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## Gender Discrimination in Hong Kong Churches

By Caroline C. Yih<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Institutional sexism continues to hinder women's career progression, creating hurdles that women must overcome in the workplace. The context of institutional religion is not exempt from such gender-related injustice, and women in leadership positions within the ecclesiastical system are vulnerable to overt gender inequality. This article examines gender disenfranchisement in Hong Kong churches. It utilizes data gathered and processed through the qualitative research methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze the lived experience of clergywomen in English-speaking faith communities in Hong Kong. The study reveals the indisputable presence of institutional sexism manifested and perpetuated by a host of gender marginalizing treatments which I refer to as gender discrimination. These oppressive, discriminatory practices range in gravity and verbal explicitness, and have been categorized as physical, emotional, and theological in nature. The pervasive and acute discriminatory behaviors collectively diminish women's voices and authority and maintain the power disparity between women and men. This article deepens the understanding of the patriarchal status quo of the Hong Kong church, expands on the existing research corpus on gender discrimination in the church, and hopes to join in the global feminist dialogue to support provisions to address the detrimental impacts on women serving in leadership roles.

*Keywords:* Institutional sexism, Gender discrimination, Gender disenfranchisement, Hong Kong churches, IPA, Religious hierarchy

### Introduction

Despite recent efforts and advancements in promoting gender equality, deeply entrenched institutional sexism and men's dominance remain a reality, hindering women leaders in the workforce (Bagilhole, 1994). These invisible gender-biased barriers within organizations create unjust obstacles, severely impacting women's career mobility. Common examples of inherent organizational sexism include vertical, horizontal, and contractual segregation. These types of segregation depict, respectively, the stratification of women into the lower end of the organizational hierarchy, the gendered allocation of less prestigious or lower-status assignments to women, and the lower quality of their contractual terms, such as short contracts and lack of full-time offers (Stewart-Thomas, 2010, p. 408). Not only is the established institution of the church not exempt from such injustice, but research has also revealed that institutional sexism may be more overt and prevalent within institutional religion (Kawahashi, 2000, p. 85). Clergywomen continue to practice surrounded by profound inequality in their leadership roles within the patriarchal ecclesiastical structure, and they are compelled to constantly overcome the constraint of the embedded structural disadvantage of the "lead roof" (Bagilhole, 2006, p. 115). In a recent article examining gender disenfranchisement, I have showcased how such gender-marginalizing treatment is similarly

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visible in Hong Kong churches, evidenced by the seriously disproportionate vertical segregation of clerical roles, with over 89% of senior leadership roles taken up by men and 95% of children's ministries occupied by women (Yih, 2023a). To further the understanding of institutional sexism in Hong Kong and to continue participating in the global feminist dialogue promoting gender equality in the church, this paper focuses on the lived experience of a particular group of women with a history of gender disenfranchisement: clergywomen in leadership positions in Hong Kong churches.

An overview of the literature corpus reveals that existing research efforts on gender discrimination in Hong Kong have primarily focused on the secular context. Such efforts, though scant, have raised awareness of gender differences and established that Hong Kong women perceive excessive gender discrimination compared with their male counterparts (Foley et al., 2005, p. 442). Research on the Hong Kong clergy's experience often concentrates on topics unrelated to gender injustice, such as work role stressors (Hang-Yue et al., 2005). There has been important research conducted on sexual harassment in Hong Kong churches (Tso, 2018), and the most significant study of gender segregation in Hong Kong churches was carried out in 2002 by the Gender Research Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. This survey-based study explored the work conditions for men and women working in Hong Kong churches, including the ministers' and congregants' perceptions of gender segregation (Foley et al., 2005). The study concluded that gender affects a candidate's chances of being ordained and of the roles offered once ordained. According to the study, men and women ministers had different perceptions of gender discrimination, with women aware of the gendered treatments and the discrimination. In response, women either accepted these conditions or expressed dissatisfaction or sometimes a desire to leave the position. The present study builds on the study by the Chinese University of Hong Kong and presents a nuanced examination of the types of gendered maltreatment experienced by Hong Kong clergywomen. I will classify these incidents of gender discrimination as either physical, emotional, or theological in nature. My examination of the state of affairs regarding ministering in the male-dominated environment of Hong Kong churches shows the gravity and pervasiveness of institutional sexism.

