

Tool 2: Women and men in church and society: the ways we talk



***"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character,
give him power."***

Abraham Lincoln, US President 1809-1865

Tool 2 contents

Gender discourses that make women weak.....	13
Social relations.....	15
Gender and power	16
What is power?	17
Transformation: gender discourses that make women and men strong	20
Negative gender discourses that resist transformation.....	24
Women integrating their identities in the face of the conflicting discourses influencing them.....	25
Conclusion	26
Attachment: Understanding POWER more deeply.....	26

For many years now, people have been asking questions about the way men and women relate in society. This is because there are many problems in society that are caused by problems between men and women. “Gender” is a term used to help people talk about these relationships, about how women and men are defined in different societies, and the influences that shape boys and girls into men and women that fit into the norms and values of a society or community.

This tool explores the different influences on men and women that shape how we understand our identities as men and women. These ideas are expressed in the ways we talk about men and women:

- how they should look
- how they should behave, and
- what they should be allowed to do, or what roles are acceptable for them.

The ways we talk influence meaning. How we understand ourselves and our lives can be referred to as different **discourses**. Any one person is exposed to any number of different discourses in their lives. Sometimes they agree with each other, and sometimes they conflict with each other.

Gender discourses have a strong influence on how women and men understand their gender identity. As they grow up, they learn about their gendered identities as men or women through the social assumptions they are taught by the adults and older children around them. Through traditional rituals and practices, they learn what is considered right and wrong. When they go to church, some of these things are reinforced by the

Gender Discourses – the ways people talk about men and women – how they should act, look and speak, what roles they should take on, and even how they should feel about and act in sexual relationships.

These often rely on stereotypes – grouping people together and judging them all to be the same. Individuals who do not fit a **stereotype** believed in their social group to be good can feel like they are not good enough, or even a bad person. Stereotyping also leads people to judge others unfairly before they even know them.

biblical teachings they hear, but some of them conflict with their cultural and social influences. As adults, they make certain choices as a result of how they understand these different discourses or ways of understanding the world.

Many of the discourses about what makes a 'good woman' or a 'real man' are negative, or not life-giving, especially to women and men who do not fit the norms. They can make women, (and some men) feel weak, and can limit their freedom to act, take charge of their lives and fulfil their potential as human beings. They can even fuel conflict between men and women.

Others are life-giving, because they make both women and men strong, and help them to live in harmony.

In this tool, we explore some of these gender discourses and how they influence people's everyday lives. We end with some positive life-giving discourses and talk about how we might contribute to sharing and extending more positive gender discourses as part of bringing about greater equality and justice in our churches and communities.

Gender discourses that make women weak



Time to talk

Talk about the negative gender discourses expressed by the characters below. They are negative because they undermine the strength of women and some are also not good for most men.



*"Men are strong,
Women are weak!"*

- Do you agree with this opinion?
- Can you think of any other characteristics that people use when they talk about members of the opposite sex?
- Which of these ring true to you?
- Can you think of how the proverbs, songs and other messages in everyday encounters reinforce this opinion?

"As a wife you should submit to your husband."



- Do you agree?
- Are there other ways to manage marriage relationships?
- In your experience, what is most important in marriage?
- Have you noticed that assertive women are often called aggressive?
- Can you think of any other behaviour that people say are only for men or only for women?



"Men should go out and work to provide for their families. Women should stay at home to care for children and maintain the home."

- Do you agree?
- Is there anything in a woman's biology that makes it more appropriate for women to do chores like ironing or scrubbing floors?
- Is there anything in a man's biology that equips him better to work outside the home?
- In many countries, unemployment is a big problem. If a man is unable to find a job, does this make him less of a man?
- In your community or family, who decides what should be done, and who usually does the work?
- Do you think it always has to be like this? Explain.
- Can you think of households where the roles are different? How does it work for them?
- How do you think healthy households should be organised? Do you think societies should decide what roles are right or wrong for men and women?

'Masculinity' and 'Femininity'

Masculinity refers to ways of being a man, and femininity refers to ways of being a woman.

Theologian Ezra Chitando, says that:

"While being male [and female] is a biological factor, the process of expressing manhood is informed by social, cultural and religious factors".

Or, to put it another way – we are all born male and female, but we grow up to become men or women.

"I find it sexy if a man comes on strong. I need a man to be tough, and it's even better if he has an expensive car!"



