

## Destigmatizing Eve:

### Tackling the Underlying Culture of Patriarchal Honor and Shame Undermining the Work of Christian Relief and Development



*“Fall”*

*Die Bibel in Bildern [Picture Bible],*  
Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, 1860.

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Christian relief and development (CRD) organizations work in patriarchal societies and cultures that devalue women and girls and limit the opportunities and rights they have. Through a theology of the “curse of Eve,” Christianity has extended this view of women as inferior, unclean, meant for subjugation, shameful, side-lined, and to blame for evil in the world. We explore how the theological and sociological drivers behind the “curse of Eve,” continue to have a shaming and blaming effect on females throughout the whole life cycle, with a vivid example of the experiences of widows in Kenya. The CRD sector has a strategic role in addressing theological and mythical roots of gender-based oppression. We explore ways in which the CRD sector can transform the deep roots of this historic and global stigma and suggest some tools for tackling structural stigmatization of women and girls.

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*From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die.*

(Sirach 25:16-26, one of the oldest attributions of sin with Eve, and by extension, all women (Early 2022, 11))

## Introduction

Christian relief and development (CRD) organizations work in patriarchal societies and cultures that present a number of challenges, not least of which are the ways that females are devalued and the opportunities for women and girls to develop and use their gifts and skills to flourish are lacking. Unfortunately, this is a problem that affects CRD organizations as well as the societies they work in, and the sector has a mixed history when it comes to an understanding of, focus on, and commitment to the role of women in its organizations and programs. On the one hand, a significant number of CRD actors have made gender balance, mainstreaming, and empowerment a significant focus of their efforts starting as early as the late 1970s and early 1980s (Bridget 1999; Tripp 1999). Many others, however, have lagged significantly behind, as shown by the analysis conducted by Amy Reynolds in this volume.

This article explores a long and enduring theological legacy—with mythic roots dating back to the advent of patriarchal societal norms in the third millennium BCE, continuing through early Mesopotamian and Hebrew culture into the early centuries of the church and then through all the significant epochs of Christendom—which viewed women as inferior and *not* made in the image of God. Indeed, women are considered inheritors of a shameful, inferior nature associated with evil and deception. This legacy lives on as an inherited psychic wound in our world today and underpins the societal, cultural, and organizational tendencies to limit the role that women play and the opportunities and rights that they have. This article posits that the Christian relief and development (CRD) sector has a strategic and high impact role to play in addressing not only the humanitarian symptoms of this ancient and systemic myth of female inferiority that lives on in our collective human subconsciousness, but also the theological and mythic roots that underlie gender-based sidelining and oppression. Only then can CRD live up to a unique role as “active restorers of shalom”—as described in the Principles for Gender Equality for Development Organizations (Wheaton Network Initiative n.d.)—in the larger global effort to create a more gender-balanced world in which all human beings can live together in a state of shared honor, mutuality, and shalom.

In making this case, we present three main points. First, we argue that it is important to better understand, with love and humility, how our own tradition has

participated, along with all of our world’s religions, in the *oldest global stigmatization in human history*: the denigration of the female half of the human family as inferior, unclean, meant for subjugation, shameful, side-lined, and to blame for evil in the world. At the core of this ancient yet enduring stigma lies a very old story—the “curse of Eve”—which has been passed down and reinterpreted through the ages and popularized into modern secular and Christian consciousness that came to associate evil, shame, and low moral character with Eve/women and likewise all things honorable and Godlike with men. As Tova Bernbaum describes in *The Curse of Eve: A Jewish Perspective on Women in Society*, “There is a primordial aspect to the struggle for [women’s] equality” deeply embedded in the mythic layers of modern society that defies logic and so much progress that has been made to shift to a more gender equal society” (2005, 1). This article traces how this harmful, hierarchical, ontological dualism (and related tendency to blame women for bad things that happen) was a thread present in the cultural fabric in which the Bible was written and interpreted over many centuries.

Second, we consider how the legacies of this story of Eve/women as members of a stigmatized second class continue to loom large over gender norms in our world and, by extension, how it lives on in the global humanitarian realities that Christian relief and development (CRD) organizations address. We briefly examine the meaning and impact of stigma and how it applies to women and girls in particular. We then explore how the theological and sociological drivers behind the “curse of Eve,” continue to have a shaming and blaming effect on females throughout the whole life cycle. We argue the deep gender dimensions of honor-shame acculturation live within our own faith tradition and in our collective consciousness as a global family. Finally, we turn to a case study of widows in Kenya and the work of Nyanam Widows Rising to illustrate this problem.

And third, we explore ways in which the CRD sector can work harder to transform the deep roots of this historic and global stigma that is still so laced with tradition and religion, and that is still alive and well in and around CRD. In so doing, we suggest how CRD organizations can more proactively use their platforms of change and connection with Christian faith communities and the NGO sector around the world to do the needed work of deep healing and repair to restore “shalom” to our world’s gender norms. We must “destigmatize Eve” as the archetypal female who represents the female half of the human family. The CRD sector is uniquely positioned to do this deeper work beneath the surface of our world’s gender-based humanitarian scourge and to shine a light on the curse and stigma itself. Such work can loosen the grip of stigma’s stain on the invisible norms that are at play in

the particular religious and cultural context(s) where they are engaged. Five concrete practices are recommended. These include (1) naming and reversing the shaming of Eve, (2) cultivating a posture of curiosity around how this harmful Eve mythology became steeped within Christianity today and how we can read Scripture differently, (3) deep listening to women who have been stigmatized, (4) formal lamenting for the part the Church has played in this stigmatization, and lastly, (5) engaging in contemplative practices around this issue.

