

## Book Review

# *Scars Across Humanity: Understanding and Overcoming Violence Against Women*

By Elaine Storkey (SPCK, 2015)

REVIEWED BY KEVIN GILES

I have read nothing quite like Elaine Storkey's book, *Scars Across Humanity*. It tells the story of violence against women in today's world. The book is very well researched and accessible; moreover, it is spine-chilling. As I sat with the book in hand after reading it I felt both pleased that someone had so powerfully told this awful story and depressed by what I had read.

This book has great weight, not only because of the important facts covered, but also because of who wrote it. Storkey is a philosopher, sociologist, theologian and BBC broadcaster who has taught in several of the most prestigious universities in England. She has been a member of the General Synod of the Church of England since 1987. She succeeded John Stott as the executive director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity in 1991. In 1997 she was appointed president of Tearfund, a UK-based evangelical aid and relief organization.

After an introductory chapter, the following eight chapters deal with specific forms of violence against women in the chronological order that they are most likely to occur in a woman's life: abortion of female fetuses and infanticide, genital mutilation, early enforced marriage, honor killing, domestic violence, trafficking and prostitution, rape, and the abuse of women in war.

Then follow four chapters exploring the various explanations that have been given for these inexcusable realities. First, Storkey gives a good hearing to evolutionary biology as the root cause, but in the end finds it wanting. It fails to acknowledge that human beings are free agents who can decide how they behave. Second, patriarchy, the belief that men should rule over women, is considered as the cause. She agrees this is a pernicious idea but again concludes that, as free moral agents, human beings are not bound to perpetuate patriarchy and its abuses. Third, two chapters consider the argument that religion is to blame. The first chapter is on religion in general and Islam in particular as the cause, and the second is specifically on Christianity. She concedes that most religions are conservative and teach the subordination of women, although often at the same time they speak of the worth and dignity of women. Nevertheless she points out that, in today's world, most religions include voices advocating for freedoms for women. Islam is no exception; there are indeed Muslim feminists. This is for them a hard path to take because the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* (the record of the life, teachings, and deeds of Muhammad) explicitly give men authority over women and allow polygamy. What is more, they can be read to give permission to men to beat their wives, to condone rape in certain circumstances, to permit the marriage of prepubescent girls, and to encourage honor killings.

Dr. Storkey says that, as an evangelical Christian, she found the chapter on Christianity the hardest to write. She has to acknowledge that across the ages Christian theologians have taught the superiority of men and the inferiority of women and have often spoken in misogynistic ways. Even today, many evangelicals dogmatically assert that the Bible teaches the permanent subordination of

women, usually in euphemistic and obfuscating terminology. Nevertheless, Storkey points out, Christianity has never endorsed any of the appalling abuses of women she speaks about in her book, and the voices for change are growing louder. A pressing issue for those many evangelicals who teach the subordination of women, she says, is domestic violence. Telling men that the Bible gives them leadership in the home encourages and legitimates controlling and abusive behavior in needy and insecure men. When women find themselves in this situation, they seldom find support when they turn to a male pastor. Holding to the belief that the man is the head of the home, some pastors place women in dangerous circumstances.

What I found most staggering in Storkey's book was the extent of the abuse against women. One in three women in the world may suffer abuse or violence in their lifetime. Possibly two million female fetuses are aborted a year; one hundred and forty million women have been genitally mutilated; over twenty million people are trafficked each year; one hundred and forty million girls have been forced into marriage in adolescence; one in four women in Western countries will experience domestic violence, and the figures are much higher in other parts of the world. It is estimated that thirty million women were raped in 2012. In the US one in five women will be raped in her lifetime. Honor killing of women is more common than one might expect, especially on the Indian sub-continent and in Middle Eastern Islamic countries, but dependable numeric estimates are elusive. An estimated ten thousand honor killings take place annually in Pakistan alone. These figures are amazing and awful. How can women be so appallingly treated, we cry out!

The endemic violence and injustices perpetuated against women are hard to believe, but even harder to accept is that all too often women themselves are perpetrators of this violence. For example, it is almost always women who mutilate young girls, and women are often involved in trafficking and running brothels and often complicit in honor killings. The involvement of women in these things is an example of how, in all entrenched social hierarchies, invariably sanctioned by religion, the oppressed internalize and own their unworthiness and subordinate status.

This book is a must read. Buy a copy and pass it on. Better still, buy several copies and give them away. This is a story we Christians need to hear.

**KEVIN GILES**, an Australian, has served as an Anglican parish minister for over forty years. He has been publishing on the substantial equality of the sexes since 1975 and is a foundation member of CBE International. He holds a doctorate in NT studies and has published books on the church, church health, ministry in the apostolic age, the book of Acts, gender equality, and the Trinity, besides numerous scholarly and popular articles.

