

Embodied Citizenship: Female Corporeality and Conflict

by *Veerle Draulans*

Images often unconsciously refer to the dividing line between dichotomies such as active-passive or public-private. We subject those dichotomies to a critical reflection on the concept of citizenship, inspired by Ruth Lister's distinction between «to be a citizen» and «to act as a citizen». What does this distinction entail if confronted with David Hollenbach's search for mutual interdependence as the basis for solidarity? A theological analysis of the story of Hagar and a reflection on Dalit women concretizes these theories.

As academics, we are used to constructing an ethical analysis based on a rigid procedure. To begin with, we will observe, register and define, bring contexts and concepts into focus, avoid terminological pitfalls, search for the implicit or explicit objectives of projects or initiatives, specify implicit or explicit values, norms and preconceptions. Eventually, the ethicist will engage in the debate about foundational ethics and about the tension between universality and particularity without any fear of taking a normative point of view. To me, this means that I shall call an act ethically good or justified, if it promotes the various dimensions of humanity and the integral well-being of a person. It involves paying attention to physical, mental, social and spiritual dimensions of human existence. It is therefore one step beyond pure description.¹

Couched in those terms, ethical analyses are a very rational activity. However, if we judge acts based on the extent to which they advance human existence in its wholeness, it is nevertheless a *conditio sine qua non* to incorporate the other, less rational dimensions of human existence into our analysis. Gender studies can be a good partner in this respect; for one, because gender studies indicate to what extent we see, feel and think in divides, in dichotomies, because of their complexity-reducing nature: dichotomies make it possible to simplify complicated processes into clear, controllable frames of mind.

It seems logical to me that a contribution on the theme of 'corporeality and conflict' should take as its starting point the frequently unreflective reactions to the visible dimensions of corporeality. It is therefore not a

¹ V. DRAULANS - J. DE TAVERNIER, *Van multiculturaliteit naar interculturaliteit. Ethische reflecties over diversiteit en bedreigd burgerschap*, in M.-C. FOBLETS - J. VRIELINK - J. BILLIET (eds), *Multiculturalisme ontleed. Een staalkaart van onderzoek aan de K.U. Leuven*, Leuven 2006, pp. 41-59.

coincidence that the power of the creation of an image is the central theme in section 1. Conflicts between individuals or groups often originate in visible or invisible types of differences. The question is, which types of differences will generate irritation, even to the point of conflict, and the role played by corporeality in this process (1.a). In a society dominated by images, I want to start my analysis with three poignant images, in which the body of a woman receives significance from its visible and invisible context. The three images place female corporeality in the public arena, which in each instance is also an arena highly charged with conflict (1.b). A propaganda poster from World War I and the picture of a girl fleeing from napalm bombs lead us to the question of whether violence against women is increasingly used as a weapon of war (1.c). We also need to examine whether our image culture is sufficiently open to diversity among women. Are women systematically represented as passive and long-suffering, in a victim role (1.d)?

Each one of the images called up in the first section refers to the dividing line between dichotomies such as active-passive or public-private; a line that is hard to draw. In the second section, we subject those dichotomies to a critical reflection based on the concept of citizenship. Inspired by the distinction described by Ruth Lister between 'to be a citizen' and 'to act as a citizen', we comment on these abstract, disembodied notions of citizenship. An important question in this respect is: who has the power to determine where the dividing line is drawn between the public and the private realm (2.a)? Lister opposes the explicit victim role that others assign to women or that women allot themselves. Although many women feel less at home in formal political environments, they nevertheless often take political action testifying to their active citizenship, in connection with issues of close interest to them (2.b). It is therefore important to correctly define the normative preconceptions of the notion 'citizenship' as well as to give a clear description of the various levels on which political action can take place (2.c). The United Nations has expressed its concern about the increasing violence against women in various documents. Extremely ambitious are the Millennium Development Goals, which are currently receiving a great deal of attention (2.d). They aim to make basic provisions such as education and health care available to all, also and in particular to the poorest among the poor. In that sense, these Millennium Development Goals are a case in point of a so-called 'access approach' to human rights (2.e).

But what is it precisely that motivates people to co-operate with the ambitious plan of the Millennium Development Goals? What motivates people to devote themselves to the common good? That is the question occupying David Hollenbach (3.a). Like Ruth Lister, he is interested in the problematics of the contemporary citizenship concept in its various manifestations from the social midfield to supranational organisations. Displaying a (passive) tolerance of differences is miles removed from

devoting oneself to the wellbeing of others driven by the awareness of a strong mutual interdependence based on equality and reciprocity, according to Hollenbach. The virtue of solidarity is crucial in this respect. Contrary to Ruth Lister, Hollenbach pays little attention to the gender dimension, which is nonetheless intrinsically intertwined with the subject matter he raises. Anyone who continues to speak in abstract terms about human rights or who talks about people as 'disembodied persons', risks marginalising the voice of women (3.b).

How can the instruction of solidarity be legitimised from a theological point of view? Some authors refer to the significance of foundational, inspiring narratives (4.a). But whose story will be told as the 'foundational story' of a community? The story of the dominant group? The biblical story of Hagar takes a different perspective; it is a beautiful illustration of how people can take action, make decisions and be someone despite becoming the victim of oppression. It is a story about the interdependence between very real people, a story that cannot be told, if one wishes to bracket their corporeality as if it did not matter. In addition, it is a story about boundaries and the possibilities associated with religious beliefs and religion as a driving force for survival or liberation (4.b). In the struggle of the outcaste Dalit women against the various forms of violence and oppression they are subjected to, the different lines discussed elsewhere in the article come together: physical humiliations, exploitation as domestic workers, their search for a place in the social midfield, their search for refuges where they are allowed to be themselves, as well as the significance of religion as a potential source of survival and resistance (section 5).

1. *Corporeality and the power of images*

People theorising about gender relations sometimes forget that the first and most direct manner in which people are confronted with differences in other people is the body. When we see someone, we react almost immediately to our first impressions on a subconscious level. Corporeality means visibility and it motivates the sometimes provocative play of visibility versus invisibility. For that reason, I think it is important to spend some time focusing on the significance of the creation of an image. What do we see, what do we think, how do we judge certain images? In a society increasingly dominated by images, this is an important starting point.

Let's take the simple example of the corridor in a large train station such as Brussels South or Rotterdam.² It is a prime place for the quiet observer who wishes to grasp the diversity of society at one glance. Orthodox Jews, Muslim women with or without a headscarf, African people

² Cf. V. DRAULANS - M. SMET, *M/V. Over cultuurverandering en betere doorstromingskansen voor vrouwen en mannen in organisaties en bedrijven*, Tiel 2005, pp. 11-12.

in colourful batik clothing, white men in dark three-piece tailor-made suits, youngsters of various ethnic backgrounds whose threadbare hipsters are frowned on by their mothers, girls in tank tops and clearly visible belly buttons with or without piercing, older people wearily descending the stairs, fifty-somethings enjoying active leisure time, parents dragging toddlers, backpackers. In summary: diversity. The diversity of the human flow in the station corridor becomes much greater still when you take into account the less visible differences between people, such as social class, nationality or educational background. People's philosophical background or sexual orientation are sometimes discernible but not always. Aspects such as individual biography refine those large categories even further.

a. One difference is not the same as another

Some differences are clearly more pronounced than others and some classification is needed.³ Certain elements of differentiation are comparatively constant, such as gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity. Other factors such as age, educational background and marital status are variable. People grow older, follow different courses or career paths, are dependent on their parents, cohabit, get married, experience few or frequent health problems, etc.

