

## FRANCISCANS INTERNATIONAL Reflections on Human Rights and Women

ADVENT 2017

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Advent is a season of joyful anticipation. Traditionally, we light four candles, one for each week spent waiting for the coming celebration of Christmas. The Gospel of Matthew mentions four women, in addition to Mary of Nazareth, in the genealogy of Jesus. Paradoxically, the Gospel writer has chosen to include women whose stories might cast them in a suspicious light. Foreigners, prostitutes, and widows, these women are hardly the stately matriarchs, such as Sarah and Rebekah, mentioned elsewhere in Scripture .

Traditional readings have focused on the "irregularities" of their situations; however, such literal readings have been viewed through a patriarchal lens and run the risk of missing out on the core message of the Gospels. Instead, we can view the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba from a more critical perspective. Having understood the oppression and injustice women have traditionally experienced, we can see and appreciate their stories in a new light.

Like many women in Scripture, countless women are the victims of oppression and injustice today. Human rights violations carry gendered ramifications that disproportionately affect women all over the world. Reflecting on the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba in light of contemporary human rights issues reveal the continued relevance of the Gospel message.

In a world of seemingly endless darkness, their stories offer us a glimpse of the Hope and Justice that is to come.

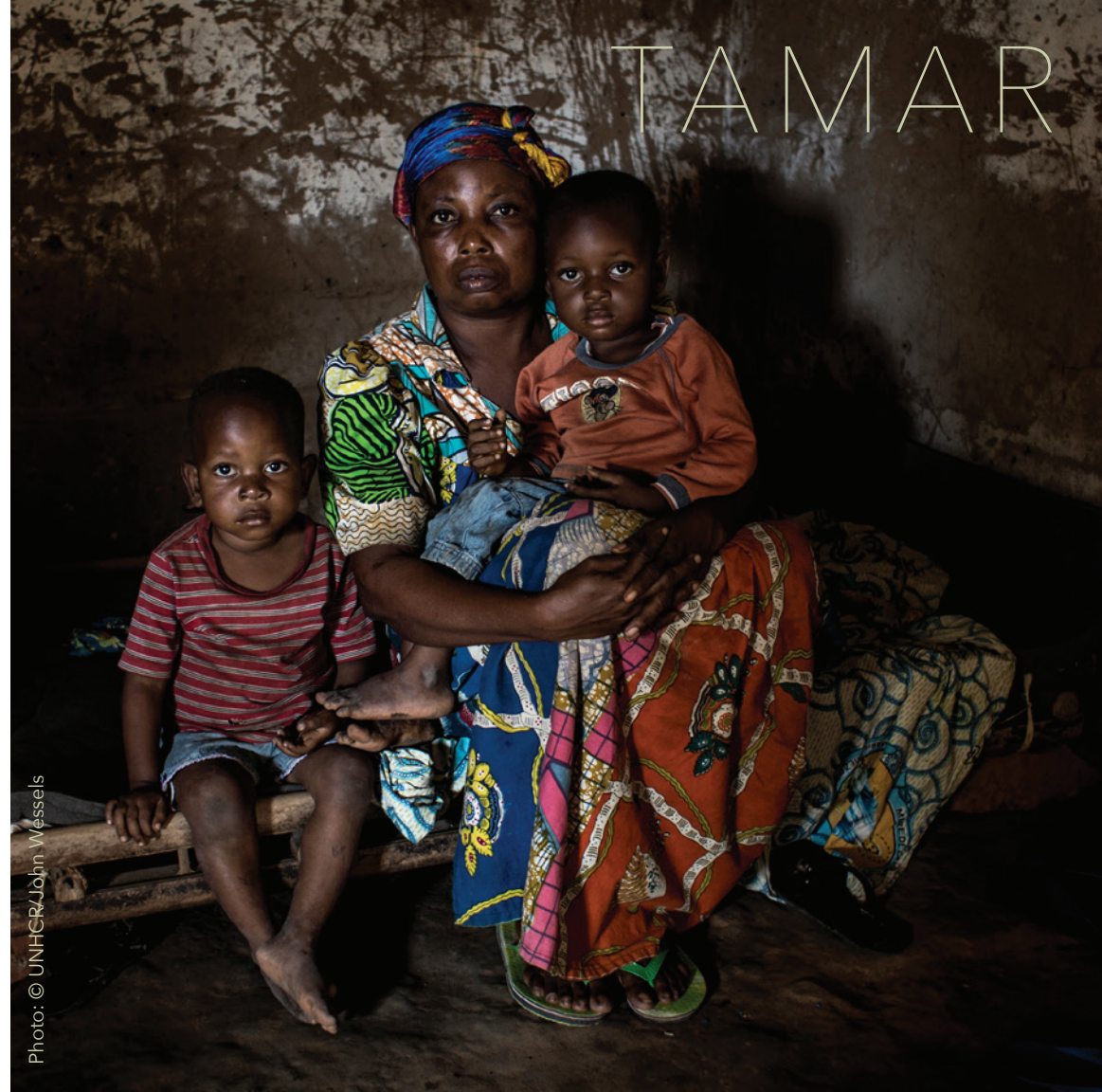
## TAMAR

A Canaanite woman, Tamar was married, in succession, to Er and Onan, the sons of Judah, son of Isaac and Leah. After her two husbands died, Judah tried to evade his obligations to provide Tamar with an heir by sending her off to live in her father's house as a widow. Out of desperation, Tamar conceived a plan to reclaim her rightful inheritance and the security she was due according to law and custom by pretending to be a prostitute and conceiving twins with her father-in-law. Tamar's commitment to maintaining Judah's lineage, albeit through unconventional means, won her Judah's admiration, who said of his daughter-in-law, she "is more righteous than I" (Genesis 38:26). Tamar's eldest twin, Perez, would become an ancestor of Jesus.

