



**The Inclusive Church Annual Lecture  
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Lorretta Minghella

CEO Christian Aid

**Does Poverty Have A Woman's Face?**

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Notes:

The lecture can be viewed on the Inclusive Church YouTube channel.

<https://youtu.be/oCmLx4PWhwo>

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[office@inclusive-church.org.uk](mailto:office@inclusive-church.org.uk)

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## **'Does poverty have a woman's face?'**

It is an honour and privilege to be here with you tonight. Thank you so much for having me and for being willing to let me talk to you about something that is so important to Christian Aid and to me.

Let me begin by reading out the Inclusive Church statement, which reflects so much of what is at the heart of Christian Aid's calling:

"We believe in inclusive Church - church which does not discriminate, on any level, on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality. We believe in Church which welcomes and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ; which is scripturally faithful; which seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation; and which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ."

Amen to that, and hence it is with sadness that I say this.

At Christian Aid, our experiences of working with people in poverty have demonstrated that at every level, from the household to the global stage, in politics and in personal life, in economics and in health, in culture and in decision making, people of one gender are poorer, disadvantaged and less powerful than another. For that reason, we at Christian Aid often say that yes, poverty has a woman's face.

Today, around 700 million people live below the global poverty line, on less than a \$1.90 day. Tonight they will go to bed hungry. It's been estimated that around 70 per cent of these people, over two thirds of the world's extreme poor, are women and girls. Women represent half the world's population, perform nearly two-thirds of its work hours, receive 10% of the world's income and own less than 1% of the world's property.

Women's wages worldwide are 17 per cent lower than those of men. And those jobs they do have are more likely to be low-paid, low-status and vulnerable jobs, with limited or no social protection or basic rights. Globally, only 18% of chief executives are women. In the UK, 46 years after the Equal Pay act, women are still paid 17.5% less than men.

As we here face this reality, we know that we, as people of faith, as believers in the one Body, must work for the transformation of global society, so that the world becomes an inclusive place where women and men may flourish and live in peace with one another.

My own personal and professional experience is itself a story about gender, so allow me to share a little of that.

When I was young, the idea that I could ever be standing in front of you as CEO of a large international development organisation would have been thought of as little more than an idle fantasy. I was born into an Italian family with all the accompanying pressures you might expect in 1960s Britain. In the Isle of Wight, being Italian was something out of the ordinary, coming from an ice-cream making family a little bit exotic. Certainly not then the standard fit for aspiring to any serious role. My first job was as a pre-schooler turning the jingle on and off on my Dad's ice cream van. When at 14, I told the school careers advisor I wanted to be a barrister or possibly a diplomat, I was told that both would probably be too difficult and anyway I wasn't English enough for the second. I should pursue speech therapy, in the light of what was then a national shortage.

My career aspirations were unusual for a young girl of Italian origins, who might have been expected to concentrate on finding a nice Italian boy to settle down with. One of the men in my extended family, on hearing me express some rather forthright views about business as a young teenager, advised me in no uncertain terms that because I was a girl, having a view on anything much was not welcome, that I should concentrate on trying to make myself less physically unattractive, and that if I didn't keep myself to myself I would never get a husband.

Luckily my parents were really keen to support my ambitions and, after a Law degree at university, I qualified as a solicitor, despite having to field illegal questions from some law firms along the way about whether there was any point in investing in my training if I was only going to have children.

I moved from legal practice into financial regulation – both male dominated environments. Even coming to my present role at Christian Aid, I find this sector at senior levels is still dominated by men.

But hey, here I am in one of the most amazing roles you could hope for - leading an organisation of over 900 staff and over 600 partner organisations in over 30 countries committed to ending global poverty including the gender inequality that helps to drive it.

Very soon my daughter is about to start her legal training and you can be assured that no one asked her an illegal question when she went for her solicitor's training contract, and no career advisor suggested her choice was beyond her nor did any family member suggest that she should concentrate on landing a husband.

Neither she nor I have progressed on our own. We stand on the shoulders of many brave people, mainly but not exclusively women, who have battled to make it possible for women like us to have aspirations which even a generation before us would have been unrealistic – and we have depended on the encouragement of so many others all along the way. Each one of you is playing a part in that.

Of course, even in Britain, even on the day when we have our second female Prime Minister, gender equality is still not a reality but progress has been made. Together we have all achieved so much. But here and across the world, there is so much more to do.

The facts and figures that I shared with you earlier could fool us into believing that inequality is about money and hence that we can buy our way out of it. Just enough aid, just enough donations. But we can't.

