, whether implicitly or explicitly, risk being interpreted as yet more Western impositions with changes in attitudes and interpretations unlikely to be sustained beyond any project intervention. The time and space to question, including questioning the authoritative knowledge assumed in many development interventions, is not only desirable but essential if deep, sustainable, personal and social transformation is to take place.



Woman receiving the communion wine during the Eucharist at a church service in a tent in Lusikisiki

Photo: USPG/Leah Gordon

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ACRONYMS

ACSA	Anglican Communion of Southern Africa
ASF	Anglican Students Federation
DFID	Department for International Development
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
PaRD	International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UCT	University of Cape Town
UN	United Nations
UNIATF-FBO	United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force
USPG	United Society Partners in the Gospel
UWC	University of the Western Cape

ABSTRACT

This report analyses the experiences of a group of 16 students at Cape Town's Universities who have participated in a series of contextual Bible studies based on some of the 'texts of terror'- specifically the story of the rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13: 1 - 22). The Bible studies were set up to facilitate the students' engagement with critical questions of gender and authority as they relate to both scripture and society. The accounts of the students reveal a number of important considerations for faith based organisations (FBOs) and faith actors. Firstly, the impact that the church has had and continues to have on the students' understandings of gender. Secondly, the limitations of church leaders in translating and communicating the human rights agenda to congregations, particularly in relation to gender equality. Thirdly, the importance of theological education and the need to counter 'proof-texting' and Biblical literalism. The significance of the university space as one of encounter and formation where students are able to rethink their understandings of gender norms is clearly articulated. Bible studies on campus are seen as a particularly important place for challenging inherited Biblical interpretations and theological hierarchies, and evaluating and analysing Biblical messages in relation to gender alongside conflicting social influences and voices. Findings stress the importance of understanding the breadth and complexities of faith communities, their complex imbrication within local systems of power and the consequent challenges for FBOs, multilateral and bilateral agencies as they increase their engagement with faith based communities.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a shift over recent years in attitudes towards religion, faith and religious actors within the complex sphere of international development. The African HIV pandemic of the 1980s and 1990s rendered visible the necessity and significance of religious connections, authorities, motivations and networks of care in the fight against HIV. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, in the context of a Pentecostal explosion in Africa and the persistence of religion in the public sphere around the world, a dawning recognition of secularism as a peculiarly western phenomenon was laid bare.

Over the past 20 years, research and advocacy on the part of faith based organisations have facilitated renewed attention to the dynamics and significance of faith and religion by governmental and intergovernmental development organisations. As a result, the importance of recognising the role of faith and faith actors in the achievement of international agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been acknowledged by numerous organisations including UN agencies, the World Bank and governmental entities. This is perhaps best evidenced through an increasing number of partnerships with faith organisations, the creation of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development (UNIATF-FBO), the Moral Imperative of the World Bank and most recently the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD).

The success of these advocacy efforts is further demonstrated by the creation of specific documents to guide the engagement of governmental departments such as the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) Faith Partnership Principles (DFID, 2012) and the efforts of governmental departments such as that of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development to highlight successful partnerships with religious organisations (GIZ, 2016).

Whilst this demonstrates greater receptivity to the power and significance of faith and religion in social life across contexts, a trend towards polarisation within the literatures on faith and gender persists. Crudely put,

Faith actors, particularly faith leaders, tend to be seen *either* as the block to gender equality or as a 'magic bullet' in its achievement.

Given the work that FBOs have had to do over the past 20 years just to keep faith on the radar of policy makers, such thinking about faith is not surprising. The work of

encouraging improved faith literacy across a range of historically secular-minded actors is ongoing. However, the renewed recognition of the importance of faith has opened up tentative *new* conversations where polarised assumptions can be tested and a deeper, critical engagement in relation to theory and practice can be fostered. Such querying offers the possibility of deeper, nuanced understanding as to the strengths, limitations and capacities of religious actors in local contexts.

The research on which this paper is based seeks to question some of the simplifications that the prevailing climate has fostered in relation to the roles of faith leaders. Specifically, it interrogates a commonly held assumption that faith leaders, with the influence and respect that they command, are able to translate and promote human rights principles about 'gender equality' within their communities.