## EXTREME POVERTY

Like Tamar, many women today often find themselves at the mercy of patriarchal systems that disregard their needs and the dignity of their humanity. The gender inequalities in cultures and societies all over the world result in the fact that extreme poverty disproportionately affects women and girls. A myriad of factors contribute to extreme poverty, but societal and cultural norms, misogyny and sexism, as well as income disparities contribute to gendered-dimensions of poverty and cause women to suffer the most from its effects.

For single mothers and women who are divorced, separated, or widowed, extreme poverty is often exacerbated by alienation and estrangement. Antipoverty measures must therefore consider and be sensitive to the variety of vulnerable situations women may encounter in different stages of their lives.







# RAHAB

## RAHAB

Rahab is the epitome of a social outcast. In the Book of Joshua, Rahab is identified as a prostitute who kept a brothel in Jericho. Her occupation, however, was not the only source of her marginalization. In addition to being a prostitute, she was also a foreigner and a woman. Despite her disreputable status, Rahab played a key role in the story of the Jewish people. When Joshua sent two spies to explore the city of Jericho, Rahab risked her life to hide them and ensure their safety. When Joshua conquered Jericho, he repaid Rahab's kindness by saving her and her entire family.

Rahab's prophetic declaration of faith, "the Lord, your God, is God in heaven above and on earth below" (Joshua 2:11), as well as her righteous works (her commitment to Joshua and his men), foreshadowed her position as an ancestor of Jesus.

## EQUAL RIGHTS

The story of Rahab is a call for recognizing equal rights and dignity for all women and girls. Economic, cultural, and political factors collude to make women and girls more susceptible to abuses and violence, including social exclusion. This is especially true for those who find themselves in vulnerable situations, such as migrants and refugees.

Rahab also epitomizes the figure of a strong woman who, despite experiencing prejudice and marginalization, lives her life with courage and dignity. However, far too often today, women still face discrimination and experience physical, sexual and psychological violence. The effort to ensure equal rights and dignity to all women and girls by eliminating all forms of public and private violence, including trafficking, sexual violence, and social exclusion, must be championed by all regardless of their gender.



