

15. SHADOWS ACROSS GENDER RELATIONS

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Any biblical or theological study of family, marriage and sexuality will eventually be faced with a darker aspect of human relationships, that of violence and abuse. Without some theological engagement with the cruelty and brutality in the dynamics of human behaviour, our study in human relationships will be incomplete. In particular, the aspect of gender-based violence cannot be ignored. In one of many reports on this disturbing phenomenon, the United Nations Population Fund sees violence against women as ‘probably the most wide-spread and socially tolerated of human rights violations’. The authors go on to suggest that it ‘both reflects and reinforces inequities between men and women and compromises the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims’.^[1]

My own concern with this subject began many years ago when an editor of a women’s magazine sent me a package of responses to questionnaires, filled in by women who self-disclosed as victims of domestic abuse. Working through a couple of hundred of these in order to write a report for the journal, I became deeply disturbed by the painful narratives of these women’s lives and experiences. For many respondents, the words they were now pouring out on to the page broke many years of silence. They found they suddenly had permission to reflect on the assaults and attacks they had suffered and to identify their ordeals for what they really were: betrayal of trust and belittling of their value and worth.

This unexpected encounter with the reality of violence in the home began for me a long involvement with the issue of intimate-partner abuse (a more accurate term than ‘domestic violence’), through both research work and counselling. By the time I travelled to remote societies as President of Tearfund, many years later, I felt I already knew a great deal about the damage that could be inflicted upon women. Yet the global manifestations of gender-based violence still took me by surprise. I found patterns of violation in cultures as far away from each other as Haiti, the Congo and India. Many different forms of abuse presented themselves, most of which were family-based but some of which were not. Institutionalized systems of damage to women cut across both public and private spheres, and were often deeply engrained in pervasive cultural attitudes. It became evident that patriarchal societies have multiple ways of reinforcing male power over women, whether through the indifference of lawmakers, collusion of the police and military or reinforcement by religious authorities. Sitting unobtrusively with all-female groups, and listening as they quietly shared their lives and stories with me, it was possible to witness levels of vulnerability which went beyond what I had ever seen before. Often lacking economic, educational and legal resources, women were left unprotected against those who would exploit and harm them. The damage was both physical and social, affecting young and old. There was little doubt that violence constituted, in the words of another UN report, ‘a continuum across the lifespan of women’, and that in places

right across the globe, women were at risk of violation from before birth to old age.^[2]

Today, gender discrimination operates in different practices in diverse cultures, much of it taking a sexual nature. Selective abortion, female genital mutilation, enforced marriage, honour killings, sex trafficking, prostitution, sexual assault and rape as a weapon of war are all aspects of the way women's bodies become targeted for abuse. And although intimate-partner violence victimizes men as well as women, the gender ratio of abuse and the homicide rate for women victims underlines their particular vulnerability. The case studies below draw heavily on examples from countries where there are fewer legal safeguards for women. Yet this should not blind us to the reality that there are aspects of gender relations in every culture which leave women at risk, and that no society is exempt from gender-based violence.

Statistics themselves provide sobering reading. In the UK alone, the 2015–16 *Violence Against Women and Girls Report* shows the highest ever recorded volume of prosecutions and convictions for rape, yet these figures reflect only a small fraction of the women who call Women's Aid and other helplines to report sexual assault. When we turn to domestic violence, we know from Crime Survey figures that 1.4 million women in England and Wales suffer this annually, and that 1 in 4 will endure it during their lifetime.^[3] We know also that 140,000 women are living with the consequences of female genital mutilation in the UK, and that around 10,000 girls under the age of fifteen are likely to undergo cutting.^[4] In yet another example of abuse, the Home Office estimates that between 5,000 and 8,000 people annually are at risk of being forced into marriage in the UK (most of them girls), with forty-six prosecutions since 2014.^[5]

Global manifestations of gender-based violence can be terrifyingly dramatic as I found during eight years' research for *Scars Across Humanity: Understanding and Overcoming Violence Against Women*.^[6] The task of this book, however, was not simply to identify and document the ugly manifestations of human brutality, or even to allow the voices of victims to be heard – although these were clearly necessary. The aim was also to address the question underlying every issue – why? What makes human beings inflict pain on each other, and damage the female of the species at a level unknown in the animal kingdom? What is it about human societies, that healthy gender relationships can become so badly distorted and malefactors left free to violate women with impunity? In the exploration of these questions we need to probe underlying assumptions about the nature of human personhood and the construction of identity. To do that, we are inevitably drawn into theological and philosophical reflection. It is the purpose of this chapter, then, to engage afresh in theological reflection both to address those questions directly and to consider critically some of the proposed explanations.

