

Gender Justice and awaking women to regaining the vision

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Introduction

I grew up in an ordinary home. My parents were government workers. My mother was a very soft, gentle lady who was faithful to her God. My father was from a strong Buddhist background and he was a social worker who was concerned about needy people in our village. He always disciplined us but I saw how he was cooperative with my mother and shared the household work. Once in a way he was the boss of the kitchen and although there were three girls in the family he wouldn't allow us to come to the kitchen when he was there. He laid the table and sat and waited until we had finished our meals. On the other hand my grandmother was a strong woman who strictly valued culture and traditions. I am the eldest in my family and as a young girl I liked dancing, and I was very active and very forward. My grandmother often used to shout at me and repeatedly advised me, "You are the eldest in the family and don't forget that you are a girl. You must be an example for your brothers and sisters. They will follow you."

I grew up with these good and bad experiences and have seen and heard how culture, power, attitudes, behaviors and values have control over families and individuals as well as how they affect the social wellbeing of society. However it is clear that definition of gender refers to the social differences between women and men that are learned, changeable over time and have wide variations within and between cultures and traditions. Gender is also a socioeconomic variable to analyse roles, responsibilities, opportunities and needs of women and men in any context. "*Society generally ascribes different roles, responsibilities, traits and characteristics to women and men to distinguish and identify them from one another.*"¹ Women contribute substantially to all economies, whether as paid or unpaid labour. The traditional challenges to women's social, economic and cultural equity in Sri Lankan society remain, despite some progress in reducing gender disparities. Women bear unbalanced burdens of structural adjustment and economic modification. There is a need to improve the status of women and to promote their potential roles in the wellbeing of society.

The awakening of women is an emerging experience of my pastoral ministry. As a Sri Lankan ordained woman who has been working with urban and rural women in my country, I am deeply concerned and disturbed about the immense suffering and oppression that exists to endanger Sri Lankan society. The women's groups in which I have participated have held gender sensitivity and awareness seminars, and all came to the same conclusion: "Gender injustice is not an unsolvable problem. There are hopeful possibilities that gender discrimination can be wiped away from our lives; we are in solidarity with the victims." When one speaks of an equivalent between gender and justice, almost always there is

Rethinking mission February 2008

misunderstanding that women are demanding and they are assertive. Then women's response is, "Don't we women have the right to share our inner feelings?" Contemporary Sri Lankan women within a critical culture and their own traditions silently struggle for social justice. Therefore I would like to share my own experiences and theological reflection on "Gender Justice and regaining the vision for women."

I would like to focus mainly on gender injustice and awakening Sri Lankan women to regain the methodology for social transformation. What I attempt in this essay is to describe the deep understanding of an emerging theology of women's struggle in Sri Lankan society. As an ordained woman I would like to focus on Biblical hermeneutics, to bring out how the patriarchal norms dominate and so enable liberation of women's journey. Doing theology in the Sri Lankan context, calls for an adequate theological method that would undertake a critical analysis of all major structures of oppression and the interconnectedness of these structures. One of the dangers of working contextually is that contexts change: the present Sri Lankan situation exemplifies this. Therefore I would like to wrestle with the present reality of women's struggle and bring Biblical interpretation to their experiences. By doing so I would like to call for women and join with women in solidarity in the ongoing process of transformation of the social structures in the Christian community. Biblical interpretation takes its place in this struggle within the wider context of theologies of liberation. In the light of this journey, interpretive activity emerges, women awaken and the vision is strengthened.

In the light of this, my effort is to create a way for common understanding on communication and solidarity between females and males who are struggling against gender injustice in contemporary Sri Lankan society. I wish to seek the possibilities for women and men to regain their own vision and motivate people to support good governance and gender balance in society. Yet this essay is not only about making heard the voices of marginalized women in society, it is also an opportunity for women and men to awaken their thoughts and reflections on these issues and put together their own perspectives. Rather than simply sharing and admiring what we are sharing with you, it is always necessary to identify a starting point. What does the Bible say about gender equality and good governance? Are there any norms of positive reflection on gender justice in our societies where female and male could be freely partakers of the Kingdom of God? What message do we have to tell others for the transformation of society and to empower society to liberate their vision? By wrestling with these issues we can open a way to create an awareness to learn from one another. Our aim is to liberate the vision of new birth and new community on our own context. *'Christian mission is about assisting with what God is doing in the world'*²

