

# WHAT IS THE CHURCH SOCIAL TEACHING SAYING ABOUT WOMEN'S RIGHTS?



By  
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JESUIT CENTRE FOR THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

*"Promoting Faith and Justice"*

## **What is the Church Social Teaching saying about Women's rights?**

**Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, at the request of John Paul II (2004)**

*Man and woman have the same dignity and are of equal value, not only because they are both, in their differences, created in the image of God, but even more profoundly because the dynamic of reciprocity that gives life to the "we" in the human couple, is an image of God.*

This booklet has been designed to assist Christian groups to learn more and reflect on the current situation of women's rights. It provides a theological reflection, with reference to some of the scripture, for the purpose of enlightening people on the Church Social Teaching in relation to women's rights.

This booklet invites individuals to share their own personal experiences and consider effective ways to advocate for the improvement of women's rights, in our own local communities, in our country and also internationally.

It is comprised of four parts, which can be led by a facilitator. It follows the process of a pastoral circle.



1. What is happening? Begin with your own experiences of women's rights.
2. Why is it happening? Consider reasons why the current situation for women exists. Think about political, economic, social and cultural factors that influence the position of women.
3. What is the Church Social Teaching saying about women's rights? Engage in some theological reflection. Discuss overarching themes such as human dignity. Explore and interpret for yourselves the Bible passages offered, and perhaps look for more that strengthen the rights of women.
4. Finally, what can we do as a Christian community to improve the situation? Consider appropriate responses of action both on a local, national and international level.

It would be extremely valuable to hear how you have used this booklet in your communities to educate and promote women's rights. We appreciate any feedback you have on the effectiveness of this booklet. Finally, if you have any further questions or comments on the issues raised, we welcome you to contact us.

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## **Introduction:**

The issue of women's rights is ubiquitous all over the world, nonetheless the type and degree of challenges that women face are undoubtedly varied. We often view women's rights as something that has evolved and improved over time; we make a connection between the development of civilization and the advancement of women's rights. However, arguably throughout history there have always been circumstances in which women's rights have been upheld, and even acclaimed, as well as withheld and abused. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is by no means an exception and Zambia faces its own unique obstructions to the realisation of women's rights.

Often women's rights can be considered in relation to gender roles. It is important that the two are differentiated. Women's rights are the promotion of legal and social equality. Gender roles are a set of societal norms dictating the generally acceptable or desirable behavior of individuals, based on their sexuality. Whilst gender roles certainly vary across countries and cultures, women's rights on the other hand are universally applicable. The challenge for any given society is to not allow for culturally accepted gender roles to infringe on the attainment of rights. Women's rights, if well considered, can be realised and achieved in any given society; this can be understood as the inculturation of women's rights.

Unbeknown to many, particularly outsiders, Africa has a rich tradition of female empowerment. Women were regarded for their maternal, professional and spiritual character. For example, not only were women the main guardians of their children but it was also common place for women to be the major food producers in the family, both in terms of farming and cooking. Women were also considered to have a special business acumen on the local market scenes and often managed their own finances [ref.](#) It was a culture that both

valued and respected women for their unique character and capabilities.

It seems as though such representations of women in Africa have been distorted, if not completely dissolved. The changes in cultural attitudes have had a negative impact on the legal and social rights of women today. Without a doubt, assigned roles to women, particularly as wives and mothers, have infringed on the provision of social, political and economic rights for women.

The Church Social Teaching (CST) is a framework of social wisdom directed at all Christians to live out their life according to the will of God. There are two main principles that are pertinent to the discussion of women's rights from a CST perspective; 'Human Dignity' and 'Rights and Responsibilities'. The acknowledgement of the dignity of all persons is fundamental to the attainment of any human right. Quite simply, dignity is inherent to all human beings; rights are necessary for such dignity to be maintained. Henceforth the violation of any right on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender or any other arbitrary distinction between persons is a direct attack on human dignity. It is incumbent on all Christians to ensure that these rights are being provided for so that our human dignity is retained.

## **Part 1: What is happening?**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) affirms the entitlement of rights of all persons without distinction of any kind, including sex. The articles include the right to liberty, security, education and work; the right to be free from slavery and torture and be equal before the law. Zambia has endorsed these universal rights by its constitution. Nonetheless, without the explicit provision of women's rights on a domestic level, the lived reality for many Zambian women is far-removed from this general constitutional commitment.

Certainly there are different types and varying degrees of infringement of women's rights. Some are an obvious violation of a basic human right. To give an example; typically, there are higher rates of human trafficking and gender based violence amongst women. This is perhaps due to the fact that women are viewed as a more vulnerable group in society, hence can be more easily exploited.

