

**KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN**

FACULTY OF THEOLOGY



**A RELEVANT THEOLOGY OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT  
IN THE CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC CHURCH AND SOCIETY IN INDIA  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *MULIERIS DIGNITATEM***

A dissertation presented in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for  
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Promoter

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by

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

AIWC	All India Women's Conference
BIMA	Bishop's Institute for Missionary Apostolate
CBCI	Catholic Bishop's Conference of India
CCWI	Council of Catholic Women of India
CRI	Conference of Religious India
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
FABC	Federation of Asian Bishop's Conference
NAB	New American Bible
NCIW	National Council of Indian Women
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
WCC	World Council of Churches
WIA	Women's India Association
WINA	Women's Institute for New Awareness
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association







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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Studies in the field of women empowerment have a great significance for our times; many contemporary theologians, especially women theologians, show great interest in this area of research. The starting point of women empowerment is the awareness that man and woman, as revealed in the sacred scripture, are created in the image and likeness of God. In spite of the several studies done in this line, even to date in the present Christian understanding, many different theories and teachings still hold women inferior to men. The latter views abound so much that the contemporary Christian theology seems to lack an adequate theological reflection on women empowerment.

In the background of this state of affair, we aim at participating in this debate in view of formulating a relevant theology of women empowerment in the contemporary Catholic Church and society in India with special reference to *Mulieris Dignitatem*. The women in India who constitute 48.3% of the Indian population are discriminated and degraded in many ways. Although women make up half of the Indian population, their “cry” for dignity and equality has not been heard for centuries. Everyday we hear and witness to the reality of growing discrimination and violence against women in social, economic, political and religious spheres, for various reasons. The oppressed situation of women in India and elsewhere raises a number of questions such as – Do women have the right to life as full human persons with proper dignity and honour? Are they not created in the image and likeness of God? With questions as these in mind, in the light of the sufferings of women in the Indian context, we aim at developing a theology for the empowerment of women that can contribute towards a holistic development of women as human persons imbued with the dignity of the children of God.

The status of women in the society and the Church is one of the most important subjects under discussion in the world today. In his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII included women’s participation in public life and their increasing awareness of human dignity among the signs of our times.<sup>1</sup> The Second Vatican Council declared thus: “[t]he joys and hopes and the sorrows and anxieties of people today, especially of those who are poor and afflicted, are also the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the disciples of Christ, and there is nothing truly human

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent P. Mainelli, “*Pacem in Terris*: Encyclical Letter of Pope John XXIII on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty,” in *Official Catholic Teachings, Social Justice* (Wilmington: McGrath Publishing Company, 1978), 41.



which does not also affect them.”<sup>2</sup> The Council also holds that “every type of discrimination affecting the fundamental rights of the person, whether social or cultural, on grounds of sex, race, colour, class, language or religion, should be overcome and done away with, as contrary to the purpose of God.”<sup>3</sup> Following the same line of thought, in his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II highlights the essential equality of man and woman since both are created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>4</sup> Reading the signs of the times, Pope John Paul II addressed the “Letter to Women” on the occasion of the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference of Women in Beijing, 1995, which was a courageous gesture of Pope John Paul II towards women. He addressed the letter to each woman throughout the world as a sign of solidarity and gratitude. He referred to the letter as a dialogue which begins with a word of thanks, and later goes on to apologize for the various injustices done to women down the ages through the history of the Church.

The Asian Synodal document of 1999 *Ecclesia in Asia* voiced a special concern for women, whose situation remains a serious problem in Asia and called attention to the awakening of women’s consciousness to their dignity and rights as one of the most significant signs of the times.<sup>5</sup> The Church placed the human person at the centre of every social system and put everything at his/her disposal to defend and protect woman/men’s God-given dignity and inalienable rights. The basis for the dignity of human beings, i.e., they are of equal dignity in the divine economy, is the main concern of the Church document of the modern period.

While the official teachings project a new liberative view of equal dignity, the reality in practice is not that promising. Women are not treated as equal to men. Women have been excluded and alienated from many of the offices and opportunities not only in the society but also in the Church. One who believes in Jesus cannot accept this discrimination. Faith in Jesus Christ calls for the liberation of the oppressed, including women. Therefore, in this dissertation we attempt at formulating a relevant theology of women empowerment in the contemporary Catholic Church and society in India with special reference to *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

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<sup>2</sup> Norman P. Tanner, "Church in World," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils Trent to Vatican II* (Sheed and Ward: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Norman P. Tanner, "Church in World," 3.

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women," *Origins* 18 (1988): 6.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, "*Ecclesia in Asia*," *Origins* 29 (1999): 34.



## 1. Relevance and Scope of the Research

According to Swami Vivekananda, a mystic thinker-reformer of India, “[t]here is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing.”<sup>6</sup> His call for women’s empowerment continues to be the need of the hour. Almost all cultures are tainted with marks of oppression of women in varying degrees. Indian culture is not an exception to this rule. It is also marred by different kinds of oppression of women. Making this fact the point of departure, this dissertation tries to present a theology for the empowerment of Indian women. The empowerment of women in India demands an adequate and relevant theology from the concerns of the voices of women. Women’s experiences of marginalisation and subjugation, as well as their struggles for legitimate freedom in all spheres of life, and participatory action for justice are to be the hallmark of such a theology. With regard to the selection of the topic and its originality the following has to be noted. It is true that many theologians have treated various problems with regard to women. However, there has not been a theological reflection carried out in a systematic manner on women empowerment from the Indian context. This is the focus of our dissertation. To achieve a deeper understanding of this theme, our research concentrates on the contemporary socio-cultural situation of women in India and their present problems and tries to address the questions arising from this socio-cultural context. This situation demands a critical response to these pressing issues obliging it to offer meaning and hope. Moreover, a new type of theological reflection on women empowerment is essential to face this situation.

## 2. The Contour of the Research

This dissertation consists of three chapters. In the first chapter, we look at the theology of women empowerment in context. Our research question is whether this Third World women theology can contribute to the empowerment of women in India? The purpose of this chapter is to clearly illustrate the context of the research project. To achieve this purpose, a good number of relevant literatures are analytically studied. This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, we discuss the context for the emergence of feminist theology in the Third World countries. We present the context and specific contributions of Asian, Latin American and African feminist theologies. The emphasis of Third World feminist theology is on doing theology from within the context of women’s experience and their struggle for liberation. Feminist theology from the Third World is a theology of struggle and hope.

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<sup>6</sup> Swami Vivekananda, *My India: The Eternal* (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1996), 68.



In the second part, we explicate the contemporary situation of Indian women. An attempt to analyse the present status of Indian women can hardly be successful because it is complex with its multicultural diversity. India being a subcontinent made up of twenty-eight states, cultural, social and religious milieus vary from state to state. In order to develop a theology for the empowerment of Indian women, we have to lay bare the present situation of Indian women. Therefore, the second part of this chapter begins with an assessment of the status of women in Indian society and tries to disclose the major areas of women's subordination, namely, social, economic, educational, political and religious. The Indian society is patriarchal in character. Women from all walks of life experience oppression in one form or another, just for being women. In order to clarify the social subordination of women, the chapter focuses on the subordination in the family, violence against women, role of media and the image of women, dowry system and the degradation of women in the society.

One of the root causes of the female oppression can be traced back to the economic dependency of women in the society. The economic inequality of women is mainly due to the gender-based division of labour and the impact of globalisation. The study maintains the view that the educational inequality of women in the past centuries, to a great extent, has been responsible for the decline in their social status. In the political field as well, there is a lack of conscious and effective attempts to empower women by formulating laws for their social dignity. After analysing these four areas of subordination, the study highlights the adverse impact of the patriarchal character of the religions in sustaining the degradation of women. Our attempt in this regard reveals that oppression and degradation of women are found in all religions. Through the use of patriarchal language and a selective interpretation of scriptures, myths and other practices, religions tend to validate the dehumanising status of women. In short, the second part of the first chapter is an exposition on the current situation of women in India.

The second chapter focuses on the Catholic vision of the dignity of women in *Mulieris Dignitatem* in view of developing a theology for women empowerment, which we will take up in the final chapter. Our research question is, whether the Apostolic Letter of John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* is helpful in formulating a theology for the empowerment of women in India. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II denounces robustly the discrimination against women in the Church and Society. In this chapter, we mainly discuss the anthropological and theological dimensions of the dignity of women in *Mulieris Dignitatem*. The anthropology of *Mulieris Dignitatem* is mainly based on the biblical concept of *imago Dei*. The theological dimension of the dignity of women in *Mulieris Dignitatem* mainly centred



around the interpretation of Gn 3:16. We take note to elaborate the other important dimensions of the vocation of women, such as, motherhood and virginity. We will offer a theological overview of motherhood, the impact of Mary's motherhood on women and the feminist critique of Pope John Paul II's visions in this regard. We will bring out how virginity can be a sincere gift to God as well as a sign of the kingdom of God. Another significant theme we examine in this chapter is Jesus' encounter with the women in the Gospels as a paradigm for the true liberative means for the establishment of the dignity of women. In the last part of this chapter, we discuss the theme, 'Church, the bride of Christ.' Here we explain the symbolic dimension of the great mystery, i.e., the comparison of man's love for a woman to Christ's love for the Church. Here we make some critical observations on the Pope's explanation of Eucharist as a sacrament of the bridegroom and the bride.

In the third chapter, we try to investigate some theological prospects and possible ways for the empowerment of Indian women. We aim at exploring the following questions: 'what is the mission of the Church in India towards the empowerment of women in India?' 'How far the feminist theology and the theology of Pope John Paul II contribute towards the empowerment of women in India?' We begin the discussions with some theological reflections on empowerment. As a first step, we discuss the ways to restore women's dignity and power. In order to do so we delve into the presupposition that man and woman are created with equal status and dignity. Thereafter we discuss the implications of being created in the image of God. In this context, we also suggest some of the ways to respect the dignity of women. Secondly, we propose a life-affirming theology for the empowerment of women. In this connection, we discuss Pope John Paul II's vision of motherhood and its implications in the Indian context. Here we ask whether motherhood hinders women's public functions. In order to answer this question, we gather information from both feminism and Catholic social thought.

Next, we discuss the mission of the Church towards the empowerment of women. We hold that the Church has the responsibility to continue the mission of Jesus. Then we discuss different ways to empower women in the Indian Church. In this section, we outline the empowerment of women through Christian women's organisations and contribution of CBCI to the empowerment of women. Establishment of CBCI commission is an important step for the empowerment of women in India. This commission has been contributing to the empowerment of women in the Church and society through conscientisation and animation programmes. We also discuss some of the decisions of the CBCI (held in Jamshedpur, India 2008) for the empowerment of women in the Church and society. We further establish that for the empowerment of



women, the Indian Church needs a liberative evangelisation. In this section, we look at the evangelising mission of Jesus, which leads to the promotion of human dignity and the empowerment of women. Then we discuss the need of evangelisation for cultural transformation. We also discuss evangelisation as a counteraction to male dominant anthropology.

In the second part of this chapter, we analyse feminist theology as a means for the empowerment of women. In this section, we mainly discuss some of the hermeneutical principles of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. The first criterion, which we propose, is a hermeneutics of suspicion towards the sources of theology. The second criterion concerns the hermeneutics of remembering and reconstruction. Here we mainly discuss Fiorenza's Wisdom Sophia movement as an alternative for kyriarchal structures. Subsequently we recognise the fact that some of the content of the Bible and other religious scriptures are highly patriarchal. This requires one to read it from women's perspective. There is a widespread criticism among feminist theologians against the exclusive centrality of the male image of God and its influence on the denigration of the human dignity of women. In this section we specifically notice Fiorenza's peculiar way of writing God as G\*d and theology as the\*logy.

In the last part of this chapter, our attempt is to make some theological prospects for the empowerment of women in India. In this section, we propose transformation of androcentric theology to inclusive theology; recovering and reconstructing history from women's perspective; an experience based theology for the empowerment of women because traditional theology has ignored the experience of women; and, a community-based theology for the empowerment of women. In view of women's empowerment, we claim space for the spirituality of women. We also explore the relationship between education and empowerment of women.

### **3. The Methodology**

The method of research we employ in this study is descriptive, analytical, critical and synthetic. The first chapter presents a descriptive analysis of the emergence of feminist theology in the Third World context and the contemporary situation of women in India. We then critically analyse the realities of the oppressed situation of women in India. The second chapter is an analytical and critical study of *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Our study of this official document and their supporting scriptural sources is in view of drawing valid conclusions for the empowerment of women in India. The third chapter is a synthesis of the conclusions of our research in different aspects, especially the mission of the Church towards the empowerment of women and feminist theology and the empowerment of women. Since our work is thematic in



nature, we make selective use of the sources relevant to the theme. Nevertheless, we humbly admit our inability to incorporate all the known sources pertaining to our theme.







**CHAPTER ONE**  
**THEOLOGY OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN CONTEXT**  
**PART ONE**  
**EMERGING PATTERNS OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY**  
**IN THE THIRD WORLD CONTEXT**

**Introduction**

This dissertation aims to formulate a relevant theology of women empowerment in the Church and society. As the first step towards this enterprise, the present chapter focuses on developing a methodology for formulating a theology of women empowerment through a background study, which consists two sections. The first section attempts to articulate the context in which feminist theology emerged in the Third World.<sup>1</sup> Our attempt at articulating the ‘context’ calls for an illustration of the meaning of ‘contextualisation’ and clarify and elaborate the term in order to explicate the reasons for and significance of the ‘context’ of our study. Then we explain the context for the emergence of feminist theology in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Hence, in this chapter, we intend to present the context and specific contributions of emerging Asian, African and Latin American feminist theology out of their struggle for survival and liberation. A study of the Third World feminist theology would require a quick survey of the contemporary situation of women in India. Therefore, in the second part of this chapter, we analyse the contemporary situation of women in India, mainly their social, economic, educational, political and religious situations.

**1. Contextualisation and Theology**

The term ‘contextualisation’ was introduced in 1972 by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in view of reforming theological education, a need dictated by various contexts.<sup>2</sup> It has been “understood as a critical assessment of the peculiarity of the Third World contexts in which Christian theology has to be worked out.”<sup>3</sup> Although related, contextualisation is distinct from indigenisation and inculturation. As to their relation and difference, Ruy O. Costa notes that “inculturation,

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<sup>1</sup> When I refer to feminist theology in the Third World, I mean Asia, Africa and Latin America.

<sup>2</sup> Ruy O. Costa, "Introduction, Inculturation, Indigenization and Contextualization," in *One Faith, Many Cultures*, ed. Ruy O. Costa (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), xii. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 21. David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 28.

<sup>3</sup> John Parratt, "Introduction," in *An Introduction to Third World Theologies*, ed. John Parratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8.



indigenisation and contextualisation are distinct and related concepts. Because they are related and because they point to dynamic cultural and social phenomena, they are often used synonymously.”<sup>4</sup> He adds:

Inculturation, indigenisation, and contextualisation are evangelistic apologetic concepts; inculturation and indigenisation are apologetic methods focused on the translation/interpretation of a received text for a given culture, whereas contextualisation sees this translation/interpretation as a dialectical process in which text and context are interdependent.<sup>5</sup>

According to Stephen B. Bevans, “Contextualisation points to the fact that theology needs to interact and dialogue not only with traditional cultural value, but with social change, new ethnic identities, and the conflicts that are present as the contemporary phenomenon of globalisation encounters the various peoples of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Contextual theologies emerged out of particular historical realities to which the liberative aspect of the Christian message is addressed. In Bevans’ view, “There is no such thing as theology; there is only contextual theology;”<sup>7</sup> such as, Black theology, Feminist theology, Minjung theology (Korea), *Dalit* theology (India), theology of struggle (Philippines), Latin American theology, etc. Each theology is developed from a particular context. In the following pages, we will discuss the meaning of contextual theologies and the context for the emergence of feminist theology in the Third World Countries.

Contextual theology can be distinguished by regions – Latin American, African, Asian, European – and at the same time by social groups such as the poor, women, Blacks, *Dalits*, indigenous peoples. However, none of these social or geographical identities can be understood in isolation. The realities of class, caste, patriarchy, and ethnicity on the one hand and local, regional, global economies on the other are intertwined.<sup>8</sup> There are differences between Asian and Latin American contexts. For example, the religio-cultural context specific to Asia is in contrast with that of Latin America. Majority of the poor and the oppressed in Asia are non-Christians and many of them adhere to a wide variety of popular religious traditions, which are more or less connected with the traditions of the great religions that have shaped the dominant Asian cultures. Compared to Asia, Latin America is a relatively homogeneous continent in terms of history, language and with regard to politico-economic

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<sup>4</sup> Costa, "Introduction, Inculturation, Indigenization and Contextualization," ix.

<sup>5</sup> Costa, "Introduction, Inculturation, Indigenization and Contextualization," xii.

<sup>6</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Bastiaan Wielenga, "Liberation Theology in Asia," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 39.



developments. Asia has to be sub-divided into various regions with different cultural, religious, political and economic histories.<sup>9</sup> Thus contextualisation of theology as an attempt to understand Christian faith in a particular context is really a theological imperative.<sup>10</sup> In the following section we will attempt a precise terminological clarification of the term ‘context.’

### 1.1 Context: A Clarification

Prior to the enquiry into the relevance of the context for the Third World feminist theology, it is necessary to clarify the term ‘context.’ No theology is isolated from the reality of the theologian’s physical context in which his/her discourse is delivered. Whether one wants to contextualise the faith, or to ‘understand the contextual nature of our faith,’ one should ‘know what a context is.’ How encompassing is a context? How long does it last? “What is that defines the boundaries of a context: regionality, nationality, cultural linguistic history, ethnicity, political system, economic class, gender identity, social status, or what?”<sup>11</sup> What is that makes a particular period a context? These and many others questions underscore the fact that the term ‘context’ is provisional. It means that one is “looking at some socio-cultural situation from an angle that involves any number of limitations.”<sup>12</sup> Consequently, there have been a number of terms developed by social theorists and social ethicists in an “attempt to identify the decisive meanings of a context.”<sup>13</sup> Even though the term ‘contextualisation’ could be applied to other fields of scientific study, our exploration is about its relevance and meaning to theology as it relates to the Christian faith and life. Therefore, it is important to know the context for the emergence of a Third World feminist theology.

### 1.2 Contextualisation as a Theological Imperative

The focus on ‘contextualisation’ in the theological enterprise of the non-Western world has its roots in theology of the West. Admittedly, Western theology failed to

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<sup>9</sup> Wielenga, "Liberation Theology in Asia," 39.

<sup>10</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, "Contextualisation, Contextuality and Contextualism," in *One Faith, Many Cultures*, ed. Ruy O. Costa (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 10-11.

<sup>12</sup> Stackhouse, "Contextualisation, Contextuality and Contextualism," 11. Here “socio cultural” will also include other aspects of human conditions, political, economical, historical and so on.

<sup>13</sup> Stackhouse, "Contextualisation, Contextuality and Contextualism," 11. Stackhouse mentions a few of the terms developed by various thinkers. He writes: “Phenomenological thinkers such as Gibson Winter have attempted to speak of context in terms of the “life-world” in which people find their identity. Contextual ethicists, such as Paul Lehman, speak often of the *koinonia*, or “community.” Anthropologists speak of “cultures”; sociologists of “societies” or social systems”; and those doing comparative studies speak of “civilisations.”



address the issues that were most pressing in many local circumstances: “the burden of poverty and oppression, the struggle to create a new identity after a colonial past, or the question of how to meet the challenge of modernisation and the commodification of the country in traditional culture and village life.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Western theology tried to present “a reflection that was universal in its scope, mirroring the universal message of the Gospel which was the subject of its investigation.”<sup>15</sup> This claim of universal ‘scope’ in its reflection did not reach far enough to address the different and compelling concerns of many local situations of the non-Western world.

With the perceived failure of the universal ‘scope’ of Western theology, the non-Western theologians began to reflect on the one Christian faith that was experienced differently by different communities. These non-Western theologians realized that “if Christianity was to engage the hearts and minds of believers, then it must take the context that shapes their lives and in which their communities are rooted much more intentionally and seriously.”<sup>16</sup> They were also aware of the fact that this should not, however, reduce the theological expression to a mere reflection determined by context.<sup>17</sup> There is also an objective truth to be preserved. Theologian, no matter what his/her background is, works not on his/her own creation. It is God’s truth he/she is trying to understand and explicate.

According to George M. Soares-Prabhu, “to do theology means contextualising one’s faith.”<sup>18</sup> It is something more than inculturation or indigenisation. Contextualisation includes the whole context in which theology is done, while indigenisation and inculturation may be understood narrowly and even apologetically. The contemporary world is characterized by great socio-economic, political, cultural and religious diversity. The Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the world of today, says: “the Church has the duty in every age of examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel, so that it can offer in a manner appropriate to each generation replies to the continual questionings on the

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<sup>14</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*, 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> George M. Soares Prabhu, "From Alienation to Inculturation: Some Reflections on Doing Theology in India Today," in *Bread and Breath: Essays in Honour of Samuel Rayan*, ed. T. K. John (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1991), 55. Soares Prabhu, one of the most influential biblical scholars of India for the past quarter of a century, is an impassioned spokesman of contextual theologies.



meaning of this life and the life to come and on how they are related.”<sup>19</sup> If the Church is to do this, she has to carry out a rigorous study of the contexts in which she finds herself; in addition, her language of theology has to be adapted to these contexts. It is because of contextualisation that the Latin American context of poverty and injustice has given birth to Liberation Theology. In the African society, the gospel attempts to create for itself an African cultural identity after the colonial depredations of the Europeans. In Asia, the gospel encounters highly sophisticated religious traditions of the East and a situation of poverty and oppression, which level a unique challenge to Asian theology. The challenge of Asian diversity calls for an inculturized Asian theology; the challenge of Asian poverty calls for an Asian theology of liberation; and the challenge of Asian religiosity calls for an Asian theology of religions and religious pluralism.<sup>20</sup> The “development of contextual theologies is not a rejection of the universal claims of Christianity;” rather an “attempt by Christianity to reach every culture, not through domination, but through genuine dialogue.”<sup>21</sup>

Contextual theology understands the nature of theology in a new way. It is precisely contextual and it gives importance to the present human experience.<sup>22</sup> It is a term now widely used to designate theological reflection which explores the dialogue between social context, scripture and tradition.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, a contextual approach to theology is in many ways a radical departure from the notion of traditional theology but it is very much in continuity with it. Therefore, to understand theology as contextual is to assert something both new and traditional, the faith experience of the past and the present.<sup>24</sup> Contextualisation/contextual theology can never be conceived as the concern of the Third World alone for its theological expression. Rather, anyone engaged in serious theological endeavour has to take his/her context seriously. Moreover, from the aforementioned overview, we conclude that all theologies that

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<sup>19</sup> Norman P. Tanner, ed., "Church in World," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Trent to Vatican II*, (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 4.

<sup>20</sup> Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), xi.

<sup>21</sup> Isaac Padinjarekuttu, "George M. Soares Prabhu and the Quest for a Contextual Theology," in *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today*, ed. Isaac Padinjarekuttu (Pune: Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, 1999), xxi.

<sup>22</sup> Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 3-4. Classical theology understood as a reflection of faith through scripture and tradition as the theological sources. Here the author used the term *loci theologici*. But Contextual theology gives emphasis to the present human experience, *locus theologicus*. It means that along with scripture and tradition, culture, history and contemporary thought-forms are to be considered as a valid sources of theological expression in contextual theology.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Rowland, "Preface," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), xiv.

<sup>24</sup> Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology: Revised and Expanded Edition*, 3.



have emerged and will emerge are and will be contextual, and in that sense, contextualisation is a perennial theological imperative.

It was evident to the emerging contextual theologies that the theologies introduced by the West were universalising theologies; i.e., western theologians imposed their reflections of their western contexts upon the Third World. Today it is widely recognised that all these universal theologies are in fact contextual theologies shaped in particular contexts. Indeed, the Christian tradition itself comprises a series of contextual theologies.<sup>25</sup> Unlike the proponents of Classical theology, contextual theologians emphasize the experience of people, in one word, context, as one of the sources for doing theology. This amounts to say that 'theology is not neutral'. In a sense, all theologies are committed and conditioned notably by the socio-cultural context in which they are developed. In the following section we delve deeper into this aspect.

## **2. Context: A Moulding Factor for Third World Theology**

We have already seen that all theologies are contextual. They emerge out of a particular context of a certain region of the world, country, nation, people or local community.<sup>26</sup> In brief, a contextual theology arises out of particular historical context and it addresses that context.<sup>27</sup> Third World theologians are trying to formulate a theology from their context. Some of the characteristics of the Third World theologies are their resistance to unjust economic system, cultural and religious oppression, racism and male domination.<sup>28</sup> The Theology of Liberation that was developed in Latin America gave the Third World theologians a "new framework, a new starting point, a new method of theologising."<sup>29</sup> Contextualization of theology is one of the most outstanding of its contribution. "This makes theologising in every part of the world unique to that part of the world even when it shares the same basic principles with others."<sup>30</sup> Liberation is the common theme and the central concern of the Third World theology. The reason for this is that the central and common experience of all has been domination and oppression whether colonial, racist, sexist or capitalist.

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<sup>25</sup> Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*, 2. See also Robert J. Schreiter, "The Changing Contexts of Intercultural Theology: A Global View," *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996), 358-360.

<sup>26</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 179.

<sup>27</sup> Parratt, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>28</sup> K. C. Abraham, "Introduction," *Voices from the Third World* 11 (1988): 1.

<sup>29</sup> Mary John Mananzan, "Who Is Jesus Christ?: A Reflection from the Philippines," *Voices from the Third World* 11 (1988): 8.

<sup>30</sup> Mananzan, "Who Is Jesus Christ?: A Reflection from the Philippines," 8.



Therefore, this calls for a theology of the Other – the other race, sex, culture, dignity, honour and land. That will include a conversion to the Other and to the God of the other.<sup>31</sup> To understand what we mean by Third World theologies, we need first to clarify what we mean by the term Third World.

## 2.1 The Term ‘Third World’: A Clarification

There are differences of opinion among theologians with regard to the concept ‘Third World.’ It is a term originally used to distinguish those nations that aligned neither with the West nor with the East during the Cold War. Most of the ‘Third World’ countries are located in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Many of these countries were colonised by other nations in the past. The populations of the Third World countries are generally very poor and with high birth rates. The economic standard of living in these countries is low. They are technologically less advanced and are mainly agricultural in production.<sup>32</sup>

The term ‘Third World’ has acquired a meaning that varies from one field to another. As Virginia Fabella rightly points out, it has “layers of meaning that varies from the purely geographic (‘the South’) to the socio-economic (‘poor,’ ‘underdeveloped’) to the political (‘non-aligned’) and even the theological (‘from the underside of history’).”<sup>33</sup> It is not an empty term used in academics, but a historical force and a movement that irrupted as the “resistance to, and decline of, the dominance of North Atlantic countries and of Western civilization.”<sup>34</sup> This particular moment of time in history has been described by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) as follows:

The Irruption of the exploited classes, marginalised cultures, and humiliated races. They are bursting from the underside of history into the world long dominated by the West. It is an irruption expressed in revolutionary struggles, political uprisings, and liberation movements. It is an irruption of religious and ethnic groups looking for affirmation of their authentic identity, of women demanding recognition and equality, of youth protesting the dominant

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<sup>31</sup> "Commonalities, Differences and Cross-Fertilisation among Third World Theologies," *Voices from the Third World* 11 (1988): 125.

<sup>32</sup> Gerard Chaliand, "Third World: definitions and descriptions," [http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/general/Third\\_World\\_def.html](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/general/Third_World_def.html), (accessed 10-8-2007). The term "Third World" was coined by economist Alfred Sauvy in an article in the French magazine *L'Observateur* of August 14, 1952. It was a deliberate reference to the "Third Estate" of the French Revolution. *Tiers monde* means Third World in French. The term 'Third World' originally derives from the 'third estate' in revolutionary France that is, the people, as opposed to the power blocks of the nobility and the church. Parratt, "Introduction," 12.

<sup>33</sup> Virginia Fabella, "Preface," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), xii.

<sup>34</sup> Fabella, "Preface," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, xii.



systems and values. [In short], it is an irruption of all those who struggle for full humanity and for their rightful place in history.<sup>35</sup>

The term 'Third World' is not universally accepted. Some prefer other terms such as global South, the South, non-industrialized countries, developing countries, underdeveloped countries, emerging nations. The term 'Third World' is the one most widely used in the media today, but no one term can describe all less-developed countries accurately.<sup>36</sup> With the profound political transformations and economic upheavals of recent years, the term 'Third World' has always been problematic. While the First World of Western capitalism still exists, the Second World of Eastern communist countries is disintegrated and the Third World of so-called 'developing countries' is deeply affected by the changes in the First and Second Worlds.<sup>37</sup>

Admittedly, these aforementioned characteristics of the Third World give rise to a theology that concerns the people of the Third World concretely. Thus, a Third World theology strives to be

Contextual, liberational, biblically based, and ecumenical; it is inductive in its method, starting with the faith experience of the poor and oppressed [...] The context is understood to include both the socio-economic-political and the religio-cultural dimensions; liberation is both personal and societal; the text and context are related dialectically in biblical reflection.<sup>38</sup>

In general, the term 'Third World' has been applied geographically, to Africa, Asia and Latin America. However, when we speak of Third World theologians or Third World theology, the geographical connotation is not the main point. "Its full significance has to be understood in terms of the historical facts of colonial, imperialistic domination and economic exploitation of those regions by the North Atlantic and other First World powers and the consequent creation of Third-Worldness."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> "The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology- Final Statement of the Fifth EATWOT Conference, New Delhi, August 17-29, 1981," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 191-206, 195.

<sup>36</sup> Gerard Chaliand "Third World: definitions and descriptions," [http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/general/ThirdWorld\\_def.html](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/general/ThirdWorld_def.html), (accessed 10-8-2007).

<sup>37</sup> Ursula King, "Introduction," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 2.

<sup>38</sup> Virginia Fabella, "Preface," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, xv.

<sup>39</sup> J. Russell Chandran, "A Methodological Approach to Third World Theology," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 83. Here the author is rightly apt in his critique where he explains the regions of Third World today as eloquent monuments of humankind's selfish, greed-driven aggressiveness and inhumanity. Then he further says that our concern, however, is not about past inhumanity, but about the even more complex forms of inhumanity rampant today.



Third World theologies began as a reaction to the dominant theologies of Europe and North America.<sup>40</sup> Whether one speaks of the Latin American, African or Asian, theologies, these recent theological developments of the Third World nations signal the rejection of the missionary theologies of their former colonizers.<sup>41</sup> Instead of accepting the prefabricated theologies of Europe and North America, Third World people are developing their own theologies.<sup>42</sup> Another important point to be noticed is Third World theologies of liberation began in the context of struggles for political liberation.

The precise character of the liberation sought depended upon the political needs of the country as defined by a people struggling to liberate itself from foreign domination. Africans began to speak of a distinct African theology with a special interest in the africanization or indigenisation of the gospel so that they would not have to become European in order to be Christian. Latin Americans spoke of theology with an emphasis on liberation as defined by Marxian class analysis. Asians also used the term "liberation" in defining Asian theology, but they included in its meaning a special focus on their culture as defined by their great religions. They spoke about contextualisation instead of indigenisation, and began to relate it to an Asian Principle.<sup>43</sup>

Since the 1970's, through the establishment of national, regional and ecumenical networks, feminist theological movements have gathered momentum in the Third World. Liberation theologians from the Third World take seriously the contexts from which theology emerges, and begin their theological reflection with social analysis.<sup>44</sup> Here our main focus is the emergence of feminist theology in the Third World context.

### 3. Feminist Theology and the Third World

Third World feminist theology has emerged during the last fifteen years and it shares many features with liberation theologies from the Third World. The emphasis of Third World feminist theology is on doing theology from within the context of women's experience and of their struggle for liberation. It is a theology that involves much

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<sup>40</sup> The term "Third World" is the object of much discussion. For a discussion of this term in a theological context, see Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella, eds., *The Emergent Gospel* (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), vii-xxii.

<sup>41</sup> James H. Cone, "Reflections from the Perspective of U.S. Blacks: Black Theology and Third World Theology," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 235.

<sup>42</sup> Cone, "Reflections from the Perspective of U.S. Blacks: Black Theology and Third World Theology," 235.

<sup>43</sup> Cone, "Reflections from the Perspective of U.S. Blacks: Black Theology and Third World Theology," 236.

