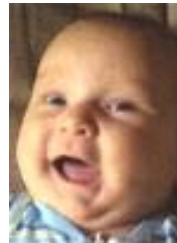


Women in the Christian Context

Probably one of the very first things we ask when we hear that someone has had a baby is: “What was it? A boy or a girl?” The critical importance that we attribute to a newborn’s sex reflects more than a curiosity about its gender; it reflects a fundamental belief that the life of the newborn will differ in essential ways depending on whether it’s a girl or a boy.

Boy or Girl?



The question of sex or gender differences has been a consuming interest of psychologists, social scientists and the public at large for many years. Think for example of books such as “He says, She says”; “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus” and “Why Men don’t Listen and Women can’t read Maps.” Interest in the subject continues to mushroom. Between 1967 and 1993, more than 35,000 articles on gender were published in social and behavioural science journals. Today, if you had to do a search on

Google, for example, you will find 46, 200,000 results if you type in the word “gender differences”.

This is an area of study that evokes much controversy and acrimony. The questions asked are important and so are the answers because they have a far-reaching influence on the way we live our lives and the way we govern society.

Men and women are different and the difference is not just skin deep,



But unfortunately, since the beginning of recorded history it has been assumed that “different” means “not equal” and that women are not only the weaker sex, both physically and mentally but that they are inferior to men. This assumption is so ingrained that it appears to be ubiquitous. I hope, during this presentation, to point out some of the disastrous consequences of this mind set, and it is

my premise that it has led to the subtle, or not so subtle, dehumanisation of women through the ages. Indeed, the inferiority of women seemed so indisputable that for centuries no serious effort was made to prove or disprove it.

In Greek times, the inferiority of women and the subjection of slaves were taken for granted. The leading Greek philosophers had contempt for women. Aristotle wrote: "The mental and physical differences between men and women are such that women are not only inferior, but fitted for a different role in life. Woman's partnership with man, necessary for the procreation of children and the survival of the species, is the basis for the family unit; but the wife must be the subordinate partner, the husband lord and master." (It is interesting that many Catholic and Protestant interpreters and translators of the Bible reflect the influence of these hierarchical Greek concepts in the interpretation of the writings of Paul)

In Roman times women were, to a large degree, emancipated. A woman entered her husband's home of her own free will and lived in it as his equal. There was more than one champion of feminism under the Flavians, who claimed for women dignity and independence on the ground of the moral and intellectual equality of the two sexes.

But these attitudes were not to last and in Victorian times women again were regarded as being of less value to society, than men. Education of women was limited to those few enlightened families where the male relations were prepared to share their reading-

matter with their sisters. It was totally unthinkable for women to enter the professions. It was not just that women were denied the vote, denied education and professional status, in the eyes of English law they had no status. Married women existed only as wives, or not at all.

Caroline Norton – society girl, granddaughter of the dramatist Richard Sheridan, and a writer of novels herself, had married at the age of 19, the Hon. Richard Norton, who gave her 3 children with a great number of bruises and unpaid bills along the way. It was a disastrously unhappy marriage. After one particularly bad quarrel, Norton took the 3 children and placed them under the care of a cousin. It was only then that Caroline became aware of her legal status. She discovered that in the eyes of the law she was her husband's property. She had no right to see her children if he removed them from her; nor, having married the Hon. Richard, did she have any rights over her own property or even the income she derived from her writings. All belonged, in the eyes of the law, to him. He refused to let her see her children. As a woman she was neither allowed to sue or to be sued.

Desperate to have her children returned to her, she contacted an old family friend, Sergeant Talfourd, who happened to be a Member of Parliament, and he ensured that by 1839 there passed into law the Infant's Custody Act, which laid down that mothers against whom adultery was not proven might be allowed custody of their children under the age of 7 but only if the woman was of good character.