Explanations are not hard to come by. Many academic disciplines offer analyses of human behaviour which in turn form the bases for responses to these issues. Biologists, psychologists, systems theorists, sociologists, political scientists, historians, legal analysts and economists have all proposed theories which have been used, often by others, to provide reasons for gender-based violence and for their widely diverse cultural forms. Inevitably, the various explanations differ widely from each other, as they draw on different assumptions. Sometimes,

as in the first case study below, these different approaches complement each other and together offer a comprehensive framework for understanding. More often, however, the result can be fragmented or contradictory, as in the second example. Some theorists even maintain that their discipline alone has the framework and rigour to furnish a reliable account, and that other theories lack this.^[7] Yet, those same theorists often work from assumptions which themselves are dogmatic and not held up to critical scrutiny.

When we explore the problem of gender-based violence from different explanatory frameworks, we quickly encounter explanations couched in cultural, economic, social, ethical, functional, biological, genetic, psychological, historical or legal terms. They all provide insights, especially when they are supported by careful study and detailed research. Each discipline asks its own set of questions, and often cites carefully compiled evidence to verify the conclusions reached. At the same time, however, writers may be unaware that they are not carefully scrutinizing the assumptions incorporated into their theories. Yet these assumptions inevitably play a significant role in how people understand the reasons for gender-based violence. It falls to us as theologians, then, to uncover and examine these, and bring a more critical appraisal to bear on them.

Selective abortion

When we turn to the issue of female foeticide – the practice of sex-selective abortion – a variety of different explanations quickly present themselves. The statistics are not precise because of the very nature of the problem, but the issue is clear enough. In India (and previously in China), violence against women begins in the womb. India has lost around ten million girls over the last two decades through the abortion of female fetuses and female infanticide. One doctor who fought hard against her husband's family in order to keep her own twin daughters, points out that the number of girls killed by female foeticide 'is much greater than any genocide of this world'.^[8] This has left that country with an acute gender imbalance in the population, seen very evidently in the child sex ratio in demographic statistics. The distorted ratio is apparently getting worse rather than better. In the census of 2011, many areas of India showed a rapid decrease of girls to boys from the previous decade. In Jammu and Kashmir, for example, the proportions of girls dropped from 964 to every 1000 boys down to only 870.

Explanations citing technological advance

A simple explanation for this decreasing ratio of girls in the population is that it is caused by the impact of sex-diagnostic technology. And that is obviously one answer. India has more than 35,000 registered ultrasound clinics. In addition, ultrasound machines can be operated outside medical centres and are available in every part of the country. The proliferation of unregistered clinics, the widespread sale of scanners and the collusion of doctors in expediting sex-selective abortions make it increasingly easy to eliminate extra girls from the family at embryo stage. The ease and speed of safer abortions have therefore all compounded the threat to girl babies and reduced their numbers.

Legal and political explanations

Technology can explain why the problem has increased, but we need to ask why it has become so marked and persistent. The legal and political context is important, and many explanations put the blame on irresponsible governance and non-implementation of law. For more than forty years, India's laws have officially offered protection for unborn girls. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971 allows abortion in India only under very strict conditions. It must take place within twelve weeks of conception, there must be evidence of grave risks of injury or ill health to the mother, or there must be substantial risks to the child of severe abnormality and impairment. When this law failed to prevent widespread abortion, further legislation entered the statute books. Following the spread of new technology the aim was to prevent its misuse. The Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act of 1994, tightened in 2002, regulated the operation of scanners and prohibited their use for sex-selective abortions. Yet experts such as Sabu George have pointed out that millions of crimes continue to be carried out every year in relation to female foeticide, and very few cases are ever brought to court or result in convictions.