Apart from variable/invariable characteristics that set them apart, differentiations can be made based on differences between visible characteristics of diversity (such as gender or race) and invisible characteristics (such as the number of years of professional experience, educational background and training or socio-economic class). Distinctions can also be made between elements in which people have a choice or that they can influence (so-called secondary characteristics, such as occupation or marital status, compared to primary characteristics, such as gender, age or race). Both primary and secondary characteristics influence the way people think of themselves and of the world. Sometimes the distinctions are even taken one step further and reference is made to values, beliefs, attitudes or personal, cognitive and behavioural styles.

In brief, when we reflect on differences between people, we need to take into account factors such as visible/less visible, variable/invariable, changeable/fixe and biographical elements. If people find it difficult to deal with differences, or if they find it hard to deal with too many differences, what type of difference do they find the hardest to deal with? The debate about the acceptability of Muslim women wearing a headscarf suggests that people find visible differences particularly objectionable.⁴

³ Y. BENSCHOP, *Diversiteit aan het werk*, in H. DOOREWAARD - W. DE NIJS (eds), *Organisatieontwikkeling. Human Resource Management*, Utrecht 1999, pp. 261-263; M. JANSSENS - C. STEYAERT, *Meerstemmigheid: organiseren met verschil*, Leuven - Assen 2001, pp. 64-66.

⁴ For a summary of the debate, see, among others: V. DRAULANS - J. DE TAVERNIER, *Van multiculturaliteit naar interculturaliteit*; N. FADIL, *Het hoofdzoekendebat: meer dan een debat over*

b. The hidden dimensions of images

Let's return to the statement I formulated earlier: corporeality means visibility and it motivates the sometimes provocative play of visibility versus invisibility. By way of illustration, I will introduce three images that left a lasting impression.

Many of you will remember the world-famous picture of the Vietnamese girl fleeing from napalm bombs. With this image, the photographer won the prestigious World Press Photo award. The eyes of the spectator are virtually drawn to the naked body of the girl, but her naked body derives its real meaning from the visible and invisible context: the girl is naked whereas the others are dressed; with soldiers in the background, the photograph refers to the horrors of war while the girl is running away in childlike innocence. Another dimension refers to the visibility of the Asian girl which is in marked contrast to the invisibility of the white, male pilot who dropped the bombs. The girl later emigrated to Canada and grew up to become a peace activist. Some years ago, a dialogue between her and the pilot was broadcast on television in which she said that she felt able to forgive the pilot, since he had been carrying out an order from above.

In 2000, there was some commotion caused by photographs of Kathy Freeman, the Australian athlete of Aboriginal origin who had the honour of igniting the Olympic flame during the Olympic Games in Sydney. The choice of Kathy Freeman was controversial: it seemed a deliberate, smart move of the Australian authorities to give the honourable task to a female athlete of Aboriginal origin. It was a symbolic, but strongly politically charged act in the midst of polemics about the authorities' failure to apologise to the Aboriginal community. In addition, her body received a lot of attention from the press and all kinds of associations of the exotic and the primitive ensued.

At an exhibition in Rome in early 2003, I saw a poster from World War I, a drawing of a woman with her teenage daughter and her toddler near the open window gazing at a squadron of soldiers marching off into the distance. The title of the poster, in big bulging letters, read: «Women of Britain say: 'Go!'». Gender plays a specific role in a nationalist discourse, in which men play the leading role.⁵ Women are fastened and fixed to their procreative function and to their task as protectresses and guardians of those traditions that should be passed on through education. Women contribute to group identity in a symbolic manner. It is expected of women that they have to sacrifice their sons for the nation and that they should be mothers not only for their children, but also for the whole nation. This

een stukje stof, in «Ethische Perspectieven», 14 (2004) 4, pp. 373-385; G. COENE - C. LONGMAN (eds), *Eigen emancipatie eerst? Over de rechten en representatie van vrouwen in een multiculturele samenleving*, Ghent 2005.

⁵ A. KOVACS, *De impact van nationalistische conflicten op de emancipatie van vrouwen* Leuven 1999.

ideology provides also the framework for the picture of the mother who grieves over her own son having been killed in the war and at the same time exhorts other mothers to selflessly support their sons in their fight for the nation (or the ethnic minorities). This discourse focuses on unselfish motherhood as well as on their willingness to make sacrifices.

Women play much less of a role in military discourses, since these take place in a closed masculine world into which women are not easily allowed. Heroism and fraternity are linked to masculinity, as illustrated in the popular television serial 'Band of Brothers', whereas women represent the weak gender in need of protection. In a militarist discourse, men are turned into 'real men' through tough, strongly disciplined training.⁶ Sexual politics have an important meaning in this whole context. Purity and cultural authenticity are absolutely necessary to defend and perpetuate group boundaries.

c. Violence against women as a weapon of war

Rape has been considered as a special weapon in war. In the context of war, rape implies visibility, because through rape the whole family as well as the population are afflicted. Through the woman who is victimized and raped, the rapist wants to strike the male population and confront it with their weakness; he wants to show them that they are incapable of protecting the women of their own ethnicity. Thus, in a context of war rape can be considered to be much more than 'just' a criminal action against an individual woman. It is a weapon that is used purposefully to affect the whole community, since systematic rape also occurs when the possibility of sexual satisfaction through prostitution is available.

Could it be said that violence against women as a weapon of war is increasing? The United Nations considered the increase in violence against women as very alarming, so much so that they have expanded the definition of war crimes at a conference of the International Court of Justice in 1998 with an article on gender rights. Rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization and other forms of sexual violence are considered to be serious violations of the Geneva Convention.⁷ The research and training institute INSTRAW⁸ focuses specifically on the theme 'gender aspects of war and peace', among others.

⁶ On this subject, see, among others, V. DRAULANS, *Toenemende agressie? Een genderanalyse*, in R. BURGGRAEVE et al., *De verruwing voorbij. Over de kwetsbaarheid van alle leven*, Leuven 2004, pp. 121-149.

⁷ N. SADIK (ed), *Samen leven in aparte werelden. Mannen en vrouwen in een tijd van verandering*. *World Population Report 2000*, New York 2001, p. 6.