- Do you agree?
- How do you think such a man might react if a woman said 'no' to sex? Would she still find this sexy?
- What kind of a man would you prefer [to have, as a woman] or [to be, if you are a man]?!

Some ways of being a man that have become widely accepted in society can be very destructive. For example, some social groupings believe a real man is aggressive, gets his way, and does not express his emotions. He also has lots of money and many women (and children). This assumption about men may be one of the reasons why violence between men and between men and women has become such a problem, and why so many children grow up without fathers.

Social relations

To understand how gender works in society, we need to understand social relations.

Social relations are relationships between people that are regulated and passed down from one generation to the next through culture and tradition. These relations are often about power and how society is organised.

Social relations influence:

- What **rights** a person may have.
- What access a person may have to **resources** like money, land or jobs.
- What **roles and responsibilities** a person may have.
- How much **control** a person has over his or her **own life**.
- How much **control** a person has over the lives of **others**.

Patriarchy is a social system where it is normal for power to be in the hands of men: in the family and home; in society; in church and religion; in politics and in the economy.

It is not necessarily the deliberate control of individual men over individual women (although in some cases it may be). It is mostly about individuals working within a dominant world view which predetermines how much power they have in their relationships and their lives. Most societies in the world are patriarchal.



Time to talk

"I am a rich and powerful man, so you'll do what I tell you to do!"



- Is it right that rich, powerful men should control what we do and say?
- Is it easy for you to get the resources you need for a comfortable life?
- Who makes the decisions in your home and community?
- What are the things in your life that you have control over?



"History is the story of the achievements of great men!"

- Do you agree? Whose histories are normally written down and taught to future generations? Who decides what makes 'history'?
- Do all men benefit from patriarchy? Which kinds of men benefit, and which are pushed to the margins?
- Are women's histories normally celebrated or hidden?
- How do women influence opinion in your community?

Gender and power

Some people say that it is only in party politics and economics that there are power struggles. But the quotations we talked about earlier in this tool show that there are power struggles in all areas of life and in all relationships – even marriages. So it is important to understand how power works in society and our institutions like schools, churches and workplaces.

What is power? ²

Power is the ability to:

- make other people do what you want them to do.
- convince other people that the way you understand the world is 'the way the world is and should be'.
- influence the main discourses in society that affect what people think about others and even themselves.

Sometimes people use their power for the good of others (like a good parent), and sometimes they use it only to serve their own ends.

The beliefs and attitudes about women's and men's roles and privileges that dominate in a patriarchal society often find common ground with culture and religion, as they often reinforce one another.

For example, the dominant cultural belief that men should dominate in all parts of life is confirmed by many Christian traditions that teach that the husband is head of the household and that women are unfit to take up leadership positions.

The Bible is full of examples of prophets and kings who have misused their power, like God's chosen king, David³. It also has stories of people who did not want to use their power for good, because it was too hard, for example, Jonah who refused to take God's message of grace to Nineveh.

A number of stories tell of people who used their power for good, for example Pharaoh's daughter who convinced her father to let her raise the Jewish baby, Moses; and of course, Jesus, who used his power to heal and release people from the burden of sin, and challenged the unfair use of power by the religious authorities of his day.

In Matthew 20: 25-28 Jesus offers a radical view of power, suggesting it can be used to serve and be a sacrifice for those you lead.

Tool 12 looks more in depth at how men relate to power in society, and how this affects relationships and social justice. It revisits some of the Bible passages that are commonly used that are used to justify men's power over women in church and society. But it also looks with new eyes at some Bible passages in which we see a very different understanding of God's intentions for humankind.

² See the endnote to this Tool if you are interested to read more about different types of power and where power comes from.

³ Tool 10 on gender based violence explores how David misused his power and became violent as he gave in to his sexual desires.

Tool 13, on the other hand, raises the uncomfortable question of sexual diversity, and how people who do not fit into heterosexual norms are disempowered and marginalised simply because of this one aspect of their identity.



Time to talk

Read Thandi's story below, and talk about the questions that follow.

Power and Manipulation

Thandi recently became the HR Manager in the government department where she has worked for five years. She has not had HR training or experience. She is not ashamed to admit that she has been having an affair with the married Chief Director in the department for the past six months. She says that, as a woman, you have to use whatever means you have to achieve your goals, because otherwise no one will recognise your potential.

