

## **Safe spaces for women in the church: the case of Dullstroom-Emnotweni<sup>1</sup>**

*Christina Landman*

Research Institute for Theology and Religion,  
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

### *Abstract*

For the 100 co-researchers in Dullstroom-Emnotweni who participate in a project called “Women’s space in the church”, the relationship between men and women of faith is one of political correctness. However, at home the man is the head of the household, and a good woman is seen as one that cares for her family and respects her husband, while he is the provider. The women identify with Mary in her role as the mother of Jesus while not feeling attracted to the powerful or “political” women of the Bible. Although there is a strong “human rights’ generation” present in the church that looks after the rights of women in terms of abuse, in practice the women do not seem to be safe in terms of their right to insist on safe sex, and the churches do not offer structural assistance in cases of rape or physical abuse. The women do not seem to have leadership aspirations in the church, or do not have the freedom to express these aspirations, although the men seem to be scared that such aspirations may exist. In spite of these fears and all the fighting and gossiping that seem to be rife in some of the congregations, both men and women emphasise that they feel safe in the church.

This article describes the research results of this project and briefly considers the premises of nego-feminism which negotiates space between men and women based on the intersectionality of their indigenous abilities as a way forward for creating space for women in the church.

### **Introduction**

In a cartoon of Hägar the Horrible, his wife Helga is educating their daughter Honi. In the first picture Helga tells Honi: “We women can do anything we want, anything a man can do.” This brings a smile to Honi’s face. However, in the second picture Helga adds a caveat: “But don’t tell your father that!” The expression on Honi’s face indicates how much this situation perplexes her.

This cartoon problematises the perplexing question of women’s space in society which, in this article, focuses on the church. What is women’s space in church, and what can or should it be? Is women’s space in the church a safe space, and will it only be safe if it remains secret? Is it a space where women uphold the church but have to keep it under cover? When and how can the church become an openly safe space for women where they do not have to behave in a covert way?

In summarising my exposure over the years to women’s theologies, I would identify four ways in which women have created church space for themselves in the past:

- Women have created space for themselves after they have become “troublesome” and demanded justice in the church.
- Women have created space by deciding to celebrate their womanhood to the full and overcome the traditional stigma against their bodies by embracing them.
- Women found space in the church when they became equal to men in rationality and other “male” attributes.
- Women found space in the church where they could be “truly woman” in sharing their abilities to care, to make peace and to create warmth.

<sup>1</sup> This article is dedicated to Cornel du Toit who has headed the Research Institute for Theology and Religion at the University of South Africa since the end of 1993. Even before I joined the RITR in 1996, while I was still teaching in the Department of Church History at Unisa, I have been encouraged by this Institute to engage in women’s studies. In 1984 Willem Vorster, the former head of the Institute, then called the Institute for Theological Research, held a conference on “Sexism and feminism in theological perspective” which was the first of its kind in South Africa. I was invited to give a paper on the historical developments world-wide of what was then called “Feminist Theology”. This introduced me to “Feminist Theology” as it was, in a second wave, sweeping over Europe and the Americas, with (South) Africa to follow. In 1994 the Institute, furthermore, published my book *The Piety of Afrikaans Women* that was strongly based on feminist (re)readings of the past as they were understood then, that is, twenty years ago. Du Toit has perpetuated this tradition of encouraging and publishing research on women of faith in Africa. He has given me time and space to do research in this regard, and has supported my applications for bursaries enthusiastically. It is therefore appropriate to dedicate to him on his sixtieth birthday an article on research done with women from black, rural South Africa, the ways in which their faith had been formed, and how this faith now influences their lives.

The main characteristic of these approaches to women's space is that they more or less exclude one another. One has to become either more woman or less woman in terms of an essentialist view of what, traditionally, constitutes a woman. Furthermore, in most of these cases women "found" space in the church, that is, space was allowed them in church, rather than "creating" space themselves. And most of these activities were done "under cover", at academic conferences or in dissertations, so as not to tell congregants that women were indeed agents, and potential leaders, in the church.