For although in the developing world a woman dies every 90 seconds as a result of childbirth, this is not simply for lack of health facilities, it is because a woman's ability to access reproductive health services depends not primarily on the existence of the service, but on whether her husband will allow her to control her own body, use contraception and travel to a family planning clinic. We know that the same girl who is forced into an early marriage is the same girl who will be forced into a lifetime of unpaid domestic labour, who will not be given the opportunity of going to school, who may be forced to have her genitals mutilated and, when her husband finally dies, will be denied the right to inherit any property. For many it is a form of slavery for which the dawn of emancipation, from birth to death, hardly even flickers.

For Christian Aid, ending gender inequality (and indeed all forms of poverty) is not about the numbers of schools or clinics built, it is about redressing fundamental imbalances of power. It is about giving people in poverty, and especially women, voice, choice and control over their own lives. Because as a Christian organisation, we believe that each person is made in the image of God – and hence that every person, irrespective of race, creed, colour, gender or sexuality is a person of inherent dignity and infinite worth. Let me share our theological understanding in more detail – and if you want to read into it, I am drawing heavily here on work by Susan Durber, then our theology co-ordinator, in our publication ‘Of the Same Flesh’, which you can read on our website. <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/of-the-same-flesh-gender-theology-report.pdf>

We start with a verse often cited as significant for a theology of gender

Genesis 1:27:

*‘So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’*

This verse offers a picture of humankind being created as the last part of God’s creation, and, most significantly, not simply ‘after its own kind’ or like itself, but made in the image of God. What this ‘being in the image of God’ precisely implies is not explained. This verse should perhaps be read in the context of those many verses in the Old Testament that stress to us that God cannot be looked at, nor can we know what God looks like.

It is striking that it is both male and female together who are described as being ‘in the image of God’, so that no one human being can be this ‘image’ alone – there is a ready-made protection against idolatry. But it is astonishingly difficult for those who read this verse often, and for whom it has become almost a kind of slogan, to feel today quite the force and groundshaking impact that it must have had in its original context. There were societies in the ancient Near East, like the Babylonians, who believed that not all that exists was good, and that some things that existed were actually bad. Against that background, this verse, which seems now almost blandly obvious to us, was profoundly significant. This whole account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis emphasises right from the beginning that God made everything, and that it

was all good. God made the light, and God made the darkness too. God made the land, and God made the water. And, significantly in terms of a theology of gender, God made male and female, and both are good. This was such an unusual and astonishing idea for the ancient world, and perhaps still sometimes today, that its full significance is hard to grasp. The second account of creation, the one often presented as the story of Adam and Eve, has a similarly significant message.

In Genesis 2 we read how the Lord God formed a human being from the dust of the ground and breathed into his (or better at this stage, 'its') nostrils the breath of life. Then, further on in the story, we read that God decided it was not good for the creature to be alone. When the human being could not find anyone from among the animals or the birds to be a companion, God took one of the creature's ribs and made another human being and they were 'one flesh'.

What is much clearer in the original Hebrew language in which this story is written, is that the first creature that God made was simply an 'earthling' (this is what Adam means in Hebrew, a creature from the earth). It is only when the second creature is made, when the first one is divided to make two, that new words for 'man' and 'woman' are used.

The very significant thing about this passage for a theology of gender is the way in which the relationship between the now differentiated 'man' and 'woman' is described. The earthling needs to find relationship and someone to heal loneliness. None of the creatures already made will do. So God makes the earthling into two, and yet two who are so completely of the same being that the earth creature can say, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'.

The message of the story is not that woman was derived from man or that woman is secondary, or even really that woman is so 'different' from man. What the text wants the reader to understand is that woman and man, female and male, are more like each other than they are different. They have a deep and essential unity with one another, being from the same source. They have something like common ground, the kind of unity that gives them a deep-rooted equality of dignity and worth.

## **Jesus and gender justice**

A further source of reflection on gender, just as radical and transformative as those key texts in the book of Genesis, comes in Jesus himself. The Gospels bear witness to a Jesus who lived out an alternative masculinity, and related to women in ways that absolutely embodied the joy and justice of our creation as 'male and female', both in the image of God. Jesus lived in a context in which human beings exercised power over others in a multitude of ways.

Divisions ran deep between Gentile and Jew, between Jew and Samaritan, between slaves and owners, between ruling Romans and subject peoples. There were multiple causes of discrimination, oppression and injustice, and many intersecting identities. But in each particular culture it was the case that men held power over women.