Our research focuses on the experiences of university students involved in contextual Bible study groups. These groups focussed on the story of the rape of Tamar, 2 Samuel 13: 1 - 22 which is one of the Biblical 'texts of terror', narrating a tragic story of rape, incest and a collusion of silence.¹ The focus on Tamar aims to help those involved in the Bible studies to explore the daily realities and experiences of gender based violence in South Africa. By using the Biblical text to think about local contextual issues difficult conversations about gender, violence and the nature of (scriptural) authority can be facilitated in a comparatively safe way, and in relation to the 'third space' of the narrative. The students' experiences strongly communicate the value of the contextual Bible study group for opening up challenging questions about religious and scriptural authority in local contexts. In light of these findings, we suggest that churches and faith based agencies consider increasing their support for processes that provide safe and non-hierarchical spaces for critical engagement with and re-evaluation of sacred texts.

¹The Bible study resource can be found at: http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/Tamar_Campaign_Contextual_Bible_Study_Manual_-_English_Version.sflb.ashx
Information on contextual Bible study methodologies and aims can be found at: <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Homepage.aspx>

OVERVIEW

The research which forms the basis of this report was conducted in June 2018 by USPG with the support of HOPE Africa, the development arm of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa ².

The Anglican Church in Southern Africa (ACSA) has a rich history of fighting for social change and justice as demonstrated by its leading role in anti-apartheid struggles where its activities ranged from international awareness-raising to local protest (de Gruchy and de Gruchy, 2004). The leadership, clergy and congregants of the churches of South Africa were heavily involved in protests and marches, often led by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who later became chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) (Tutu, 1999).

ACSA retains a vocal role in the ongoing fights for social justice across South Africa. It campaigned against gender based violence following the brutal rape and murder of Anene Booysen in 2013 ³ and has been active in the #FeesMustFall student protest movement which opposes increasing university fees and questions the persistent inequality of access to higher education post-1994, an inequality which is understood as a residual shadow of apartheid (Booyesen, 2016: p.1, Molefe, 2016: p.32). The bishops of the Church have demonstrated solidarity by participating in protests and sit-ins alongside students and the current Archbishop Thabo Makgoba has engaged with academic leaders (Anglican Communion News Service, 2016; Anglican Communion South Africa, 2016: p.1).

Grey literature based on African case studies suggests that engaging faith leaders can help reduce gender based violence due to the respect that leaders hold within communities, their legitimacy as authority figures, their ability to access networks and to communicate to large groups of people (Christian Aid, 2015; Episcopal Relief and Development, 2018; Le Roux and Bartelink, 2017). The approaches used by FBOs, through processes such as Channels of Hope and Church and Community Mobilisation Processes in the Christian FBO world, focus on how these processes can change the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of faith leaders and communities (World Vision, 2014).

Organisations working amidst this complex terrain know and acknowledge the inherent challenges and contradictions. However, in fora where FBOs and policy makers are brought together to examine the intersections between gender, faith and development,

² Ethical clearance was obtained from SOAS, University of London and written consent obtained from all students.

³ <http://www.anglicanwomensfellowship.co.za/media-statements/18-anglican-church-of-southern-africa-media-statement-11-february-2013.html>



About a thousand women march against gender based violence in Cape Town, South Africa.

Photo: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

nuance is too often lost in favour of a common narrative. This narrative imagines faith leaders as all-powerful actors, capable of modelling values that support human dignity and foster behavioural change. Faith leaders are crucial gatekeepers, yet we must also recognise their variability and fallibility. They face a range of constraints and challenges. Many of them have strongly held, culturally informed ways of thinking about and asserting 'male headship' and too often there exist few opportunities to engage in deep dialogue about the implications of questioning such convictions. If we are truly to '...engage the social capital and capacities vested in diverse faith communities for sustainable development and humanitarian assistance in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (PaRD, n.d.), then

We must discuss to whom we are referring when we talk about faith leadership. We must recognise the importance of theological education and work collectively to identify, foster and support the emergence of new kinds of leadership within faith communities.