<sup>44</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 151.



anguish and demands a high cost of commitment to personal and social transformation. Many women find it difficult to articulate their struggle and write about it, but they are helped by new networks and by new organisational structures created by Christian women around the world.<sup>45</sup> The irruption of the poor and the oppressed is the most significant development in the Third World.<sup>46</sup> "Third World women are the poor among the poor. They are, however, creators and sustainers of humanity, embracing all the miseries of Third World-ness in their bodies."<sup>47</sup> The subjugation of women in Third World societies is a tragedy that has not been resolved. The reason is that the patriarchal pattern of culture and civilization constrains "women to be subject to men, to male-defined rules and to a patriarchal God."<sup>48</sup>

Feminist theology in Third World countries has emerged because of women's association with ideas, institutions, and publications. Women from the Third World "stress the importance of their own struggle and efforts to achieve their own liberation while participating in movements for the political and economic liberation of their own countries."<sup>49</sup> In a Third World context, feminist theology expresses itself as a liberation theology in a much stronger sense, as it develops within situations where the oppression of women and the denial of their full humanity often occurs on a much larger scale than in the first world.<sup>50</sup>

The emergence of feminist consciousness in the Third World is associated with the following situations: (1) 'wider political climate of national struggles', (2) 'the fight against economic exploitation', and (3) 'the quest for cultural self-definition'. The fast changing social and political situation and the mobilisation of the masses enabled women to step outside their domestic spheres and try out with new roles that were traditionally denied to them. The nature of feminist politics in the Third World does

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<sup>45</sup> Ursula King, "Doing Theology from the Third World Women's Perspective," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 21.

<sup>46</sup> J. C. Duraisingh and K. C. Abraham, "Reflections from an Asian Perspective," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 210.

<sup>47</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 23.

<sup>48</sup> Cora Ferro, "The Latin American Woman: The Praxis and Theology of Liberation," in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*, ed. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson (New York: Orbis Books, 1981), 24-37.

<sup>49</sup> King, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>50</sup> King, "Introduction," 3-4. Kumari Jayawardena has documented the history of women's participation in anti-imperialist movements in Asia and the Middle East since the 1880s. Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986).



not narrowly focus on gender inequality and on the freedom and liberation of women. Instead, feminist struggles are generally seen as a part of the whole liberation of the entire people, but with different focus and strategies.<sup>51</sup> Mary John Mananzan writes: "There is no total human liberation without the liberation of women in society. And this is not an automatic consequence of either economic development or political revolution. In other words, the women's movement is an essential aspect of the very process of societal liberation."<sup>52</sup>

Different forms of contextual theologies are developed by Third World theologians in order to address concrete social and political concerns and to relate the Christian tradition to the lived experiences of the people. Male theologians are against imperialism and corrupt dictatorial regimes, but they have not enough denounced the patriarchal privileges and the suppression of women. Therefore, the feminist theologians have to create an alternative space to articulate the theological vision of the hope and ambition of women.<sup>53</sup> Pui-lan further says, "women's movements focus on practical, social and political issues affecting women, such as education and reproductive rights, specific localised struggles, coalition building with other oppressed groups, and a community efforts to address the particular needs."<sup>54</sup>

The critical principle of feminism, and thus of feminist theology, "is the promotion of the full humanity of women."<sup>55</sup> Because feminist theology is part of the family of liberation theologies, it begins with the experience of oppression, in this case the oppression of women, and the ways in which gender has been constructed in society.<sup>56</sup> Experience is neither neutral nor global but is particular and thus women's experience differs according to race, class, education, country of birth, religion, etc. Feminist theology now gives much attention to difference and diversity in women's experience.<sup>57</sup> In the following section, we discuss the fundamental shift in the methodology of the feminist theology.

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<sup>51</sup> Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 151-152.

<sup>52</sup> Mary John Mananzan, "Redefining Religious Commitment in the Philippine Context," in *We Dare to Dream*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1989), 105.

<sup>53</sup> Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 150.

<sup>54</sup> Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 151.

<sup>55</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 18.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Rakoczy, *In Her Name* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004), 15.

<sup>57</sup> Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 16. Rakoczy gives the example of Jacquelyn Grant and Delores S. Williams first challenged the use of white middle-class women's experience as the starting point of feminist theological reflection. Jacquelyn Grant, *White Woman's Christ and Black Woman's Jesus* (Atlanta:



### 3.1 A Shift in Methodology

Feminist theology is dynamic and pluralistic. It includes and expresses the voices, experiences and approaches of many different women in different situations and societies. It is not a systematically developed body of received knowledge handed down in traditional institutions of learning. On the contrary, the emphasis is very much on 'doing theology,' on theology in the active mode. It means "suffering and seeking, listening and speaking, voicing and questioning, encountering and sharing, responding to and being responsible for action. To use a traditional distinction, the process of theologising occurs inductively rather than deductively."<sup>58</sup> It is women's view-point that theology must be done with passion and compassion. It means that theology has to be done with the heart, the body and the mind; it calls for a new language, one very different from the language of the academic.<sup>59</sup>

In 1976 a group of Third World theologians met at Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, to speak about the new kind of theology that was emerging from their countries. In their concluding statement they wrote the following words. "We reject an irrelevant and academic type of theology that is divorced from action. We are prepared for a radical break in epistemology which makes commitment the first act of theology and engages in critical reflection on the praxis of the reality of the Third World."<sup>60</sup> The point was spelled out a bit further in the same statement: "Our conviction is that the theologian should have a fuller understanding of living in the Holy Spirit, for this also means being committed to a lifestyle of solidarity with the poor and the oppressed and involvement in action with them."<sup>61</sup> The document of the fifth EATWOT Conference picks up the same perspective; it says that

[t]he starting point for Third World theologies is the struggle of the poor and the oppressed against all forms of injustice and domination. The committed involvement of Christians in this struggle provides a new *locus* for theological reflection. Their participation is faith in action and the

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Scholars Press, 1989). Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

<sup>58</sup> King, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>59</sup> "Commonalities, Differences and Cross-Fertilisation among Third World Theologies," 130. This is a document based on the seventh International Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, held in Oaxtepec, Mexico, December 7-14, 1986.

<sup>60</sup> "Final Statement: Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians," in *The Emergent Gospel: Theology Form the Underside of History*, ed. Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), 269. This Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, August 5-12, 1976. This is known as the charter of the identity of EATWOT.

<sup>61</sup> "Final Statement: Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians," in *The Emergent Gospel: Theology Form the Underside of History*, 270.



manifestation of Christian commitment, which constitute the first act of theology.<sup>62</sup>

K. C. Abraham says, Jesus' praxis, the life in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed is the basis of this methodology.<sup>63</sup> Further he says, the liberational thrust helps us to enter into a dialogue and co-operation with people of other faiths and ideologies.<sup>64</sup>

All of this and the irruption of the Third World speak of an important and significant fact that the world in which we live in is not a Christian world. In Asia, where three-fourths of the people of the Third World lives, the overwhelming majority of the population holds religious traditions that are non-Christian. Hence "the irruption of the Third World is also the irruption of the non-Christian world. The vast majority of God's poor perceive their ultimate concern and symbolise their struggle in the idiom of non-Christian religions and cultures."<sup>65</sup> The theological reflection and expression emerging from the Third World regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America focus their attention on particular situations that are divergent. The central concern of each is determined by whatever is the dominant factor in their divergent experiences. Moreover, the emergent theologies that they construct are from the many churches/denominations of Christianity and not from the Catholic Church alone.

Like all feminist theologies, women theology from the Third World, puts great emphasis on doing theology. It is theology as an activity, as an ongoing process rooted in praxis,<sup>66</sup> interdependent with and compassionately committed to life, justice, and freedom from oppression.<sup>67</sup> According to Gustavo Gutierrez, "All theology starts

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<sup>62</sup> "The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology: Final Statement of the Fifth EATWOT Conference, New Delhi, August 17-21, 1981," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 199. This is the fifth EATWOT Conference also known as the Delhi Conference of Theology held in New Delhi, August 17-29, 1981.

<sup>63</sup> Abraham, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>64</sup> Abraham, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>65</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "The Place of Non-Christian Religions and Cultures in the Evolution of Third World Theology," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 113.

<sup>66</sup> Praxis is one of the distinctive terms in liberation theology. It has generated a variety of meanings and it finds its place in the writings of Aristotle, Hegel, Marx, and Freire. Basically, it means "practice" and "experience." Michael E. Allsopp opines, "Praxis implies life-history rather than book-knowledge; it means active living rather than armchair analysis: committed action rather than distanced observation; it means concrete, hands-on involvement rather than objective, impartial speculation." Michael E. Allsopp, *Renewing Christian Ethics, the Catholic Tradition* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2005), 77.

<sup>67</sup> King, "Introduction," 16-17.



with an act of faith.”<sup>68</sup> For Gutierrez, this methodological starting point builds on the premise that “Only if we start in the realm of practice will we be able to develop a discourse about God that is authentic and respectful.”<sup>69</sup>

Another important theme often expressed by Third World women is that of a new sense of empowerment. This implies a new understanding of power where power is not practiced in a dominant, hierarchical mode as “power over.” Such power is “finite and cannot be shared; only some people can have it, while others remain without it.” But power understood as “enabling power,” and as “empowerment, can be shared, and it can grow and increase so that all who participate in it are strengthened and affirmed without excluding or diminishing anyone.”<sup>70</sup> Third World women have become empowered to speak to one another, to their communities, and they are responding to the challenge of their own situation.<sup>71</sup>

### **3.2 Commonalities and Divergences of Third World Feminist Theologies: Factors and Approach**

Feminist theology in the Third World must be understood within the larger context of both feminist theology and liberation theology as well as that of a distinct Third World theology. Feminist theology from the Third World is so rich and diverse that it consists of a wide range of different perspectives and voices. Within this larger context, perhaps the most unifying aspect of feminist theology from the Third World is a theology of struggle and hope. On the one hand, it is marked by anguish and a sense of pain. On the other hand, it is equally marked by a freshness and vibrant vitality fed by the quest and determination to seek the full humanity of women and ultimately that of all people. It is a listening theology attentive to women’s suffering and oppression.<sup>72</sup>

There are certain similarities between Africa and Asia on the question of doing theology in a multi-religious context. “Religio-cultural realities are strongest where traditional religions and cultures have resisted the European attempt to westernise the whole world. Latin American theologians have ignored for a long time the native and Afro-American expression of religiosity and have been influenced by the middle class

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<sup>68</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, “Liberation Theology,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith A. Dwyer and Elizabeth L. Montgomery (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1994), 549.

<sup>69</sup> Gutierrez, “Liberation Theology,” 549.

<sup>70</sup> King, “Introduction,” 18-19.

<sup>71</sup> King, “Introduction,” 18-19.

<sup>72</sup> King, “Introduction,” 20.



culture, which is a minority in a vast and multi-racial continent.”<sup>73</sup> Each of these continents has contributed to theology its own unique perspective. In “Latin America, the emphasis is on liberation in the socio-political and economic dimension, Africa, the integrity of indigenous cultures and religions, and Asia, the need to do theology in a religiously plural context.”<sup>74</sup>

In all three continents, women constitute a vital and dynamic force within the Church. Yet these women constitute a strong labour force within the Church, they are powerless and voiceless, and in most Churches, they are excluded from leadership roles and ordained ministries. “This deplorable condition urgently calls for sustained efforts to discover new ways of being Church, of being in the world as the visible presence of God’s Reign, and of the new creation.”<sup>75</sup>

According to the Mexico conference, in all the three continents – Asia, Africa and Latin America the oppression of women is affirmed as a hard and abiding reality of life, though this varies in form and degree from place to place. Women have an irreplaceable role in society, yet their contribution is not acknowledged, nor are they accorded equal rights with their male counterparts. Oppression is felt in all sectors of life: economic, social, political, cultural, racial, sexual, religious and even within the family itself. Having become conscious of their human rights and of the injustices perpetrated against them in all these sectors, women are teaming up and organising various liberating movements and projects to help themselves.<sup>76</sup>

Among the efforts being made toward liberation from oppression, theologising emerges as a specific manner in which women struggle for their right to life. Women participants of the Mexico conference make the following remark:

Our theologising arises from our experience of being discriminated against as women and people of the Third World. The emerging spiritualities we perceive in the three continents show that spiritual experience rooted in action for justice constitutes an integral part of our theology. As women we articulate our theology in prayer and worship, in our relationship with our neighbour in whom God lives, and in our ongoing struggle as one with the poor and the oppressed.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> “Commonalities, Differences and Cross-Fertilisation among Third World Theologies,” 126.

<sup>74</sup> Parratt, “Introduction,” 11.

<sup>75</sup> “Final Document: Intercontinental Women’s Conference,” *Voices from the Third World* 11 (1988): 199. This is held in Oaxtepec, Mexico, December 1-6, 1986.

<sup>76</sup> “Mexico Conference: Final Document on Doing Theology from Third World Women’s Perspective,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 37.

<sup>77</sup> “Mexico Conference: Final Document on Doing Theology from Third World Women’s Perspective,” 38.



A hopeful sign is the increasing leadership roles played by women in basic ecclesial communities in Latin America and in parts of Africa. The presence of women who stand for justice is challenging in all the Third World countries. But this is the way in which the Church will be able to rediscover its true identity.<sup>78</sup>

Nevertheless, addressing a particular context and people with its liberative and praxis-oriented vision, the Third World feminist theologies differ from one another. Their difference must be appreciated and seen as authentic and meaningful. Although all the regions of the Third World experience oppression and domination, suffering and death in general, there are certain aspects peculiar to each continent. The liberating process happens differently in the three continents. Women organize themselves around survival strategies in Latin America. The same time the awakening of women takes place in Africa due to their struggle to overthrow the oppressive elements in African traditional cultures and religions and the evils of colonialism. In Asia, the struggle is mainly centred in rediscovering the pride of being woman, especially by fighting against political, economic and sexual injustices.<sup>79</sup>

From what has been discussed it can be stated that a particular Third World theology has its own validity. Nevertheless, "no single Third World theology can be regarded as the whole truth, a 'universal truth' on its own to the extent that all others could be subsumed or submerged within it." "A genuine Third World theology cannot be exclusively Latin American or African or Asian or black American." Necessarily, it must "include the particularizations of all the emerging Third World theologies." For, although situations differ in each region, "the various forms of oppression (social, economic, political, and those based on class, race, sex, religion, culture) are present in different degrees in all of them and therefore cannot be ignored." Hence the tools of analysis should never be merely religio-cultural, socio-economic or politically reliant, rather all should be included.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, our next concern is to analyse the context for the emergence of feminist theology in Asia, Latin America and Africa.

#### **4. Context for the Emergence of Asian Feminist Theology**

The emergence of a 'feminist liberation-orientated theological consciousness' among Asian women is a recent development. In some Asian countries, it began during the

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<sup>78</sup> "Mexico Conference: Final Document on Doing Theology from Third World Women's Perspective," 40.

<sup>79</sup> "Final Document: Intercontinental Women's Conference," 196.

<sup>80</sup> Frank Chikane, "EATWOT and Third World Theologies: An Evaluation of the Past and Present," in *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences*, ed. K. C. Abraham (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 166.



1970s, and it occurred in the context of women's participation in political and theological liberation movements that were dominated by men.<sup>81</sup> Together with Asian male liberation theology, Asian feminist theology is derived from the Third World reality of poverty and oppression.<sup>82</sup> Kwok Pui-lan says that "feminist theology in Asia will be a cry, a plea and an invocation. It emerges from the wounds that hurt, the scars that do not disappear, the stories that have no ending. Feminist theology in Asia is not written with a pen, it is inscribed on the hearts of many who feel the pain, and yet dare to hope."<sup>83</sup> The pervasive patriarchalism of Asian society and the stories of oppression and poverty of Asian women occupy a special place in Asian theology.<sup>84</sup> Asian women's theology give due respect to women's experience of suffering and struggle and that must enhance their experience of power amidst of powerlessness.<sup>85</sup>

George Soares-Prabhu maintains that massive economic poverty and pluri-form religiosity are the realities of Asia and institutionalised inequality is a unique feature of India.<sup>86</sup> Clemens Mendonca comments that the women of Asia come under this third category. She further explains that "their de-humanisation is another dimension of the 'institutionalised inequality' that thrives under the banner of the religions in Asia."<sup>87</sup> Women's oppression is deeply rooted in the patriarchal system that has become part and parcel of Asian social, cultural, legal and religious ideology. "Violence has a social and cultural pattern in Asia which determines the way that a female is to behave in a particular situation and the manner in which she is to be treated by society."<sup>88</sup> As Chung Hyun Kyung has said, "women's truth was generated by their epistemology from the broken body."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 8. The Korean Association of women Theologians was initiated in 1980 by the Christian women who recognised sexism in the Church and society through their experiences in the 1970s.

<sup>82</sup> Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 23.

<sup>83</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, "God Weeps with Our Pain," in *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World*, ed. John S. Pobee (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 90.

<sup>84</sup> Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 188.

<sup>85</sup> Pauline Chakkalakal, "Asian Women Reshaping Theology: Challenges and Hopes," *Feminist Theology* 27 (2001): 34.

<sup>86</sup> George M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Indian Church Challenged by Poverty and Caste," in *Biblical Themes for a Contextual Theology Today – Collected Writings of George M. Soares Prabhu*, Vol. 1, ed. Isaac Padinjarekuttu (Pune: Jnana-Deep Vidyapeeth Theology Series, 1999), 142.

<sup>87</sup> Clemens Mendonca, "Church in Asia: Following the 'Mystery' Model or Imitating the 'Mastery' Model?," in *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced*, ed. Evelyn Monteiro and Antoinette Gutzler (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 118.

<sup>88</sup> Mendonca, "Church in Asia: Following the 'Mystery' Model or Imitating the 'Mastery' Model?," 119.

<sup>89</sup> Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 104.



As the increasing numbers of female foeticide and infanticide indicate, from birth onwards, they are denied the right to life. Many women are subjected to various types of oppression at home and at work. "They are often denied mobility, education, freedom of expression, freedom of decision-making, job opportunities, property rights and legal justice."<sup>90</sup> Due to the male dominated patterns of culture and society, the suffering of women is immense. They are considered as a 'minority' or of inferior status. Women's oppression has been made more evident by their general absence in decision-making positions. This is true not only in society at large but in the churches as well.<sup>91</sup>

According to Chung Hyun Kyung, the resources for Asian women's liberation theology must come from the life experiences of Asian women themselves.<sup>92</sup> In her view, theological languages, paradigms, and questions that come from the life experiences of Western male intellectuals, reduced poor Asian women to the status of non-person, and hence, cannot serve as a source of Asian women's theology. In her opinion, doing theology should be accountable to their experience. Since Asian women's theological writings with a feminist consciousness have only become visible in the 1980s, there have not been many research projects on Asian women's theology. Many individual essays on specific topics of Asian women's theology have appeared in various journals. However detailed research is rare.<sup>93</sup> The spirituality of women has its context in the situation of oppression in which they live. It is therefore necessary to describe the Asian situation in order to understand the emerging spirituality of women in the continent.<sup>94</sup>

#### 4.1 The Historical Context of Asian Feminist Theology

The situations of women may vary from country to country and culture to culture, but the oppressive structures are similar everywhere. Because of this oppression, various types of women's movements have started in Asia.<sup>95</sup> Women began to organise their own groups in order to voice their concern for justice for themselves. This effort of women was encouraged by the United Nations Declaration of the Decade for Women

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<sup>90</sup> Mendonca, "Church in Asia: Following the 'Mystery' Model or Imitating the 'Mastery' Model?," 119.

<sup>91</sup> "The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology," *Voices from the Third World* 11 (1988): 75. This is the fifth EATWOT Conference held in New Delhi, August 17-21, 1981.

<sup>92</sup> Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 5-6.

<sup>94</sup> Mary John Mananzan and Sun Ai Park, "Emerging Spirituality of Asian Women," in *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Curt Cadorrette (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 245.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 33.



(1975-1985) because the Declaration helped women's issues to gain greater public visibility.<sup>96</sup>

The United Nations Decade for Women (1975-85) had culminated in an international women's conference in Nairobi (1985). Followed by this, the World Council of Churches decided to declare 1988-98 as the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women. The importance of this step for Christian women is significant. The WCC suggested to its member churches three areas for particular consideration: "women's full participation in church and community life; women's perspectives on, and commitment to, justice, peace, and integrity of creation (this falls into a wider programme of the WCC's work); women doing theology and sharing spirituality. It is the last area in particular that is important for the development of feminist theology in the Third World."<sup>97</sup>

Another important feature to be noticed is the establishment of various women's movements. First among them is the development of liberal feminism among educated middle class urban women. Their focus is on women's rights and gender equality with regard to salaries, jobs, leadership positions, etc. They also campaigned against particular issues such as the dowry problem. Another group is represented by women's sections of leftist political movements. They tend to be limited to working-women especially on industrial labour. A third group is made up of popular movements such as farm workers, fisher women, slum dwellers, factory workers, unorganised urban workers, and so on. Their focus is mainly on basic issues of life such as food production and marketing, ecological destruction, water and land issues, freedom from violence, and compulsion in personal and family life.<sup>98</sup>

## 4.2 The Social Context of Asian Feminist Theology

When we come to the situation of Asian women, we recognize sadly that women are also victims of the same structures of domination and exploitation. In the context of the Asiatic religions and cultures, the relationship between men and women is still one of domination-submission.<sup>99</sup> Chung Hung Kyung says: "Asian women's theology has emerged from Asian women's cries and screams, from the extreme suffering in their everyday lives. They have shouted with pain when their own and their children's

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<sup>96</sup> King, "Introduction," 9.

<sup>97</sup> King, "Introduction," 10.

<sup>98</sup> Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom*, 33-34.

<sup>99</sup> "Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity Towards a Relevant Theology," *Voices from the Third World* 11 (1988): 35.



bodies collapsed from starvation, rape and battering.”<sup>100</sup> Like their Latin American sisters, they have to contend with the accusations of male theologians who accuse them of selling out to the white capitalist feminism of the West. Chung responds that Asian women are defining feminism for themselves today in their own context. She states: “If people can accept the fact that Christianity in Asia still has some liberative power in spite of its Western, missionary and colonial background because Asian Christians rediscovered its liberative core, then they should be able to accept the liberative core of feminism rediscovered by Asian women.”<sup>101</sup> Therefore, we could say that the theological reflection of Asian women has emerged as a response to the wretched sufferings they undergo constantly.

The emergence of capitalism and modernization in the Third World societies have to a large extent, caused the inferior status of women mainly in areas of job opportunities and remuneration. Another important effect that is specific to Asia is the rapid growth of international tourism and free trade zones; both affect Asian women’s lives. They have been forced to become part of the cheap labour market with inhuman and dangerous working conditions, for example sexual exploitation that eventually leads to prostitution.<sup>102</sup>

Asian women who attended the EATWOT Asian women’s conference rightly described this sinful situation of oppression in the following words:

In all spheres of Asian society, women are dominated, dehumanised, and de-womanized; they are discriminated against, exploited, harassed, sexually used, abused and viewed as inferior beings who must always subordinate themselves to the so-called male supremacy. In the home, church, law, education and media, women have been treated with bias and condescension. In Asia and all over the world, the myth of subservient, servile Asian women is blatantly peddled to reinforce the dominant male stereotype image.<sup>103</sup>

In the context of the poverty of the teeming millions of Asia and their situation of domination and exploitation, Asian theology must have a very definite liberational thrust. The first act of theology is commitment. This commitment is a response to the challenge of the poor in their struggle for full humanity. The final statement of the EATWOT affirms that “the poor and the oppressed of Asia are called by God to be the architects and builders of their own destiny. Thus theology starts with the

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<sup>100</sup> Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 22.

<sup>101</sup> Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 25.

<sup>102</sup> “The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology: Final Statement of the Fifth EATWOT Conference, New Delhi, August 17-21, 1981,” 193.

<sup>103</sup> “Final Statement: Asian Church Women Speak (Manila, Philippines, Nov. 21-30, 1985),” in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 119.



aspirations of the oppressed towards full humanity and counts on their growing consciousness of, and their ever expanding efforts to overcome, all obstacles to the truth of their history.”<sup>104</sup>

### 4.3 Theological Context of Asian Feminist Theology

The inadequacies of traditional theology and Christology are other important factors for the emergence of Third World feminist theology. Asian women are searching for the God who is present among them and with whom they can share their tears and sighs. They want a “God who weeps with [their] pain.”<sup>105</sup> They ask, ‘what is God doing in our lives and where God is working?’ ‘Who and what is God?’ etc. The first question is about God’s action in their lives from which they proceed towards the question about God’s being or essence.<sup>106</sup> While affirming the great contribution made by Asian religions, women point to the patriarchal roots in all religions and cultures as the major force that legitimises and sustains the violence they experience.<sup>107</sup> Asian women’s conference on theology discussed the following points:

- (1) The patriarchal image we have of God; (2) the predominant male interpretation of the Bible; (3) the overemphasis on the maleness of Jesus which has been used to discriminate against women in the church and society; (4) the propagation of a “Mary cult” which not only vitiated the person of Mary, but also dislocated her and minimized her active role in salvation history; (5) the bias against women in Christian tradition buttressed by male-oriented Asian religious beliefs.<sup>108</sup>

Many Asian women theologians reject these above mentioned Western theological concepts. Christian tradition has always used predominantly masculine images in its language about God. Various theological attempts have been made to develop a meaningful language about God which is inclusive of both masculine and feminine images. Here we raise a few pertinent questions: Does our theology not be liberated from patriarchal chauvinism? Are there really sound reasons to speak of God only in masculine terms? Feminist theology emerges in reaction to the androcentric bias of theology whereby God is imaged as male and the male experience is made normative for Christianity and religion. It makes women excluded from the sacramental system and ecclesial decision-making on the one hand and on the other leaves them

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<sup>104</sup> "Asia's Struggle for Humanity Towards a Relevant Theology," *Voices from the Third World* 11 (1988): 37.

<sup>105</sup> Pui-lan, "God Weeps with Our Pain," 90.

<sup>106</sup> Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 23.

<sup>107</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, "Feminist Theologies South Asian," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russel and J. Shannon Clarkson (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1996), 110.

<sup>108</sup> "Asian Church Women Speak: Statement of Asian Women's Conference on Theology," *Voices from the Third World* 11 (1988): 182-183.



subordinated to men and thereby also marginalized. It challenges Church to examine its use of language and images and to refrain from everything that is demeaning and destructive of the full humanity of women.<sup>109</sup>

Feminist theology is grounded in women's experience of oppression in the society and in the Church in particular. It envisions a humanity where women enjoy equality with men in dignity and discipleship. Concerned with justice and emancipation, it seeks the reclamation of the feminine into theology. It is deeply engaged in unmasking and deconstructing the language, structure, institutions and symbol systems that perpetuate patriarchy and the institutional and structural submission of women by men.<sup>110</sup> We will have a detailed discussion on this point in the third chapter.

#### 4.4 Characteristics of Asian Feminist Theology

We would say that Asian women's theology is 'very Third World, very Asian and very women.' Asian feminist theology is 'very Third World' because the everyday life of Asian women is marked by "poverty, oppression, colonialism, neo-colonialism, militarism and dictatorship."<sup>111</sup> Asian feminist theology is 'very Asian,' because it embraces many different people, rich religions, cultures and linguistic heritages. Asia encompasses 58 percent of the world's population and Asian women comprise one quarter of the world's people.<sup>112</sup> Asian feminist theology is also 'very women' since it is a theology articulated by women out of their specific experiences and questions.<sup>113</sup>

Another important element of an Asian feminist theology is the experience of the link between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature. Vandana Shiva has expressed this well, pointing to some of the themes and directions of the struggle that oppose such exploitation.

Indian women have been in the forefront of ecological struggles to conserve forests, land and water. They have challenged the western concept of nature as an object of exploitation and protected her as *Prakriti*, the living force that

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<sup>109</sup> Anne Hunt, *What Are They Saying About the Trinity?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 22.

<sup>110</sup> Hunt, *What Are They Saying About the Trinity?*, 23.

<sup>111</sup> Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 23.

<sup>112</sup> Virginia Fabella, "Asian Women and Christology," *In God's Image* (September 1987): 14. Asia is also the birth place of all the great world religions. Christians in Asia are less than 3 percent of the population. The majority of the Asians are Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Taoists or Confucianists. Asia is also the birth place of all the great world religions. Asia therefore, is a non-Christian continent. See also, Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 87.

<sup>113</sup> Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 24. "Asian women are oppressed economically, socially, politically, religiously, and culturally in specific ways just because they are women."



supports life [...]. Their ecological struggle in India is aimed simultaneously at liberating nature from ceaseless exploitation and themselves from limitless marginalization. They are creating a feminist ideology that transcends gender and political practice that is humanly inclusive; they are challenging patriarchy's ideological claim to universalism not with another universalising tendency, but with diversity; and they are challenging the dominant concept of power as violence with the alternative concept of non-violence as power.<sup>114</sup>

Here we can see the themes of protection of life, liberation of nature and women, an inclusive humanism that transcends gender differences, insistence on diversity and the power of non-violence. One can see the close relationship between the liberation of women and the liberation of creation or nature from masculine domination. Women and creation are not only dominated and exploited by the masculine that objectifies and instrumentalizes them; they also share a common lot as the oppressed and are mutually related as producers and defenders of life.

## 5. Context for the Emergence of Latin American Feminist Theology

Latin American Feminist Theology has long been associated with liberation theology.<sup>115</sup> Recent theology done from the perspective of women in Latin America is set within the broad context of liberation theology. In other words, feminist theology is one of the family members of liberation theology which began in Latin America in the 1960s.<sup>116</sup> Soon after Latin American liberation theology began to take its place on the 20<sup>th</sup> century theological stage, oppressed peoples in other parts of the world realised that the methodology of liberation theology was also relevant to their experience as well. Like other Third World countries, Latin America too has undergone the miserable experience of being conquered and colonised by European powers. Although discrimination against women has a long tradition in society and the Church,<sup>117</sup> for the women of Latin America and the Caribbean it reached violent dimensions through the conquest. They were mistreated and considered as inferior beings because they were women.<sup>118</sup> We will analyse some of the reasons for the emergence of feminist theology in Latin America.

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<sup>114</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), xvii-xviii.

<sup>115</sup> Ursula King, "Preface," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), xii.

<sup>116</sup> Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 5.

<sup>117</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 76-77.

<sup>118</sup> Maria Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 13. Mexican theologian, Maria Pilar Aquino has sought a more expanded analysis of economic injustice. She analyses gender oppression in the context of the multi-dimensional aspects of



## 5.1 Historical Context

As we have already seen, there is a close connection between Latin American liberation theology and feminist theology. Theology of Liberation in Latin America helped the poor to theologise in a new way. This led to giving visibility and visible unity to the voiceless people in society and in the Church; the women too were a part of this initiative.<sup>119</sup> It started as a critical reflection of unjust social structures, for example, the sufferings of people caused by oppression, impoverishment and death. It began with the particular struggles of the oppressed in their efforts to construct more equal and participatory forms of life. Their aim was to abolish social inequalities and to recognize the full humanity of women and men. "This means that liberation theology must incorporate and make explicit the historical and spiritual experiences of women, their specific struggles, and their proposals; women suffer not only from economic exploitation and socio-political and cultural oppression, but also from ancestral, androcentric, racist, and sexist structures in society, the Church and theology."<sup>120</sup> Therefore, Latin American theology especially by women means acknowledging a convergence:

On the one side there is a 'contextual' theological tradition in the specific environs of Latin America and, on the other, the emergence and new growth of Latin American theologies in the light of feminist theology and the women's movement. As a result of this interface, a dominant line of thinking developed under the title 'feminist theology of liberation.' Alongside this theology other forms developed that can be characterised as 'theologies from the perspective of women.'<sup>121</sup>

Margarita M. Pintos considers feminist theology as the critical theology of liberation. Then she points out some arguments, liberation theologies had been worked out by men who were not much concerned with the systematisation and integration of women's emancipatory experiences. They ignored the oppressive experiences of women and ignored the analysis of the sexist components of the Church, society and

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racial, class, cultural and ecological violence wrought by neo-liberal global economy, as the framework for her feminist liberation theology. In her book, *Our Cry for Life*, Aquino seeks to sketch the foundations for a Latin American feminist theology. In this book she uses the methodology of liberation theology as foundational, deepening it by situating Latin American women's oppression and praxis of liberation as its central topic.

<sup>119</sup> Ana Maria Tepedino, "Gender and New (Re-Newed) Images of the Divine," *Voices from the Third World* 24 (2001): 87.

<sup>120</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 62. See also Fiorenza, "Editorial", *Concilium* 182 (1985): x. "If theology is faith seeking understanding, then feminist theology is the reflection on Christian faith experiences in the struggle against patriarchal oppression."

<sup>121</sup> Virginia R. Azcuy, "Theology in the Light of Challenges of Poor Women," *Theological Digest* 52 (2005): 19.



theology. Thus the integration of women into liberation theology was an important corrective to the androcentric emphases in Christian liberation discourse.<sup>122</sup>

Silvia Regina divides the history of Latin American feminist theology into three phases. The first phase of this feminist theological reflection was started in 1970's. The characteristic of this phase was "the discovery of the face of woman as a specific face within the world of the poor." The reasons for this identification are the "context of poverty, the denouncing of injustices, of the disrespected human dignity in the face of the poorest."<sup>123</sup> Gebara reads the option for the poor as also the option for women:

In this sense the word "poor" means an impoverished culture, an unlawful minority without any possibility of getting a hearing, groups in search of basic recognition in human society. The word "poor" applies especially to levels of the population that are robbed of all the basic necessities and material goods of life. In this broader sense, the option for the poor includes women.<sup>124</sup>

Ana Maria Bidegain recalls the consequences on those Latin American women who had participated in the liberation movements in the 1970s as, "we were required to abandon our female identity. Anyone embracing the feminist theory, then being developed among European and North American women, was put in her place with the allegation that feminism was an imperialist theory calculated to divide and weaken the popular sector."<sup>125</sup> Maria Pilar Aquino comments that some male liberation theologians "maintain that feminism is an expression of First World neo-colonialism carried out by white high-and middle class women and, as such, is foreign to the cultural world of the poor and oppressed Latin American communities."<sup>126</sup> She argues that the Latin American feminist experience is old and fertile and that some liberation theologians continue to ignore it.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Azcuy, "Theology in the Light of Challenges of Poor Women," 20-21.