Clearly there is a massive gap between legal expression and public implementation. It suggests an absence of political will to enforce laws which protect the female child, an absence which leaves room for others to exploit. George points to the strong links between companies which manufacture the diagnostic machines and sections of a powerful medical fraternity who make profits from the sex-selection technologies. He believes that collusion between them, the politicians and the bureaucrats 'has made a mockery of the legal provisions'.^[9] For the law to have teeth, its enactment is essential, ensuring high penalties for those who ignore the legislative provisions.

These are all crucial points. Both law and its enforcement are vital. Yet as George acknowledges, explanations couched in political or legal terms can only explain why a practice persists. They do not uncover the reasons why it occurs in the first place.

Economic explanations

An economic explanation might yield a deeper analysis. Poverty is still very evident in much of India, and the cost of raising children is considerable. Boys are an economic asset as they remain rooted in their family of birth, contributing economically and supporting parents in their old age. But girls leave to join the family of marriage. So in poor families it is no surprise that, if there are too many mouths to feed, the girls are the ones seen as disposable. The economics of poverty and deprivation are strong motivating factors for sex-selective abortion.

The economic argument cannot, however, focus on poverty alone. Most of the research points to the high level of take-up amongst middle-class families. They are the ones more likely to investigate the sex of their unborn child and pay the fee for the diagnostic test and abortion clinic. The very poor more commonly resort to infanticide, leaving their newborn girl babies exposed in isolated areas. In many areas not afflicted by poverty there are even steeper gaps in the sex ratio. In Punjab, for example, there are only 846 girls per 1,000 males. In Haryana there are only 830, dropping down as far as to 774 in the rapidly developing, cattle-wealthy district of Jhajjar.^[10]

The economics of affluence therefore also contribute to sex-selective abortion. This is further conflated by the economic drive of those who profit from the sale of scanners, offer diagnostic tests, run abortion clinics and dispose of foetal remains. Middle-class families want to maintain their standard of living, rather than see it decline through constant increase in their family size. But, more importantly, they still want sons rather than daughters, and we are back to the same, unresolved issue – why? To understand that we need to dig deeper.

Cultural explanations

An explanation which explores cultural factors regarding the preference for sons is likely to open up a more comprehensive understanding of sex-selective abortion. For centuries, in India's patriarchal society, sons have had a higher status than their sisters. Not only do they continue the family line, and preserve the name through generations, but the bonds between parents and son are reinforced economically and socially. Traditional concepts such as *paraya dhan* dictate that a girl is not seen as a permanent member of her birth family. So if she is given a share in its assets or property, the family will lose out. In some Hindu families, sons are even given religious significance. 'Through a son, he conquers the worlds, through a grandson, he obtains immortality, but through his son's grandson, he ascends to the highest. All that has been declared in the Veda.'^[11]

Marriages are arranged, and the bridegroom's family is at a clear material advantage, as the parents of any potential bride must furnish the dowry. The dowry affects all sections of Indian society. A middle-class girl's family who want to secure a well-educated and successful husband for their daughter will have been saving for this since she was born. 'Decades ago, a wealthy bride's father would have been expected to give gold bracelets. Today it is jewellery, fridges, cars and foreign holidays – and the bride's family may end up paying the bill for the rest of their lives.'^[12]

The dowry has been illegal in India since 1961, but this is another piece of legislation which is largely ignored. Women are particularly vulnerable, especially when the dowry is paid in instalments and the money runs out. The patrilocal culture, which requires girls to become part of the family of their husband, also requires them to be subject to the rules and mores of their new family, without the protection of their own parents. Many of them become homicide victims. With the rise of dowry-related deaths (girls killed by disgruntled parents-in-law and husbands) a further law was passed in 1983, designed to protect women from dowry harassment. However, most of the public debate since then has been on the misuse of the law by women, and police in some regions have watered down the requirements of arrest following complaints. Meanwhile, the victimization of girls by their in-laws continues. The Indian National Crime Records Bureau recorded a total of 24,771 dowry deaths in 2012–15.

