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## Letter from the Editor

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..... from the editor

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## **Gender Discrimination is not Religious Truth: A Call to Leadership**

Woman may not fare well in world religions, but she is greatly loved by God who created her equal to man. — Anne Graham Lotz

When we think about the best known world leaders in history, Jesus Christ, Mahatma Ghandhi, Nelson Mandela, and MLK, Jr. typically come to mind. They were all humble men delivering a compelling message through peaceful means. Yet, while tortured, imprisoned, and shunned, they did not stand in the shadows, but made their messages of salvation, independence, freedom, and equality known – on the mountaintop, from the Dandi salt flats, through the island prison cell, and on the streets of Memphis. These leaders were steadfast in message, undaunted by critics, and unassuming in character. But from biblical times to the present age, *female* leaders have been few and while more and more women are presently vying for positions of political and business power, gender equality struggles abound. For instance,

- Pay scales remain vastly disproportionate (women earn approximately .79 for every dollar earned by men for comparable work in nearly every occupation (U.S. Department of Labor));
- Violence against women has reached epidemic levels (over 200 million women and girls are officially reported as “missing” by the United Nations and over 30% of women in the U.S. Armed Forces and on college campuses have been sexually assaulted (GlobalResearchCentre)).

While such secular matters are debated openly, those concerning gender parity in religious leadership are, for the most part, left unchecked. Even disenfranchised women (forbidden from serving as leaders of major religions and denominations including the Roman Catholic Church, Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, LDS Mormon, Orthodox Judaism, Islam, and Southern Baptist Convention) together with those who disagree with this form of gender inequality are often silent.

### **Why?**

Isn't it ludicrous to think that if we have all been created by God, that any of us are to be considered inferior? African theologian Dr. Nantondo Hadebe opines,

***“Moreover, it is unfortunate that issues such as gender bias still exist today in an age where women have stood and excelled alongside men in all aspects of life – be it in religious, political, work or familial matters. It is time we stop and reevaluate what is right rather than blindly follow what society believes to be true.”***

Silence signals a paucity of leadership, a dangerous complacency, a general lack of courage, and widespread risk avoidance – and, more disturbingly, fosters a male-dominated culture which demoralizes females and renders them undeserving of parity in education, career, marriage, and reproductive choices.

Many religious scholars agree that history has witnessed women around the globe devolve into second-class citizens, losing autonomy, dignity, and rights ... leaving them to occupy passive and obedient roles, especially with the growth of Abrahamic-based religions worldwide (i.e., Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). The religious texts of the *Bible*, *Torah*, and *Quran*, as well as related writings and interpretations, contain passages and stories that have been selectively used to subjugate women. References to female figureheads in the Bible are scant and others are portrayed in a negative light. It was, of course, a woman (Eve) – the architect of original sin – who caused humanity to be expelled from paradise;

*Jezebel*, who convinced her husband to abandon the worship of Yahweh; *Bathsheba*, a married woman, blamed for tempting King David; and *Salome*, who nefariously requested the beheading of John the Baptist. Also, the following passages accentuate the secondary status of the female, the treatment of her as property, the expectation that she be subservient, and the inevitable repercussions of disobedience:

**THE BIBLE:**

1. **Exodus 20:17 (treatment as property):** “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”
2. **Deuteronomy 22:28-29 (violence against females):** “If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay her father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the young woman... .”
3. **1 Kings 11:3 (multiple wives viewed as a sign of status):** “He [Solomon] had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray.”
4. **1 Timothy 2:11-15 (subservient to men):** “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”

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**Ordination of Women**

*Whether major religious groups generally allow the ordination of women*

American Baptist Church	Yes
Buddhist	Yes
Episcopal Church	Yes
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	Yes
Jewish: Reform and Conservative Movements	Yes
Jewish Orthodox	No
Latter Day Saints (Mormon)	No
Missouri Synod Lutheran Church	No
Muslim	No
Orthodox Church in America	No
Presbyterian Church (USA)	Yes
Roman Catholic Church	No
Southern Baptist Convention	No
Unitarian Universalist	Yes
United Church of Christ	Yes
United Methodist Church	Yes

Source: Staff reports

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5. **1 Corinthians 14:34 (women should be seen, but not heard):** “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.”

