

Women's Submission. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 18 November 1999. [disclaimer](#)

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MS CATHY P MAKHENE: Mr Chairman of the TRC, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the team and the house, we thank you for this opportunity granted us. We really are grateful to the Lord for having given us this chance. As women to come and present to this aghast team how we feel about the situation within the church. I am here to make a submission from the women's perspective within the faith communities. I am honoured to represent such a large body of people, but need to say that I represent them primarily from the present point of view. The group that met to discuss and draw up the submission were all christians. We were given very little time to prepare this document. It was approximately four days, thus precluding us from being a consultative and inclusive, as we should have liked.

All religions are patriarchal based on the rules of the fathers. This was reinforced by the missionaries. The legacy of this tradition is that women remain largely powerless and voiceless. In the christian tradition, spirituality has largely been the preserve of men. The language of prayer and worship is generally male. The symbols and images of God are male. The scriptures have been used to promote male dominance. The ruling sexes of the church are predominantly male. There is prevailing male consciousness. This is somewhat of an anomaly, as the congregations are predominantly female. Women are excluded from christian religious language, in hymns, liturgy and scriptures, people are referred to as men. The sons of God, or brothers, not to mention the militaristic language commonly used too. The language for God is predominantly male. Of course you will hear Lord, King, Master and Father. Not only do these terms entrench patriarchy, but they are also the terms of the ruling class. God is represented as a ruling, controlling male, thus the male is seen as more fully representative of God than the female.

I believe that this male language and imagery has contributed to the churches sanctioning of men dominating women. The early church shaped much of the Christian thoughts which we carry around with us today, much of it plainly misogynist. Women are misbegotten males, painted evils and devils doorways. The great tragedy is that some women have come to believe this of themselves. There is very little affirmation for those women who struggle within the church structure from other women. Women need to encourage and support one another as we seek to find affirmation in the scriptures. When we look in the book of the first Timothy, Chapter 2 verses 11 – 15 and allow me to share this because it really bothers us: "Women should learn in silence and all humility. I did not allow them to teach or have authority over men. They must keep quiet." The scripture is used as justification for the denial of equality of women within the church, but surely the passage on baptism which is found in Galatians Chapter 3, and that needs to be corrected because there is a

misprint in what we submitted. Verses 27 – 28: "You were baptised into union with Christ and now you are clothed so to speak with the life of Christ himself. So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free men, between men and women. You are all one in union with Christ Jesus"

These verses give another perspective on the position of women with God's kingdom. The patriarchal nature of church structures regrettably has condoned, encouraged and in some cases, actively enforced the subjugation of women to men, denying them the revelation of their full potential, not only within the church, but politically, socially and economically. It is a matter of debate that our new political constitution grants women far more status than any religious one. Our clergy need to be trained in the understanding of the rights now legally granted to us constitutionally but withheld from us spiritually. We celebrate the changes that are taking place and acknowledge that women are being ordained as ministers, priests and elders within some of our faith communities. However, it should be noted that there are no female Bishops, moderators or Archbishops, so decisions taken with regard to issues pertaining specifically to women remain within the male domain. Things like abortion, rape, birth control, etc. Within one denomination with the ordination of female clergy, despite the fact that this was a majority decision, a conscience clause was introduced. This allows that no congregant was to feel obliged to have a female priest within their congregation or to be served the sacrament by a women. If a women was to serve the sacrament, this fact was to be advertised in advance and a member of the male clergy was to be available as an alternative for those who preferred. The offensiveness of this clause is quite breathtaking! One can imagine the uproar that would have ensued if this sort of clause had been instituted when the racial barriers started coming down. There have been reports of sexual harassment of women by male clergy. When these incidents are brought to the attention of other male clergy, they are largely ignored. Or hushed up so that the church is not brought into disrepute. Women have complained that on seeking pastoral care and advice from male clergy with regard to abusive marriages, they are often sent back to these abuses and sometimes life threatening relationships with the command to forgive and live out their faith in a way that would change their husbands. I don't know how.

The church endorses the abuse of women in the home and fails in the pastoral care of these women, often their children too. Faith communities often support or turn a blind eye to cultural and traditional customs that entrench suppression and oppression of women. The cry, "But it's our tradition, it's our culture." Is used to maintain the status quo. The church was instrumental in bringing about the abolition of slavery. Why is it so tardy in emancipating women? It is a sad reflection on our faith that in keeping women in spiritual bondage, men themselves are not fully free. Our clergy need to be ...[indistinct] to the issue of women within the church. There needs to be a greater sensitivity to the needs, aspirations and rights of women within our different faiths and denominations. Our men need to unlearn many of the things that have consciously and unconsciously learned at their father's knees, reinforced by the church's patriarchal attitude. Men are discouraged at every level of their lives from recognising their own feminine attributes as though they were something of which to

be ashamed or had no worth. Sometimes you will hear someone saying, "don't cry, did you ever hear your father cry?" In so doing, they deny themselves the richness and fullness that God has created in us. It needs to be acknowledged that women often support and sustained their oppression. They accept without question or challenge the view of God's love for them, taught largely from a totally biased and subjective theology. They sometimes allow themselves to be co-opted, which often results in them behaving like men, to the detriment of all, as well as the kingdom of God. Patriarchy has been so internalised that women will often vote for men in their absence.