Hong Kong has an interesting background for this type of research as it presents specific contextual idiosyncrasies that one must consider when trying to understand any aspect of its Christian practices. Having been a gateway between China and the global world in areas such as finance, trade, and tourism (Chu, 2011, p. 46), coupled with its colonial history, Hong Kong has become a present-day melting-pot of diverse cultures and languages. The unique context of Hong Kong as a "hybrid community" (Kwong, 2011, p. 67) with its non-homogenous population presents an additional layer of intricacy in examining congregations' gender expectations and clergywomen's leadership experiences within the church. The local religious landscape, with its unique blend of East and West (Tsang, 2003), is characterized by a rich collage of religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. The Hong Kong Protestant community constitutes roughly 15% of the local population, with over 1,500 churches representing nearly 70 denominations (GovHK, 2016); the rest of the Christian community belongs to the Catholic church. Of these Protestant churches, the majority are Chinese-speaking faith communities, but there are also around 60 English-speaking Protestant churches (Ray Bakke Centre, 2016). Some of these English-speaking churches experience an influx of local millennials resulting from a move of the younger Chinese-speaking congregants into English-speaking international churches in recent years (Snelgrove et al., 2021).

It is not possible for a study of the present length to tackle all the complex diversity of Hong Kong's Protestant churches, both Chinese-speaking and English-speaking. Yet the lack of prior scholarly research has led me to begin filling this gap by delving into gender disenfranchisement in leadership positions of clergywomen within English-speaking faith

communities, including denominations from Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal, and Ecumenical traditions. This setting represents the kaleidoscope of cultures, languages, and races distinctive of Hong Kong while still showcasing a manageable degree of heterogeneity and size. The methodology and lens utilized for this study could be extrapolated into analyses of other Hong Kong or international Christian communities.

## Methods

The author has approached this study from the perspective of Practical Theology (a discipline that seeks to examine Christian practices) by focusing on the lived experience of this important and potentially disenfranchised group of Christian practitioners in their professional lives. To do so, an interdisciplinary approach has been employed, which enables the combination of a Practical Theological focus on the practice of women in clerical roles together with other methodologies from Psychology and Sociology useful for the investigation of human experiences. The objective of Practical Theology is to inform better practice, and the qualitative research methodology of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as a suitable methodological approach to fulfill this aim within the current investigation. As a methodology, IPA originated in clinical psychology from its inception in the mid-1990s and has since expanded in its utilization by other disciplines, including the human, health, and social sciences (Smith et al., 2009, p. 5). IPA, underpinned and guided by phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiographic approaches, aims at understanding the lived experience of a “person’s relatedness to, or involvement in, a particular event or process (phenomenon)” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 40). IPA’s methodological commitments aim to unearth fresh, implicit, hidden, and insightful accounts of the lived experience of a particular group in a specific context. Therefore, this idiographic methodological approach is especially suitable for investigating the lived experience of clergywomen in Hong Kong, allowing them to interpret how they make sense of gendered encounters in their practice.

Additionally, IPA was selected as an appropriate methodology for this study because it is an approach that has been deemed especially helpful for the exploration of topics on which little information is currently available (Al Omari et al., 2017, p. 36; Bonavita et al., 2018, p. 378), and which are under-researched (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006, p. 227), difficult (Turner, 2018, p. 452), or “complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41). The small sample size is a distinctive feature of IPA, which places high value on the benefits of in-depth engagement with a smaller number of participants (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56). The recommended sample size is usually between four and ten participants (Smith et al., 2009, p. 52).

## Procedure

After I obtained the approval from the Committee for Research Ethics & Governance at the University of Aberdeen, recruitment of participants commenced. Through an email letter, I invited eight participants who fulfilled the following criteria: ordained female ministers with more than a year of experience employed in a senior leadership position within an English-speaking faith community in Hong Kong. As the researcher’s native language is English, the project focused on the English-speaking community to adhere to IPA’s preference for eliciting in-depth and nuanced sharing of the participants’ lived experience. A language barrier may have prevented such sharing. The small and homogenous sample set is in keeping with IPA’s methodological emphasis on the depth and richness of analysis and its idiographic commitment (Smith et al., 2009, p. 49). The purposeful design to limit the study to a small number of participants allows for a deep evocation and subsequent fine-grained analysis of the intricate and emotionally-laden experiences captured from the homogeneous sample. The participants all occupy or have occupied positions of leadership as ordained ministers. The email included

a participant information sheet and consent form containing the study's description. Once a participant expressed an interest in participating in the study, she was contacted to arrange a time and date for a meeting for further questions and clarifications. Once the consent forms were signed, interviews were conducted.