⁸ United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, see <http://www.un-instraw.org/en/>

d. Avoiding the traps of generalisation

Do the media direct enough attention to the diversity that exists among women? Aren't press reports about women in war zones or in countries under reconstruction after a war not primarily full of stereotypes of dependency or neediness? The wrinkly old lady with the headscarf, looking at the ruins of her house between a handful of chickens? The young woman with a baby at her breast in a refugee camp in the African lake district? Muslim women dressed in black, shouting out their allegiance to their political leaders?

Images of Muslim women as suicide terrorists have indisputably shocked the world. At the Beslan hostage drama on September 1, 2004, women were among the Chechen resistance fighters. This act of terrorism, but also the involvement of women in it, shocked the world; probably for various reasons. Firstly, some people still harbour a persistent, sometimes covert essentialist way of thinking, which links femininity to giving birth and pacifism and which ignores the diversity among women. Furthermore – and sometimes as a consequence of it – people associate femininity with a victim role, with the passive role of the one suffering the afflictions of war or violence. The image of women taking direct action does not tally with this image. Thirdly, the image of the female terrorist is at odds with the association of femininity with the private realm, since it shows women acting in the public realm, making the headlines and coming out of obscurity. The fact that a growing number of women becomes actively involved in conflict areas, acting in the public arena, in full view of the world press, also became apparent in September 2006 when a group of Palestinian women used their body as a living shield around the buildings in which their men had taken cover, trying to avert an attack by the Israeli army.

2. *Beyond the dichotomies: Active or passive, public or private?*

a. Ruth Lister: To be a citizen – to act as a citizen

All the examples I gave contain elements of the tension between active and passive: are women presented in a passive role, as victims? Or can women also be thought of as people who become actively involved in public life? I want to consider the theme 'corporeality and conflict' against the background of the notion 'citizenship' and the various bodies of political experience and policy making associated with it. One of my sources of inspiration for the subject was Ruth Lister, author of the book *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*.⁹ From the first page of her book, Lister

⁹ R. LISTER, *Citizenship. Feminist Perspectives*, London 1997.

challenges us to transcend dichotomous thinking. She describes how some people define the core of the debate as follows:

«Is the goal a gender-neutral conception of citizenship which enables women to participate as equals with men in the public sphere ('equality') or a gender-differentiated conception which recognises and values women's responsibilities in the private sphere ('difference')?». ¹⁰

For Ruth Lister, however, the emphasis does not necessarily lie on the (theoretical) choice between similarities or differences. She develops a different and, in my view, interesting thought pattern with *human agency* at its centre. This notion «provides the conceptual tool for a synthesis of the rights and participatory traditions of citizenship». ¹¹ Lister makes an interesting distinction between 'to be a citizen', associated with legal rights, and 'to act as a citizen'. Elsewhere in her book, she calls this distinction the creative tension between the universal and the particular. ¹²

The notion 'citizenship' is in itself problematic for women, because it has traditionally been anchored in an abstract idea of disembodied individuals, as if it was possible to think about individuals in a purely abstract way, independent of their body. Even when citizenship is approached in a less abstract way, the concept is often associated with a male frame of reference, anchored in the public realm.

Lister argues for a less rigid, less ideological division between private and public life. In this context, she poses a question that frequently surfaces in gender theories: «who has the power to decide where the line is to be drawn in any particular situation on any particular issue?». ¹³

Sometimes people may have an interest in keeping the dividing line transparent with but few rules being imposed on the private sphere. At times the private sphere is the ideal starting point for political action: inheritance tax legislation or resistance to the inhumane working hours of low-paid 'nannies' in dual career households in the USA or domestic workers, often outcaste Dalit women, in India.

b. Political rights, political action

Lister explains that there is little point in women hanging on to the role of victim. Such emphasis on shared victimhood interferes with women taking action based on common strength. In addition, it encourages women to retain their passive role. This point of view certainly does not deny that women are often the victim of violence or oppression, but it refuses to identify women as a group with victimhood.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 9. See also pp. 92 f.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

¹² See *ibidem*, chapter III, «A differentiated Universalism», pp. 66-90.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

To act implies activity. To act, even if the actions are not aimed at large political reforms but at survival at a basic level, can be extremely important to someone's personal self-awareness.¹⁴ People can grow as individuals and feel strong by taking small steps. Ruth Lister fully realises that her call to action does not dispel the aversion a lot of women feel towards formal political structures and their prevailing androcentric culture.¹⁵ She advocates action grounded in the immediate social environment. Occasionally this action based in the social environment has developed into internationally acknowledged political action, but even then the protest or political action by women has remained explicitly associated with women as either mothers or partners, for example, the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, that Lister refers to, or the Russian women who refused to send their children to conflict zones such as Chechnya. According to a traditional concept of citizenship, the women may be criticised for not allowing their political action to transcend the boundaries of their private situation any further. But is their political action any less meaningful because these women act explicitly as mothers or partners? And isn't it likely that the force of their protest and their political awareness will become more powerful, if it is rooted in the experiences of their private life? In addition, over a century's worth of the woman's movement teaches us that many of the issues promulgated by what would later be called the 'traditional' women's movements were closely connected to those women's personal circumstances. That is partly what gave them their strength. This concept of citizenship even allows to consider agricultural projects in countries of the developing world as a strong lever for political emancipation: if women obtain starting capital through micro-credits in order to provide for their food requirements, they may be reinforcing their position as citizens in the long term.

c. Different layers of citizenship

A more detailed reflection on the distinction between 'to be a citizen' and 'to act as a citizen' requires further attention to the various levels of political experience and policy making,¹⁶ i.e. individual citizenship, local midlevel organisations, regional or national authorities, supranational political organisations (like the EU) or the transnational, global level. Women may prefer to be active in local midlevel organisations or in regional initiatives. The problem is that these are not always recognised as expressions of 'real' citizenship. Belonging to more elevated, formal political structures such as the House of Parliament still carries greater status than acting as an individual citizen or fighting for local midlevel organisations, even through women who are engaged in the basic consciousness-raising work, close

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 38 f; see also *infra*, note 51, D. WILLIAMS, *Sisters in the Wilderness*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 166 f.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 29 f., 196-204.

to the people, possibly achieve greater results than one vote or another in a remote political capital. Just think of the distinction between a formal vote on an act in parliament about basic health care on the one hand and trying to raise awareness for this issue among women locally, based in local organisations. The conclusion is evident: both levels are important.