It is therefore important to open up a fifth possibility for women and space in the church, and this is for women to "negotiate" space – in the open and in the heart of the church itself. In 2003 Obioma Nnaemeka, (2003:357-385) although not a theologian, introduced the designation "nego-feminism" to name "Africa's way" of theorising and practising negotiations between men and women from a perspective of "non-egoism". Nego-feminism as a term that names African feminisms is therefore used to refer both to positionality and intersectionality; that is, the position of "non-ego" from which men and women "negotiate" the intersectionality of their capabilities as indigenous human beings (Nnaemeka 2003:361). In the setting of African feminisms, "indigenous" is not equated with "traditional", creating space for women to "invent" spaces in local communities that are appropriate to their needs in the community and applicable in their present contexts (Nnaemeka 2003:358) without being kept captive by traditions that might stylise women in subordinate roles.

This article will present the results of a research project conducted among men and women of faith in the "township" of Dullstroom-Emnotweni, now unpopularly known as Sakhelwe, "the place we (the whites) built for you". This town is situated in what was previously known as the "Eastern Transvaal highveld", in what is now the eMakhazeni Local Municipality which forms part of Mpumalanga, South Africa's most eastern province which shares a border with Mozambique. The people in the township are remnants of the so-called "Mapoch Wars" against the Southern Ndebele and the "Sekukuni Wars" against the Bapedi which, at the end of the nineteenth century, left black people condemned to work as farm workers on the white farms that had previously belonged to them. In the middle of the twentieth century the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of these farmworkers moved from the farms to Dullstroom – which was established in 1916 by Dutch immigrants – to work on the railways, at petrol stations and in white houses and businesses. There they lived first in "the old location", now referred to as Madala ("old"), from where they were forcefully removed to the top of the hill in 1980, that is, to Sakhelwe, to make space for the sewerage for the white town (Landman 2013:348). In this article the name of Sakhelwe will not be used, but Dullstroom-Emnotweni, which according to the latest decision by the Municipality is the name by which the (traditionally white and black) town will be referred to *in toto*.

This article, then, will describe and analyse the views of 60 women and 40 men from Dullstroom-Emnotweni on the space of women in the church. The views of the "research population" – who will be referred to as "co-researchers" from here on – are a mixture of traditional, indigenous and human rights approaches to women's religious positions in the community. The analysis will be followed by a re-scoping of "women's space in the church" from the insights presented by Nnaemeka on nego-feminism.

### **Views on women's space in the church**

During February 2013 interviews were conducted with 60 women and 40 men of faith in Dullstroom-Emnotweni, an almost exclusively Christian town. There are 20 Muslims of Indian descent residing in the town, and word of mouth has it that there are also a handful of white women in town who are witches (paganists). Not surprisingly, therefore, the people who reacted to the invitation to participate in the project were all Christians. The women were interviewed first, and the interviews with the men followed slightly later. The questionnaires used were open-ended, that is, they contained questions that invited the interviewees to give opinions and tell stories. The female co-researchers, then, are black, rural and Christian. Half of them (30) belong to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa of which the author is the presiding minister. Apart from one interviewee who worships in the Lutheran Church (ELCSA) and two others from "Alliance" (Presbyterian Church), the other women belong to an African Independent Church – 14 from the Elohim Bible Church, another 14 from the Church of Jesus Christ, and 18 from the Zion Christian Church (ZCC). As will be indicated later, there was not much of a difference in view between women from mainline churches and women from independent churches on women's space in the church. Both expressed themselves in traditional terms according to cultural concepts of women, while at the same time showing that they have been conscientised by the laws of the country that give rights to women.

A description and analysis will now be given under seven headings of the women's reactions to the (open-ended) questions in the questionnaire.

#### *Determining context as age, income and cultural identity*

The first set of questions contextualises the interviewees in terms of age, income and cultural identity. Almost half (27, that is, 45%) of the interviewees falls into the age bracket of 25 to 35. They constitute, of course, the “human rights generation”, and were teenagers with the coming of democracy and women’s rights. Thirteen of the interviewees are between 15 and 25 years of age, five between 35 and 45, six between 45 and 55, and nine older than 55. Consequently, the older women hold more of a consistently religio-cultural view on women’s space in church, while the main group of younger women displays a tendency towards expressing themselves in terms of human rights while they remain unconscious of a possible conflict with religio-cultural views.