#### **THE TORAH:**

The divine prescription of the superiority of men to women derived from the Hebrew Bible is reflected by a commonly-recited, morning prayer by Orthodox Jewish men worldwide.

***“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe,  
who did not make me a Gentile,  
who did not make me a Slave,  
who did not make me a ...Woman.”***

The *Talmud* also contains many negative references about women. Various rabbinical teachings have described women as prone to witchcraft, laziness, jealousy, gossip-mongering, and vanity.

#### **THE QUR’AN:**

The Qur’an is also highly patriarchal and warns followers not only about the inferiority of women to men, but prescribes punishment for those suspected of disobedience.

**Qur’an 4:34:** *“Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great.”*

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Speaking not just as an academic, but as one trained in the practice of law, it is easy to see that a case can be made for any desired faith-based interpretation if presented with relevant material. But it is also very important to consider the historical setting of these writings: submission to males was expected and slavery and domestic battery condoned. Regardless, contrary to the message of the passages above quoted, gender equality is still unambiguously prevalent as reflected by the following:

#### **THE BIBLE:**

**Galatians 3:28:** *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

God created man in His own image, male and female, and instructed them to “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:27-28). Thus, the biblical record is without equivocation that God created men and women equal where both would share world dominion; there was never any establishment of any gender hierarchy. But with the Fall, humans became separated from God; the Divine order was obscured, spawning an increasingly oppressive patriarchal society (Genesis 3:16). However, with the birth of Christ came the selection of His bearer – a virgin. The role of women in the New Testament was elevated and barriers of gender, race, and nationality jettisoned, e.g.:

1. Jesus’s first revelation of Himself as Messiah was to a woman (**John 4:25- 26**).

2. His death was memorialized by a woman (*John 12:1-8*).
3. Women stayed with Him throughout His crucifixion, even after the men had left. Women observed His burial (*Matthew 27:55-56, 61*).
4. Following His resurrection, He appeared first to a woman (*John 20:1- 16*).
5. Women were among the very first “believers” or “Christians” who comprised the core of the early church (*Acts 5:14; Acts 8:12; 17:4, 12*).

**THE TORAH:**

According to most Jewish scholars, “man” was created as per Genesis 1:27 with dual gender attribution and was later separated into male and female. Thus, the equality of men and women began at the highest possible level. In Judaism, unlike traditional Christianity, G-d has never been viewed as exclusively male or masculine as G-d has been deemed to possess both masculine and feminine qualities (<http://www.jewfaq.org/women.htm>).

**THE QUR’AN:**

Significant value is attached to women in verses of the Qur’an. Women are placed under special protection not because she needs it, but because she is seen to possess a special value. In terms of responsibility, however, both genders are deemed to be equal in task (<http://www.harunyahya.com/en/Books/191085/bigotry-the-dark-danger/chapter/15444>).

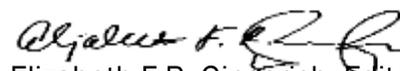
*Qur'an, 33:35: “Men and women who are Muslims, men and women who are believers, men and women who are obedient, men and women who are truthful, men and women who are steadfast, men and women who are humble, men and women who give the alms, men and women who fast, men and women who guard their private parts, men and women who remember God much: God has prepared forgiveness for them and an immense reward... .”*

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***And so, I ask again, where are the leaders?***

Is it because the notion that the topic of gender equality conjures fear as the status quo in the home, in the workplace, and now even in places of worship might be radically transformed? In so many parts of the world today, the male child is still favored over the female to the point of selective feticide. Power remains largely in the hands of men. The resulting imbalance has inevitably led to injustice and the creation of a global society where so many of its female citizens are intentionally kept uneducated, isolated, and dependent. Violence against women is even sanctified by houses of worship which preach that it is *God’s Will* to perpetuate these gender roles (in fact, statistics show that gender violence is “a greater cause of death and disability among women aged 15-44 than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents or war” (<https://ecumenicalwomen.org/theology/academic-articles/gender-gender-equality-and-the-church-by-nantondo-hadebe/>)).

Enough is enough. Gender inequality is nothing short of a crime against humanity. So, to every reader – raise your voices from the favela, from the mansion, from the high-rise – and lead!

  
Elizabeth F.R. Gingerich, Editor-in-Chief