In this context, it is clear that all conflicts are born out of gross injustice and inequalities in society. Mission in church has a special task for bring in vulnerable groups and leading them towards hope and transformation. But we Christian women have recognized the complication of the struggle of women facing gender injustice, discrimination and violence and finding that the church is unable to respond meaningfully to gender issues. Re-reading the past now, women have begun to rediscover how the patriarchal theology alienated them from society and created injustice around their lives. When ever I meet a women's group this is the constant struggle women spoke of. Then I have always wondered 'How can we Christians make a common contribution towards gender balance in society and help to break down barriers and achieve social freedom. It is very exciting to search for freedom, creating a forum for

Rethinking mission February 2008

togetherness as well as the opportunity to build and to be partakers in a just society. A new awakening has begun within the women's groups. My involvement with community empowerment programs for women has very often challenged me. I take that as a challenge to consider the implications of transforming Sri Lankan Christian mission and building a bridge across oppression towards social renewal. *"Christ is not found among the clouds. He is found in the community of the brothers and sisters of Jesus, and he is found also among the insignificant, even when they do not belong to this community³".* From this point of view Christian theology and mission must be renewed for the formation of this option for new society. A time such as ours calls for a self-understanding of the church different from that of the past. What the renewed interest in Sri Lanka points to, is the renewal and restoration of the social area for Sri Lankan women.

What is gender and why consider gender?

Women and men are generally identified through their biological sex. It is through the concept of sex that people are identified as either male or female. Gender refers to the socially constructed attributes to being a woman and a man, of being masculine and feminine. These attributes are not naturally or biologically given or determined by birth, but are acquired by culture and traditions in our society. The content and nature of this interpretation varies historically and culturally. Therefore gender is defined by culture, power relations, behavior, values and attitude. However in general gender role or idea of being masculine/feminine seems to be true to most societies and cultures around the world. Power is entrenched in the relationship of men and women. Each society has its own respective cultural and traditional process which defines the gender role and encourages women and men to control their behavior, attitudes and values.

Trends in gender discrimination

The Bible tells us that God created humankind in God's image as male and female. The striking thing about the created beings in Genesis chapter one is the goodness of their created appearance. God's perspective was that He declared that everything was beautiful. There was harmony. God expected people to continually live in harmony and peace. Unfortunately selfish ambitions, power-grabbing, gender, caste and creed have motivated people to be against each other. Everywhere around the world people are losing the image of God. Look around your community today. We see the absence of justice and peace. If there is beauty and harmony in creation there is justice and peace around the creation and we should experience it.

In spite of all changes and different views we women and men have been living on in different cultures and traditions. We have played different roles without realising that injustice, inhumanity and oppression have shaken lives in different forms. Through our experiences and our subjection to inhumanity many women scholars and women's groups have tried to analyse a way of fullness for women. As a result of these facts today women are joining other oppressed groups in search for their freedom and their relationship to God and human beings as defined by the realities of modern lives. To fulfill their vision they have been wrestling with

Rethinking mission February 2008

their challenges and trying to understand human actions and freedom from the perspective of gender. From these viewpoints many feminist theologians have been trying to contribute as much as possible towards the transformation of women in society, particularly towards the theological issues in their own contexts. Among Sri Lankan women theologians, activists and socialists some are playing a dynamic role regarding gender issues and they are attempting to awaken women to their need for re-birth. In the last two decades they have been dynamically reflecting the nature of the relationship between male and female dimension relating to gender perspective and they have critically challenged the society to prevent gender injustice and to stop violating women's rights.

Women have special needs which are different from men, due to their different sexual and reproductive roles. For the survival and wellbeing of children, women have special needs as mothers during pregnancy and child birth. Girls also have special needs arising from their sex roles. Gender issues arise when there are gender gaps. Gender gaps are initiated and maintained in any given society by systems of gender discrimination. However the reality is that relationships between women and men affect also the social wellbeing of society. The gender gap arises when sharing resources and access to resources. Land, credit, labors, family name and services are always for men, and women have less access. For a woman to get her equal share, she has to make a special effort. Whenever women make special effort to assert their right to equality of access to resources and overcome their obstacles to access they have to confront gender discrimination.