We see this reflected in the Gospel narratives, in which women are often unnamed, are silent and voiceless, or cast either as wives or prostitutes. But Jesus subverted and challenged the 'default' gender narrative. It is clear in the Gospels that Jesus often seems to go to the places where women are. There are women among his closest friends and he speaks to women in public even though this was seen as improper behaviour. He acknowledges that women can be prophetic, and encourages Mary, the sister of Martha, to listen to his teaching in a way traditionally reserved for male disciples. He heals women and gives them dignity. If the world told women to be silent, it's Jesus who entrusts them with the task of proclaiming the resurrection.

Jesus also emerges from the pages of the Gospels as a remarkable kind of man, subverting traditional understandings of masculinity. This is really important in the way we work with men and with boys. He weeps, for his friends and for his community. He rejects the path of retaliative violence. After he is betrayed he is neither assertive nor vocal, but silent, passive and yet unafraid. In John's Gospel, Pilate says to the people as Jesus is presented to them for mockery, 'Here is the man!' If any of us need new 'gender models', if gender justice can only come as masculinity is itself renewed, if boys and men need to rediscover gender as something personally challenging and transforming, then Jesus is 'the man'.

This is the context in which can make sense of what Paul says in Galatians 3:28- There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus. At the heart of our faith is a belief in equality. The all-encompassing love of Christ is so vast and deep that it overlooks our differences and brings us all together as one.

So, with the example of Jesus in our minds, if we are serious about tackling poverty, we have to tackle gender inequality.

Our work at Christian Aid teaches us very clearly that poverty is not just about money. Poverty is about the uneven distribution of personal, social and political as well as economic power. And women are worse off the world over in each of these dimensions.

Let's focus on those four dimensions, starting with the **lack of personal power** which manifests itself in physical vulnerability.

One of the things that horrifies me most in my travels round the world for Christian Aid, is the extreme physical vulnerability which women face.

## **Violence**

Domestic violence and sexual violence against women are major public health problems. Recent global prevalence figures from the World Health Organisation indicate that 35% of women worldwide have experienced either intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. On average, 30% of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence by their partner.

In 2013, UN research based on 10k men in Asia found that one in four admitted to have committed a rape, sexual entitlement being the main reason – the belief that men are entitled to sex regardless of consent.

Rape is often used as a weapon of war and there is evidence that it rises after natural disasters. I remember the shock of hearing, for example, when we were working in Haiti after the earthquake in 2010, that women in the camps reported wearing several pairs of jeans because they were at risk of being raped in their tents. Wearing several pairs of jeans helped buy them time to raise the alarm in the event they were attacked.



## **Family planning**

Layer on to this the fact that more than 220 million women in developing countries have great difficulty in accessing family planning. Inadequate family planning when combined with inadequate maternal healthcare means that pregnancies happen earlier and more frequently than is safely managed. Young girls often become pregnant as soon as they start ovulating and long before their bodies are ready. In 2015, there were around 303,000 maternal deaths globally, almost all of them in developing countries.

## **Social power dimension**

Moving on beyond the purely personal power dimension, to the social dimension, women's place in society is not guaranteed before the law.

In still too many countries (e.g. DRC, Yemen, Sudan) women are prevented from doing certain kinds of jobs and/or have to ask permission from their husbands to embark on a profession or open a business. In many countries, daughters and sons do not have equal inheritance rights. Many fail to outlaw domestic and sexual violence.

In practice, national laws even where they exist are not enforced. In many parts of the world customary laws and family codes which are discriminatory take precedence over national legislation. So whatever the position at the national level on marrying off a girl of 12 to a 60 year old man, or FGM, or honour killing, it may not be outlawed in the traditional legal system enforced where that girl lives.

It remains a matter of sorrow and condolence in many countries when a woman gives birth to a girl rather than a boy and the stats show that son preference in some countries does not just entail a series of commiserations. According to the 2011 Census in India, there were 927 girls for every 1000 boys in 2001, and that ratio is actually getting worse – there were only 919 girls for every 1000 boys in 2011. Gender based terminations have played a part in this.

### **The third dimension is Political**

Women are underrepresented at every level of decision making which affects them in the political realm right across the world. Only 22% of all national parliamentarians across the world were female as of January 2015. I won't dwell on that because it won't surprise you: We're all too familiar with that here in the UK. Even today, as we have our second female PM, only 29% of the House of Commons are female and only 25% of the House of Lords.

### **The fourth dimension is Economic**

I've already touched on this, but it's worth spelling out that it's more than an issue of equal pay. Let me say something about tax.