Based on the experiences of young members of the Anglican Students Federation (ASF), our study aims to identify what role, if any, faith plays in constructions of gender norms. It focuses particularly on hegemonic gender understandings, the role of the church in supporting or contesting these and the reactions of the church to gender based violence. It explores how the church continues to influence the students' ways of thinking about gender and how movements between the different spaces of church, university and 'home' allow students to wrestle with hegemonic gender constructions and re-evaluate their own behaviours and practices.

The students whose experiences inform this report are all members of a weekly Bible study fellowship group in which resources produced by the Ujamaa centre (Cooper-White, 2007) are being used to facilitate thinking and discussion about gender and power within the church and wider society.

Specific research objectives:

- Explore any influence the Church has had on young members of the ASF in relation to gender constructions at different times in their lives, in their home communities and at university.
- Analyse other key actors or spaces, such as state or traditional leaders, in the construction of hegemonic gender understandings.
- Analyse factors contributing to and inhibiting change in relation to the students' attitudes and behaviour related to gender norms.

Research questions:

- What messages are the churches communicating in relation to gender and gender norms in different spaces (within their home communities and the university campus) and times (in their childhood and as young adults)?
- How, if at all, do the churches' messages around gender influence members' behaviour?
- What other social or institutional settings influence their constructions of gender norms?
- How is the influence of the Church seen in relation to that of other institutions?
- What factors encourage and discourage change in the students' understandings of gender norms?

METHODOLOGY

The data comprising this report are part of an exploratory, qualitative study, exploring the churches' roles in relation to gender across the life-course. The analysis is based on a core set of qualitative data collected from one of a number of different cohorts considered within the overall study.

Three focus groups and two in-depth interviews were undertaken with students from the Anglican Student Federation (ASF) in Cape Town. Fifty-five students from the ASF, 31 females and 24 males, enrolled at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) or the University of Cape Town (UCT), formed the sample population. All of these people are regular participants in gender-focused Bible studies and discussion groups. An invitation was sent to the ASF WhatsApp group resulting in a self-selecting sample. Sixteen students, nine females and seven males, participated in the first group (FGD 1) which was mixed gender (as are their Bible study meetings). The number of students was greater than anticipated. As they had travelled some distance and taken time from their revision, the decision was taken to continue with all 16 students. The aim of the FGD was to inform the researchers' initial contextualisation with a further FGD planned to provide a more in-depth understanding. However, at the students' request and because of large numbers the second FGD was divided into two according to a male-female binary. Seven students participated in the female group (FGD 2) and six in the male (FGD 3). In-depth interviews were conducted with the two students with greatest experience of the Bible studies to aid the researchers' understanding of the Bible study's history, successes and challenges and demonstrate how they experienced areas of consensus and contestation discussed in the FGDs. These data were supplemented by numerous informal meetings and conversations with ASF students and student leaders.

Within the broader scope of the study, a number of focus groups and semi-structured interviews were undertaken to explore intersections between church, culture and gender in False Bay Diocese, Cape Town Diocese and Zululand Diocese. Conversations and interviews were also undertaken with a number of Anglican church and community development leaders in all three diocesan contexts (including a diocesan bishop, local priests and a number of staff who facilitate community development work around issues of gender in the Dioceses of False Bay, Cape Town and Zululand). The wider data set serve to act as the broader context within which the experiences of the cohort considered within this report are situated and analysed.

³ <http://www.anglicanwomensfellowship.co.za/media-statements/18-anglican-church-of-southern-africa-media-statement-11-february-2013.html>

FINDINGS

The following discussion is organised according to the major themes which emerged from the data in relation to the influence of the church on students' understandings and constructions of gender.

