

FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS AND THE QUEST FOR AN INCLUSIVE HARMONY OF LIFE

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Abstract

This article examines feminist biblical hermeneutics as a transformative approach to Old and New Testament interpretation grounded in suspicion, remembrance, and creative actualisation. Engaging pioneering scholars such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Phyllis Trible, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, it explores texts of terror, subaltern readings, women's discipleship, and questions of male victimisation. The study argues that feminist subaltern hermeneutics fosters inclusive harmony by exposing power structures, centring marginalised voices, and cultivating communities of justice, compassion, and mutual participation across genders.

Keywords: Feminist Hermeneutics; Hermeneutics of Suspicion; Subaltern Theology; Inclusive Harmony; Women's Discipleship; Intersectionality; Gender Justice

Introduction

Feminist biblical hermeneutics emerged in the late twentieth century as a critical scholarly approach that examines how gender shapes the production, transmission, and interpretation of biblical texts. It challenges patriarchal readings and seeks to recover women's

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voices, experiences, and agency within Scripture.¹ This interpretive movement has profoundly reshaped biblical scholarship by exposing the gendered assumptions that have long governed exegetical traditions and by demonstrating that interpretations are never neutral but embedded within social, cultural, and political power structures.

Rather than accepting androcentric readings as objective or normative, feminist scholars have shown how patriarchal frameworks obscure women's contributions and normalise violence against women. Feminist biblical hermeneutics thus functions both as a method of critique and as a constructive theological project. This article traces the development of feminist biblical hermeneutics, outlines its principal methodological approaches, and demonstrates its contribution to what may be termed inclusive harmony: the formation of religious communities grounded in justice, mutuality, and the full participation of all persons regardless of gender.

1. Pioneering Scholars and Foundational Contributions

1.1. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is widely regarded as the most influential figure in feminist biblical hermeneutics. Her work *In Memory of Her* introduced a systematic "hermeneutics of suspicion" that interrogates androcentric bias within biblical texts and their interpretation.² Recognising that Scripture emerged from patriarchal cultures and has largely been interpreted by male authorities, Schüssler Fiorenza insists that feminist interpretation must critically evaluate both the texts and their associated traditions.

At the heart of her scholarship is the notion of a "discipleship of equals," which she maintains was a defining feature of early Christian communities prior to the reemergence of patriarchal systems.³ Her methodological framework, often described as a "hermeneutical dance", includes a hermeneutics of suspicion, proclamation, remembrance, and creative actualisation, enabling interpreters to critique, recover, and re-embody liberative biblical traditions.⁴

¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 1-14.

² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 105-59.

³ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 105-59.

⁴ Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 15-22.

1.2. Phyllis Tribble

Phyllis Tribble's contribution lies primarily in feminist rhetorical and literary criticism. In *Texts of Terror*, she examines narratives of extreme violence against women; Hagar, Tamar, Jephthah's daughter, and the Levite's concubine refuse to domesticate their horror or explain it away theologically.⁵ Tribble insists that faithful interpretation must acknowledge trauma and lament injustice.

Her earlier work, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, challenged exclusively masculine God-language by recovering feminine metaphors for the divine in Hebrew Scripture.⁶ Together, these works demonstrate how feminist criticism can be both textually rigorous and ethically transformative.

1.3. Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Radford Ruether integrated feminist biblical interpretation with systematic theology and historical analysis. In *Sexism and God-Talk*, she examined how patriarchy shaped biblical traditions and Christian doctrine, arguing that feminist theology must reject theological constructions that legitimate domination.⁷ Ruether also situated feminist biblical hermeneutics within broader liberationist movements, highlighting the intersections among gender oppression, class exploitation, and racism.⁸

1.4. Other Significant Voices

The field expanded through the work of scholars such as Letty M. Russell, who developed partnership-based liberation hermeneutics;⁹ Renita J. Weems, whose work laid foundations for womanist biblical interpretation;¹⁰ Luise Schottroff, who applied feminist social-historical methods to early Christianity¹¹; Carolyn Osiek, who explored feminist hermeneutical alternatives;¹² and Katharine Doob

⁵ Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

⁶ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 18-27.