In 2014 the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) conducted a study on gender roles in India comparing behaviour among men ranked on a 'masculinity index'. In a society already prone to ranking and hierarchy, they found that linguistic ethnicity, caste and class all had a profound effect on how Indian men develop their sense of masculinity. The more pronounced this was, the more it affected their preferences for sons, their attitudes towards women and their likelihood of controlling their partners. The study found that one in three men

surveyed did not allow their wives to wear the clothes of their choice, two in three believed they had a 'greater say than their wife/partner in the important decisions' that affected the family, and three in four expected their partner to agree to sex. Men high on the 'masculinity index' also showed a stronger inclination for violence towards an intimate partner.¹³

Culture, traditional practices, gender-expectations, attitudes towards wealth, family mores and religion all therefore play into the practice of sex-selective abortion. They are the expression of a pervading world view which ranks people according to specific criteria of caste or gender, and which in turn justifies practices which have enormous consequences for the future of the country. In this kind of context, those made vulnerable by the world view are very likely to suffer.

Theological explanations

It is time to move on to the deepest level of explanation – one which addresses the problem from both ethical and theological perspectives. For below the cultural practices, the gender disparity, the economic pressures, the legal indifference and the technological advances lies the question of human identity. There are deep assumptions at play, not simply about the construction of masculinity or the nature of the family, but about the very meaning of personhood. The underlying perspective here is one which ranks human beings according to human-controlled criteria. People do not have equal significance before God, but take their place in a hierarchal structure of values, where women come lower than men, and the girl baby is at the bottom of the pile. When this gender and caste ranking is reinforced by religion, upheld by cultural rituals and absorbed into normality, the challenges are pushed to the margins. It becomes even more difficult to hold the prevailing assumptions up to critical scrutiny.

The significance of childhood also lies beneath foeticide and infanticide. A biblical theology of childhood is one which entrusts adults with the guardianship and care of youngsters; their well-being and nurture is in our hands. In the New Testament, Jesus draws a child towards him and issues a dire warning to any who would harm children. The vulnerability and lack of maturation of a child is addressed in positive, even loving terms. St Paul refers back to the time when as a child he 'understood as a child, and thought as a child', recognizing that it is only in adulthood that we 'put away childish things' (1 Cor. 13:11, AV). Jesus points to a child's simple trust and dependence as a role model for our relationship with God. Childhood is therefore defined as the accepted period of immaturity and vulnerability, with children in need of adult protection. At the same time, the child is also fully human, fully spiritual, and of equal value to an adult.

By contrast with this biblical view, the tragic narrative of selective abortion, infanticide and wide-scale foetal death indicates something deeply sinister. It is that children are disposable. Their worth is extrinsic and situational, not intrinsic and given them by God. So both embryos and new-born infants must meet the criteria already decided by an adult society or they can be deprived of the right to live. And the women who bear children are required to fall into line with these deep-seated attitudes, or suffer the consequences.

It falls then to the Christian biblical theologian to provide a different framework for

evaluation, and offer a view of personhood rooted in the truth that we are creatures of a God who loves us. Our identity before God and our intrinsic worth are tied up together; they apply to us all, for God gives equivalent value to every one of his human creation. The practice of sex-selective abortion rejects the equal meaning and significance of human persons – a rejection that is both cultural and personal – and replaces it with institutionalized patterns of greed, pride, status, deceit, conformity and violence which are allowed to dominate the societal mindset and set the agenda. The result is a free rein for profiteers who turn the elimination of girl foetuses into personal gain.

The tireless campaigners against sex-selective abortion in India, fighting for laws which protect the female foetus, know these truths only too well. When we support their work and commitment with our own theological insights, we can begin to share their hope for both the unborn girl and the growing woman. We also demonstrate the impact of the biblical teaching of women and men together made in the image of God. To see women and men as co-stewards of the earth, equally accountable before God, showing each other mutual respect, offering neighbour love, nurturing the young and protecting the vulnerable, enables us to recognize the widespread acceptance of sex-selective abortion for what it is: a denial of our fundamental calling to be human.