1. The importance of context
2. Rural and urban distinctiveness
3. Female leadership
4. Students as leaders
5. Theological education for all

1. The importance of context

The importance of historical and cultural context in relation to both gender constructions and responses to calls for greater gender equality has been well documented in extant literature. This was supported by the students who noted *'What we have in Africa is so unique in that Christianity arrives as patriarchal and finds another culture that is patriarchal...'* [Male student 4, FGD 3] The student groups felt that *'The two [religion and culture] constantly interact to a point of indivisibility'* [Female student 1, FGD 1] and mutually reinforce patriarchal structures and unequal gender relations. Furthermore, they noted how this pervasive culture of patriarchy continued to influence faith leaders' interpretations of scripture:

'...pastors no matter how much they are guided by Biblical principles, they always have a level of subjectivity [with] regards to patriarchy...in a church in a rural area I am sure none of us would be surprised to get there and the pastor to be interpreting the Bible to the core of patriarchy.' [Male student 6, FGD 3].

The reading of scripture through a patriarchal lens was further evidenced through 'proof-texting' – a practice discussed in all three focus groups where text is selectively used out of context to support a particular idea or justify a behaviour (Fortune and Enger, 2005: p.2). The students believed that proof-texting was being used to maintain hegemonic, unequal, gender relations and that *'...the people who interpret the Bible themselves... they prefer to look at the Biblical understanding through the cultural prism.'* [Male student 6, FGD 1]. The following example was given: *'...In relation to one fairly prominent [Biblical] saying that the oil starts from the head, [leaders] prefer the interpretation that the head is the male.'* [Male student 4, FGD 3].

Such findings highlight the complexities of encouraging alternative readings of scripture and the importance of understanding the cultural and historical contexts through which scripture is read. They indicate the significance of time and space in which people can reflect on the intersections and tensions between their inherited worldviews and those of scripture. Indeed, the focus group spaces themselves were appreciated for the opportunities that they gave for different groups of people to think and reflect on what they had experienced through the Bible studies.

In contexts with strong hegemonic ideals of female submission, those using the Bible to challenge gender inequality and discuss human rights faced many challenges. These were particularly pertinent to stipendiary clergy who *'...tend to not speak what they want, tend not to be prophetic...because certain families in the church will start pulling the strings and saying we want a new [priest]...'* [Male student 4, FGD 3]. This finding was heavily supported by the wider data gathered, including from church leaders themselves. Without greater support from church hierarchies, clergy are often unable to preach against prevailing patriarchal gender norms, even where there exists a theological commitment to social justice and the church is prophetic. Such findings highlight the importance of recognising and engaging the complexity of local power structures and dynamics which inform how churches and church leaders operate within communities. Specific challenges include long-term feelings of local ownership where

'...certain families who have been part of the church [have a] generational attachment [and] entitlement, to how the church runs so you can come as a priest and try and change things but you won't last if you go against the norms.' [Male student 4, interview 2].

The contextual vulnerability of faith leaders raises fundamental questions about their capacity to challenge prevailing social and cultural norms within the communities they serve. This complicates existing narratives which see clergy as able to translate human rights agenda (Tomalin, 2007; Para-Mallam et al. 2011: p.27) and the policies of bilateral and multilateral organisations whose work with faith communities often assumes the power of faith leaders to encourage change (DFID, 2012; GIZ, 2016; UNFPA, 2016; UN Women, 2016; UNIATF, 2018).

2. Rural and Urban Distinctiveness

In considering the relationships between scripture, culture and gender, students noted differences between their experiences in the rural communities in which they grew up and those of Cape Town. *'...you go to the rural places and it is Biblical literalism. You come to Western Cape...they are able to deconstruct; they are able to interpret within a context.'* [Male student 13, FGD 3].

However, even within the context of Cape Town, churches were seen, particularly by female students, as lagging behind prevailing social and cultural norms. There was a contrast between social messaging in the city and the messaging of the church. One student suggested: *'Some churches still expect the woman to be submissive, to be humble and to be dumb whereas society is telling you women empowerment, women empowerment.'* [Female student 9, FGD 2]. This was likened by the students to different teachings in relation to homosexuality where *'The church is saying God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve whereas in society they are saying be whoever you want to be.'* [Female student 11, FGD 1].