⁸ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 18-27.

⁹ Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974).

¹⁰ Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

¹¹ Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

¹² Carolyn Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. A. Y. Collins (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 93-105.

Sakenfeld, who addressed methodological issues in feminist Old Testament interpretation.¹³

2. Various Methodological Approaches

Feminist biblical hermeneutics is methodologically pluralistic, often employing multiple approaches simultaneously.

- Hermeneutics of Suspicion questions whose interests are served by dominant interpretations and exposes patriarchal power embedded in texts and traditions.¹⁴
- Hermeneutics of Remembrance (or Retrieval) recovers women's presence, voices, and agency that have been minimised or erased.¹⁵
- Hermeneutics of Reconstruction uses social-historical research to reimagine women's lives beyond androcentric textual limits.¹⁶
- Creative Actualisation brings biblical texts into dialogue with contemporary struggles for justice while maintaining critical distance from oppressive elements.¹⁷

3. Intersectional and Global Developments

Contemporary feminist biblical hermeneutics increasingly emphasises intersectionality. Womanist interpretation, developed by scholars such as Renita Weems and Clarice Martin, centres African American women's experiences and highlights the interplay of race, gender, and class.¹⁸ Delores Williams's *Sisters in the Wilderness* reinterprets Hagar as a paradigm of survival and resistance.¹⁹

Mujerista theology, articulated by Ada María Isasi-Díaz, foregrounds Latina women's social realities,²⁰ while postcolonial feminist scholars such as Musa Dube and Kwok Pui-lan analyse the convergence of patriarchy and imperialism in biblical interpretation.²¹

¹³ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 55-64.

¹⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 15-18.

¹⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 19-20.

¹⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 41-67.

¹⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 20-22.

¹⁸ Clarice J. Martin, "Womanist Interpretations," *JSFR* 6 (1990): 41-61.

¹⁹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (New York: Orbis, 1993).

²⁰ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1996).

²¹ Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000); Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

These approaches resist universalising “women’s experience” and underscore the diversity of women’s lived realities.

4. Texts of Terror from OT

4.1. Hagar (Genesis 16; 21)

Hagar exemplifies intersecting oppressions of gender, slavery, and foreignness.²² Yet she is also uniquely honoured: God appears to her alone, and she names God *El-roi*, “the God who sees.”²³ Womanist scholars identify Hagar as a figure of profound theological significance for enslaved and marginalised women.²⁴

4.2. Jephthah’s Daughter (Judges 11)

Trible highlights how Jephthah’s daughter becomes collateral damage of male religious ambition.²⁵ Though she exercises agency, her life is destroyed by her father’s vow. Scholars note her namelessness as symbolic of women’s erased identities.²⁶

4.3. The Levite’s Concubine (Judges 19)

Often regarded as the most horrific narrative in Scripture, this text depicts extreme sexual violence and narrative silencing. Tribble and others argue that the text itself participates in violence by rendering the woman voiceless and disposable.²⁷

4.4. Tamar (2 Samuel 13)

Tamar’s articulate resistance underscores the injustice of her rape, yet she is silenced afterwards and left “desolate.” Feminist scholars emphasise that the narrative prioritises male honour over Tamar’s violated personhood.²⁸

4.5. Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11)

Feminist interpretation challenges readings that blame Bathsheba, emphasising David’s absolute power and the text’s grammatical portrayal of her passivity. Many scholars interpret the encounter as sexual coercion rather than consensual adultery.²⁹

²² Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 9-35.

²³ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 18-19.

²⁴ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 15-33.

²⁵ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 93-116.

²⁶ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 16-41.

²⁷ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 65-91.

²⁸ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 170-201.

²⁹ Weems, *Battered Love*, 65-78.

5. Feminist Hermeneutics as Subaltern Hermeneutics: Reading the Bible "From Below"

The term subaltern refers to individuals and communities who are socially, economically, politically, and culturally marginalised. The concept was developed in social theory, especially by Ranajit Guha, and has been adopted in theology to describe those whose voices have been silenced or ignored by dominant structures of power.³⁰ Subalterns include the poor, women, Dalits, colonised peoples, and all those who are excluded from social, political, and religious privilege.

