



Reflections on challenges of preferring the male child in an African marriage – A practical theological observation

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Children are considered the crowning glory in an African marriage – the more children are conceived during the marriage, the greater the glory. There are certain expectations from family, and an African community, especially to married couples. Presumably, families pity the deaths of childless couples because they will not be remembered when they die. From an African perspective, one of the purposes of marriage is childbearing. When a child is born, it is expected from community to congratulate the couple. Among some tribes, it is considered an abomination for any member of the community to delay or refuse to congratulate the new mother. That is why monogamous marriages in which no children are born are difficult to endure. Because children are regarded as the crowning glory of a marriage, evidence shows that in some instances those who cannot bear children are regarded as abnormal and outcasts. Hence, polygamy was practised as a way of begetting children in barren marriages. It is debatable that parenthood remains a critical issue for the success of most marriages. Although childbearing is applauded, male children are given more priority than female children. It is, therefore, the intention of the researchers to argue that the birth of male children, which is celebrated more than the birth of female children, contributes to undermining one gender in favour of the other. The reader will become aware of the negative role of patriarchy. Without detracting from the joyous moment of the birth of a child in an African family, the researchers assert that it is important to celebrate the birth of children of both genders equally. This article is based on insiders' observations and a relevant literature study.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: We raise these African cultural issues of concern to enable situation analysis efforts and stimulate the search for improvements. This article highlights the African cultural beliefs and practices relating to the preference of the boy child over the girl child. The value of this discussion is to inform people about the negative views and conduct of African cultural origin, to highlight, disapprovingly, gender inequality among some African peoples. While this is a contribution to the discussion in gender discourse, it is also a practical theological attempt to encourage equality as demanded by the Christian teaching and the South African constitution that embraces human rights. While highlighting the cultural situations, it also points out to the need for transformation; hence, the pastoral counselling recommendations towards new theoretical framework that aims at improving the situation. This contribution is, thus, a necessary multi-discipline enterprise to provide knowledge and encourage women's self-determination.

Keywords: African male child; childbearing; priority; inheritance; childlessness.

Introduction

In many African societies, children are the buds of society and failing to bear children is worse than committing genocide (Mbiti 1969:110). Oladimeji (1980) emphasises his view about the childbearing process among Africans, saying:

A person who, therefore has no descendants in effect quenches the fire of life and becomes forever dead since his line of physical continuation is blocked if he does not get married and bear children. (p. 34)

Ashcraft-Eason, Martin and Olademo (2010:197) agree that procreation changes the social status of a woman from being a stranger to becoming a wife. According to Vahakangas (2009):

[O]nly male children were counted when dealing with the reasons that a husband could desert his wife – female children were not acknowledged, as if she did not have any children. (p. 10)

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Baloyi (2013:171) commented, 'Many researchers have contrasted the African family's attendance celebrating the birth of a boy to the less enthusiastic attendance at the birth of a girl'. Kimathi (1994:12) expresses similar sentiments when articulating that a marriage that conceived only girls is pitied among Africans.

In South Africa, the Tsonga people have a saying: *Ku tswala wansati i ku tswala wanuna* [To beget a woman is to beget a man] (Junod 1990:184). This idiom may be underestimated, but it highlights the superiority of a male child's birth over that of a girl child. One can literally translate it as saying:

Do not grumble when you have begotten a woman, she will give birth to a man, or to beget a woman means that when she is taken in her marriage, her husband becomes your son.

This idiom supposedly diminished the agony and anguish that parents experienced when male children were not born in their marriage. Yet, such idioms do not give peace to those who give birth to female children, and parents always worry when their children are traditionally welcomed into the community. This implies that the birth of a girl child usually invited problems in the family. Another similar idiom that shares the same ideas is *Vanhwana i tihuku to khomela vayeni* [Girls are chickens for visitors] (Junod 1990:74–75). This idiom refers to the fact that when a girl gets married, she moves from her home to join her husband's family. This came from the emphasis on marriage by African tribes, where it is believed that every person that is born will grow up and one day get married. In case of girls it is generally known that they are the ones who leave their families when getting married, to join the family of the husband. This idiom stresses that girls are at their own homes temporarily because it is expected for them to get married as they grow up. It is, therefore, said that they are like chickens who are only waiting to be offered when the visitor arrives.