There are also less obvious infringements of women's rights, associated with development and social justice issues. These typically take the form of discrimination, on an institutional, social and cultural level. For example the sidelining of women in education and the work place. According to a Gender Statistics Report Booklet (Central Statistical Office, 2010) females are significantly behind on literacy rates; 76% literacy rate amongst males, compared to 56% amongst females. It is clear that low enrolment and high drop-out rate amongst girls in schools is a contributing factor to this. Furthermore, the CSO report also found that women occupied significantly less managerial roles than men (only 29% compared to 71%). Both these examples indicate that opportunities in education and the workplace, i.e. places that harness human capital, more often than not favor men. The denial of women's right to education ultimately hinders their economic and social

development, with the net result of this being that women continue to bear the harshest brunt of poverty (Mwale, 2012).

### **Story one**

*Anaya has been married to her husband for five years. He had always been a heavy drinker, but recently it had become a lot worse. His mood swings had become unpredictable, often he shouted and threw things aggressively; this made Anya scared to be around him. One day on her return from Church, he asked her where she had been. She told him the truth but he did not believe her. He scorned her for having an affair with another man and beat her to the floor. This became a frequent occurrence for Anaya; he would beat her for the slightest things; if she hadn't done something properly, or if she ever dared to answer back. Anaya feared for her life every day. Eventually, she found the courage to tell her Mother. Her Mother shunned her and told her not to speak about her husband disrespectfully as he has always loved and provided for her.*

### **Story two**

*Alala is seven years old and lives with her Mother and two brothers, Ayo (11) and Kofi (13) in a small village. Alala watches both her brothers leave for school every day while she stays at home with her Mother. Her Mother did not have enough money to send all three of them to school and so prioritised the two boys. Alala had to stay at home to help her Mother grow potatoes and sell them on the street. She was told that it was not necessary for her to go to school because when she grows up her role will be at home, cooking and cleaning for her husband. Alala's Mother thought she was giving her the best preparation for her future, as it was what her Mother did for her when she was young. Sometimes Alala would open her brother's schools books, she enjoyed looking*

*at the pictures but desperately wanted to be able to read the writing.*

### **Story three**

*Pandora is the eldest of 8 children. Her parents struggle to provide enough food to feed the family. When she was fifteen it was decided that she would have a better life if she got married. Pandora's father arranged for her to marry a man twenty years her senior; he had his own property and a well-paid job. Pandora did not feel comfortable with this arrangement but knew that she could not argue with her Father's decision and she was taking the burden off her family. Two years into the marriage, Pandora was very unhappy. She knew that her husband was having affairs with other women but could not confront him about it. It was not long after that, Pandora found out she was HIV positive.*

**These are not authentic accounts, but fabricated stories based on the relevant research**



**Suggested questions for group reflection:**

***Side note: This is a sensitive topic for discussion; some people might find it difficult sharing personal experiences. Please provide the safe space to do so or any services necessary to assist women who might be experiencing violations.***

- Do any of the stories above reflect what you have seen or heard about in your community?
- Do you think women are entitled to the same rights as men? If so, why?
- Do some rights of women conflict with Zambian culture?
- How can we better protect women's rights?

## **Part 2: Why is it happening?**

### **Inadequate law**

Although Zambia is a signatory both to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and African Charter on Human and People's Rights (1981) which prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender, it has not developed national laws for the protection of women's rights. The current constitution does not expressly provide for the equality between men and women. Without an affirmation of gender equality and specific provision for the economic and social rights of women, it is inevitable that loopholes exist.

In the absence of adequate statutory law it seems to be the case that communities are governed primarily by their

customary laws. Customary laws vary hugely across chiefdoms, depending on the prevailing traditional norms and practices; however they almost always favor men over women.

## **Customary law**

Despite the fact that Article 23 of the Constitution affirms that *“a law shall not make any provision that is discriminatory either of itself or in its effect”*, under the same clause it makes an exception to customary law. In other words customary law is respected and maintained under the Constitution; hence any anti-discriminatory measures in the Constitution can be over ruled even by contradictory customs.

Two of the main customary laws that notoriously deprive women of equal rights are: ‘land ownership and inheritance rights’ and ‘rights in marriage and divorce’. It is very rare that women have full ownership to land. Often, a woman’s only access to land is through a male- either her Father or her Husband. This means that a woman is entirely dependent on a male counterpart for security and income.

With regards to inheritance of land, this nearly always skips the female heir and instead passes down to the next eligible male. The lack of ownership and independence inevitably puts women in a very vulnerable position. For example, in the case of a divorce it is most likely that a woman will lose access to the land; this deprives her of a home, livelihood, security and food. Customary law does not observe women’s rights to entitlement without the presence of a male; as a result women can never be self-sufficient.