In those days a woman could not sue for divorce. Divorce, which we now take for granted, was still something women could only obtain if they were in a position to move a special Act of Parliament – in each and every divorce case. Not until 1857 could divorces be obtained through law courts, and even then, while a man could divorce his wife on grounds of her adultery only, a wife had to prove her husband had additionally committed incest, bigamy, cruelty or desertion. And it was not until 1925 that women were allowed full, equal guardianship of their children under English law.

In 18 hundreds, researchers examining corpses in Europe and America took crude measurements of the brains of cadavers and found that intelligent people have bigger, heavier brains than intellectually challenged people. They also found that women have smaller, lighter brains than men. From these 2 facts it was just a short leap to the conclusion that women were less evolved mentally than men.

In 1879, Gustave le Bon wrote:

“Women represent the most inferior form of human evolution and they are closer to children and savages than to an adult, civilised man. They excel in fickleness, inconsistency, absence of thought and logic and incapacity to reason. Without doubt, there exists some distinguished women, very superior to the average man, but they are as exceptional as the birth of any monstrosity, as, for example, a gorilla with two heads...”

Perhaps one of the most crippling consequences of sin has been the development of the thought that because women are not like men, because they are different and men do not always understand the way they think, they must, in some way, be inferior to men.

So how will a person's life be different if you are female, for example, rather than male?

Well, for one thing, you may never be born, especially if you happen to have been conceived in China, India or the Republic of Korea.



Worldwide “apartheid of gender” is responsible for the deaths of millions of females. The selective abortion of female foetuses and infanticide of female infants has resulted in 100 males for every 92 females in India and 100 males for every 28 females in rural China, with disparate sex ratios favouring males in many other countries in the world. Cultures that consider a double-X

chromosome a deformity may in fact be committing gender genocide. According to estimates from UNICEF, "more than a million children die each year because they are female"

As defined by UNICEF, female infanticide is defined as the abortion of a foetus or the killing of an infant by a relative because it is female. Another definition states that it is the intentional killing of baby girls is due to the preference for male babies and from the low value associated with the birth of females." (Marina Porras, "Female Infanticide and Foeticide".)

Infanticide has been practiced as a brutal method of family planning in societies where boy children are still valued, economically and socially, above girls. In some Asian countries medical testing for sex selection, though officially outlawed, has become a booming business.

The phenomenon of female infanticide is as old as many cultures, and has likely accounted for millions of gender-selective deaths throughout history. It remains a critical concern in a number of "Third World" countries today, notably the two most populous countries on earth, China and India. But it is not a new phenomenon. 200 B.C. in Greece, for example, the murder of female infants was so common that among 6,000 families living in Delphi no more than 1 percent had two daughters. In one village of 79 families there were only 28 daughters to 118 sons. ... But classical Greece was not unusual. Killing of "defective" children, including female children has continued, from the time of the Renaissance till the present. In India, because of Hindu beliefs and the rigid caste system, young girls were murdered as a matter of

course. When demographic statistics were first collected in the nineteenth century, it was discovered that in "some villages, no girl babies were found at all; in a total of thirty others, there were 343 boys to 54 girls. [I]n Bombay, the number of girls alive in 1834 was 603."

The phenomena of sex-selective abortion, which targets female foetuses almost exclusively and neglect of girl children are closely linked to female infanticide. It reflects the low status accorded to women in most parts of the world; it is arguably the most destructive manifestation of the anti-female bias that pervades "patriarchal" societies.

How else might your life differ just because you are a female?

Well, for one thing you might be more tired than your male counterparts.



United Nations statistics:

Women comprise:

- Approx. 50% of the world population
- Do 2/3 world's work

Worldwide, whether they have a job outside of the home or not, women do most of the housework. A male partner who is a blue-collar worker may help with 20% of the housework, while white-collar workers generally do only 5%. In Africa, among the rural African people where the women do 90% of all agricultural work, there is a saying: "The men are too busy being big and brave and strong to work, so the women must do it!"

Women work hard and they are often overworked and tired.