One can understand when families do not invest in educating the girl child because she is passing on to another family. Various African scholars indicate that singlehood or being unmarried is an abomination and marriage is expected of everybody in the African context (Baloyi 2010; Kimathi 1994; Landman 2007; Reynolds 2008). This highlights that a girl child is not expected to stay at home permanently, rather she will get married and relocate when reaches a certain age – hence the idiom that a hen can be offered to a visitor at any time. In contrast, a male child, especially the firstborn, acquires the exclusive status of an heir according to Basotho and other African traditions (see Morojele 2011:678).

'It is often said that male children are very special and more important to the family than the females, and also that the females are other people's property' (Egualona 2013:84). Gatkuoth (2007:1) argues that in Sudan, women who have more girls never give up producing children in the hope that they may eventually have a baby boy. Many black African women greatly desire to have baby boys because they believe

that that will secure their place alongside their husband. It is for this reason that for the Basotho, 'Boy heirs are valued by families to the extent of viewing their education as more important than that of their siblings, particularly that of girls' (Morojele 2011:678), with a view to their future role as providers for their ageing parents.

One mother-in-law in Igbo, Nigeria, came into conflict with her daughter-in-law because the mother was forcing her son to take a second wife in her desperation to receive a male grandchild (Caspani 2013). Besides the fact that sonless marriages are built on shaky foundations, the wife is usually the one blamed for the lack of sons in the family, not the husband and his family. This is another scenario in which patriarchy makes women feel inferior and leads to the unconditional subordination of women. It is generally assumed that as male children become adults, they will become the breadwinners of their family and take care of their elderly parents. This is one of the reasons that Africa has become a patriarchal society. Akujobi (2009:10) says: 'So much importance is attached to a male child that any home without a male child is considered disastrous'. This argument, among others, clearly indicates how an African marriage can be rendered incomplete and unhappy without a male child. Morojele's (2011:677) research in Lesotho primary schools confirmed, 'Children's identities play a role in undermining gender equality in schools' and in the day-to-day lives of many Africans. In some families, even when girls are born, the lack of a boy poses a threat to monogamy.

The purpose of this article is to examine the reasons for the importance attached to having male children – rather than females – in African society, as well as the impact thereof in the family and the community. This article will attempt to link the importance of having male children to gender inequality, which is condemned not only in the South African constitution, but also in Jesus' teachings, especially his new law of love and justice (see Jn 8:1–11).

Problem statement, aim, relevance and focus of the study

South Africa is among the countries that still uphold certain traditions and customs that overlook the discrimination that results from treating women as subordinate to men. This undermines females in a patriarchal society. Mbiti (1969:142) notes: 'If the first wife has no children, or only daughters, it is likely that her husband will find another wife'. This shows that the lack of male children in the family is considered a serious problem. The fact that polygamy, which has its own set of problems, is seen as a solution to families without male children is an indication that the lack of male children is indeed a challenge for African families (Baloyi 2013:169). The tradition of making the male child more important than the female child is patriarchal in nature and it contravenes the constitution of the country and the apostle Paul's message to the Galatian Christians (Gl 3:28), where he speaks of the equality of all people before Christ. This emphasises the relevance and urgency of this study. There are many different

African ethnic groups living in South Africa, but the focus of this study is limited to black South Africans. Although there is a possibility that the entire African continent shares similar traditional practices, it is important to avoid stereotyping.

The aim of this article is, moreover, to contribute towards large-scale campaigns designed to reduce and ultimately eliminate gender disparities that are caused by our own traditions, among other things. Thus, the pathologies that use culture and tradition to promote the domination of one gender over the other need to be challenged. The church and by extension theology are often blamed for turning a blind eye, while one gender is being undermined and suppressed by the other (Pillay 2015:558), except when violence against women is condemned publicly. Pillay (2015:563) continues citing the call of Bishop Ndungane in 2005, the call that acknowledged 'collusion of our faith with discriminatory attitudes of our cultures'. The concern for gender equality should not only be a political one but also a theological one, and it is the duty of theologians to address people on contemporary issues that affect their lives, including the cultural entrenchment of gender disparities. This, however, seems to be conveniently ignored by the church or theology as highlighted by Pillay (2015) above. The need for all people to pursue gender equality is also in line with the human rights-inspired vision of humane co-existence, which emerged in South Africa after 1994. In this regard, Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger (2012) write:

In recent South African gender politics, we have evidence of shifts toward gender equality in constructions of masculinity that have held the promise of hegemony. This was most noticeable in the presidency of Nelson Mandela, who explicitly embraced a more equitable masculinity. This example provides evidence for the possibility for a hegemony without oppression. (p. 25)

This shift needs to be welcomed and embraced to foster humane co-existence among the genders in our country. Husbands' desire for a male child places extreme pressure on their wives to have more children, sometimes placing their wives' health and the family's future sustainability at risk (Vlassoff 2007:50). This should be clearly and emphatically impressed upon our men and boy children.

An overview of the article

As with many ethnic groups, the Tsonga-speaking people of South Africa get frustrated when a male child is not born in a family. Factors such as inheritance contribute to this distress, even though female children are born. The socio-theological distress surrounding sonless marriages is the central focus of this study. From a pastoral point of view, the intention of the study is to determine the possible causes of this problem among some ethnic groups in South Africa, specifically the Tsonga-speaking people. Although the study focuses on the Tsonga, the problem is not exclusive to African ethnic groups; other cultures throughout the world share the same problem. Certain African sayings that perpetuate the perception of patriarchy will also be part of this discussion. The perceived

superiority of the male child over the female child in this context is problematic as it entrenches gender inequality, which defies the South African constitution and the biblical teaching of equality. Theological principles will encourage the family and community to view the birth of both males and females equally.

Reasons suggested for preferring a male child

Waruta and Kinoti (2000) contend that:

[N]ot only is the birth of a child important among the African people, but the gender of the child is also important. Male children are valued, especially in many patrilineal African societies. (p. 36)

Other African scholars support this opinion because it is a long-standing tradition that the male child will not only continue with the family name, but will ensure the subsistence of his family through his labour. After shepherding the flock during his youth, the oldest son is expected to leave home when he reaches a certain age to seek employment to care for the family. Among the Tsonga-speaking people in Limpopo, only once a male earns his own income is he allowed to marry (Boonzaaier 2002:4). The traditional view of men within the entire community has shaped the concept of masculinity. In some African tribes, marriage cannot be considered complete unless there are children (Habel 2001:114). The Pedi or Bapedi people in South Africa share similar sentiments. Among the Zulus, the first-born child is most important, particularly if it is a boy. Many men from rural areas are migrant workers, spending more than half of their lives demonstrating their masculinity and resourcefulness being good breadwinners. Being a male in Africa is one thing but being a hardworking provider for your family is another. According to Morojele (2011:678), citing Molapo, the Sesotho word *Mojalefa*, or heir, with reference to the male firstborn 'is literally the one who eats the inheritance but also one who eats and pays'. This carries two meanings: (1) inheritance of property only and (2) inheritance of property and responsibility. The heirs, thus, must work harder to pay for what they are because of inherit and to care for the family. It is for that reason that unemployed males are regarded as useless in many African contexts and many marriages are on shaky grounds when men fail to provide for their family's needs. Although it is not the focus of this study, it is important to note the clear gender imbalance here: males get frustrated when their wives achieve higher working positions and/or earn a larger income than them. Traditionally, there is an ingrained belief that men are superior and must be the providers in the home.

According to Makofane (2015:1), maleness can be emphasised by, among other things, the explanation of the word 'father', 'which conjures up different images to a child, such as that of a strong man who will love, protect and provide for her needs'. This simply means that the person that can defend and put food on the table should be respected and highly regarded. Authors such as Clare (2000:184–185) and Marsiglio and Pleck

(2005:256) agree that males (or fathers) are traditionally perceived as the providers and protectors of their family. Ratele (2012:557) uses the concept 'being there' to emphasise that many children, both females and males, would insist that their fathers have always been 'there for them' through different situations. This plays a pivotal role when insinuating males are more important than females. Stereotypically, 'real men' can be described as having certain personality traits. Community views them as strong, independent, high achieving, hardworking, heterosexual, tough, aggressive, unemotional, physical, competitive and forceful.