My own experiences of meeting women as I journey through different part of the island and other countries have been transformative for my understanding of gender concerns. The privilege of being involved with other continents and various gender movements has helped me analyse both the positive and negative in gender injustice. My rich experiences of solidarity with people who struggle for liberation may have strengthened my theological thinking. I always say that meeting marginalised women and oppressed people has motivated me to support and empower the oppressed masses. Therefore this essay is a starting point for identifying the communication between women and men, respecting diversity of context and seeking for the embodying of women's vision as achieving gender justice.

In many parts of our society women are still isolated, unorganised, and constrained by socio-cultural and legal structures that restrict their access to resources and control over their own lives. Gender discrimination continues to persist, with some areas in country reporting the worst health and education indicators for women in Sri Lanka. Deaths of women in connection with childbirth are highest among the women who are living in border villages, tea plantation areas and uncleared areas in the North and East. Through my recent experiences of working among plantation women, I see that the lack of education, health facilities and access to income-generating opportunities are a challenge to their families. The plantation women make a substantial contribution to the economy of the country but their standard of living is very low and the survival of their families is a matter of struggle. My observation is that almost all women in the family are working daily in the estate and mostly the men are at home. Women go back home in the evening and while they are busy with the housework all the men meet at the arrack tavern and have enjoyment.

All over the country women work in virtually all sectors of the economy - as labourers,

Rethinking mission February 2008

teachers, health care workers, doctors, domestic workers, factory workers, etc. They all have their own story about how their rights are violated, how they faced discrimination, sexual and verbal abuse and harassment, and how injustice is done to them because they are women. Some women are burdened with the physical and psychological scars of gender injustice.

Biblical interpretation

The Bible records many incidences that demonstrate gender injustice. In the book of Judges Chapter 19, we find the story of the Levite and his concubine. After a long journey they sought refuge in an old man's house. During the night, another visitor came home. This visitor was a homosexual Benjaminite who insisted on having sex with the Levite. The old man refused because the Levite was his guest. Instead he offered the concubine of his guest and his very own daughter who was still a virgin according to him. The Benjaminites took the concubine and raped her all night, leaving her almost dead on the doorstep of the Levite the following morning. The Levite carried her home and hacked her body into twelve pieces. He sent a piece of her body to each of the twelve tribes of Israel to let them know what the Benjaminites had done. Nothing was done against the old man who offered his own daughter to be raped.

There is another story of Jesus healing a sick woman. The synagogue ruler was angered by what Jesus was doing. He said that Jesus should not do this healing on the Sabbath day. The real fact is that Jesus healed a woman. These two stories clearly describe real situations of discrimination against women. The biblical significance of gender injustice is an important issue. We have common experiences as women. The experiences of women in the Bible are also our experiences today. In biblical history women had very little worth.

The other important fact is that we believe that the biblical interpretation of the Kingdom of God enriches human relationships. Through biblical women's experiences, we can draw strength and can have a deeper understanding of our own situation now. These "nameless" women and "silent" warriors have been part of our Christian faith journey. Therefore through women's unique perspectives on gender injustice we must recover a deeper interrogation of the gender dimensions of gender injustice which takes place in our religious organisations, institutions and forums. But perhaps the main reason for our avoidance of the real struggle in our situations is that we can see no way around how women could share their real feelings without fear and with confidence. In that situation both women and men view justice and peace as mutually contradictory and self defeating.

Now Sri Lankan women are living in an era in which they have to fight for themselves and struggle to protect their human dignity, contribute their abilities, and avoid devaluing their lives. It is perhaps appropriate that churches in solidarity with women have a critical role to play in bringing about a value change in policymaking circles and in society at large. At this critical time we must give room for feminist theology and women's studies to enter a new stage in Sri Lankan theological contexts and theological curriculum. To challenge the patriarchal theology we as a human community can move towards a higher level of consciousness and realize our human interrelatedness. In the entire liberation struggle our norms and method could promote our human dignity irrespective of colour, creed, and other elements which cause splits in human relationships.