The preaching and practices of the churches in Cape Town were further contrasted with legislative frameworks: *'...in the workplace you have affirmative action, in the Bill of Rights or Constitution we are all equal...I feel what society is saying, it clashes with what church says. It is the opposite.'* [Female student 3, FDG 1]. Such dis-junctures pose particular difficulties for students who want to engage with the church but see it as out of touch or regressive. It was clear throughout that students were constantly having to negotiate the different voices of: the church; the predominantly rural cultures in which they grew up; those of a rights-based constitution. The Bible study spaces provided opportunities to reflect on how these different authorities were understood and negotiated.

3. Female leadership

In 2017 the ACSA celebrated 25 years of female ordination (ACSA, 2017). The number of female clergy are growing, which is important for many reasons including its impact on young women who spoke of the difference that this made to their perceptions of the church; *'...we had a female reverend so for me it was ok for women to be within leadership...I think it is different from what society really says...'* [Female student 7, FGD 1]. As well as modelling different ways of thinking about leadership, evidence also suggests that women in South Africa are more likely to report GBV to female clergy (Petersen, 2006: p.62). However, whilst female leadership is important, it cannot be seen as the solution to encouraging churches to promote gender equality. The students noted the many challenges female clergy face, including possible decreases in male attendance in those churches with female incumbents.

The idea of 'palatable patriarchy' (Nadar, 2009) where appearances of female power serve to mask a lack of actual power, was also discussed in relation to female ordination:

'...women's faces [are] in the front but we [men] lead from behind...they were ordained but to what implications? Were they really given power or were they just situated within a power?' [Male student 4, FGD 3].

Female clergy in South Africa face difficult decisions and compromises. If they as clergy challenge hegemonic gender norms they may be removed or church attendance may fall. If they decide to remain quiet about patriarchal structures they can at least stay in post and support individual women, reflecting another instance of 'palatable patriarchy'.

4. Students as leaders

The university space broadened students' exposure and understandings by enabling them to experience other cultures and ideas that were distinct from the norms with which they grew up. For example a student who had never visited Lesotho noted: *'...[growing up] we only experienced our own culture...now things are different. For example, I know that in Lesotho when you graduate that is when you become a man...because of the exposure.'* [Female student 3, FGD 1]. The importance of the exposure and encounter provided by the university space is consistent with existing literature (Mantell et al. 2009: p.11; Andersson, Sadgrove and Valentine, 2012). The university provides a space where inherited norms, including those relating to gender, can be questioned and where one is *'...able to see how things are happening in other countries and so on and you are able to be like, well if that other country is functioning without this and this why do we have to stick to this?'* [Female student 9, FGD 1].

The Bible studies were seen as positive spaces situated within the critical atmosphere of the university environment. Bible studies were seen as a key tool in enabling young members to engage analytically with the implications of the dis-junctures between social, legislative, scriptural and cultural authorities in relation to gender and other received norms. Significantly, it was felt that what was experienced within the Bible studies was stimulating conversations and debates in other spheres, indicating, however tentatively, the capacity for wider change. The process *'...started very small with a Bible study and then it goes beyond the Bible study and it goes to conferences and you can see people are talking...'* [Female student 10, FGD 2].

The enhanced theological understanding that the Bible studies provided increased the students' relative power and confidence as they were emboldened to challenge Biblical literalism and proof-texting. They were able to argue that *'...the words in the Bible might say that but what does the Bible in its entirety say?'* [Male student 4, interview 2] and were able to question why *'...people always take it in isolation. Like that sentence, why do you take it in isolation and create a whole discourse?...'* [Male student 4, interview 2].

This ability to question proof-texting and Biblical literalism gave the students confidence to 'educate' others, particularly in their home communities and contexts. Male students in particular believed *'...it is our responsibility, the people in this type of discussion, that we will get this knowledge and to actually go back to our communities...'* [Male student 5, FGD 3]. The ability of universities to encourage critical thinking in students from diverse backgrounds and communities, who then often return home armed with new conceptualisations, reveal its critical role in challenging the perpetuation of gender inequality within South Africa.