Subaltern hermeneutics is not primarily a method but a perspective. It seeks to interpret Scripture from the standpoint of the marginalised rather than from elite or institutional viewpoints. This approach emphasises lived experience, daily struggles, and concrete realities of suffering. It reads the Bible not as a text detached from life, but as a liberative word addressed to people in situations of oppression and vulnerability. Subaltern hermeneutics thus aims to restore dignity, generate hope, and enable social and spiritual transformation.³¹

5.1. Jesus and the Spirituality of the Subaltern

Jesus of Nazareth emerges in the Gospels as a profoundly subaltern figure. He comes from a peasant background, lives in a colonised Galilean society and belongs to the economically and politically marginalised sections of his world. His life and ministry are shaped by the realities of poverty, insecurity, and social exclusion.³²

Jesus consistently aligns himself with the poor and the outcast. He proclaims, "Blessed are you who are poor," and declares that he has been anointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor, liberty to captives, and healing to the oppressed. He lives in the peripheries, eats with sinners, touches the sick, and welcomes those who are considered impure. Through these actions, Jesus reveals a God who

³⁰ Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 37-44.

³¹ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 18-35.

³² John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 25-60.

does not remain distant from human suffering but enters into it and stands in solidarity with the marginalised.³³

This spirituality of Jesus is therefore a spirituality of presence, accompaniment, and liberation. God's reign is disclosed not in the centers of power but in the lives of those who struggle to survive.

5.2. The Subaltern Values in the Kingdom of God

A distinctive feature of Jesus' spirituality is the radical reversal of values that characterises the Kingdom of God. In contrast to worldly logic, which prioritises power, wealth, and status, Jesus presents a vision in which the last become first, the small become great, and the poor become blessed. The Kingdom operates according to a different set of criteria grounded in service, humility, and compassion.³⁴

This reversal is beautifully illustrated in the parable of the leaven. The Kingdom of God is compared to a small quantity of leaven hidden in flour. The image is surprising because leaven was often associated with impurity in Jewish tradition and because the agent of the Kingdom is a woman, a figure marginalised in patriarchal society. The parable teaches that God's reign grows silently and invisibly through ordinary, hidden, and socially insignificant realities. The Kingdom does not advance through domination but through transformation from within.³⁵

5.3. A Feminist Subaltern Re-reading of Women's Discipleship in the Gospels

Women occupy a central and active role in the spirituality of Jesus. The most revolutionary aspect of Jesus' approach to women is possibly not that he associated freely with them and treated them as responsible human beings, not that he had women as friends and not that he allowed them to listen to his teaching, but rather that he taught them personally, engaging in theological conversation with them, encouraging and expecting a response. At the synagogue, women were thought of as coming to listen rather than to learn. Jesus assumed that women were capable not only of learning and understanding but

³³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (New York: Orbis, 1988), 114-20.

³⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 133-48.

³⁵ Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 117-24.

also of engaging in debate. Some of the greatest conversations ever reported between Jesus and women are found in John's Gospel.³⁶

The Samaritan woman in John 4 engages in one of the longest recorded dialogues with Jesus and becomes a missionary to her community. Schüssler Fiorenza reads Martha Mary's text in Luke 10:38-42 as affirming women's discipleship, while later scholars problematise interpretations that devalue women's labour³⁷. Postcolonial feminists caution against romanticising Mary at the expense of women for whom domestic work is survival.³⁸

Martha, in John 11, makes a profound confession of faith comparable to Peter's Christological confession. Mary Magdalene becomes the first witness of the resurrection and is traditionally called the "Apostle of the Apostles." The Syrophoenician woman challenges Jesus himself and expands the horizon of his mission.

Through these encounters, Jesus affirms the intellectual, spiritual, and moral agency of women. He recognises them not merely as listeners but as thinkers, witnesses, and proclaimers of the Gospel. This represents a radical reconfiguration of gender roles within religious life.³⁹

5.4. Implications of Feminist Hermeneutics as Subaltern Hermeneutics

Feminist Subaltern hermeneutics challenges institutional religion to recover its prophetic and compassionate character. It breaks down the false division between the sacred and the secular and insists that spirituality must be lived in everyday social realities. It calls the Church to listen to marginalized voices, to practice solidarity, and to embody God's compassionate presence in the world.

