



Unearthing the Hidden Stories of the Double Marginalised

Ini Dorcas Dah and Verena Suchhart-Kroll

LUDGER HIEPEL: Verena Suchhart-Kroll ist wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin an der Arbeitsstelle für Theologische Genderforschung. Sie interviewt Dr. Ini Dorcas Dah, eine evangelische Theologin aus Burkina Faso. Diese Folge des TheoPodcast ist auf Englisch, da Dr. Ini Dorcas Dah auf Englisch forscht und dies – anders als Deutsch – eine der vielen Sprachen ist, die sie fließend beherrscht.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: Hello, everyone! This is Verena Suchhart-Kroll. I am research assistant at the *Centre for Theological Gender Studies* here in Münster. At the centre, we focus on questions of gender and theology from the perspectives of many different theological disciplines. Moreover, in the last years, we have started to concentrate more on the connections between biography, contextuality and intersectionality. By looking at these connections, we try to reflect on questions of gender as part of a bigger picture of our identities, perspectives and, most importantly, our theological thinking.

Someone who joins us in this project at the centre, is Dr. Ini Dorcas Dah. Dorcas is a Burkina Faso national, who studied in Ghana and now goes back and forth between the two countries. In 2015, she finished her PhD at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture, in Ghana. Since then, she has done several bigger and smaller theological projects.

She combines her theological thinking with practical work. The project closest to her heart is her “Association Evangélique SOWTAA” (Evangelical Association for Mutual Assistance) that she founded in 2010. Its goal is to empower women for their sustainable development and to support young women’s education so that they can pay their school fees, rent and their living expenses during the academic year.

I am very happy that Dr. Ini Dorcas Dah is joining us today to talk about this project as well as her theological work. Hello Dorcas!

INI DORCAS DAH: Hello, Verena!

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: Dorcas, to get an idea of your theological work, it is probably best to first and foremost have a look at your doctoral dissertation from 2015. It has the interesting and somewhat startling title “Women do more work than men”. It focusses mostly on Birifor Women. Can you tell me a little more about the Birifor? Where are they located and how would you describe Birifor culture?

INI DORCAS DAH: The Birifor are a people divided by colonial borders between Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana. They are an acephalous people with no chieftaincy.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL Wait, let me stop you there. ‘An acephalous people with no chieftaincy’ – what does that mean exactly?

INI DORCAS DAH: An acephalous people means that the Birifor do not have a centralised chieftaincy system in their social-political organisation. Therefore, the head of the family is the chief in his household and oversees all religious matters. Even though the Birifor are matrilineal, religious offices are inherited by men not women. The clan head is the one in charge when the problem is at the clan level. Finally, the priest of the earth-shrine steps in to solve problems when it goes beyond family and clan levels to affect the entire community.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL In your work, you focused on the situation of women specifically. What is the situation of women in Burkina Faso and what are their struggles?

INI DORCAS DAH: In Burkina Faso, I would say that there is still a gender bias against women at various aspects of life including some of the churches’ attitudes that do not make life easier for women in some contexts. However, as you noticed in the book, my work is about the *positive* impact of women in the expansion of the Christian faith in general regardless of whatever negative pressure they go through in our communities.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: Ah, yes! I see! We sometimes tend to focus on people’s suffering and difficulties. And then, there is a danger that we overlook people’s – especially women’s – own agency and strength: How much they accomplish, that they are role models, how much the churches need their work...

INI DORCAS DAH: Yes, exactly. And I wanted to really highlight this. In most communities in West Africa today, Birifor women work together with women of other ethnic groups. Therefore, the work talks about all women with a particular focus on Birifor women whom I call ‘the marginalised within a marginalised ethnic group’ and the major role these women played in Christian mission in West Africa through their contribution to the establishing of the various churches among the Birifor. I also looked at their participation in the various women’s movements among the Birifor and how they bring relief to people spiritually, socially, morally, emotionally and so on by transforming their lives. I also examined individual women’s lives by writing their biographies and looking at how their lives have played a significant role in the growth of the church. I also explored current models in Christian mission to enable me to evaluate how these women are really participants in Christian mission in the lenses of these models established to measure one’s role in Christian mission.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: When you say mission, what do you mean by it? In Germany, the word “mission” has become rather unfamiliar or even strange, because we mostly associate mission with

the missionaries of the last centuries, with colonialism and violence. You know, people who force others to follow a specific belief-system. But in your book, you use a much more positive definition. From what you have described so far, maybe, we could describe mission as working toward the development of the church and helping people transform their lives through the good news that is God's word?