Our colonial past has also had a role to play in ensuring that the gender disparities were widened, particularly against black women. Fonchingong (2006) confirms the machination of colonialism in the patriarchal conspiracy, saying:

There existed a complementarity between male and female roles in pre-colonial African societies ... and it is during and after colonization that the downfall of the African woman from a position of power and self-sovereignty to becoming man's helper occurred. (p. 135)

There is evidence from ancient history that in some African countries, for example, Egypt, women were not discriminated against. Herodotus is cited as having observed with shock that:

Egyptian women attended market and were employed in trade. In ancient Egypt middle class women were eligible to sit on a local tribunal, engage in real estate transactions and inherit property. Women also secured loans and witnessed legal documents. (Prichard 2016:412)

Such rights were denied to Athenian women, which is why the Egyptian situation of that time shocked the Athenian philosopher, Herodotus. It is thus clearer that colonialism is the source of the scourge of gender inequality. In the Star newspaper of 03 March 2016, De Beer wrote an article entitled 'Why more black women get raped'. In this article, the author argues that many black women who are rape survivors suggest, 'Black women are safe to rape'. In her book entitled *Rape, Gqola* (2015:23) uses the example of how the woman at the centre of Jacob Zuma's rape trial was treated appallingly by both the legal system and the country. The author contends that this woman was widely dismissed, with few people wanting to hear her story because she was a black woman, who was expected to get over the rape quietly; even her safety in this country was later threatened. Of great concern is the fact that the poor woman was even shunned and ridiculed by some of the other women members of her political party during the trial.

Colonialism degraded women (Fonchingong 2006:135), especially black women, who were regarded as inferior people in society; they were only seen to be good enough to do domestic work for their employers. This inferiority of women dates to the time of the slave trade, where black women were always made 'available' even for sexual exploitation, without being able to put the slightest bit of

resistance towards their masters in the United States. Burton (1998:340) pointed out to the inability of black women slaves to resist repressive and forced acts against them. Black women slaves' lives were regarded as low and worthless, only fit to serve as pillow for the dead wife of the slave master (Frank 1982:479, 480). Another factor is the expectation of a male child to inherit his father's wealth and belongings. According to Gaskiyane (2000:15), the desire to have male children is because male children are regarded as heirs of property. It has been observed that among many African tribes, a daughter was not supposed to inherit the property of her parents because she would be expected to get married, and the property was expected to remain in the family. Beyeza-Kashesya et al. (2010) have this to say:

Another important consideration that leads to producing many children was the process of getting the heir. Young men reported that there was no hard and fast rule to choosing who will be the heir as long as it was a boy heir. (p. 74)

Phiri (2002:37) argued that for many African families, a male heir would always be the objective. This view links well with the traditional Tsonga idiom: 'Vanhwana i tihuku to khomela vayeni' [Girls are chickens for visitors] – in other words, girls will not stay in their home forever because they will get married, but boys will stay, ensuring that the elderly parents will have an heir who will take care of them. The issue of males being the only inheritors originates in patriarchy. However, this is changing gradually owing to new policies and the increasing acceptance of the human rights culture by more countries (Konya, Kovarik & Markelova 2014:7).

Women are rarely allowed to have access to land. Women's rights often come in the form of secondary rights, or they gain rights via marriage. In addition, women often inherit less land if they are permitted to inherit. According to Boonzaaier (2002:5), among the Tsongas, the eldest son of the principal wife (see also Morojele 2011:678 regarding the Basotho) normally inherits the bulk of the general kraal property (cattle, ploughs, etc.), with smaller portions going to the principal heirs of the lesser households. There are also African sayings that perpetuate the preference for males. In the introduction, the Tsonga idiom that was used, *Ku tswala wansati i ku tswala wanuna* [To beget a woman is to beget a man] (Junod 1990:184), emphasises that even if a woman bears only a female child, it is believed that a male child will follow. When that female child gets married, she and her husband may bear a male child. This indicates that the goal of marriage is to bear a male child, either through the wife or through the daughter.

The role of communal life cannot be ignored in influencing the desperate need for male children. Even the fact that a man's brothers in the same clan have sons can play a major role in creating a strong desire in the man to follow suit. For Tischler (2007:230), there are three factors that influence the desire to have male children: (1) economic factors – the value assigned to women's work and the ability to contribute to the family income; (2) social factors – kingship, marriage patterns

and religion; and (3) psychological factors – influence from parents and deciding on the size and composition of the family. Other people suggest that a married couple want a boy to be the firstborn because sons take better care of their younger siblings (Peppers 2013:1).