The different explanations which operate in the case of sex-selective abortion and infanticide come together as a comprehensive whole. They each pinpoint one way of seeing the issue without contradicting each other. If anything, each element of explanation urges further examination to build up a composite picture. However, in other areas of violence against women, we see a different spectrum. Particularly when we try to understand rape or intimate-partner abuse we are confronted with explanations which are fundamentally at variance with each other, even mutually exclusive. This leads us to recognize that truth about our humanness is highly contested.

Intimate-partner abuse and rape

Intimate-partner abuse affects women in every continent and every society. In the United States, according to the US National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, women experience about 4.8 million intimate-partner-related physical assaults and rapes annually, with an estimated 1,640 in one year ending in death.^[14] Half a world away in Bangladesh, the World Health Organization suggests more than 50% of women experience some form of domestic violence, with around 3,000 acid attacks reported in one decade. In both countries, as in the UK and elsewhere across the globe, the reported level of sexual assault or physical battering is known to be much lower than the actual incidence. And even if women do seek help following a crime, they often have no guarantee of redress. In Bangladesh, for example, out of 121 attacks reported in 2010, there were only seven convictions.^[15] In many cultures, women who report a sexual attack will find little sympathy from the police or authorities. There are many records of wives being returned to their abusive husbands who are not charged but left free to violate them further. Over 600 million women live in countries where domestic violence is not even a crime. And even in the UK where it is a crime, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary

(HMIC) in 2014 exposed ‘alarming and unacceptable weaknesses’ in the way that police forces dealt with domestic violence.^[16]

Violence in the home may take many different forms. In some Asian countries it can take the form of acid attacks. For refusing to comply with a partner’s demands women can be scarred, disfigured, blinded and left with wounds which never heal. In the UK it can be physical violence, sexual assault or emotional abuse. Whatever the form, the purpose is normally to control a partner, restrict her freedom, bring her into line or increase her dependency. Male victims of intimate-partner violation suffer equally, although in much smaller numbers and often with a different outcome. Partners of both sexes might die as a result of injuries, but Karen Ingala Smith makes a penetrating observation from British homicide figures: men are more likely to be killed by someone they were abusing; women are more likely to be killed by someone who was abusing them.^[17]

Rape also exists everywhere and shows no sign of diminishing. Current figures from the United Nations Women’s Desk indicate an increase in most countries, both of the reporting of rape and of convictions. The main differences between countries lie in the existence of protective legislation and the level of its implementation. Some countries, like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or regions, like many areas in Egypt, are commonly referred to as ‘rape capitals of the world’, but cities like Delhi and Jakarta are also known for the prevalence of sexual violence. Few people have contested UN Secretary Ban Ki-moon’s insistence in 2015 that the world has made ‘uneven progress’ in combating violence against women, and that this still persists at ‘alarmingly high levels’.^[18]

The impact of rape on a victim has been well documented. Long after the bruises or scars might have healed, the emotional and mental reverberations remain. The after-effects of shock, the sense of violation, fear, anger at the perpetrator, anger at oneself and deep sense of loss, can continue for decades. Harvard psychiatrist and specialist in trauma study Judith Herman warns about the deep-seatedness of the effects: ‘Traumatized people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self. They lose trust in themselves, in other people, in God . . . The identity they have formed prior to the trauma is irrevocably destroyed.’^[19]

It is therefore crucial that an understanding of domestic abuse and rape is developed within our churches, and not simply left to welfare, medical and counselling services. If the ministry of the gospel is to make any impact on the lives of those who have undergone these traumas, we need to incorporate the teaching of appropriate pastoral awareness and skills into the curricula of theological colleges and training institutions. To do that most effectively, we need also to develop our theological approach to these issues, so our thinking and compassion go together.^[20] Once again, we pursue our reflection against the backcloth of the many other explanations of sexual violence against women. Systems theorists, cultural anthropologists and functionalists have all developed responses to the question ‘why?’ But given the limited space available here, I will focus on two main clusters of answers which differ strongly from each other: those that offer cultural explanations, and those that pinpoint biology and evolution.