We've heard a lot recently about how tax dodging is diminishing public revenues and disproportionately impacts poor people. This is acutely true in poor countries where essential public services like maternal health care are so woefully underfunded.

Developing countries often find it difficult to raise sufficient revenues because of widespread tax dodging by multinational corporations and wealthy individuals.

The IMF has routinely advised such countries to look to VAT as an income generation it is efficient, raises a considerable amount of revenue and is relatively easy to administer. Unsurprising then that in developing countries, income from VAT can represent a substantial proportion of total tax revenue, often around a quarter.

In 2013, the Kenyan government amended the VAT laws to impose VAT on a long list of essential household items. This change impacted much harder on the disposable income of women, because many of these items were on the list of what women rather than men are expected to buy. In April 2014, following a campaign led by civil society, including Christian Aid's partners, the Kenyan government passed an amendment to the VAT bill to reinstate VAT exemptions for many of these items including fertilizers and staple foods.

Another brake on women's economic power is the huge burden of unpaid domestic work. A recent project of ours in Ethiopia was typical in identifying

that a woman's day involved about 18 hours of work, mostly unpaid, whereas a man did about 7 hours work, mostly paid. Unpaid women's work commonly involves walking miles to collect water and firewood. Because of this burden of work, many girls are not encouraged to complete their education, but rather to help their mothers at home. No wonder a girl in South Sudan is more likely to die in childbirth than to finish school. Uneducated girls are less likely to get well-paid work or become politically active. And so the cycle continues.

Across all four dimensions then – personal, social, political and economic power, women are discriminated against – and one dimension of poverty feeds another.

### **Climate and gender**

You see this come together when you look at the implications of climate change for women and girls.

One thing I didn't appreciate until relatively recently, and then once it's been pointed out you see it everywhere – climate change affects women and girls more harshly.

Because women are more vulnerable to the floods, droughts and diseases that are expected to increase as the climate changes.

Climate change's gender discrimination will be far more pronounced in those swathes of the poorer, developing world where sexual inequality is typically much greater, where the effects of global warming will be more extreme, and where less money is available to protect against the consequences.

Women in poorer countries tend to be more vulnerable because, when disaster strikes, they are far more likely to be in the home cooking, cleaning or looking after others, putting them at greater risk from collapsing buildings.

But that is just one of many reasons why women tend to suffer disproportionately in natural disasters in the developing world. Research suggests that women could be considered more vulnerable in severe storms because they are less likely to have been taught to swim in poorer countries, as well as being less likely to own a mobile phone which could be used to call for help.

In the most extreme cases of disasters in patriarchal societies, women may be unable to leave the house without a male companion or their movement can even be hampered by long clothing.

90 per cent of the 150,000 people killed in the 1991 Bangladesh cyclone were women and you see similar disproportionate impacts on women in the Tsunami of 2005 as well.

Not only do women typically suffer more than men in the kind of climate-related disasters likely to result from global warming – they are also far more vulnerable to the day-to-day impact of rising temperatures. They are more exposed to the mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue and chikungunya, which they come into contact with through the duties of water collection and food harvesting that typically fall to women and which are transmitted through floods and rising humidity.

Women are also more likely to go without food in the event of food shortages because of drought, while water scarcity means they sometimes have to travel huge distances to collect water. This task will become more difficult and require longer walking distances, which may heighten the risk of women and girls being assaulted. Most importantly, it robs them of precious time which they could dedicate to education.

If political leaders around the world are serious about poverty, if they're serious about gender equality, they must also get serious about climate change.

## **Solutions**

Thankfully there are solutions:

### **Sustainable Development Goals**

<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

Goal number 5 is focusses on gender equality.

A standalone goal for gender equality.

Mainstreaming across the other goals, so that they're not met if they're not met for women

**Legal change** – press for laws everywhere which guarantee at the legal level equal pay, equal rights to inherit, outlaw child marriage, FGM, domestic abuse,

### **Working with men and boys**

To change the harmful social norms we have to work with men and boys too. Men and boys are diminished by the diminishing of women and girls. Our models of masculinity are very damaging for men and boys too.

To help kickstart the necessary shifts in cultural understanding, we often start by getting men and women to talk to each other. For we know that if women find it hard to be good partners, mothers, daughters, sisters and citizens, men also struggle to be good partners, fathers, brothers, sons and citizens too and to live up to those expectations society puts upon them. We and our partner organisations get them to talk frankly about these pressures and share them. We help them take personal responsibility for a world in which we are all, often unwillingly, pigeon-holed into roles and expectations of behaviour and emotion set from birth. That we are all, as individuals, both part of the problem and part of the solution.