Rethinking mission February 2008

According to my personal understanding, patriarchal theology separates and alienates people from each other. It will never be fully challenged unless it is challenged not merely in its details but at its very roots. Thus our method should be based on biblical, dialectical, and experiential foundations. Through these ideas we could try to awaken the oppressed to a new awareness by relating their stories in a new way. It is an open path for liberation. This is something very dynamic. Because out of these stories women's real experiences are explored and shared. Theologians refer to this as a "revaluation". It is an open path to solidarity with each other. Sharing and caring for each other makes for mutual understanding in the community. Then it will expand the dynamic liberating process. As a fighter against oppression I believe our attitudes towards the reconstruction of theology itself open a path to a critical theology of liberation. In the New Testament a common understanding of Jesus' ministry is a symbolic of transcending the barriers and creating a space for meaningful relationship. Jesus does not allow any kind of barrier to dictate how human beings should behave. He proves that each person has worth and dignity where they could fully participate in the wellbeing of a just society.

Theology and life

*Theology is widely understood as an academic exercise*⁴. We Christian women reflect on our lived reality in the light of Christian faith. Therefore we women do theology not just for its own sake, but for the whole wellbeing of our community. A practical life experience is at the root of women doing theology. Doing theology encourages and empowers our human spirit, enables us to regain our abilities, mutual understanding, and promotes a creative and inclusive community.

We all constitute one human family. Although women hold leadership roles in their communities and in the church, women continue to be under-represented at most levels. The universal Declaration of Human Rights states that every person has a right to take part in his or her government. But the crime of gender injustice has been committed for so long in their own homes, offices, working places, in the factories, on public transport, in the streets and on the pavements, in the refugee camps and in the schools, in the universities and professions, even in the religious places and institutions. I see gender exploitation omnipresent and omnipotent, with women and children at the victim's end. In these situations Sri Lankan women's experiences and the context feature a great deal in practical background more than theory or statistics. Therefore basically as with several other theologians, "experience" can be counted as a source for our method to empower the vision of Sri Lankan women's lives. But when women speak about experience in gender perspective it is not simply somebody's experience. It is the committed life experience of women in society. This is the reason why and how we have to build up our own method of dealing in depth with ideas in theological circles. The other factor is that our interpretation of ideas relating to life means that our theological ideas must be dynamic. We must try to open dialogue to interconnect ideas to formulate a rich theological interpretation within life realities. The way we interpret the facts broadens others' minds. "Women's rights are also human rights" means that women also have a voice for their feelings, protest for their injustice, freedom to tell their stories and prevent violent situations. Here we can see how women can relate things to interconnect them and press to understand reality

Rethinking mission February 2008

within the life situation. *“We Asian women must trust our own feelings and judgments and use them to challenge the established norms which designate what is right and wrong or what is good and bad. Our concrete, historical, everyday, lived experiences must serve as the final test of our theology.”*⁵

There is no single, universally recognized method in theology. Methods vary from one theologian to another and largely depend on the degree of importance attached to the various sources. Every theologian has their own way of interpreting theological issues and of expressing them. When we consider Sri Lankan theological reflection we may say that it has a deep understanding of doing theology in a more meaningful way for the context. *“What we need is neither optimism nor pessimism, in these terms, but committed love. This means that we remain committed to a vision and to concrete communities of life no matter what the trends”* may be”.⁶

Along with "experience" we must give priority to historical traditions. *“Human experience is the starting point and the ending point of the hermeneutical circle”*.⁷ Therefore, gender perspective theological criteria were formed on historical tradition based on theology. Scripture and tradition are basic sources of theology, mainly for gender critique of patriarchy and sexism, and they develop an alternative way for building up relationships. I would like to look at these things from an early point in the history of human experiences and try to seek a clear space for wisdom and integrity which will embolden us to carry out our ministries of wholeness, justice, peace and fullness of life. We also open our mind to other historical traditions and try to analyse things in the global community. Our deep thoughts run up against patriarchal tradition and the prophetic significance of contemporary experiences. From this we want to form a more just interpretation of gender. *We would like to see a community where there is real koinonia (fellowship) and where a new community of women and men and the whole of creation could live in freedom, justice, peace and sharing”*.⁸