Cultural explanations

Since the 1980s the social sciences have been much more aware of the need for gender

disaggregation in statistics and research. In older approaches, issues which affected women were hidden in research which looked at families, institutions or work in a non-gendered way. By contrast, current students of psychology, sociology and social anthropology have more gender-aware research and more reliable data to draw on regarding gender-based violence.

Throughout the world, both social structures and social processes have been unevenly influenced by male perspectives. What happened within these structures and processes was formerly identified by such terms as 'institutional norms', 'deviance', 'patterns of nurture', etc., and was not seen as specifically gendered. So the fact that workplace patterns were often 'family-unfriendly' was regarded as a normal property of work, rather than derived from male definitions of it. Now, there is general agreement that the social constructions of gender are completely woven into the organization of human societies, and are fundamental to a person's life experiences. They are culturally varied: people learn how to be men and women in specific contexts, and gender values and ideologies become inculcated through habits and protocols. Furthermore, these habits will be formed against the backcloth of economic and social values with their built-in vulnerability for women. Explanations that refer back to culture therefore look at all the cultural predictors which frame our human expectations.

Social science research over the last few decades has provided a wealth of cross-cultural examples to show that the link between gender, culture and sexuality operates in the discourses of the family, economics, politics, social structures, jurisprudence, the military, history and religion. The presence or absence of laws, the understanding of human rights, the establishment of hierarchies and privileges, the restrictions on movement or dress, the attitudes of authorities and the interpretation of religious instruction, are all pivotal in the gendering of social reality. Taken together, they offer a persuasive reading of how gender-based violence can become shaped, framed and normalized.

We can illustrate this with reference to an article on gender-based violence in Nigeria. The author draws on a study which sees the connectedness of the factors above, and identifies a rigorous socialization process 'in which every member of the community is aware of what duties, responsibilities and roles are expected from them which is perceived as the correct order crucial for family and communal harmony'. She identifies the exercise of marital power as an aspect of this 'correct order'. The female partner anticipates what the other thinks, intends or requires, and defers to it, believing she has no power to resist, even fearing reprisals if she does resist. There is no negotiation on issues where she might feel differently, or any use of enabling strategies. Psychologically, the systems of inequality and the reinforcement of the *status quo* mean that this partner cannot even conceive the possibility of having input in decision-making. The writer argues that this power imbalance significantly influences the woman's experience of conflict in marital relations.^[21]

The experiences of victims of violence in other areas further affirm these cultural analyses. They point to processes that produce the sense of entitlement that men display in relation to women. The right to 'punish' their wives, the practice of polygamy, early, enforced marriage, the trafficking of girls for sex and rape as a weapon of war, all illustrate the negative undertones of the concept of 'patriarchy' – the system of male predominance which operates

across the globe. 'Patriarchy' justifies male power and control, upholds it as normal and allows it to infiltrate into every structure of society. It creates gender stereotypes which excuse male violators, allowing them to abuse with impunity and, in many cases, blame the victim. In many cultures, a woman who is the victim of rape will be rejected by her husband; she may even be accused of infidelity and stoned to death.^[22] And in some countries, even though rape might be a punishable offence, the penal code allows a rapist to marry his victim to escape custodial or financial punishment. It does not take much imagination to picture what kind of husband he will be! All this suggests that it is an uphill struggle to convince many cultures that all forms of violence against women are wrong. This would overturn deep-seated, gendered perceptions of worth, value and meaning. In the eyes of far too many, men who violate women are simply complying with patriarchal norms.

Patriarchy might reinforce entitlements of men, but many contemporary psychologists point to the fact that it also harms them. There is an increasing volume of research which looks at the way in which both sexes are its victims, although with different outcomes. One significant author argues: 'As long as men are brain-washed to equate violent domination and abuse of women with privilege, they will have no understanding of the damage done to themselves or to others, and no motivation to change.'^[23] She agrees with many others who maintain that patriarchy brutalizes men and robs them of their full humanity.

Concepts of 'full humanity' are often assumed by social scientists. Although ethical evaluation is rarely made explicit, few sociologists or social psychologists would demur from the understanding that gender-based violence is wrong, and that good reciprocal relationships, mutual respect and protection of the vulnerable are better mores for society. Yet, the question remains of how we know what is 'full humanity' and what it might rest upon, which is rarely examined by social scientists. To know how to respond to the problem more completely, we need to probe that question.