Each of these areas nevertheless plays an important role: the individual citizen may decide to travel to Thailand as a sex tourist or to employ a low-paid nanny from a South-American country, expecting her to work for 16 hours a day. Midfield organisations are excellently placed as a first line of combined forces to take social and political action or to express resistance. In this context I like to refer to the pioneering role of Amnesty International in opposition to violence against women. People spontaneously associate political thinking with regional or national authorities. Just one example: how tolerant is each of our countries towards serving as a transit country for human trafficking? Supranational authorities seem very distant from the practical, grounded-in-reality political activities preferred by many women. Yet, in the EU, INSTRAW, UNFPA¹⁷, UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) or the ILO, stacks of material have been processed and are made available that can provide real support for practical, small actions.

d. Important frames of reference: CEDAW and Millennium Development Goals

If tools and instruments called 'gender diversity tools' are being developed separately, does it mean that the position of women is receiving special attention within the activities of supranational authorities such as the United Nations? Indeed, such tools are trying to raise the general awareness of the specific and often vulnerable position of women in society, in particular of women in conflict zones. A number of documents have supplemented and added a more gender-specific perspective to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The rights of women are specifically addressed as a theme in the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict (1974), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993).

Unfortunately, the content of these documents is comparatively little known among the wider public. For example, the CEDAW (Convention Elimination Discrimination Against Women) document calls upon all the parties concerned to award women basic rights and fundamental liberties «in all fields, in particular in the political, social, economic, and cultural fields»

¹⁷ United Nations Population Fund. At the centre of this organisation, various 'gender documents' have been prepared and are available through the Internet, such as *Focusing on Gender: An Assessment of Gender Integration in UNFPA Materials* (2006) or *Empowering Young Women to lead Change. A Training Manual* (2006).

(art. 3). This document focuses systematically on combating stereotypes and argues in favour of the fully-fledged participation of women in political and public life, for adequate and equal educational opportunities and for fair working conditions, for decent health care, etc. Particular emphasis is given to women living in rural areas. Economic rights (getting a loan from a bank, for example) or legal equality (succession rights, marriage) are also included. These documents deserve more attention because they provide support and can be an important reference point to people who are politically and socially active on one of the aforementioned levels in their resistance against the violation of human dignity. Significantly, roughly 80 of the 182 states that ratified the CEDAW convention expressed strong reservations about some clauses, in particular about those in relation to family and matrimonial law.¹⁸

In 2000, the United Nations formulated the ambitious plan to halve world poverty within 15 years in the famous Millennium Development Goals. These Millennium Development Goals can be considered as practical goals or action points based on fundamental human rights. The eight goals show an acute awareness of the importance of gender for development: 1) reduction of extreme poverty and hunger by half, 2) primary education for all boys and girls, 3) gender equality and the empowerment of women, 4) reduction of child mortality by two-thirds, 5) reduction of maternal mortality by three-quarters, 6) combat against HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases, 7) environmental sustainability, 8) more aid, fair trade, less debt.¹⁹ Five years after they were publicly announced, the UNFPA World Population report 2005 concludes that gender equality reduces poverty, saves lives and improves the quality of life.²⁰ The world population report 2006 specifically focused on women and migration.

e. Access approach to human rights

I interpret the Millennium Development goals, with their aim at making accessible elementary necessities such as food, water, health care and education to the poorest among the poor, along the lines of what Annelies van Heÿst calls the 'access approach to human rights'. Important human rights such as freedom of speech or the freedom of association are hardly accessible to people who are fighting for survival on a daily basis. At times, concerns about these rights are extremely far removed from sheer survival, which is their primary concern. Out of respect for human dignity, authorities should guarantee everyone access to fulfilling these basic needs. In other words, human rights with their focus on human

¹⁸ M. HEIMBACH-STEINS, *Menschenrechte der Frauen. Universaler Anspruch und kontextbezogene Konkretisierung*, in «Stimmen der Zeit», 224 (2006), p. 547.

¹⁹ JUSTITIA ET PAX, *Act Now for the Millennium Development Goals. Appeals from Religious Leaders and Scholars*, The Hague 2005, p. 4.

²⁰ P. FUHRI SNETHLAGE, *Armoede en de belofte van gelijkheid. UNFPA World Population Report 2005*, internet document, p. 22.

dignity do not only take shape in legal phrases but also (and primarily) in material circumstances.²¹

3. *Respect for human rights as a «minimum minimorum» of solidarity*

a. D. Hollenbach: Badly needed: A sense of mutual interdependence

«Awareness of diversity is thus a prominent fact in daily experience today. When difference generates conflict, fear grows».²² This sentence from the book *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* by David Hollenbach, S.J., Professor of Catholic Theology at Boston College, U.S.A., touched a chord with me. Maybe because it was so clearly linked to the question raised in the first paragraph: which differences do people find hardest to deal with? The book also touches on other issues under discussion in this article. Similarly to Lister, he refers to the problematic character of the contemporary notion of citizenship.²³ Like her, he is not blind to the great inequality dividing citizens in relation to their possibilities to exercise power and to make decisions. He speaks in terms of «an agent (... who acts or initiates action) and a patient (who undergoes the effects of the action and must deal with its consequences)».²⁴ Once more, we hit on the active-passive dichotomy, verging closely on Lister's distinction 'to be a citizen – to act as a citizen'.

Hollenbach particularly highlights the issue of poverty in large North-American towns, and against that background he reflects on boundaries and opportunities for a new way of thinking about the common good. He observes that a substantial number of U.S. citizens, particularly from the middle classes, apply a misunderstood idea of tolerance which in fact perpetuates the *status quo*.²⁵ As individuals, they accept ethnic differences, but at the same time they are convinced that people living in poverty only have themselves to blame for that poverty.²⁶ Tolerance consequently becomes part of the problem:

«When acceptance of difference becomes acquiescence in deep social disparities and human misery it becomes part of the problem, not part of the solution».²⁷

Hollenbach argues in favour of «a stance that goes beyond» and states that «a sense of mutual interdependence»²⁸ is sorely needed. How can the

²¹ A. VAN HEYST, *Liefdewerk. Een herwaardering van de caritas bij de Arme Zusters van het Goddelijk Kind, sinds 1852*, Hilversum 2002, pp. 289-290.

²² D. HOLLENBACH, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (New Studies in Christian Ethics, 22), Cambridge 2002, p. 21.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 184.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 178-179.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 179.

dominant middle classes be stirred into action and be made sufficiently sensitive to the situation so that they will no longer accept serious forms of social injustice? In this respect, solidarity features as a key concept in his thinking, despite the term not being one of the 'traditional' cardinal virtues (fortitude, justice, prudence and temperance), nor one of the theological virtues, which are hope, love and faith. Nevertheless, solidarity deserves a place among the original list of seven, since the concept has an explicitly reciprocal character and since it emphasises the social cohesion, or, stronger still, the interdependence of people, both on an individual and an institutional level, with its political, economic and cultural implications.²⁹ It is evidently important to make a distinction between positive and negative interdependence. The author naturally opposes oppressive dependencies but argues in favour of solidarity based on mutuality and equality.