Only 18 of the women interviewed are employed. This constitutes 30% or rather, less than a third of the women, and is a reflection of the overall (un)employment rate in the “township”. Those employed have a very low income. They are employed as waitresses and domestic workers. One earns less than R1000 per month, 12 between R1 000 and R2 000 per month, and five between R2 000 and R3 000 per month. No woman in the research population earns more than R3 000 per month.

Forty per cent of the women (24) are Ndebele and constitute the main group, as is the case in the “township” in general. Ten are Swazi, 13 are Zulu, seven are Southern Sotho and six are Pedi. This information is of significance in the light of the fact that a majority of the Ndebele women who are from the “human rights generation” are sending or have sent their sons to initiation schools.

#### *Women’s preferences in church*

A second set of questions invites the women to talk about their preferences in the church. Have you changed churches recently, and why? Do you belong to your mother’s church and why (not)? What do you enjoy most about your church? What is not nice at your church? Does your church treat men and women the same? These are some of the questions that opened up space for the women to express their ecclesiastical spirituality.

There has been little movement between churches in Dullstroom-Emnotweni, with families attending the same church over periods of time. However, there has been a small movement to the Elohim Bible Church which was established as a breakaway from the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa during a ten-year period when there was no minister in this congregation, that is, before the present minister was ordained there five years ago.

What do women enjoy most in church? The answers are the same across churches: Singing and praising. Worshipping. A few women expanded on Bible reading, praying and preaching as their preferences in their church, but the majority spontaneously referred to their participation in singing. One woman said she “feels free when in church”. None of the women mentioned leadership as her preferred way of being in the church.

What do women not like in church? Gossiping and fighting. A few of the older women answered that the singing was too noisy, and that the youth in particular was too noisy in the church for their liking. Nobody mentioned a lack of leadership positions for women as something that kept them from going to church. Significantly, eight women indicated that the question was “not applicable” and that the question itself was disrespectful and suggested that women might make up their minds whether church was good or bad or might have an opinion on what was wrong with the church. Women, it seems, are not to be critical of the church. The women here obviously do not see themselves as agents of change in the church.

The vast majority of the women, 56 out of 60, affirm that their church treats men and women the same. One woman complained that women may only wear skirts to their church, and another pointed out that in the ZCC women are not allowed to be pastors. However, this was referred to by only one woman, who pointed out that keeping women from not becoming pastors is a way of dealing differently with women than with men. One woman actually stated that in her church it is the women who are treating the men badly. This remark points to an ambivalence between what the women answered in their interviews and the actual power games that might manifest themselves on congregational level between men and women.

#### *Women’s views on sex*

Next, the women’s willingness to speak about and their way of speaking on intimate issues were tested. Accordingly, they were asked the following questions: Are you in a relationship? And what do you think about condoms, pre-marital sex, masturbation and circumcision?

Ten of the women are not in a relationship and one “not yet”. Only 14 of the women are married and they are mostly older women, that is, older than 55. For another 13 women lobola (a bride’s price) has been paid without them being “legally married”. These women are over the age of 35. The rest of the interviewees (22), who are younger than 35 years of age, have boyfriends. Both old and young (58 out of 60) women answered that condoms are good and protect one against diseases and unwanted pregnancies. Only two (of the older) women felt that condoms encourage the youth to engage in sex prematurely. Some of the younger women issued the caveat that one should not rely on condoms too much.

Although almost everyone was in favour of the use of condoms and only half of the women are married or lobolaed, a clear majority (45) was against premarital sex. Some gave religious reasons for this: It is a sin. Others were concerned that premarital sex is dangerous since it gives you babies and diseases. Thirteen of the older women refused to answer the question on premarital sex and considered it an inappropriate question for Christian women to answer. One woman exclaimed: "I am speechless!". Another misunderstood the question as one on homosexuality and said that it is not good, for "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Stif (sic)". It is as if the women answered that condoms are good in a politically correct way, and that premarital sex is bad in a way the church expects from them.