- How do you feel about Thandi's success?
- Do you agree with the negative gender discourse that women's only source of power is their sexuality?
- What else could she have done to obtain a higher position in her department? What positive discourses could motivate her to take a different route?
- Some people would say that this kind of use of power simply reproduces stereotypes of women as 'temptress' and reinforces some of the fears that some men have of working with women in the church? How can this kind of stereotype be overcome?

Power at work, power at home: living two lives.

"I worked in the domestic violence section of the police station and the court at Umlazi. Every story I heard and worked through with my clients was like a slap to my face. I was a hypocrite; here I was advocating for other people's rights in their

relationships, when I did not have a voice in mine. I was seen as a champion to the women I worked with. I was their voice in my reports to the courts. The magistrates sought my opinion on cases and I always had an answer and a strategy to help. In my own life I was living in bondage. At work I was free; at home I was bound by my own fears and wanting to bring stability to my own children. Little did I know I was doing more damage by staying. I hated going home. I was made to feel inferior at home and yet at work I was powerful. I could not cope with work because it brought home all of my issues. I resigned and changed focus.

I knew I was abused but did very little to free myself until he wanted to kill me. The day I put an Order into place was the first step towards my freedom. I moved little by little to free myself. But I still struggled as a Christian, knowing that the Bible doesn't allow divorce. Until I had a meeting with my pastor. He said: "God gives us a second chance, and allows for a U-turn, especially if it's for your safety." And so God set me free to be free.

There is no comparison to the feeling that comes from leaving an abusive relationship. I am now free at last and can live my life the way I want to. I am now free to transfer my history to my work and to fight for others who are living in the same conditions, so they can set themselves free." Thandeka

- What type of power is described in the first paragraph?
- What changed when she took her first steps to freedom?
- Do you agree with her pastor's advice? Explain.
 - Would this be the advice your pastor would give? Talk a bit about your experiences of the church and gender based violence.
- How is Thandeka using power now, and how has this changed her life?

Thandi and Thandeka:

- Both Thandi and Thandeka struggle with traditional patriarchal gender discourses. Compare the choices that they made (above).
- How can the church help women in these kinds of situations that would enable them to make positive life choices to access their personal power?

Transformation: gender discourses that make women and men strong



Time to talk

Look at this picture and think about the questions that follow:

- What is this man doing?
- Do you know a man who takes on these roles, and what is his story?
- What do other people say about him? Why?
- What do you say about him? Is what he is doing OK?
- What would help a man like this feel good about how he is living his life?
- Do you think this man has a leadership role in his workplace, in church, or his community?
- If he did, would he be a good role model for others?



Gender justice is when a society (or church or family) is organised in such a way that all members have equal chances to succeed, can participate fully in all aspects of life, and live dignified, fulfilled lives.

Gender injustice happens when women are prevented from living freely and are dominated and controlled by men. Men who do not meet the criteria for being 'real men' can also suffer gender injustice.

It is important to understand that social relations can change. Just like the relations between blacks and whites have changed in South Africa, gender-based power relations in society can also change.

An example: A hundred years ago, women in European countries had very few rights, but things have changed in many of those countries (though still not in all ways in all countries). In fact, in Switzerland (one of the strongest economies of the world) women only won the right to vote in 1990, when in most Southern African countries women had already won their right to vote by 1965. On the other hand, Saudi Arabian women have been promised the right to vote only in 2015 and are still fighting to be allowed to drive a car.



Women in Saudi Arabia are still campaigning to be allowed to drive. Source: women2drive (creativecommons.com)

Indeed, things have changed all over the world in the last 100 years, but these changes have taken place at different rates depending on the social, cultural and religious influences in different countries.

So we can see that patriarchy and the male-dominated cultures and traditions that we experience today will not necessarily be with us forever.

One way that we can bring about change for greater gender justice is by thinking more carefully about the kinds of gender discourses we use, and deliberately using more positive and life-giving gender discourses.



Time to talk

Read these stories and talk about them, using the questions that follow if you find them useful:

20 years ahead of time

"In the southern part of Zimbabwe there is a town called Masvingo, surrounded by rural settlements. One of these villages is called Nyajena, where I was born. Over time, our family grew to 15 children: 5 girls and 10 boys (including cousins).

The boys learnt early on that sometimes we were supposed to do the dishes, fetch water using tins that we balanced on our heads, and also scrub floors and cook. We met with women from the village at the water point and wouldn't care less what they said. We began to understand and love our mother better. The girls were expected at times to go and milk the cows and herd the cattle for the day, and they grew closer to my father. In our large family gender roles were not defined by sex, but by the need

to have a well-rounded training that prepared each member of the family for life. It was as if our parents had peeped into life 20 years ahead of time.