Liberation of Vision

Social transformation is the process of creating a just society. *It aims at eliminating the structures and values, and removing the forces, which prevent people from achieving a fuller humanity.*⁹ We are women who believe in the biblical perspective of equality for women and men with which God has enriched our lives. God’s word is a liberating experience, and for women it ought to be good news in their exploitative and unjust situations. Unfortunately social structures and this equality are in disorder in our society. When women attempt to resist injustice and regain their vision they face discrimination and devaluing of their rights. However, gender discrimination has affected basic justice and integrity of human relationships in all areas of life. I believe it is within family life that women’s rights are most violated. Therefore we need to reconstruct our family relationships. *“We speak of reconstruction when human relationship, a piece of land, a city, or even a society needs to remake itself, recreate itself, renew its relationship, a bond of friendship”*¹⁰

Therefore women’s studies and feminist theology would challenge and express the broken mutuality between the genders and a critique of patriarchy. Though some other feminist theologians analyse their ideas only from a feminist point of view, in the Sri Lankan context

we have to explore our ideas more openly, giving equal weight to other influences, such as care of the gender, culture and contexts, and oppression; communication is necessary between men and women. But we try to identify when and where the mutuality has broken down between the parties. This will lead us to show real commitment to an understanding of the global community. We want full humanity not just for women but for all. We want healing not only of humanity but of the whole earth. I would say if we want to do theology more meaningfully this is an important mark of a good theological endeavor.

At this point I would like to contribute some of my own thinking about where we have to develop some of our ideas. It is clear that we are concerned about oppressed women in society and we are very interested in liberating our vision. . Though we analyse these issues deeply, I think sometimes we have failed to communicate properly the main characteristic point. In order to identify the facts we will use theological backgrounds far removed from our reality. Sometimes our thoughts are philosophically profound and far-reaching. But I have my doubts how these highly complex theological ideas relate to the poor women who are struggling to identify their humanity in an inhuman society. I think doing theology begins with the human questions. Then these practical experiences an articulate response of hope and invitation to action. Then praxis will flourish within the oppressed masses and it will inspire the hope for liberation from their bondage. Only then they can look to the future as their own strength.

Deliberation for New Birth

What are the priorities for women in challenging the church and society to ensure that the human rights of women and girls are protected? Today Christian women around the globe are breaking through centuries of imposed barriers of silence by speaking in their own voice and rediscovering the rich heritage of their Christian femininity. They are reinterpreting the Christian faith and practice in the light of their own experiences in terms of a holistic vision of new birth, which is a sign of new hope, new life, new journey and new spirituality for life which transforms society.

I gathered my rich experiences through the Christian faith community. The faith community has dynamic elements for transforming suffering communities. God is a God who will always be with victims. God's suffering solidarity and His love, compassion and grace identify with the pain and agony of the oppressed masses. I have seen how Christian women have been living with death due to gender discrimination, violence and when their rights were violated. Yet it is amazing that with all their bitter experiences how they rely on God, seeking His guidance with weeping heart and painful experiences. A powerful faith transforms the heart, mind and spirit of suffering women. Faith also shapes life at all levels. In the light of the crucified Jesus the crucified women are becoming a witnessing community. This is the reality of the crucified women and that's how they regain new birth. The new birth gain holistic solidarity where they are ready to take risks for the sake of others. They take risks to bring forth justice for their fellow sisters and for the wellbeing of society.

Today feminist theologians and theologically trained women are taking risks for the sake of a dynamic interpretation of a gender-perspective Christian view of suffering women. Many Christian theologians "crucified" themselves for the sake of sharing their rich experiences and

Rethinking mission February 2008

expression of gender injustice through feminist theology, gender sensitivity or women's concerns. Though the women who regained their new birth are in danger they are not afraid, nor are they backward in every attempt to establish justice. They feel others' pain because they have gone through it and their theology is practical. It is another woman's true story. Moreover they have their own experiences of how their life was wounded, weak, vulnerable, and how much they longed for help and healing process. Therefore gaining the new birth is a sacrifice, but it gives breath to weakened suffering women and wholeheartedly strengthens the vulnerable to receive this new birth. It means that holistic solidarity leads women to metaphorically share the labour pains of fullness for womanhood. This sacrifice is very meaningful and also powerful. This sacrifice is moulded by the cry of reality in unjust situations.