IPA's primary concern is eliciting detailed, first-person accounts of the experiences under investigation. For qualitative data collection, semi-structured interviews were selected to facilitate a rich sharing of the clergy-women's lived experiences. The interviews were transcribed following IPA procedures (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 82-101).

As guided by IPA's idiographic commitment, following the collection and transcription of the data from the interviews, I performed a fine-grained analysis of one case before proceeding onto the second case. This process was repeated until each set of data in the corpus of cases had been thoroughly examined, before moving on to cross-case analysis. The individual analytical procedure began with the six steps recommended by Smith et al. (2009, pp. 82-101): reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, creating tables with these themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases. Motivated by IPA's theoretical emphasis to understand "the person as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being [assuming] a chain of connection between people's talk and their thinking and emotional state" (Smith, 2003, p. 54), my analysis was intentionally slow as I focused on the complex connection between the participants' articulation and experience. At the beginning of the analytic process, descriptive comments were generated that allowed for reflection on linguistic and paralinguistic elements such as gestures, grammatical usage, silences, pauses, hesitations, repetitions, and metaphors to uncover the embedded and hard-to-verbalize meanings behind the surface of the content shared. At the next stage of the analytical process, cross-case analysis was conducted by comparing the tables of themes for each participant, looking for convergences and divergences. I identified themes with similarities between cases and arranged them into clusters of themes. Patterns were sought across cases to generate superordinate and subordinate themes.

### **Results: Gender Discrimination in Hong Kong Churches**

The data gathered in the interviews and analyzed using IPA methodology revealed clusters of themes that show the homogeneous presence of institutional sexism, and which can be classified under the superordinate theme of "gender discrimination." This theme refers to a set of violent and/or discriminatory behaviors that male colleagues or church members demonstrated, directed towards women in leadership positions in Hong Kong churches.

Institutional sexism is, therefore, showcased through gender discriminatory treatment that varies in the gravity of the offence and the explicitness in manifestation. Regardless of how grave, the participants experienced this treatment as abiding and distressing, as reflected in the data. The scale and extent of the oppressive experiences uncovered in the data suggest that Hong Kong churches lack vital safeguards of justice and are without a proper system of oversight, which allows the current culture of gender discrimination to thrive. This absence of an established system of accountability and the lack of effort in upholding gender equity allow for the high tolerance and perpetuation of gender discrimination indicated by the data. The assortment of discriminatory behaviors was classified as physical, emotional, and theological in nature, all of which are detailed below.

#### *Physical Maltreatment and Sexual Harassment*

One participant shared her traumatic experience of being physically assaulted at work, which was behind her past hesitation and reluctance to be ordained:

Fear... ummm... I was leading a small team in worship once and then out of nowhere some of the men, they just literally pushed me [gesturing pushing with force with both hands] came and pushed me against the wall. Like, I was leading a team and then some of the men questioned the way I was leading. I was a staff at the church at the time... like why are we not doing the programme the way he has asked us to do etc... pushing me on the wall and questioning me about the programme. (Nala, personal communication).

It is worth highlighting that congregants and staff witnessed this incident, yet there was no follow up nor reporting undertaken. The lack of action by the witnesses points to the church's culture of tolerance regarding gender discrimination.

The gravity of the physical assault leaves the participant extremely vulnerable. Multiple aggressors assault the clergywoman violently, which instigates abiding fear in the participant. The fear generated from such an assault is a mechanism to maintain power and control through the use and threat of violence to force the clergywoman into conforming to entrenched institutional expectations (Pharr, 1998, p. 55). It is a punitive approach that removes her autonomy and agency to practice her vocational vision and ultimately renders her voiceless and powerless. Silencing is a major tool to perpetuate the patriarchal status quo, accomplished not only through physical threat but also through other kinds of punitive behaviors.