Education systems and curricular need to be received and revised within our seminaries and religious institutions. Why is God acknowledged as God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and never of Sarah, Rachel and Rebecca. The new testament with its male trinity has denied us all the understanding and experience of the nurturing care of our creator and has denied women the same sex identity with God. Jesus described God as a woman looking for a lost coin and as a woman sweeping, looking the lost, our saviour discussed theology with the women at the well, healed a women on the Sabbath, listened to women and stayed in their homes. Sought the kingdom with them, and received anointing from a women. Rebuked a man who scorned her on the day after the crucifixion, it was a women who went to the tomb, physically weak, to roll away the stone, but strong in faith and trusting that God would provide whatever was needed for her task. It was to this women that the risen cried with the message, "Go and tell the good news".

The book of Ephesians, chapter 5, verses 22 to 24 needs to be read in the context of verse 21 and verse 25 to 30. "Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For a husband has authority over his wife, just as Christ has authority over the church. And Christ is himself the saviour of the church, his body, and so wives must submit completely to their husbands, just as the church submits itself to Christ" Verse 21 says: "Submit yourselves to one another because of your reverence for Christ". I think we need to revisit some of these chapters so that we can see how applicable they can be in our situation. Verse 25 reads: "Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave his life for it. He did this to dedicate the church to God by his word after making it clean by washing it in water." When studying the scriptures, three things should be borne in mind: who wrote the passage? What was the context within which the passage was written? How old was the person writing the passage?

Marriage vows need to be examined and expounded to words that perpetuate the subjugation of women. It is demeaning and degrading to ask all if one part of our faith community is opposed in this fashion. There exists a classism and racism with the church that has resulted in a differentiation of the facilities provided for pastors. And here I speak as a pastor's wife, your Honour. Usually with an urban bias. Though aimed at the clergy, it also has resulted in the suffering of indignities by the spouse and this is done overwhelmingly. (and the children). Lack of adequate sewerage, water and other basic needs are common, especially in rural areas. Urban areas differentiate between townships and suburban facilities thus reinforcing classism and inevitably,

racism. The wives of clergy are often exposed to conscious and unconscious patriarchy that would make a weaker person buckle at the knees. Whilst studying, their husbands are accommodated in seminaries, spouses and their children are not. Often living in conditions that are simply disgraceful because of poor or non-existent stipends. Little or no training is offered to wives to equip them for the contribution that make to their husband's ministry. There is little choice in the matter of wives' ministry. The expectation of the congregation, the denomination of the ministers themselves is that wives will participate actively and fully in the lives and work of the congregation or parish. Ministers are called. They have vocations. Wives are not recognised for their contribution they make, called or not.

Ministers wives, often professional people, have little choice in the decision to work or not. Their financial contribution to the family often exceeds that of their spouses and is often what keeps the family clothed, fed and educated. Should their husbands predecease them, they lose their homes. If provision has not been made to purchase a home prior to his death. Given the stipends most clergy are paid, the chances of that having taken place are usually remote. Newly widowed and homeless and usually with a family to provide for, what support can this woman expect from the church. Often marginalised and isolated by their position as the Minister's wife and neglected by their husbands because of church commitment, many of them are lonely and depressed. With the new political constitution, many young single professional women are no longer members of church groups, simply because of the lowly status granted to them within the church compared with the status they are being afforded in business, commerce and industry. These young women realised that they are achieving key positions in secular society, long denied them within the church. Their voices are being heard finally and they are making meaningful decisions, but not within the church. Although women have had no authority within the church, they have had a profound influence. Women and women's organisations have made a significant and valuable contribution to the lives and work of their denominations, especially in areas concerning family and social issues. Their service has brought no positions of responsibility, outside the domestic. For example, women raise much of the church funds, but are not in a position to decide how these funds should be allocated. That important decision is made by the male church council. It should be noted that Gert van Manen, General Manager of the Ecumenical Development Co-operative Society, which is the financial department of the World Council of Churches had this to say at a conference on sustainable development, which was spearheaded by the South African Council of Churches in April 1996, and I quote: "Our recovery raid on loans lending to the poorest of the poor, is 90% the highest of any financial institution in the world. We emphasis women participation. Women never let their children down. If school fees, shoes and food on their children depended on the success of the business, women will fight for it. Their commitment is ...[inaudible] as compared with males, whose commitment is often more entrepreneurial". There is a need for true emancipation within our denominations. We need to examine our teaching of the scriptures to free them of gender bias. Our political constitution enshrines freedom expressed in the scriptures, but not applied in practice. Attitudes of male clergy and leaders within church organisations need to