From an early age, socialisation instils inequality in children in Africa. For instance, in many other African tribes, such as the Shona in Zimbabwe, males are socialised to view themselves as breadwinners and heads of households, while females are taught to be obedient and submissive housekeepers (Kambarami 2006:3). In this way, patriarchy is a causal factor promoting gender inequality through the subordination of women and reducing them to mere objects of obedience. Morojele (2011) corroborates this:

The ascendancy accorded to boys, especially those who had the resources to maintain and perform hegemonic forms of masculinities, ensured that boys were generally treated differently from how girls were treated. Being a boy was fundamentally oppositional to anything feminine. (p. 686)

In accordance with patriarchal thought patterns, boy children were treated from an early age as though they were more mature, while 'girls were subjected to strict control and surveillance' (Morojele 2011:686), both at home and at school. This situation, in which boy children are preferred to girl children, has serious consequences for both genders and society.

Consequences

There are many consequences of parental preference for the birth of boy children in a marriage. However, in this article we will focus only on the following three.

Extramarital relationships

Observations in cases of childless couples (Baloyi 2017; Kanokanga 2010; Mayuya 2012), especially sonless marriages, show that there are instances where the man is so desperate for a son from his wife and that he ends up having extramarital affairs. Kanokanga (2010:71) says: 'These men have affairs for the sake of having a boy child'. The extreme stress that the couple experiences because of the strong desire to have a male child often drives men to try to father a male child outside their marriages. Many marriages collapse as a result because if a concubine can bear a male child, she may also win the heart of the man against his wife. Mayuya (2012:1) observed this occurrence in Kenya, where many men left their wives and daughters in search of a woman who could give them male children.

Undermining God-given birthrights

The argument here is that children are gifts from God (Ps 127:3; Gn 48:9; Ps 133: 9). Both boy and girl children are equally gifts of God and have their specific genders as birthrights that no one should undermine. By nature of them being a gift, there is no need for us to worry about gender

because the Giver decides which gender to give to us as He purposed in His plans. If this is understood, there would be no concern as to which gender one is born in the family because the Giver gives what He deems fit in accordance with His own purpose.

Right from the time of their birth, females are regarded as inferior to males. The traditional African society denied women exposure to work outside the home and forbade them to attend school. In contemporary South Africa, women are still subjected to different forms of oppression. Yet, the South African constitution 1996 opposes discrimination against either gender: 'No person may unfairly discriminate, directly or indirectly against anyone, on one or more grounds in terms of subsection (3)'. The subsection mentioned includes race, ethnic grounds, colour, sex, gender, culture, language and so forth (South Africa Department of Justice 1996:7).

Many women endure the pain of their oppression because they are economically dependent on men – they cannot afford to repay the lobolo, which is often expected to be repaid if the woman decides to divorce (Mawere & Mawere 2010:3). Idialu (2012:9) agrees with Osimiri (1990:7) that in many ways girls are the target of abuse and exploitation. There is a tendency to discriminate against girls, especially regarding their schooling. The high level of gendered illiteracy in southern Africa was orchestrated; instead of going to school, girls were to be trained to be good future wives and housewives.

Polygamy

When the God-given birth is undermined, traditional African people would seek their way out by resorting to marry a second or even a third wife to get the male child born into the family. This is where polygamy comes into the discussion. Khathide (2007) argues:

In the minds of African people, a man who has many wives and children, earned great respect in the eyes of the community. If the first wife had no children, or only daughters, it followed almost without exception that her husband would add another wife. (p. 39)

Emphasis is placed on the importance of the male child. The author indicates that without a male child, there is a likelihood that the husband would take a second wife. This refers to one of the ways in which polygamy has been entrenched. According to Okeke-Ihejirika (2004:47), in many cases a marriage without a male child indirectly invites men to initiate polygamous marriages. In support of this view, Kyomo and Selvan (2004:36) articulated that the emphasis of polygamy was influenced by, among other factors, the importance of having a male child in the family. In other words, such marriages still provide the husband with opportunities to 'try his luck'.

