

Gender, Economics, and Structural Injustice

Scripture

Ruth 1:6–13

⁶Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. ⁷So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. ⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” ¹¹But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹²Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.”—Ruth 1:6–13 (NRSV)

The Text in Its Context

The Book of Ruth relates that Ruth and Orpah, two women of Moab, had married two sons of Elimelech and Naomi, Judeans who had settled in Moab to escape a famine in Judah. The husbands of all three women die; Naomi plans to return to her native Bethlehem and urges her daughters-in-law to return to their families.

The Book of Ruth was written in Hebrew sometime in the 6th–4th centuries BCE. The culture and practice at the time meant that women were permanently and solidly on the cultural margins. If they were without a husband or a son, they were left stateless, unprotected, and vulnerable in their communities. Naomi knew the fate that awaited widows and did not want to see her daughters-in-law become outcasts dependent on the mercy of their husbands’ extended families. Instead, Naomi believed that if her daughters-in-law returned home to their families, they would be looked after, or they would find other men to marry and bear sons, giving them new opportunity for social protection. In these societies, social, gender, and economic injustices were deliberately structural and therefore embedded in the norms of community life.

The injustice faced by all three women was not an accident, since women were seen as little more than objects—voiceless and largely defined by their relationships to the men in their lives. The system in operation perpetuated a lack of rights and benefits, with no opportunity for women to flourish in their own right.

The Text in Our Context

Poverty and injustices today are not an accident. Economic systems are built with a deliberate structure; they are designed to keep vulnerable communities in a state of poverty, and women are hardest hit. Over the centuries, many Western economies have been perfected to create

wealth and power that serves the few at the expense of billions of lives across the world. Evidence collated by the UN, the World Bank, and other global institutions inform us that millions of women take the brunt of the consequences of social, economic, and political inequalities and injustices.

Many of the countries in which we at Christian Aid work, have experienced high levels of economic growth and falling poverty rates. Yet, notional economic success can mask severe pockets of poverty, growing levels of inequality, or the destruction of the natural world. And although market mechanisms, fundamental to economic growth, have been vital for lifting some people out of poverty, they are rarely able to address the needs of the hardest to reach.

For some in the global South, the dogmatic pursuit of economic growth is, far from being part of the solution, part of the problem: a form of neoliberal globalization that “has already cost the lives of millions and destroyed much of God’s creation.”¹ By asking the question “What enables a truly human life?” we can see the economy as a tool that should exist to facilitate human and planetary flourishing. Our economic system should be judged by its potential for sustaining life, both of people and planet, in ways that support the common good.

Today, the world faces some of the most serious economic, environmental, social, and political challenges it has ever faced. Across the world, citizens are calling for governments to implement policies to address these issues, but again and again, governments tell them the same thing: “We don’t have the money.” At the same time, it is a fact that governments worldwide tolerate widespread tax evasion and avoidance—and that malevolent actors routinely steal from government funds. Indeed, it is estimated that 416 billion US dollars is lost every year to IFFs or illicit financial flows,² that is, illegal or harmful movements of money or capital from one country to another.

The impact on women and girls has been disproportionate, leaving them bearing the brunt of poverty, climate change, health pandemics, conflict, and fragility. Women are the primary victims of violence. Violence takes different forms and manifests itself in poverty, displacement, and a lack of access to essential healthcare services, education, and shelter. Nearly one in three women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by any perpetrator in their lifetime.³

The challenges faced by Ruth and Naomi were structural and based on a cultural context that placed women as second-class citizens of their nations, communities, and families. More than two thousand years later, while there has been progress on a number of fronts, women continue to be at the mercy of systemic structures, norms, and practices that keep them poor, powerless, and voiceless.

¹ “The Accra Confession,” 2004, World Communion of Reformed Churches, <http://wrcr.ch/accra/the-accra-confession>, quoted in Christian Aid, *An Unquenchable Thirst for More: Faith and Economic Growth*, December 2017, <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-01/An-Unquenchable-Thirst-Dec2017.pdf>.

² Christian Aid, *Trapped in Illicit Finance: How Abusive Tax and Trade Practices Harm Human Rights*, September 2019, <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-09/trapped-in-illicit-finance-report-sep2019.pdf>.

³ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

The Bible tells us that Ruth and Naomi managed to find a way through the different rules and practices in order to gain the security and protection that they needed. They worked together as two women to achieve the desired results. In this 21st century of the Common Era, there is much that we can learn from their strategies that will contribute to transforming our lives and the lives of future generations—standing in solidarity with one another and presenting our petitions before God in agreement. God tells us that where two or three are gathered in God’s name, God is there with them; that whatever is bound on earth is also bound in heaven. There is power and strength in women of faith coming together in prayer and action as we respond to the call in Micah 6:8 to “do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with [our] God.”

From a position of humbleness, Ruth, a migrant and foreigner, was to be elevated to be one of the women in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:5. There are millions of women who are displaced, who have not lived in their home for many years, and who do not know when they will next have a place to call home. Yet, through the scriptures, both in the Hebrew Bible and in the accounts of the life of Jesus, God is revealed as one who is concerned about the fatherless, the widows, and those who are socially excluded.

As followers of Christ, we have a duty to continue this work and reach out to others, contributing to lifting them out of poverty, to helping to bring down structures that keep people vulnerable, and to creating spaces for everyone’s voice to be heard. From a faith perspective, our work on gender justice motivates us to walk together, to provide support and accompaniment, to build solidarity and improve networks of support, and to nourish community life with spiritual and pastoral care, with empathy, love, compassion, and neighbourliness—during and beyond the current crisis.

Questions

- How can we reconstruct the conversation around a just economy, especially one that starts with self-assessment and moves towards a global transformation?
- Financial debt including climate debt, defined by policies developed in wealthy economies, shapes the realities of the global South. Debt within developed economies is very different to debt in developing nations. Therefore, how can we examine who owes whom, and for what?
- How can we confront corporate powers—beyond academic economists, bankers, et al. and including religious powers and practices—that contribute to continued inequalities and injustices?
- How can we cross the divide of race, ethnicity, and wealth to stand in solidarity as women across the world? Looking at how decolonization has shaped and influenced different levels and layers of privilege, what do we understand by the concept of privilege, and how can we restore that which has been taken—dignity?

Activities

- Think of and list cultural practices that women face. Share them and discuss the damage that they do to women’s wellbeing. Talk about how such practices contribute to violence against women and how they dehumanize women and girls.

- Reflect on the life of Jesus and how, during his earthly ministry, he reached out to those who were socially excluded and marginalized, including women. What can we learn from Jesus' actions? Discuss as a group.
- Jesus saw poverty, inequality, religious and economic oppression, unemployment, depression, the physically ill, and the socially unclean. His heart was moved with compassion, and his sense of what was right drove him to take action. He pronounced what his mission was all about. Consider what this means for the ecumenical mission together.

Resources

“The Accra Confession.” 2004. World Communion of Reformed Churches.

<http://wcrch.ch/accra/the-accra-confession>.

Christian Aid. *Trapped in Illicit Finance: How Abusive Tax and Trade Practices Harm Human Rights*. September 2019. <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-09/trapped-in-illicit-finance-report-sep2019.pdf>.

Christian Aid. *An Unquenchable Thirst for More: Faith and Economic Growth*. December 2017. <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-01/An-Unquenchable-Thirst-Dec2017.pdf>.

Prayer

Our God, who changes times and seasons, deposes kings, and sets up kings; who gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; our God, who reveals deep and hidden things, who knows what is in the darkness and with whom light dwells—to our God we give thanks and praise.

Oh Lord, give us wisdom to see the context in which we live, reveal to us the solutions that will be pleasing to you, and give us the strength and courage to stand in solidarity with women across the world as together we work to fight poverty, tackle power structures that do harm, and lift our voices in concert and in thanksgiving.

Jesus, you walked and lived on this earth, and you sit at the right hand of the Father advocating for each one of us. Help us to walk in your footsteps and be bold in stepping in for those who are socially excluded and marginalized in our communities.

Remind us, oh Lord, that we are all created in your image and that we all receive favour before you that is undeserved and unmerited; that your love is offered and extended to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, class, caste, or social-economic status; that the only criteria that matters is to be a member of the human race.

Grant us now your peace that surpasses all understanding so that we can be a true manifestation of your love and a testimony of your faithfulness. Amen.

Short Bio of the Author

Amanda Khozi Mukwashi is the chief executive officer of Christian Aid, a global movement of people, churches, and local organizations working to end poverty. Her career spans

intergovernmental and non-governmental spaces, including the UN, VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) International, and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa. She is the author of *But Where Are You Really From?* published by SPCK Publishing in 2020.