<sup>123</sup> Silvia Regina de Lima Silva, "Latin American Feminist Theology and Gender Theories," *Voices from the Third World* 24 (2001): 66.

<sup>124</sup> Ivone Gebara, "Option for the Poor as an Option for Woman," *Concilium* 194 (1987): 110.

<sup>125</sup> Ana Maria Bidegain, "Women and the Theology of Liberation," in *Through Her Eyes*, ed. Elsa Tamez (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 27.

<sup>126</sup> Maria Pilar Aquino, "Latin American Feminist Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14 (1998): 93.

<sup>127</sup> Aquino, "Latin American Feminist Theology," 93. We observe here that this type of negative attitude and evaluation is hard to be limited to one particular region, as far as women theology/feminism is concerned. For example, the same experience is meted out to the Asian women too. Thus, it has been said that women's liberation movement and feminism in Asia are imported from white women's ideas in the capitalist West and have nothing to do with Asian women's reality. Any Asian woman, therefore, who raises her voice for the specific rights of women, is open to the charge of being brainwashed by white feminists. Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 26.



The second phase of Latin American liberation theology was started in 1980's; it was characterised by "theological production concentrated on recuperating the feminine dimensions of God, in a complementary relationship with patriarchal theology. For this reason some identified themselves as doing 'theology from a women's perspective' or 'women's theology.'"<sup>128</sup> The third phase of feminist theology arises in the 1990's and is characterised by theological reflection from a gender perspective. This phase specially marked by "feminist theology from the perspective of gender categories carries out the task of deconstructing theology in which the hermeneutics of suspicion receive new nuances and strength."<sup>129</sup>

In Latin America, women have emerged in various fields of human activity, with a growing participation in the liberating processes. Although women's theological work is set within the broad context of liberation theology, we can find the particular contributions made by women both to the 'historical processes of change and to the epistemology of liberation theology.' Nevertheless, until recently women were given scant attention, either as a theme for reflection or as doers of theology. So women's theological reflection is set within liberation theology in general, but acquires its own special features because of where it is coming from: poor and oppressed women.<sup>130</sup> In the opinion of Maria Pilar Aquino, Latin American liberation theology from the perspective of women is a necessary response to God's present activity in the life of poor and oppressed women. "The context of our theological viewpoint is liberation theology, which underpins it."<sup>131</sup> Aquino examines "the special features of theology done by women that distinguish it from other theologies, and how women's theology advances liberation theology by widening its analytic and hermeneutic scope."<sup>132</sup>

In liberation theologies, this attitude points directly to the method that distinguishes its way of doing theology. In Maria Clara Bingemer's opinion, "the most important thing is not their theological discourse and the words they use, but the liberation that has to take place, in the process of which theology has a part to play and a specific identity."<sup>133</sup> Thus liberation theology's central concern is not to become a self-sufficient discipline, but rather to contribute to the liberation of oppressed peoples.

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<sup>128</sup> Silva, "Latin American Feminist Theology and Gender Theories," 66.

<sup>129</sup> Silva, "Latin American Feminist Theology and Gender Theories," 66.

<sup>130</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 1.

<sup>131</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 4.

<sup>132</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 4.

<sup>133</sup> Maria Clara Bingemer, "Third World Theologies: Conversion to Others," *Concilium* 199 (1988): 118.



## 5.2 Irruption of History into Women's Lives

Theology starts from experience and reflects on God's self communication in the history of the world. The understanding of faith is a never-ending effort to reach the ultimate meaning of life, history, and the destiny of the world and humanity. Theology does this in the light of God's revelation insofar as it is accessible within the limits of human knowledge.<sup>134</sup> In this context, it is necessary to point out certain features. Going outside the domestic sphere is restricted to the female. This has forced them to reformulate questions about their own situation. At the same time, certain conditions are necessary for them to be recognized as subjects in their own right with full human status. This is the reason to speak about the irruption of history into the lives of women.<sup>135</sup> What does this mean? Ivone Gebara answers this question as follows:

When we speak of the irruption of history into the lives of women – and especially the theological expression of their faith – we do not mean the entrance of women into history; they have always been present. What we have in mind is something qualitatively different and new, that is, the irruption of historical consciousness into the lives of millions and millions of women, leading them to the liberation struggle by means of an active participation in different fronts from which they had previously been absent.<sup>136</sup>

It means that women begin to take their place as agents of history through participating in labour unions, neighbourhood movements, mother's groups, etc. In other words, "[e]ntering into history in fact means becoming aware of history, entering into a broader meaning, in which women are also creators or increasingly want to be forgers of history."<sup>137</sup> Knowing this reality of oppression urges women to be aware of the need for change. Gaining this awareness through particular commitments helps women understand themselves in relation to oppression, to become conscious of it, and transform it. It is a sort of encounter with themselves in which they re-appropriate the right which was refused until very recently, and they share in the forging of their own lives.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 9.

<sup>135</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 21.

<sup>136</sup> Ivone Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," in *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America*, ed. Elsa Tamez (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 43. Gebara speaks as a privileged Brazilian woman but one who has chosen to identify with the poorest black and indigenous Brazilians of the northeast of her country both as an option for the poor and as the context from which the oppressive system can be more truthfully discerned from its underside. See also her book *Theologia a Ritmo de Mujer* (Madrid: San Pablo, 1995), 12.

<sup>137</sup> Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," 43.

<sup>138</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 21.



Emergence of popular movement<sup>139</sup> is another important development in the Latin American feminist theology. They become aware of the double oppression they suffer. It means their double workload, i.e., besides waged-workers, many women also continue to be solely responsible for domestic tasks at home. In this situation, two structures of domination – the exploitation of the capitalist system's exclusive structure and the system of domination that justifies the subordination of women by men get intertwined in their exploitation.<sup>140</sup>

### 5.3 Living Realities and Theological Elaboration

In addressing the characteristics of doing theology as a woman, Gebara mentions the context as fundamental in which she works as a theologian. Her writings are marked by the social conditions of north-eastern Brazil, conditions that mould her being, actions, outlook and feelings. She says, "I recognize that I am a woman who lives in privileged conditions, conditions that give me enough space to reflect, to speak and even to write." She continues, "I speak of the woman that I am myself, and of others, the poor women of my region, in an effort to move over into their world on the basis of my option for our liberation, as well as the basis of our common human condition as women."<sup>141</sup> Gebara thus tries to develop a theology that comes from the experience of life itself, drawing upon the profound intuitions of many poor women.

An important feature in Latin American theology is the people's growing awareness of the causes of poverty and wretchedness that grind them down. Side by side with this awareness of causes, the apparent question is, 'what must be done to eliminate the inequalities in the present situation?'<sup>142</sup> As Gustavo Gutierrez has indicated, what is new in the present situation is the fact that "the people are beginning to grasp the causes of their situation of injustice and are seeking to release themselves from it. Likewise, new and important is the role, which faith in the God who liberates is playing in the process."<sup>143</sup> Here, the contributions made by women to the analysis of a particular situation will throw new light on the critical body of work done in liberation theology.

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<sup>139</sup> This term is used to define, as Pablo Richard points out "simply all the organisations, activities and other expressions by which the poor and the oppressed manifest their struggle for liberation and which demonstrate that the people are on the move." Pablo Richard, "The Church of the Poor within the Popular Movement," *Concilium* 176 (1984): 10. See also, Leonardo Boff, "A Theological Examination of the Terms 'People of God' and 'Popular Church'," *Concilium* 176 (1984): 93.

<sup>140</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 23.

<sup>141</sup> Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," 38.

<sup>142</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 26.

<sup>143</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. Matthew J. O' Connel (New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 20.



“Feminist theological expression always starts from what has been lived, from what is experienced in the present. Consequently it rejects an abstract type of language about life and those matters deeply affecting human relationship.”<sup>144</sup> The inequality between men and women is the most prolonged, scandalous and hidden form of existing inequalities. But the most important thing in this present situation is the new awareness that these shackles that have bound women for so long need not bind them forever.<sup>145</sup> Here we may note the point made by Ivone Gebara about Latin American women’s growing self-awareness:

In connection with history, one can speak of the causality of things. The condition of women is the result of an evolution: it has been different, and it can be different. Their present state can be partly explained on the basis of historic causes. The discovery of the causes of the oppression of the poor and, among them, of the oppression of women, has changed women’s understanding of themselves as persons individually and corporately. Woman is not marked for an unchangeable fate, nor is she the object of alien wills that shape her existence. Despite the conditions inherent in human existence, she can conquer spaces in which to express her word and her being.<sup>146</sup>

There is a substantial change in women’s own understanding of themselves; they see themselves as active subjects – not passive objects – in history. They become aware of the causes of their subordinate position and this awareness is not just a psychological state; it is an intellectual process concerned with the special way in which women understand themselves in their situations and their experiences. It is also concerned with how they understand reality, starting from their own self-awareness and their own reality as women.<sup>147</sup> In this context, it is interesting that Gebara uses the term creativity to indicate this change in women’s awareness. When she speaks of creativity, she means women’s new place in society. Then she points out that among other things, women are adopting a new attitude toward family organised hierarchically under the control of men. This awareness helps women to initiate new and more equal relationships and even to change certain aspects of the male role. It makes them realize the value of domestic work considered as worthless, and struggle to have it truly recognised and valued.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," 45.

<sup>145</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 27.

<sup>146</sup> Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," 43-44.

<sup>147</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 28.

<sup>148</sup> Gebara, "Option for the Poor as an Option for Woman," 114-115. These contributions by Gebara are very important in indicating Latin American women’s new situation as a protagonistic collective force; however, they do not appear to question the exclusive assignment of domestic work to women or the use of women’s biology to justify the assignment of social roles by sex.



Although the theological treatment of women's problems and their solutions is not a matter exclusively for women, it is they who have taken the initiative to break the bonds of silence and make their voices heard within theology. Women have reclaimed the right that they have been denied in the past – the right to reflect on their own experience of faith and to articulate their own understanding of the Christian experience with a view toward change and reflection. This is certainly a new phenomenon in Latin American liberation theology – as it is in the Church in general – and it is an evidence of a change in women's self awareness. Ivone Gebara observes that “women's attainment of historical self-awareness and their readiness to act on it is one of the cultural revolutions of our time. Hence it is also a theological revolution struggling to happen in spite of difficulties of all kinds.”<sup>149</sup>

The realisation of the importance of women,<sup>150</sup> Indians and Blacks in Latin American societies has led liberation theologians to pay more attention to these oppressed sectors, especially the culturally oppressed.<sup>151</sup> During the period we are considering, Latin American liberation theology has become more inclusive. But the contributions made by women theologians are a beginning to correct the excessively male bias in liberation theology until the beginning of this decade.<sup>152</sup> The contribution of women is one of the most promising hopes for the future development of Latin American theology.<sup>153</sup>

## 6. Context for the Emergence of African Feminist Theology

When we come to the situation of Africa, African theology is both contextual and liberational. In drama, novels and poetry, Africans demonstrate the importance of contextual expression. In the situation of Africa, contextualisation means that theology deals with the liberation of people from cultural captivity. It is also liberational because “oppression is found not only in culture but also in political and economic structures and the dominant mass media.”<sup>154</sup> When we come to liberation

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<sup>149</sup> Gebara, "Option for the Poor as an Option for Woman," 111.

<sup>150</sup> Report given by the Latin American Region to the Second General Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in Oaxtepec, Mexico, December. Julio de Santa Ana, "The Situation of Latin American Theology," *Concilium* 199 (1988): 50.

<sup>151</sup> Santa Ana, "The Situation of Latin American Theology," 50.

<sup>152</sup> Santa Ana, "The Situation of Latin American Theology," 51. The contributions of Beatriz Couch, Ivone Gebara, Elsa Tamez and others opened the way for women theologians such as Maria Clara Bingemer, Tereza Cavalcanti, Nelly Ritchie, Ana Maria Tapedino and others.

<sup>153</sup> Santa Ana, "The Situation of Latin American Theology," 51.

<sup>154</sup> "Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians," *Voices from the Third World* 11 (1988): 27. This Conference is held in 1977 (December 17-23) in Accra, Ghana. Like Latin American and Asian theologians, African theologians also see the need to be liberated from socio-economic exploitation.



theology, the focus on liberation in African theology connects it with other Third World Theologies. African theology concerns itself with bringing about solidarity of Africans with Black Americans, Asians and Latin Americans.<sup>155</sup> African feminist theologians focus on African women's oppression and liberation.<sup>156</sup>

African women's theologies are a "critical, academic study of the causes of women expression: particularly a struggle against societal, cultural and religious patriarchy."<sup>157</sup> They are committed to the abolition of all forms of oppression against women through a critique of the social and religious dimensions both in African culture and Christianity. African women's theologies take women's experience as its starting point. For example, they focus on the "oppressive areas of life caused by injustices such as patriarchy, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, capitalism, globalisation and sexism."<sup>158</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye describes the contemporary African context as one in which "the drama of poverty has altered much of Africa's traditional norms of human relationships" and thus "African women's theology cannot but reflect this poverty syndrome by working to construct a liberating theology."<sup>159</sup> The Pan African Conference of the Third World Theologians referred to the need to struggle against sexism. The participants of the document declared thus:

We recognise that African women have taken an active role in the Church and in the shaping of our history. They have shown themselves to be an integral part of the liberation struggle. But we cannot ignore their exclusion from our past theological endeavours. The future of African theology must take seriously the role of women in the church as equals in the doing of theology.<sup>160</sup>

In Africa, Women liberation struggles have been taking place in different forms over the years. For example, women's revolt against colonial oppressive measures was held in Aba, Nigeria in 1929. However, it is very recently that these struggles have become a theological issue. "Feminist theology seeks to clarify the identity of women as equal partners with men in the human community. The point of departure is the biblical story of creation (Gen 1:26) whereby God made man and woman in his own

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<sup>155</sup> "Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians," 27.

<sup>156</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 258.

<sup>157</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Southern Africa," in *An Introduction to Third World Theologies*, ed. John Parratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 156.

<sup>158</sup> Phiri, "Southern Africa," 156.

<sup>159</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 22.

<sup>160</sup> "Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians," 28.



image.”<sup>161</sup> Oduyoye challenges Third World theologians “to see the women issue as a priority, and calls for a theological redefinition of the concepts of headship, authority and power in the light of the gospels.”<sup>162</sup> Teresa Okure tries to analyse the image of the woman in Church and society from a biblical perspective. It is a cultural bias that there is continued exclusion of women from participation in certain Christian ministries.<sup>163</sup> Rosemary Edet urges that “women be moved from the periphery to the centre of Church’s life and activity.”<sup>164</sup> Bette J. Ekeya says that elaboration of theology should be done with the involvement of women at the grassroots level. She is of the view that in evolving an African Christology from women’s perspective the image of the victorious Christ is most relevant.<sup>165</sup>

### 6.1 Emphasis on Feminist Christology

The writings of African women theologians emphasise on an emerging African feminist Christology. For example, Mercy Amba Oduyoye has pointed out that African women “do theology with their whole beings: rural women walking for water and firewood, cooking meals, caring for children; urban women working in shops and in the market – everywhere in Africa women proclaim through their lives a courageous hope in the goodness of life in the midst of incredible poverty and oppression.”<sup>166</sup> Therese Souga emphasises that “[w]e need a Christology that takes into account the situation of women in the African world. Christology cannot be reformulated without taking into account women and their place in church and society

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<sup>161</sup> Justin Ukpog, "Theological Literature from Africa," *Concilium* 199 (1988): 71.

<sup>162</sup> Ukpog, "Theological Literature from Africa," 71. Oduyoye is the author of "The Roots of African Christian Feminism" in *Variations in African Theology*, ed. John S. Pobee and Carl F. Hallencreutz, Nairobi, 1986). She has written on feminist and inculturation issues.

<sup>163</sup> Ukpog, "Theological Literature from Africa," 71. Teresa Okure, a New Testament scholar at the Catholic Institute of West Africa, Nigeria. Her publications include "Biblical Perspectives on Women: Eve the mother of the Living (Gen 3:20)," *Voices from the Third World* 8 (1985).

<sup>164</sup> Ukpog, "Theological Literature from Africa," 71. Rosemary Edet, teaching at the university of Calabar, Nigeria, has written on women and inculturation issues. Her publications include, *From Nature to Divine: An Introduction to the Study of Religions* (Rome, 1984); "Women in Church Life" (EATWOT Conference Paper, Mexico 1986).

<sup>165</sup> Ukpog, "Theological Literature from Africa," 72. Bette J. Ekeye, a Kenyan and a lecturer at the University of Nairobi. She is the author of "Christ in the Various Experience in which Women Do Theology" (EATWOT Conference Paper, Mexico, 1986).

<sup>166</sup> Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 117. This comment was made at a public lecture in October, 1988 at St Michael's College in the Toronto School of Theology, Toronto, Canada which the author attended. Oduyoye was asked by a man in a very aggressive tone, "Where are the writings of African women theologians?" Then she replied in this manner. These actions of care and concern are the first theological voices of African women.



in Africa.”<sup>167</sup> This Christology is “not a discourse but a relationship” and the praxis which flows from it.<sup>168</sup> In a more clear way, for African women Jesus is a friend, healer, advocate and source of transformation. Again they consider Jesus as ‘the boundary breaker’ which means that he is a source of hope for women bound on all sides by religions and cultures of Africa.<sup>169</sup> It is from their experience that African women speak of the images of Christ which give them hope and courage.

Another important point is the anthropological focus of African feminist Christology. In this respect, African women name Christ as Mother, the one who nurtures life and cares for the weak. In African culture women are seen mainly in the roles of bringing forth life and lovingly caring for their children.<sup>170</sup> But Nasimiye-Wasike stresses that women’s roles in Africa can no longer be limited to physical motherhood. Then she puts forth the example from gospels showing that Christ recognised women as responsible persons in their own right and called them as disciples. She adds:

Jesus today recognizes the African woman not just as a nurturer of life but as one who participates fully in the life of the Church – as theological teacher, catechist, biblical interpreter, counsellor and as one called to restore the Church and humanity to the initial inclusiveness, holistic and mutual relationships between women and men.<sup>171</sup>

Other Christological models for African women are Christ as the liberator, cosmological restorer and healer.<sup>172</sup> Denise Ackermann asserts that the future of the feminist theology “is crucial to the future of the entire theological project in southern Africa.”<sup>173</sup> Rakoczy remarks that this is applicable to all of Africa. The development of African theology will be incomplete without women’s voices and contributions.<sup>174</sup> There are a number of significant contexts which influence the approach and themes of African women’s theology. The religio-cultural context is central to the work of theology.

<sup>167</sup> Therese Souga, "The Christ-Event from the Viewpoint of African Women: A Catholic Perspective," in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 29.

<sup>168</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 58.

<sup>169</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Feminist Theology African," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1996), 113.

<sup>170</sup> Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 120.

<sup>171</sup> Anne Nasimiye-Wasike, "Christology and an African Woman's Experience," in *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*, ed. J. N. K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi: Initiatives Publishers, 1989), 131.

<sup>172</sup> Nasimiye-Wasike, "Christology and an African Woman's Experience," 131-133.

<sup>173</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, "Forward from the Margins: Feminist Theologies for Life," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 63.

<sup>174</sup> Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 20.



## 6.2 Emphasis on Communion

Oduyoye emphasises the communal nature of African women's theology. The various women's groups in Church communities "give them both a community of accountability and a locus of resource for theologising."<sup>175</sup> Anne Nasimiyu outlines five tasks for African women's theology: (1) To conscientise the community so that people become aware of both their own dignity and that of others; (2) to unmask the cultural bias against women and "recover the basic, communal, liberative thrust of the scriptures;" (3) to awaken people to critical reflection so that they do not accept tradition simply as given; (4) to critically undermine the "established sinful order" and renounce all that dehumanises people in African culture; and, (5) to consider the Gospel as "a sharp cutting edge to our culture in order to transform and restore it to wholeness."<sup>176</sup>

A significant era in the development of African women's theology began with the establishment of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the "Circle") at Trinity College, Accra, Ghana in 1989. Their goal was to assess critically the status of women in Africa and to examine the role of religion and culture in shaping their lives and destinies.<sup>177</sup> This Circle has become the major vehicle for the exchange and development of African Christian women's theological work.<sup>178</sup> The Circle's vision is to encourage African women to write and publish their works. The goal of the Circle is to promote the well-being of African women and all women through theological analysis and the study of the Bible which commits as to social action.<sup>179</sup> Before the inauguration of the Circle, there had been some efforts to publish collaborative works, which included some writings by African women theologians, such as *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*. The Circle is decentralised with a minimum of formal co-ordination. The work of the Circle focuses on three main areas: "the roles and images of women in relation to men in African culture, with special emphasis on rituals in rites of passage; an analysis of the interaction between African culture and Christianity and its impact on African women; and

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<sup>175</sup> Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 37.

<sup>176</sup> Anne Nasimiyu, "Feminism and African Theology," *African Christian Studies* 9 (1993): 26-27.

<sup>177</sup> Theresia Hinga, "African Feminist Theologies: The Global Village and the Imperative of Solidarity across Borders: The Case of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18 (2002): 79.

<sup>178</sup> Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History*, 254.

<sup>179</sup> Musimbi Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology: African Women's Contribution to Theology in the Twenty - First Century," *Feminist Theology* 27 (2001): 48.



reading the Bible through the eyes of African women.”<sup>180</sup> The Circle’s evaluation meeting was held in Kenya in 1996 and their decision was that there should be a fourth area of focus, namely, African women’s histories.<sup>181</sup> Here we can see that theological reflection by women in Africa is gradually increasing as they begin to reflect on their experience and articulate new interpretations of the meaning of Christian life. As of 2003, there were about 400 women in Africa who are members of their local Circle. The Circle “includes African women representing all the major religions of Africa; it also embraces all women of Africa, regardless of colour.”<sup>182</sup>

## 7. Theological Focus of Women’s Liberation in EATWOT

Another important development in the Third World Feminist Theology is the establishment of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. EATWOT’s birth in 1976, in Tanzania, had been preceded by a decade of heightening awareness of the common problems of ‘Third World’ countries, politically, economically and socio-culturally. Before discussing this point, we have a brief discussion on WCC (World Council of Churches) and its activities for the development of feminist consciousness among Christian women worldwide. WCC has acted as an enabler for women in many parts of the Third World and it helps the theological development of women in different countries. For example, it has provided a supportive network, financial and human resources, and many opportunities through workshops, conferences, publications, etc.<sup>183</sup>

In 1974 the WCC organized a conference in West Berlin dealing with ‘Sexism in the 1970s’. 170 women from 50 different countries participated in the conference. This was a new departure and it gave some important insights to women who were present. Also in 1974, the WCC Sub-Unit on Women in Church and Society established a worldwide ‘Programme on Women and Rural Development,’ which involved education, leadership development, and skills training.<sup>184</sup> It is important to notice that these developments are closely interconnected with the development of Third World theologies. This was initially undertaken by male theologians who gave little attention to women. Male theologians from different Third World countries met with each other at international conferences; however, they did not meet at those conferences

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<sup>180</sup> Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Doing Theology in Community: The Case of African Women Theologians in the 1990s," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 71.

<sup>181</sup> Phiri, "Doing Theology in Community: The Case of African Women Theologians in the 1990s," 71.

<sup>182</sup> Phiri, "Doing Theology in Community: The Case of African Women Theologians in the 1990s," 69.

<sup>183</sup> King, "Introduction," 11.

<sup>184</sup> King, "Introduction," 9.



organized by the WCC. Eventually, they decided to form their own organization known as the EATWOT.<sup>185</sup> The actual association, which began in Dar es Salaam in 1976, had as its aim, “the continuing development of Christian theologies which will serve the church’s mission in the world and witness to the new humanity in Christ expressed in the struggle for a just society.”<sup>186</sup> Since that time, EATWOT has held different continental and intercontinental dialogues engaging in the specific situations of women in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It has taken up for discussion the theological significance of race, indigenous peoples and Third World women.<sup>187</sup> Its theology was from the beginning contextual, liberational, and ecumenical and the primacy of praxis was its hallmark. But the real breakthrough for women did not come until EATWOT’s fifth conference in New Delhi, in 1981.<sup>188</sup> EATWOT claims to work in the context of the challenges of realities to theology. As such, the feminist claim that “the male dominated patterns of culture and social organisation” oppress women in society and manifest themselves in the life and theology of the Church has to be examined.<sup>189</sup>

Maria Pilar Aquino remarks: “the systematic development of feminist theology has been accomplished in several important events sponsored by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and its women’s commission,

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<sup>185</sup> King, "Introduction," 11.

<sup>186</sup> Virginia Fabella, *Beyond Bonding: A Third World Women's Journey* (Manila: Philippines, 1993), 16.

<sup>187</sup> Important books on Third World women in the development of liberation theology are Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge, eds., *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God* (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 1996); Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, eds., *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992); Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park, eds., *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women* (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1989); Elsa Tamez, ed., *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989); Maria Pilar Aquino, ed; *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993); Mary John Mananzan et. al, eds., *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996); John S. Pobee and Barbel Von Wartenberg Potter, eds., *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986); Virginia Fabella and Dolorita Martinez, eds., *Third World Women Doing Theology*, Nigeria, Port Harcourt, EATWOT, 1987); Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, eds., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988); and Ursula King, ed., *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994).

<sup>188</sup> Mary Grey, "Feminist Theology: A Critical Theology of Liberation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 93.

<sup>189</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Reflections from a Third World Woman's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 29.



beginning in 1979.”<sup>190</sup> As Virginia Fabella states women felt that their contribution was not taken seriously. She is of the view that,

[D]espite the supportive statements regarding women’s equality and the declarations against sexism in all the past conference documents, the reality was different. Both disturbed and disappointed, the EATWOT women decided it was time to demand their rightful place not only in society but in the association as well. Oduyoye referred to this as the ‘eruption within the eruption’ in her assessment of the Delhi event.<sup>191</sup>

The ‘eruption’ had an influence on the final statement of the Delhi Conference. Clause 7 of the statement reads: ‘Just as the experience of the Third World as a true source for theology must be taken seriously.’ This final phase was envisaged as a dialogue between First and Third World women, a dialogue, which finally took place at Costa Rica in December 1994.<sup>192</sup>

At first, there were hardly any women theologian present at EATWOT meetings, but they soon came to represent one third of its membership. EATWOT held three major assemblies in countries of three different continents.<sup>193</sup> Each conference had a different focus influenced by the continent where the meeting took place:

Africans stressed indigenisation; Asians focused on religious pluralism; Latin Americans stressed class analysis. In addition to these differences in emphasis, though there were many similarities: including a stress on liberation as the central core of the Christian gospel, the need to reread the Bible in the light of the hermeneutical privilege of the poor, and a rejection of the dominant theologies of Europe and the USA. These are all themes that subsequently influenced the discussions of feminist theologians from the Third World and are reflected in their work.<sup>194</sup>

One of the major issues of EATWOT women’s conference was the oppression of women. Sexism was understood as the distinct structure of marginalisation of women within the system of domination. From the beginning of discussion, it was clear that there was not a single view of sexism or a unified position against its unfavourable

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<sup>190</sup> Maria Pilar Aquino, "Feminist Theology Latin American," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1996), 115.

<sup>191</sup> Virginia Fabella, *Beyond Bonding: A Third World Women’s Journey* (Manila: IWS, St. Scholastic College, 1993), 16.

<sup>192</sup> 45 women theologians from 25 countries met in San Jose, Costa Rica from 6 to 13 December on the theme, ‘A Spirituality for Life: Women Struggling against Global violence.’ Panellists reflected on domestic, ecological, cultural, economic and military violence as well as violence against women’s health. The keynote speaker for the Third World was Professor Chung Hyun Kyung from Korea, and the First World, Professor Ursula King, Bristol University, England.

<sup>193</sup> Ghana 1977 (Africa), Sri Lanka 1979 (Asia) and Brazil 1989 (Latin America)

<sup>194</sup> King, "Introduction," 11.



effects on women and on society as a whole.<sup>195</sup> There were differences of opinion among women themselves. For example, women from the Third World were not always comfortable with the First World feminists' definition of the issues and strategies for change. When sexism was discussed, the reaction from the male groups was negative and it ranged from dismissal of the issue as very irrelevant to a genuine self-examination of their own role in perpetuating the patriarchal system.<sup>196</sup>

### 7.1 Establishment of EATWOT's Women's Commission

The main impact came at the International Conference 1983 in Geneva, especially from European and North American feminist theologians known as 'Dialogue between First and Third World Theologians'. The ten female EATWOT members present in Geneva felt confirmed and empowered in their uneasiness and criticism about the male dominated association and its theology. As a concrete result, after the consultation, the EATWOT Women's commission was established in 1983. This body was not only responsible for the elaboration and development of a rich variety of feminist theologies in the Third World, but also for a substantial change of EATWOT itself, concerning the gender issue.<sup>197</sup> The Women's Commission was recognised, and a whole chapter in the final statement was devoted to the contribution of women to theology. Nevertheless, women theologians had the decisive step forward in the Third General Assembly in Nairobi (1992). There they contributed to the discussions by fresh and new ideas, convinced by great competence and commitment and introduced the gender issue as a permanent task for EATWOT.<sup>198</sup> The Women's Commission of EATWOT has played a very important role in the process of developing a Third World feminist theology. Women theologians from Asia, Africa and Latin America were able to gather regionally and internationally to organise regional networks of communications and develop a sense of their own identities as women theologians from Asia, Africa and Latin America.<sup>199</sup>

An intercontinental conference of women theologians from the Third World was held in Oaxtepec, Mexico, from December 1 to 6, 1986. The theme of the conference was

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<sup>195</sup> "Doing Theology in a Divided World: Final Statement of the Sixth EATWOT Conference," in *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, ed. Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books), 186.

<sup>196</sup> "Doing Theology in a Divided World: Final Statement of the Sixth EATWOT Conference," 186.

<sup>197</sup> For the history of EATWOT Women's Commission, See Virginia Fabella, *Beyond Bonding, a Third World Woman's Theological Journey*, (Manila: IWS, St Scholastic College, 1993).

<sup>198</sup> Joseph Estermann, "Theology of Hope or Hope for Theology?," *Voices from the Third World* 26 (2003): 160.

<sup>199</sup> Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History*, 243.



“Doing Theology from the Third World Women’s Perspective.”<sup>200</sup> The Conference was planned to operate in three stages where women’s project sought

(1) To broaden the understanding of women’s situation in respective socio-economic, political and religio-cultural realities; (2) To discover the vital aspects of women’s experience of God in emerging spiritualities; (3) To reread the Bible from Third World women’s perspective in the light of total liberation; (4) To articulate faith reflections on women’s realities, struggles and spirituality; (5) To deepen the commitment and solidarity work towards full humanity for all.<sup>201</sup>

This conference provided a forum of exchange among women, on their findings of the study in their respective continents. Twenty-six delegates from seventeen countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America took part in the conference.<sup>202</sup> The women discussed at Oaxtepec several important issues such as the affirmation of the oppression of women and the existence of liberation movements. Among the efforts towards liberation, theologising emerged as a specific manner in which women struggle for the right to life. It was accepted and confirmed that the Bible plays a vital role in the lives of women and in their struggle for liberation. Christology appeared to be central to Women’s Theology. In the person and praxis of Jesus Christ, women find the grounds of their liberation from all discrimination. The passionate and compassionate way in which women do theology is a rich contribution to theological science. Finally, the women-members made several recommendations to the leadership of EATWOT in terms of organisation, content and publications.<sup>203</sup>

In the final statement of the Delhi Assembly, chapter 17 was dedicated exclusively and expressively to the discrimination of women in society and Church:

Women everywhere and at all levels suffer immensely from male dominated patterns of culture and social organization. Although women have contributed to the development of Third World countries, they have been accorded minority or inferior status. Women’s oppression has been made more evident by their general absence in decision-making positions even on issues that radically affect them. This is true not only in society at large but in the churches as well. All religions without exception are guilty of discriminating against women.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> "Final Document: Intercontinental Women's Conference," 194. The Conference was sponsored by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) as part of its commitment to total liberation and the achievement of full humanity for all, women and men alike.

<sup>201</sup> "Final Document: Intercontinental Women's Conference," 194.

<sup>202</sup> "Final Document: Intercontinental Women's Conference," 194.

<sup>203</sup> "Final Document: Intercontinental Women's Conference," 196-201.

<sup>204</sup> "The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology, Final Statement of the Fifth EATWOT Conference," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books), 193. This Conference was held in New Delhi in 1981, August 17-29.