## Origins: The Ancient Stigmatization of Eve and Inferiority of Women

*I wondered how such a situation came about, whereby half – in fact just over half – of the world’s population was created inferior to the other half? Whether this occurred at Eve’s birth, because a higher power decided to make something less than perfect or after a long process of evolution, this appeared nonsensical: the first seemed out of character, and by the second process, the number of females in the world would be decreasing through selection. So why and how did these myths about women’s inferiority arise and why did they persist so long?*

(Crandall 2012, 1)

As people working within the Christian relief and development sector today who care about the uplift and dignity of women, we need to be curious and ask this question. We should be humble and mindful of the mixed history of Christianity on our world’s gender norms. Christianity remains the world’s largest religion, accounting for roughly a third of the global population (Zurlo et al. 2024, 50) and, over the course of its history, has left an indelible mark on our world, for good and for ill. Implicit in the work of CRD is the belief that there is something about Christianity that has been and continues to be a force behind human uplift, justice, and shared liberation. We rightly point to the example of Jesus and how he challenged the norms of the day to treat all human beings, including women, with dignity. His respect stood in contrast to the exclusion or inferior treatment of women that was the norm in the Middle Eastern culture of his day.

In a world where patriarchal norms so stubbornly persist and are resurgent in virtually all cultures on this planet, we can proudly hold onto this example of Jesus and the earliest days of the Church as our north star. If we truly want to make strides in creating a better world and work with cultures that honor women and turn the page on the historic and global pandemic of systemic violence towards and devaluation of women and girls, we need to take the time to be curious, and to understand the particular way that Christianity has used

its theological platform and social capital over the centuries. Theology has been used to sanction and perpetuate a harmful “honor gap” (Jones and Misolo 2018) across the gender line, which elevated the masculine as honorable and Godlike, and stigmatized females as inferior, shameful, and to blame for bad things that happen in the world.

As Joseph E. Early explains in *Because of Eve: Historical and Theological Survey of the Subjugation of Women in the Christian Tradition*, this inquiry rightly begins with the story of Eve. As Early points out, “The history of how men in the Bible define women begins with Eve. Because she was the first woman, and because of her role in the Fall, men have presented her as the archetype of all women” (2022, 2). This is not an easy story to tell as there are many historical, cultural, and theological threads that have evolved over time to create the popularized story of Eve that we have received from the past. In every generation, how Eve is interpreted is a window into the gender norms of the day. To understand how Eve, and by extension all women, became stigmatized as an inferior, subjugated class of human beings, it is necessary to turn back the page and spotlight the ancient roots of this stigma, beginning within the early Israelite tradition and the early Christian fathers of the faith, who formulated the theological containers that we now understand as orthodox Christianity.



The first point is that in the original Hebrew context, Eve actually had a high and exalted status as *Chavah* (חַוָּה), the “Mother of all Living” who had a close connection with Creation and reflected the image and likeness of the Creator. “Eve” (/i:v/) is an English given name for a female derived from the Latin name *Eva*. It originates from the Hebrew חַוָּה (*Chavah/Havah* - *chavah*), to breathe, and *chayah*, to live, or to give life. The traditional meaning of “Eve” is “life” or “living.” It can also mean “full of life” and “mother of life” (Meyers 2021; Crispe 2006). Yet over the centuries of Christendom, the Church Fathers created a “theology

of Eve” that became justification for the low, servile place women were expected to occupy in male-dominated family and society that treated them like property. Customs emerged like polygamy, concubinage, wife beating, male inheritance, and particular dress codes that symbolized her shame and subjection. Purity codes treated normal bodily functions as unclean, and myriad forms of exclusion restricted women from the full sovereignty of adulthood.



*Don't be such an Eve... Know your place... Eve didn't complain, so why should you...* and other variations of admonitions have been heard over many centuries in sermons, Bible studies, and marriage seminars the world over. These come directly from the theology developed by these Church Fathers centuries ago. In fact, it is quite shocking to read passages today from these Church Fathers on the subject of Eve, and in what follows is a sampling of those passages. The Church Fathers made three main points in their stigmatization of Eve and hence of all women; first, Eve was the pathway for evil to enter the world and therefore bears the blame and shame; second, women inherently have that of Eve in them, insofar a tendency towards evil and duplicity; and third, Eve (and all women) are inferior to, and defective in comparison with, Adam in all dimensions.

### ***Eve and Women as the Source of Evil and Shame***

First, Eve is seen as the pathway through which evil entered the world, and as a result, all women are tainted in the same way. Tertullian, one of the earliest and most prominent of the church fathers born in 160 AD, is particularly graphic in his depiction:

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's

image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die. And do you think about adorning yourself over and above your tunics of skins? (*De Cultu Feminarium (On the Apparel of Women)*, Chapter 1, as cited by Mowczko 2013).

Clement of Alexandria, a contemporary of Tertullian in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, theologized that given this inherently culpable nature of women, “[Women’s] very consciousness of their own nature must evoke feelings of shame” (*Pedagogues II* 33, 2, as cited in Tarico 2013).

The second main point of this theology is that women are inherently duplicitous temptresses. “Watch out that she does not twist and turn you for the worse. What is the difference whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman,” cautions Augustine a few hundred years later (*Letter to Laetus*, Letter 243.10, as cited in Mowczko 2013).

The third way that Eve, and by extension all women, were stigmatized from the early stages in the theology of the Church Fathers is by declaring that she was inferior and defective in all aspects as compared to Adam. The first line of argument along these lines is that she was not made fully in the image of God, as was Adam, a point expressed clearly by Augustine:

... the woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that that whole substance may be one image; but when she is referred separately to her quality of help-meet, which regards the woman herself alone, then she is not the image of God; but as regards the man alone, he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman too is joined with him in one” (*On the Trinity* 12.7.10, as cited in Mowczko 2013).

As a result, theologized Origen in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century, God regards women as inferior as well, in that “What is seen with the eyes of the Creator is masculine, and not feminine, for God does not stoop to look upon what is feminine and of the flesh” (*Selecta in Exodum (Fragments on Exodus)*, Patrologia Graeca 12, Column 296–297, as cited in Mowczko 2013).