Solidarity implies attention to human rights, since human rights express the most fundamental requirements, the *minimum minimorum* for achieving real solidarity:

«Human rights are the moral claims of all persons to be treated, by virtue of their humanity, as participants in the shared life of the human community. These moral claims will be practically guaranteed when respect for them is built into the basic structure of society, i.e., into the main political, social, and economic institutions that set the overall terms of social cooperation».³⁰

Naturally, Hollenbach is not blind to the debates about the scope of universal human rights and the tensions arising when they are applied to specific cultures and traditions. But he resolutely opposes any perspective that would dismiss universal human rights to such an extent that they are altogether discounted as an illusion of the Enlightenment. Such a perfunctory view would seriously undermine the search for cross-cultural solidarity, according to Hollenbach.³¹ Human rights can be a fundamental frame of reference for the levels of citizenship mentioned above. A Rwandan tribunal or judicial procedure in The Hague against Slobodan Milosovic were only conceivable against the background of a common interest in human rights.³²

The respect for human rights can be an important vehicle for social cohesion across cultural or ideological boundaries. Hollenbach writes about 'intellectual solidarity', referring to the willingness of people to respectfully learn from each other across boundaries of disparity. Such a dialogue constitutes both a means to an end and an end itself, because it is «both an instrumental procedure and a substantive good».³³ In this dialogic learning process, a strong associational life in civil society, including

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 188-189. Note that Lister calls for «a politics of solidarity in difference»; pp. 80 f.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 159.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 163.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 217.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 158.

religious communities, can play an important role. Social organisations can be a strong weapon in the struggle against social isolation which is a breeding ground for intolerance. On the condition, obviously, that these social organisations, including churches and religious communities, pursue the common good of all citizens and respect the rules regarding freedom of opinion, for example.³⁴

b. Universal human rights, women's rights and the attention to context

Hollenbach is particularly concerned about highlighting poverty issues, linking them to ethnic diversity and/or the social environment in large U.S. towns. However instructive and inspiring his thinking may be, the high level of abstraction is and remains a demerit, with the associated problem of generalisation: *the* refugees, *the* poor, *the* citizens ... as if it were possible to write about the refugees, the poor or the citizens as 'disembodied persons'. Do male or female refugees or poor people experience the same problems? They certainly do to some extent, but not entirely. Generalised language risks being gender-blind. People nevertheless experience their humanity as specific individuals in specific contexts.³⁵ Viewed against this background, it is surprising that people are often aware of the fact that the 'traditional' human rights are rooted in a Western cultural context, but less aware that the violation of those rights has different implications for men and women. Anyone who remains gender-blind can fall into the trap of gender-neutrally formulated standards, laws or regulations. It does not automatically follow that any claim to universality in the human rights discourse must simply be dropped with the risk of slipping into particularity as a standard, but we would argue in favour of a context-sensitive approach to universality.

Let us return briefly to the images described in the introduction to this contribution. An Asian girl flees from napalm bombs, an athlete of Aboriginal origin is invited by the Australian authorities to light the Olympic flame. By considering the context of both pictures, we reinforce the power of the images and the questions they invoke. Not by coincidence both photographs involve a gender issue as well as a story about cultural ethnicity. In the development of a theory it is nevertheless not self-evident to combine the two elements. On the contrary; since Susan Moller Okin's high-profile article in 1999, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, some authors have argued that the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private realm, advocated by 'multiculturalists', may be detrimental to women. Anyone advocating that society should offer people scope to find an expression for specific cultural practices in private, seems to forget that some of these cultural practices or beliefs are oppressive for women. Hollenbach also refers to ethnic diversity, among other things. The

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 77 f.

³⁵ M. HEIMBACH-STEINS, *Menschenrechte der Frauen*, pp. 546-561.

question put by protagonists of women's rights is: are women in these minority groups adequately represented to ensure that their voice is heard in negotiations for the rights of the entire group?³⁶

Not by coincidence did Marianne Heimbach-Steins chose 'Universaler Anspruch und kontextbezogene Konkretisierung' as the subtitle for her contribution.³⁷ Lister refers to 'a differentiated universalism'. Advocates of women rights and so-called 'multiculturalists' can find common ground precisely in the interest of their cause, writes jurist Eva Brems. Remaining gender-blind and/or culture-blind when formulating abstract human rights marginalises the voice of women or of minority groups, she writes. In addition, she attaches great value to the opinion and viewpoint of the people concerned. All too often, outsiders lead the debates and the voice of victims or those immediately concerned is hardly heard. A third issue to be considered is dialogue: among the women themselves, between men and women, between people of different cultures and religions, etc. Dialogue can contribute to differences being acknowledged and bridged, wherever possible. After all, no one benefits from victims competing with each other, despite it being an everyday reality when protecting human rights, in the struggle to catch the attention of the press or politicians or for the (scarce) resources, argues Brems. However, she does not express a view on whether private experiences of injustice eventually strike a note in a universal frame of reference.³⁸

4. *Respect for human rights: Also a theological challenge*

a. Foundational, inspiring stories

Let us briefly revisit Hollenbach. The author argues at great length why «a universalist human rights ethic is required by a Christian commitment to solidarity, not a secularist adversary of the Christian ethos».³⁹ Hollenbach defends intellectual solidarity through dialogue referring to Vaticanum II (*Gaudium et Spes*) and the concept of the human being created in the image of God.⁴⁰

³⁶ G. COENE - C. LONGMAN, *Ten geleide. Rechten, representatie en emancipatie van vrouwen in een multiculturele samenleving*, in G. COENE - C. LONGMAN (eds), *Eigen emancipatie eerst?*, pp. 5-6.

³⁷ Cf. M. HEIMBACH-STEINS, *Menschenrechte der Frauen*.

³⁸ E. BREMS, *Epilogue. Mensenrechten in conflict: gaat de bevordering van vrouwenrechten ten koste van multiculturele rechten en vice versa?* in G. COENE - C. LONGMAN, *Ten geleide*, pp. 156-159.

³⁹ D. HOLLENBACH, *The Common Good*, p. 159.

⁴⁰ Personally, I learnt a great deal about what such social questions can mean to Christians from Professor B. DE CLERCQ, O.P., who raised the theme in publications such as *Menselijk samenleven als opdracht. Grondlijnen van een sociale ethiek*, Leuven 1980 or *Politiek en het goede leven. Zeven hoofdstukken uit een politieke en sociale ethiek*, Leuven 1981, focusing specifically on the motivating power of the so-called 'contrast experiences'; but I will not elaborate any further on this theme in the context of this publication.

To act, even if the actions are not aimed at large political reforms but at survival on a basic level, can be extremely important for someone's personal self-awareness. People can grow as individuals and feel stronger by virtue of the small steps they may take. Such actions and small steps are often recounted or passed on in stories. Stories passed on through oral traditions are very important, particularly in groups with fewer educational opportunities. The adjective 'narrative' has clearly existed in theology for several decades. Some authors attribute a far-reaching theological significance to 'the story', for example the North-American Hauerwas, whose theological ethics is based on the notion of «community as a story-formed community».⁴¹ Some elements of his line of reasoning are tempting, but they also reflect the old debate about dominant relationships in a community. Hauerwas posits that people cannot cope without an inspirational story. If you ask someone: «Who are you?» or «Why are you doing this or that?», you hear a story in reply. People create their identity through a story. The same applies to communities, according to Hauerwas. Communities are able to experience cohesion and collectivity by means of an inspiring, supportive story that offers them a frame of reference, giving their life meaning, values and norms. Hauerwas argues that people should not live in too many story-based communities at once, since this would lead to a blurring of inspiring stories or weakening of the narrative. For example, the Christian story should suffice as complete guidance for the behaviour of Christians, Hauerwas writes.