Sexual harassment is highly prevalent in hierarchical organizations, whether religious or secular, which exemplify gendered treatments of members (Acker, 1990, p. 139). In fact, Hong Kong's churches demonstrate a "backwards" approach in handling sexual violence, causing additional harm to the victims by their determined circumventions and negative responses in addressing sexual-harassment complaints (Tso, 2018, p. 389). One participant, Georgianna, recounts how the church handled a female colleague encounter:

There was a senior male minister... he was accused by a female minister of sexual harassment. But this accusation was not handled. At the end, this female minister left the church... There was no justice. It was completely unfair and was never given a fair hearing. It was just not taken up. No committee, all closed doors... and that's disturbing. Disgusting... purely disgusting. (Georgianna, personal communication)

This situation reflects the prevalence of abuse and the institutional failure to deal with such occurrences. Women are made more vulnerable in their role within the Hong Kong churches, which are "characterized by authoritarian, patriarchal leadership and cultures that routinely silence the voices of women" (Tso, 2018, p. 388). This deeply entrenched and systemically fostered patriarchal ministerial setting in Hong Kong lacks essential safeguards and trustworthy systems of accountability to ensure gender justice. The absence of a transparent scheme of oversight not only allows for gender violence to thrive but also permits other practices of gender oppressive behaviors, such as those demonstrated below, to remain and be reinforced in the church.

### *Emotional Maltreatment*

Of equal concern is the pervasiveness of emotional mistreatment to which clergywomen are subjected in the "toxic environment" (Lucy, personal communication) of the work conditions within the church. The manners of emotional oppression may be "subtle" (Diana, personal communication) and implicit, concealed and reinforced by the impenetrable barriers prohibiting clergywomen from "venturing out" of assigned roles such as women's and children's ministries (Diana, personal communication). More blatant manifestations may include overt statements of exclusion, refusal of acknowledgment of the clergy-women's

ordained status, as well as other undermining and bullying behaviors such as name-calling and ostracism. Regardless of the modes of emotional abuse, all the participants experienced the detrimental depletion of their sense of well-being, with over half of the participants having to make the difficult choice to resign. A few clergywomen reported enduring impacts even after leaving the job, requiring an extended period of time to recover.

#### *Verbal Discrimination and Maltreatment*

Clergywomen experienced emotional distress because of explicit verbal discriminatory actions such as name-calling or gender-explicit deprecation, aimed to undermine their authority and keep them in a subjugated position within the boundaries of their assigned roles. One participant, Lucy, shared her experience of repetitive verbal bullying.

[I]n terms of bullying behaviors and how I have been constantly, habitually undermined by other male priests...you know, one of them would say to others when I walked past them “oh here comes the she-priest.” Yeah, you heard right. She-priest...I have had countless negative experiences with them. (Lucy, personal communication)

Other than this type of mocking deprecation, the church's overt denial of clergy-women's ordained status continues to add to the emotional toil experienced by the participants. Another participant, Simone, recounted her painful encounters with her church's strong discriminatory stance against women in ministry:

I remember them saying, yeah, well we can't call you pastor because you are a woman and we won't allow that...I was there for twelve and a half years serving like this actually. So I was kind of [stops and tears up. Pauses for a few minutes]... He [newly appointed senior male pastor] drew the line in the sand and then made a statement that we do not believe in women in ministry and then went on the website and blah blah blah so, it was basically... [trails off and tears up again]. (Simone, personal communication)

The men in these examples use verbally discriminatory treatment to remove the authority of the ordained status for women and further create distance in the power hierarchy between female and male ministers. The gender-explicit deprecation and the refusal to acknowledge women's ordained authority is a means of diminishing the voice and visibility of clergywomen.

It merits mentioning that verbal discrimination originates not only from male priests but also includes disrespect from lay congregants in their attitude and behaviors towards clergywomen, as exemplified by one participant: “I was just getting prepared in the vestry, and I came through to speak to the organist. And he just glared at me and yelled at me” (Lucy, personal communication).

#### *Silencing Treatments*

Another frequently observed mode of gendered experience highly detrimental to the emotional well-being of clergywomen includes an array of actions which collectively discourage and stifle the voices of the participants in their role. As shown below, these silencing behaviors, besides the physical threats exemplified above by Nala, also include prolonged periods of ostracism, persistence in disregarding articulated needs and opinions of participants, and devastating experiences of broken trust and profound betrayal in response to the decision to speak up. This host of punitive consequences of the women's expressions of their thoughts serves a silencing function. Clergywomen who initially choose to speak up soon reconsider

this decision and may opt to submit to the dominant oppressive power, relinquish their rights to express themselves, and remain quiet. An example of punitive ostracism is shared by Lucy when explaining her hesitation to speak up in meetings: “if you are in a meeting and I gave my opinion on something to which they didn’t agree, well, I would be ostracised for months! So sometimes like in the staff meeting I am constantly thinking is it worth saying anything” (Lucy, personal communication).

