

**Micah Network Consultation:**

**Integral Mission and the Community: local church, local change, global impact**

**First set of Case Studies**

## **The Need to Analyse: Often Issues are not Recognised as a Gender Problem**

### **Beulah Wood**

Speaking from South India, let me tell you three case stories. (Names and circumstances are changed.) I want us to analyse each to find the true reasons for each unhappy circumstance. I want to show things that happen on a community level, ignored even by Christians. I want to show that local churches need to analyse and work for local change. We can hope to make a global impact only if we as churches and Christians know that **the driver of gender discrimination often starts in families, even Christian families.**

#### *Sunalini Comes to South India*

*Sunalini, an Adivasi<sup>1</sup> in the North East of India, was nine when her father accepted Rs 10,000 and gave her to a family of Christians, James and Sara. Sunalini worked all day doing their cooking and housework, sometimes night as well, giving massages to Sara. Unable to leave. No wages. No choices. Often beaten. That was slavery. Then the family took her to Chennai where James studied at a Bible College. That was trafficking.*

*When Sunalini was 19, still illiterate, they put her to work in an orphanage with wages passed to them. (They said she wanted to help the education of their two children!) Even the Christian matron of the orphanage did not recognise this as exploitation. One night when Sunalini was back at James and Sara's house Sara beat her again and she ran to the orphanage. James arrived and beat her in front of the matron. Finally the matron thought she should protect Sunalini. The next day she told a*

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<sup>1</sup> Adivasis are tribals, considered lower by more dominant tribal groups.

*friend who called an organisation to rescue Sunalini. James said he did not know he had done anything wrong and that where he comes from lots of Christians have these Adivasi girls.*

We can write labels for what happened to Sunalini.

- a. Ill-treatment and exploitation of a person of a poorer or darker race.
- b. Poverty.
- c. Child labour, slavery and child abuse.
- d. Trafficking (giving money for a child; no choices; taking her to another place).
- e. Lack of respect for a young female, even in a Christian family.
- f. In fact, denigration of a female – the belief that a girl did not matter and had no rights.
- g. Exploitation of her powerlessness and isolation, with no education or knowledge of her rights.

### *Vimala's Marriage*

*Vimala's father had borrowed Rupees 10,000 (US\$182) a small loan even in South India, from a money-lender. When he had not repaid it after three years he arranged that his daughter, 17, marry the money-lender to pay his debt. However, the money-lender told Vimala to work 'to pay the debt', and sent her out as a prostitute. She later reached a women's refuge. "There are no answers for these women," exclaims the Christian founder/director of the refuge. "It all comes down to poverty."*

What are some of the issues for Vimala?

- a. Yes, one issue was poverty.
- b. Vimala was under the legal marriage age of 18, a fact ignored by the men and probably not known to Vimala (44% of girls in India are married before 18).
- c. The father and husband saw marriage as a financial contract.
- d. The father assumed a right to destroy his daughter's future for the sake of his minor debt.
- e. Both father and husband assumed a right to control and gain from Vimala's body.
- f. A parent used a daughter for his advantage.
- g. A husband used/abused a wife for his advantage.
- h. Under-age, forced prostitution.
- i. Vimala's lack of education about her rights.
- j. Her culturally powerless position, unable to argue for rights in face of father, husband or clients.
- k. With no limitation on Vimala's 'work', she would pay many times over her father's debt.
- l. Lack of respect, in fact hateful denigration, towards a female.

m. To top it all, the manager of the women's refuge recognises nothing of the invisible cultural currents that put Vimala there.

Sometimes people analyse superficially, even those in social work. The issues were far more than poverty.

#### *Teresa, a High School Teacher and Mother of Two*

*Teresa, a devout educated Christian woman, hoped much from her marriage, arranged by her well-meaning parents. The next week she was back teaching at the quality Christian school in Hyderabad, India. Her educated, English-speaking husband Roy had no job. He still had no job five years later, ten years, twenty years. He listened to music, sat about with his friends, and watched videos while Teresa brought a salary that paid the rent and food. They continued with church.*

*Teresa kept asking Roy to get a job, and then asked the church leaders to convince him to work. They did nothing. It was her role to let her husband make the decisions about what happened in the house. Tired at the end of each day, Teresa cooked, cleaned, paid the bills and helped the two boys with their homework while Roy took to drinking and abusive behaviour. For this Christian woman, divorce was not an option.*

*By age 22, the older son held a good job, but the younger, 19, failed his exams, drank and hung out in bad company. Teresa decided, perhaps too late, to leave the marriage, to take her younger son away from the bad influence of his father. Suddenly the church leaders demanded she stay. "Divorce is wrong," they said, but Teresa left. She took the help of an NGO and then rented a place to stay, but where will she go to church?*

What are the Issues for Teresa?

- a. A self-serving lazy husband, disrespecting his wife's wishes.
- b. Exploitation of Teresa's desire to keep the family together.
- c. A wife trapped, powerless, in a bad marriage.
- d. The effect on one son of the father's bad modelling.
- e. The church leaders' lack of respect for Teresa as a suffering church member.
- f. Their belief that a husband in the home could never be wrong.
- g. Their failure to correct a man who ill-treated his wife.
- h. The church leaders' self-righteous condemnation of a decision for divorce after 23 years.

There was far more at stake than the hope of the church leaders to keep a marriage intact.

Is there a link between these three stories? There is indeed. They all exhibit the belief that a man is a first-class citizen and a woman is not.

Each of the three abused women received help from a Christian organisation. There are hundreds of such organisations in India. But where are the Christians who will tackle the **source of the problem?** The belief that men are in charge and women cannot be joint participators with equal voice in the decisions made in homes.

Without working at the reasons for the problem, our services are still the proverbial ambulance at the bottom of the cliff instead of the fence at the top. The organisations around India which are trying to help, will be doing the same task still in 200 years' time!

How can this change?

- First, we Christians need to be sure of the equal value and equal decision-making right and capability of women. If our churches cannot get their teaching right about women and men, and strengthen the hand of those who work against injustice, they stand weakened for the task. The theological teaching on the equal value of men and women is available.
- Let us then teach across the world, **as part of gospel justice**, the inherent equality of men and women made in the image of God, and the charge God gave both women and men to rule. "So God created **human beings in his own image...** male and female he created them. God blessed them and said **to them...** 'Fill the earth and **subdue it. Rule** over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature'" (Genesis 1:27-28).

Let me repeat what I said at the beginning. Local churches need to analyse and work for local change. We can hope to have a global impact only if we as churches and Christians know that gender discrimination starts in families, even Christian families.

The belief that women cannot take part in the decisions about their own lives does untold damage to the life, liberty, health and happiness of countless millions of women and girls. Let us as NGOs energise Christians to fight this lie.

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