Such arguments in favour of a single, foundational narrative for an entire community are bound to raise some extremely critical questions. After all, whose story will be told as the 'foundational story'? Usually it will be the story of the dominant group in the community concerned. Anyone advocating one overarching narrative silences the stories of minorities, but also the stories of women. The Afro-American culture critic and woman of letters bell hooks⁴² discusses the potentially oppressive or liberating force of stories in her work. In her writing, she plays with the tension between 'giving voice to' and 'being silent'. One of her most famous works is called *Talking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Talking back, answering back to men, used to be prohibited for Afro-American women in the past and remains problematic to date according to bell hooks.⁴³ 'Talking Back'

⁴¹ See e.g. S. HAUERWAS: *Vision and Virtue. Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection*, Notre Dame 1974; *Character and Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics*, San Antonio (TX) 1975; *Truthfulness and Tragedy. Further Investigations in Christian Ethics*, Notre Dame 1977; *A Community of Character. Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, Notre Dame 1981; *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Life in Between*, Durham (NC) 1988; S. HAUERWAS - D. BURELL, *From System to Story: an Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics*, in S. HAUERWAS - L.G. JONES (eds), *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, Grand Rapids (MI) 1989, pp. 158-190.

⁴² The author bell hooks spells her name with small letters to express the low recognition for Afro-Americans.

⁴³ «As African American women, we have learned to breathe on stolen air, silently so that no one could detect our presence», writes T.L. Fry Brown, who spent many years treating speech and language pathologies. See: T.L. FRY BROWN, *Avoiding Asphyxiation. A Womanist Perspective on*

developed into a standard expression of opposition and resistance. In the film *The Colour Purple*, the expression is used early on, and the furious response of the male counterpart to the 'talking back' speaks volumes. bell hooks clearly indicates in her work how talking and being silent to this day draw the dividing lines between men and women in Afro-American communities. Due to the silence imposed on them, women developed their own language and narrative tradition which is passed on 'for and among women'. These stories have a high testimonial value and work as a 'survival strategy' or 'traditional survival' in the dual meaning of the term: survival and 'to hand on' from the Latin *tradere*.⁴⁴

b. Hagar: A Biblical story about interdependence, female corporeality and survival

Some elements of this viewpoint I also found in the book *Sisters in the Wilderness. The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* by the Afro-American womanist theologian Delores Williams.⁴⁵ Williams' analyses are a prime example for the significance of theoretical viewpoints regarding 'intersectionality' in theology. Gender theories often refer to the importance of intersectionality, i.e. the interconnectedness of various aspects determining people's lives, such as gender, economic status, ethnicity, age, sexual preference, etc., with specific attention being paid to the position of power of those involved.⁴⁶ Intersectionality therefore adds a particular focus to the aforementioned 'competition between victims': in reality, in the life of a single individual, it tends not to be a question of either gender or ethnicity, but rather of a combination of both. Afro-American feminist or womanist writers, among others, have contributed in important ways to the development of theories of intersectionality.⁴⁷

In contrast to interpretations of biblical stories from the perspectives of liberation theology, for example based on Exodus, Williams introduces the possibility of another interpretation which is focused on survival rather than on liberation.⁴⁸ She observes that survival is more directly related to

Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Transformation, in E.M. TOWNES (ed), *Embracing the Spirit. Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation and Transformation*, New York 1997, p. 73.

⁴⁴ See on this issue: V. DRAULANS, *Verhalen vertellen als 'survival strategie'*, in «Vrouw-en Geloofkrant», 2 (2001), pp. 5-12.

⁴⁵ D. WILLIAMS, *Sisters in the Wilderness. The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, New York 1993, a.o. pp. 15-40.

⁴⁶ See the contribution of M.K. Moser, in this volume.

⁴⁷ About intersectionality in general: E-QUALITY, *Lezingenbundel Intersectionaliteit*, Den Haag 2003; in theology, see for example A. DE COENE, *Kleur bekennen. De ontwikkeling van een kritische, witte feministische theologie*, in «Tijdschrift voor Theologie», 46 (2006), 4, pp. 355-376.

⁴⁸ For a discussion, see for example A.E. BROWN CRAWFORD, *Hope in the Holler. A Womanist Theology*, Louisville (KY) - London 2002, pp. 8-9, 94-96, 106, 114; K.A. MCLEAN, *Calvin and the Personal Politics of Providence*, in A.P. PAUW - S. JONES (eds), *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, Louisville (KY) - London 2006, pp. 117-120; M. MARTIN, *Between Vocation and Work. A Womanist Notion of a Work Ethic*, in A.P. PAUW - S. JONES (eds), *Feminist and Womanist Essays*, pp. 172-174; S.Y. MITCHEM, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, New York 2002, pp. 81-85.

the history and everyday reality of contemporary Afro-American women. The biblical figure of Hagar, who has been playing a role in Afro-American culture for over 100 years, is central to Williams' work. Sculptures, poetry and literature depict the female slave of African origin who was forced to act as a surrogate mother and who gave life to a child fathered by her master, because of her mistress's infertility. Williams convincingly draws parallels between the figure of Hagar and the situation of Afro-American women: both have African roots, Hagar was a female slave and is bringing the history of slavery closer to home, Hagar experienced hostility from Sarah, a hostility that Afro-American women also experienced as slaves or when employed as free women in the way they were treated by white women. Just like Hagar and her son, Afro-American slaves were the property of their master. And just like in the time of Hagar, in the days of the slave trade the master was free to avail himself of the corporeality and sexuality of female slaves. Just like Hagar and Ismaël were eventually left to their own devices, many black women with a child fathered by the landowner were cast off and left to fend for themselves. Last but not least, Hagar lived as a single mother with her child, drawing on a very strong relationship with God, which gave her the strength to survive. Williams observes that even today, Afro-American women bear witness to the power of religious experiences in their church communities.

The story of Hagar can also be read as a narrative telling us about shifting and sometimes subtle power relationships between women. Sarah is a mistress obviously superior, but Hagar is a fertile woman with the strength to give birth to a child. As a slave, Hagar doesn't count and others control her body, but her fertility gives her something 'extra' in comparison to her female mistress. When Sarah becomes a mother herself later on, she mercilessly makes use of her power to send mother and child, Hagar and Ismaël, away into the wilderness of the desert despite Abraham's hesitations.