Epitaph on Gravestone in old English graveyard: (1860)

Here lies a poor woman
Who was always tired,
For she lived in a place
Where help wasn't hired.
Her last words on earth were
'Dear friends, I am going
Where washing ain't done,
Nor sweeping nor sewing,
And everything there
Is exact to my wishes,
For there they don't eat
And there's no washing of dishes...
Don't mourn for me now,
Don't mourn for me never,
For I'm going to do nothing
Forever and ever.

For all that effort, however, United Nations statistics state:

Women comprise:

- Approx. 50% of the world population
- Do 2/3 world's work
- Own 10% money
- Own 1% property

Poverty is increasingly a female problem



70% of the world's poor are female.

Even in the USA, more than 60% of all adults living below the poverty line are White women.

And in the work place a substantial wage gap still exists, world wide, when women and men are compared, even when controlling for critical variables such as education, age and length of employment. In the late 1960's and early 1970's many students wore buttons that read "59 cents" as a symbolic reminder of the amount that women were paid for every dollar men were paid. This gap has closed only slightly in the 4 or more decades since then.

In a developed country such as Australia, the standard of living of women has been estimated to drop 73% after separation or divorce.

Another harsh reality of being female is the likelihood of being illiterate.



UNICEF estimates the literacy rate for females at 2/3 that of males because worldwide 20 million more girls than boys are denied access to school.

A girl is twice as likely to be uneducated as a boy and this fact contributes to the increasing poverty level amongst females. We know that illiteracy is powerfully linked to low social status, poverty and poor health.

And poor health is another problem that you might face, being female.



In many countries, women and girls are fed after the men and boys. The WHO estimates that 50% of all poor women might be anaemic. Globally the health of women has deteriorated.

In certain countries in the Middle East women are not allowed to see a male doctor and yet there are no female doctors. In these countries you might be denied medical care just because you are female.

Certainly in African countries the face of HIV-AIDS is increasingly that of a young female.

And finally, if you are female, your chances of being abused are much greater than if you are male.



Family violence against men does exist but 95% of DV victims are female.

Approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ of all women are abused in their own homes.

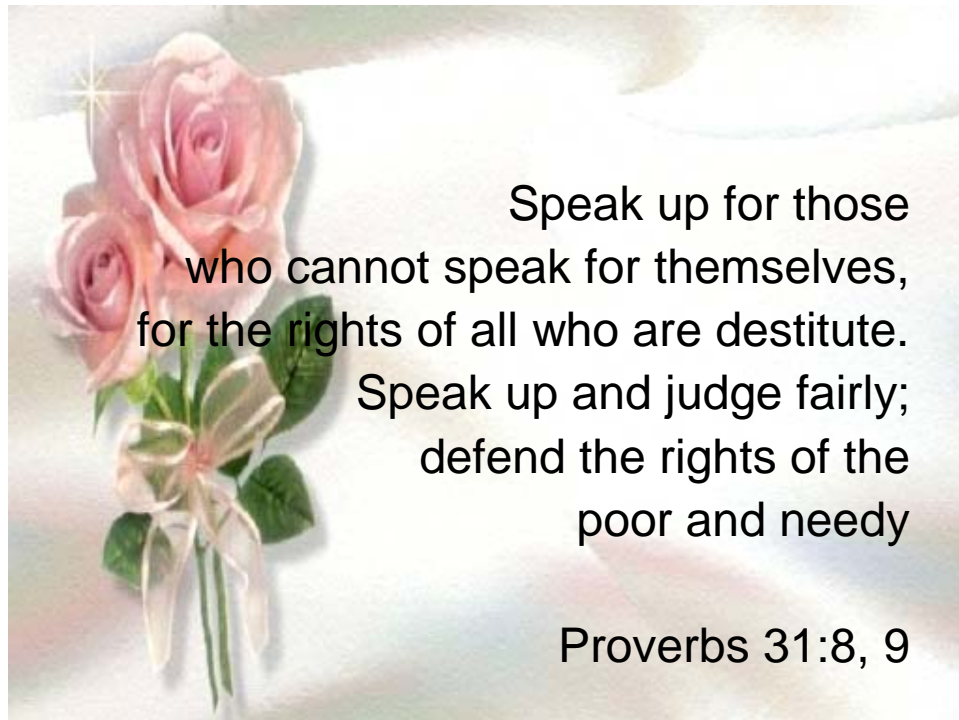
It is estimated that 46% of female homicide victims are killed by their partner or ex-partner.