INI DORCAS DAH: When I talk about mission in my work, it is about the work every Christian can do for the expansion of the good news of the Gospel. Mission here is not going out there to impose the Gospel or waging war against people to force them to become Christians. It is rather living in such a way that people see the image of Christ in us and voluntarily accept Christ. Yes, some of the women went out of their comfort zones to preach the Gospel, but they also lived out the Gospel in order to touch people's lives with their actions, they sacrificed their resources for the wellbeing of both church and society to bring about positive impact in their various communities.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: And in your book, then, you were analysing which roles Birifor women play in Christian mission and in doing so, you even broadened the definitions of Christian mission you have worked with. What were your discoveries?

INI DORCAS DAH: What I discovered is that every Christian is a missionary who can impact people's life in his/her community to lead them to Christ. It does not matter which society you come from and how society treats you, but is a matter of availing oneself and God can use us to accomplish marvellous things for his glory. Therefore, in analysing my research, I discovered that Birifor women are missionaries, evangelist, pastors, apostles, and priests even though they do not bear these titles. Why I am saying this is that most of them travel miles on foot putting their lives in danger to share the Gospel with other people. Many of them have sacrificed their finances and resources to contribute to the expansion of the church in their communities and beyond. They have also been able to overcome cultural, denominational, and religious boundaries for the Gospel to be preached.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: This reminds me: Once you told me that when we start reading Scripture from the start, we read a lot about that God says creation is "good" or even "very good". The first time, God says it is "not good" is for man to be alone... This is the same for the church and Christian mission, isn't it? It is not good for the church to be a church of men first and foremost... What do you think should change in our churches?

INI DORCAS DAH: I think our churches need to be deliberate about the inclusion of women in all spheres of the church if we really believe that both man and woman are created in the image of God. The value we give to a woman should be based on the first value God gave her at creation and not on what our various societies dictate us about women.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: To describe the contribution of Birifor women to Christian mission, you looked at practical examples of women who would otherwise have just been forgotten. Can you give me an example of one of these women?

INI DORCAS DAH: Yes, one of these women is Imhobnouor Kambou from Burkina Faso. Imhobnouor did not have the chance to attend formal school. However, I see this woman as a true missionary who impacted her community with her faith before God called her to glory in 2007. Imhobnouor had a heart for human needs in her community to the extent that she never tired going around to visit people in the hospital and in the community and spend time praying with them and testifying about God's goodness to people. She also shared the little that she had with anyone she thought was in

need and could benefit from what she had. This is one of the hidden stories in Christian mission which I decided to unearth (her full story is told in Chapter Six of my book).

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: You finished your PhD in 2015. Has the situation for women changed in Burkina Faso since then? I mean, on the one hand, we hear about a lot of positive developments – for example with the help of the United Nations and the Sustainable Development Goals – but lately, on the other hand, especially for Burkina Faso, we hear about terrorist attacks, many refugees looking for a safe place to stay... How would you describe the situation – especially for the women and girls?

INI DORCAS DAH: You are right about the changes that are occurring in Burkina Faso, but still, life is becoming more and more difficult for families living in zones that have been invaded by the terrorists. Many people have had to move out of their villages to find safe havens elsewhere. As we know in situation of ‘war’ women and children are the most vulnerable. I have read about women struggling to cope with the current situation and that left me in tears.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: As I have already mentioned, you do not only do your theoretical work on the situation of women in Burkina Faso, you also do practical work with young women. Can you tell me a little more about that?

INI DORCAS DAH: Yes, after the establishing of the Association Evangelique SOWTAA in 2010, I started the House of Hope in 2016. The House of Hope is mainly for the education of young women and children who are left to struggle for their education due to poverty and socio-religious beliefs. From 2016 until now we have been able to touch over 20 young women’s lives with the limited resources that we have. I believe that everyone regardless of gender or social class is created in the image of God and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Therefore, discrimination against a child based on gender is a social injustice for me and this needs to be corrected. Thus, my commitment to seek decent education for these young women in a sound environment.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: At the end of the podcast and in the written text, we will include some information where people can find more about your activities with the young women. But I would like to take the chance to talk to you about another pressing issue of today: At the moment, you also do a lot of theological work on ecological questions. In the German context, I feel like we still need to fully reckon with how important these questions are. We still only rarely feel the effects of the climate crisis in our daily lives. I guess, in Burkina Faso this is different, isn’t it?

