



'It shall not be so among us'

*A theological reflection by the Revd Dr Sarah Bachelard,
following the 58th session of the UN Commission on the Status of
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At the 58th UN Commission on the Status of Women, our Anglican Communion delegation joined with numerous civil society groups to explore the systemic injustices constraining the lives and prospects of women and girls, and to advocate for transformation of the structures, practices and assumptions that perpetuate inequality, poverty and violence against women.

What difference does faith make to our participation? What does our theological perspective have to contribute to this shared work?

Partly, it's to do with our understanding of transformation. During this year's CSW, it was generally agreed that true equality and empowerment of women requires more than simply enacting legislation or campaigning on particular areas of disadvantage. What is needed is a radical transformation of the underlying norms of societies that, in so many contexts, operate as if girls are less valuable than boys, as if women's work is less significant, women's participation in decision making less necessary than that of men, and so on.

How does transformation of such unjust structures and norms take place? Education, awareness raising, resistance, advocacy – all these things are important.

Yet what is needed ultimately is the transformation of persons, and this is usually difficult and painful.

It is not easy for anyone, whether oppressor or oppressed, to let go of entrenched patterns of behaviour and identity formation. The way to a new form of life can feel profoundly unfamiliar, threatening and dislocating. As Christians, we know that the deepest human transformation requires a willingness to be vulnerable, to let go old certainties and to source our lives, not in culturally accepted patterns of domination or competition, but in the generous, reconciling, humanising and empowering love of God which is beneath and beyond all cultural and moral systems and which draws all people into fullness of life.

One aspect of our contribution to the work of gender equality must therefore be to undergo and accompany others on this deeper journey of personal transformation, without which the fear-based patterns that underpin distorted gender relationships will remain in place.

What can we do when this work of transformation is refused and resisted?

The temptation is to become either cynical and withdrawn or anxious and ever more frenzied in our activism. When the need is so urgent – women and children trafficked daily into slavery, gender-based violence in epidemic proportions, women disproportionately affected by climate change, unjust legal, trade and macroeconomic frameworks, and profoundly discriminated against economically and in access to decision making (including in many of our Anglican dioceses and churches) – then despair or anxiety are natural reactions.

Yet, to paraphrase Jesus, we believe that 'it shall not be so among us'.

The deep work of justice and reconciliation in which we are invited to participate is God's work. We are called to yield ourselves to whole-hearted, intelligent and costly participation in this work, but without anxiety or frenzy. We are to be prophetic but not reactive, our fierce love growing in the soil of prayer, listening, and discernment.

Our faith teaches us that we become agents of authentic new life insofar as we entrust our own lives and work to God's larger truth, confident even in the midst of suffering and chaos that love is indeed stronger than death, and that in Christ all things are already being made new. May it be so.