reflect what is written, but not lived out in our religious lives. If only it was understood that if any of your wives remain in subjugation, then none of us are truly free. Women and men are created to co-operate with, and compliment one another. Not to be in perpetual competition with one another. Eve was created from Adam's rib, not from his heel to be trampled on. Nor from his head to be over him, but from his side, that we may walk together in partnership, in support and encouragement of one another. If women sound shrill and militant at times, it is because we are not heard and so little recognition of our work and value as God's creation is accorded us. There are faith communities represented at this hearing whose female believers are not allowed to worship in the same area as their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. They are separated from the fullness and richness of their spiritual and family life. Not because of sin or omission or commission, but merely because of their gender. They are absolutely voiceless and powerless and suffer denigration and humiliation because they are women. God hears the cries of the oppressed. When will we?

In closing, Chairperson, we wish to share this creed which we as women feel could be encouraging not only us but the total change. The creed is thus: We believe in God who created women and men in God's image. [Tape 4] ...[inaudible] created the world and gave both sexes the care of the earth. We believe in Jesus, child of God, chosen by God born of a woman, Mary, who listened to women and stayed in their homes. Who looked for the kingdom with them, who was followed and supported by women disciples. We believe in Jesus who discussed theology with the woman at the well, who received anointing from a woman at Simon's house and rebuked the man guest who scorned her. We believe in Jesus who healed a woman on the Sabbath, who spoke of God as a woman seeking a lost coin, as a woman swept, seeking the lost. We believe in Jesus who thought of pregnancy and birth with reverence. We believe in Jesus, who appeared first to Mary Magdalena and sent her with the message, "Go and tell". We believe in the wholeness of God, in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, female nor male, for we are one in God. We believe in the Holy Spirit as she moves over the waters of creation and over the earth, the woman's spirit of God who created us and gave us birth and covers us with her wings. Amen.

We thank your Honour for this opportunity.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. Is there anything that you want to add, Brigalia? We have only - I told you right at the beginning this morning that we have a total of 30 minutes. We have actually already gone beyond that. I will give you another ten minutes.

MS JOYCE SEROKE: Thank you very much for that lucid submission. I will cut down my questions from three to two. You have painted a very sad picture of the position of women within the church. How marginalised women are, there subjugation and the male dominance and the denial of equality. I just want to find out from you, what has the WCC programme, that famous programme of the WCC of the decade of churches in solidarity with women. What has it done for the women's position in the church. Did we get that solidarity from the churches?

MS CATHY P MAKHENE: To answer that, my dear sister, it has really helped to maximise the awareness. The churches are aware and particularly on women. I must say that because this WCC programme is world-wide, quite a number of churches have support it, but at the same time very few of our churches in South Africa really show this solidarity with women. There are very few – I'm not going to discredit all churches now – there are some who have really supported us, because we have quite a number of women now who have assumed responsibilities with their churches, and we appreciate that. But much still needs to be done and we do hope that before the end of the decade, before we go and conclude with celebrations through the festivities, the word will come to all churches that women through the SACC assistance, women have organised themselves into a body which now is called Ecumenical Women's Conference. And we do hope that at the close the decade and at the beginning of new things, particularly after the TRC completes its work, that recognition, programmes that women are going to be doing will be taken seriously by the church. Would you like to add?

MS B BAM: Yes, I would like to add to say that the churches in South Africa, generally and those churches who are members of the WCC, owe women an apology for failing us during these last ten years in supporting us, when in fact the churches have been requested and asked to support us and I think the churches have to announce a public apology, the churches in South Africa, for not supporting us and for not speaking out on our behalf, for not carrying out the resolutions that are related to women. For also not speaking out to support us in this country as so many of us are raped. The churches have been very silent.

MS JOYCE SEROKE: I am sure that you are aware that during the hearings of the TRC, most of the victims who came to give testimony were women, compared to men and most of those women didn't come even to tell us about their own stories, they came on behalf of male relatives. What is this women's movement within the church, the Manyalos and Mother's Union, whatever you call it in different denominations. What solidarity have you given to the female victims who have come forward to the TRC and now that we are winding up and waiting for the recommendations of reparation, what will such bodies be doing in support of these women?