Now the boys are all married, but we live in the same compound with our families. During the Christmas holidays the brothers prepare a big Christmas meal for our wives and children, all in the spirit of sharing. We demonstrate to our children that women are not to be considered as the perpetual labourers in the kitchen. In our homes, we all take turns with our wives to prepare meals and do domestic chores. It has created a bond with our wives and children. I traditionally prepare a special meal on my wife's birthday. My wife and daughter always look forward to this day." Gabriel Sheunopa Manyangadze, Programmes Manager, Zimbabwe Council of Churches



Boys need warm and loving father figures. This boy is blessed to have his great-uncle to look up to.
Source: S'bu Khanyile, PACSA

Using my leadership to bring about change

"A woman in my congregation had been asked to participate in the serving of Holy Communion on Sunday. That Sunday the husband came early, complaining that the wife is always late, saying she keeps on going in and out of the house. When asked about his activities from the time he woke up, the man confessed that his wife woke him up telling him his water for bathing was ready. He went to bath while she went to prepare breakfast. As he was having breakfast, she was bathing the children and feeding the young ones. Then she rushed to have a bath and the man was ready waiting at the door with his Bible. The woman came out and then realised that her dress was not pressed. Meanwhile the husband was tired of waiting and walked away leaving her behind.

I was saddened by the lack of support and I asked him to go back home and allow her to come to church. I asked him to do whatever was remaining to be done in the preparation of the children. Then he should follow her with the children. Men and women should share home chores and help each other do God's work in the world."

Rev Jane Nyirongo, Church Minister and Moderator, Presbyterian Church in Zambia



- Can you relate to any of the writers' experiences?
- Do you think you would have made the same decisions as the writers?
- What do you think your own pastor would say in similar situations?
- If you are a pastor, how would you respond?
- Whether you are a church member or leader, what is it like in your own home?



Time to talk

Read the story below and talk about the questions that follow:

Supporting each other

"I recently met a nurse, whose name is Saviour, who told me she was a Pastor's wife. She also told me that she was studying towards a degree in Adult Literacy at the University of Zambia, as she wanted to be of better service to her husband in his ministry. I was surprised, because in my experience men often don't encourage their partners to improve their education levels.

When we talked further, I shared with her about a gender programme I was running - an intensive all-day training over a number of days. She did attend, and was on night duty at the same time. (God knows when she slept!) Her husband encouraged her, and continues to encourage her. He refers women from their church and community to her for help, and appreciates the contributions she is able to make to the ministry of the church." Jacqueline Muthee-Kabalo, Norwegian Church Aid, Programme Officer, Zambia.

- How do you feel about this story?
- Do you think you would have made the same decisions as the people in this story?
- What do you think your own pastor would have said?

- If you are a pastor, how would you respond?
- How is power being used in this household? What do you imagine the consequences are for the partners, their family and the people they each work with?

Negative gender discourses that resist transformation



Time to talk

Are you familiar with the following arguments against working for gender equality?

Talk about them (and refer to the Tools given in brackets for more information and ideas on how to tackle them).

- Biblical arguments based on the creation story in Genesis 2 are often presented. (See Tool 3 on theology and the Bible, as well as Tool 12, which revisits the Bible again, from the point of view of creating new discourses of transformative masculinities, for a more peaceful and just world.)
- Some say that the struggle for gender equality leads to high divorce rates, domestic violence and general unhappiness in families. (See Tool 9 on gender based violence.)
- Many people in Africa argue that gender equality is a western concept. (See Tool 4 on culture and tradition, and Tool 5 on the international and Southern African protocols that commit governments to work towards achieving gender equality.)

Talk about the following questions:

- What are some other reasons people give against getting involved in the struggle for gender equality?
- How would you respond to these?
- Using the Table of Contents – where in this Toolkit do you think you might find further information to help you?

Women integrating their identities in the face of the conflicting discourses influencing them

Rev Professor Christina Landman⁴ refers to 4 ways that women commonly respond in an effort to integrate their identities as women:

1. Becoming 'troublesome' and demanding their rights in an oppositional way
2. Embracing their womanhood and surpassing the stigma against women's bodies
3. Becoming equal to men in "male" attributes such as rationality
4. Being "truly woman" in caring, making peace and creating warmth

She says, however that these responses do not change their status in society, and nor do they really change their social identity as women. They may even have destructive consequences for their relationships.