Feminist resources and methodology for reconstruction of women's vision go far beyond theory. They exist in the practical experiences of our personal life journey and solidarity of sisterhood. Gender injustice determines to dominate and control women's abilities, confidence, talents, knowledge, creativity, potential gifts and power of spirituality by refusing, condemning, rejecting, misunderstanding, provoking negative impacts, devaluing women's contribution and over controlling opportunities. In such a situation the reality of sacrificial new birth consists of faith and that faith opens a way for commitment, creativity, and for vision. That vision always affirms the new way for solidarity. Holistic solidarity is the womb which bears the new womanhood and which nurtures and empowers the new life until it matures enough to reclaim her womanhood. *Therefore holistic solidarity leads us out of guilt of caste and gender oppression and helps us to free ourselves for collective repentance. Women in the Bible did in similar ways resist death and affirm life and truth*¹¹. Likewise we women need to create a space for our faith journey where we can regain power and strength to reconstruct the values and attitudes of community, caring, sharing and protecting new womanhood and restoring our vision.

Reconstruct structures, regain vision

In the liberation processes of the holistic society, women's contribution, presence and activity are essential at the levels where decisions are made about social, political and economic life. Recognition of women's participation alongside with men has an impact on the socioeconomic life as well as building the faith community. Therefore by identifying the structural gender base of injustice which alienates women from church and society we can create an alternative concept for gender balance in a just society where women and men can live in harmony. We can encourage and ensure that the church provides opportunities that enable women to put their abilities to use in order to participate in their own development, and value women's spirituality in building up mutual relationships between women and men for fulfillment of the vision and mission of church and society. An alternative framework should be created for policy makers and women's groups to expand and increase possibilities for women to take part in activities in the church and society. The church should implement programmes and workshops to enhance women's potential gifts and education. In addition to basic education we must encourage and give opportunity for women to have further education that empowers them and expands their skills and knowledge beyond the traditional role of women. There are possibilities to reduce the risk of gender injustice and discrimination by introducing gender studies to the curriculum

Rethinking mission February 2008

of theological colleges, religious institutions and schools, and encouraging and exploring ways to resist and overcome all forms of violence. We must promote awareness among women and men so that they can mutually condemn all sexual, verbal, and other forms of abuse of power within the church and in society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can reflect on women's vision for gender justice-based social transformation. We have seen how women's vision of gender justice is centred on their life experiences. In the past women had faced great difficulties on their journey towards liberating their vision. *"Women are crossing male-instituted barriers in our religious communities, women are preaching the truth about relationships"*¹² We are all involved with the healing praxis of women's broken body, mind and spirit.

Education for justice and social transformation is a difficult task. Education for gender justice is more difficult but society is in urgent need of transformation. However, to continue the struggle against all forms of gender discrimination, the violation of women's rights and in particular gender-based violence in the Sri Lankan context, we should adopt strategic actions for gender education so that the church plays a role in women's empowerment and advancement in church and society.

Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice but it can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's abilities and their interests to be taken into account. In the gospel of John women were spiritually and psychologically empowered by Jesus to lead a normal social life. Jesus always helps to restore people to full humanity. Likewise, *"Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved."*¹³

Therefore we church women have to organise ourselves and reflect on how in our church mission we can reduce the incidence of gender inequality in Sri Lanka, by enhancing skills and knowledge for attitudinal and behavioral change. We must appeal to the churches to seek to dismantle oppressive structures, institutions and attitudes through awareness creation, sensitization, education, skills development, capacity building, and information sharing and networking. Our vision for the future is of a society with absolute gender equity and equal opportunities for women and men in all realms - domestic, social, political and economic. There will be the deliberate creation of a new way of meaningful mission and the formation of a faith journey. Society will get a chance to know the role of women in the church and understand what the churches' mission truly is.

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Rethinking mission February 2008

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End Notes:

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³ Gonzalez, Antonio *The Gospel of Faith and Justice*, New York; Orbis books 2005, p105

⁴ Dhyanchand Carr, *God, Christ and God's People in Asia* (Hong Kong: CCA Theological Concerns, 1995) 1

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⁸ CCA 8th Assembly Document No.13

⁹ Justice & development: CCA-CCPD/WCC Asia Forum on Justice & Development, Singapore, 1984, p.19

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¹¹ *Ibid* p80

¹² *Ibid* p132

¹³ Beijing Platform for Action, para, 181