In her book, Williams takes issue with the force of the dominant interpretation, despite it being predisposed to liberation theology. She argues that God's answers to Hagar's complaint can hardly be called liberating. The first time, God summons Hagar to return to Abraham and Sarah and to submit to her masters. Hagar obeys, returns and gives birth to Ismaël, the son of Abraham. When she is expelled together with her child, Hagar once again has a strong religious experience in the desert. She finds the strength to survive. Hagar chooses an Egyptian wife for her son, an archer. Afro-American theologians see this as her wish to connect to her own cultural heritage rather than to the culture of Abraham and Sarah, her oppressors.

The story of Hagar offers Afro-American women powerful parallels to their own experiences of poverty, sexual and economic exploitation, violence, homelessness, motherhood, one-parent families, ethnicity, etc. It is a very specific story, in which corporeality, fertility, the quality of

life and power do not feature in a theoretical, abstract way but are very real in and through the central characters of the story. The Hagar story is also stimulating because of the way it describes religious experiences. Rather than emphasising God's liberating intervention, the focus in this story is on a religious experience that gives the strength for survival.⁴⁹ Hagar experiences these moments of empowerment in the middle of the wilderness and in the bleak desert: in situations of utter misery, death or destruction, God is found as the one providing a way out, the one who makes it possible to survive. Williams questions the symbol of the cross as a symbol of redemption. She argues that the metaphor of redemption through innocent suffering is in fact destructive for powerless people who are the victim of poverty, violence and exploitation.⁵⁰ The metaphor of redemption is not Jesus' death, but his life of resistance and survival, she argues.⁵¹

5. *A case in point: The vulnerability of Dalit women*

I also found a reference to the Hagar story in a testimony of the Flemish nun Jeanne Devos, founder of the National Domestic Workers Movement in India, who was nominated alongside other women for the Nobel Peace Prize for her dedication to children's and women's rights:

«Domestic workers are frequently subjected to inhuman punishments for trivial matters. If they happen to break a glass, they may be deprived of food for several days or given a beating. I know at least ten children who died after ill-treatment or after so-called 'accidents'. A similar thing happened to Kavita. We went to visit her at night, because she had been beaten up. When she saw us, she said: 'I knew you would come.' It sounds like the God of Hagar: 'God who sees me' and 'I will be there for you'. Kavita is doing well now. She is going into higher education. I hope she will decide to read law».⁵²

The struggle of Dalit women in India against oppression is an interesting, and at the same time tragic example, since they are subject to several dimensions of oppression simultaneously. Estimates of the number of Dalits in India vary. Some sources talk of 160 million, others mention

⁴⁹ D. WILLIAMS, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, pp. 159-161, 193 f.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 161-167. Cf. p. 167: «Humankind is, then, redeemed through Jesus' ministerial vision of life and not through his death. There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross ... As Christians, black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify the sin of defilement».

⁵¹ In another publication, Delores Williams describes three strategies that black people can use in their struggle for survival and their pursuit of a better quality of life. These are: remembering heroes (both 'heroes and sheroes'), changing from a 'can't do' to a 'can do' attitude, and last but not least, trusting in a critical but constructive and reflective approach and planning, without being overtly led by emotions. See in this respect: D.S. WILLIAMS, *Straight Talk, Plain Talk. Womanist Words about Salvation in a Social Context*, in E.M. TOWNES (ed), *Embracing the Spirit*, pp. 105-117.

⁵² J. DEVOS, *Het gaat erom dat we ons verliezen voor de ander*, in CMC, «Jaarverslag 2004», p. 17; J. DEVOS - G. VAN THIENEN, *In naam van alle kinderen*, Tiel 2006, p. 13.

200 to 250 million Dalits. In this section of the population, 75% lives below the poverty line. Just above 16% of the total female population in India belongs to the Dalit group. Dalit women, who are outcastes, are said to suffer a maximum level of discrimination because they belong to the lowest caste and the lowest social-economic group, bear the consequences of specific cultural traditions and they are women, too.⁵³ This mutually reinforcing influence of caste and class is referred to by some authors using the blend *claste*.⁵⁴

What does survival mean in a situation of extremely high levels of illiteracy and huge health problems? Figures suggest that in some areas, the percentage of illiteracy among women is increasing rather than decreasing. Others are constantly in control over the body and sexuality of Dalit women, for example by turning them into a specific target group for family planning. Dalits are humiliated into doing the lowest work, such as cleaning:⁵⁵ cleaning toilets or clearing away excrements is rated as the dirtiest work possible. Sometimes their only strategy for survival is to search through domestic waste. It is obvious that this leads to a vicious circle with even more health problems.

a. Vulnerable to violence

A combination of all these factors makes Dalit women particularly vulnerable to various types and levels of violence. Rape has already been mentioned elsewhere in this article as a weapon of war, targeted not only at the individual woman but also intended to confront the men in that section of the population with their inability to protect the women. Mary Grey writes on this subject: «Dalit women are raped as a way of humiliating Dalit men».⁵⁶

A very particular form of violence was temple prostitution, which was in fact religiously legitimised violence, ‘celebrating’ the loss of virginity and the initiation into prostitution. In the Devadasi system, young girls were

⁵³ JUSTITIA ET PAX et al., *Geweld tegen Dalit-vrouwen: waarom ongestraft?* Rotterdam 2006, p. 5. This compilation is a selection of texts from the Institute of Development Education, Action and Studies (IDEAS), *Dalit Women Speak Out – Violence against Dalit Women in India*, Madurai 2006; M. GREY, *Dalit Women and the Struggle for Justice in a World of Global Capitalism*, in «Feminist Theology», 14 (2005), 1, pp. 130-131. M. Grey bases her analysis on G. DIETRICH, *The Relationship between Women’s Movement and Dalit Movements: Case Study and Conceptual Analysis*, in *A New Thing on Earth: Hopes and Fears Facing Feminist Theology*, Delhi 2001, among others.

⁵⁴ M. MELANCHTHON, *Indian Dalit Women and the Bible*, in U. KING - T. BEATTIE, *Gender, Religion and Diversity. Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, London - New York 2005, p. 215.

⁵⁵ It should be noted that ‘domestic work’ comprises a wide range of jobs on different levels, from work that is generally appreciated to work that is not. Home-based work, interpreted as caring for others, possibly for small children, sick people or elderly people, is included in ‘care activities’, clearly distinguished from ‘domestic services’, such as cleaning jobs, involving looking after material things with less association to care work. In the wider scope of thinking about care ethics, this distinction and the associated hierarchy of respect and status deserves more attention. It would lead me too far astray here to develop this thought within the context of this contribution.