Paragraph Number 49 of this document observes on the one hand that theology in the First and the Third World has too long been a theology of the white man, and demands on the other hand to incorporate the gender issue and the perspective of women into theological reflection.<sup>205</sup> Paragraph number 50 mentions the contribution of feminist theologians in deconstructing patriarchal presuppositions of dominant theologies and in reading the scripture from a feminist perspective.<sup>206</sup>

Feminist theology and gender issues were explicitly discussed at the Fourth General Assembly in Tagaytay (Asia) in 1996. It was held in a very controversial and even emotional way. All women left the room at a critical moment protesting against the male refusal to give more space to women within EATWOT. As a result of these heated debates, the recommendations of the Women's Commission<sup>207</sup> were integrated into the final statement of the Assembly. However, the debate about the implications of feminist theology and gender perspective for theological paradigms and conceptions was postponed to the next intercontinental meeting, the Quito Assembly. In the meantime, the Women's Commission realized a quite ambitious dialogue-program on the gender issue.<sup>208</sup> Third World women theologians became more visible when they grouped themselves together in 1983 as a separate Women's Commission of EATWOT. They organised regional and national consultations, followed in 1985 by continental conferences held in Latin America, Asia and Africa.<sup>209</sup>

## 7.2 The Irruption of Women as an "Irruption within the Irruption"

The Quito Assembly, held in 2001 was an important test case for the 'irruption within the irruption,'<sup>210</sup> the position of women in EATWOT and the overcoming of

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<sup>205</sup> "The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology, Final Statement of the Fifth EATWOT Conference," 200.

<sup>206</sup> "The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology, Final Statement of the Fifth EATWOT Conference," 200.

<sup>207</sup> There were six concrete proposals, which were incorporated into the text of the final statement: All members should read at least five contributions on feminist theology; all regions should organise dialogue-meetings on the gender issue; at all meetings of EATWOT, half of the papers should be given by women; the meeting should consider all sensibility towards different kinds of experience; the experience of grassroots people should influence our theologising; and the gender issue must have its place in the analysis and theological reflection. Estermann, "Theology of Hope or Hope for Theology?," 171.

<sup>208</sup> Estermann, "Theology of Hope or Hope for Theology?," 160.

<sup>209</sup> Oduyoye, "Reflections from a Third Woman's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies," 35.

<sup>210</sup> This phrase "Irruption within an Irruption" means 'within the irruption of the poor.' Oduyoye constitutes this phrase in the question of sexism in the struggle against oppression and liberation. She considers the Quito Assembly as the one where women raised their voices to denounce sexism and discrimination among Third World theologians and to criticise very strongly the arrogance of the male participants towards the female theologians present at the Assembly. She called this protest



androcentric and patriarchal theology.<sup>211</sup> This gender-sensitive theologising was also notable on the level of theological method and language so much so that the following were taken seriously: “inclusive language,<sup>212</sup> narrative theology, the weight of everyday life, sensitivity, metaphorical speaking, dynamic forms of presentation, holistic celebrations and grassroots experiences.”<sup>213</sup>

According to Oduyoye “The irruption of women in church and society is an integral part of the voice of the earth’s voiceless majority that is beginning to penetrate the atmosphere and disturb the peace of the principalities and powers that hold the structures of our so-called one world in their hands.”<sup>214</sup> The process of involving women in meaningful roles in EATWOT did not begin at the initial stages. So Oduyoye says that “until Virginia Fabella undertook the assignment of programme co-ordinator EATWOT was virtually a male enterprise.”<sup>215</sup> The presence and contribution of women as women have not been fully appreciated or respected in the Delhi Conference. So an outburst came out because women were being treated as mere spectators at the meeting.<sup>216</sup> Nevertheless, EATWOT has made some real progress in the matter of women’s participation and is genuinely concerned about the promotion of women. So women’s presence in this theological community is becoming visible. As a result, women are making a new contribution and discovering a new methodology for they have their own way of sensing the meaning of the

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from women as ‘the irruption within the irruption,’ a challenge to the male dominated theologies. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Reflection from a Third World Women's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 247-249. Ruther calls it a “cry of protest of another yet more invisible and marginalized group – women – within the communities of the oppressed.” Rosemary Radford Ruether, "A Feminist Perspective," in *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 65.

<sup>211</sup> Estermann, "Theology of Hope or Hope for Theology?," 161. One of the recommendations of the Tagaytay Assembly – half of the participants and speakers at EATWOT meetings have to be women – was fully achieved: 34 out of 62 participants were women, and also among the speakers, there was a gender balance.

<sup>212</sup> Estermann, "Theology of Hope or Hope for Theology?," 161. The Constitution of EATWOT was discussed with a view to explicitly taking care of inclusive language. However, the headlines of official EATWOT documents still keep the exclusive male forms in French (*Theologiens du Tiers Monde*) and Spanish (*Theologos del Tercer Mundo*).

<sup>213</sup> Estermann, "Theology of Hope or Hope for Theology?," 161.

<sup>214</sup> Oduyoye, "Reflection from a Third World Women's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies," 247.

<sup>215</sup> Oduyoye, "Reflection from a Third World Women's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies," 247.

<sup>216</sup> Oduyoye, "Reflection from a Third World Women's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies," 248.



faith.<sup>217</sup> Overcoming sexism in theory and practice will demand the joint search of women and men, not only by taking up that challenge in a conference but wherever sexism appears in other areas of emphasis. In general, we would say that Asian, Latin American and African women are doing theology as a response to the suffering they experience.

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<sup>217</sup> “Commonalities, Differences and Cross-Fertilisation among Third World Theologies,” 142.



## PART TWO

### CONTEMPORARY SITUATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

The role and status of women is a widely discussed and debated issue in India. The Indian women who constitute 48.3% of Indian population belong to diverse socio-cultural religious contexts. An attempt to analyse the contemporary situation of Indian women is a difficult and complex task due to its multi-cultural diversity. Women are the social conscience of a nation and have always been an integral part of human society. The contribution of women to humanity throughout history has been not less than that of men. However, for centuries, women who constituted half of the population have been suppressed, oppressed and treated as subordinates.<sup>218</sup> According to U.B. Singh, “the future of development and society lies in the future of women, equality with men because they constitute nearly half of the country’s population.”<sup>219</sup> Indian women at the end of the twentieth century would argue that they still have a long way to go to attain gender justice.<sup>220</sup>

Women are still one of the most powerless and marginalised sections of Indian society after sixty years of independence. According to 2001 census, India’s sex-ratio is 933 females per 1000 males, which is the lowest in the world. Female literacy percentage is 54.16 while that of male is 76.85. Women’s representation in the Indian Parliament and in the State Assemblies has never totalled beyond 8 and 10 percent respectively.<sup>221</sup> When we look at history, we can see how once woman was considered as divine and worshipped as the embodiment of all the virtues. But with the passing of time, she has been discriminated against and victimized by the norms created by the male dominated society. They have been discriminated against and have suffered a lot for a long time as they were in a disadvantaged position on account of social barriers and impediments.<sup>222</sup> This section is an analysis of women in Indian society and investigates the five major areas of women’s situation, namely, social,

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<sup>218</sup> R. Letha Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance* (Delhi: Author Press, 2006), 12.

<sup>219</sup> U. B. Singh, "Empowerment of Women in Urban Administration," in *Women's Development in India Problems and Prospects*, ed. Lalneihzovi (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2007), 123.

<sup>220</sup> Geeta Tiwari, *Role of Women in Family* (New Delhi: Sumit Enterprises, 2006), 154.

<sup>221</sup> Meenu Agrawal, "Women Empowerment Today's Vision for Tomorrow's Mission," in *Women Empowerment Today's Vision for Tomorrow's Mission*, ed. Meenu Agrawal (New Delhi: Mahamaya Publishing House, 2007), 132.

<sup>222</sup> Hari Mohan Mittal, "Domestic Violence against Women in India: A Study in Its Legislative and Judicial Trends," in *Women Empowerment: Today's Mission for Tomorrow's Mission*, ed. Meenu Agrawal (New Delhi: Mahamaya Publishing House, 2007), 75.



economic, educational, political and religious. We would make use of the information and insights from history, sociology, theology, and philosophy.

## 1. Status of Women in Indian Society

India is a land of diversities: diversity of religion,<sup>223</sup> people, culture, language,<sup>224</sup> and flora and fauna. Every state in India differs from the others and there is only very little that Indians have in common. Women world-wide have been devalued in relation to men and India is not an exception. The Conference of Religious India (CRI) states that “one of the most oppressed groups in the society is women.”<sup>225</sup> The present position and status of women in general and rural women in particular is not satisfactory; rather their position in society is in no way better than that of second-class citizen. Theoretically, women are considered important and equal partners in the process of development, but in practice they are generally ignored. In spite of so many statutory productions, women still remain under-privileged, under-valued and exploited; moreover, various kinds of discriminations continue to persist against them.<sup>226</sup>

The status of women in India has long been paradoxical. They have had access to important professions such as medicine, teaching and politics and have the right to own property. Women are extremely powerful in some social classes. Yet, there is a long history of oppression of women by men, delegated to playing subordinate roles. Gender inequality is not the only inequality in India, women are not free and equal, but neither are members of subordinate castes and communities, landless people, displaced people and many other groups. Yet, women are at the bottom of the pile in every one of these groups.<sup>227</sup> The degradation of women in India is a major concern today. However, one cannot neglect the changing face of Indian women today. Many Indian women are playing major roles in the society – they are active in politics, and are experts in many respects. Many are seeking higher education and the number of

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<sup>223</sup> The important religions in India are the following: Hinduism (81%), Islam (13%), Christianity (2.3%), Sikhism (2%), Buddhism (0.7%) and Jainism (0.4%). K. M. Mathew, ed., *Manorama Yearbook* (Kottayam: Malayala Manorama, 2008), 562.

<sup>224</sup> The Constitution of India recognises 22 official languages. They are Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Malayalam, Manipuri, Maithili, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Panjabi, Santhali, Sanskrit, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. K. M. Mathew, ed., *Manorama Yearbook*, 563.

<sup>225</sup> Conference of Religious India, *National Assembly Report* (New Delhi, 1993), 65.

<sup>226</sup> Meenu Agrawal, "Preface," in *Women Empowerment: Today's Vision for Tomorrow's Mission*, ed. Meenu Agrawal (New Delhi: Mahamaya Publishing House, 2007), x.

<sup>227</sup> Mary Cherian, "Information and Communication Technology for Women Empowerment," in *Women's Empowerment: Politics and Policies*, ed. M. R. Biju (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2006), 168.



employed women is increasing gradually. Nevertheless, the majority of Indian women belong to the underdeveloped, illiterate and exploited segments of the society. In this section, we analyse the degradation and oppression of women in the different spheres of society.

### 1.1 Social Status of Women

Women in India have been subjected to varying degrees of social discrimination through the ages. The female is confined to the traditionally ascribed role within the four walls of the house. She had been the object of prejudice in an orthodox milieu and had to be content with a secondary place in society.<sup>228</sup> Women and their problems assume great significance in recent times. Padmini Sen Gupta analyses the position of women starting from the Vedic period and she stresses that for centuries, “women have been suppressed, oppressed and treated as subordinates.”<sup>229</sup> Historically, women were supposed to carry forward the traditions, norms and values of the society.

In Indian society, discrimination on the basis of sex exists since ages. It often starts at the earliest stages of life. In pre-Vedic period, the society in India was matriarchal and women occupied significant roles and positions compared to men.<sup>230</sup> In *Gurukulas* women studied with men and many women were well versed in the Vedas. They were actively associated with men in every social and religious ritual and ceremony. In this era, women were considered equal partners and enjoyed equal status and prestige. It is evident from the fact that many religious rituals were regarded as incomplete unless women were present.<sup>231</sup>

The contemporary Indian society is patriarchal in character. Every sphere of social life heavily suppresses a woman whether she is “a tribal woman or a *Dalit* woman, a factory worker or a clerk, a doctor or a university student; a Hindu, a Christian or a Muslim; a low caste or a high caste, a house wife, a prostitute or a religious, an

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<sup>228</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 19.

<sup>229</sup> Padmini Sen Gupta, *The Story of Women of India* (New Delhi: Indian Book Company, 1974), 125.

<sup>230</sup> Singh, "Empowerment of Women in Urban Administration," 124. Women are rather considered indispensable for certain rites as men cannot be a spiritual whole without her participation.

<sup>231</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 21. All sacred rituals are to be “*Sapatnika*” (with wife), otherwise these rituals are useless. Scholars like Asthana and Majumdar accepted her role in society as the measuring rod in assessing the standard of culture. See also, Pratima Asthana, *Women's Movement in India* (Delhi: Vikas Publishers, 1974), 150; Dharendra Nath Majumdar, *Races and Cultures in India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961), 104; Rani Moses, "Empowering Women," in *Dalit and Women: Quest for Humanity*, ed. V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul, 1992), 195.



educated one or an illiterate. Women from all walks of life experience oppression, in one form or another, on account of being women.”<sup>232</sup>

Here it is important to understand the meaning of patriarchy and patriarchal system. Patriarchy, in its narrower sense refers to the system historically derived from Greek and Roman law. The characteristic of this system is the following. Male head of the household has absolute legal and economic power over his dependent female and male family members.<sup>233</sup> In its wider definition, patriarchy can mean “the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general.”<sup>234</sup> Patriarchy may be described as the epitome of the authoritarian style of leadership and exercise of power. Derived from two Greek words *pater* and *arche*, patriarchy literally means the power of the father over his children and other members of the clan or household. Fiorenza has introduced the term *Kyriarchy*, i.e., “the rule of the Lord, slave, master, husband, elite freeborn, propertied, educated gentleman to whom disenfranchised men and all wo/men were subordinated.”<sup>235</sup> This expression ‘*kyriarchical*’ creates a problem: the oppression against women have their source in the image of the patriarchal God. This expression ‘*kyriarchical*’ comes from the Greek language ‘*kyrios*’, lord or master; and ‘*archein*’, to rule or dominate, is an expression applied to God. By analogy it is used to describe the master of a family. Consequently, the father of a family stands for and represents the heavenly Father. The kyriarchical system values rationality; power and objectivity; and all these qualities are considered to be male qualities. Women are considered emotional, irrational, subjective and passionate.<sup>236</sup>

Maria Mies describes patriarchy as a struggle concept, rediscovered by the new feminist movement to express the totality of the oppressive and exploitative relations which affect women. She shows patriarchy as not only socially oppressive, but also economically exploitative and thus related to class and colonialism.<sup>237</sup> According to Vanlalatlani, “the patriarchal state of mind and norms let many men and some women

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<sup>232</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," *Vidyajyoti* 61 (1997): 809.

<sup>233</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 238.

<sup>234</sup> Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 238. She has shown how sexual subjugation is used to subvert women's political and religious authority.

<sup>235</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Book, 2001), 115, 118. Fiorenza has coined the word *kyriarchy* which is a stronger word than patriarchy.

<sup>236</sup> Tepedino, "Gender and New (Re-Newed) Images of the Divine," 85-86.

<sup>237</sup> Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 37.



blind to see equal human value bestowed in both sexes. It let women feel inferior at the face of men, cause them think to be subordinate to their men in their relationship, made them over-controlled by their men.”<sup>238</sup> He further states that due to these reasons, women need to be empowered to respect and value themselves, to have self-esteem and promote themselves, and to accept their equal value and importance with their men.<sup>239</sup> In order to clarify the social degradation of women we shall analyse the following points.

### 1.1.1 Subordinated Role of Women in the Family

Social life for the majority of Indian women is confined within the four walls of the family. Once they are married most of them are isolated and are allowed to have no more social contacts.<sup>240</sup> “Family is the basic unit of a society, and is constituted by a pair of male and female persons united by the socially or religiously accepted rite of marriage.”<sup>241</sup> Indian family structure is based on the patriarchal system of domination, which is notorious for the degradation of women. Women are supposed to have no identity of their own apart from their ties to their husbands. They cannot assert themselves in any situation. They are known only in terms of their relation with the male members of their family. A woman’s status is considered always in relation to a male: either the daughter of her father, or the wife of her husband or the mother of her son. Beyond these relational terms of identification, no other social designation is important or significant as she is a mere appendage to men.<sup>242</sup> Man considers household work as the most degrading and humiliating while he considers his wife as the most competent to do it.<sup>243</sup> Therefore, most of the Indian women remain at home. They cannot find any expression to their inborn talents or desires except as housewives. Actually they were seen as just adjuncts to men. The secret and socially tolerated crime of wife-beating is common not only among the illiterate poor in

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<sup>238</sup> T. Vanlaltlani, "Empowerment of Women from North East Indian Women's Perspective," in *Women's Development in India Problems and Prospects*, ed. Lalneihzovi (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2007), 143.

<sup>239</sup> Vanlaltlani, "Empowerment of Women from North East Indian Women's Perspective," 143.

<sup>240</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," 810.

<sup>241</sup> Saju Chackalackal, "Planning a Family in the Context of Gender Discrimination," *Journal of Dharma* 29 (2004): 249.

<sup>242</sup> Saraswathy Govindarajan, "Caste, Women and Violence," in *Daliths and Women*, ed. V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research, 1992), 154.

<sup>243</sup> Meenakshi Sharma and Meena Shukla, "Role of Government in Women Empowerment: Myth and Reality," in *Women Empowerment: Today's Vision for Tomorrow's Mission*, ed. Meenu Agrawal (New Delhi: Mahamaya Publishing House, 2007), 166.



remote villages, but also among highly educated upper class families, irrespective of class, caste and religious barriers.<sup>244</sup>

The Indian constitution grants women equal rights with men.<sup>245</sup> But it remains an ideal! In practice, strong patriarchal traditions continue. Women's lives in most Indian families are miserable because of the age-old, but still prevailing traditional customs. A girl child is considered as a liability and she is conditioned to believe that she is inferior and subordinate to boys. A daughter is a burden to her parents and her marriage is an expensive affair. Many dowry deaths, lack of proper nutrition and food, inadequate education, improper emphasis on a male child, etc., are all problems arising out of the unfair treatment and handling of girl child in modern India.<sup>246</sup>

In order to understand the degradation of women in the family, we have to analyse two important problems – gender inequality and patriarchal division of labour in the family. The concept of gender refers to the qualitative and interdependent character of male and female position in society. Gender relations are constituted in terms of relations of power and dominance that govern the lives of women and men. Thus, gender divisions are not only fixed by biology, but also constituted by the wider aspects of social factors like the division of labour, which are rooted in the context of cultural, religious and ideological systems prevailing in a society.<sup>247</sup> Gender is the cultural definition of behaviour acknowledged as appropriate to each sex in a given society at a given time. It may be described as a set of cultural roles, defined by existing power relations and social practices. Unfortunately, the term 'gender' is used both in academic discourses and in the media as interchangeable with 'sex.' As Lerner rightly remarks, such a usage hides and mystifies the difference between the 'biologically given sex' and the 'culturally created gender.'<sup>248</sup> Ann O' Hara Graff has

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<sup>244</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," 810.

<sup>245</sup> The Fundamental Rights incorporated in the Indian Constitution include equality under the law for men and women (Article 14), equal accessibility to the public places (Article 15), equal opportunity in matters of public employment (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39). In addition, there are statutory provisions that guarantee these rights, such as the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 and the Maternity Benefit Act 1976. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 prohibits the giving and taking of dowry, and section 498 A of Indian Penal Code, 1961, criminalizes physical and mental cruelty to married women perpetrated by their husbands or in-laws. Geetanjali Gangoli, *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 2.

<sup>246</sup> R. K. Uppal and Suman Lata, "Progress and Problems of Women in India," in *Women Empowerment: Today's Vision for Tomorrow's Mission*, ed. Meenu Agrawal (New Delhi: Mahamaya Publishing House, 2007), 20. See also, Devaki Jain, *Indian Women* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1975), 90-91.

<sup>247</sup> Lise Østergaard, "Gender," in *Gender and Development: A Practical Guide*, ed. Lise Østergaard (London: Routledge, 1992), 6.

<sup>248</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 138.



the same opinion that the socially and culturally dependent gender constructs of 'feminine' and the 'masculine' as distinct from biological sexual identity as male or female. This idea of gender construct tends to support the arrangements of dominant powers and interests in a society. Thus, irrational women cannot vote, while rational, preferably propertied, males can.<sup>249</sup> Ivone Gebara affirms that gender is not just a biological fact of being a man or a woman. It is a social construct which means, a way of being in the world, a way of being educated, and also a way of being perceived that conditions one's existence and action.<sup>250</sup> Feminist theorists sharply divide sex from gender; sex referring to the biologically given references between women and men whereas gender refers to the social and cultural meanings assigned to these differences.<sup>251</sup>

Another field of degradation of women in the family is the invisibility of their work. Work of women is rarely recognised in the family and the society. The concept of the father as the primary bread-winner is strongly linked with his role as head of the household. He is in charge of the family, and the woman is only fit for domestic work. She is devalued because her efforts do not bring any direct monetary gain. There are two reasons for considering women's paid work-force and their contribution as secondary: the first one links their primary work with mere home-making and child-bearing; the second reason is that their income is considered supplementary to their spouse's. As a result, they are often paid less and offered less opportunities for advancement.<sup>252</sup> Astrid Lobo states:

What is urgently required is a definition of the family in terms of economic co-dependence. We need to recognize the economic contribution not only of those who go out to work, but also of those who work within the home. Women who work at home save us the expenses and responsibility of employing domestic workers to do the job. Further, by providing their support at home, they leave their men free to contribute to the economic production of society.<sup>253</sup>

Consequently, women are reduced to commodities and controlled by men. In India there is a growing frustration about the marriage system and patriarchal customs of

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<sup>249</sup> Ann O'Hara Graff, "The Struggle to Name Women's Experience," in *In the Embrace of God*, ed. Ann O'Hara Graff (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 73.

<sup>250</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, trans. Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 63.

<sup>251</sup> Ursula King, "Introduction: Gender and the Study of Religion," in *Religion and Gender*, ed. Ursula King (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 6.

<sup>252</sup> Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, "Women: A New Reality, New Responses," *Vidyajyoti* 58 (1994): 763-764.

<sup>253</sup> Gajiwala, "Women: A New Reality, New Responses," 764.



dowry and marriage.<sup>254</sup> In the *Brahmanical* law (the High Caste Hindu law), it is written that the wife is a friend, the daughter a misery, and the son is for the father 'light' in the highest heaven. A daughter in a family means above all a misfortune for the mother, especially if the mother has not fulfilled the only purpose of her life – to be the mother of a son. Since time immemorial, a woman who gave birth only to female children is considered to be cast off.<sup>255</sup>

Today, quite a large number of people not wanting a girl child to be born make deliberate efforts to diagnose the sex of the foetus and get it aborted if it is a female. The female child is neglected as she is considered economically a bad bargain for parents. Therefore, abortion of female foetuses is increasing alarmingly. Moreover, female infancy death is also high in India.<sup>256</sup> According to the 2001 census, there is a deficit of 35 million women as compared to the 3 million in 1901. On an average, there should have been 35 million more women in the country had the standard sex ratio of 945 women to 1000 men been maintained over the years. The sex ratio in the age group of 0 to 6 has decreased at a much faster pace than the overall sex ratio of the country after 1981. From 945 in 1991, the child sex ratio has declined to 927 in 2001.<sup>257</sup> This diminishing of sex ratio bears an expressive testimony of violence against women even in the safety of a mother's womb.<sup>258</sup>

Family drains women of their physical and mental energy. For example, early marriages are stumbling blocks in the path of women's progress since they become home-bound due to child bearing. Women's autonomy and physical mobility is

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<sup>254</sup> Selma Maria Pinto, "Homes Could Be Havens: Confronting Wife Battering," *Vidyajyoti* 67 (2003): 614.

<sup>255</sup> Maria Mies, *Indian Women and Patriarchy* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1975), 42.

<sup>256</sup> Mukta Mittal, "Girl Child a Neglected Dimension in India," in *Women in India Today and Tomorrow*, ed. Mukta Mittal (New Delhi: Aunmol Publications, 1995), 107. According to the report of *India Today*, an estimated 6000 female babies have been poisoned to death just in the Usilampatti Kallar community of Tamilnadu. Richard De Smet, "Origins and Problems of Bioethics in India," *Vidyajyoti* 60 (1996): 661. See also, George V. Lobo, "Women's Rights and Reproductive Technologies," *Jeevadhara* 17 (1987): 24.

<sup>257</sup> Mathew, ed., *Manorama Yearbook*, 564. Sex ratio is defined as the number of females per 1000 males in the population. It is an indicator of the decline in the number of girls as compared to boys. The child sex ratio is an indicator of the status of the girl child in the society. Analysis of the census data shows that those parts of the country where technology for sex determination is not common have a much better child sex ratio than places where people are affluent and technologically advanced. India cannot afford to wait till the next census of 2011 to determine whether the growing practice of female foeticide had waned or the girl child mortality rate has gone up. In order to strengthen the monitoring of female foeticide and girl-child survival, the Registrar General of India has made it mandatory for all the Chief Registrars of births and deaths to closely monitor the sex ratio at birth every month.

<sup>258</sup> Mittal, "Domestic Violence against Women in India: A Study in Its Legislative and Judicial Trends," 71.



restrained by various cultural traditions and practices. In this context, women's powerlessness is reinforced by behavioural norms, which present life-long disadvantages. The most prominent of these are seclusions, subservience and self-denial, which have important implications on women's control over their fate, including their reproductive choice.<sup>259</sup> The malnutrition prevalent in a significant proportion of adult Indian women can be attributed primarily to inadequate food intake. Even in households that theoretically have enough food, the way it is distributed may leave women inadequately nourished. Typically, adult men and male children are fed first. Women eat only after men have finished, and a young wife must allow her mother-in-law to eat first. Whatever is left is divided among the young mother and her female children.<sup>260</sup> From the above-stated facts we can conclude that family could be recognized as the primary site of oppression of women. However, this is not equally applicable to the whole Indian situation. Various factors such as economic power division of labour, and restrictions on women's autonomy, marriage kinship patterns, etc., act as barriers to women's all-round development.

### 1.1.2 Violence against Women

The most obvious example for the humiliated social status of women is the violence meted out against women. Pinto describes violence as follows:

Violence is an act of aggression in interpersonal relationships. It finds resonance in a hierarchical society based on oppressive and exploitative gender relations. There is a dynamics of power and powerlessness involved, as assertions of one's will over the other to prove one's power.<sup>261</sup>

Violence against women is often considered not a violation of human rights, although women are physically and mentally abused, ill-treated, battered, tortured, maimed and killed just because they are women.<sup>262</sup> Violence against women is of several kinds: it includes rape, sexual harassment in the work place and in public places, pornography, trafficking, prostitution, selective sex determination, female infanticide, child marriage, dowry and domestic violence, etc. In other words, a range of events or incidents are experienced by women both within home and outside, where perpetrators can be male or female, family members or members of the wider

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<sup>259</sup> Kiran Ramachandran Nair, "Women, Development and Policy: Changing Feminist Perspectives in India," *Journal of Dharma* 23 (1998): 434. Devaki Jain, *Indian Women* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1975), 90-91.

<sup>260</sup> Tiwari, *Role of Women in Family*, 182.

<sup>261</sup> Pinto, "Homes Could Be Havens: Confronting Wife Battering," 614.

<sup>262</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 311.



community; all of this is conceptualised as violence.<sup>263</sup> The types of violence perpetrated on women fall under two categories – domestic violence and violence outside.

### **1.1.2.1 Domestic Violence against Women**

Violence ranges from amniocentesis and female foeticide,<sup>264</sup> female infanticide,<sup>265</sup> to denying the female children opportunities of education and development. The socially accepted mal-practices such as child marriages, wife beating, forced widowhood, bride burning, dowry deaths, harassment and humiliation by the in-laws, *sati*, etc., also disclose the pathetic nature of women's social status.<sup>266</sup> Domestic violence is a reality; it is rooted on the idea that women are property of men.<sup>267</sup> Female infanticide and sex-selective abortion are the most extreme reflections of the low status of women and girls in Indian society. The preference for sons is more readily apparent in

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<sup>263</sup> Gangoli, *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India*, 8.

<sup>264</sup> Through amniocentesis and other modern technology the female foetus is aborted. Technique like amniocentesis was introduced in the country in 1974 to ascertain birth defects in a sample population. Unfortunately it is mainly used for sex determination and thereafter for extermination of the female foetus. Several investigative reports published on amniocentesis reveal that between the year 1978 to 1983, around 78,000 female fetuses were aborted after sex determination tests in the country. A recent study reveals that out of 8000 fetuses aborted in a year, after such tests in Mumbai, 7999 were female. See Aarti, "Changing the Mindset," *Indian Currents*, (June 3, 2001): 9-10. See also Lobo, "Women's Rights and Reproductive Technologies," 25.

<sup>265</sup> Female infanticide is the intentional killing of baby girls due to the preference for male babies and due to the low value associated with the birth of females.

<sup>266</sup> Govindarajan, "Caste, Women and Violence," 155. The custom of burning alive of any widow along with the dead body of her husband is popularly known as *sati*. It is the practice of a widow's self immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband. The system of *sati* was widely practised in India during the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The reasons for the practice of *sati* are several. Most of the widows ascended the funeral pyre of their husbands because of the cruel and tiresome life they would be required to lead as widows. Sometimes, the cruel relatives of the widows burnt them forcibly, because they were either afraid that the widows might misbehave and bring disgrace to the family or that they wanted to misappropriate their share in the family property. The practice of *sati* was quite common among the Rajputs and Marathas of Central India. Godavari D. Patil, "Changing Role and Status of Indian Woman through the Ages," in *Indian Woman Myth and Reality*, ed. J. P. Singh (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1996), 212-215. *Sati* is a crime peculiar to the Indian scenario. The age old practice prevailing among the Hindu community was first prohibited by enactment of law at the initiative of social reformer, Raja Rammohan Roy. Mittal, "Domestic Violence against Women in India: A Study in Its Legislative and Judicial Trends," 74.

<sup>267</sup> Pinto, "Homes Could Be Havens: Confronting Wife Battering," 616. There are evidences from the early Vedic writings and epics of Hinduism of women being part of the movable property of the Aryan immigrants. A man had unlimited property rights including land, houses, sons, wives and slaves. Due to this concept, adultery was considered theft of another man's property. According to some Vedic hymns, the wife is among the kind of property that had to be destroyed after the death of the husband. Therefore women are property that can be owned, controlled and disposed off when no longer useful. See also, Patil, "Changing Role and Status of Indian Woman through the Ages," 209.



differential treatment that leads to higher mortality rates for girls – particularly those born into families that already have a daughter.<sup>268</sup>

India is one of the few countries in the world where males significantly outnumber females. As we have already seen according to the 1991 national census, there were only 927 females for every thousand males.<sup>269</sup> Among children 0-4, the female mortality rate in 1989-91 exceeded the male mortality rate by 10 percent. The most recent figures available (1992) show that female infant mortality is still higher than male rates (with a low of 0.88 in Uttar Pradesh).<sup>270</sup> The 2001 census showed that there were only 878 females for every 1000 male in the capital (New Delhi) revealing a disturbing trend across the country against the girl child.<sup>271</sup>

The Indian government has indicated its strong opposition to antenatal sex determination, and the 1994 Antenatal Diagnostic Technique Act (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) makes such tests a legal offence. The purpose of this act is to prevent misuse of technology to determine pre-natal sex leading to female foeticide. The act of disclosing the sex of the foetus by using any pre-natal diagnostic technique is made an offence punishable with imprisonment for three years and fine up to Indian Rupees 10,000.00 Every offence under this Act is made cognisable and non-bailable. However, implementing the Act has proved it difficult.<sup>272</sup>

### ***1.1.2.2 Violence against Women Outside Home***

Violence against women outside home is worse; this is evident from gender specific violence, such as rape, murder, kidnappings and abductions, eve-teasing and molestation. Sexual harassment of women is a common part of public life in India, and can be understood as an expression of masculine sexual control over women who have stepped out of the normative private sphere.<sup>273</sup> In recent years incidents of aggressive violence<sup>274</sup> against women are reported to be increasing alarmingly in

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<sup>268</sup> Tiwari, *Role of Women in Family*, 180.

<sup>269</sup> Tiwari, *Role of Women in Family*, 155. The main reason for the difference is that up to about age 30, females in India die at higher rates than males.

<sup>270</sup> Tiwari, *Role of Women in Family*, 158-159.

<sup>271</sup> Uppal and Lata, "Progress and Problems of Women in India," 22-23.

<sup>272</sup> Mittal, "Domestic Violence against Women in India: A Study in Its Legislative and Judicial Trends," 71. See also Tiwari, *Role of Women in Family*, 180.

<sup>273</sup> Gangoli, *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India*, 63. Sexual harassment of women in public places is named and culturally constructed in India as 'eve teasing', a specifically 'Indian-English' term. The semantic roots of the term, 'eves' as temptresses being 'teased' normalises and trivialises the issue.