## RUTH

Following a famine, Naomi and her family moved from Bethlehem to the land of Moab. There, her two sons married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. When tragedy struck, leaving the three women widowed, Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem and released her daughters-in-law from their marital obligation. Orpah returned to her family but Ruth remained faithful, saying, "Wherever you go I will go... Your people shall be my people and your God, my God" (Ruth 1:16). Despite encountering many difficulties along the way, Ruth's love and commitment to Naomi was justified in the end. She married Naomi's relative, Boaz and both became the parents of Obed, the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David.

## MIGRATION

The story of Ruth is a story of faithfulness and love, but it is also the story of a foreigner and of the difficulties migrants and refugees find in a foreign land. Whether it is climate-induced, or brought about by war, natural disasters, or lack of economic opportunities, global migration is one of the most pressing issues in the world today. Women and girls are the most vulnerable migrants and refugees, and they often face unspeakable violence in the form of physical and sexual assault, and even death. Moreover, women experience multiple and intersecting oppressions before, during, and after their migration journey. Sexism, misogyny, racism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia collude with other forms of gender-based violence to inflict harm on migrant and refugee women and girls.

Our response to the global migration crisis must therefore work to develop and promote gender-responsive policies and a compassionate, human rights-based approach to migration that recognizes and defends the innate dignity of all women.



**Franciscans International**  
A voice at the United Nations

Photo: © UNHCR/Markel Redondo

# RUTH



# BATHSHEBA



Photo: Courtesy of Ratfy Lerna

## BATHSHEBA

Named in Matthew's Gospel only as "Uriah's wife," Bathsheba suffered violence as a result of one man's abuse of power. King David, after seeing Bathsheba bathing on a roof, sent for her in order to sleep with her. Given the imbalance of power, their union can be understood as one of coercion and dominance.

After realizing that Bathsheba was pregnant, David tried to cover up his transgression by ordering Uriah to sleep with his wife. When Uriah refused, David had him sent to the frontlines of battle to be killed. Bathsheba was forced to marry her husband's murderer and was further punished with the death of their first child. Later, she would bear a son named Solomon, who would be one of the direct ancestors of Jesus.

## EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS

Women experience gender-based violence all over the world. However, they are also victimized by other forms of violence, including killings and murders that do not directly target women or girls. Amongst many other examples, the war on drugs in the Philippines and police brutality in the United States have ravaged already vulnerable communities. And while the victims of extrajudicial killings and of police brutality are most often men, women, too, are caught in the crosshairs of this violence.

A mother mourning in the streets after her son was accused of being a drug-dealer. A woman livestreaming the death of her boyfriend on social media after a policeman shot him during a routine traffic stop. Like Bathsheba, they mourn the loss of their husbands and children, as well as their brothers, fathers, partners, and other members of their community.



## ADVENT PRAYER

Most High and Glorious God, just as the Advent candles dispel the dark, so, too, You dispel the darkness of injustice and oppression. We give You thanks for Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, through whom You have illuminated the way to Your Son.

God of the Poor, grant us the generosity of heart to provide for those who suffer under the burden of extreme poverty – *Open our eyes to the sources of inequality that disenfranchise women all over the world.*

God of Freedom, grant us the confidence to work for the liberation of those who have been ensnared by contemporary slavery – *Give us the courage to defend the rights of our sisters, and all who have been degraded by sexual exploitation and human trafficking.*

God of Justice, grant us the strength to journey with our migrant and refugee sisters and brothers – *Inspire us to dismantle the barriers, both physical walls and those within our hearts, that are propped up by xenophobia, racism, and fear.*

God of Mercy, grant us the compassion to comfort those who mourn because of senseless violence – *May we learn to value the sanctity of all life, especially those who are seen as less than because of the color of their skin, their social class, or their addiction.*

Ignite our hearts with Your justice, as we wait with joyful and expectant hope for Your coming.