According to Phiri (2002:37), this view is also held by the Chewa people in Kenya, who attribute polygamy to the

importance of the birth of a male child. For Baloyi (2013:171), the birth of a male child is the fulfilment of the family's desire, which is to have their own blood to inherit whatever they own. All these arguments suggest that even if only girl children are born, there is still uncertainty whether such a marriage will succeed monogamously. In some cases, if the firstborn child from the first marriage was a girl, that was the reason enough to find a second wife (because a male child is expected to be the firstborn). Although this may be a topic for future research and discussion, it explains why a marriage would start having problems if the firstborn were a girl. According to Mace and Sear (1997:499), 'birth intervals after the birth of the boy were significantly longer than after the birth of a girl, indicating higher parental investment in boys'. These long intervals undoubtedly play a role in entrenching polygamy because the husband would not abstain for a long period. Mace (1996:268) showed that the prevalence of polygyny is mostly related to the desire for a male child.

The need for a male heir in the family connects very well with the levirate marriage, where the brother of the deceased is expected to marry his brother's widow. According to Baloyi (2015):

[T]here is considerable pressure on a widow who did not produce a male heir with the same surname. This may force a woman to accept her late husband's younger brother as her husband, in that way she may be protected from eviction or loss of her husband's property'. (p. 487)

Ntozi (1997:127) argues that a widow without a son to claim a share of his father's property would be left without any physical assets, such as cattle or land. In this way, there was a relationship between levirate marriage and polygamy in search of male heirs, prioritising the importance of the male child in a family. In short, girl child is not viewed as human being but property of man.

Evaluation

The fact that the importance of the male child in the family is supported by some African sayings indicates that it is a cultural or traditional issue. The opinion that culture or tradition is dynamic could be the topic of further research. As important as it is to maintain our culture, it is also crucial to revisit cultural and traditional practices that are oppressive to other people – in this case, females. The authors of this article contend that the issue of women subordination in an African context does not receive much attention in theological discourse. This is evidenced by the continuation and even escalation of gender imbalances in various African countries. Sadly, the role of religion (including Christianity) in demoting women to perform only peripheral roles places theology at the centre of this discourse. The preference for a male child in this context is just one of the many factors that prioritise males over females. Undoubtedly, most theologians are males, who defend their traditions. It is for this reason that religion and theology are negatively associated with issues relating to gender inequality. Snyman (2009:236) feels that the same theology that has misinterpreted biblical messages

entrenches past injustices and needs to be reinterpreted in the light of the scriptures to correct the wrongs done in the past. To some extent, therefore, theology should be held accountable for perpetuating discriminatory traditions.

Kanokanga (2010:70) agrees that childlessness cannot justify extramarital affairs. Therefore, unfaithfulness cannot be condoned. It is for this reason that the well-known story of Sarah and Abraham in the Bible cannot be used to justify extramarital relationships and polygamy. While acknowledging that these patriarchs experienced childlessness, they also lived in a socio-political and economic environment that was completely different from ours. As Hebrews, their culture is not accepted everywhere as truth.

The issue of valuing male children more than females is an age-old tradition dating back to the times of the Bible. This was exemplified in the time of Moses, when Pharaoh commanded that every Hebrew newborn boy be killed (Ex 1:15–16). Besides being regarded as a threat in times of revolution, the male children were people who would bring hope and revival to the nation, which Pharaoh wished to keep under Egyptian domination. Therefore, by eliminating the male Hebrew children, Pharaoh was denying the Hebrews the power and authority that would have been vested in their males. Although this biblical incident is negative, it helps to explain why many tribes, even outside the Middle East, came to ascribe more power to males than to females, thus affirming the perception of male children as more important than females.

The South African democratic constitution strengthens the Apostle Paul's argument by saying: 'No person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds in terms of subsection (3)' (South Africa Department of Justice 1996:7). Among other forms of discrimination, subsection 3 mentions discrimination based on race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status and ethnic or social origin. Therefore, everyone living in this country, both Christians and people from other religions, is expected to abide by the Constitution. Thus, our constitution clearly complements the teachings of Jesus and his disciples regarding equality between genders. From this perspective, then, women who are leaders in their communities and workplaces deserve the same respect that is shown to their male counterparts.