The majority consensus for condoms and against premarital sex begs interpretation, since it is questionable that only the married women are using condoms. A possible interpretation is that the women answer in favour of the use of condoms since human rights and HIV awareness programmes allow them to, while traditionally the church is known for condemning condoms. On the other hand, the women condemn premarital sex in respect of church morals in spite of the fact that human rights give women the right to their own bodies as individuals without external constraint. Again, this points to an unproblematic but inconsistent integration of political, ecclesiastical and private space among the women co-researchers.

The next question concerned masturbation. One woman said that "it is natural for women", another said that she does "not prefer it", and yet another that "it is insane". The other women clearly considered this to be a male activity. A majority (33) said it is not good, totally wrong, a condemnation of the self, and a sin. A small minority (8) said it is good for (unmarried) men to help them not to think about sex. Eighteen women (30%) refused to comment.

Nine women pointed out that the question on circumcision is not applicable to women, while the others considered it to be a male practice, all considering it positively especially for young boys. A majority of the interviewees are, of course, from Ndebele descent and send their boys to be circumcised at initiation schools. As reasons for recommending circumcision for men, the women gave cultural reasons ("it is the people's culture"), as well as religious reasons ("even Jesus had it done, as well as Isaac and all his children and servants") and health reasons ("it is good for protection"), all of which can be considered sides of the same coin. At the basis of culture and religion lies health.

And it was the middle-aged group, the "human rights generation", that showed remarkable skills in integrating health issues with cultural and religious dogma.

The question is whether this symbiosis between religion, culture, health and rights will continue unproblematically when women's space vis-à-vis men is considered in the intimate spaces of the household and family life.

#### *Women of faith in their intimate relationships*

Who, does your church say, is the head of the family, the man or the woman, and do you agree with that? All the women answered that their churches regard the man as head of the household, and 52 agreed with this. Only six women indicated that, in their opinion, both the man and the woman should be regarded as heading the family, while two said that in their cases, the woman is the head.

Since this may be the answer women think the church expects from them, the following question tests this by asking what the consequences of male headship is. May a man punish his wife when she is disobedient? To this the women did not give a religious answer. A few women (5) answered "yes" because, the answers ran, a woman must learn what is wrong and what is good for her; she must follow the house rules and learn to do things in the right way; moreover, women have no discipline. The vast majority of the women answered "no". Only two gave answers from the church's perspective: The Bible does not allow abuse; there is no verse in the Bible that says a man may abuse his wife. The majority of the women, coming mainly from the "human rights generation" gave legal reasons why a man may not "punish" his partner: It is illegal; it is abuse; no one has the right to abuse another. Many gave cultural alternatives to "punishment": My culture tells us to sit down and talk to one another. To a direct question, "Does your partner beat you?" all the women answered "no" – excluding, of course, the ten women in the research population who are single and do not have partners. One woman answered that her previous boyfriend had beaten her.

Consequently, a "cultural" question is asked: May a man have more than one wife? To this 58 women answered "no", with two saying "a man needs more (than one wife)".

The religio-cultural questioning then continued. What is a real man? The women obviously answered this from their lived needs, the answers being disturbingly similar: A good man takes responsibility for his family, supports and respects them. He treats his wife as special, and is faithful to her. The women's needs are displayed in these answers. The women of Dullstroom-Emnotweni need men who can help support them and their children, be faithful to them, and treat them like women. The answers have a religio-cultural undertone where a real man not only supports his family, but also teaches them about the will of God. He is the priest in the house. Only a few of the women, in answering this question, accentuated that a man is a real man because he is

different from a woman. Again, the women did not fantasise or romanticise about men: the need men to take responsibility.

What do the women of Dullstroom-Emnotweni see as a “good woman”? She is a good mother and wife, and respects her husband. She is understanding, faithful and caring. She does not drink beer. In the answers women took on the traditional roles given to them by the church; however, no role in performing religious actions or taking religious leadership is given to them.

Subsequently, a question was asked to ascertain whether the women experienced a “female” side to being religious: What is God’s will for you as a woman? Not surprisingly, the women think that God’s will for them is to be good mothers and wives, to respect their men and care for them, to do what is right and to forgive when necessary.

### *The pastor and Biblical women as role models*

Who, then, do these women, who seem to have no other religious identity than to be mothers and wives according to God's will, regard as role models? Two of the largest churches in the "township" have women as pastors, that is, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa and the Elohim Bible Church. Consequently, two-thirds of the women (40) indicated that they have a woman pastor, and 57 of the 60 confirmed that their pastor, whether a man or a woman, preaches about the women in the Bible.