This argument that women are not made fully in the image of God was joined with the argument that women are inherently inferior intellectually, morally, and spiritually, as Augustine also details:

I don't see what sort of help woman was created to provide man with, if one excludes procreation. If woman is not given to man for

help in bearing children, for what help could she be? To till the earth together? If help were needed for that, man would have been a better help for man. The same goes for comfort in solitude. How much more pleasure is it for life and conversation when two friends live together than when a man and a woman cohabit?" ". . . woman was given to man, woman who was of small intelligence and who perhaps still lives more in accordance with the promptings of the inferior flesh than by superior reason. Is this why the apostle Paul does not attribute the image of God to her? (*De Genesi ad literam (The Literal Meaning of Genesis)* 9.5.9, 11.42, as cited in Mowczko 2013)

By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, this misogynistic theology was well established, as seen in the words of Aquinas:

But woman is naturally of less strength and dignity than man . . . As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence. Such as that of a south wind, which is moist, as the Philosopher observes... One is servile, by virtue of which a superior makes use of a subject for his own benefit; and this kind of subjection began after sin. There is another kind of subjection which is called economic or civil, whereby the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good; and this kind of subjection existed even before sin. For good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates" (*Summa Theologica*, Vol. I, Q. 92, Art. 1, Objection 2, Reply to Objection 1, as cited in Mowczko 2013)

Moreover, many leading figures of the Reformation, such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox, draw on and propagate these arguments. According to Knox,

Nature I say, paints [women] further to be weak, frail, impatient, feeble and foolish: and experience has declared them to be inconstant, variable, cruel and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment [or, leadership]...Woman in her greatest perfection was made to serve and obey

man . . . (*The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, as cited in Mowczko 2013).

Thankfully, there are other theological currents within church history that affirm that women too possess the image of God, such as the Reformation concepts like the priesthood of all believers and the right of all people to read the Bible, the Quaker notion of "inner light" and mysticism, and minority viewpoints within the dominantly patriarchal heritage of the church that have sought to reclaim the spiritual equality we see in the gospels. Yet the negative male stereotypes of women as morally deficient and more prone to sin persisted into the modern era of the church and still to this day. Justifications to exclude women from leadership in the family, church, and society continue to center around the same appeals to Eve as the originator of sin in the world and the need for women to "know their place" in the created, biblical order. It is to these legacies that we now turn.

## The Legacies of Interpreting Eve: A Mirror of Larger Cultural and Theological Shifts

*We are living inside the dreams of dead people. All these kings, priests and poets from hundreds of years ago created powerful stories that still shape how we behave and think today.*  
*It's as if these dead people are still controlling us from beyond the grave*  
(Harari and Ruiz 2022,  
as cited in McKenzie 2022)

How the story of Eve was and is interpreted has shaped how generations of humans over the millennia have come to think about what it means to be a female human being. One cannot ignore how the dominant Christianized retelling of the story of Eve has shaped gender norms over many centuries and made women scapegoats for evil done by men to them (Milne 1989). As Christians, most of us have inherited the negative, shaming and blaming theology of Eve that continues to persist in our churches, ministries, non-profits and, most of all, within our collective imaginations.

As CRD practitioners, we need to guard against the tendency to focus on what we know to be the positive, liberating message of the gospel and be willing to look at the underbelly of the dominant trajectory of Christianity and its complicity in the global stigma that, from cradle to grave, still looms large over the female half of the human family. Anyone engaged in some aspect of CRD related to the multifaceted conditions that surround women's and girls' lives knows well the continued pervasive cultural devaluation of females that

persists in our world, and which exposes them to much emotional, psychological, and physical harm, and continually sidelines them from full participation in society. It is chilling how the human penchant for scapegoating a group deemed inferior continues to be manifest in the sexual double standard that we see around the world where victims of sexual violence are all too often blamed and shamed for not wearing the right clothes and “causing a man to stumble.” Delving into this topic can be uncomfortable but can open a doorway of understanding to better understand the negative impact that Christianity has played in the evolution of gender norms in our world. We do not need to beat ourselves up, but learn how we can address root causes and be part of positive change in creating the safer and more mutually respectful world we seek for all human beings. Three issues will help us understand these legacies better; (1) the meaning and impact of stigma, (2) the lingering effect of the patriarchal culture of honor and shame, and (3) the way the latter is upheld through systems justification.

### The Meaning, Operation, and Impact of Stigma

We all know on some level what stigma is, but unpacking it and explaining how it functions helps us in two main ways; first, to better isolate and illuminate humanity’s oldest stigma of gender-based oppression, and second, to understand how it continues to be shrouded in the collective human imagination through cherished traditions, symbols, and religious mythology that give it a type of fixed idea of “just the way things are.” We look briefly at several definitions of stigma and how it tends to operate, and then consider how the stigmatization of women and girls functions today.

First, the term “stigma” derives from the Latin word *stigmat* which referred to a brand or mark burned into the skin of enslaved people, criminals, and those deemed traitors. These marks were used to identify certain groups of people as “blemished” and impure and worthy of being shunned (Swaim 2023). Dictionary definitions of stigma are “a mark of shame or discredit: stain” (Merriam Webster Dictionary n.d.), “a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person” (Oxford Languages Dictionary n.d.), and “a mark of disgrace or infamy; a stain or reproach, as on one’s reputation” (Dictionary.com).

Second, the study of how stigma operates began most prominently in the 1960s, when sociologist Erving Goffman defined it as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” and that disqualifies a person from full social acceptance (Goffman 1963, as cited in Clair 2018, 1). Goffman’s study of stigma makes four important points for the purposes of this article. First, stigmas can be hard to detect because they are so embedded in the cultural/religious fabric and reflect a

subconscious valuing that cannot be addressed by humanitarian interventions alone. Second, and related to the first, the real challenge with stigma is that it can persist for many generations as we see across many racial and ethnic stratifications globally. Third, stigma operates at both *micro* and *macro* levels, “restricting the well-being of stigmatized individuals” (micro) and operating on a structural level (macro) with “population-level consequences, and collective responses... reproduc[ing] social inequality through the maintenance of group hierarchies” (Clair 2018, abstract). And fourth, the relevance of the study of stigma has been not only to understand how it functions, but most importantly, as Clair states, to “identify the conditions that foster destigmatization” (Clair 2018, abstract).