A fifth way?

She goes on to quote Obioma Nnaemeka (2003), who has coined the term "Nego-Feminism" as a new way of bringing about a meaningful change in the gender identity and status of women. Nnaemeka suggests working together with men in *negotiating* from an unselfish position how to find new ways of understanding each other and themselves and their positions in relationship, sharing their strengths and supporting each other's weaknesses in a way that avoids competing for power and dominance.



Time to talk

Lindy, a gender activist, and her boyfriend Pule have decided to get married. Pule's father is afraid that Lindy will overpower Pule, and undermine his God-ordained headship in the home. He tells them in no uncertain terms that he is opposed to their planned marriage. They talk about this together without taking sides, and decide that Pule will go and speak to his father in a calm way, to explain that he wants to marry a woman who can be his equal and challenge him to grow rather than someone who will just do as she is told. He goes and explains to his father that he has made this choice because he wants to grow stronger as a person. Over time, his father accepts his decision and learns to respect Lindy in a new way.

⁴*Gender and Human Rights – A presentation at FOCCISA Conference on Human Rights and Theology. Johannesburg. April 2014.*

- What gender discourses have influenced Pule's father?
- What alternative discourses influence Pule and Lindy?
- Why do you think that Pule's father comes to accept Lindy over time? Do you think he also changes as a result?
- Pule and Lindy have used the fifth way mentioned by Professor Landman. Can you think of how you might have used this approach in solving gender struggles in your own relationships?
- For the fifth way to work, both men and women have to work together and be very aware of who they are, be honest and humble with each other, and committed to doing things differently. How can the church help both women and men to be able to do this, and support them in making choices that sometimes conflict with traditional church and cultural teachings?

Conclusion

It is up to us to question the gender discourses that are destructive for individuals, our churches and wider society. And it is up to us to live our lives differently, so that we can transform our lives and those of others by our actions and our example.

Attachment: Understanding POWER more deeply

Essentially, people in groups tend to engage in power struggles. This is because those with the most power can access the most important resources needed for survival: land, money, support, and the power to make important decisions for how society is run and what is regarded as right.

Where does power come from?

There are different ways that people gain power in society and in relationships.

These include physical strength and size, money and other resources, knowledge or information, social position and having a strong personality.

In a community where most people believe that men should be the heads of their households, men are given more power to decide what is good for everyone in their family, and this can give men a sense that they can do what they like. This is not so bad if they are good gentle people, but if they are unhappy or not confident as men, they can impose their power by force.



Different types and uses of power

Power can be used in different ways, some of which are good and others not.

Power-to

This just means the capacity to act, to do something, to shape one's life or one's world. It is a good use of power, as long as using one's power to act does not harm others.

Power-over

Power can be used to control others or get them to serve the powerful person's needs. Powerful people do not like to share power, as they fear that they will lose out in some way. And this is why most conflicts in the world are linked to competition for this kind of power.

Power-with

When power is shared, it becomes stronger. Two people are obviously stronger than they would be alone, and a large group of people can influence powerful decision makers. But shared power must be carefully managed to ensure that one of the power-sharers does not become too powerful and begin using their power to control the others for their own ends.

Power-within

This is using one's inner strength, wisdom and ability to act in ways that make one stronger to cope in difficult situations or more courageous to challenge unjust uses of power. Faith can be a good source of power-within.

A relationship based on **power-over** can undermine a partner's **power-to** act, and can also crush their **power-within** as they lose self-confidence and even the strength to shape their own lives.

A relationship based on **power-with** is more like a partnership, appreciates the other's **power to** act, and strengthens both partners' **power-within**.

Power-under

This is the use of power in destructive ways that comes out of feelings of powerlessness—usually against those one loves the most, or against one's own property. Examples include domestic violence, power struggles in community organisations or even violent demonstrations where people turn on each other or their property.

Research shows that most rapists or violent abusers have suffered abuse, mostly when they were children or younger and have never got over it. This is not an excuse, but it can help to understand how dangerous abuse of power is in society: a victim can become an abuser and in this way the cycle of abuse keeps rolling. Usually, abusers who act out of power-under feel quite out of control, and so usually have weak power-within, and often act out of fear or anxiety. Read more about this in Tool 12.

Notes



*Please send your feedback for this tool to
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