## Culture

Cultural norms can be defined as an unstated expectation or explicit standards of behavior that members of a group or society share (Wortman 1984 in Cheelo, 2002). Unfortunately, the cultural norms in Zambia more often than not reinforce male superiority and dominance over women. This is conceivably exacerbated in rural areas where the tribal culture is particularly dominant.

Women are entirely defined by their role as a wives and as a mothers. Within these roles there are particular behavioral expectations; these are generally subservient and submissive in relation to male figures. This culture inevitably disadvantages women in a number ways: limiting their autonomous capacity, restricting them to the home and making them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Marriage is particularly valued within Zambian culture; not necessarily for the loving union of man and woman, but often as a strategy for financial security. Since men are the 'breadwinners', it is in the interest of a woman to be married so she can reap the benefits of this; particularly if her own family is struggling to provide for her. According to research conducted by UNICEF (2013), 8.5% of Zambian girls are married before they are 15 and 41% are by the age of 18.

In traditional marriages there is a custom of paying a bride price (*lobola*). Whilst this has been practiced as a token of appreciation, it has undoubtedly been distorted. A woman is considered as a commodity rather than a person within her own right; daughters are seen as a source of income to their family and wives become property to their husbands. It is not uncommon for a woman to feel that because a man has, in effect, paid for her, he has the right to expect her to be productive in all aspects; from house work to sexual wants

(PEPAIDS, 2016). The dynamic between a man and woman in a marriage becomes unbalanced and more reminiscent of 'master' and 'servant' rather than 'husband' and 'wife'.

Within the 'traditional' household, it is the man's duty to provide for the family and a woman's to attend to domiciliary tasks. As both a Wife and a Mother a woman is expected to prepare food, maintain the house and rear the children. Despite the fact these are heavy responsibilities, women are often denied the information, resources and freedom of action required to properly fulfil them (NGOCC, 2014). As already mentioned, women do not have sufficient ownership of land to make executive decisions about farming. Furthermore, they do not always have access to the agricultural or agribusiness education necessary to make a success of their farming and trade.

Since it is customary for daughters to imitate their mothers and sons their fathers, these gender roles have continued to permeate generations. From a very young age girls assist their Mother's with the cooking and cleaning, whilst boys watch. Typically, if there is an opportunity to attend school, sons are privileged over their daughters on account of the fact that it is their role as the main income producer in any future household is predetermined.

Such norms conceivably remain even more unchallenged in traditional households where it might be considered disrespectful to question the 'man of the house'; hence women and girls comply with the expectations placed on them even if it is contrary to their own beliefs and aspirations.

## **Poverty**

Poverty can be considered as both the biggest cause and effect of human rights violation. Those who are in poverty are more likely to have their basic human rights compromised;

equally when a human rights are compromised this can lead to a person becoming subjected to poverty.

Unfortunately in Zambia, those women who are in the most impoverished of circumstances face greater challenges when it comes to their rights. As already discussed it is more common for women in rural areas to be disadvantaged in terms of accessing education and owning their own land. As a result, women simply do not produce and maintain their own capital. This means that they become subject to a perpetual cycle of poverty, since they do not have the means to break out from it; i.e. education or economic empowerment.

### **Part 3: Theological Reflection**

Any form of violation of fundamental personal rights on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender or socio-economic standing is incompatible with God's revelation. The concern for women's rights stems from a regard for human dignity and the common good. All human beings, in as much as they are created in the image of God have dignity. This is the foundation of gender equality within the Church.

Foremost, it is emphasized that men and women have religious/spiritual equality, i.e. they are both equal before God. However God intended for man and woman to be different and not the same. The Bible reflects this and hence celebrates the distinctive yet complementary roles of man and woman. It is with regret that over the centuries, man has interpreted this in ways that has denigrated women and deprived them of basic rights. The challenge therefore, is to fully realize and understand God's plan to render man different to woman, whilst maintaining equal rights of both. We can look to some passages from scripture which illuminate God's plan for women.

## Scripture

As already stated, all humans are born with dignity since they are created in the image of God. This is expressed in Genesis 1: 26 “so God created human beings, making them to be like himself”. This inherent quality of a human being cannot be taken away or distorted. In likening all humans to himself, God did not discriminate against gender, hence it is not within our right to do so either. Arguably this is the most crucial premise for understanding women’s rights in the context of our society.