Goffman’s broad definition of stigma touches on many contemporary “discredited attributes,” including what he defines as “tribal stigmas” (e.g., race, ethnicity, and religion), “physical deformities” (e.g., deafness, blindness, and leprosy), and “blemishes of character” (e.g., homosexuality, addiction, mental illness), but it does not specifically address gender (Clair 2018, 1). In fact, it is notable that in most places where different categories of stigma are mentioned in the studies above, there is little to no addressing of the first and the oldest form of stigma that lives on within other stigmas and cuts across most cultures: the patriarchal denigration of the female. This is in part because the stigmatization of females goes back to pre-history, making it hard to trace, even though it is embedded in all the world’s venerable traditions that have shaped our collective imaginations and mental models upon which civilization was built.

Because gender-based beliefs, practices, and norms are so laced with venerable tradition and religious narrative that live on in our collective imagination and give patriarchy a holy sounding sanction and immovability, we tend not to see gender stratification in the same vein as racial and ethnic forms of stigma that led to horrific incidents of genocide and/or slavery. Because biological females make up half of the human family and because this form of oppression is so ancient and laden with venerable tradition that has shaped our collective imagination, it is hard to name and see the stigmatization of females in the same vein as more well-recognized stigmatized minority groups, which leads to an examination of the second aspect of the legacies of the theologies of stigmatization developed by the Church Fathers around women; the way that they were and are a part of the structures of patriarchy that continue to operate today.

## The Lingering Hold of the Patriarchal Culture of Honor with Shamed & Blamed Females as Inferior & Evil

*... for even though the feminine voice is gaining prominence in our society, her essence remains mostly in the shadows. That essence is part of a truth that patriarchal culture buried thousands of years ago and confined to the darkest corners of our memory. Yet its truth also remains in everything, and is within reach.*

(Warden 2022)

We first briefly consider the definition of patriarchy, then explore how patriarchy operates to stigmatize women based on social stratification and the code of honor and shame. We conclude with an analysis of how the justification of patriarchy allows it to persist.

First, the word “patriarchy” has a host of definitions, some more comprehensive than others. A basic definition, drawn from the Oxford English dictionary is that patriarchy is “a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it” (Oxford English Dictionary 2023). Most definitions of patriarchy define it in terms of male power/dominance over women, but there is a set of factors at play that illuminate what and how this social structure arose and functions (Christ 2022).

Second, the range of definitions and multifaceted nature of how patriarchy operates points to how it is, at its core, a structure of social stratification, rooted in stigma. As with all stratification, the superior group is deemed to be inherently made of a higher, more godlike substance and thus is deemed as a “master” worthy of ruling and owning others; and the inferior, stigmatized group is seen as inherently made of a lower, defective substance meant for subjugation and often associated with evil. When applied to women and girls today, we tend not to use the language of women being “unclean” as a reason for excluding women from leadership and participation in church life, even though this has been a consistent belief throughout humankind’s patriarchal heritage. The legacies of the theology of the Church Fathers in this regard are clear: prohibitions based on the presumed “ritual uncleanness” of women have remained in official Church Law for the last 700 years (Wijngaards Institute n.d.), and a stain of disgrace and lack of credibility still hangs over women and girls around the world. Right from the womb, girls around the world are devalued and less wanted than boys, which translates into a host of deprivations, shaming, and maltreatment at each stage of their development: infancy, childhood,

adolescence, young adulthood, mid-life, and as seniors (World Bank 2022).

Third, a key underpinning to this social stratification of patriarchy is the underlying belief of male honor and shame which persist in the traditional layer of society and continue to elevate men as the rightful godlike rulers and owners of society. Females are inferior, unclean, meant for subjugation, and to blame for evil in the world. This leaves a spiritual wound that needs deep healing from the roots up. “Honor” is a word that harkens back to ancient patriarchal codes of honor and shame that shaped the cultural and religious presuppositions that to this day live on in our collective heritage of symbols, stories, and our consciousness as a human society (Brown 2016). Honor has a proud ring to it, but it has an underbelly of shame and stigmatization that operate on many levels of society: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural (Uskul et al. 2023). Artifacts of this patriarchal honor and shame culture live on in our religious narratives and cultural practices, creating a long, enduring global legacy of structural stigmatization of females from cradle to grave.

Civilization itself and all of our world’s great religious traditions were formed within the soil of patriarchal honor cultures so this is a big macro topic with so many layers that lie buried within many of our cherished traditions, taken-for-granted paradigms, and likewise within our own hearts and minds. It is this *honor gap* (Jones and Misolo 2018) that we cannot ignore if we truly seek to advance the work of mainstreaming gender balanced organizations and societies. There has been some effort within Christian missiology to address the deeply rooted nature of honor-shame culture around the world (Georges 2017), but not much focus has been given to the gender dimension of its presence within our own tradition. The persistence of this pervasive and overarching honor gap between men and women also appears to be systemically undermining the good intentions and work toward gender equality mainstreaming within CRD and other sectors as well. Although more research needs to be done on this subject, anecdotally many women within CRD also report a similar experience of something “in the airwaves” undermining gender mainstreaming efforts even within organizations supportive of women in leadership.

Finally, along with inherent social stratification rooted in the concepts of honor and shame, patriarchy is also underpinned and perpetuated by what has been called “system justification,”

a social psychological propensity to defend and bolster the status quo, that is, to see it as good, fair, legitimate, and desirable. A consequence of this tendency is that existing social, economic,

and political arrangements tend to be preferred, and alternatives to the status quo are disparaged. System justification refers, therefore, to an inherently conservative tendency to defend and justify the status quo simply because it exists, sometimes even at the expense of individual and collective self-interest” (System Justification n.d.).

Much can be written on this concept of systems justification, but for our purpose here it can be drawn on to provide additional insight into the forces in our collective psychology as a human species that resist change and thus maintain hierarchical caste-like social systems. As applied to patriarchy, because the historic stigmatization of females as inferior, unclean, and to blame for evil is so ancient and wrapped with venerable tradition, patriarchy is particularly stubborn and in many places around the globe still has the appearance of being “honorable” and rooted in some fixed, immovable reality established by God.