<sup>274</sup> George Plathottam, "The Cry of Women, the Cry for Freedom," *Indian Currents* (March 8, 1992): 34.) All types of crimes against women, ranging from eve-teasing to abductions and killings, are



India. A large number of cases go unreported out of concern for one's reputation, social stigma, or social pressures.<sup>275</sup> Raping and killing of innocent women and children during caste feuds and gang wars get reported almost every day from some corners of the nation; and custodial rapes have rocked even the floors of the parliament. Subsequent expression of grave concern over such violence and promise of stringent punishments seem to go no further in stamping out violence against women. Violence on women continues unabated.<sup>276</sup>

Mackinnon remarks; "If sexuality is central to women's definition and forced sex is central to sexuality, rape is indigenous, not exceptional, to women's social condition."<sup>277</sup> Statistics on rape and child sexual abuse in India present a harsh reality. The Indian Ministry for Women and Child Development reports that on an average, one woman is raped every hour in India.<sup>278</sup> Aruna Gnanadason observes; "The oppression of women is to be understood not simplistically but as a systemic sin rooted within the context of well-organised and established structures of oppression, which grind to dust the aspirations of large sections of workers, peasants, tribal groups and particularly women."<sup>279</sup> Violence against women has its roots in the subordination of women at the social level and their vulnerability has not decreased but increased as a consequence of social disruptions, backlash and general degeneration of values. The growing market mechanism is treating women as a commodity.<sup>280</sup>

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reportedly on the increase. In 1996, the National Crime Records Bureau reported an overall increase of 5.9% and 7.5% crimes against women over the respective previous years 1994 and 1995. The average rape cases in the country between 1990-1994 are 30 every day. So, also going by the average, 33 girls or women are kidnapped or abducted daily. See also, A. Akkara, "Women's Right as Human Rights," *Indian Currents* (December 28, 1999): 17. Aarti writes that abductions have risen by 6%, dowry deaths and rapes by 8% and torture and sexual harassment by 13 and 18% respectively. Aarti, "Sexual Harassment: A Pragmatic Approach," *Indian Currents* (June 3, 2001): 53.

<sup>275</sup> Pinto, "Homes Could Be Havens: Confronting Wife Battering," 615.

<sup>276</sup> Govindarajan, "Caste, Women and Violence," 155-156.

<sup>277</sup> Catharine A. Mackinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 163.

<sup>278</sup> Recently this was reported in Yahoo India News, 'Rape of minors on rise in Delhi', [http://in.news.yahoo.com/hindustantimes/20080126/r\\_t\\_ht\\_nl\\_crime](http://in.news.yahoo.com/hindustantimes/20080126/r_t_ht_nl_crime) [...] (access 25-1-2008). Out of the total one-third rape cases registered with the Rape Crisis Cell (RCC) of the Delhi Commission of Women, most of the victims are under the age of 10. Of the 69 cases registered with the RCC in 2007, 21 were minors. In 2006, of the 199 cases reported, 45 of the victims were minors.

<sup>279</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, "Women's Oppression: A Sinful Situation," in *With Passion and Compassion, Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 72.

<sup>280</sup> Singh, "Empowerment of Women in Urban Administration," 130.



We now turn to another important precarious situation which needs urgent attention of all. Women are most affected when religious fundamentalism breaks out into riots. While on the one hand, more and more women are mobilized for communal violence, on the other hand, communal riots increase the sexual and physical vulnerability of all women. The recent riots of 2002 in the state of Gujarat in India showed the shocking extent of violence done to women. They were taken to the roads and sexually abused in day-light. Some were physically hurt while their houses were being looted.<sup>281</sup> Hundreds of Muslim women were mercilessly raped under the umbrella of Hindu nationalism in Gujarat only because they were Muslims. Many women are raped and molested only because they are *Dalits* and poor in a caste hierarchy that is getting more violent and intolerant day by day.<sup>282</sup> Communal violence of all kinds across religious lines is recurring in the country and this is a major threat to development and empowerment of women especially among those belonging to the minority community.<sup>283</sup> Critics of Hindu fundamentalism have pointed out that in the February 2002 massacre of Muslims in Gujarat, women were singled out for specially horrible treatment. In this riot, more than two thousand people were killed and a hundred thousand were left homeless.<sup>284</sup> Here it is important to notice the remarks of Baldwin, "If a woman's body belongs not to herself, but to her community, then the violation of that body signifies an attack upon the honour (*izzat*) of the whole community. Hindu nationalist fundamentalists raped and burned minority women to destroy not only their bodies, but also the integrity and identity of Muslim society."<sup>285</sup> Aruna Gnanadason remarks that mass rape has frequently been used as a political or military weapon either to punish or to threaten those who rebel. The logic here is to hurt the women in order to teach men a lesson.<sup>286</sup> Sexual abuse of the female children is

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<sup>281</sup> Pinto, "Homes Could Be Havens: Confronting Wife Battering," 615. A subsequent report stated that Muslim women had been subjected to "unimaginable, inhuman, barbaric" sexual violence during the riots. Women's Situation in India, <http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/womensit/in-w-sit.pdf> (access 9-2-08), 3.

<sup>282</sup> Vanlaltlani, "Empowerment of Women from North East Indian Women's Perspective," 147.

<sup>283</sup> S. A. Lalitha, "Gender Concern in CISRS' Programme," *Religion and Society* 52 (2007): 140.

<sup>284</sup> Ruth Baldwin, "Gujarat's Gendered Violence," in *Nothing Sacred: Women Respond to Fundamentalism and Terror*, ed. Margaret Lamberts Bendroth (New York: Nation's Books, 2002), 186. In an editorial in *Hindu*, India's national daily newspaper, Raka Roy, sociologist at Berkeley, argued that the root of such treatment was that the creation of the inferior Other in India begins with the divisive caste system that has allowed the principle of inequality to become embedded in Hindu culture, continuing the belief that women are not only inferior, but also that women's sexuality has to be patrolled so that it is legitimately accessible to some men and inaccessible to others. Raka Roy, as quoted in Baldwin, "Gujarat's Gendered Violence," 186.

<sup>285</sup> Baldwin, "Gujarat's Gendered Violence," 186-187.

<sup>286</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, *No Longer a Secret: The Church and Violence against Women* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), 15.



another serious violence against them. Young girls, even small girls, are not safe when they go to their schools and colleges or to places of work. The danger of eve-teasing, molestation and rape threaten them.<sup>287</sup>

Child Marriage is another form of violence still prevalent in the Indian society. Child marriages keep women subjugated. Child marriage is restricted under different Acts. As per Native Marriage Act 1872, The Age of Consent Act 1891, and Sharda Act 1930, marriage of a girl below 14 and a boy below 18 were prohibited. But even today, the social evil of child marriage is in practice in some parts of the country.<sup>288</sup> Amendment to the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1976 raised the minimum legal age for marriage from 15 to 18 for young women and from 18 to 21 for young men. However, in many rural communities, illegal child marriages are still common. In some rural areas, nearly half of the girls between 10 and 14 are married. Moreover, there is pressure on women to prove their fertility by conceiving as soon as possible after marriage and thus adolescent marriage is synonymous with adolescent childbearing: roughly 10-15 percent is teen age mothers.<sup>289</sup>

We can see a difference between the customs and cultures in different parts of India. For example, the marriage system in the northern and the southern parts of India are different. The traditional Hindu society in northern rural areas is hierarchical and dominated by men, and its patrilineal, patrilocal structures have important implications for women. Marriage provides a good example. North Indian Hindus are expected to marry within socially acceptable boundaries; i.e., according to their caste. The marriages are alliances in which young women and men have no say. The bride and groom must not be related to each other and the man must live outside the woman's natal village. After the marriage, the bride moves in with her husband's relatives. This arrangement influences the lives of female children, who are generally considered more of a burden to their parents than sons because of the cost of losing a productive worker and providing a dowry.<sup>290</sup> Violence against women affects adversely not only the health and quality of women's lives but also the well-being of their children and families. Therefore, the violence against women and girls should be

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<sup>287</sup> Mittal, "Girl Child a Neglected Dimension in India," 119.

<sup>288</sup> Uppal and Lata, "Progress and Problems of Women in India," 24.

<sup>289</sup> Carol S. Coonrod, "Chronic Hunger and the Status of Women in India" (July 1998) <http://www.thp.org/reports/indiaiwomhtm>, (access 20.02. 2005).

<sup>290</sup> Tiwari, *Role of Women in Family*, 175-176.



recognized as a social evil and as an insult to womanhood. Women should be empowered to regain their dignity, freedom and human rights.<sup>291</sup>

### 1.1.3 Role of Media and the Image of Women

Today the communication media plays a vital role in shaping the society. It acts as a mirror, in imagining the concerns, conceptions, capacities and aspirations as well as the problems, catastrophes and evils of a society. They also mould, focus and accelerate the public opinion about issues and events. Media creates as well as destructs images of societies, peoples and persons.<sup>292</sup> According to Letha Kumari, “the media in any society has two roles: to serve as a chronicler of current events and as an informer of public opinion, thereby fostering different points of view.”<sup>293</sup> With regard to women’s issues, very often mass media tends to minimise coverage of events and organisations of interest to women. The media, including women’s publications, does not adequately inform the public about the rights and roles of women in society; nor does it take issue with government measures for improving women’s position.<sup>294</sup>

The image of women projected in the media can constitute several means in eliminating discrimination against women; it serves also as a main factor in preserving traditional attitudes towards them. The printing media in India, especially, the newspapers report, by and large, sexual crimes against women, creating an impression that women’s sexuality is a constant threat to themselves. These reports include rapes, dowry harassment and deaths and other atrocities on women.<sup>295</sup> Women are presented as passive victims of such crimes perpetrated on them.

This sensationalisation in the reporting of those occurrences, the piling up of the reports and statistics of gruesome dowry deaths, rapes, etc., often leads to a growing desensitisation of the reader population on these issues. There is little analysis of the underlying causes, the root situation of which these extreme manifestations are but the tip of the iceberg.<sup>296</sup>

The preference for news on atrocities and crimes against women, and picturing women as passive victims of such crimes perpetrated on them, immortalizes the situation and feeling of women’s powerlessness and feebleness. It also indirectly

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<sup>291</sup> Uppal and Lata, "Progress and Problems of Women in India," 25.

<sup>292</sup> Mathew C. Teekoy, "The Image of Woman in Communication Media," *Journal of Dharma* 16 (1991): 143.

<sup>293</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 137.

<sup>294</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 137.

<sup>295</sup> Philomena D'souza, "Changing Figure of the Indian Young Woman: Problems and Perspectives in Educating Feminine Awareness in India," *Vidyajyoti* 59 (1995): 511.

<sup>296</sup> Teekoy, "The Image of Woman in Communication Media," 147.



means that women as victims of sexual assault are more 'newsworthy' than as participants in developing programmes.<sup>297</sup>

Another important point to be noticed is that women are largely alienated from the political decision-making process, which is also ignored by the media. The media is at times used to cultivate gender biases and promote a stereotype about "a woman's place," helping conservative governments and societies put the blame on women for the failure in family policy and reinforce the idea that women are responsible for increasing social problems, such as divorce and growth of minor crimes.<sup>298</sup> Film industry has great influence on the urban as well as rural population of India. Nevertheless seldom can one watch a movie that does not degrade the position of women in society, or even in the family. India claims the promotion of scientific temper and women's empowerment as some of its important social development goals but nearly all the television channels have serials portraying only women as evil spirits, witches and ghosts.<sup>299</sup> Though television in India began with the avowed goals of education, modernisation and development, today's satellite channels have done more damage to the cause of women's development by regressing to highly negative values that impede women's empowerment.<sup>300</sup>

Media generally serves as an apparatus of the state legitimising class oppression and reinforcing patriarchal norms. Media stabilises and strengthens the existing feudal and imperialist patriarchal culture. The vast pornographic and anti-women content in music and dance are repulsive and affect women directly. Even the art forms of painting and sculpture focus more on the physical structure of women for market purposes, rather than concentrating on real issues that concern them.<sup>301</sup> Portrayal of women and girls in print and electronic media and the adverse impact it has in reinforcing a subordinate and cosmetic image of women in the public eye was a major concern of the women's programme.<sup>302</sup>

Another widespread trend in the media is to depict women as beautiful objects. In this case, women are identified and objectified according to their gender and are made to

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<sup>297</sup> Philomena D'souza, "Changing Figure of the Indian Young Woman: Problems and Perspectives in Educating Feminine Awareness in India," 511.

<sup>298</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 138.

<sup>299</sup> Kiran Prasad, "Contemporary Mass Media and Gender Justice," *Journal of Dharma* 29 (2004): 153.

<sup>300</sup> Prasad, "Contemporary Mass Media and Gender Justice," 154-155. Advertisements on television project a new type of woman, who is selfish, actively aggressive, sexist, abusive, insensitive and a hormone-driven female chauvinist. Advertisements promote oppressive notions of gender and class.

<sup>301</sup> Pauline Chakkalakal, *Discipleship a Space for Women's Leadership: A Feminist Theological Critique* (Mumbai: Pauline Publications, 2004), 167.

<sup>302</sup> S. A. Lalitha, "Gender Concern in CISRS' Programme," 134.



internalise certain notions of beauty and attractiveness which relate more to a woman's physical capacities than to her mental faculties. Such an approach encourages the long-standing patriarchal stereotype of the 'weaker sex,' wherein women are sexual objects and 'second class' citizens.<sup>303</sup> Admittedly, the mass media also tells stories about women politicians and about business women and their successes, but such coverage is rare and infrequent. More typical is the presentation of topics such as fashion competitions, movie stars, arts and the secrets of eternal youth. Not surprisingly, such views hardly promote women's sense of self-worth and self-respect or encourage them to take on positions of public responsibility. Mass media still needs to recognise the equal value and dignity of men and women.<sup>304</sup>

#### 1.1.4 Dowry System and Degradation of the Dignity of Women

One of the reasons for the degradation of the dignity of women is the practice of dowry system in Indian society. The term dowry means the property that a bride is forced to bring with her at the time of marriage.<sup>305</sup> There are differences of opinions among scholars with regard to the origin of dowry system. According to A. S. Altekar, the dowry system was generally unknown in ancient societies. In rich and royal families some gifts used to be given to sons-in-law at the time of marriage but they could hardly be called a dowry because they were voluntary gifts given after the marriage out of pure affection.<sup>306</sup>

The practice of giving dowry had started among the Hindus as compensation paid to the bridegroom's kin, as the woman was economically non-productive.<sup>307</sup> Hedwig Bachmann is of the opinion that the Hindu concept of dowry shows the expression "*Danar Dakshena*" that used to describe the handing over of the bride with the dowry.<sup>308</sup> The custom is connected with the conception of marriage as a *dana* (gift),

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<sup>303</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 138.

<sup>304</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 138.

<sup>305</sup> Wanda Teays, "The Burning Bride: The Dowry Problem in India," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7 (1991): 29.

<sup>306</sup> Anant S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1959), 71.

<sup>307</sup> Madan Chandra Paul, *Dowry and Position of Women in India* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publication, 1986), 23. See also, Gayatri Devi, "Emancipation of Women in India," in *Women in India*, ed. Sahab Deen Maurya (Allahabad: Chugh Publications, 1988), 34.

<sup>308</sup> Hedwig Bachmann, *Von Der Seele Der Indischen Frau, on the Soul of Indian Woman*, trans. Shilavati Ketkar, Vol. 2 (Tipogr: Rangel Bastora, 1943), 63. The present made to a Brahman, with the object of heavenly powers propitious, was called "*Dana*" and so to the Hindu mind the word "*Dana*" has a sacred sense. Moreover, a *Dana* can only be given to a person, who thanks to the meritorious qualities, is fully entitled to and worthy of it. "*Dakshena*" means the gift consisting of money (alms) which must follow the "*Dana*." So the father of the girl chooses the bridegroom, and in which she presents her as a gift (*Dana*), as it were, to God, as the most meritorious of all gifts, in the hope of



which was probably the outcome of the Brahminical patriarchal ideology. A religious gift in kind is usually accompanied by a gift in cash or gold. Therefore, the gift of the bride, who is gifted mainly for progeny or reproduction as well as spiritual companionship, was also accompanied by a formal and small gift in cash or ornaments. There is no custom of sharing parental property to the female children in the beginning, therefore as a compensation for this, gifts and presents were given to the daughters at the time of marriage. This custom of giving gifts out of love for a daughter during her marriage has now established itself as dowry.<sup>309</sup>

Historically, dowry began also as a religious act. It is a gift offered to the deity at the time of the offering of the virgin-daughter in the temple at the time of marriage. This tradition of voluntary gift eventually became a compulsory payment in favour of the superior gender, the male partner.<sup>310</sup> The system of giving dowry to a daughter at the time of marriage is due to the fact that she had no right to inherit the paternal property under the old Hindu Law. But the greed for acquiring more property and enjoying comfort by accepting dowry has come to such a pass that newly married women are subjected to physical and psychological torture by the husband and in-laws for non-fulfilment of the payment of dowry by parents of the women.<sup>311</sup> Therefore, today marriage proposal with a 'bride price' has become a business to make money and to invest in real business for the bride-groom and his family. Consequently, many parents of girls with poor economic background "either remain in bondage of debts for their whole life or suffer from the pressure of society to get their daughters married or bear the insult of a small dowry transaction."<sup>312</sup> The phenomenon of dowry is one of the major symptoms of unequal socio-economic development. Dowry, by and large, indicates women's inferior status in family and society in India.<sup>313</sup> The

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deserving the blessing of heaven. But along with this gift, she gives other presents too, generally money, and the conception of both kinds of gifts is clearly shown in the expression "*Dana Dakshena*" used to describe the handing over of the bride with the dowry.

<sup>309</sup> Uppal and Lata, "Progress and Problems of Women in India," 23. See also, S. Ram, *Women: Socio-Economic Problems* (New Delhi: Common Wealth Publishers, 2004), 300.

<sup>310</sup> Rose Paul, "Educated Women in the Marriage Market," in *Dalits and Women*, ed. V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research, 1992), 170.

<sup>311</sup> Mittal, "Domestic Violence against Women in India: A Study in Its Legislative and Judicial Trends," 62.

<sup>312</sup> Paul, "Educated Women in the Marriage Market," 170.

<sup>313</sup> Paul, "Educated Women in the Marriage Market," 170. See also, Madan Chandra Paul, "Dowry as a Symbol of Women's Subordination in India," *Social Action* 42 (1992): 305. The dowry system prevalent today is an obvious social evil, a curse to the Indian social set up. Since marriage is an imperative for a girl, her parents suffer social censure if they have not found a suitable husband for their daughters. While the girl's parents offer dowry the groom's family makes demands on which they will agree to the marriage, which often forces a girl's family into heavy debt.



practice of dowry strengthened the arrogance of patriarchy in contemporary Indian society in all religious communities. It has corrupted the people to such an extent that marriage has become a bargaining market, where the girl is accepted not for what she is but for what she brings.

#### ***1.1.4.1 Dowry and Cruelty against Women***

Dowry, like wife-beating, dowry deaths, and bride-burning, is one of the major factors responsible for domestic violence among all social categories in India. Dissatisfaction over dowry payments results in cruel treatment, harassment, and abuses of the wife not only by her husband but by her in-laws as well. The practice of dowry also leads to female foeticide and female infanticide.<sup>314</sup>

Due to the practice of dowry system, the birth of a girl is treated as a 'calamity' in an average Indian family. The menace of dowry in all its dangerous forms is essentially an urbanised evil originated from material greed.<sup>315</sup> Wife-beating, one of the cruel crimes committed against women is mainly related to the problem of dowry. The working class women and those women living in slums are often the helpless victims of this horrible violence. In fact, it is gradually creeping amongst middle class and rich families as well. The life of a woman who is beaten by her husband turns out to be an isolated life and it remains under constant fear. In India, even to date, the problem of wife-beating has been an unspoken problem, hidden behind shame and embarrassment.<sup>316</sup>

Bride-burning or suicide by women due to harassment for more dowry is one of the most frequently reported crimes against women in the newspapers. "The humiliating custom of dowry is one of the most painful expressions of the fact that a woman is a piece of property passed on from one male-owner (girl's father) to another male (husband). Instead of providing security for women, the dowry serves to perpetuate their constant dependence on male, her father or husband."<sup>317</sup> Dowry deaths due to the increasing demands for dowry and the accompanying greed and dissatisfaction on the part of the husband and his family are common. "Dowry has become a form of extortion, 'a drip-feed of money and goods.'"<sup>318</sup> The growing trend of dowry murders only reflects the socio-economic crisis in the country. Like an unsatisfied consumer,

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<sup>314</sup> Pinto, "Homes Could Be Havens: Confronting Wife Battering," 616-617.

<sup>315</sup> Ram, *Women: Socio-Economic Problems*, 302-303.

<sup>316</sup> Ram, *Women: Socio-Economic Problems*, 303-304.

<sup>317</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," 810.

<sup>318</sup> Teays, "The Burning Bride: The Dowry Problem in India," 37. In 1995, the National Crime Bureau of the Government of India reported about 6000 dowry deaths every year.



the husband's family may make further demands, and some families seem to be greedy, turning to harassment or murder because of their dissatisfaction and revenge.<sup>319</sup> According to Michael Amaladoss; "When the time comes for the girl to be married, her family has to buy her a husband by paying exorbitant dowries, often falling into irretrievable debt in the process. Even then, the husband's family may not be happy, and she may be subject to constant harassment and occasional 'accidents' that lead to her death."<sup>320</sup> The common tendency is to seek status in the existing system and that may mean using hard earned money for a girl's dowry rather than her education.<sup>321</sup>

#### **1.1.4.2 Dowry Deaths**

Dowry deaths are now a constantly featuring phenomenon in India. Unfortunately, in modern society where everything is so commercialised even husbands demand dowry blatantly. Brides are burnt when demanded items are not received.<sup>322</sup> In 1983 alone 690 women had died by burn in the capital, Delhi. Dowry deaths are caused due to ill-treatment at the hands of husband and in-laws leading to death of young women. Subjugated and suffering women are found in every socio-economic stratum.<sup>323</sup> There is also the problem of bride burning. Many married women commits suicide by burning themselves because they cannot bear the tension and strain that they and their parents are put through by their in-laws and sometimes by their husbands demanding dowry in the form of a flat, a car or cash in return for marrying them. Sometimes the in-laws themselves proceed to burn the women.<sup>324</sup> Although providing or demanding dowry is illegal under the Dowry Prohibition Act, dowry is practiced widely. In a typical dowry dispute, groom's family members harassed a new wife for not providing a sufficient dowry. This harassment ended in the woman's death, which

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<sup>319</sup> Teays, "The Burning Bride: The Dowry Problem in India," 37.

<sup>320</sup> Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom*, 32.

<sup>321</sup> Tiwari, *Role of Women in Family*, 141.

<sup>322</sup> Ram, *Women: Socio-Economic Problems*, 313-314. According to an official release, there were 2690 Dowry Deaths in 1976 and 2917 in 1977. *Saheli*, a social organisation of Delhi has done a lot of field work for working out crime against women. This organisation investigated 109 cases of death by burning and came to the conclusion that out of 109 cases, 85 were married women and their average age was 26 in 80 cases and remaining 29 were 17 years. It is surprising that out of the 109 cases, 99 cases were closed because no foul play was suspected. Of the remaining 10 cases arrests were made in 7 cases and in one case bail was granted. Out of 99 cases, 34 cases were described as pure suicide in the presence of their husbands who allegedly tried to have them. Most of those women committed suicide because of serious domestic problems, such as wife beating, drunken behaviour of husbands, harassment by in-laws, dowry and childlessness. A far higher number of deaths occurred due to burning were called 'accidents,' 74 of the 109.

<sup>323</sup> Ram, *Women: Socio-Economic Problems*, 311-312.

<sup>324</sup> Uppal and Lata, "Progress and Problems of Women in India," 23.



family members tried to portray as a suicide or accident.<sup>325</sup> The Apex Court, differing from the trial court as well as the High Court, observed: "The Indian woman is brought up and trained in a traditional atmosphere and told that it is better to die in the husband's home than return to her parent's home and bring disgrace to them. She finds it very difficult to violate this cardinal principle and prefers to die at her husband's place. This is the social reality of a woman's life. The legal agents in power need to understand this and be sensitive to it."<sup>326</sup>

#### **1.1.4.3 Dowry Prohibition Act**

The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 was enacted with a view of checking the growing menace of the social evil of dowry. It makes giving, taking and abetting of dowry punishable with imprisonment up to five years. The very demand of dowry at the time, before or after the marriage is also considered as an offence punishable with imprisonment up to two years.<sup>327</sup> The dowry prohibition law of 1961 too has its loopholes. To begin with, it does not define dowry and makes both giving and taking of a dowry an offence.<sup>328</sup> The Dowry Prohibition Act has been variously described as a negative, limited penal and impractical Act, one which has not achieved its objective. According to Section 2 of the Act, "any property of valuable security given or agreed to be given at or before the marriage as 'consideration for the marriage of the parties,' any presents given at the time of marriage unless made as consideration for marriage will not be termed as dowry."<sup>329</sup> The concept and definition of dowry itself is thus narrow and limited. The substantive as well as procedural law was amended in 1986 to prevent dowry deaths of newly married women. According to section 304 B of Indian Penal Code, "If anyone who perpetrates dowry death would now be punished with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than seven years but which may also be extended to an imprisonment for life."<sup>330</sup> However, in

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<sup>325</sup> Women's Situation in India, <http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/womensit/in-w-sit.pdf> (access 9-2-08), 2.

<sup>326</sup> Mittal, "Domestic Violence against Women in India: A Study in Its Legislative and Judicial Trends," 65.

<sup>327</sup> Mittal, "Domestic Violence against Women in India: A Study in Its Legislative and Judicial Trends," 62-63. Section 3 and 4 of the Dowry Prohibition Act 1961.

<sup>328</sup> Ram, *Women: Socio-Economic Problems*, 313. A look at police records reveals alarmingly high death rates among young women due to burning. The inadequacy of the investigation machinery is revealed by the fact that 690 women died in 1983 of whom 290 were between 18-25 years of age, out of this 23 were alleged dowry burning in Delhi alone.

<sup>329</sup> Ram, *Women: Socio-Economic Problems*, 305. The Act does not include any of the things belonging to women like sofa set, television, refrigerator, car, jewellery and such items which accompany or even precede a bride into her home.

<sup>330</sup> V. S. Elizabeth, "Gender Justice in the Constitution of India," *Journal of Dharma* 29 (2004): 215.



reality there has been not much change in the attitude of the law-enforcement officials as there has hardly been any perceivable change in the status of women in the society. Thus women face the same problem of domestic violence and dowry deaths.<sup>331</sup>

## 1.2 Economic Dependence of Women

Economic independence is an important means for the empowerment of women in today's world. Various schemes for economic independence of women were also launched in earlier times; however, their situation did not improve.<sup>332</sup> The status of any given section of population in a society is intimately connected with its economic freedom and independence. The debate regarding women's economic position in the society centres around three basic arguments: First, rigid distinction in men's and women's role in the society as a cause for women's dependent position in the society. The role of women is identified with only housework and child bearing; hence, they continue to be the victims of exploitation. Second, any society's development is mainly based on the proper and full utilisation of its human resources. Third, there is a need to extend the spheres of knowledge and activity of all members of society due to socio-economic and political changes.<sup>333</sup> These basic arguments would enrich us to analyse further women's role from within an Indian economic perspective.

The status of women is closely linked to their economic position. According to Astrid Lobo, "Economic independence is one of the keys to women's liberation, for wealth is intimately linked with power. In every sphere of life, be it at the local, national or international level, the wealthy are the powerful. They assume a position of superiority over others and demand subordination."<sup>334</sup> The link between economy and a girl child, creates the scenario of unhappiness at the birth of a girl child. One can attribute two important reasons for the economic degradation of women – gender-based division of labour and the impact of globalisation.

### 1.2.1 Exploitation and Gender-Based Division of Labour

Gender-based division of labour can be seen as the allocation of particular tasks to particular people. Women in India are working in organised as well as unorganised sectors of the economy. However, most of the Indian women work in the unorganised

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<sup>331</sup> Elizabeth, "Gender Justice in the Constitution of India," 216.

<sup>332</sup> R. C. Agrawal, K. D. Gaur, and Meenu Agarwal, "Women Empowerment: At a Glance," in *Women Empowerment: Today's Vision for Tomorrow's Mission*, ed. Meenu Agrawal (New Delhi: Mahamaya Publishing House, 2007), 7.

<sup>333</sup> Arati Ganguli, "Women in India Economic and Political Perspective," in *Women in India Problems and Prospects*, ed. Somen Das (Calcutta: ISPCK, 1997), 38-39.

<sup>334</sup> Gajiwala, "Women: A New Reality, New Responses," 763.



sectors. Women are subjected to various forms of exploitation whether they work in the organised or the unorganised sectors. The state entitlement to some of the benefits such as health insurance, pensions and welfare payments are looked into only through women's relationship with men.<sup>335</sup>

The main economic activity of the Indian people centres around the agricultural sector. The growth of industrial sector in the urban centres has led to the movement of men to non-farm employment which is more productive. As a result of this, men migrate to industrial sectors, which results in women taking over agricultural tasks. In recent years, therefore, their participation in the agricultural sector has been increasing. Various reasons prevent women from seeking better and more remunerative employment, for example, rural poverty, illiteracy and family responsibilities. Thus, women stagnate in the traditional economic sector as men advance into the modern sector.<sup>336</sup> Ruether states that "on the economic level, poor women carry the double work role of both homemaker – mother and the paid job. But they carry this double work role under the most unfavourable conditions. They work in the most exploited sectors of the labour force – those reserved for minority and poor women."<sup>337</sup>

### 1.2.2 Marginalization of Women in a Globalized Economy

Marginalization of women in economic activities mainly takes place due to the new technological inputs that globalisation has introduced. As a result of these changes in economy, new occasions for learning and training are offered to men. Thus globalisation excludes a whole lot of unskilled groups of people most of whom are women. Women are particularly oppressed and exploited among this mass of exploited working people.<sup>338</sup> According to Jacob Kavunkal, "The Asian world is a wounded world lying at the edge of the highways of modernisation and globalisation.

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<sup>335</sup> Pauline Chakkalakal, "Gender Justice: A Utopian Ideal? A Feminist Perspective," *Journal of Dharma* 29 (2004): 170.

<sup>336</sup> Nair, "Women Development and Policy: Changing Feminist Perspectives in India," 442.

<sup>337</sup> Ruether, "A Feminist Perspective," 70. It should be noted that the patriarchal ideology and its gender based division of labour affect poor women more severely than upper class women. Their workload is doubled as they shoulder the major part of the burden in agricultural production, along with domestic chores. The majority of women work fourteen hours a day, but their contribution is not recognised as they are always paid lower than men. In 1961 the equal wages act was passed. Since that time the whole organised sector stopped recruiting women workers. Thus most of them joined the unorganised sector. In the unorganised sector the biggest number of women are working in the tobacco industry. This particular industry thrives on cheap labour. The ways of exploitation are many. Chakkalakal, "Gender Justice: A Utopian Ideal," 169. See also, Ganguli, "Women in India Economic and political Perspective" 40.

<sup>338</sup> Puspha Joseph, "Women as Social Minorities: Well-Being in the Age of Globalisation," *Jeevadhara* (2004): 58.



Everywhere and in many forms we find an utter disregard for human dignity.”<sup>339</sup> There is also a direct link between globalisation and the intensified violence against women. In the increasingly globalized Indian society women’s exploitation is also increasing because of insufficient laws to protect their dignity and ensure justice at working places.<sup>340</sup>

Due to the liberalisation of economy and globalisation the middle and upper middle class women seem to have been carried away by the games of the new economic policies so much so that they have become blind to the exploitation and marginalisation of the less privileged under the new system.<sup>341</sup> Another important area of exploitation is the cultural and social onslaught on women under the so called economic reforms. As a result, the already existing view and treatment of women as a commodity is becoming universalised.<sup>342</sup> Again we see the growth of cosmetic industry with the parallel and associated rise of beauty competitions, where model winners are chosen more and more from the developing countries to propagandise these products. As a result, we witness continuous trafficking of young girls and growing violence against women.<sup>343</sup> In addition, multinational corporations attempt to homogenise a universal image of the body of the ideal women through advertisements, leading to increased commoditisation of women’s bodies.<sup>344</sup> Globalisation has serious effects on women in India. Although abuse of women was prevalent in India before globalisation, globalisation seems to have caused an increase in domestic violence due to the stress and strain of changes in traditional lifestyles. In the joint family system, there were certain social systems which helped to protect

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<sup>339</sup> Jacob Kavunkal, "Mission of Harmony and Complementarity," *Vidyajyoti* 67 (2003): 943.

<sup>340</sup> Statement of the Indian Theological Association, "Women's Concerns and Indian Theological Responses," *Vidyajyoti* 68 (2004): 696.

<sup>341</sup> Chakkalakal, *Discipleship a Space for Women's Leadership*. 166. The popularisation of the beauty contests has further helped to divert the attention of women from real issues and strengthen the notion of women as objects of beauty turning them merely into profitable consumers for the cosmetics' industry.

<sup>342</sup> John D'Mello, "Paradigms for a Feminization of the Church," *Vidyajyoti* 63 (1999): 123.

<sup>343</sup> D'Mello, "Paradigms for a Feminization of the Church," 123. See also Joseph, "Women as Social Minorities," 61. In the last seven years, much energy and money has been spent in India over beauty contests. The phenomenon has ranged from the local level to the international. It is true that the corporations that advertise their products through these shows garner the benefits of these fashion displays. Nonetheless it is also evident that the entire display has its impact on the minds of Indian women, particularly urban middle and lower middle class women. As a result beauty parlours and facial creams in particular which promise to increase fairness have ever been on the increase. Thus globalisation has augmented the cosmetic industry, which has aggressively perpetuated through the media the notion that for women beauty and only beauty is everything, thus turning women's body into a mere sex object.