⁵⁶ M. GREY, *Dalit Women and the Struggle for Justice*, p. 137.

married off to the temple goddess. The men who use those girls believe that it gives them sexual contact with the goddess itself. These practices were officially prohibited not before the 1980s, but as so often, reality paints a different picture from the one laid down in law. The dividing line and transition from religiously legitimised prostitution to commercial prostitution was and still is very blurred in this respect.

b. Social midfield organisations

Dalit women fail to gain attention from any direction. The women's movement in general is more oriented towards Hindu women and certainly not to outcaste women. Without wishing to deny the problems Hindu women have in common with Dalit women, it is nevertheless important to be aware of the consequences of the mechanisms of exclusion imposed by the caste system. In addition, the Indian women's movement has less affinity with women in rural areas, whereas caste discrimination is much more prevalent in rural areas than in cities. There is a specific Dalit movement, actively trying to place the situation of the Dalits on the social and political agenda, but this particular movement pays little attention to the specific problems affecting Dalit women. What's more, even Dalit men benefit from preserving certain oppressive practices: by subjecting Dalit women to violence, Dalit men compensate for their own vulnerable and powerless social position.⁵⁷

c. Creating refuge

It is important to approach Dalit women not only in terms of their victim role: «If the victim refuses to be a victim, the power at the top of the hierarchy gets destabilised».⁵⁸ Dalit women are creative in looking for so-called refuges, some scope for freedom, although such refuges are not always recognised as actual refuges by women analysing the situation from a pronounced Western point of view with in-built resistance against any form of female self-sacrifice.⁵⁹ Quite a few testimonies exist to indicate how acts of resistance, closely associated to daily activities, can empower women. At the same time, such forms of political activity result in increased vulnerability, because activism is not always gratefully received by everyone.⁶⁰

Nuns play a crucial role in creating refuges and safe houses open to women of all denominations. Jeanne Devos aptly articulates what a refuge can mean:

⁵⁷ JUSTITIA ET PAX et al., *Geweld tegen Dalit-vrouwen*, pp. 8-9; M. GREY, *Dalit Women and the Struggle for Justice*, pp. 137-138.

⁵⁸ G. DIETRICH, *The Relationship between Women's Movement*, p. 239, quoted in M. GREY, *Dalit Women and the Struggle for Justice*, p. 146.

⁵⁹ M. GREY, *Dalit Women and the Struggle for Justice*, pp. 132-133.

⁶⁰ JUSTITIA ET PAX et al., *Geweld tegen Dalit-vrouwen*, pp. 13-14.

«I remember my very first meeting with six young domestic servants, whom we had trouble rounding up. The oldest one was eleven years old, while the youngest was six. I had prepared myself for every possible scenario. I had brought enough money to go to the cinema, to visit the town and to buy an ice-cream. They would also have been free to play, to run around or to go to the park. Plenty of opportunities for a child that has been locked up in a stranger's house. I asked them what they would prefer to do most of all: 'Sister', the girls said, 'we would like to be allowed to cry. Because when we cry in the house we are living in, the lady tells us that we did not go there to cry, but to work'. It left me completely speechless. I had expected anything except this. That being allowed to cry would be their greatest wish'». ⁶¹

d. Religion as a potential resource for survival and resistance

Of the twenty million Christians in India, 75% belong to the Dalit section of the population, 60% of Indian Catholics are Dalits. But this does not resolve the caste problem or the inferior position of women in the Catholic/Christian (Dalit) community. On the contrary, it poses a dual challenge: to be critical of the patriarchal presumptions in one's own religious tradition as well as to search for the liberating forces both within and outside that tradition.

The minority position of Christians in India and the Christian option not to restrict debates about human rights to one's own community, but to reason from the common good, requires shared and joint efforts, across the boundaries of denominations or ideologies. ⁶²

For Dalits, earth and water are crucially important elements for survival. So it is hardly surprising that they worship the earth and the earth goddess as their mother, as a nourishing source of life. Assigning a place to those elements in the rituals of the great dominant religions like Hinduism, Islam or Christianity is not so self-evident. Mary Grey writes that religion gives Dalits the strength to survive and to resist, also by reallocating a place to traditional myths and stories in their religious conscience.

A great challenge to Christian theology is its readiness to recast traditional central concepts of salvation and redemption with images of well-being, growth and dignity, while assigning a central value to survival. The fact that the majority of the Dalit group is illiterate and has no access to a written text makes the challenge even more complex. The richness of the visual and the audible, as it is recorded in the narrative of stories, must therefore be more valorised:

«The narrating of the story becomes a vehicle for understanding attitudes, cultural taboos, relationships in families and kinship networks, and many forms of social behaviour». ⁶³

⁶¹ J. DEVOS - G. VAN THIENEN, *In naam van alle kinderen*, pp. 13, 9-10.

⁶² M. GREY, *Dalit Women and the Struggle for Justice*, pp. 144-145; M. MELANCHTHON, *Indian Dalit Women and the Bible*, pp. 217-219.

⁶³ M. MELANCHTHON, *Indian Dalit Women and the Bible*, p. 222.

6. *In summary*

«When difference generates conflict, fear grows».⁶⁴ This article started from the question about the types of difference people find most difficult to deal with. We also described the context of conflict with regard to female bodies in three pictures: a girl fleeing from napalm bombs, an athlete of Aboriginal origin, and 'Women of Britain say: Go!'. Elsewhere in the article, we highlighted female suicide terrorists, Palestinian women using their bodies as a living shield to protect their husbands against the Israeli forces, protesting mothers on the Plaza de Mayo, pacifist mothers protesting against the fact that their children were sent to conflict zones by the Russian armed forces, Jeanne Devos and her dedication to the Domestic Workers Movement, the biblical woman Hagar whose fertile body is a cause of attraction and repulsion, a source of life and a reason to be expelled. Case by case, they bear witness to the tension between the passive victim role and active resistance.

Ruth Lister opposes the passive victim role and invites us to revise our concept of citizenship into a concept that is at least rooted in real people of flesh and blood who can be (politically) active in society in many different ways and on many different levels. But what motivates people to take the step to actual engagement, in particular when other people's interests are at stake? David Hollenbach hopes that people are prepared to go further than showing mere tolerance confirming the *status quo*, that they will understand their interdependence, and that their actions will be based on mutual respect and equivalence. Solidarity is a key concept in this respect. My major criticism of Hollenbach's analysis is that he barely pays attention to the gender dimension in his pursuance of 'the common good'. But arguing in favour of less gender-blindness and more contextuality is not automatically the same as negating the universal claim of the human rights' discourse. The stance that everything should only ever be considered in its context would seriously undermine the search for cross-cultural solidarity. Fundamental, abstract and gender-neutrally formulated human rights do need to be translated into more gender-conscious, context-sensitive measures. The very ambitious Millennium Development Goals are in any case an explicit step in the right direction. This article finishes as it started: by referring to very real women's lives. This time not in images, but in words. The biblical story of Hagar was and is a source of inspiration for many women in their struggle for survival, often women who are forced to live at the margin of society, like the outcaste Dalit women. Those stories, with their cry for more justice and recognition of human rights, simply cannot be told from a 'disembodied' perspective. Solidarity and mutual alliance is necessarily a physically experienced solidarity.

⁶⁴ D. HOLLENBACH, *The Common Good*, p. 21.