The strength of the negative consequences of voicing her opinions affects the participant’s confidence or willingness to speak up. Lucy, for example, perceives these deterring behaviors to be more evident in the Hong Kong church context compared to her experience in the UK: “Obviously in England, similar things may happen. But if we met with our bishops, our views and opinions will be heard even if they do not agree with us. But you wouldn’t do that here. You would not dare or bother to speak up” (Lucy, personal communication).

Sometimes, the silencing treatments do not directly lead to punishing outcomes, yet they serve the same function in discouraging women from speaking about their needs. One participant exemplified this mode of silencing behaviors by recounting how her articulated request for time off to work on an important and time-sensitive project was blatantly disregarded by male colleagues: “The disappointment was of them [male colleagues] not recognizing or hearing that I had this need which I really asked for. But...can just charge in and force their needs on me... it just felt that they would ignore and keep choosing to ignore” (Ada, personal communication).

The continual efforts by men to stifle clergy-women’s voices and opinions, whether by punitive consequences or by brazen disregard when they do speak up, precipitates a deep sense of suffocation, as captured by Georgianna, who said, “So I was thinking one day when there are more female than male ministers, would we still be suffocated in our expressions of views?” (personal communication). The overarching reach of these ongoing silencing effects not only discourages women from speaking up, but also shapes women’s expectations and related behaviors towards resisting gender discrimination, including harassment.

Lucy encapsulated another form of silencing, this time through a serious breach of confidentiality. Her decision to speak up and find ways to resist gender discrimination at work, despite prior experiences with negative outcomes, was met with a betrayal of trust and a breach of confidentiality within the supposedly safe relationship she had with her training incumbent. Lucy shared with her training incumbent her “horrendous” (personal communication) experience of aggressive and repeated gendered oppression from another senior minister. A while later, she was met with the shocking outcome of rebuke by the perpetrator himself. It was only then that Lucy realized her training incumbent’s betrayal, having chosen to protect his male colleague and warn him about her complaint and intended actions of formally reporting it. This extreme case of silencing treatment utterly shattered Lucy’s residual faith in her ability to effect change within the system, which she thought of as being in “a nightmare” (personal communication), leading to her subsequent decision to resign.

Unsurprisingly, habitual encounters with these negative and costly silencing treatments leave the clergywomen emotionally diminished, feeling “discouraged” (Ada), “hurt” (Nala), and “suffocated” (Georgianna). Collectively, these ongoing oppressive gender-minimizing behaviors strip women ministers of the power to withstand or defy the status quo so that they remain voiceless in the “all-male enclave” (Bagilhole, 2006, p. 109) of the gendered and hierarchical ecclesiastical organization.

### *Gender Marginalizing Culture: An “Exclusive Male Club”*

The abiding emotional woundedness sustained by the women ministers is not confined to the discriminatory behaviors of verbal abuse and silencing mistreatments but extends to



extensive marginalizing actions at work. These gender-related segregations in the church have been observed in the data to range from the subtle yet persistent omission of including women ministers in meetings, to a failure to take notice of their requests or ideas, to the overt banishment of women's roles in priestly duties. Bearing this pervasive oppression at work has led to clergywomen experiencing their roles as permanent "outsiders," "imposters," or "guests" (Simone, personal communication) when in the company of their male counterparts.

The data has revealed that clergywomen have been excluded from the weekly clergy meetings, leaving them feeling alienated in their role:

So, there are still exclusions. I mean, we are still excluded from the male only morning meetings. [smiles] Yeah, I know that I could put on my crocodile skin and go but no one really invited me, and I just felt... I thought, it's been such a long time already, so I am not going to stir now. I am still aware of it. Yeah, it is still disappointing... I asked the senior male pastor the day before he retired... and he was very honest with me. He just smiled and he said in theory, yes, you were not invited because in reality we are only all males there. It's an exclusive male club apparently. (Diana, personal communication)

The omission of invitation was openly acknowledged as a conscious decision to exclude women ministers from the "exclusive male club" (Diana), further reflecting the pervasiveness and implicit tolerance of gender discrimination in the form of segregation of women at work.

#### *Banishment from Priestly Roles*

Other, more overt, gender-based segregation in ministerial roles was reported, with some participants being prohibited from performing certain roles reserved only for male ministers. These candid marginalizing actions resemble previously mentioned examples of verbal discrimination corresponding to the refusal to acknowledge women's status, further diminishing their voice and visibility in the church. One example of this type of marginalization is the explicit denial of women's ordained status, as illustrated by Simone, whom the church told that she would not be allowed to be referred to with the title of "a pastor" because of her gender (Simone, personal communication).