However, when asked who their role model among the women of the Bible is, 52 of the women mentioned Maria (Mary) giving reasons boiling down to "because she has given birth to Jesus". Ruth drew four votes, "because she stands for her rights", "she stayed with her mother", "she is strong like a rock", and "she was patient". Hannah was also chosen by two women because of her patience in praying for a child. One woman was inspired by Hagar "because she is a strong woman", and another favoured Sarah "because she was a fearful woman to God". Again, these answers are difficult to interpret. Do the women of Sakhelwe not know any other Biblical women but Mary? Do the pastors indeed preach about the women in the Bible? Do the women identify with their women pastors, or is the ideal woman not the one who preaches and takes the lead in the church, but the one who gives birth. What can be pointed out from the data is that the words "being strong" and "stands for her rights" are by far in the minority.

If women have Mary as Birth-Giver as a role model, how do they see their own space in church? We now turn to this question.

### *Actual and preferred roles of women in the church*

What is your role in the church? This question was put straightforwardly to the women. An astounding 42 women, that is, more than two-thirds, then indicated that for them this question was "not applicable". They do not see themselves in any role in the church; they have no role to play. A few indicated that they are on the church council; others simply referred to their role in the church as that of member, singer or worshipper, or belonging to the Christian Women's Ministries (CWM), the Christian Women's League (CWL) or the Christian Youth League (CYL), the "traditional" places for women to be.

The next question is, of course: "What would you like your role in the church to be?" Fifteen women (a quarter) did not even answer this question, and another quarter considered it to be "non-applicable". While a few women simply wanted to be "a good woman in the church" who sees that everything goes well, there were indeed ten women who wanted to become a preacher, and another ten the pastor. Another seven were aiming for the church council.

Seeing that there are seemingly women who are ready for an opportunity for leadership, the next question is of particular importance for the subject matter of this article: What is keeping you from obtaining this role? However, 56 of the interviewees did not answer this question. Do they not know how to obtain leadership in the church? Do they have no hope that this can be achieved? Do they find it improper for a woman to make suggestions in this regard? Is aiming for a role in the church not culturally acceptable? One woman spoke out and said that it is the church itself that is keeping her from taking up her preferred space in church, and another said she remains behind in church "because some people have attitude".

### *Safety and leadership in the church*

From the above it seems that the few women who indeed aspire to or long for creative space in the church do not know how to get there. But will it make a difference when women are in creative positions as leaders in the church? Will that make women feel safer in church? Will they feel physically safer? Will they have more space to ask for help from the church when they are physically threatened? Will they feel safer in church to aspire for creativity and leadership?

To a question as to whether there should be more women in leadership in the church, 58 women answered "yes" and two "no". To the question of whether they feel safe in church, again there were 58 "yes" answers and two "no" answers.

Consequently these two lines – safety and leadership – were pursued further.

### *Women feeling safe in the church*

Since almost all the women interviewees said that they feel safe in the church, is this a topic we need to explore further? The problem is that when the women are asked what the role of the church is in cases where women have been unsafe, the answers do not really point to existing practices in the church that aim at making women safer. "What does the church do when a woman is raped?" was asked. The answers were "counsel her" and "pray for her". A second question was asked: "What does the church do when a woman is beaten?" To this the

responses were: "Try to find out what the problem is", "Counsel and comfort her", and "Try to solve the problem". One woman answered that a beating should be reported to the police. One must of course see this in the light of the fact that, in a previous question, all the women interviewed denied that they had been beaten.

The following question may shed light on the situation. When asked "When you have personal problems, will you discuss it with your pastor?" the answers were mainly, "No, this is a family issue". It seems it is not for the church and the pastor to keep women safe, it is a family issue. Other answers to this question included "No, I shall not tell the pastor because I do not want the whole church to know about it", and "No, the pastor will anyway judge me for being in an unmarried relationship".

Consequently, when women were asked: "What must the church do to make women feel safer?" the answers were variations on "Keep on praying" and "Keep the women busy". A few of the women suggested that women would be safer when the church "gives them lessons to respect their husbands" and "teaches them to behave and show respect".