Cone's book, *God of the oppressed*, refers to the story of Exodus, where God told Moses to take the Israelites out of Egypt; this is a good example of how God uses people to liberate others who are subjected to oppression. The authors of this article assert that because men are the oppressors, they would be the right people to rectify the past and encourage change in the present. Baloyi (2012:4) argues that if men join the campaign against male domination, the battle can be won. 'Preachers ought to be the voice of the voiceless women' (Cone 1982:122).

One of the popular teachings of theology is that people must love and embrace one another – love and justice must work

hand in hand, according to Vorster (2007:81). In other words, the love that God shows us should encourage us to love our neighbours, which is manifested when justice prevails. It is for this reason that Ramsey (1993:2) insists that the commandment of love is rooted in God's love and his governance of justice is expressed through the work of Jesus Christ. Theologically speaking, giving birth to a child is one of God's miracles, which no one should question, let alone favour one gender over the other.

The theology of creation teaches that man and woman were both created in the image of God. Different kinds of arguments arose while trying to explore the aspects of *Imago Dei* (Latin for the image of God), homo interior (Borreson 1986:28), rationality (Vorster 2007:19), image in relation (Heyns 1970:100) and man in a natural state (Needleman, Bierman & Gould 1997:307). Although it is not the intention of this article to discuss the different kinds of philosophical arguments around the 'image of God', it should be emphasised that being created in the image of God means humans should reflect or represent God's will on earth (Moltmann 1984:11). That is the primary difference between human beings and the other animals that God created. Importantly, in the creation accounts of humans there is no mention of gender differentiation in terms of which one gender was superior to the other. Thus, we contend that valuing male children as more important than females is biblically unfounded and any theology that supports that view is contrary to the Bible.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, African traditions stress the value of childbearing in a marriage, with special emphasis on the birth of boys. Women whose firstborn children are boys are valued and respected in society and men whose families are filled with male children are considered dignified. This creates a situation where many families so desperately want to have male children that the husbands engage in polygamy and extramarital affairs. While some women are subjected to severe violence and abuse as a result, others decide to get divorced. It is important to note, however, that this is contrary to their faith in Jesus Christ. We know that every person is created in the image of God, but we also need to understand that everybody – regardless of his or her gender – is created for a purpose. It is also important to adhere to the Constitution of South Africa, which forbids any kind of discrimination, including gender-based discrimination. Through its pastoral services, the church needs to preach and teach the equality of all people, despite their gender differences.

Another measure that can help to improve our efforts in combating women marginalisation and discrimination is the activation of our churches and communities to actively affirm and uphold the resolutions of the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) and its parallel event, the non-governmental organisations forum, both held in China in September 1995. There the following themes were discussed:

- the prevention and elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls

- the eradication of poverty based on sustained economic growth, requiring the involvement of women in economic and social development
- the right of all women to control all aspects of their health, particularly their own fertility
- ensuring that all women and girl children's human rights are respected
- ensuring women's equal access to economic resources, including land, credit, science and technology and vocational training (adapted from Manala 2015:6).

From a practical theological perspective, South African practical theologians need to do the following:

- deliberately and visibly prioritise and work towards the implementation of the third and fifth Millennium Development Goals, namely, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and the improvement of maternal health, respectively
- redefine, reinterpret and be oriented to true Ubuntu values of solidarity with, and love and care for, women
- continually discuss the plight of women and engage in serious discourses aimed at positively influencing and transforming their situation with a view to their ultimate emancipation (adapted from Manala 2015:8).

In conclusion, the female poet Odia Ofeimun gives what Fonchingong (2006) considers a more honourable characterisation of an African woman:

The community building role of women is brought to the fore in *Benin Woman* by Odia Ofeimun. The poet pays tribute to a fallen hero whose extraordinary powers led to the liberation of her society. The poet salutes her courage: 'Emotan, I make my solemn prostration to your guts!' Even the bronze statue erected in her honour is not enough to the poet who is perturbed by the loss: 'And how I wish some woman now would bear your name anew for my sake'. (p. 141)

What a respectable characterisation and view in acknowledgment of the good that flows from womanpower! In view of this, we can conclude unanimously that female children can and must be entrusted with inheritance.

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Authors' contributions

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Ethical considerations

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