Explanations from sociobiology and evolutionary psychology

A strongly opposing set of explanations starts from a concept of our humanity. It is centred upon human biology. These explanations focus upon our 'evolutionary history', and argue that specific differences between male and female explain the paradoxes of human behaviour, including violence against women. The most prolific of the explanations argue that all the characteristics we can see currently in nature are most probably 'adaptations' – characteristics which have conferred some kind of survival advantage in the evolutionary history of the particular organism. They also identify the gene as central in the explanation, maintaining that individual organisms – animals, humans, plants, bacteria – are 'survival machines', whose purpose is to give temporary lodgings to our genes. Like all life on the planet, human life is driven towards pursuing genetic survival. Evolution has sculpted our brains with preferences that yield reproductive success.

These assumptions play heavily into analyses of gender. Because males produce far more sperm than females produce eggs, different strategies are needed for males and females to maximize their genetic potential. A man can have many children with little inconvenience to himself; a woman can have only a few, and with great effort. In many species, males direct

most or all of their energy into producing strong offspring, and their success is entirely dependent on access to fertile females plus female parenting of their offspring. So, the theory goes, we can expect this to be reflected in human behaviour. For optimal gene reproduction a man needs access to many sexual partners, while a woman needs a safe environment to raise her children to adulthood. These needs predispose men's and women's choice of mates and of mating strategies.

Some evolutionary psychologists suggest that polygyny would have been the natural state in human evolutionary history because it enables men to impregnate many women in a secure setting without trespassing on the territory of other men and thus fuelling inter-male aggression. The males who out-produced other males in evolutionary history were precisely those who were willing and able to copulate with many females at the peak of fertility. And it is their genes which have continued down the generational line.

I have offered a very full critique of this biological reductionism in *Scars Across Humanity*, and there is space here for only a few comments. The question of the scientific value of sociobiology in particular has often been raised. Proponents have been criticized for their methodology, their lack of careful empirical research, their assumption of gender stereotypes, and the way they interpret all findings against the pervasive backcloth of biological determinism. On this theory, for example, rape is not an aberration, but, as Glenn Wilson proposes, an alternative 'gene-promotion strategy', most likely to be adopted when consenting sex is not available.^[24] Apparently the human male, faced with 'the choice between force or genetic extinction', will obviously go for force. 'Non-receptive women can still get pregnant, so their protests are, genetically speaking, irrelevant.'^[25] In another often-quoted text, *Why Men Rape*, the authors confidently assert that men use only enough violence in rape to accomplish the purpose of distributing their sperm to fertile females. The 'evidence' they submit consists of comments by volunteers at a rape centre that only 15% of the victims they spoke to reported excessive violence.^[26] This spurious bit of research could be quickly contradicted by any conversation with Refuge in the UK or any visit to a hospital treating rape survivors in the Congo. Seeing a fuller picture of the brutal violence of rape raises huge questions about claims that it is a gene-promotion strategy. Even less gene-promotion happens when the victim dies!

More fundamental problems about the scope of the explanation also arise. The first is that the explanation lacks any ethical or moral understanding. No connection exists between what is naturally selected and what is morally right or wrong, and there is little space for those categories in the theory. In fact some positive biological or adaptive traits might well be considered by us as heinous in ethical terms. The second is that the explanation leaves us with a situation which cannot be redeemed or put right since, from the point of human reproductive history, there is nothing to be put right. In the 'ancestral environment' males who compelled women forcefully into sex may even have had 'greater reproductive success' than less aggressive males.^[27] Evolutionary psychology does recognize that behaviour which was best suited for gene-promotion in the ancestral environment may not work today, but does not provide any solution to the problems the theories leave us with. The third is that terms like 'justice', 'repentance', 'reparation' and 'remorse' have little meaning in this naturalistic

framework. The violent abuser is simply, in Dawkins' terms, 'just a machine with a defective component'.^[28] Our only hope, it seems, is that new adaptations might eventually make it easier for violence against women to be eradicated, but we really have very little idea as to how that might happen.