From both a human rights' and a women's theological perspective, the answers are next to tragic. Apart from the insinuations that women are unsafe when/because they do not respect their husbands, no structural suggestions were made on how the church can address women being unsafe. Above all, the answers display no consciousness about the discourses, the beliefs that keep women vulnerable and unsafe in their intimate spaces.

#### *Women taking leadership in the church*

The second line, apart from safety, is to explore women's leadership in the church. "What must the church do to make women better leaders?" was asked. Here the answers were more concrete and focused not only on the encouragement that is needed, but also on workshops that should be held for potential women leaders. This was accompanied with the caveat that the training should be "through the Bible" which may imply that only a certain type of (subordinate) leadership is available to women.

Eventually, of course, the lines of women's safety and women's leadership should cross, which was done by asking the question "Will you feel safer when you have more women leaders in the church?" Most of the women co-researchers have a female pastor and the question obviously left them confused with nobody answering the question.

In summary, then, the women do not see safety in leadership. And if they see safety in the deconstruction of traditional cultural discourses, they would rather turn to human rights to assist them in this than to the church.

#### **Men's views on women's space in the church**

After interviewing the women, 40 men were interviewed as co-researchers in this project.

In terms of age the men are evenly spread over age groups. There are four young men between the ages of 15 and 25, and another 11 young men between 25 and 35. There are six men between 35 and 45 years of age, eight between 45 and 55 years old, and another 11 over the age of 55. There is therefore a slight predominance towards men aged 25 to 35 years, the so-called "human rights generation", and those over 55 years of age, the "apartheid generation".

More than half of the men (25) belong to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), 12 to the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) and two to the Elohim Bible Church. There is also one man from the Lutheran Church (ELCSA).

In terms of traditional identity there is a predominance of Ndebele men (16) as there is with the women. There are five Swazi men, nine Zulu, five Southern Sotho and four Pedi men. One man calls himself "English".

Two-thirds of the men (27) are unemployed. The 11 (33%) that do work earn between R1 000 and R2 000 per month, one earns between R2 000 and R3 000 and one other R3 500 per month. As is the case of the women, of whom only 30% are employed, the male unemployment statistics probably reflect the overall situation in the (black) community.

The men were asked the same questions as the women, except on issues that are gender-specific (e.g. What role do you as a woman want to play in the church?). A summary of their answers will now be given in relationship and in comparison with those of the women.

In church women like the singing most while men regard the preaching as the reason they go to church. This may point to singing being seen as a female activity and preaching as "male". While the women do not like gossip in the church, men resent the fighting for positions. All the men stated that in their church men and women are treated the same.

As far as their views on sex are concerned, the men gave more or less the same answers as the women. They like condoms, except for five men who say that condoms prevent them from enjoying sex. They think premarital sex is bad, and more men than women think that it is not only bad, but a sin and against God's will. The men also dutifully called masturbation bad except for a few (6) who thought that it is good and healthy, and prevents one from thinking about sex. All the men, like the women, are in favour of circumcision.

Only two of the men are not in a relationship. Equal numbers of them (13) have a girlfriend, are married or lobolaed. All of them think that the man is the head of the household.

In contrast to the “human rights’ generation of women, the men did not offer any legal reasons why a man may not beat his partner. On the contrary, they offered religious reasons such as “It is a sin” and “God will punish you”. Some indigenous wisdom was displayed with “Violence solves nothing” and “Talk is the best way to solve a problem”. Again, the men presented religious reasons why a man should not have more than one wife: it is a sin, and against God’s law.

Both male and female co-researchers agreed on what is a real man, and what a good woman is. Male and female were defined in traditional terms, that is, both culturally and religiously traditional: a real man provides for his family, can be trusted and teaches his family about God’s will; a good woman looks after her family, teaches her children respect for their father and God, and can be trusted. Adding to that, quite a few men said that a good woman does not take alcohol.

None of the men has ever felt like beating his partner.