INI DORCAS DAH: Yes, what I can say related to this question on climate change is that developing countries in general are the most affected by this situation. And Burkina Faso which is already a landlock country in a savannah area is much more affected. There are times the heat becomes unbearable making life very difficult for most people who are already struggling to put one meal on the table let alone getting a means to adjust to the situation.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: Currently, you are writing on an article about gold mining. Can you tell me what you are looking at exactly?

INI DORCAS DAH: The article I wrote on gold mining looked at how the desacralisation of gold in the South West of Burkina Faso is affecting creation (human and other-than-human creation).

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: What does desacralisation mean? In the South West of Burkina Faso, gold was seen as something sacred that people could not produce in big amounts?

INI DORCAS DAH: Yes, as you just said, gold was seen as something sacred which people were not supposed to break the rocks to search for. Even when the Lobi (the people in the South West of Burkina Faso) saw gold in a rock they took it and left it on the hills because for them God kept the gold in the rocks. The Lobi even believed that it was forbidden for a Lobi to wear gold and if one insisted the gold would swallow their soul. Women could only wash what the rain waters washed down and sold that in the market so to use the money to buy useful commodities for the wellbeing of their families.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: So, in your article you show that just getting rid of a traditional religious perspective on gold and starting to only look at it from an economic perspective of “getting more money out of it” really becomes a burden on people and the whole community. What I find really interesting about that is finding an appropriate relationship to traditional religions. On the one hand, when we look at women in Burkina Faso, one might say, it is important to overcome traditions for example when women are seen as lesser than men and discriminated upon right from birth. Thus making life difficult for them in society. On the other hand, when we look at how nature is valued and safeguarded – for example when gold is not produced in a responsible manner, one might say, it is important to keep traditions or traditional religion. How would you navigate between the two?

INI DORCAS DAH: It is not a matter of keeping traditional religion or throwing it away. However, it is all about promoting what is positive in traditional practices and letting the Gospel transform what needs transformation for the well-being of creation.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: Which role would you like the churches to play when faced with crises like these?

INI DORCAS DAH: The church should have a clear position about things like gold mining and other practices that are affecting creation negatively, because if we love God as Christians then we ought to safeguard the integrity of creation for the glory of the Lord by not keeping silent over actions that are destroying the universe.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: And which roles should we as Germans play? I mean, of course, we do not decide on how to do the gold mining, but we are part of one global economy, we buy gold and benefit from the exploitation of nature... And we are not as much affected by the climate crisis as other countries in the world. What would you say?

INI DORCAS DAH: Hum, this is a challenging question for me. However, like in the case of the transatlantic slave trade, I have already met a group of Christians in Liverpool who are trying to redeem the descendants of those affected by the slave trade. I have also met Christians in the USA who are trying to redeem people's lives in the Congo by trying to build schools for communities that are still having schools under trees and so on. So, I think the idea of these two groups above can serve you as an example for contributing to build sustainable programmes for Burkina Faso, because poverty and unemployment are mainly the leading forces behind people turning to look for quick money without realising the long-term consequences for their lives. You could also contribute towards the education of the people towards a better understanding of sustainable development.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: Dorcas, in the last minutes you gave us a glance into your theological work and also your practical work. And I know, this is kind of a meta-question, but, how would you describe how your biography or your own experiences in life, your specific context and your theology influence each other?

INI DORCAS DAH: As I told you lately, I come from a very difficult background. I struggled with vital needs to reach where I am today. And for me being able to complete a PhD is only by God's grace. Therefore, I have taken the resolution to not close my eyes and ears to the cry of any person especially women I meet in need of vital resources for survival. I believe that my theology of hope, social justice and let us say holistic mission in short is useless if it does not take the socio-religious context within which I live and work into consideration.

VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL: Thank you very much for these fascinating insights into your work! And for everyone, who is interested to learn more from Dorcas, you can go and buy or borrow her book: "Women do more work than men" (you can find the details in the description to the podcast). And, you can learn more about her practical work with young women on facebook at 'Association Evangelique Sowtaa'. And we are very much looking forward to welcoming her in person in Münster this October and November.

The aforementioned book is called: Ini Dorcas Dah: Women do more work than men. Birifor women as change agents in the mission and expansion of the Church in West Africa (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana). Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2018. For more information on her practical work, you can go to 'Association Evangelique Sowtaa' on facebook (web.facebook.com/groups/AEJDF/). A website will also be available soon.