The Revd. Dr Vicentia Kgabe, rector of the College of Transfiguration, South Africa, speaks at the 'Rethinking Mission: global perspectives on contextual mission' day conference held at Southwark Cathedral in February 2017. Photo: USPG/Leah Gordon



The Rape of Tamar painted by Eustache Le Sueur (1616-1655) in collection of the Metropolitan Museum. Photo: Eustache Le Sueur [Public domain]

The students' desire to 'educate' was, however, tempered by an acknowledgement that their home communities would be resistant to change and that although they believed they had a '*...responsibility to go back and preach these things that we learn inside.*

They will still tell us to get off ...they will ask you who are you? How old are you? [Male student 8, FGD 1]. It was anticipated that attempts to challenge existing ways of thinking would be faced with opposition by appeals to 'cultural' authority: '*It was done even before you were born. You don't question culture. That is what they say.*' [Male student 8, FGD 1]. This led the students to query the utility of their developing understanding, and more importantly to recognise the context-specific limitations of their agency:

'Being in positions of power or being in locations of power is not the same as having power. So we are in positions of knowledge and we can practice it every day from Monday to Sunday for as long as we are this side. But it doesn't mean we have that knowledge as wisdom where we can apply it when we are back at home. So the question of what does it all mean for me on campus is simply abstract; it is simply theory. Because in practice, I must still go back home. For example, this feminist theology, gender studies right but I critique Lobola, I critique all of these African traditions. But when I go home...' [Male student 4, FGD 3].

Neither the Bible studies nor the university provided a consistent space where the students could be supported to think through these issues in structured ways. However, the enhanced status accrued through education and the concurrent ability to gain higher paid employment was reported to generate a respect within students' home communities that some hoped might translate into increased influence over gender norms. The in-depth contextual understanding and insider status may mean that once these young people have gained employment, they will be able to influence gender relations in a way that a priest, who is at the service of the community and can be removed by the community, cannot.

5. Theological education for all

Theological education for the students was not only important in enabling them to challenge proof-texting but also in articulating their frustrations that churches in Cape Town claiming to be gender-equal were actually ignoring 'oppressive' texts rather than educating congregations with alternative interpretations. For example, one student noted that

'Tamar was raped but they don't raise such issues in the church. In the Anglican church we are just recycling scriptures...why are they not mentioning other scriptures, what are we teaching people?' [Female student 16, interview].

Clergy must be encouraged and enabled to preach on 'texts of terror' with gender equity in mind. *'It is not enough for you to stand in the pulpit and omit to preach on Corinthians, you omit to preach on Leviticus court laws, you omit to preach on all of this abomination stuff.'*

'Simply saying that, well in my church we don't preach anti-homosexual, we don't preach anti women's equality but what I am saying is you are not confronting it either because if you are a trained theologian you should be able to...' [Male student 4, interview 2].

The benefits of theological training which enables clergy to preach on ‘texts of terror’ have been identified by West and Zondi-Mabizela (2004: 7). More broadly, we argue for theological education which enables people – clergy and laity – to relate their faith and the texts of their faith to the texts and contexts of their lives.

Students used their theological understanding to make sense of the world around them. In the story of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-22), Tamar was raped by her half-brother Amnon. Amnon’s cousin had prior knowledge that the rape would take place. One student questioned the actions of the cousin asking ‘...why didn’t he warn Tamar or why didn’t he just tell the servants or the securities? Or why didn’t he tell the brother or King David because he knew what was going to happen...Him just being quiet is wrong.’ [Female student 16, interview 1]. She used this example to talk about #menaretrash – a social media movement drawing public attention to violence against women, which gained traction after the brutal murder of Karabo Mokoena⁴. This student used the story of Tamar to argue that #menaretrash is applicable to all men, whether they themselves are violent or not. She concluded that *‘[the cousin] just deserves [the] same punishment as the others because he kept necessary information that would have prevented [the rape].’*

Current literature emphasises both the value and importance of clerical engagement with theologies of gender equality and sensitisation as to the urgency of the task and scale of the challenge (Episcopal Relief and Development, 2018). The importance of strengthening theological education in relation to gender is also documented (Petersen, 2006: p.76). Additional support could be provided for clergy in contexts in which inequitable gender constructions predominate and inform local power dynamics. The vulnerability of leaders in such contexts needs to be recognised by church hierarchies and support offered where possible. Policy and programming can usefully acknowledge the wide variety of formal and informal leadership within the church and ensure that theological education is available to all to enable laity in particular to challenge theological hierarchies and unhelpful scriptural interpretations and feel confident about the ways in which they relate the Bible to their lives, congregations and contexts.