In summary, patriarchy continues to persist across the globe despite many waves of movements over many centuries to reclaim a more mutual rapport of shared honor and dominion across the gender line. In fact, by many measures, the needle has gone backwards for women and girls’ basic security, dignity, and human rights over the course of the pandemic and as authoritarian movements and patriarchal forms of religion have been ascendant around the world over the past few decades (Cooper 2023). The work of gender equality mainstreaming will continue to hit regressive forces of resistance unless the underlying patriarchal myths and worldview are dislodged in our collective consciousness. As Colleen Samuel, founder of the Diva Shanti Christian Association and Trust in India, describes in *Marriage and Life After in India: Addressing Myths that Enslave Girls* “a girl will continue to be exploited as long as the myths that oppress her are permitted to remain unchallenged and unchanged” (1998, 72).

This is particularly applicable to the many today who work within Christian relief and development efforts to stem the harsh humanitarian effects of patriarchal oppression around the world. They often find themselves doing very sensitive work within their own religious traditions to establish a clear framework for working to mainstream gender balance, equality, and shared honor and dignity. This stigmatization that persists around the world continues to draw strength from Christianity as well as from the world’s other great patriarchal religious traditions. Consider the following example from western Kenya that analyzes the manifestations and repercussions of the structural stigmatization of widows, and how Christian religious

traditions and actors both alleviate and perpetuate stigma against widows.

### Case Study: The Stigmatization and Suffering of Widows in Rural Kenya

In Kenya, much as in Africa and Asia, female widowhood is a young, gendered and a highly stigmatized social identity (The Loomba Foundation 2015). Nearly half of widows in Kenya are younger than 60 years old. For every one widower, there are at least eight widows in the country (KENPHIA 2018). Stigma, expressed through patriarchal norms, beliefs and practices coded in religious traditions, local culture and statutory laws favor and honor men over women during widowhood (The Loomba Foundation 2015; Federation of Women Lawyers - Kenya n.d.). When a husband dies, widows lose more than their husband. They lose their social status and become inferior, they lose relationships they had when their husband lived, and they also lose economic resources they enjoyed in their marriage. A threat of losing their children looms too should they make counter-cultural decisions like remarrying outside their deceased husband’s home (Potash 1986). At a challenging time in a woman’s life when she can use as much support as can be offered, such support is often withdrawn.

Just as “Eve” is blamed for sin, and hence death entering the world, widows in rural Kenya endure similar blame, shame, and stereotypes that devalue their humanity. When a husband dies, it is common for the widow to be blamed for his death, regardless of the cause of death. Labeled “husband killer,” the widow is also believed to acquire a spiritual impurity (the shadow of death) that threatens the survival of her children and the wellbeing of her community. She becomes a “witch” and a “bad omen.” She is held responsible for all misfortunes that befall her family and community, and is excluded from all forms of social events to keep “bad luck” and death at bay. The only recourse is to become purified through a sexual cleansing ritual. Sexual cleansing is a form of sexual exploitation that assumes women are unclean after the death of a husband, and that they can only be cleansed through sex with another man. Sexual cleansing is often forced upon widows, and performed without protection against sexually transmitted diseases. It is important to note that men who lose their spouses are neither accused of killing their wives nor carry a bad omen that needs cleansing (Ogweno 2010).

Luo culture in western Kenya also restricts a widow’s right and freedom to remarry should she desire. In the traditional practice of *ter* in Luo, (presently referred to as widow inheritance), a husband’s brother or cousin, called *jater*, is required to “marry” a willing widow to keep the children and property of the deceased within the family (Perry et al.

2014). This practice preceded the advent of Christianity in Kenya in the colonial periods, but it is difficult to assess the directionality of the influences during colonialism. A similar practice is seen in the biblical stories of widows like Tamar (Genesis 38) and Ruth (Ruth 2) and has been called levirate marriage, *levir* referring to husband's brother in Latin. In Kenya, *ter* has eroded to further objectify widows. The combination of HIV/AIDS epidemic and clan-based sexual networking in the era prior to condoms and antiretroviral therapy led to massive family deaths and the fear of widows as HIV carriers. Despite deceased husband's brothers opting out of this practice due to fear of HIV, *ter* is still justified for women. Presently, non-relative *joter* (plural), demand payment for levirate services, require sex in levirate arrangements, and exploit resources at the widows' disposal. These commercial *joter* have sexual relationships with multiple widows concurrently, increasing the risk of sexually transmitted illnesses during widowhood (Perry et al. 2014). In short, levirate and patrilineal custom have contributed to the current climate in Kenya in which widows are socially undesirable for marriage in Kenya. Widowers, on the other hand, know no such restrictions on their sexuality and remarriage desires.

Despite progress in laws that promote gender equality in Kenya, statutory laws applicable during widowhood mimic patriarchal and religious norms that uphold male dominance, including economic dominance, and plunge widows into more poverty (Ogwenko 2010; Federation of Women Lawyers, Kenya n.d.). Often, widowhood means the loss of a breadwinner and the expansion of a widow's financial responsibilities. This situation is most desperate for women whose husbands prohibited their participation in the labor force, insisting they remain housewives. The desperation deepens when the same widows suffer property disinheritance, with their land, animals, and household effects grabbed by their in-laws who cling to patrilineal customs of inheritance and see the widows as responsible for the death of their son, and thus undeserving of their son's or family's wealth. Although Kenya's constitution protects women's rights to inheritance, the law does not guarantee a widow's inheritance rights. Widows have user and not ownership rights of their matrimonial property. If widows remarry outside their deceased husband's home, they lose all rights to the matrimonial property she had with the deceased husband. On the other hand, widowers have full ownership rights over matrimonial property (Ogwenko 2010). Such "feminization of poverty" in widowhood contributes to the negative view of widows as "social burdens" and "beggars" to be avoided in the community.