This hermeneutics transforms one's image of God, reshapes prayer, deepens interpersonal relationships, and generates a commitment to justice and liberation. It invites believers to participate in God's

³⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 187-210.

³⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 160-62.

³⁸ Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 71-83.

³⁹ Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2003), 151-70.

womb-love and to become agents of healing, reconciliation, and hope in a wounded world.⁴⁰

6. Feminist Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Male Victimization

Feminist hermeneutics of suspicion arose as a critical response to patriarchal structures embedded in biblical texts, their interpretation, and the social systems they shape. Its primary aim has been to uncover hidden power dynamics, expose silenced voices, and resist theological legitimations of gendered violence and exclusion. Yet, as feminist scholarship has matured, a pressing question has emerged: can feminist hermeneutics remain genuinely inclusive if it fails to address male victimization alongside gendered patterns of violence against women? A consistent application of feminist hermeneutics of suspicion not only allows but requires attention to male victimization, without undermining recognition of systemic gendered injustice.

6.1. Affirming the Reality of Male Victimization

An inclusive approach begins by clearly acknowledging that men and boys experience abuse, false accusations, manipulation, and victimization, and that these experiences are real, serious, and deserving of attention and care. Feminist hermeneutics, at its best, is not a zero-sum advocacy for women alone but a critical methodology concerned with all forms of injustice, domination, and abuse of power.⁴¹

Biblical narratives themselves attest to male vulnerability. Joseph is falsely accused of sexual assault by Potiphar's wife, an accusation that leads to imprisonment and social erasure (Gen 39).⁴² Uriah the Hittite is manipulated and ultimately murdered by King David, a paradigmatic example of lethal abuse of political and military power (2 Sam 11).⁴³ Samson, despite his physical strength, is betrayed and exploited through intimate deception (Judge 16).⁴⁴ Read through a hermeneutics of suspicion, these texts expose how power, desire, and vulnerability intersect in ways that harm men as well as women.

⁴⁰ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 31-59.

⁴¹ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 15-18.

⁴² Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 39-41.

⁴³ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 272-76.

⁴⁴ Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 61-76.

6. 2. Systemic Patterns and Individual Experiences

Feminist analysis rightly focuses on systemic and structural patterns of gendered power while also recognising that individual experiences vary significantly. At the systemic level, patriarchal societies have historically structured power to favour men as a class over women as a class.⁴⁵ This reality remains foundational to feminist critique. However, systems are not monolithic, and within them individuals occupy shifting positions of power and vulnerability.

At the individual level, men may be victimised by women or by institutions, particularly when other power differentials, such as economic status, legal authority, social credibility, or racialised assumptions, operate against them.⁴⁶ Cultural norms that discourage male vulnerability often prevent men from being believed or from seeking help. These two levels of analysis are not contradictory. Acknowledging systemic gendered patterns does not erase individual male suffering, nor does acknowledging male suffering negate systemic injustice against women.

6.3. Applying Hermeneutics of Suspicion Consistently

A consistent hermeneutics of suspicion applies the same critical tools to all forms of victimisation. This includes questioning whose voices are silenced. Men who experience domestic violence, sexual assault, or false accusations frequently encounter disbelief, ridicule, or pressure to conform to ideals of masculine stoicism. Cultural scripts insisting that "men cannot be raped" or that victimisation is incompatible with masculinity function as mechanisms of silencing that merit feminist critique.⁴⁷

This approach also examines the power structures that prevent male victims from coming forward: toxic masculinity, homophobia, legal biases, lack of institutional resources, and cultural assumptions about male strength and agency.⁴⁸ Intersectionality further complicates these realities. Male victimisation is experienced differently across race, class, sexuality, and disability. For example, false accusations against Black men carry disproportionate danger

⁴⁵ Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 20-24.

⁴⁶ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241-99.

⁴⁷ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 67-71.