Other forms of marginalization and denial of status observed include the banishment of women ministers from taking part in the main services at the church. Instead, they are sent to serve in the smaller, more rural satellite churches or to lead evening services, which have a much lower attendance:

I was there for twelve and a half years serving like this actually. So, I was kind of [stops and tears up. Pauses for a few minutes] sometimes you could preach in the evening, which is strange because [snickers] I guess God doesn't mind when it's dark, you know? You are left with the message like if there are fewer people there then it would be okay? (Simone, personal communication)

As mentioned in the introduction, women are habitually assigned women's and children's ministries, as supported by a study conducted in 2021, showing that the clergy who lead those ministries is 95% female (Yih, 2023b). This type of assignment is experienced by the participants, showing that clergywomen are prohibited from "venturing out" of the roles assigned by their male colleagues, like women's and children's ministries (Diana), "secretary" (Diana), and "refreshment lady" (Diana). In addition to this restrictive assignment, they are banished from other priestly duties, as demonstrated by Simone:

So ordained women ministers like myself are not allowed to preach or do baptism. So, you wouldn't baptise but you would do all the classes. You would do all the prep work, but not the baptism. Oh, and communion as well. So basically, women are exempted from all the priestly functions. (Simone, personal communication)

Together, the marginalizing culture of the church, coupled with the previously revealed modes of gendered treatments, operate to foster female submission, reinforcing their invisibility and inaudibility, and buttressing the existing patriarchal status quo of the church.

### *Gender Injustice from Inequitable Expectations and Standards*

Marginalizing treatments extend beyond the injustice pertaining to the limitation of the clergy-women's ministerial functions or the lack of inclusion in meetings. These treatments also involve unfair implementation of policies and gendered attitudes that further reinforce male dominance and gender inequity in the workplace. For instance, comments on clergywomen's physical aspect denote an implementation of clothing policies that is not upheld for male colleagues. Lucy shared an experience which very clearly illustrates that discriminatory treatment:

Another [incident] which took place...some celebration after pre-Christmas service... I was in full clerical gown and then changed after the service to join the party. I had on black woollen trousers, black leather shoes, clerical shirt... and I had on black pearl earrings. The senior minister came up and said can I speak to you about your dress code? But he didn't go to another male colleague... wearing doc martens, jeans, stripey jumper! And he was considered appropriate... while I was not. (Lucy, personal communication)

Gendered treatments in the professional context mean that professional roles are assigned in relation to gender expectations. Participants express how they regularly are given certain roles that their male colleagues believe belong within the female sphere. Another participant spoke of the same type of gendered role assignments:

So say, if I walked into a church committee meeting as the only female, I would be immediately assigned secretary. Just [emphasized] because I am female. So yeah, there are subtle things... people expect us to be like the refreshment lady... hey wait a minute, I am here to preside!...why am I pouring wine for everybody? (Diana, personal communication)

The prevalence of gender role assignments described by Diana reflects the significance of vertical segregation and its corresponding gender discrimination within Hong Kong churches. The shaping impacts of gendered processes extend beyond the women's perceived ability and willingness to resist oppression at work to influence their expectations of self, as needing to be "everything to everyone." This unfair expectation from implicit and unchallenged gendering creates an additional barrier for women's success because of the added pressure to fulfill the many expectations within the different assigned roles:

There is definite pressure...to balance that role between a mother, a wife, and working here also as a minister...We women are in everything you know... eventually we are left so strengthless. You know, like my emotional well-being is

like so low... you know there are expectations... I feel pressure to being everything to everyone. (Nala, personal communication)

### *Theological Features of Gendered Discrimination*

Thus far, the clergy-women's lived experience of the physical and emotional impacts endured from the assortment of institutional sexism explicated in the earlier section revealed that profound gender inequality and discrimination against women exists within Hong Kong churches. An important mode in which institutional sexism is observed from the data corresponds to a distorted interpretation of scriptures, or "skewed theology" described by one participant (Georgianna), to advance and fortify the established inequity within the church, and to detain women in a subjugated position:

Say in bible study, a few of the men [leaders would teach that] only men have God's glory with them... like a man is the head of the household and of the woman etc? I have heard some male ministers here preaching skewed theology... do you know why our church is experiencing a revival? [they would ask] It is because every woman has been brought to submission. Can you believe it?... I have heard so many theologically malnourished sermons here. They would often re-package bible truths to oppress women. (Georgianna, personal communication)

The Hong Kong churches' use of "skewed theology" is a means to uphold the entrenched patriarchal ideology, promoting the belief that it is God's will for women to submit to men who hold superior control over them. This gender-deprecating practice gives rise to "one of the worst forms of violence" (Wood, 2019, p. 3), further marginalizing women and keeping them exposed to unjust and disparaging conduct. Similar modes of gender-oppressive behavior exist in the wider, global Church, which likewise has chosen to preserve institutional sexism, preventing women from being perceived as equally valuable as men (Johnson, 2005, p. 17). In the same way as Georgianna's observation in Hong Kong, the Church, more globally, has been critiqued for perpetuating and justifying systemic gender discrimination through discrediting women's equality through interpretation of scriptural texts and reinforcing the androcentric professional hierarchy of the Church (Valentine, 2013, p. 243).

### *Pervasiveness of Gender Discrimination*

Irrespective of the individual clergy-woman's encounter with varied kinds of gender discriminatory treatments at work, all the participants share a common experience of enduring acute institutional sexism. This journey of ministering within such strong institutional sexism is so wounding to clergywomen that nearly half of the participants reported having to make the difficult decision to resign for the sake of their mental wellbeing. A distinct sentiment of hopelessness (Ada), woundedness (Lucy), and fatigue (Simone) is evident from the lived experiences of the participants, who had to endure the unrelenting corrosive impacts of gender discrimination. The reflection of Georgianna below succinctly captures the gravity of the cumulative impacts from prolonged immersion within the profoundly detrimental ministerial setting of the church:

And so, I left the church using the excuse of sickness... I really was very vulnerable then. I had to leave and not fight the church for our rights, you know. These ten years... it really took me a long and hard time to stand up again... I was feeling so powerless. I was not supported. I had to... I did not sleep for the first year... I really was so fragile and powerless... I had doubts if I would ever be able to influence the church. But to be honest, the church? It is like a mountain. We can only hammer all

we want, but we are dealing with a mountain. It is an impossible task. (Georgianna, personal communication)

As exemplified by Georgianna, the abiding and wounding experiences sustained by clergywomen in their ministerial role leaves them acutely vulnerable and in need of support and healing in the aftermath. The overwhelming sense of fatigue, despair, and weariness shared by the participants has at its core a resignation and a hopelessness. The experience of having to endure the unrelenting onslaught of the multitude of gender discriminatory treatments has led them to the conviction of their powerlessness and the futility of trying to effect change with a mere “hammer” against the immovable “mountain” of the deeply rooted patriarchal hierarchy of the church (Georgianna, personal communication).

## Conclusion

I have examined the lived experience of clergywomen in their roles within Hong Kong English-speaking faith communities and employed IPA to deepen understanding of institutional sexism within the context of Hong Kong. Through an in-depth analysis of the data generated, this article has brought to light the indisputable presence of a range of gender-marginalizing practices within the church, denoted by the superordinate theme of gender discrimination. Women ministers in leadership positions are continually subjected to discriminatory and oppressive treatment at work, with enduring and wounding impacts on their well-being. These detrimental experiences of gender discrimination manifest in different ways, categorized as physical, emotional, and theological in nature. Collectively, such gender-biased conduct serves a silencing function, continually diminishing the audibility and visibility of women within the male-dominated church setting.

This study has revealed a distressing picture of the state of affairs for women in leadership roles within Hong Kong churches. The injustice of institutional sexism is similar to the global context as evidenced by the host of damaging gender discriminatory treatments presented in this paper (Johnson, 2005, p. 85). Efforts to establish a transparent and trustworthy system for advancing gender equity and justice in the church are therefore essential. The data reveals a critical absence of safeguards and of a system of oversight and accountability to ensure gender equity, as well as the absence of support for women clergy. These absences lead to a high tolerance for injustice and a push for institutional sexism to be preserved and perpetuated.

In this article, I have provided an overview of gender discrimination in the Hong Kong Protestant church on which future research can build. It aims to arouse attention to the gendered experiences of Hong Kong clergywomen and to open the way for further endeavors to address the needs of these women in accessing equitable treatments and a system of support to survive and thrive in their leadership roles.

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