Nyanam, a local non-profit in western Kenya, was created to address this stigmatization of widows and its negative impact on their spiritual, health, social, and economic well-being. It was established by a widow's daughter, Jackie Odhiambo, who found her childhood experience of her widowed mother, grandmother and aunt as resilient, hardworking, and caring family leaders, to be irreconcilable with the social stigmatization of widows she witnessed as an adult. During a community borehole project that she and her team inspired, Jackie observed how widows who spoke their ideas were ignored or plagiarized; when they succeeded, someone else claimed the credit; and when something went wrong in the borehole project, widows were blamed. These negative patriarchal attitudes challenged her to secure a platform for women's leadership in the community. Because widows were the least respected women in the community, Jackie and her team chose to center widows as leaders, hence founding Nyanam with a mission to prepare widows as leaders of community transformation.

While many widows lean on their local churches for spiritual encouragement and social connection, the churches are a mixed blessing. The widows at Nyanam come from over 50 villages and in various church denominations, and 60% of 512 widows who completed Nyanam's baseline survey noted a change in their relationship to faith and religion since widowhood, with 87% of those noting a change saying they became more spiritual or religious during widowhood.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, this is a result of removed restrictions a husband may have imposed on his wife's religious practices. Other times, this is a result of acute isolation and suffering that leave widows feeling they have only God to lean on. And still, only 1.5% of Nyanam widows mention receiving support beyond preaching and self-sought individual counseling in the church. From Nyanam's discussions with widows on these statistics, most churches either lack or neglect tailored programming for widows. Moreover, some churches still embrace and perpetuate the harmful norms, traditions, and narratives surrounding widowhood, with congregants alienating widows who do not conform to traditional rituals such as sexual cleansing, as they would be seen as defiling the house of God. Others seek to repress these traditions and cultural norms, but do so not by speaking out against them but by punishing widows who engage in them. In these churches, traditions such as levirate marriage are banned, and widows are denied holy communion if they enter into levirate relationship. Some churches also exploit religious texts like Isaiah 54:5 ("For your Maker is your husband") and 1 Timothy 5:6 ("But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives") to

<sup>1</sup> These figures are taken from Nyanam's 2023 baseline survey for all widows newly enrolling in their programs.

induce guilt among young widows who may still desire a husband. Broadly-speaking, the churches have discarded the biblical responsibility of caring for widows, with the majority not offering practical support, whether material or counseling to help widows overcome trauma from societal stigma.

Nyanam's ongoing research on stigmatization of widows (soon to be published) also shows how the stigmatization of widows extends to their children. In the extended family setup, the children of widows are either overworked or assigned jobs that other parents would not want their own children to do, like buying alcohol or cigarettes for adults. Whenever a group of children is involved in mischief, the widow's child among them is scapegoated and blamed for the bad behavior in the group, whether or not they had a role in it. When gifts are distributed, those of lowest value are given to the children of widows. Widows' children born out of *ter* (levirate arrangements) face even more stigmatization. Culturally, they are children of the deceased husbands, but legally they are children of *jater*. They face discrimination in both families and struggle with belonging, especially male children whose identity is linked to establishing a home and need an inheritance of land to do so.

Stigma reduces social support for widows, encourages hostility toward and humiliation of them and their children, and entrenches loneliness that started with the loss of a husband, creating a significant toll on widows' mental, physical, social, and economic health. Many widows internalize the stigma and develop feelings of inferiority, viewing themselves as "unable," "empty," "helpless," "hopeless," "outcasts," "unworthy," and "social burdens" (The Loomba Foundation 2015). They remain silent or comply with oppressive social impositions due to fear of further disdain or violence. In addition, this kind of stigma for female widowhood is a root cause of health and wealth inequalities, as well as social and sexual vulnerabilities women experience in widowhood. For example, practices of sexual cleansing and diminished opportunity to be in stable and healthy sexual relationships might explain why widows of reproductive age in Kenya have a HIV prevalence of 32%, the highest in any social group in the country, with no government program tailored to address HIV/AIDS in widowhood (Ministry of Health 2018). Widowed women also experience twice as much gender-based violence as married women (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2023). Some avoid seeking healthcare especially for reproductive health issues due to fear of stigmatization. Kenya still has no social protection programs for widows, with the government assuming that if help is provided to the poor and the elderly, then it will reach widows too. This situation of widows in contexts such as rural Kenya contributed to the United Nation's (UN)

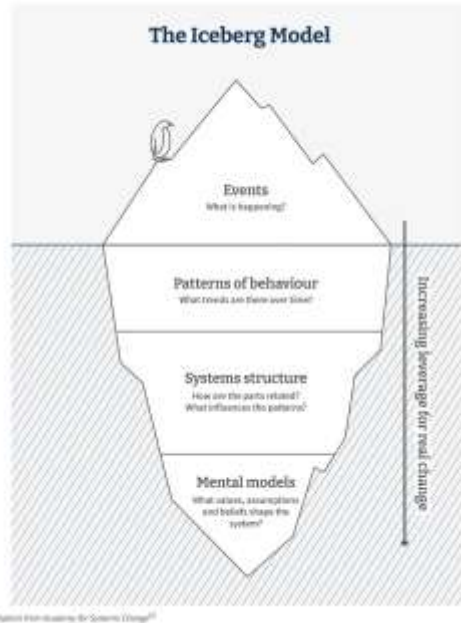
first resolution on addressing the situation of widows that passed in 2022 and now needs concerted action (Addressing the Situation of Widows 2022).

## Tools for Tackling the Structural Stigmatization of Women and Girls

*If I had an hour to solve a problem  
I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem  
and 5 minutes thinking about solutions.*

(Popular saying, often attributed erroneously to Albert Einstein (quoteresearch 2014))

The stigmatization of widows in Kenya is just one manifestation of the persistence of the legacies of the ancient curse of Eve in our world today and shows the compounding nature of gender-based stigmatization that contains other "deeply discrediting attributes" that create multi-faceted "stains" on the person's perceived character. As briefly mentioned above, this due to a combination of local society's historical traditions and the influence of Christianity-informed culture. These stigmas lead to compounding vulnerabilities and social alienation. Efforts within the Christian relief and development sector that seek to address the particular challenges widows and other women and girls face cannot make much progress without addressing the more deeply rooted and pervasive stigmatization of femaleness. The global dominance of Christianity around the world and its influence on the evolution of civilization in general and patriarchal gender norms in particular, suggest that there are deeper layers of work needed within the CRD sector. The persistent "honor gap" needs to be "let out of the vents," as it continues to stall and undermine efforts toward gender equality mainstreaming both within CRD organizations and the communities where they serve.