⁴⁸ Michael Flood, "The Harms of Masculinity," *Men and Masculinities* 22 (2019): 215-24.

within racially biased criminal justice systems, while gay and bisexual men face distinct barriers in reporting sexual violence.⁴⁹

Discussions of gendered violence are often disrupted by the defensive question, “What about men?” when raised to deflect attention from women’s suffering. Such rhetorical deflection warrants critique. However, the same question may arise from men who have been harmed and feel excluded from prevailing narratives of victimisation.⁵⁰ Feminist hermeneutics must distinguish between these contexts.

The solution is not choosing between women’s and men’s suffering, but recognising that patriarchal systems harm people of all genders, though in distinct and gendered ways. bell hooks famously argued that patriarchy wounds men by constraining their emotional lives and equating worth with dominance.⁵¹

6.4. Patriarchy as a Source of Harm to Men

Feminist scholarship has long recognised that patriarchy does not benefit men unambiguously. Men who are victimised often struggle to access support because cultural norms deny their vulnerability. Emotional repression damages relationships and mental health. Men who fail to conform to dominant masculine ideals due to sexuality, disability, poverty, or temperament—face ridicule, exclusion, and violence.⁵² Disproportionate rates of incarceration, violent death, and suicide among men are frequently linked to rigid masculine scripts that equate worth with invulnerability and control. Addressing these harms is not contrary to feminist goals but integral to dismantling destructive gender hierarchies.

6.5. Theological and Ethical Grounding

Biblical interpretation can play a transformative role in reshaping masculinities. The Gospels portray Jesus as expressing grief, fear, dependence, and abandonment (John 11:35; Mark 14:33–36; Matt 27:46), challenging ideals of invulnerable masculinity.⁵³ Likewise,

⁴⁹ Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories, 2003), 26–32.

⁵⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 35–38.

⁵¹ bell hooks, *The Will to Change* (New York: Atria, 2004), 17–25.

⁵² James Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), 85–90.

⁵³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 168–72.

figures such as Job, Jeremiah, and David model lament, emotional honesty, and relational dependence.

Religious communities informed by such readings may cultivate pastoral practices that affirm male vulnerability, challenge shame, support male survivors of abuse, and resist toxic masculinity as incompatible with human flourishing.⁵⁴

From a biblical-theological perspective, every human being bears the divine image (Gen 1:27), partiality in justice is condemned (Lev 19:15), and Jesus identifies with all who suffer (Matt 25:31-46). A consistent hermeneutics of suspicion, therefore, asks: Who is vulnerable here? Who lacks power? Whose voice is silenced? The answer varies by context and often involves intersecting forms of marginalisation.

Conclusion

Feminist biblical hermeneutics contributes to inclusive harmony by naming violence honestly, centring marginalised voices, exposing power structures, validating women's full humanity, creating space for lament, challenging idealised family models, fostering interfaith solidarity, and cultivating ethical discernment beyond proof-texting.⁵⁵ It also democratises interpretation, empowering communities to read Scripture critically and responsibly.

Feminist biblical hermeneutics refuses the false choice between rejecting Scripture and defending all its portrayals. Instead, it models faithful, critical engagement that honours both the text and the lives of those harmed within and beyond it. By attending to women's suffering, resistance, and theological insight, feminist hermeneutics fosters communities capable of justice, healing, and inclusive harmony – communities with the courage to name injustice and the hope to imagine transformation.

Feminist Subaltern hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of compassion, kenosis, and liberation. It emerges from below, from the experiences of the poor, the excluded, and the suffering. It reveals a God who is not distant or indifferent but deeply involved in human history and human pain. This subaltern hermeneutics invites everyone to a faith

⁵⁴ Stephen B. Boyd, *Redeeming Men* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 102-10.

⁵⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 10-14.

that is embodied, relational, and transformative, and to participate actively in God's ongoing work of renewing the world through love.

The goal of feminist hermeneutics is not the reversal of hierarchies but their dismantling. Genuine inclusivity entails naming injustice wherever it occurs, recognising patterns without erasing individual experience, creating space for vulnerability across genders, and building communities of mutuality and care. When questions of male victimisation arise, they present not a threat to feminist analysis but an opportunity to demonstrate that justice, rightly understood, is expansive, relational, and truly inclusive.