<sup>344</sup> Gangoli, *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India*, 13.



women to a certain extent, however, they do not exist in the nuclear families. Globalisation as responsible for insatiable consumerism has also led to demands of increased dowry for a woman. Although Indian government has passed laws restricting certain traditions like the dowry, globalisation appears to have increased materialism and consumerism and dowry demands often include new televisions, cars and other articles of luxury.<sup>345</sup>

Further, the coming of capitalism and modernisation in Asian societies has led to more and more oppression of women. Women are doubly oppressed: they have a lower pay scale and they are sexually exploited. In more recent times, consumerism and tourism pressurise women into cheap labour market with inhuman working conditions and late hours, thus exposing them to the harassment of unscrupulous employers.<sup>346</sup> Globalisation also appears to contribute to the increase of modern day slavery of women in Asia. Due to the technological advancement of globalisation many women lose their jobs in the textile, clothing, food and other industries. It results in the depression of wages and greater unemployment. This has forced thousands of women to migrate to other countries to find better opportunities. Liberal governmental migration policies have encouraged trafficking of women as prostitutes.<sup>347</sup> The impact of globalisation on women has been the focus of feminist debate today. The socio-economic changes due to globalisation had led to increased hardships for working-class and lower caste women, both economically and socially.<sup>348</sup> In short, the Indian society has largely failed to recognize the economic and social value represented by women.

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<sup>345</sup> Sakhi Athyal, "Globalization, Youth and Religion: Views from India," in *Youth, Religion and Globalization: New Research in Practical Theology*, ed. Richard R. Osmer and Kenda Creasy Dean (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), 206. The New Delhi police reported that six women die in the city every day from dowry-related suicides, and many women's organizations are working hard to change these practices in Indian society. Usha Narayanan, "Challenges Before Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *India News* (March 15, 1994): 7.

<sup>346</sup> Franklyn J. Balasundaram, *Women's Concerns in Asia* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1993), 5.

<sup>347</sup> Athyal, "Globalization, Youth and Religion: Views from India," 206. A survey conducted by the Women's Employment and Human Resource Development Center explored the widespread phenomenon of child prostitution in three cities in Kerala – Trivandrum, Cochin and Kozhikode. The survey participants included 300 boys and girls between the age of eight and sixteen. Among these boys and girls many have passed SSLC (10<sup>th</sup> standard), nevertheless they are pressed into prostitution for economic reasons. The study also found that many children in prostitution came from broken families where physical abuse and addictions were present.

<sup>348</sup> Gangoli, *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India*, 13.



### 1.3 Educational Inequality of Women

Education is considered as an important agent of empowerment. To have a better future for women in India, both in society and in the family, their education is of vital importance. Education aims at creating certain measure of independence of thought, spirit of enquiry and objectivity. Being educated helps women achieve economic and political empowerment and also develop their leadership qualities. It creates awareness and dispels ignorance.<sup>349</sup> Educational degradation of women in the past centuries has been to a great extent responsible for the decline in their social status. Kiran Ramachandran Nair remarks that “education is intrinsic to development and an important instrument in empowering people with basic cognitive skills and making them self reliant.”<sup>350</sup> This had been recognised in the constitution of India, which upholds the basic right to equal opportunity for education irrespective of sex. But literacy, school enrolment and attendance of females are lower compared to the same opportunities provided to males.<sup>351</sup>

India has the largest population of non-school-going working girls. India’s constitution guarantees free primary school education for both boys and girls up to age fourteen. This goal has been repeatedly reconfirmed, but not attained. Overall, the literacy rate for women is 39 percent versus 64 percent for men in 1991 census. Although substantial progress has been achieved through the years, the gains have not been rapid enough to keep pace with population growth. Although it is 39 percent today, an increase from less than 8 percent at the time of India’s independence in 1947, the growth is very meagre.<sup>352</sup> At the same time, Vasanthi Devi remarks that women are gaining higher education more or less equal on footing with men, and the gender gap is narrowing. In states like Tamil Nadu, the gender gap hardly exists in general education, except in professional education. She states further that though the

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<sup>349</sup> Rakhi Mittal, "Women's Equality: Still a Dream," in *Women Empowerment: Today's Vision for Tomorrow's Mission*, ed. Meenu Agrawal (New Delhi: Mahamaya Publishing House, 2007), 175. Education builds up women’s confidence; it also enlightens her mind and gives her power to rise up against injustice. Proper education enables a woman to question the wrongs done to her or other women and to challenge the wrong-doer individually or collectively, also legally if need arises.

<sup>350</sup> Nair, "Women Development and Policy: Changing Feminist Perspectives in India," 440.

<sup>351</sup> Nair, "Women Development and Policy: Changing Feminist Perspectives in India," 440. According to the 2001 census, male literacy rate is 75.85% and female literacy rate is 54.16%. Mathew, ed., *Manorama Yearbook*, 564.

<sup>352</sup> Carol S. Coonrod, "Chronic Hunger and the Status of Women in India" (July 1998) <http://www.thp.org/reports/india womhtml>, (access 20.02. 2005).



country encourages higher education of women still the educational institutions are not committed to the empowerment of women.<sup>353</sup>

Education is the key instrument that helps national development. It liberates everyone from ignorance and enhances especially the self esteem of women. At the same time, it enables women to choose their own way and look after their families in a better way. So empowerment of women is directly linked with education. However, it is unfortunate that even after six decades of independence, the country has not been able to combat illiteracy, and women are far behind their counterparts. Lack of education, training and low level of literacy not only excluded women merely from social, economic and political power but also from the power of knowledge.<sup>354</sup>

The following data from the census depicts clearly the lower rate of education for women in India:

Underpinning the high levels of female illiteracy in India are low rates of female school enrolment and retention. However, these rates now show a promising upward trend. Gross enrolment ratios in primary education increased from 82 percent for boys and 33 percent for girls in 1981 to 116 for boys and 88 percent for girls in 1991 statistics suggest that from 1981 to 1991, female enrolment in primary schools grew at 3.7 percent annually and male enrolment, at 2.5 percent.<sup>355</sup>

In today's world, education is the key to success. With the growth of new disciplines like computer and information technology, the importance of mental capability has left physical strength way behind and this is to the advantage of women. Educated women know this and make the most of it. However, those who take advantage of this benefit are few.<sup>356</sup> For thousands of years women have been silenced and made 'invisible' in the public arena not only through pressure against any role played by them outside home, but also by denying them education. Education is essential for women to gain confidence, self-esteem and equip themselves with skills to struggle for equal rights. Education is an inevitable tool in promoting equality.<sup>357</sup>

### **1.3.1 Reasons for the Educational Degradation of Women**

Females are clearly at a disadvantage in India with regard to education. The aforementioned literacy level gives a clear picture of the educational situation of

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<sup>353</sup> Vasanthi Devi, "Higher Education and Women Opening a Window to Reality," *Jeevadhara* 33 (2003): 63.

<sup>354</sup> Singh, "Empowerment of Women in Urban Administration," 130.

<sup>355</sup> Tiwari, *Role of Women in Family*, 185. Whether a girl will be enrolled in school and, once she is enrolled, how long she will be allowed to continue is linked to socio-economic status.

<sup>356</sup> Mittal, "Women's Equality: Still a Dream," 175.

<sup>357</sup> Agrawal, Gaur, and Agarwal, "Women Empowerment: At a Glance," 4.



Indian girls and women. Geeta Tiwari rightly remarks that “most Indian women are illiterate, and most Indian illiterates are female.”<sup>358</sup> Reasons for the low education of girls are various. Women and girls receive far less education than men in many states of India due to negative social norms as well as fear of violence. The high preference for the male children in India has led parents to neglect the education of their daughters and invest more for the education of their sons who are considered as a source of support in their old age. It is assumed that girls who would be married off require no formal education since their duties are restricted to household tasks and reproductive activity. The girl child from lower strata of society is treated as a helping hand to her mother rather than as a student to be going to school like her brother.<sup>359</sup> Traditionally, most religions have excluded women from advanced learning and teaching. The traditional Hindu belief is that the son safeguards the future of the family; hence the daughter’s education can solemnly be sidelined. This thinking leaves no provision for women to receive the *upanayana samskara*.<sup>360</sup> Thus the storehouses of sacred learning were beyond the reach of women. Since women are treated in view of their stereotyped roles of wife and mother the opportunity for higher education is often denied to them.

#### 1.4 Political Inequality of Women

The question of women’s political participation is now on the international agenda; it permeates many regional and national plans of action. Various international conferences were held under the auspices of United Nations aims for the political empowerment of women. For example, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Political Rights of Women in 1952. Since 1975 four international conferences on women have been held under its auspices; all the conferences have emphasized women’s political empowerment as a key concern.<sup>361</sup> The issue of women’s political empowerment actually came to the forefront of the global debate at the time of the

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<sup>358</sup> Tiwari, *Role of Women in Family*, 184.

<sup>359</sup> Nair, "Women Development and Policy: Changing Feminist Perspectives in India." 440; See also, Singh, "Empowerment of Women in Urban Administration," 130.

<sup>360</sup> *Upanayana Samskara* was meant to initiate a boy into education and learning. *Upa* means near and *nayana* means taking. Taking the child for education to *Guru* (teacher) was an important step. Subhash Anand, "Women in Hindu View and Way of Life," *Jeevadhara* 17 (1987): 58. See also, Ursula King, "Women and Spirituality: Critical Reflections on Christianity and Hinduism," *Vidyajyoti* (1988): 261.

<sup>361</sup> M. R. Biju, "Women's Empowerment in India: Changing Socio-Political Equations," in *Women's Empowerment: Politics and Policies*, ed. M. R. Biju (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2006), 215-216.



Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995.<sup>362</sup> Women in India did often have limited access to mainstream political power.<sup>363</sup>

In modern society, political status of women is generally defined by the equality and freedom enjoyed by women in the shaping and sharing of power and in the value given by society to the role of women.<sup>364</sup> The position of Indian women in politics has always been marginal. Their position in the parliament has always remained at a very low level, never going beyond 10 percent at any point of time. This is very astonishing. The sentiment in favour of women being active in politics is nothing new. Women's right to equal political participation including their right to vote was accepted very gracefully in India much before most western societies.<sup>365</sup> Indian women were given their political right along with independence. The national movement and the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi were the two major catalysts, which relentlessly worked for the emancipation of women in India. In Indian democratic system, participation of women in politics has to be viewed at the levels of acquisition and exercise of power and exercise of rights.<sup>366</sup>

As we have already seen, women's participation in the political life of the present day India dates back to the early twentieth century.<sup>367</sup> During this period, women participated in large numbers in the freedom struggle against the British colonial rulers. The entry of Mrs. Anne Besant into Indian politics (1914) accelerated the process of women's association with the freedom struggle. Sarojini Naidu was the first Indian woman to make politics her full-time occupation. From the very beginning of the Indian National Congress, its membership was open to women. It was Mahatma Gandhi who gave a new direction, strength and inspiration to the freedom movement and drew into it women in large numbers.<sup>368</sup> M. K Gandhi encouraged women to participate in all spheres and phases of nationalist activities. This provided a

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<sup>362</sup> Biju, "Women's Empowerment in India: Changing Socio-Political Equations," 216.

<sup>363</sup> Gangoli, *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India*, 3.

<sup>364</sup> Ganguli, "Women in India: Economic and Political Perspective," 43.

<sup>365</sup> Roopa Sharma, "The Women's Reservation Bill: A Crisis of Identity," in *Women's Development in India Problems and Prospects*, ed. Lalneihzovi (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2007), 155-156.

<sup>366</sup> M. R. Biju, "Politics of Women's Reservation in India," in *Women's Empowerment: Politics and Policies*, ed. M. R. Biju (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2006), 6.

<sup>367</sup> Ilina Sen, "Women's Politics in India," in *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, ed. T. V. Sathyamurthy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 444-445. Organisations such as Women's India Association (WIA), the National Council of Indian Women (NCIW), and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) were formed in 1917, 1926, and 1927, respectively. The roots of women's movement in India can be traced back to the Indian National Movement.

<sup>368</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 24.



widespread inspiration to women of all sections of society for joining the freedom struggle, and thus they came to the forefront.<sup>369</sup> Gandhi's notions and approach towards the role of women in the freedom struggle stood in sharp contrast to the age-old prejudices ingrained in the Indian psyche against them. The social condition of women was quite terrible in those times and it was primarily due to the conscious efforts of his leadership, at the forefront of the freedom struggle that women fought against the might of the British Empire in partnership with men.<sup>370</sup> One of the important features noted in the freedom movement was the participation of a good number of women. Newspapers of that time specially highlighted the presence of women during *satyagraha*, *Dandi* march, in the picketing of shops selling foreign goods, *khadi* campaigns, and at many other instances. Of the 80000 people arrested during the salt *satyagraha*, 17000 were women. Only a few women of that time continue to be known by name whereas the rest of them have disappeared from the scene.<sup>371</sup>

Another important thing to be noticed is that almost all the top leaders were arrested during the time of Quit India Movement (1942) and the movement became practically leaderless. At this critical time of National movement, women joined hands with others and carried on with the processions, holding of meetings and demonstrations and organising strikes.<sup>372</sup> When India became independent, the Constitution guaranteed to all men and women equal political rights. But paradoxically, women are still a deprived lot and do not get their due share; the social norms, customs, traditions, economic factors and cultural constraints block them from receiving their rights.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 25. As a result of this inspiration and enthusiasm from Gandhi, women organised themselves into groups and were willing to join processions, face police firing, and go to prison. They broke the salt-law, picketed shops selling liquor and foreign manufactured clothes. Young girls in their teens and women with their children went to prisons where conditions were miserable.

<sup>370</sup> Yogendra Narain, S. N. Sahu, and L. Lakshmi, "Political Empowerment of Women," in *Women's Development in India Problems and Prospects*, ed. Lalneihzovi (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2007), 70.

<sup>371</sup> Sharma and Shukla, "Role of Government in Women Empowerment: Myth and Reality," 168-169.

<sup>372</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 25. Aruna Asaf Ali, Kalpana Joshi, Roopvati Jain, Durga Bai and Sushila Devi were the famous figures.

<sup>373</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 25. In Independent India, women have held important political and administrative positions. Women have served as governors, chief ministers, ministers in union and state governments, presiding officers of legislative bodies, judges of the high courts and secretaries to the Government of India. Vijayalakshmi Pundit was India's Ambassador to the Soviet Union and first woman president of the U.N. Hansa Mehta and Sareefa Hamid Ali were on several U.N. Commissions, and more recently Najma Heptullah was president of the Council of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Although Indian women have held important positions



The Fundamental Rights Resolution of Indian National Congress (1931) can be considered an important landmark in recognizing women's dignity and rights; it clearly declared equality, freedom and justice for women as essential ingredients for building the nation.<sup>374</sup> Nevertheless, the participation of women in Indian politics is comparatively less than that of men. Here it is important to notice as to what is actually meant by political participation.

#### 1.4.1 Meaning of Political Participation

In general, political participation means "to take part in the political affairs of the state and influence the policy of the government through exercising franchise, contesting election and getting elected as members of the elective bodies, holding public offices, giving petition, criticising the government's policies and resisting such laws and authority having demoralising and degenerating effects on the people."<sup>375</sup> It is considered as the principal means by which consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy, and rulers are made accountable to the ruled. Thus political participation provides the citizens with "channels of direct access to the sources of authority."<sup>376</sup>

The concern for women's political equality in India first emerged as a political issue during the time of national movement. Indian women raised the issue of representation in politics, as early as 1917, which at the time meant a demand for adult franchise. By 1929 women had the right to vote on the basis of wifehood, property and education. Under the Government of India Act 1935, all women over 21 could vote provided they fulfilled the conditions to play a significant role in less conventional political activities such as environmental movement, anti-alcohol agitation, peace movement, etc., and even revolutionary activities, which equally affect power relationships as they have the capacity to influence the state. Yet politics proved to be a very unwelcoming terrain for women and continues to be the male stronghold into which the entry of women is severely restricted.<sup>377</sup> In the present political perspective we find the status of women rather paradoxical. Throughout the Indian history, we find glimpses of women's potential in empowerment which has never been properly analysed.

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both at the national and international levels, their participation in the political arena and in the decision making bodies is not in proportion to their population.

<sup>374</sup> Chakkalakal, *Discipleship a Space for Women's Leadership*, 158.

<sup>375</sup> R. N. Prasad, "Women's Participation in Politics and Decision Making: Problems and Prospects," in *Women's Development in India Problems and Prospects*, ed. Lalneihzovi (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2007), 59.

<sup>376</sup> Prasad, "Women's Participation in Politics and Decision Making: Problems and Prospects," 59.

<sup>377</sup> Biju, "Women's Empowerment in India: Changing Socio-Political Equations," 218.



The right to franchise is the first basic right in a democracy. In India, women along with men got the right to vote as citizens of free India in 1950. Although women exercise their franchise, the percentage of women voters remains comparatively low, because 'political space has always been monopolised by men.' Thus, women's representation at the higher rungs of decision making positions has also been consistently low.<sup>378</sup> At this point, it is vital to notice the political representation of women in different countries of the world:

Women around the world at every socio-political level find themselves underrepresented in parliament and far removed from decision-making levels. While the political playing field in each country has its own characteristics, one feature remains common to all: it is uneven and not conducive to women's participation. Women who want to enter politics find that the political, public, cultural and social environment are often unfriendly or even hostile to them.<sup>379</sup>

This lack of adequate political participation in decision-making bodies has far reaching consequences. It deprives women of important rights and responsibilities as citizens of a country. Their viewpoints and perspectives tend to remain unheard or under-represented and in some instances ignored while taking key decisions on national budgets and setting up priorities for the Government.<sup>380</sup> Political empowerment still remains a distant dream for Indian women. The present *Lok Sabha* has 44 women parliamentarians, a mere 8% of the total 547 seats. And during the last 50 years this number has risen from a meagre two percent. Even though women played a crucial role in the freedom struggle, on the power seat she could not make her presence felt. It has been more than half a century and she is still struggling for her share.<sup>381</sup>

India had in the past, women prime minister in the person of Mrs. Indira Gandhi who headed India for some years. And the present president of India is a woman named

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<sup>378</sup> Singh, "Empowerment of Women in Urban Administration," 128. See also, Sharma and Shukla, "Role of Government in Women Empowerment: Myth and Reality," 166-167. There was a study conducted by Mehta and Menon about the role of women in political participation. The results show that the participation of women as voters has increased during the past three decades. However, unfortunately, women in India do not exercise their franchise to the full extent and their low turnout in the election is discouraging. This is especially true in rural areas, where the tradition-bound and largely illiterate women often hesitate to come out and vote. In a male dominated society, women are often the "rubber stamp" of men and vote for the person or party of her husband, father or brother. Another factor is the lack of effective mobilization of women at the grass root level.

<sup>379</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 126. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, over 95 percent of all countries in the world had granted women the two most fundamental democratic rights: the right to vote and the right to contest for elections. New Zealand was the first country to give women the right to vote in 1893 followed by Finland in 1906.

<sup>380</sup> Narain, Sahu, and Lakshmi, "Political Empowerment of Women," 69.

<sup>381</sup> Agrawal, "Women Empowerment Today's Vision for Tomorrow's Mission," 135.



Prathibha Pattil. This does not mean that women of India are politically empowered enough, because having one woman at the top cannot really represent the voiceless millions of women. Here it does not reflect that all women's voices are well taken and listened and given attention in the parliamentary decision-making and resolution. But it means that a very less number of women members in the central and state governments cannot really represent the voice of all women of India and of the states.<sup>382</sup>

Political equality is granted to women under the Indian Constitution. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex. Even though more and more women participate in politics only a few women hold elected positions. Different political parties are responsible to favour women to hold elected positions but they are not doing so.<sup>383</sup> According to Jaya Kothari Pillai, "political parties have generally been indifferent towards women and treating them more as appendices to men."<sup>384</sup> Only five women serving as members of Legislative Assembly in Mizoram affirms the above allegation. Hence, political empowerment of women is an urgent need of the times.<sup>385</sup>

Political empowerment of women is necessary in order to help them participate and raise their voices for the political welfare of human life in general and to better the life of women in particular. Unless and until sufficient numbers of women hold positions in the Indian Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies, rules and regulations promoting women and their welfare cannot be passed and resolved.<sup>386</sup> Though the Indian polity recognises equality of rights between men and women, society implicitly accepts a sharp distinction in their roles and spheres of activity. Decision-making for the community and the exercise of political power is still regarded as an almost exclusive male reserve. This is clear from the exclusively male composition of the traditional *panchayats*, either of villages or of caste groups.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Vanlaltlani, "Empowerment of Women from North East Indian Women's Perspective," 144.

<sup>383</sup> Vanlaltlani, "Empowerment of Women from North East Indian Women's Perspective," 144.

<sup>384</sup> Jaya Kothari Pillai, *Women and Empowerment* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1995), 8.

<sup>385</sup> Vanlaltlani, "Empowerment of Women from North East Indian Women's Perspective," 144.

<sup>386</sup> Vanlaltlani, "Empowerment of Women from North East Indian Women's Perspective," 144. The absence of women in the State legislative Assembly of Mizoram indicates a lack of the protection of women's rights and a lack of protection to women in the state. This calls for a political awakening of women through active participation in village councils, *Panchayat* system, Regional, State, and National/central governments which govern the people.

<sup>387</sup> Chakkalakal, "Gender Justice: A Utopian Ideal," 178.



### 1.4.2 Reasons for the Low Participation of Women in Politics

Political representation was initially based on the argument that it deals primarily with individuals that regardless of sex equal opportunities should be granted for power and influence in society. It is a fact that a very few women were actually joining politics, but given time the overall change in terms of education and employment opportunities would necessarily permeate into the political sphere too and their representation would increase.<sup>388</sup>

Another important thing to be noticed is that a very few women are actually participating in the elections. In the sixth general elections out of the total 2439 contestants only 70 candidates were women and in the 14<sup>th</sup> elections, out of the total number of 59435 contestants only 355 were women. Though the number of women participating in the elections may be increasing gradually they continue to constitute a very small percentage of the total number of contestants.<sup>389</sup> Another surprising fact is that out of the total number of women who actually contest the elections, the percentage of women who finally make it to the parliament is very less. In fact over the years the percentage of women who have found their way to the legislature has been reduced. In the sixth General Election, 27% of the women contestants won the elections and by the fourteenth General Election less than 13% have actually made it to the House.<sup>390</sup> Among the political barriers that women face, the following features are prominent:

#### 1.4.2.1 Masculine Model of Political Life

One of the reasons for the low female representation could be the prevalence of the 'masculine model' of political life and of elected governmental bodies.<sup>391</sup> The political arena has long been monopolised and dominated by a few upper caste men. The general trend of the traditional Indian society is that politics is the least suitable vocation for women; hence, it should be men's job. Consequently, the participation of women is lesser in all political activities compared to men.<sup>392</sup> The politically

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<sup>388</sup> Narain, Sahu, and Lakshmi, "Political Empowerment of Women," 74.

<sup>389</sup> Narain, Sahu, and Lakshmi, "Political Empowerment of Women," 76.

<sup>390</sup> Narain, Sahu, and Lakshmi, "Political Empowerment of Women," 76.

<sup>391</sup> Historically, political life is organised according to male norms and values and in some cases, even male lifestyles. For example, the political model is based on the idea of 'winners and losers,' competition and confrontation, rather than on mutual respect, collaboration and consensus building. This environment is often alien to women. The existence of this male-dominated model results in either women rejecting politics altogether or rejecting male-style politics. Thus, when women do participate in politics, the numbers are meagre. Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 128.

<sup>392</sup> Prasad, "Women's Participation in Politics and Decision Making: Problems and Prospects," 62.



uneducated women are not even aware of the fact that they are democratically ruled in accordance with the written constitution. Monica Melanchton observes that Indian women are often politically unaware and uninformed of the political climate of the country. This arises out of the feeling that politics is not women's business. Often they vote for the person of their husbands' choice. Most of the women are not aware of their legal status or the many existent laws pertaining to women and their rights.<sup>393</sup>

#### **1.4.2.2 Social Roles and Economic Barriers**

Family background and environment are significant influences, which encourage or discourage women's participation in public life. In traditional societies such as that of India, women are barred by current social and cultural conditions from safely stepping out of the limits of the four walls of their homes. The entry into public life and politics is usually through their fathers and husbands. However, it must be remarked that the concept of public life is not limited to political participation alone, but it entails a scope of community activities and leadership of developmental programmes which will broaden women's outlook and give them a better understanding of current events.<sup>394</sup> Household activities and child care are generally considered women's reserve and they do not have much time for out-of-home concerns. Lack of social support structures render all public pursuits beyond women's reach.<sup>395</sup> Social impediments, lack of awareness, access to education, the double burden of work and household responsibility and their attitudes are also the most discouraging factors for women to participate both in politics and decision making.<sup>396</sup> Socio-economic conditions play a significant role in women's legislative recruitment within both long-standing and new democracies. It is understood that the social and economic status of women in society has a direct influence on their participation in political institutions and elected bodies.<sup>397</sup>

#### **1.4.2.3 Ideological and Psychological Barriers**

There is a belief in the Indian traditional society that when a woman becomes a politician she does cease to be a woman. Even to date, in many countries, traditions

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<sup>393</sup> Monica Melanchton, "Christology and Women," in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1989), 22.

<sup>394</sup> Nair, "Women Development and Policy: Changing Feminist Perspectives in India," 144.

<sup>395</sup> Prasad, "Women's Participation in Politics and Decision Making: Problems and Prospects," 62.

<sup>396</sup> Prasad, "Women's Participation in Politics and Decision Making: Problems and Prospects," 63.

<sup>397</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 132. Researchers point to the correlation between women's legislative recruitment and proportion of women working outside the home, as well as the percentage of women college graduates.



continue to emphasise and often dictate the primary role of women as mothers and housewives. This traditional and strong patriarchal value system favours sexually segregated roles which militate against the advancement, progress and participation of women in any political process. Societies all over the world are dominated by an ideology about “a woman’s place.” According to this perception, women should play only the role of “working mother,” which is generally low-paid and a-political.<sup>398</sup> One of the important reasons for women’s under-representation in formal political institutions, including parliaments, governments and political parties is lack of self-confidence.<sup>399</sup>

#### **1.4.2.4 Lack of Party Support**

Another important reason for the low participation of women in politics is the attitude of political parties. The lack of party support includes limited financial support for women candidates; limited access to political workers; and the prevalent double-standards.<sup>400</sup> Male chauvinist thinking that dominates political parties does not encourage women to reach higher leadership positions.<sup>401</sup> Women politicians point out that even within the political parties, women are rarely found in leadership positions.<sup>402</sup> Letha Kumari remarks that “Men dominate the political arena; they formulate the rules of the political game; and they define the standards of evaluation.”<sup>403</sup> It is important to be observed that women play main roles in campaigning and mobilising support for their parties, yet they rarely occupy decision-making positions in these structures. In fact, less than 11 percent of party leaders worldwide are women.<sup>404</sup> The selection and nomination process within political parties is also biased against women because here also ‘male characteristics’ are emphasised and often become the criteria in selecting candidates.<sup>405</sup> All the political parties do the lip service about the ideal of women in politics but have been hesitant to

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<sup>398</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 134.

<sup>399</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 135.

<sup>400</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 128.

<sup>401</sup> Prasad, “Women’s Participation in Politics and Decision Making: Problems and Prospects,” 62. In the election manifestos, political parties normally do not take women’s issues, which need special representation of women. Most parties do not set aside a quota for women or provide for reservation of seats.

<sup>402</sup> Women’s Situation in India, <http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/womensit/in-w-sit.pdf> (access 9-2-08), 1.

<sup>403</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 126.

<sup>404</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 129. Although political parties possess resources for conducting election campaigns, women do not benefit from these resources. For example, parties do not provide sufficient financial support to women candidates.

<sup>405</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 129.



gamble with seats.<sup>406</sup> The declining moral values such as “the increasing use of money to achieve the political power, lumpenisation rapid criminalisation of the society and politics, politicalisation of criminals, fear of character assassination, and muscle power reflecting the country’s deepening socio-economic crisis are some of the factors which do not encourage women to take active part in politics.”<sup>407</sup> These evils have great impact on women’s condition in the country.

### 1.4.3 Representation of Women in Indian Parliament

India is a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic with a parliamentary form of government and a system of universal adult franchise. India is a bicameral parliamentary democracy, with a strong multi-party political system. The lower house is called the *Lok Sabha*<sup>408</sup> (People’s Assembly) and it has 545 members. The upper house is called the *Rajya Sabha*<sup>409</sup> (State’s Assembly) with 250 members.<sup>410</sup>

During the first general elections, 66 women contested the elections to parliament and 19 were elected to the House of the People. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was quite shocked at the low representation of women in parliament. Expressing his anguish over the issue he wrote a letter to the Chief Ministers that reads as follows:

I have been meeting our new Members of Parliament. There are over 700 of them as between the two Houses. I have noticed with great regret how few women have been elected. I suppose this is so in the State Assemblies and Councils also. I think we are very much to be blamed. It is not a matter of showing favour to any one or even of injustice, but rather of doing something, which is not conducive to the future growth of our country. I am quite sure that our real and basic growth will only come when women have a full chance to play their part in public life. Whenever they have had this chance, they have as a whole, done well, better if I may say so, than the average man. Our laws are man made, our society dominated by man, and so most of us naturally take a very lopsided view of the matter. We cannot be objective, because we have grown up in certain grooves of thought and action. But the future of India will probably depend ultimately more upon the women than the men.<sup>411</sup>

The figures do not tell a different story today either. In fact, in the 14<sup>th</sup> General Elections, 2004, there were only 355 women candidates out of a total of 5435 and only 45 women have been elected to the 14<sup>th</sup> *Lok Sabha*. And in the *Rajya Sabha* out

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<sup>406</sup> Tiwari, *Role of Women in Family*, 131.

<sup>407</sup> Prasad, "Women's Participation in Politics and Decision Making: Problems and Prospects," 62.

<sup>408</sup> *Lok Sabha* is the lower house in the parliament of India.

<sup>409</sup> *Rajya Sabha* is the upper house of the parliament of India.

<sup>410</sup> Shirin Rai, "Class, Caste and Gender – Women in Parliament in India," [http:// www. idea int.](http://www.idea.int) (access 5-12-07)

<sup>411</sup> Narain, Sahu, and Lakshmi, "Political Empowerment of Women," 73.



of 250 members, only 28 are women. It is unfortunate that in India after 57 years of the functioning of the Constitution, we find that women are still fighting for their empowerment, for gaining equality of status and securing a role for themselves in the decision-making bodies. The situation which prevails in India is hardly any different from what it is in several other parts of the world.<sup>412</sup>

#### 1.4.4 Feminization of Poverty in Political Participation

Women constitute nearly 50% of the total population in India yet their number in the decision-making level, i.e., in the legislative bodies, was 2.8% in 1957 which increased to 8.1% in 1984. After this it declined to 7.0% in 1998 in the case of *Lok Sabha*. In *Rajya Sabha* it was slightly better since it started with 7.3% in 1957 and increased up to 16% in 1991. However, it declined to 9% in 1998.<sup>413</sup> In the latest election held in 2004, out of 545 members in the *Lok Sabha* only 45 are women representatives, and in *Rajya Sabha* out of 250 only 19 are women.<sup>414</sup>

In spite of their promises of support to the stalled Women's Reservation Bill ensuring 33 per cent of seats for women in legislatures, none of the main political parties has even given them as much representation while allotting tickets in the current general elections. It is also shocking to observe that some of the political parties announced in their manifestos 30% - 33% reservation for women but actually did not put up even 10%.<sup>415</sup> One of the reasons for this decline may be the male dominant political party system. Padmavathi comments that "for most political parties women are sacrosanct cows. But when it comes to the point parties turn a blind eye toward them."<sup>416</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> Narain, Sahu, and Lakshmi, "Political Empowerment of Women," 73. Given the low representation of women in politics there has been a consistent demand for more meaningful methods to increase their representation in decision-making bodies. In pursuance of this notion of empowerment of women, the Constitution (73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment) Act and the Constitution (74<sup>th</sup> Amendment) Act reserved seats for women at the grassroots level bodies, namely, the *panchayats* and municipalities with the hope that these measures will set the trend to provide women their legitimate place in public life.

<sup>413</sup> Mary Scaria, "Most Adored but Most Neglected," *Indian Currents* (March 2000): 26.

<sup>414</sup> Mathew, ed., *Manorama Yearbook*, 512.

<sup>415</sup> Padmavathi, "Give Women Their Due." *Indian Currents* (July 1999): 37. When we analyse the 2004 Parliament election in India, the attitude towards women subordination in most of the political parties become clear. Out of the 34 candidates contesting parliamentary polls from the three parliamentary constituencies, only three were women. There were only 11 women candidates against 151 men in the fray for the 26 *Lok Sabha* seats from the Gujarat state. Out of the 172 candidates from Karnataka, only 10 were women. In Bihar out of 329 candidates only seven women were in the fray. There were only seven women candidates from Tamil Nadu, which has 39 seats. Indian Parliament Election 2004, "How They Fare When It Comes to Giving Chance to Women," [http://www.hindustantimes.com/news/7066\\_712417,001600630000.htm](http://www.hindustantimes.com/news/7066_712417,001600630000.htm) (access 12-3- 2005).