Not only does a materialist view of human life, which these theories rely upon, allow little space for proper analyses of power, it also shrivels our significance as human persons. It fails to connect us with our deepest experiences in life, or offer any guidance for the choices we might make in how we live. When a theory leaves no room for either human will or accountability, it justifies any behaviour in naturalistic terms, and exposes us to ultimate hopelessness.

Theological explanations

A theological explanation of violence against women also starts with a concept of humanity, but one rooted in our identity as persons before God, not in our biology. The understanding of human anthropology offered by biblical theology goes further than the social scientist appeal to patriarchy and directly counters the reductionist view of sociobiology. At its kernel it sees human beings as responsible agents – not simply a product of overarching systems or determined by their selfish genes. Human behaviour is certainly influenced by the contexts in which we live – by the requirements of our own bodies, by the way our sense of worth and self-esteem has been shaped through childhood and beyond, and by the prevailing attitudes and ideas which surround us. Yet human beings make choices; we have the capacity to reflect and decide on the morality of what we choose, we can marshal our will to certain forms of action. All this is part of our created humanness. We are not defective machines, but living beings who can respond both ethically and spiritually to the world we are placed in.

I have already noted how a theology of our creation as *imago dei* addresses foeticide, and it is relevant here also. Created as ethical, responsive creatures and called to uphold the moral structures of our created universe, we face the many challenges to our relationships. The biblical requirement of neighbour love would, on its own, rule out the dreadful practices of rape and violation we have been documenting. Even more would the theology of marriage, where wife and husband are called to show mutual love and respect for each other and live in truth and life-long commitment. A theology of justice, of right relationships and of protection of the vulnerable all require that we hold these patterns of violation to account.

However, it is with the Christian theology of sin that we gain a deeper understanding of human violence and abuse. Sin is a crucial concept in grasping the direction much of humanity has taken. In a nutshell it indicates that, though human beings are created with the capacity for good, we often do not live according to the life-giving norms God has structured into our creation, but instead choose a different way. The theological metaphors for that way are varied – embracing of evil, disobedience, rebellion against God, enthronement of self, venting of hatred – but whatever terms we choose, the evidence before us is pain and brokenness.

Sin is clearly manifested in the global oppression of vulnerable people, and in particular in violence against women. Its alienating and destructive nature means that people become cut off from God and from each other by the impact of sin on their lives; those sinned against are

damaged by those who should be loving and supporting them. Sin's ability to distort and delude means that cultures, institutions and individuals become caught up in wrong ways of living, and begin to believe their own propaganda. Sin's addictive power makes it hard to break the bondage to violence or abuse that people are plunged into, and its structural implications mean that it becomes embedded in institutions and in families for generations. When sin fosters hatred, vindictiveness, hardness of heart and patterns of un-love, it is easy to see why so many people suffer. But without a theology of sin, it is very difficult to understand why some humans should treat other humans with such flagrant disregard for their well-being. Once we understand that patriarchy is not merely a cultural or economic edifice, but one built on the foundations of structural sin, we can see in a much fuller way the depth of its roots, and the difficulties in challenging its power.

Yet a proper understanding of sin actually brings hope to the discussion of gender-based violence, because in biblical theology sin never has the last word. It always points to the possibility of redemption and a new start. The theological answer to sin is Christology, where Christ's redemptive love, poured out on the cross, urges us to repentance and a bigger vision of our humanity. And those cultures who hear and respond to the message of redemption need also to hear how it speaks into the barbarity of all forms of violence against women. They need to recognize that it can bring change. It can spur on education programmes which challenge gender stereotypes and concepts of worth. It can undergird the drive towards more effective legislation, bringing robust protective measures and appropriate punishment for violation. It can institute greater healing and growth for those damaged by the brutality of others. It can take more effective steps towards economic justice and the empowerment of women. It can do all this because redemptive living is able to challenge sin, combat selfish gender attitudes and reject the distorted views of humanness which lie beneath. The challenge to theology itself is to recognize the urgency to make the implications of a theology of redemption evident in many more areas of life. The challenge to theologians is to serve with bold humility, alongside others, to address and overcome violence against women.

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