These deeper layers can be conveyed through the image of the iceberg, a simple and frequently used visual in the work of systems change to depict the forces and patterns that are less visible but need to be addressed to keep a problem from repeating over and over again ([Leverage Points and the Iceberg Model](#), n.d.). In this case, the work of systems change—to shift from a patriarchal to a gender equal social structure—must involve addressing this deep, historic, persistent subconscious stigmatization. This builds on the legacies of the continual work of (re)interpretation of Scripture which many women (and men) over the centuries have engaged in as a source of liberation and equality for women in the context of misogyny.

Many working within CRD have been formed within the very narratives, beliefs, and theological frameworks surrounding the negative characterization of Eve. As contemporary people of faith whose religious imaginations in particular have been so shaped by symbols, thought patterns, beliefs, and narratives developed within the soil of our ancient patriarchal faith traditions, we live within the logic and mythology of the patriarchal stigma. It is often easier to work on the humanitarian level to mitigate the symptoms of the patriarchal stigma than to work to address the ways our own faith traditions create such problems. Often our traditions have been and continue to be complicit in creating and reproducing this root patriarchal stigmatization that creates such a harmful honor gap between men and women.

The following five specific tools may help Christian relief and development organizations tackle this problem as they progress in becoming “active restorers of shalom” as described in the Principles for Gender

Equality for Development Organizations (Wheaton Network Initiative n.d.).

**Naming and Reversing the Shaming:** The first tool for addressing the ongoing stigmatization of women is to bring that stigmatization to the forefront and tackle it head-on in order to reverse it. The mythology of the “curse of Eve” is a reality in the water that Christian relief and development organizations swim in (Ritenbaugh 1997a). There are three ways to name and then engage in reversing this shaming.

The first way of tackling this misguided mythology is to use the quotes mentioned previously from the Church Fathers and present-day theologians such as Ritenbaugh (1997a) to facilitate reflections on how the “curse of Eve” is still playing out in and around the work of CRD in terms of the culture of patriarchal honor and shame that persists. Two key questions can be asked as prompts along with a facilitated exercise that follows them:

1. **In your work and personal life, where have you encountered this very ancient stigmatization of females (“curse of Eve”) described above and its myriad ugly contemporary consequences?** Start with the beginning of the life cycle and move through each stage of female human development and have people reflect on where they see remnants of this culture of patriarchal honor that has devalued and shamed the female body and personhood. Where do they see any remnants of the double standard of male honor and female shame/blame alive and well in various traditional practices, beliefs, and norms? What are some examples still happening today where women are easily blamed and scapegoated for bad things that happen? Don’t take too long to discuss each example, just create a list and carry this forward into a subsequent conversation where you will delve in more deeply to explore the role of religion in both perpetuating this ancient “curse of Eve” and also its potential to dispel and transform this. If you need some “inspiration,” have people read “Son Preference” (n.d.) and “What is Period Stigma” (Resnick 2021) to see how stigmatization starts right from birth and surrounds a girl’s passage through puberty.
2. **Where, in subtle and blatant ways, do you see an “honor gap” between women and men in your own place of worship and/or in your own CRD organization? Is there something in the air that feels like it needs to be let out of the vents?**

Second, this stigmatization can also be named and reversed by encouraging the reinterpretation of the ancient creation story. Drawing on curiosity and lament

(two additional tools detailed below) at how our origin story has been used over the centuries to shame, blame, and degrade the humanity of women, should lead to a posture of intentional care in how to tell stories from the Bible. As thoughtful Christians who know the harm that misuse of the Bible has done over the course of church history, we should be open to rethinking our own taken-for-granted presumptions about the meaning and details of this ancient story. Part of this process is embracing the story of Adam and Eve for what it is: an ancient Hebrew “origin story” that leads us to ponder the divine mysteries of our origins as a human species. A helpful resource in rereading and reinterpreting Eve is to draw from Jewish ways of interpreting the Hebrew text that involve four levels of approaching the text to make room for the symbolic and esoteric meaning. These are: 1) Peshat (פְּשָׁט): meaning plain or simple. It is used for the most obvious and simple meaning of a text; 2) Remez (רֵמֵז): meaning hints. It is used for the allegoric (hidden or symbolic) meaning beyond the literal sense; 3) Derash (דְּרָשׁ): meaning inquire or seek. It is used for the comparative (midrashic) meaning, looking at similar occurrences of a word. 4) Sod (סוֹד): meaning secret or mystery. It is used for the esoteric and mystical meaning, as often used in the Kabbalah (jonathan33m4 2012).

The third way to engage in reversing the shaming that comes from the stigmatization of Eve and its legacies is to honor Eve as the “Mother of all Living,” a title that Eve bore before she was shamed, framed, and blamed. As Crispe (2006) describes in “Chavah: Mother of All Life,” “Chavah” is a derivative of the Hebrew word *chayah*, meaning “living one.” Chavah embodies both the essence of life itself and the creative ability to grant that life to others. The idea of “Mother of all Living” expresses not only the ability to physically give birth, but also to create, nourish, and enhance all facets of life. This is the ability of a mother—to take something from the state of potential, develop it, and bring it to actualization through her creative abilities. Eve, then, among many other things, represents the feminine creative spirit which is ever birthing all of life into being. She embodies the female face of God, past, present, and future in all the daughters of Eve who have been mothering life in all its forms. Like all stigmas, this man-made stigma reflects more about the group who created the stigma than the stigmatized group. Thankfully, this man-made curse has never been able to take away Eve’s intrinsic glory and dominion. It shines from within each baby girl born each day and reminds us of who we truly are. Eve’s intrinsic glory as the “Mother of all Living” shines within all of the ways that women mother one another and ourselves to be and become who we truly are. And though we have largely made God into the image of men and forgotten the womb who bore us, as it says in Isaiah 49:14,

thankfully the mothering side of God has not forgotten us: “Can a mother forget her infant, and be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you.” The best way to lift a stigma is to bow in honor to the stigmatized group and see the divinity she has always possessed as an image-bearer of God.