MS CATHY P MAHKENE: Thank you Joyce. Very little is being done by the Manyalo and I need to qualify that because there are certain Manyalo groups nationally who really are involved and are giving assistance to some of isolated cases. The trouble with us, we are so denominationalised, that some people will cater to cases of women they know. And I think this is the problem. I am saying because of the observation and having been involved and visited certain areas, whereby the Manyalos should not be selective. They within the communities, really needs to come together and do something. There are cases that are being attended to, but others are neglected. It is unfortunate. Again, because of lack of assistance from the total church, guidance. Some of the ministers's wives may not realise that it is their duty to encourage some Manyalo women to take more active roles within those communities.

It is unfortunate but we need to confess and we apologise for that. We really need to apologise. We have not played the role we should have been as women who are sent by the word of God to go and tell good news. Not just tell good news, but the actions should complement all that.

MS V GCABASHE: From the perspective of the SACC what do you think would be the way forward in terms of the help before reparation?

MS B BAM: I think that the way forward would be for us to create structures within the church. Structures within our dioceses, and parishes that are directed specifically at helping those people who are termed the victims of the system. Now victims are not only those people who have come to give testimony, but what we know as victims in our communities. Victims of poverty, victims of all kinds, so that we have specific programmes that are directed towards rehabilitation. In the same manner as we had programmes that were directed to the victims of apartheid. We had what we refer to as the Dependant's Conference. I think we should revive the Dependant's Conference again and that it should focus on helping those victims that have come to you and still others that have not, but need help.

CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Virginia.

MS V GCABASHE: Thank you Chairperson. I know that you are anxious to get through with your programme. I have a small concern for my two sisters there. You mentioned in your presentation that women often do not affirm other women. You mentioned the problems that we have and I think this phrase has been said by women over and over again. But it would appear that we don't seem to move from that mould of not affirming other women. I wonder if perhaps that now that we are talking in this session, you could come with a suggestion as to what should be done to enable women to stand up and affirm other women. Because unless we are able to recognise ourselves as women who can stand up on our own, as women who can affirm one another, we will be coming back with the same story of oppression by men. Men oppress us because we create that space for them to oppress us.

MS CATHY P MAKHENE: I understand you very well. We have a great deal of work to do to re-educate ourselves as women. We need to realise that we are called by God to do his work and all the oppressive language that has been drilled into our thinking: you are inferior, you are inferior. Some women believe that they are inferior, so therefore we need to re-educate ourselves that unless we stand on our two feet and do things ourselves, nobody else will do it for us. So therefore even within the church, we need to have programmes whereby women will prove themselves to realise that we need to be counted as producers, no longer as being submissive.

MS B BAM: Virginia, I want to add one little thing, and that is as Cathy says, we have been told for so many years that we are inferior, we are weak, we are emotional, we are not reliable. I don't know why they say we are not reliable, because we are the fund-raisers of the church, so when it suits them we are very reliable in raising the

money for the church, but when it comes to leading a church or a position, then we are suddenly emotional and all that. And so that - and now we have started to internalise these things although we don't say it, we begin to think it. And because we are afraid of failing, we don't have confidence in ourselves, we don't have confidence in another women. So unless we can, as individual women, begin to be assisted by the parents of the children who are growing, the young girls that they are as good as boys, and that they are not because of the difference, inferior. We have to start from there. But I think we learn a lot from the church and the politicians, because we support our women politicians. That's why they are there. Because we support them. We must learn also to support other women in the church and not do it only out there.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. I think we want to acknowledge the quite outstanding contribution of women, both in the church and in the time of our struggle and as Joyce was saying, one has been struck by the fact that women coming forward to testify and somebody has pointed out that mostly when they have come to testify, they have come to tell about what happened to somebody else, whereas whenever men came they have come to tell us what happened to themselves.

We have certainly I have, become increasingly aware that without women our liberation would not have happened and I want to salute the women folk and to pay a very warm tribute to the. Coming from a church that has only recently ordained women, I can again testify to how we have been enriched by the ministry of women. We didn't realise just how impoverished we were in our ministry when women were not allowed in our church to become priests and again we just want to say thank you to God and to the women who have brought something that would not have been there without them. I think that things that you raised about sexist language and so on...I am always a little amused that women get very upset when you say "God, he" have you ever heard any women worry when you say of the Devil, "He"? They don't mind, I mean you can be as sexist as you like, they think they agree that the devil is a he. I agree entirely that we often minimise the importance of language whereas actually just descriptive of reality, language creates the reality it describes and therefore, we are fortunate in our African languages, because I think on the whole that sort of difficulty doesn't occur in the pronouns, but it occurs in the images that you use, and maybe we become, not maybe, we should become a lot more sensitive and I hope that will be the case for those who are here. I am just a retired Archbishop now and I have no real influence, thank you very much. You may stand down dear ladies. APPLAUSE.

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