In Australia, the most vulnerable groups of women are women who live in isolated or remote areas (DV was lower in major cities), indigenous women, and pregnant women. The 1996 ABS *Women's Safety Survey* found that pregnancy is a time when women may be vulnerable to abuse. 20% of the women surveyed who had experienced DV had first experienced it when pregnant.

So the realities are that, as a woman, your life is likely to be very different from a man's life. Women and men around the world can

expect to live qualitatively different lives solely on the basis of whether they are male or female.

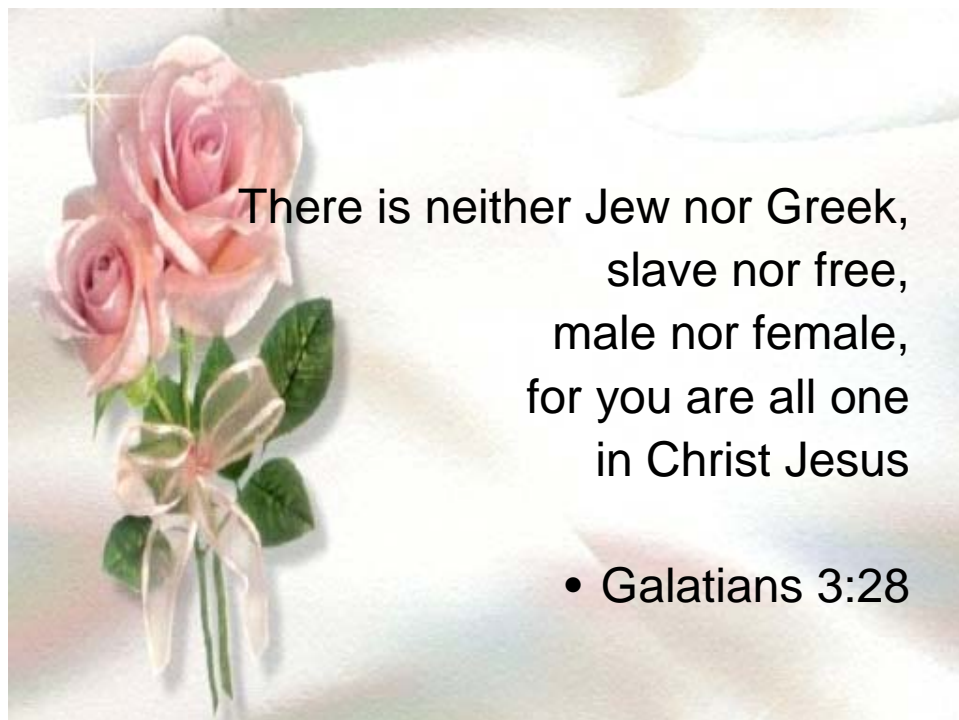
So what should the response of the church be to these issues?



Jesus refused to adopt the cultural double standard of the day. One example is the story of the woman caught in adultery. Obviously a woman cannot commit adultery by herself, but because the religious leaders held to a double standard they did not bring the man to trial. In the biblical law that Jesus' accusers were supposedly upholding, both the man and the woman were to be put to death. Jesus refused to be pulled into their biased judgement. He quietly wrote on the ground and simply said, "If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." (Interesting that the One there who was without sin, the only one without sin, did not pick up a stone)

Jesus words spoke volumes: sin is sin- whether committed by a man or a woman. When equity is the standard, stones are rarely thrown. (David Joel Hamilton)

But we have a message of hope to bring to the world for Jesus' ministry while on earth was not gender-biased but gender inclusive.



Sometimes, verses such as these, which very clearly state an overriding general principle, are disregarded in favour of verses that seem much more difficult to interpret and which may have been influenced by a negative bias dating from ancient times.