<sup>416</sup> Padmavathi, "Give Women Their Due," 36.



The regular under-representation of women in politics prevents them from their participation in the decision-making process in the country. In this context the statement of the Indian Theological Association is noteworthy:

Most women are kept out of the political power structures that govern our society. The much debated 33% reservation issue is a sign of the resistance that women encounter in their struggle to break through the stifling boundaries that circumscribe their lives. Marginalized from decision making processes at all levels and confined within domestic walls, they are unable to make an adequate contribution to society.<sup>417</sup>

Women's participation in politics is vital both to her position in society and to the society. Women's rights and women's equality cannot be achieved unless women in large numbers are visibly active in politics.

## **2. Patriarchal Religion and Degrading Status of Women**

The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions states that "the subordination of women to men became widespread in all religions."<sup>418</sup> Religion plays an important role in the lives of people in India. It is often used as a powerful weapon to reinforce the subjugation of women. Religions on the whole, patriarchal in character, are busy with orthodoxy rather than orthopraxis. The oppression and subordination of women is found in most religions. Through the use of patriarchal language and a selective interpretation of scriptures, myths, rituals and other practices, religions tend to authenticate and continue the dehumanising status of women. Religious rituals and epics have been used to keep up the image of the ideal woman as one who accepts the superiority of the male and is submissive to androcentric norms.<sup>419</sup> Within religions themselves, women have been largely excluded from both positions of leadership and access to religious knowledge.<sup>420</sup> Religion has been a strong force in subjugating women's status through its oppressive laws and teachings. We will discuss it in the following sections.

### **2.1 Images of Women in Hinduism**

Hinduism, in general, supported and perpetuated gender discrimination in different forms.<sup>421</sup> Indian culture and society have contributed in shaping its members

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<sup>417</sup> Indian Theological Association, "Women's Concerns and Indian Theological Responses," 695.

<sup>418</sup> John Bowker, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 640.

<sup>419</sup> Indian Theological Association, "Women's Concerns and Indian Theological Responses," 696-697.

<sup>420</sup> Christine E. Gudorf, "Violence against Women in World Religions," in *Violence against Women in Contemporary World Religions: Roots and Cures*, ed. Daniel C. Maguire and Sa'diyya Shaikh (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>421</sup> Chackalackal, "Planning a Family in the Context of Gender Discrimination," 237.



especially its women. Through art, literature, myths, and beliefs, Hinduism has enclosed women in images that have subtly influenced its men and women alike. From the moment of birth a girl is exposed to these images and as she grows up these images are internalised and used in shaping her self-image. Images can be inspiring, liberating, challenging and encouraging to a woman to develop her full potential, or they can also be stifling and restrictive, setting limits on her development. As religions play a vital role in shaping and enforcing the image and role of women, it is appropriate to discuss about the images of women that various religions have created and handed down from generation to generation and how far these are beset by contradictions.<sup>422</sup>

The Hindu tradition maintains a paradoxical position regarding the issue of woman's rights. On the one hand, it has a vast array of female deities- Durga, Kali, Saraswati, Mahalkshmi, Parvati, etc., who are being worshipped with great reverence on different occasions. On the other, the ordinary mortal woman has always been looked down upon. In Hinduism, multitude of derogatory attributes have been ascribed to women. Just as the Shudras,<sup>423</sup> excluded from studying the Vedas, women are also not permitted to study the Vedas or perform any sacrifices. According to Ursula King, "Hindu women are not allowed to learn Sanskrit, study the Vedas, or recite Vedic mantras, just as Jewish women were excluded from studying the Torah and Talmud."<sup>424</sup>

Asthana points out that a prestigious status was assigned to women in the Rig-Vedic period in India. During this time, "women were not ornamental addendum but co-partners in life in its pleasures and hazards, in its joys and sorrows."<sup>425</sup> The field of education was open to her. Women composed hymns and learned the Vedas. They had a position of equality and were respected both in family and in the society. They played significant role in the familial, social and political life.<sup>426</sup> A virtuous wife and a happy house are the ideals for women in India. Loving submission and absolute

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<sup>422</sup> King, "Women and Spirituality Critical Reflections on Christianity and Hinduism," 262.

<sup>423</sup> According to the *brahmanical* tradition, there are four classes in the society. They are *Brahmanas*, *Ksatriyas*, *Vaisyas* and *Shudras*; the fourth class is the lowest class and they are denied of all the privileges. Women have been equated with this lower caste and definite restrictions have been placed on both. Both have been defined as unclean; hence, unworthy to offer sacrifice to the deity.

<sup>424</sup> King, "Women and Spirituality Critical Reflections on Christianity and Hinduism," 264-265. See also Mies, *Indian Women and Patriarchy*, 39. She observes that until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women had no access to the study of the classical religious and philosophical texts in Hinduism.

<sup>425</sup> Paul T. Thomas, *Indian Women through the Ages* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1964), 49.

<sup>426</sup> Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 339. They participated along with men, in the political bodies like 'Sabha' and 'Samiti.'



fidelity to the husband are the characteristics of an ideal wife. The Hindu law-giver Manu says that “though destitute of virtue [...] or devoid of good qualities (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife.”<sup>427</sup> A Hindu woman is to be identified with Sita and Savitri in their devotion to their husbands. In both stories, the wifely qualities of chastity, self sacrifice, submissiveness and faithfulness are emphasized. Woman as a weak creature needing male protection is another image.<sup>428</sup> From childhood onwards, women are told to be careful, and to be accompanied by a male protector. Constant danger of assault from men on women is the reason for such protection. Thus women’s mobility is curtailed. They are restricted in freedom of movement and in a way are forced to depend on men.<sup>429</sup>

Two other concepts of woman are found in ancient Hinduism that depict woman as sex object and as image of an unclean creature. Women are looked upon primarily as physical objects to satisfy the lust of men. Prostitution, eve-teasing and rape are all evidences of the tenacious influence of this image on society. During menstruation and after child birth, both of which are natural bodily functions, women are treated as unclean creatures and are barred from participating in social and religious activities.<sup>430</sup> Even now in orthodox Hindu families, women are segregated from the rest of the family in a special room during their period of ‘uncleanness’. This is another means to control women and to limit their freedom.

The positive foundational perspectives on the reality in terms of an integration of the female and the male principles, *sakti* and *siva*, or *prakrti* and *purusha*, do not seem to have been translated into the actual integral relationship between women and men. According to this doctrine, without the female principle, the male is static, and the transcendental potency of the ultimate would remain inert.<sup>431</sup>

## 2.2 Women Neglected Dimension in Hindu Religious Laws

The Hindu law giver, Manu states that a woman must never be independent. She is viewed solely as the mother and the wife and these roles are idealized. Women are never treated as independent entities; they are always seen in relation to a male either

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<sup>427</sup> G. Bühler, *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), V, 154.

<sup>428</sup> Anna Vareed Alexander, "Through the Feminist Looking Glass: Images of Women," in *The Emerging Christian Woman*, ed. Faria Stella, Anna Vareed Alexander, and Jessie B. Tellis-Nayak (Pune: Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra, 1984), 77.

<sup>429</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 23.

<sup>430</sup> Alexander, "Through the Feminist Looking Glass: Images of Women," 78-79.

<sup>431</sup> Chackalackal, "Planning a Family in the Context of Gender Discrimination," 237.



as the daughter of a father, wife of a husband and mother of a son.<sup>432</sup> One of the important mechanisms which keeps women in an inferior position is the process of socialization which is applied only to girls. There is a belief that a woman is man's property created for his pleasure, and above all for the pleasure atrocities which keep women in constant fear of venturing 'beyond their boundaries.'<sup>433</sup> Through the *Devadasi* system, a girl is in theory offered to a goddess called 'Yellamma' and dedicated to the temple; but in actual fact she is available for pleasure for the high caste men of the village. Here religion is misused to satisfy men and dehumanise women.<sup>434</sup> In Hindu religion, women have only one 'dharma' that is to remain as a 'pativrata'.<sup>435</sup> The above-stated facts point to the gender discrimination and domination over women on the one hand and on the other the nurturing and encouragement of the same by the elite. This is indicative of the fact that traditional Hinduism legitimised discrimination against women through religious texts and thus society derived its sanction for it.

### 2.3 Seclusion of Women in Islam

The position of women in Islamic tradition<sup>436</sup> is controversial. It has to be noted that the Quran presents men and women in equal status. However, down through the centuries of Muslim history, Quran and other sources of Islam have been interpreted only by Muslim men, who have arrogated themselves to the task of defining the

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<sup>432</sup> Bühler, *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries*, V, 148.

<sup>433</sup> Jessie Tellis Nayak, "Alienation of Women in India," *Vidyajyoti* 45 (1981): 377-378.

<sup>434</sup> Nayak, "Alienation of Women in India," 376. The *Devadasi* system is thoroughly exposed and evaluated in a study undertaken by the Joint Women's programme. This system is widely prevalent in the adjoining districts of Karnataka and Maharashtra. The dedication of a *Devadasi* takes place in many of the temples in that region, particularly at the main Yellamma temple at Saundatti. Somen Das, *Women in India Problems and Prospects* (Calcutta: ISPCK, 1977), 56. The Yellamma tradition in the temples of south India is an example in which religion perpetrates exploitation of womanhood.

<sup>435</sup> Maurya, *Women in India*. 6. The Hindu concept of *pativrata* signifies that to a woman there is only one god, the husband, in whose selection mostly she has no voice. She has only one duty, unquestioning obedience to her husband, and unlimited services to him however low he may be morally or however unfair his demands may be. This idea of *pativrata* was governed by patriarchal structures in the Hindu society.

<sup>436</sup> Riffat Hassan, "Muslim Women and Post-Patriarchal Islam," in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, ed. Paula M. Cooley, William R. Eakian, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 39. The Islamic social code is derived from more than one of the following: "The *Quran* (the Book of Revelation believed by Muslims to be the Word of God); *Sunnah* (the practical traditions of the prophet Muhammed); *Hadith* (the sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad); *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence) or *Madahib* (Schools of Law); and the *Shariah* (the code of life that regulates all aspects of Muslim life). While all these sources have contributed to what is cumulatively referred to as the Islamic tradition, it is important to note that they do not form a coherent or consistent body of teachings or precepts from which a universally agreed upon set of Islamic norms can be derived."



ontological, theological, sociological and eschatological status of Muslim women.<sup>437</sup> Within the Islamic tradition both negative and positive attitudes are found toward women and women's issues. Asma Abdel Halim comments that the status of Muslim women thus far has been articulated along the lines of traditional interpretations of the *shariah*.<sup>438</sup> These interpretations have focused on sex as the determining factor for rights and duties.<sup>439</sup>

In the sphere of worship, the obligations of Muslim men and women are identical. There are five pillars of Islam, the first three are considered feasible and therefore obligatory for all Muslims, rich and poor, male and female.<sup>440</sup> In view of this, it is hardly surprising that until now the overwhelming majority of Muslim women have remained totally or largely unaware of the extent to which the Islamic rights have been violated by their male-centred and male-dominated societies.<sup>441</sup> Asghar Ali Engineer observes:

In Quran, men and women should enjoy equal rights in every respect. It would be necessary to re-read and re-interpret many verses which were used for centuries to subjugate women in Muslim societies. This subjugation was more cultural and patriarchal than Islamic or Quranic.<sup>442</sup>

Challenging the traditional misinterpretation of Quran, Hassan states that in the contemporary world there is an urgent need for the Muslim women to engage in scholarly study of Islam's primary sources in order to become effective voices in the theological deliberations and discussions on women-related issues that are taking place in much of the contemporary Muslim world. Again she comments that political activism is necessary in order to combat the onslaught of anti-women laws and acts of brutality toward women.<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> Hassan, "Muslim Women and Post patriarchal Islam," 41.

<sup>438</sup> *Shariah* is the Islamic law derived primarily from the Quran and secondarily from the *Sunnah* – the sayings and exemplary customs and habits of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>439</sup> Asma M. Abdel Halim, "Reconciling the Opposites: Equal but Subordinate," in *Religious Fundamentalisms and the Human Rights of Women*, ed. Courtney W. Howland (New York: Palgrave, 1999), 204. Women's sexuality is dealt in relation to its effect on men, who are regarded as the centre of social life in Islamic societies.

<sup>440</sup> Patricia Jeffery, *Frogs in a Well Indian Women in Purdah* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1979), 18. The five pillars of Islam are the confession of faith, the five compulsory prayers, which are performed daily, and fasting from dawn until sunset each day during the month of Ramzan. The two other pillars are only incumbent on those who are wealthy enough to bear the expense: the pilgrimage to Mecca (the Haj), and the payment of alms. It is interesting to note that a Muslim woman may not go to Mecca alone, but if she has the means, she should arrange it accompanied by a male relative.

<sup>441</sup> Riffat Hassan, "Feminism in Islam," in *Feminism and World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 250.

<sup>442</sup> Asghar Ali Engineer, "Islam Women and Gender Justice," *Journal of Dharma* 29 (2004): 200.

<sup>443</sup> Hassan, "Muslim Women and Post patriarchal Islam," 153.



The social condition of the Muslim women in India is deplorable. They are enslaved, oppressed and humiliated in many ways. Muslim law laid down that marriage is a contract for which the consent of man and woman is obtained. As a contract, mutual agreement and consent are essential for marriage. Nevertheless, when it comes to divorce the woman concerned is not consulted at all. A woman has no say at all in the issue while a man can divorce her even in her absence.<sup>444</sup> Jessie Tellie Nayak observes that having denied women their religious and social rights, men in Islam started to enjoy the power of divorcing a wife on silly reasons and with very easy procedures.<sup>445</sup>

A large section of Indian Muslim Women are denied the right and the benefit of education and are economically dependent on their husbands, which makes their position extremely vulnerable. The practice of polygamy in Islam has reduced Muslim women to the status of an object of man's sensual pleasures, a toy in the hands of a husband, an unpaid slave.<sup>446</sup> Asghar Ali states that "Quran must be reread and reinterpreted in today's context as the classical jurists read and interpreted it in their own context. No reformation is possible without such rereading and reinterpreting the Quranic verses."<sup>447</sup> The patriarchal assumptions and attitudes that are universally present in Muslim culture have had serious negative implications both theoretically and practically for Muslim women throughout the Muslim history up until the present time.

## 2.4 Patriarchal Church and Unequal Status of Women in Christianity

As we have already seen, the oppressive aspects of religions also significantly worsen the deterioration of the already deteriorated condition of women. Christian tradition has encouraged the subordination of women through its theologies and interpretation of scripture. Violence against women is seen in the Church in the form of sexism

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<sup>444</sup> James Naritookil, "Shariah: A Reflection on the Issue," *Jeevadhara* (1987): 68-69. The Muslims constitute 12 percent of the population of India and they are the largest religious minority. The Islam religion entered India through invaders from the Middle East and central Asia during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. They formed part of the Indian culture, maintaining their own religious identity, at the same time inculturated themselves in India. But as far as the treatment of women is concerned, Indian Islam is on a par with the general trend which devalues the status of women.

<sup>445</sup> Jessie Tellie Nayak, "Why This Oppression of Women," *Jeevadhara* 17 (1987): 16. Nayak observes that an Indian court in its judgement exhorted the woman folk in Islam to pressurise Indian Government to pass the Muslim Woman's Divorce Bill. This bill was expected to protect the rights of women in the case of a divorce. But the men leaders in Islam soon blocked all such moves. She comments that this is an example of male domination and power.

<sup>446</sup> Naritookil, "Shariah: A Reflection on the Issue," 67.

<sup>447</sup> Engineer, "Islam Women and Gender Justice," 196.



where women are excluded from power, decision-making and ministry.<sup>448</sup> Just as patriarchy pervades all areas of women's life in society, so too Church structures and doctrines control and domesticate Christian Women. With a clearly fabricated theology and the incorporation of the oppressive socio-cultural norms, the Church continues to deny women access to positions of authority and leadership.<sup>449</sup> It seems that the Church often prefers to keep women away from the mainstream theology and social life by asserting the patriarchal ideals about women. As Pearl Drego points out, the Christian community prefers to idealise women as a kind of goddess of celestial virtues rather than emphasising her dignity and equality. He adds that the Church delights in giving examples of women as gentle maidens who never say harsh words, but who are humble and obedient servants.<sup>450</sup>

The statement of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (1981) reminds us that all religions validate violence against women, and that theological arguments are used to support such violence.

Women everywhere and all the levels suffer immensely from the male dominated patterns of culture and social organization. Although women have contributed to the development of Third World countries, they have been accorded minority or inferior status. Women's oppression has been more evident by their general absence in decision making positions even on issues that radically affect them. This is true not only in society at large but in the Churches as well. All religions without exception are guilty of discriminating against women.<sup>451</sup>

According to Letha Kumari, the roots of the oppression of women can be traced back even from the religious doctrines of classical period.<sup>452</sup> In the following section our task is to investigate some of the reasons for the patriarchal domination of the Church. The patriarchal-hierarchical structure of the Church can be traced back to the Jewish world where Christianity found its inception and from where it appropriated much of the first century Hebrew cultural and religious traditions.

### **2.4.1 Gender-Biased Theology in Jewish Tradition**

In patriarchal Hebrew society, which is at the background and basis for Christian social understanding, women had low status and were inferior and subordinate to

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<sup>448</sup> Pinto, "Homes Could Be Havens: Confronting Wife Battering," 615.

<sup>449</sup> Chakkalakal, *Discipleship a Space for Women's Leadership*, 36.

<sup>450</sup> Pearl Drego, "Women in the Church," *Vidyajyoti* 45 (1981): 384.

<sup>451</sup> "The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology, Final Statement of the Fifth EATWOT Conference," in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Sergio Torres (New York: Orbis Books), 193.

<sup>452</sup> Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance*, 12.



men. A woman was identified not as a separate individual, but in relation to man, in her family on whom she was always dependent. Both the socio-political and religious spheres enforced and perpetuated the dependence of woman and her image as inferior to man. This is adequately illustrated in the laws regarding inheritance, sexuality and religious observance.<sup>453</sup> For example, property was transmitted through the male line. A woman's sexuality belonged exclusively to her husband and women were not allowed to study the scriptures, and along with children and slaves they were not obliged to pray the *Shema*.<sup>454</sup> As far as ancient Judaism was concerned, women had an inferior social status on the same level as that of slaves and gentiles. A thanksgiving prayer recited by Jewish males reads: "Blessed be God that has not made me a Gentile. Blessed be God that has not made me a woman. Blessed be God that has not made me a slave."<sup>455</sup>

In the New Testament, the Pauline texts, particularly 1 Cor 11:2-16 (covering of women's head in the Church) and 1 Cor 14:26-40 (women's silence in the Church), have been misinterpreted in favour of women's subjugation. In fact, they have been locked out of their contexts, and applied to totally different situations, or to issues, which lie beyond their concern. It is amazing to note how Pauline authority has been invoked in favour of female domestication in the Churches down through the centuries. This has not only deteriorated women's position but also contributed to the development of patriarchal theology as exemplified in the teachings of the prominent Christian thinkers in the patristic era.<sup>456</sup> Christine Tse observes the contradictions in Pauline teaching with regard to the status of women. For example, Paul contradicts himself when in Galatians 3:28 he says that "there is no such things as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female, for you are one person in Christ", and in Ephesians 5:22-24 when he exhorts the married women in the words, "wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church. Therefore as the Church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing" (Eph 5:22-24).

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<sup>453</sup> Jyotsna Chatterji, *Good News for Women* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1979), 11.

<sup>454</sup> Coyle, "Tradition, Theology and Women in the Churches," 213.

<sup>455</sup> Bernie Silva, "The Gospels and the Liberation of Asian Women," *Jeevadhara* 17 (1987): 80-95, 81. The Bible itself contains many discriminatory passages, which degrade women and extol the myth of male superiority and female inferiority. For example, (a) woman treated as man's property (Ex 20:17; Dt 5:17-21; Gn 18:12); (b) laws on inheritance (Nu 27:1-11); (c) laws concerning vows (Nu 30:4-9; Gn 19:18, 20:1-14; Jdg 19:30); (d) man's right to divorce (Dt 24:1; Sir 23:22-26); laws of ritual purity (Lv 12:1-5; 15: 19ff); and (f) woman confined to home (Sir 42:9-11; 2Macc 3:19; 1Sm 1:23-24; 2:19; Prov 1:8; 6:20).

<sup>456</sup> Chakkalackal, "Gender Justice: A Utopian Ideal," 174. See also, Kathleen Coyle, "Tradition, Theology and Women in the Churches," in *Asia Journal of Theology* (1990), 213.



Here he legitimises submission of women by adapting it to the Greco-Roman patriarchal structure.<sup>457</sup> Throughout the Christian teaching there is ambivalence towards women. Some passages express subordination while others affirm the full equality of women. However, in the past, male interpreters of the Bible have in general preferred to dwell in those passages which can be used to reinforce women's status of subordination and dependence rather than their equality.<sup>458</sup> According to French theologian Jean Marie Aubert, the inherent anti-feminism of Christianity is closely linked to a "masculinising exegesis."<sup>459</sup>

#### 2.4.2 The Misogyny in the Patristic Writings

Down through the centuries, the image of woman in society and Church has reinforced each other. The subordinate status of women was expressed in classical theology in an elaborate theory of the inferiority of women's nature. We have classic example for misogynic thought in the writings of Tertullian and other Church Fathers. This is what Tertullian had to say to women:

You are devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of the forbidden tree; you are the first foresaker of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image of man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die.<sup>460</sup>

According to John Chrysostem, woman did not possess the 'image of God' as man did, and he linked her subordinate status to this deficiency. In other words, her inferior status was not a result of the fall, but she was inferior even at the moment of creation.<sup>461</sup> Augustine of Hippo, the most important among the Western Fathers of the Church, asserted that only the male is created in the image of God and that woman is the image of God when she is joined to her husband:

[...] the woman with her husband is the image of God in such a way that the whole of that substance is one image, but when she is assigned her function of being an assistant, which is her concern alone, she is not the image of God;

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<sup>457</sup> Christine Tse, "New Ways of Being Church: A Catholic Perspective," in *We Are Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Hong Kong: AWCCT, 1989), 35.

<sup>458</sup> King, "Women and Spirituality Critical Reflections on Christianity and Hinduism," 263.

<sup>459</sup> Jean Marie Aubert, *La Femme, Antifeminisme et Christianisme*, Paris : Cerf-Desclée, 1975.

<sup>460</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983), 39. Here the woman is portrayed as the cause of sin and death, hence deserves severe punishment. Such disgraceful statements have played their role in the distortion of woman's image.

<sup>461</sup> Clark, *Women in the Early Church*, 34-35. Chrysostem argues his case in Discourse 2 on Genesis against those who claim that both the man and the woman have the 'image of God.'



whereas in what concerns the man alone he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman is joined to him in one whole.<sup>462</sup>

Using Augustine's thought, Thomas Aquinas argued that males possess the image of God in a different way compared women and that the males' image is superior to that of the females. Her sexuality, which is identified as her essence as a woman, involves a weaker and more imperfect body, which in turn affects the intelligence upon which moral discernment is based.<sup>463</sup> Aquinas joined Aristotle in teaching that women were a biological mistake. It is because of accidents in the conception process. Thus Aquinas declares that a woman is *aliquid deficiens et occasionatum* - something deficient and misbegotten.<sup>464</sup> Therefore, the female was by nature inferior in her capacity for thought, will and physical activity. Scholastic theology borrowed Aristotelian biology. Aristotle taught that women were a secondary biological species.<sup>465</sup> These interpretations have continued to exert power in Christian theology even to date.

### 2.4.3 Patriarchal and Hierarchical Domination

Patriarchy regards males as essentially superior to females, and this division of the sexes according to the superior-inferior category results in the imposition of the male authority upon the so-called 'weaker sex.' It is not only the subordination of females to males but the whole structure of father-ruled society, aristocracy over serfs, master over slaves, kings over subjects, racial lords over colonised people, Popes over Christians, priests over laity, etc.<sup>466</sup> We see this exemplified in Aristotle's thought which, Fiorenza explains as follows:

Aristotle did not define patriarchy simply as the rule of men over women but as a graded male status system of domination and subordination, authority and obedience, rulers and subjects in household and state. Wives, children, slaves and property were owned and at the disposal of the freeborn Greek male head of the household. He was the full citizen and determined public life. The patriarchal relationships in household and state according to Aristotle are based not on social convention but on 'nature'. He therefore insisted that the discussion of political ethics and household management

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<sup>462</sup> The passage from *De Trinitate* quoted in Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 34 (*De Trinitate*, 7.7, 10).

<sup>463</sup> Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 35.

<sup>464</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 1 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1946).1q. 92, a.1, ad 1.q. 99, a.2, ad 2.

<sup>465</sup> Johannes Morsink, *Aristotle On the Generation of Animals: A Philosophical Study* (Washington, University Press America, 1982) as quoted in Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Western Religious Tradition and Violence against Women in the Home," in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 32.

<sup>466</sup> Coyle, "Tradition, Theology and Women in the Churches," 215.



begin with marriage which he defined as 'the union of natural ruler and natural subject'. Slaves and freeborn women, Aristotle argued, are not 'fit to rule' because of their 'natures' which he in turn defined according to their socio-economic functions.<sup>467</sup>

Aristotle's motive for assigning an inferior nature to women is based on biological concepts that modern scientific developments have rendered unacceptable. But the fact that for many centuries these concepts were taken seriously that they influenced the view of women held even by such great scholars like Aquinas, explains partly why the notion of inferiority has been difficult to be uprooted in the Church.<sup>468</sup>

The contradiction between the claim of equality of all citizens and their subordinate position in patriarchal structures that defined the Athenian and modern Western democracy has also influenced to form a patriarchal structure of Christianity. Such a contradiction between the call to the discipleship of equals and patriarchal ecclesial structures was introduced towards the end of the first century in the process of ecclesial adaptation to Greco-Roman society and culture. "The so-called household code texts of later New Testament writings that require the subordination of women, slaves and all Christians to the patriarchal Greco-Roman order have codified the Aristotelian political ethos of submission and domination as Holy Scripture."<sup>469</sup> J. Nayak observes that though Christ has categorically said that "I have come that all may have life and have it to the full" (Jn 10:10), the Church especially with regard to the issues of woman opted for Judaic traditions, Greek philosophies, and incorporation of the Roman hierarchical structures.<sup>470</sup>

Misogynist theology and exclusion of women from ecclesial leadership went hand in hand as the subsequent centuries have confirmed. Patriarchal teaching authority in the Church is established at the price of women's silence and oppression. Fiorenza states

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<sup>467</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Breaking the Silence- Becoming Visible," *Concilium* 182 (1985): 5. See also, L. Lange, "Woman Is Not a Rational Animal: On Aristotle's Biology of Reproduction," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra G. Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983), 1-15.

<sup>468</sup> Chakkalakal, "Gender Justice: A Utopian Ideal," 173.

<sup>469</sup> Fiorenza, "Breaking the Silence- Becoming Visible," 7. Theologians like Augustine and Aquinas have incorporated the Platonic and Aristotelian construct of the inferior human 'natures' of slaves and free born women into the basic fabric of Christian theology. The Aristotelian Christian theology has provided religious legitimisations of racism, colonialism, classism and hetero/sexism in society and Church. It interacts with adrocentric linguistic and ideological systems of legitimisation that sustain and contribute to the double invisibility and multifaceted exploitation of the third World women oppressed by patriarchal racism, poverty, colonialism and hetero/sexism.

<sup>470</sup> Nayak, "Why This Oppression of Women," 16-17. One could search for the reasons why Christian theology adopted a patriarchal stance towards women. The Christian Scriptures were formulated at a time when patriarchy was the ideal of the time. So it is understandable that patriarchal ideas, styles and cultures were incorporated by the sacred authors.



that women are not only the 'silent majority' but are also the 'silenced majority' in the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>471</sup> Having explained the patriarchal domination of the Church, we may boldly reiterate that the patriarchal system multiplies women's suffering and the forms of subjugation.

## **Conclusion**

Having made an analysis of the theology of women empowerment in context, we now highlight some significant points in terms of the context of our work and the content of our findings. In the first part of this chapter, we discussed the context for the emergence of feminist theology in the Third World countries. Third World feminist theology begins with the experience of the oppression of women. The emphasis of Third World feminist theology is on doing theology from within the context of women's experience and their struggle for liberation. It is a theology as an activity, as an ongoing process rooted in praxis. Feminist theology from the Third World is a theology of struggle and hope. In all three continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America oppression of women is affirmed as a hard and abiding reality of life, though this varies in form and degree from place to place.

The situations of women may vary from country to country and culture to culture, but the oppressive structures are similar everywhere. Asian feminist theology is derived from the Third World reality of poverty and oppression. Women's oppression is deeply rooted in the patriarchal system that has become part and parcel of Asian social, cultural, legal and religious ideology. Latin American feminist theology has long been associated with liberation theology. Feminine reflections on God challenge the maleness of traditional theology and seek to bring to theology a distinctive and different perspective of women's experience of God. African women speak of the images of Christ which give them hope and courage. In the last part of this section, we have discussed the theological focus of women's liberation in EATWOT. It has made some real progress with regard to women's participation and is genuinely concerned for the promotion of women. As in general, we would say that the Asian, Latin American and African women are doing theology as a response to the suffering they experience.

In the second part of this chapter, we examined various spheres of the inequality and degradation faced by Indian women, in the social, economic, educational, political and religious milieu. In the first section we explored the social degradation of women in the Indian society. Here we analysed inequality in the family and how the dignity

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<sup>471</sup> Fiorenza, "Breaking the Silence- Becoming Visibile," 3.



of women was violated in the family. Then we considered the deterioration of violence against women in different forms, namely, female foeticide, female infanticide, rape, sexual abuse, etc. The image of women projected in the media is also a cause for the degradation of their status. After describing the manifold expressions of the social degradation of women we came to the conclusion that dowry system is one of the main causes for the degradation of women. In describing the economic degradation faced by women we noticed mainly two points: first, the exploitation of women through gender based division of labour; and second, the victimhood of women in a globalised contemporary society. We noted that often women were denied of equal opportunity in education and the reasons are mostly cultural and social. In the political sphere we noticed that women are totally ignored in decision-making process and in legislative bodies.

In the second section, we tried to analyse the influence of the patriarchal notion of social structure advocated by the major religions and how it tends to keep women subjugated. Here we pointed out that the Hindu religion with its cultural images and patriarchal laws often denied social status to women. We noted as well that the seclusion of women in Islamic society is mainly due to the misinterpretation of Quran by the patriarchal male dominated society. In the final part, we tried to explain how the Christian tradition and the Church are basically influenced by patriarchal and hierarchical domination. We observed that there are deliberate exclusions of women from different strata of ecclesial leadership and decision making bodies.

The oppressed situation of women raises a number of questions. Do women have the right to life as full human persons with dignity and honour? Are they not created in the image and likeness of God? Pope John Paul II in his letter on the dignity of woman's vocation (*Mulieris Dignitatem*) has clearly pointed out that the time for action has come. Referring to the message of Vatican II to women, he proclaimed that "the time is coming, indeed it has already come when the vocation of woman will blossom; her radiance, her influence, her power will be discovered to be greater than was ever suspected. This is why at this moment when humanity is changing so radically, the women inspired by the spirit of the gospel can do so much to help and sustain humanity."<sup>472</sup> Given this context, we deem it necessary to suggest some theological prospects for the liberation of women. The second chapter of our thesis intends to focus on the Catholic vision on the dignity of women from the perspective

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<sup>472</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women," *Origins* 18 (1988): 261.



of *Mulieris Dignitatem*; this further aims at developing a theology for women empowerment in the final chapter.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE CATHOLIC VISION OF THE DIGNITY OF WOMEN IN *MULIERIS DIGNITATEM*

#### Introduction

In view of our attempt to formulate a theology for the empowerment of women, in the first chapter we illustrated the context of the research project. For this purpose, we discussed the context for the emergence of feminist theology in the Third World countries, especially, the contemporary situation of women in India. The present chapter is a detailed study of *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), the Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II. As a theological, philosophical, and prophetic supporter of human rights, Pope John Paul II has spoken and written extensively about women rights, against the discrimination of women, dignity of women, etc. His respect and concern for women is evident in almost all of his writings.<sup>1</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem* is Pope John Paul II's most developed effort to address the topic of the dignity of women.

The starting point of Christian understanding of man and woman is the awareness that they have been created in the image and likeness of God that is revealed by the sacred scripture. Nevertheless, even in the present Christian understanding, different theories and teachings that held women inferior to men continue to exist. The silence, the invisibility and the trivialization of the role and experience of women in the Bible are considered as divinely authenticated rather than recognizing them as the work of men written in an ethos of patriarchy. Similarly the images of women such as the 'weaker vessel', 'created for the sake of man', 'inferior', 'temptress', 'gate-way to hell', etc., are deemed to be designed by the Creator rather than human creations. The theme of 'women' has been adversely treated in the Bible due to its patriarchal bias. Nevertheless, Pope John Paul II handles it with great erudition. He analyses several biblical texts and brings out their critical as well as hermeneutical perspectives in order to convey a theological thought pattern, which abundantly supports the dignity and vocation of women.