In Genesis 2:22 it is explained how God created a companion for Adam: “he formed a woman out of the rib and brought her to him”. Whilst the creation of ‘woman’ came after and even from the very body of man, this is not to suggest that a woman is secondary. Eve was indeed subsidiary and her creation demonstrates that God intended women to have a significant and necessary role supporting men. Arguably it is the fault of human imperfection and inadequate understanding of God’s will that has rendered women the inferior gender and, as a result, in practice has refused women basic human rights. As explained, this is an insult on human dignity and hence contrary to the revelation and will of God.

It is recognized that God has created man and woman with physiological differences. Most notably, a woman has been blessed with the reproductive capacity necessary to bear children. It is worth noting here that St Paul affirms “to the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do” (1 Corinthians 7:8), which implies that not every woman is obliged to bear children. Nonetheless, Motherhood is certainly a status and a role that is considered sacred within the Christian tradition. To note the most obvious example, the significance of Mary as the Mother of Christ is expressed in Luke 1:42 “you are the most blessed of women, and blessed is the child you will bear!” The fact that Mary carried Jesus in her womb brings her closer to the

righteousness of God and exalts the position of Motherhood. This responsibility of women is extended to the life of a child after it is born, as Mothers are identified as the primary nurturer.

In light of this, the role and responsibility of Motherhood should be welcomed and celebrated by women since it sets them apart from men. Nonetheless, it should not be a barrier to the socio-economic empowerment and civic participation of women, as it appears to have been. Whilst Motherhood might be a dominant aspect of a women's life, it is not necessarily definitive; in other words, women should not be inhibited by this role. As we shall see, the Bible demonstrates how women have other valuable capacities and talents which can contribute to the common good of a society. It is indeed possible and encouraged in the bible to pursue both a domestic and professional vocation.

Perhaps the most appropriate way for the Church to realize and understand the rights and responsibilities of man and woman is within the institution of marriage. Whilst again, with reference to St Paul's letter, (1 Corinthians 7:8) this practice is not incumbent upon all Christians, it is certainly common place. However, contrary to teaching, it is typically within marriage that women's rights have been/are being denied or abused and their responsibilities exploited.

According to Christian teaching, Marriage is a covenant between man and woman, based on mutual love, respect and responsibility. It is incorporated into the social doctrine of CST under 'Family, Community and Participation'. Marriage is a platform in which human dignity can be preserved and common good sought. Proverbs 31: 10-31 relates to the many jobs a woman has as a wife. However it should be noted that this list surpasses household responsibilities of preparing food, making clothes, rather it also emphasizes jobs such as looking and buying land, earning money and planting a

vineyard. In addition to this, the passage draws attention to the good character of a wife, describing her as caring, strong, respected and wise. It ends with the statement “give her credit for all she does, she deserved the respect of everyone” (Proverbs, 31:31).

It is blatant within this revelation, that women (or in particular, wives) are endowed with many rights and are commended for a multitude of abilities and characteristics. Their role as a Wife, Mother and Professional is depicted as fluid and interchangeable; one does not impede the other, rather she is empowered by all. This is the representation and attitude towards women found in scripture that must be extended to society, for the human dignity and common good of all to be realized and fully implemented.

Lastly, we can look to the example of Christ to locate and understand the CST on women’s rights. Many would describe Jesus’ actions and attitude towards women as counter-cultural. This is not surprising, since he came with a new covenant, to set things right, including the way women were perceived and treated. Christ sets himself apart from others in his compassion and mercy towards women. In the story of the women who committed adultery (John 8), Jesus responds “I do not condemn you either. Go, but do not sin again” (John 8:11). By asking the men to reflect on whether they had committed sin, Jesus levels the ground between both man and woman. This passage reminds us that both man and woman are sinners. We are made the same by the mark of our sin, hence one is not to be discriminated against or persecuted more for their sin, on the basis of gender.

This is a lesson to learn and apply to today’s social context. Too often than not women are tainted by their sins and subsequently denigrated and denied of their rights. To give examples, those that are HIV positive, female prostitutes and single Mothers all carry the burden of their sin which then has



an unwanted and discriminatory effect on their status and rights as humans. Foremost, our thinking towards these issues needs to be altered; perhaps their plight is a result of the original shortfall of women's rights. This being the case, they should be considered as victims rather than perpetrators of sin. As Jesus treated women with love, respect and openness, and honored the inherent dignity of women, regardless of sin or their social standing, it is incumbent on all Christians to follow his example.