**Curiosity:** The second tool for tackling stigmatization is that of encouraging curiosity. There is so much about the version of this ancient creation narrative of Adam and Eve that should prompt a basic sense of curiosity. Because of the deep stigma that this story has been complicit in sanctioning and reinforcing, Christians should be open to a posture of looking again at all the inherited presumptions of what this story means. The first step in enlisting curiosity as a tool in one’s toolbox within CRD is to create spaces for open and safe dialogue around underlying religious and cultural presumptions that operate within and around the work of the organization or community, in particular related to gender norms and conventions. It is not easy to criticize sacred stories and traditions, but to move forward as a human family we must be willing to look at the stories and interpretations we receive from the past and continue to pass down. Every culture and religion has patriarchal sacred cows that function very similarly to the framing, shaming, and scapegoating of Eve. This is hard but necessary work if we truly want to lift the heavy intergenerational stigma that women and girls still experience around the world. Cultivating a posture of curiosity around holy texts like the Bible and such an ancient, foundational story as the Genesis creation account might seem intimidating or too academic for the work of CRD, but finding ways to achieve this is important.

**Deep Listening:** The third tool for tackling the stigmatization of Eve and of women in general is deep listening, especially through the approach of storytelling. Destigmatizing Eve requires that we listen to unvarnished stories of stigmatized women who are brave enough to share the horrors they have endured at the risk of being restigmatized. By valuing and centering personal stories, we use our presence to create sacred spaces where women can be who they truly are. Nyanam Widows Rising, for example, has made oral storytelling an integral part of its activities, creating times and moments throughout its work when widows can share their personal stories as part of a healing process. CRD organizations can likewise incorporate storytelling. Sometimes deep listening requires that we ask no questions, but instead simply receive and carry the story along with the sharer. Our attentive and compassionate presence is its own intervention, and deep listening is love.

**Lament:** The fourth key tool for tackling the stigmatization of women is that of encouraging openness to and the practice of lament. In the sacred space of listening, our hearts open into a posture of lament and we find a deeper spiritual unity that is stronger than any stain or curse we humans have inflicted on one another. Lament not only connects our hearts with an individual girl or woman who has been stigmatized, it connects us with the past and the future. Our hearts are wiser and more powerful than we know. CRD organizations can embrace lament, especially in moments of tragedy, to encourage full expression of not only grief but also anger at subjugation of women. In a moment of shared lament, there is deep healing beyond words that can liberate both the hearer and the sharer of a story. Insights on how to respond to the injustice can emerge.

**Contemplation:** The fifth and final tool for tackling the stigmatization of women is related to the practice of lament – contemplation which refers to the wordless prayer of the heart. This knowing of the heart unites us with our shared humanity and the timeless river of life which is ever healing and renewing all things. Centering our faith traditions in this stream of consciousness—the real ground of faith deeper than all of the creeds and tomes of theology which have attributed this curse of Eve to God—is a pathway of restorative prayer to participate in the deep healing of our world’s gender wounds and connect in silence with what the Spirit of true liberation which is our shared birthright as a human family. CRD organizations interested in tapping more into this contemplative stream of knowing can first of all acknowledge that this domain of consciousness exists, is part of our native endowment as human beings, and is a lost current we can seek to reclaim within our own faith traditions. As a CRD organization, there are many ways you can weave in moments of contemplation into the rhythm of your organization, including: periodic guided, silent prayer which invite a shift into the love that exists at the center of one’s being; guided seasonal retreats in the more contemplative seasons of the church calendar (Advent and Lent) including time to get outside to commune with the presence of the Divine in the beauty of creation; and reading books together to support people to dig a little bit deeper into the rich contemplative tradition of Wisdom found within the Bible and many branches within Christianity. It can be very hard to become more aware of how our own cherished faith tradition has for so many centuries created and used its theology and storytelling platform to sanction patriarchal social structures in this shaming and stigmatizing way. Finding a deeper, liberating current of faith within oneself and within one’s own tradition can be incredibly grounding as one continues the journey of awareness to shed so many of the layers

that continue to oppress and stigmatize women and girls. If you are interested in reclaiming this contemplative current of faith as an individual or within your organization, there are so many resources to draw from too numerous to list here, some of which are the following:

- The [Center for Action and Contemplation](#),
- The [Transforming Center](#),
- [Leaderships Transformations, Inc.](#),
- [PAX Center for Christian Spiritual Formation](#),
- Lastly, please listen to this short animated video [Understanding Our History of Patriarchy: What’s faith got to do with it?](#) created by [Girl Child Long Walk](#), which has been translated into 13 languages to invite people of faith to go on this journey to reclaim the emancipatory current of faith from within our patriarchal religious traditions.

## Conclusion

As a human family, our well-being on this planet is tied to reclaiming the wisdom and honor of the female half of the human family. Naming this oldest curse/stigma for what it truly is—the oldest fake news in history books—is a needed step towards restoring balance between the masculine and feminine in our world and liberating ourselves from the ancient roots of this oldest oppression. Naming it will not, once and for all, let the stigma out of the windows and vents; but by calling it a stigma, not just a humanitarian problem, it will disarm it of some of the intergenerational holding power it still has on our collective psyche.

Together in so many different types of work, Christian relief and development organizations can do what no other sector working for gender equality can do: bravely and sensitively use its platform to name and reverse the curse that patriarchy (not God) inflicted on the female half of the human family. This is not easy work because there are so many patriarchal sacred cows we need to be willing to look at and let go of to transform into something else. We like to think of our beliefs and doctrines as set and fixed but, like everything in life, these two were created by humans (in many iterations over the course of history) and so can be recreated by humans to live up to our highest and best timeless values. With one foot in the pond of patriarchal theology and the other in justice, relief, and development work, CRD is well-situated for this work of deep listening and healing to reclaim something precious that has been lost and find tangible and practical ways to honor what has been stigmatized.

May it be so.

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