

# Women's Broken Bodies in God's Broken Earth

BY MELISSA BROWNING

**In places where the earth is broken by environmental degradation, people are also broken. The poor and marginalized—especially women and their children—are often shoved by their circumstances to live in and carry the burdens of these broken places.**

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**I**n the world around us we see both beauty and brokenness. The beauty of creation calms our souls and reminds us of our Creator, but too often this beauty is marred by pollution. When we see dirty rivers and green spaces littered with trash, when our bodies breathe the air of smog-filled cities, when our eyes witness the barrenness of over-farmed and over-grazed lands, we know all is not well with our world.

In places where the earth is broken, people are also broken. For better or worse, the environments in which we live shape the course of our lives. In places where food does not grow, people starve. In places where water is not safe, people die of water-borne diseases. In places where factories emit toxic pollutants, people struggle against any number of diseases caused by environmental degradation.

The broken places of our world in turn break the people who live there. Even more, those who are already marginalized are often shoved by their circumstances to live in these broken places. While people with money or resources can leave when land becomes desolate or toxic, those without resources have few options and must stay.

In our world, those who are most marginalized by environmental degradation are the poor, those who live off of the land. And the poor are most often women. Because the feminization of poverty is on the rise, it is often women and their children who carry the burdens of these broken places.

When I was doing research on HIV/AIDS in Mwanza, Tanzania, one group of women I interviewed were fish-sellers who worked along the shores of Lake Victoria. This massive lake, which connects three countries in East Africa, has become environmentally degraded through overfishing and the export-based fish industry. The introduction of large fish for export, such as Nile Perch, have eliminated hundreds of species of fish native to the lake and destroyed biodiversity. Today, those who make their living from the lake fight for limited resources and in the process, further degrade the environment.

Along the lake in Bondo, Kenya, women fish-sellers trade sex for fish to sell in the market. Women who refuse to participate in this sex-for-trade system may not be given fish to sell at the market, a place on the bus going to the market, or a space at the market to sell the fish. While it is less public, this same practice occurs in Mwanza where I did my research. Women in my study reported that some of the men fishers would not sell fish to older women or to women who refused sex. Yet these women fish-sellers must buy from the men who fish the waters because in Mwanza women do not fish. Some women thought this was due to taboo and others thought it was because men are stronger, but none of the women in my study believed that women could fish the waters. Women, they believed, were confined to the land.

During the time when I was doing field research, some of the women were in trouble with local police officers. In this area of the lake it is illegal to catch fish that are smaller than seven inches long in order to control overfishing. Yet when the police enforce the law they go to the market and arrest women selling small fish rather than go to the beaches to catch men bringing in illegal fish. Here, women are seen as easier targets and as a result are pushed even further to live off what remains of the broken earth.

Women fish-sellers in Mwanza have much to teach us about the beauty and brokenness of creation. They remind us that more often than not, women carry the greatest burdens of environmental degradation. In places where patriarchy dictates the norms of a society, women will always be given the leftovers. This means that when a community is living off of already depleted resources, women and children will have even fewer resources with which to survive. In a very real way, the women fish-sellers in Mwanza bear the burdens of a harsh environment in bodily ways, as they are asked to trade their bodies for the limited catch that will provide income to feed their children.

If we are to effectively respond to the brokenness of creation, if we are to truly care about the bodies of people, broken as they are pushed to the margins of a broken earth, then we must explore (or perhaps interrogate) our own understanding of the creation story.

Genesis 1:28 reads: "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" Within Christian history, the idea of subduing and having dominion over the earth has gotten us into a bit of trouble. We

have too often misinterpreted the idea of dominion as “rule over” in a way that depletes resources without taking any responsibility for their renewal. The word used in the Bible is best compared to the care benevolent rulers would extend to their people. It is a rule that brings justice, not destruction.

Dominion without responsibility, without justice, can only be understood as a hierarchy, which leaves no room for mutuality or care. We would do well to remember that patriarchal dominion was not God’s original intent

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for creation. Even the mention of a man ruling over a woman (Genesis 3:16) is framed as consequent punishment for their sin. But in Christ Jesus “there is no longer male and female,” the Apostle Paul writes, for the rule of Christ is a rule where dominion is based on care and mutuality, rather than conquering and conquest.

When we seek to care for creation, we must move beyond dominion that fosters hierarchy and seek to

model care that restores justice. In reflecting on the stories of the women fish-sellers in Mwanza, I suggest that because environmental degradation and the devaluing of women’s bodies are deeply linked, learning to value women’s bodies and women’s work can also teach us to care for the earth and the flourishing of all creation.

Theologian Sallie McFague has suggested that one possible answer to the ecological crisis is to learn to see the world as the body of God. Drawing on the biblical creation story to speak about the unity of creation that has been present since the beginning of time, she argues that Christian theology not only values the body, but values all bodies. In McFague’s approach, we extend the respect we give to our bodies to the bodies of every living and non-living thing. According to McFague, if we believe that bodies matter, then we must also believe that our ethical obligation extends to all other bodies on the planet.<sup>†</sup>

In thinking about the ways in which broken bodies and broken earth are connected, we can ask if a stronger obligation to the earth could be created if we learned to value bodies – all bodies. If we truly saw the body of the woman fish-seller in Mwanza as part of the body of God, would we not care for the earth underneath her feet, for the waters where she makes her living? If we realized that the Nile Perch that is exported from her lake to our table was killing her environment and her future, could we be uncaring?

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The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;  
for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.

*Psalm 24:1-2*

Yes, the earth is God's body, and we are called to be co-creators with God. May we find ways seek out the broken places and join God in making them well.

**NOTE**

† Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).



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