It is even sometimes the case that the Bible is used by perpetrators of violence to sanction their actions and to enforce a way of living which is far from Christian.

The church unfortunately, is not immune to problems of violence, abuse or discrimination. But it does have a message of reconciliation for the world.



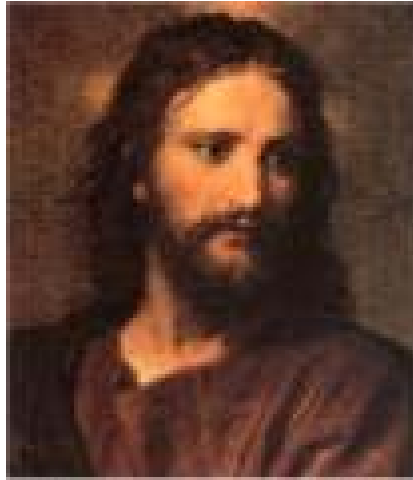
Perhaps we are not to focus so much on the ways in which we differ as men and women but rather on the fact that we were all created in His image. It seems to me that God is wonderfully complex and so multi-faceted that it took the creation of 2 genders to fully reflect his image.

But whatever the reason, the fact remains that God, in His wisdom, created us differently. Male and female He created us. So, here we are, wonderfully different and yet meant to complement each other.

In her Map for Gender Reconciliation, Jane Crane has spelt out the Elements of Reconciliation:



1. **Recognition** Acknowledging the need for reconciliation regarding gender issues
2. **Healing** This can only happen when both genders confess their unjust actions, thoughts, attitudes, or responses regarding gender matters and then ask for forgiveness, and extending it to others.
3. **Sensitivity & Commitment** This comes when we acquire knowledge in order to relate with greater sensitivity and empathy to each other, regardless of gender. It means choosing to recognise that each person is of equal worth in the sight of God.
4. **Restitution** Attempting to restore that which has been damaged or destroyed and seeking justice where we have the power to act.



There is a great deal of evidence to show that God, a family of three, live together in a relationship of warmth, love, and fellowship. They are masters of communication; they are social, generous and hospitable. They put themselves at one another's disposal; they achieve genuine fulfilment in doing the will of the others. This is mutuality and reciprocity. There is no hierarchy in the Trinity, no one superior or inferior to the other one. This is a model for us to follow in our human relationships.

Human beings are called upon to express their maleness and femaleness in Christ through equality, unity, mutuality and complementarity modelled after the relationship of the trinity.

As we seek to understand and offer compassion to those caught in the cycle of abuse and violence, let us, first of all, be **aware** of our own prejudices and preconceptions. Then let us **examine** them in

the light of God's love and grace for **all** humankind. In particular, let us emulate the example of Jesus:

Isaiah 42:1-7

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice... and open eyes that are blind, free captives from prison and release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."

References consulted for the preparation of this paper

Crane, J. L. (2004). *Map for gender reconciliation*. California: San Diego

Domestic Violence in Australia – an Overview of the Issues. 7 August 2003.

Retrieved 22/4/2006, from

http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SP/Dom_violence.htm

Dunbar, M. (1995). Domestic Violence: Why does it happen?

AdventistReview, March.

Case study – Female Infanticide. (n.d.). Retrieved 11/5/2006, from

http://www.genderwatch.org/case_infanticide.html

Halpern, D. F. (2000). *Sex differences in cognitive abilities* (3rd ed.). Hillsdale,

NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

- Hamilton, D. J. (2004). What does Jesus teach us about gender? Research papers for the *Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism*, Occasional Paper No. 53.
- Kendall, F. (1993). *The sexy factor: Gender differences at home and at work*. Johannesburg: Amagi Books.
- Nelson, E. (1997). Breaking the cycle. *Adventist Review*, March 20.
- Olsen, N. V. (1993). *The new relatedness for man and woman in Christ: A mirror of the divine*. California: Loma Linda University Center for Christian Bioethics.
- Wilson, A.N. (1989). *Eminent Victorians*, London: BBC Books