The questions on women’s leadership in the church provided interesting – albeit contradictory – answers. Two-thirds of the men have a woman as a pastor, and they are quite happy with the situation. However, a majority of them feel that there should not be more women in leadership positions in the church because “they do not know how to lead” and “once they lead they want to take everything”. A few compliments came women’s way, with the men acknowledging that “women are the mothers of the nation” and “are good advisers” and therefore should be in leadership roles. Although a majority of the men wanted fewer women in the church’s leadership, their answer to the question “Which roles in the church should be kept for men only” was a resounding “Not a single one”. In spite of the threat of female leadership, all the men felt safe in the church as men, and would discuss their problems with a woman pastor if necessary.

In summary, then, it seems that the men gave politically correct answers in affording women leadership roles, but in fact think that women are good leaders only when they lead according to their traditional roles.

### **The road forward**

For the 100 co-researchers in Dullstroom-Emnotweni who participated in this project on women’s space in the church, the relationship between men and women in the church is one of political correctness. However, at home the man is the head of the household, and a good woman is seen as one that cares for her family and respects her husband, while he is the provider. The women identify with Mary in her role as the mother of Jesus while not feeling attracted to the powerful or “political” women of the Bible. Although there is a strong “human rights’ generation” present in the church that looks after the rights of women in terms of abuse, the women do not seem to be safe in terms of their right to insist on safe sex, and the churches do not offer structural assistance in cases of rape or physical abuse. The women do not seem to have leadership aspirations in the church, or do not have the freedom to express these aspirations, although the men seem to be scared that such aspirations may exist. In spite of these fears and all the fighting and gossiping that seem to be rife in some of the congregations, both men and women emphasised that they feel safe in the church.

The introduction stated that women usually gain access to space in the church by: (1) making trouble; (2) celebrating their female bodies; (3) becoming equal to men in rationality; or (4) being truly woman in caring. It seems that in Dullstroom-Emnotweni women’s space in the church is restricted to the fourth method: being truly woman through the traditional role of caring.

### **Space for “negotiations” in terms of nego-feminism**

The question to be, albeit briefly, answered in this article is whether a fifth option could be considered in terms of nego-feminism and its notions of the intersectionality of genders, the positional location of non-egoism, and the indigenous as a point of departure rather than tradition.

In theory, the answer to the question is quite apparent. Firstly, space should be created for women by negotiating between men and women on “what is a good woman/what is a real man” in terms of what is indigenous but not necessarily traditional. Here, the human rights’ “tradition” has been quite helpful in supporting the indigenous feeling of righteousness among the women against the oppressive practices of some traditions pertaining to women. However, the problem lies in the fact that the church is not seen as a strong and trusted agent in changing views on women. On the contrary, the co-researchers often gave answers that conformed to the traditional views of the church while, elsewhere they opted for other slightly more liberal views on condoms and women’s potential leadership roles.

Secondly, then, what should be done for the church to establish itself as a negotiating agent between men and women to determine the intersectionality of the abilities of women and men based on their indigenous wisdom and practice? Since human rights movements have succeeded in reaching people even in the most remote areas of South Africa, the church should similarly engage in conscientisation processes. Workshops may

be an effective way of doing this, since the majority of both the male and female co-researchers recommended this.

Of utmost importance, of course, is that the church levels the playing field for both men and women by attempting the negotiations from a “nego-egoism” position. Men and women can negotiate their safety and their space in church only when they are liberated from their gender captivity. They should not come to the negotiation table as men or women, but as people of faith. Furthermore, the church should remember that they come to the table as poor people, as unemployed and as HIV affected.

The men and women of Dullstroom-Emnotweni are afraid to speak their minds on the relationship between men and women in the church. Not only are they held captive by tradition, but they also do not have the words to explicate space in different ways, especially not in indigenous ways that are not simultaneously traditional.

However, from the interviews it has become clear that there are enough indigenous skills present in the community, acquired through the struggle for survival and inherited from the people’s forebears, to re-scope the church as a safe place for both men and women where their leadership capabilities can be realised without threat.

### **Works consulted**

- Landman, Christina 2013. Faith-based communities and politics in Dullstroom-Emnotweni: local stories of identity. *Oral History Journal of South Africa* 1(1), 347–360.  
Nnaemeka, Obioma 2003. Nego-feminism: theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa’s way. *Signs* 29(2), 357–385.