## **Papal Teaching**

Pope John Paul II in his letter to all women (1995) acknowledged that, regrettably, the conditioning of history has been an obstacle to the full realization of women's dignity and rights. With sincerity and great apology, he admits that members of the Church have also been misguided and mistaken in their attitudes towards women, ungracefully relegating them to the margins of society. The full realization and implementation of women's rights is thus a journey for both religious and secular institutions to continue on, setting women free from domination and exploitation. John Paul affirmed that "womanhood is part of the essential heritage of mankind and of the Church herself". He spoke of the creation of women out of 'the principle of help', i.e. women made as a complementary companion to Adam. He emphasized that this help is not one-sided but mutual, it is not only 'acting' but also 'being' and described the unification of man and women as a gift from God which enriches responsibility of the two. This being the case women should be esteemed for their human dignity in all their forms as Mothers, Wives, Daughters, Sisters, Workers and Nuns.

More recently, Pope Francis too embraces the journey of transforming women's rights, reinterpreting the message of the gospel to overcome obstacles in our world. In the 'Amoris Laetitia'- The Joy of Love (2016) he explores the issues and

challenges of 'family life', with reference to marriage, children and gender roles. He affirms that women also have the capacity to take on the leadership roles that have more often than not favored men over the years. Equally, men can take on some of the domestic responsibility in the family, rather than this being an exclusively female burden. This is an extremely receptive transformation of the 'normative' functions of men and women that has infiltrated our society. The Pontiff is by no means undermining the role of Motherhood for women, but simply empowering women with at least the opportunity to engage and contribute in additional ways. Such an exhortation on gender roles is of course, deliberately well considered. Francis is careful not to limit women to the home and men to the place of work, but equally does not denounce this normative nuclear family set up; rather he opens up new avenues of possibility for modern society. This is a realistic and promising insight into family dynamics.

In addition to his reflections and recommendations for family life, Pope Francis has also considered women religious; in particular the integration of women in the Church. He has affirmed that women are made in the likeness of God and therefore can know God. This being the case, women within the Church are both capable and responsible for spreading the good news gospel of Jesus Christ. What is more, women have original insights and valuable gifts to share with us and enrich the tradition of the Church.

**Suggested questions for reflection:**

- Is there anything that confuses you in some of the passages about women's rights?
- Do you know any other passages within the scripture about women?
- How do you feel has taken steps to integrate women?
- What can we learn from Jesus about women's rights?

**Concluding prayer****Part 4: Christian response**

Having considered the ways in which women's rights are overlooked or even entirely violated, it is necessary to reflect on ways in which women's rights can be properly realised and upheld within Zambia. The promotion of women's rights is the responsibility of all; government, duty bearers, shareholders, civil organisations, the church and individuals, including women themselves. Indeed a critical understanding of the barriers to the realisation of their rights is necessary in order to shape law and policy, as well as organise ways to transform embedded attitudes. At the heart of this development should be the Church Social Teaching.

**Law and Policy**

The fact that Zambia is a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) indicates that it recognizes the important of gender equality from both a human rights and sustainable development perspective. Further strengthening

this commitment, gender equality and women's empowerment was made one of the Millennium Development Goals.

Nonetheless, Zambian government has not been proactive enough to achieve these goals. Notably, the absence of provision of women's rights in the Constitution and lack of comprehensive government led programmes has slowed down the process of realising women's rights.

The first step to remedy this should be the inclusion of economic, social and cultural rights in the Bill of Rights. This would be an assurance of the provision of services and opportunities such as education, employment and health in which government could then be held accountable too. It is also crucial that there is explicit provision for women's rights incorporated into the constitution. As it stands the Gender Equity and Equality Bill is in its second stage of reading, however there appears to be a lack of urgency to have this approved and implemented.

## **Sensitisation**

The little legislation that is provided for women's rights anyhow is too easily overridden by deeply embedded cultural attitudes. Arguably the best way to counter these is through education and training of the issues related to gender equity and equality. This should include not only the content of these rights, which will help people recognise when a woman's rights are being contravened, but also actualization of these rights. This can be done at all levels; for example, in the home, school, work and church.

### **Suggested questions for reflection:**

- Is our government doing enough to promote women's rights?
- What programmes do you know about already that are actively helping to promote women's rights?
- At a community level, what steps can we take to improve the rights of women?
- In what ways can women participate in the promotion of their own rights?

### **Final thoughts**

The key for women's rights in Zambia is not to impose a western Eurocentric perspective, but allow for women's rights to be realised and upheld within a Zambian context. In-keeping with the theme throughout this booklet, it is neither necessary nor justifiable for gender roles to infringe on the attainment of women's rights. As individuals and communities we must reflect on our traditions, culture and civilization and reshape them to accord gender equity between men and women.

### **Concluding Prayer**

One member of the group should give a concluding prayer to close the reflections

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