At the community level, of course, we help women build secure livelihoods, we help them organise and seek political space, stand up for their rights, and yes, access education and decent community health care. But our work to end gender inequality from Brazil to Bangladesh is, at its heart, about tackling relationships between those with power and those without.

We recognise faith leaders hold great power to foster compassion and positive change within a community. Over the past 70 years Christian Aid has often partnered with faith leaders, particularly on work to combat HIV and HIV stigma.

But faith leaders are by no means the silver bullet or always the right choice, as they can too often be complicit in reproducing harmful practices and attitudes.

However, we are seeking to change that at Christian Aid. In March 2015 Christian Aid invited a number of faith-based organisations and institutions to

a consultative workshop to discuss ways of addressing gender injustice. The outcome was the decision to establish a movement of people of faith who will work together to bring about change and create justice and equality for all people, regardless of gender. A global inception group began planning, and Side by Side was born – the product of much collaboration.

<http://sidebysidegender.org/>

What does Side by Side do?

We recognise that gender justice cannot be achieved by individual efforts alone. We therefore work to build a more coordinated and collaborative faith movement which:

- \* Builds greater awareness amongst people of faith, faith leaders and institutions of the moral and theological imperative for gender justice and supporting them to demand this of themselves, their own partners, communities and leaders
- \* Establishes safe spaces for senior faith leaders and champions of gender justice to discuss, understand and commit to take leadership action on gender justice at every level from the household to global
- \* Builds capacity of faith actors to challenge and change harmful social, religious and cultural norms and implement practical activities to address gender injustice

How can I get involved?

**Give:** Donations to Side by Side help us to scale up and deepen the faith response to gender inequality. Donations support practical activities to strengthen the commitment and capacity of faith actors to speak out and address gender injustice in their communities on issues such as gender based violence, early and forced marriage, female genital cutting, access to education, employment and healthcare.

**Act:** You can sign the pledge to support gender justice and find practical faith based activities to help you promote gender justice in your own community at [www.sidebysidegender.org](http://www.sidebysidegender.org)

**Pray:** prayer resources and materials for theological reflection can be found on our website.

I started by saying that 50 years ago it would have been thought an idle fantasy to imagine that I would be talking to you all today as a female CEO of an international development organisation. When I visited our programme in Bangladesh in 2012, I stood in front of 200 incredible women who had together worked and planned and collaborated to rebuild their community after Cyclone Aila, and their lead spokeswoman nearly couldn't speak when she stood up to make her presentation. And then she said, 'I'm sorry, it's just that I never imagined I would be standing here talking to someone like you'. I said 'It's ok; I never imagined I'd be here either'.

It's that sense of shifting power which moves me and gets me excited. It's the change we all want to see, and it's the change that, in a way which wasn't really possible before, we can now be a part of.

I'd like to ask you to consider how you could help secure gender justice for the world's poorest women and girls?

I don't know what will be the best way for you, but I do know this.

Whether it's local, national or global change we're looking for. It starts with us. For it is through the good will and involvement of individuals like you that we can collectively make a difference in our world.

If you asked me to give a one word answer to the title of this lecture, 'Does poverty have a woman's face?', it is abundantly clear from the examples I have given you that yes, in one sense it does. Because numerically it is a discrimination that affects so many. But discrimination on the grounds of sexuality, an issue I know also concerns you deeply, is another such driver of poverty. And all groups marginalised by identity, whether race, creed colour, disability, sexuality, caste or anything else suffer disproportionately from poverty. Because poverty is about the misdistribution of power, of injustice unredressed by love. It mars the image of God in each one of us. It takes from us the place at the table which Jesus laid for each one of us as equals.

Do you dare to dream? I do. It might be interesting to imagine how different the world would be if everyone actually believed that though we are all different and that we all matter equally, that we are irreplaceable.

On the front of Christian Aid's strategy document Partnership for Change, there are the soaring words from Psalm 99 – 'Lover of Justice, you have established equity'! From that notion of equity, that we whilst different are all equal because we are all made in the image of God, from that notion flow the joy, the energy and the purpose of Christian Aid's work. Once we realise this truth, that we are all equal, irreplaceable, uniquely beautiful, we, as people of Christian faith, but also those of other faiths and none, can rally together to love our global neighbours as the uniquely beautiful and worthy people that they are, and then, we can share in some good news in a world in which - with your help - poverty, though all too prevalent, though reinforced by economic models, conflicts and disasters which have taken us backwards, poverty need not have a woman's face – indeed, poverty need not have a face at all.