⁴<https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/gauteng/we-remember-karabo-mokoena-16358440>

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research illuminate some of the complexities facing faith leaders in the area of gender equity and illustrate the fragility and variability of an Anglican parish priest's authority in South Africa. Specifically, they demonstrate the ways in which the views of congregants and the wider community, the complexities of local power dynamics and the threat of removal from post, limit the capacity that a leader has to challenge prevailing norms about relationships between men and women. In particular, priests find it very difficult publicly to address issues of domestic violence, even where these are well known by the local congregation and wider community. We argue for the importance of analysing the role of a faith leader within the contexts both of the faith community as a whole, riven with internal power dynamics, and within local networks of power so that the potential limitations of individual faith leaders can be better anticipated.

There are a number of implications for policy makers and FBOs who seek to work with faith leaders to challenge prevailing social and cultural norms and transliterate human rights principles into locally appropriate idioms. Not least there is a need to move beyond simple analyses to recognise complex interactions between history, religion and culture; the impact of local power hierarchies on the agency of church leaders; the importance of theological engagement with 'texts of terror'. If the aim is to work effectively with faith communities and leaders, then a set of critical questions emerge for those seeking to partner with faith groups:

- Who do we mean when we talk about faith leaders and faith communities?
- On whose behalf does this leader speak? How can we engage a range of perspectives across different constituent member groups (youth, minorities, older people)?
- What are the opportunities and constraints faced by leaders and group members in different social contexts and across different hierarchies?
- How are those with formal leadership roles engaging and collaborating with others who hold informal authority?
- Who is currently included and excluded from programmes with theological training elements?
- Which Biblical texts are currently included or excluded from programmes with theological training elements?
- Whose Biblical interpretations are given credence in current programming?
- How can new spaces for theological questioning and biblical re-interpretations be created?

The challenges highlighted in this report represent only one aspect of our broader findings in relation to the churches' critical and ongoing work around gender and gender based violence in South Africa. Despite the limitations of the church's position as articulated by the students, it was clear that leadership wishing to encourage more

critical engagement with gender norms were able to provide vital space for thinking and reflection using Bible study methods. (West, 2004: pp.12-13).

When thinking about 'the church', the diversity of spaces in which it is located and influential for different cohorts must be taken into consideration. In particular, the manifestations of church within the space of the university campus need to be taken seriously, given the opportunities for critical thinking and re-evaluation of ideas.

The breadth of faith communities must be recognised and alternative internal voices, such as those of students, and those in formal and informal positions of leadership, supported with creative interventions that enable dominant theologies and voices to be challenged and hegemonic gender norms to be re-imagined.

The combination of education, cross-cultural encounter and contextually appropriate gender-related Bible studies in the context of the university space, hold the potential for enabling people to challenge inherited hegemonic norms within South Africa. This is of particular value given the growth of student numbers in South Africa and the increasing support and funding available for faith actors.

Finally, we caution that processes which simply aim to import and encourage the adoption of 'pro-gender equality' Biblical interpretations, whether implicitly or explicitly, risk being interpreted as yet another Western imposition. Where this is the case, changes in attitudes and interpretations are unlikely to be sustained beyond any project intervention. The time and space to question, including questioning the authoritative knowledge assumed in many development interventions, is not only desirable but essential if deep, sustainable, personal and social transformation is to take place.



The second day of protests at the University of Cape Town calling for student fees and debts to be lowered. Was one of a number of such protests across South Africa on the day. Photo: Discott CC BY-SA 4.0 mvia from Wikimedia Commons

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