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, "Letter to Women," *Origins* 25 (1995); John Paul II, *The Genius of Women* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997); John Paul II, "Women's Dignity Must be Respected," *L'Osservatore Romano*, (29 June 1994); John Paul II, "Culture of Equality is Urgently Needed Today," *L'Osservatore Romano*, (28 June 1995); John Paul II, "Appeal on Behalf of Women," *Origins* 27 (1998); John Paul II, "The Rights of Women," *Origins* 18 (1988); John Paul II, "Man and Woman: A Mutual Gift for Each Other," *L'Osservatore Romano* (11 February 1980). These are some of the examples of Pope John Paul II's writings on women.



In this chapter, we will explore the vision of Pope John Paul II on the dignity of women in *Mulieris Dignitatem*. First, we will discuss the context for the publication of this Apostolic Letter. Second, we will make a detailed discussion on the anthropological dimension of the dignity of women in *Mulieris Dignitatem*. In this section, we will discuss the equal dignity of man and woman in the Yahwist and the Priestly account of creation. The third point of our discussion is the theological dimension of the dignity of women. Here we intent to make an exegetical study of Gn 3:16 in order to prove that there is no discrimination between man and woman in the creation narrative; and that subordination of women is caused by sin, and it can be redeemed. Fourthly, we will discuss the dimensions of the vocation of women, i.e., motherhood and virginity. Here we will make a critical study of motherhood and its implications for women. Subsequently, we will discuss motherhood in relation to the mother of God, both positive and negative viewpoints. We will also discuss virginity as sincere gift to God and a sign of the Kingdom of God. Fifthly, we will focus on some aspects of Jesus' liberating ministry in the light of the document *Mulieris Dignitatem*. In this section, we further discuss women guardians of gospel message and Mary Magdalene, 'apostle of the apostles.' Finally, we will discuss the theme, Church-the bride of Christ, and in this section we will try to explain the symbolic dimension of the great mystery. As a part of this section, we will also discuss the Catholic teachings on the ordination of women and the arguments against it. Althroughout our discussions we pay adequate attention to the critical views and comments from various authors, especially the feminist authors, with regard to this Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

## 1. The Context of *Mulieris Dignitatem*

*Mulieris Dignitatem* deals with the dignity and vocation of women; written in a meditative style, the text notifies the significance of issues concerning women for the dignity and vocation of women have become "a subject of constant human and Christian reflection."<sup>2</sup> Two issues prompted the publication of the Letter: first, the 1987 World Synod of Bishops, and second, the emergence of the contemporary feminism. While the former had taken up issues relating to women in the light of the twenty years of post-Vatican teaching, the latter had sometimes taken extremist views. The Bishops' Synod had asked "for a further study of the anthropological and theological bases that are needed in order to solve the problems connected with the

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, "Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women," *Origins* 18 (1988): 1. See also, Marianne Lorraine Trouve, ed., *Mother of Christ, Mother of the Church: Documents on the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2001), 361.



meaning and dignity of being a woman and of being a man.”<sup>3</sup> The Apostolic Letter aimed at responding to the request of the Bishops for a deeper consideration of Church teaching on women.<sup>4</sup>

Women’s rights have never been analysed or clarified as part of the teachings of the magisterium of the Church before Vatican II. At Vatican II, however, the question of the vocation of women was considered to be an important one, and Pope John XXIII urged the hierarchy to give it greater attention in the future. In response, the 1971 Synod of Bishops prevailed on Pope Paul VI to establish a special commission to promote the dignity of women.<sup>5</sup> In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II applies to women the council’s teaching on the dignity of the person: a person, made in the divine image, is “the only creature on earth whom God willed for its own sake.”<sup>6</sup> The Pope affirms strict equality of women with men in their dignity of being persons. In *Mulieris Dignitatem* Pope John Paul II further develops the theology of the body. Although the theme of the dignity of women is discussed within the theological frame work of Mary’s unique place in the God’s plan for the world, and women are modelled after the unique vocation of Mary, the context of the document tells us that the Pope was primarily addressing the concrete question of the equality of women with men.<sup>7</sup> Promoting the mission of women was one of the goals most emphasized by the 1987 Synod.

The immediate context for the publication of the Letter is the Marian Year, a year following the Synod on the Laity. The document begins with a parallel between woman and the Mother of God, because the dignity and mission of woman is fully illumined by the singular dignity of the *Theotokos*.<sup>8</sup> In the final chapter of the document the Pope says that the prophetic character of women in their femininity finds its highest expression in the Virgin Mother of God.<sup>9</sup> Through the publication of this Letter, Pope John Paul II calls for an end to all discrimination against women in everyday life.

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<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 1.

<sup>4</sup> Mary C. Segers, “Feminism, Liberalism and Catholicism,” in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick, Readings in Moral Theology No. 9 (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 597.

<sup>5</sup> Jo Renee Formicola, *Pope John Paul II: Prophetic Politician* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 70.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 6-7. For the development of this theme from “Church in World,” 24.

<sup>7</sup> Trouve, ed., *Mother of Christ, Mother of the Church: Documents on the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 162.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 3-5.

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 29.



## 1.1 Response to Contemporary Feminism

This Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* responds also to the emerging feminist movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When he prepared this Apostolic Letter, Pope John Paul II had a clear view on the objections raised by radical feminists.<sup>10</sup> The radical feminists often hold religion as responsible for the oppression of women. In their view, Christianity, in general, and the Church, in particular, justify and promote sexism both in theory and practice.<sup>11</sup> Extreme gender feminism claims that men and women are fundamentally and in all respects the same; it rejects any ontological concept of essence and any given structure, thus denying any differentiation apart from the biological difference.<sup>12</sup> Pope John Paul II makes a twofold response: Firstly, he shows how badly distorted and baseless such perspectives are; Secondly, and more importantly than the first, he presents a Catholic vision on women. One may say that *Mulieris Dignitatem* is the net-result of the Pope's critical-creative engagement with the concerns sounded by the World Synod on the one hand and the claims raised by Christian feminists. Interestingly, in a roundabout way, this Letter has become the manifesto of a new feminism.<sup>13</sup>

## 1.2 To Promote the Dignity of Women

*Mulieris Dignitatem* affirms very strongly the rights of women as human persons and insists on their 'essential equality' with men. Clearly, Pope John Paul II has been trying to listen to the signs of the times. However, women have noted that his 'listening' has not seemed to have achieved the moral radical conversion that is needed.<sup>14</sup> Christine Gudorf notes: "Before Vatican II, popes assumed and explicitly taught women's inequality and subordination to men, as well as condemned advocates

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<sup>10</sup> Sara Butler, "Women and the Church," in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology*, ed. Peter C. Phan (The Liturgical Press, 2000), 429.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, "Women and the Church," 428.

<sup>12</sup> Beatriz Vollmer Coles, "New Feminism: A Sex- Gender Reunion," in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 59.

<sup>13</sup> We see this expression in Pope John Paul II's recent writings. His presentation of new feminism is an alternative to the emerging radical feminist movement. For example in *Evangelium Vitae* we read, "In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a 'new feminism' which rejects the temptation of imitating models of 'male domination,' in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation." John Paul II, "*Evangelium Vitae*," *Origins* 24 (1995):99. We see the other expressions of this notion in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 4, 5, 18, 20, 30; see also John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 9.

<sup>14</sup> Kevin T. Kelly, *New Directions in Moral Theology: The Challenge of Being Human* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), 88.



of both women's equality and public roles for women."<sup>15</sup> Besides, Catholic theology also related sexual inequality in a doctrine of creation. For example, Pius XI argued that subordination was divinely willed, and hence ought not to be changed.<sup>16</sup> But according to John Paul II, inequality is a consequence of sin and this consequence can and should be remedied. For the current Catholic theology, the basis of equality is that men and women are "created in God's image" and both of them "are equally capable of receiving the outpouring of divine truth and love in the Holy Spirit."<sup>17</sup> In other words, their equality is "based on the recognition of the inherent, inalienable dignity" of the human person.<sup>18</sup>

The essence of manhood or womanhood, according to John Paul II is "by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of human person as such."<sup>19</sup> This deep difference, he writes, is not a matter of "roles to be held and functions to be performed," but rather is part of God's "wise and loving plan."<sup>20</sup> John Paul II has argued for the equality of women against those who would subordinate or needlessly restrict women. He also resists the loss of the "unique richness and inherent value of femininity."<sup>21</sup> For him, "the personal resources of femininity are certainly no less than the resources of masculinity: they are merely different."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, he asserts the primacy of women in the order of love and insists on "the unique role which women have in humanizing society and directing it toward the positive goals of solidarity and peace."<sup>23</sup>

The Pope is aware that the extreme views of feminists are a "reaction to the lack of respect accorded to each woman." However, he admits that "respect for women and amazement at the mystery of womanhood" are important elements that have never

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<sup>15</sup> Christine Gudorf, "Encountering the Other: The Modern Papacy on Women," in *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teachings*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 270.

<sup>16</sup> "Casti Connubii: Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on Christian Marriage," in *The Papal Encyclicals 1903-1939*, ed. Claudia Carlen (Wilmington: McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), 26, 28.

<sup>17</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 6, 16.

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, "Welcome to Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women," in *The Genius of Women* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997), 2.

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, "The Apostolic Exhortation on the Family," *Origins* 11 (1981): 11.

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, "*Christifideles Laici*: Apostolic Exhortation on the Laity," *Origins* 18 (1989): 50.

<sup>21</sup> John Paul II, "Welcome to Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women," 3.

<sup>22</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 10.

<sup>23</sup> John Paul II, "Welcome to Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women," 5; John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 29.



been completely absent in the faith and life of the Church.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, he declares that in the midst of these circumstances, an authentic theology of woman is to be reborn and the particular genius of women is to be rediscovered. Moreover, he urges that the basis for the consolidation of the position of women in life, not only family life but also social and cultural life, are being redefined. And for this purpose, the Pope says; “we must return to the figure of Mary, Mary herself and devotion to Mary, when lived out in all its fullness, become a powerful and creative inspiration.”<sup>25</sup> In this Apostolic Letter, Pope presents Mary as a model for all Christian women. *Mulieris Dignitatem* includes the Pope’s reflections on several topics. In the following section, we discuss the anthropology of *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

## 2. The Anthropological Vision of *Mulieris Dignitatem*

*Mulieris Dignitatem*’s anthropological reflections derive primarily from the scripture. The Letter begins with an extended meditation on two texts from Gn 1:27-28 and 2:18-25, in view of establishing the equality of sexes before God.<sup>26</sup> The document maintains that God creates human beings, both man and woman equal in degree of dignity. “Man is a person, man and woman equally so, since both were created in the image and likeness of God.”<sup>27</sup> Hence, woman is created as a companion to man equal in dignity and status. However, the denial of women’s dignity as fully and equally created in the image of God pervades the tradition. Various opinions have been expressed in the past to understand ‘the image of God’ in which humans are created. According to the traditional interpretation, women are inferior by nature and not fully in the image of God. Departing from centuries of Church tradition,<sup>28</sup> current papal teachings emphatically affirm the equality of men and women before God. Gregory Baum notes that in *Mulieris Dignitatem* the Pope uses a new hermeneutical approach to various biblical texts “that leads him to interpretations that differ strikingly from the interpretations given by the Church Fathers and the Church’s traditional teaching.”<sup>29</sup> This approach, argues Baum, places John Paul II in direct line with Pope

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<sup>24</sup> Vittorio Messori, ed., *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 216-217.

<sup>25</sup> Messori, ed., *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 217.

<sup>26</sup> Segers, “Feminism, Liberalism and Catholicism,” 597.

<sup>27</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 6. Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women also has a detailed analysis of the two accounts of creation presented in the Book of Genesis. See, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and World,” *Origins* 34 (2004): 5, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Earlier and Patristic Church traditions on women, see, Chapter one, 91-93.

<sup>29</sup> Gregory Baum, “Bulletin: The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*,” *Concilium* 2 (1989): 145.



John XXIII's discernment of the "signs of the times" regarding women.<sup>30</sup> In the following, we will engage in a detailed analysis of the creation narratives in the book of Genesis and show that equal dignity has been accorded to both man and woman in those stories.

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<sup>30</sup> Baum, "Bulletin: The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*," 145. Wherein the author references John XXIII, "*Pacem in Terris*, Encyclical Letter," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 55 (1963): 268. English version Vincent P. Mainelli, "*Pacem in Terris*: Encyclical Letter of Pope John XXIII on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty," in *Official Catholic Teachings, Social Justice* (Wilmington: McGrath Publishing Company, 1978), 41. The Church teaching on women in the twentieth century represented a significant departure from traditional Church attitudes. The encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of John XXIII recognizes the question of women as a 'sign of the times.' Here the Pope emphasizes the rights of women by asserting that in founding a family both men and women have equal rights and duties, and that working conditions have to be "consistent with their needs and responsibilities as wives and mothers." (Nos 15, 19) See also Kenneth P. J. Hallahan, "*Pacem in Terris*," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith A. Dwyer (College Ville: Liturgical Press, 1994), 698. The Pope maintains that one of the distinctive characteristics of the modern times is the active role women play in political life especially among Christian nations. This change in the approach of the Church is also a consequent of the social, political and cultural changes in the world. Maria Riley remarks that the Pope's promotion of women's rights in the domestic and public life was not only a matter of justice to women, but also essential to the survival and well-being of societies. Maria Riley, "Feminist Analysis: A Missing Perspective," in *The Logic of Solidarity*, ed. Gregory Baum and Robert Ellsberg (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 187-188.



## 2.1 Equal Dignity of Man and Woman in the Creation Stories

The two creation narratives of humankind, found in the Book of Genesis, 1: 27-28 and 2:7, 18-24, are from different sources. Gn 1:27-28 belongs to the Priestly ('P') tradition and Gn 2:7, 18-24 belong to the Yahwist ('J') tradition. Since the sources are different, there is difference also in their theological vision. In the Priestly account, the creation of human beings – both male and female – is narrated in a simultaneous manner, whereas in the Yahwist account, Adam is made from the dust (2:7) and Eve is created from the rib of Adam (2:22). Among these two creation accounts, the Yahwist account is traditionally considered to have been composed first and the Priestly account is written a few centuries later.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, we shall discuss the Yahwist account first and its various connotations related to the equal dignity of man and woman in the creation story.

### 2.1.1 Creation of a 'Helper' Fit for Man

Genesis 2:18-24 focuses on the creation and nature of human beings. The rest of the creation is mentioned only secondarily where it relates to humans. The narrative begins with the creation of Adam out of the clay of the ground (אָדָם - 'ādāmā 2:7),<sup>32</sup> created by God as a living being but not yet having the sort of existence God had in mind for him. So God decided: "I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gn 2:18). The creation of animals did not meet this lack but served to heighten the tension in the narrative. Man found himself before God in search of his own identity.<sup>33</sup> Genesis chapter two presents the story of Adam and Eve in narrative form. In so doing, it

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<sup>31</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, 2 ed., Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1963), 23; Jacob Milgrom, "Priestly Source," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, ed. David Noel Freedman *et al.*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 454-461. See also, Albert De Pury, "Yahwist Source," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, ed. David Noel Freedman *et al.*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1012-1021. In Pentateuch there are four sources namely J, E, D and P. The oldest source documents are known as Yahwist (J) and Elohist (E) because of their distinctive use of the name for God. H. B. Witter and J. Astruc had noticed the fact that the two stories were using different names 'Elohim' and 'Yahweh' when speaking of God. The choice of vocabulary, style and theology of these sources differ significantly. The Yahwist may be dated in 950. The priestly document is said to have been exilic or post exilic in origin - between 538-450 B. C. Thus, in the order of composition, the Yahwist creation account is the first.

<sup>32</sup> Sibley Towner, "Clones of God: Genesis 1:26-28 and the Image of God in the Hebrew Bible," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* (2005): 345. Creation of 'ādām in Genesis 2 describes "Lord God creates 'ādām out of the dust adamah. The noun adamah, 'earth', looks like a feminine form of a masculine 'ādām a grammatical relationship that could hint at a background in mythic narrative in which the adamah is the mother or the wife of the 'ādām whom he impregnates when he plows and plants her." This may be a deep background to the Yahwist creation account in Genesis 2.

<sup>33</sup> John Paul II, *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981), 47.



reveals a great deal about the origin, and purpose of the human race. The central concern of the verses 18-25 in Genesis chapter 2 is the relationship of men and women.<sup>34</sup>

The creation of woman from the rib of man is an important action in Genesis chapter two. The basic meaning of the word 'rib' (רֵצֶלָה - *ṣēlā*) in Hebrew is not clear. It could mean either 'side' or 'flank.'<sup>35</sup> It means that God took one side of the human being and formed it into a woman – Eve.<sup>36</sup> The image indicates closeness of relationship. It is important to notice that the significance of the mode of creation of the woman, i.e., woman is the same kind of being as man, not a different and inferior species. Therefore, the creation of woman from the rib does not ascribe any inferiority to woman but it indicates the sameness of nature between man and woman.<sup>37</sup>

The idea of being a "helper fit for man" also gives another meaning, i.e., 'woman's correspondence to man.' Therefore, the Hebrew word for "fit" in this context implies a 'similarity between man and woman.' It means that woman is a helper who corresponds to man; both are of the same nature unlike the animals. In a clearer way, the woman was created to be man's partner, as another human being who would live with him and help him. Therefore, the phrase "fit for man" clearly stresses "woman's sameness and community of nature with her husband."<sup>38</sup> Observing the Yahwist

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<sup>34</sup> Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Michigan: Servant Books, 1980), 15. There are differences of opinion among scholars with regard to the explanation of this text. According to some interpreters, there is no difference in literary form between Gn 1:1- 2:4a and Gn 2:4b-25. Therefore, we have here two different views of the roles of men and women. According to this view, Genesis chapter 1 presents both man and woman as truly equal, whereas chapter 2 presents man as superior to woman.

<sup>35</sup> Fabry, "Ṣēlā," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 12, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 400-401. Fabry gives the explanation 'Rib' in Gn 2:21-22, in line with the explanation given by the Yahwist. For example, Yahweh creates the first woman by taking one rib (*Ṣēlā*) of Adam and making it into a woman. There are different interpretations given for this passage from mythology, the history of religions, anthropology etc. This passage is also considered as a *locus classicus* for feminist theology because it can be interpreted as an expression of a lesser, equal, or higher valuation of women.

<sup>36</sup> John Wijngaards, *The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church: Unmasking a Cuckoo's Egg Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001), 72. See also, Phyllis Tribble, "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread," in *Womanspirit Rising*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 74-83.

<sup>37</sup> Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 23. For the interpretations of the word *kneḡdo* (a helper fit for him) See Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, 2 ed., Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1963), 80. The word *kneḡdo* contains the notion of similarity as well as supplementation; but one may not here personify *ezer* (helper) and translate it 'helpmate' with reference to the later creation of the woman. The verse speaks in the first place only of an assistant, of one who is to be for man the embodiment of inner and outer encouragement. Thus the narrator speaks first of the animals.



account, Phyllis A. Bird comments that “although the woman is taken from the man, he cleaves to her, acknowledging her power over him; although he is destined to become her master that domination is presented as the consequence of sin, not as a design in creation.”<sup>39</sup> According to Walter Kasper, “woman is created by God in symbolic language while man is fast asleep. In biblical terminology that means that woman’s existence, as far as man is concerned, is an inaccessible mystery, with its explanation and answer as God alone. Woman is not frustrated and inferior to man, but an original creative thought of God.”<sup>40</sup> The above discussion substantiates that the dignity of women in creation is elevated. However, the subordinate aspect of the creation of woman as a helper for man is still prevalent today. Therefore, in the following section we will discuss this question.

### ***2.1.1.1 Is Woman Subordinate in the Creation?***

There are differences of opinion among the biblical scholars regarding the position of woman in the creation narrative. In the Priestly account of creation that man and woman are created together whereas in the Yahwist account of creation the woman is created as the culmination of God’s creative action. Nevertheless, there are certain arguments still prevalent which say that woman was destined from creation to be subject to man and to play a subsidiary role in society by comparison to the man. So, we will discuss some of the arguments for and against of this views.

The first indication to the subordination of woman is that man was created first and the woman second, and that woman is created to be a helper for man.<sup>41</sup> The reason is that woman was made out of the man’s rib and was destined to be his helper (Gn 2:7, 20-22). In Gn 2:20, it is stated that Eve is created to be an *ezer kenegdo*, “a helper fit for him” (RSV). This expression has often been considered as an indication about the

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<sup>39</sup> Phyllis A. Bird, "Sexual Differentiation and Divine Image in the Genesis Creation Texts," in *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo Christian Tradition*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Borresen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 20.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Kasper, "The Position of Woman as a Problem of Theological Anthropology," in *The Church and Woman: A Compendium*, ed. Helmut Moll (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 54.

<sup>41</sup> Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 24. There are differences of opinion among scholars with regard to the usage of the word *ezer*. Feminist authors emphasize that the Hebrew word used here (*ezer*) does not imply subordination of women. For example, in the Old Testament this word is often used of God as a help for human beings. The Psalms speak of God as our “help” in English as well as in Hebrew. But the observation of the word *ezer* is only a first step in looking at the phrase in which it occurs. The actual phrase says that God created woman to be a help for man; that is, the purpose of her creation was to be a help to the man. Taken in its context, there is clearly some sort of subordination indicated by the phrase as a whole. There are different arguments among scholars regarding this point. We will discuss later some of these arguments.



subordination of Eve to Adam and consequently of women to men in societal and family life.<sup>42</sup>

In the Priestly account of creation, the Hebrew word used for woman is *naqav*, which denotes the sex as 'female' (Gn 1:27). Whereas in the Yahwistic account, God intended to create woman (*'ishâ*) as *ezer kenegdo* to remove man's loneliness (Gn 2:18). The phrase *ezer kenegdo* is translated by the NRSV as "helper as his partner." The literal meaning of the word is 'a helper as in front of him.' It also meant a helper like him, suited to him, worthy of him, corresponding to him.<sup>43</sup> This phrase has been interpreted traditionally as denoting the subordination of Eve to Adam. But the modern interpreters including the feminist scholars ascribe different meanings to this phrase. For instance, Samuel Terrien says: "The verb *azar* from which the noun *ezer* derives, means 'to succour' (at the existential level of being), 'to save from extremity,' 'to deliver from death.'"<sup>44</sup> The noun *neged* means, "that which is conspicuous, in front of, in full sight of."<sup>45</sup> Therefore, he concludes that the woman is the saviour of man who will deliver him from the distress of his solitude.<sup>46</sup> Phyllis Tribble translates *ezer kenegdo* as a helper corresponding to it, which indicates identity, mutuality and equality.<sup>47</sup> "To give him a companion fit for him requires a new

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<sup>42</sup> Howard N. Wallace, "Eve," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, ed. David Noel Freedman *et. al.*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 677.

<sup>43</sup> U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1961), 127. See also Francis Martin, "The New Feminism: Biblical Foundations and Some Lines of Development," in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 148. The helper is someone who matches *'ādām* but is not a replica. The woman is taken from man but differs from man. In naming her, *'ādām* himself assumes a new name: her presence "matching him" is a revelation of who both of them are in relationship.

<sup>44</sup> Samuel Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 10. Outside this passage, the word 'ezer' applies only to God himself. He is the giver of succour, "the helper of Israel in time of distress" (Deut 33:7; Pss 33:20; 115:9).

<sup>45</sup> Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings*, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 90. See also Carol Meyers, "Eve," in *Women in Scriptures*, ed. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 80-81. The relationship between Adam and Eve is also expressed by the term *ezer kenegdo*. It translates "helper as his partner" by the NRSV. Tribble comments that this unusual phrase probably indicates mutuality. The noun helper can mean either "an assistant" (subordinate) or "an expert" (superior); by the modifying prepositional phrase, used only here in the Bible, apparently means "equal to." This phrase, which might be translated literally as "an equal helper," indicates that no hierarchical relationship exists between the primordial pair.



creative intervention. More than this, the narrative treats woman with equal status and a partner of man."<sup>48</sup>

In Tribble's opinion, "God is the helper superior to man; the animals are helpers inferior to man; woman is the helper equal to man."<sup>49</sup> Walter C. Kaiser translates *ezer kenegdo* in the same manner as a helper corresponding to him or a helper alongside him.<sup>50</sup> Such correspondence is unique between the man and woman and this is what makes them equal in power or strength. Marsha M. Wilfong identifies the word *ezer* referring to a helper or deliverer, who is otherwise equal (rather than superior) to man.<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Dominguez argues that "woman was created in order to give real company and companionship that can only be enjoyed by equals, not by superiors and inferiors."<sup>52</sup> Phyllis A. Bird opines that the word *ezer* has no status connotations in the Yahwistic creation account. The man in this creation account recognises the woman

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<sup>48</sup> John L. Mckenzie, "The Literary Characteristics of Genesis 2 - 3," *Theological Studies* 15 (1954): 559. See also, Teresa Okure, "Biblical Perspectives on Women, Eve, the Mother of All the Living," *Voices from the Third World* 8 (1985): 87-88. God first recognises Adam's need for somebody with the same nature as his (v 18). He then leads Adam to a personal recognition of this same need (vv 19-20). His excitement and joy are underlined by his own exclamation in v 23a: "This at last bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." Since woman was taken out of man, all underline that the man and the woman belong to one and the same nature, and belong inseparably to each other. There is no suggestion in this passage, regarding woman's inferiority to man. The narrative emphasizes the man's need and not the woman's inferiority. See also, Carroll D. Osburn, *Women in the Church: Reclaiming the Ideal* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2001), 111. Carroll comments that made out of the 'same stuff', she was equal.

<sup>49</sup> Tribble, "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread," 75.

<sup>50</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Michigan: Academic Books, 1983), 181.

<sup>51</sup> Marsha M. Wilfong, "Genesis 2:18-24," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 42 (1988): 59. In the Old Testament, the word helper (*ezer*) has many usages. The noun *ezer* occurs 19 times in the Old Testament. Twelve times the *ezer* (helper) is God (Ps 20:3; 33:20; 70:6; 115:9; 10:11; 121:1-2; 124:8; Ex 18:14; Deut 33:7-26). When it refers to human help, the help expected is from an army or a powerful prince (Ps 146:4; Isa 30:5; Ezek 12:14; Dan 11:34; Hos 13:9). In both cases, i.e., human or divine, the help to which *ezer* refers is (a) "deliverance from a predicament of danger or need, (b) by a powerful individual or group." Therefore, the word *ezer* does not simply mean subordination or equality. It can be used to refer to a superior person or even to God, for example Ps 146:5. The text in its original form is concerned with the potential for intimacy in the divine-human relationship and in human relationships in light of the alienation that exists in the world. See also, Howard N. Wallace, "Eve," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman *et.al.*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 677. Allen Ross remarks, the word 'helper' describes one who provides what is lacking in the other. In a more clear way, the helper is the one who can do what the other by himself alone cannot do. Then she concludes that human beings cannot fulfil their destiny except in mutual assistance. Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 126. The word helper describes a beneficial relationship between man and woman in which both help each other. Barbara J. Mac Haffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Dominguez, "Biblical Concept of Human Sexuality: Challenge to Tourism," in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1989), 85.



as his equal and as a helper fit for him.<sup>53</sup> Osburn has the same opinion; "the Hebrew term "helper" does not specify rank or position. One should understand the specific meaning from the context."<sup>54</sup> Richard M. Davidson notes that Hebrew literature often makes use of an *inclusio* device in which the points of central concern occur at the beginning and hence, the creation of woman at the end, correspond to each other in importance. Only with the creation of woman does creation reach its climax. Thus, the "order of creation" in Genesis chapter two does not indicate male superiority or female subordination.<sup>55</sup>

According to Brueggemann, the formula "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" does not imply biological derivation at all; rather is a traditional way to denote a covenantal partnership.<sup>56</sup> To support this covenantal interpretation, Brueggemann points out that in verse 24 both words "abandon" and "cleave to" have a traditional usage in the description of covenants. The same is true of the words "one flesh," which have a traditional usage to denote a community of understanding and loyalty as much as any biological identification.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, it is questionable to draw any hint of masculine superiority from this text. Only through the creation of woman, *'ishâ*, man is able to call himself as *ish*. Mutual dependency is needed in order to express each ones' identity. The question of man's domination over woman arises only after the fall. This is to be seen as the result of sin.<sup>58</sup> Men and women are human beings with perfect equality.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, the theological vision of womanhood in the Yahwist account is that woman is equal to man. She stands together with man as he stands together with her.

Another reason for arguing for the subordination of women in the creation account is that the man named all the creatures including the woman (vv 19-20, 23b). Von Rad refers to Gn 2:23 as an example of a 'naming motif' by which he believes that man names the woman and thereby has power and authority over her.<sup>60</sup> In the Semitic

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<sup>53</sup> Phyllis A. Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 277.

<sup>54</sup> Osburn, *Women in the Church: Reclaiming the Ideal*, 120.

<sup>55</sup> Richard M. Davidson, "The Theology of Sexuality in the Beginning: Genesis 1-2," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 26 (1988): 14.

<sup>56</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Of the Same Flesh and Bone (Gn 2:23a)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970): 539.

<sup>57</sup> Brueggemann, "Of the Same Flesh and Bone (Gn 2:23a)," 540.

<sup>58</sup> Catharina J. M. Halkes, *New Creation: Christian Feminism and the Renewal of the Earth* (London: SPCK, 1991), 134. Pope John Paul II has included this vision in his new reflection on women.

<sup>59</sup> Ralph L. Smith, *Old Testament Theology: Its History, Method and Message* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1993), 242.

<sup>60</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 80-82.



culture to name a thing was to have dominion and control over it. This taken to mean that man is destined by God to have authority over woman as over the rest of creation.<sup>61</sup> Tribble points out a positive argument which is different from the Semitic mentality. The verb used in this verse is *qurah*, which means 'call', and it is translated as "she shall be called woman." In calling the animals by name, Adam is understood as exerting authority over them. But in 'calling' the woman by the name Eve in Gn 3:20, Adam does not name her; but in fact finds an equal counterpart. Male and female are equal sexes without having any unequal authority over either of them.<sup>62</sup> In the words of Jewett, the theology of the second creation narrative is "the integrity and freedom of the woman over against the man and of the man over against the woman, even as it commits us to their togetherness in an ineluctable relationship."<sup>63</sup> However, in Christian literature these pages have occasionally been interpreted as implying the subordination of woman to man. But the above arguments reveal that there is no subordination of woman in the creation account. Having enumerated some mainline arguments we now turn to the point of the creation of woman as a sign of perfection.

#### **2.1.1.2 Creation of Woman as a Sign of Perfection**

In the Yahwist account, woman is created as a second thought in order to perfect the imperfection that God found in the creation of man. According to Westermann, the creation of man becomes complete only through the creation of woman. So the clause "a helper..." (עֵזֶר - *ēzer*) has the meaning in its broadest sense, "not only for work or procreation, but also for mutual help in all spheres of human existence."<sup>64</sup> Therefore, Wenham remarks, "the creation of woman from man's rib supplies what was missing for his perfect happiness."<sup>65</sup> Ramsey says: "The exclamation in Gn 2:23 is a cry of discovery, of recognition, rather than a prescription of what this creature built from

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<sup>61</sup> Okure, "Biblical Perspectives on Women, Eve, the Mother of All the Living," 85.

<sup>62</sup> Phyllis Tribble, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 41 (1973): 38. In the Yahwist history, the word for "call" is *quara*. But to 'call' and to 'name' are not parallel usages. To express superiority or power over something the Yahwist has a special formula: 'to call by name.' For example Gn 4:17, 4:25, 4:26a. It is only after the fall that Adam calls his wife by name Eve. (Gn 3:20) Besides, *isha* is not a name, but a quality or a category. At least there is no evidence in the Yahwist creation story that God's intent was for man to be superior to woman by his naming for her. Her subordinate position is announced only in Gn 3:16 as a result of sin, and it is at that point that the man names her, not in the creation stories.

<sup>63</sup> Paul K. Jewett, *Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 161.

<sup>64</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 20-21.

<sup>65</sup> Jordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 69.



his rib shall be. An essence which God had already fashioned [...], (which) he perceives in this new creature determines the name.”<sup>66</sup> So it is an act of discernment rather than act of domination. In the opinion of John Wijngaards, she was truly ‘the other half,’ “flesh of my flesh and bones of my bones.” Rather than teaching the subjection of woman to man, this text proclaims their basic equality as human beings.<sup>67</sup> Subsequently, a mysterious relationship occurs between man and woman when man leaves his father and his mother and clings to the woman (*’ishâ*) and they become one flesh (Gn 2:24). For Tribble, such a union indicates the equality of roles in which man (husband) does not control woman (wife) as he moves towards her for union. She calls it “the convergence of opposites into a consummation of union.”<sup>68</sup> This man-woman relationship indicates mutual dependence rather than dominion of one over the other.

It was only with the creation of woman that God’s work in creating human beings was successfully brought to a conclusion evoking the joyful cry from the man (v.23). Tavard comments that the chief lesson of the text refers to woman’s relationship to man because it is his solitude that provides the occasion for her creation. Adam’s failure to establish a society with the animals has tremendous importance for the differentiation of Adam into male and female (*אִישׁ* -’ish and *אִשָּׁה* ’ishâ), of humankind into male and female.<sup>69</sup> According to Tavard, being created at the end is a sign of major perfection. Woman is not made because man is lonely; but is made as the perfecting element, to the revelation of which he aspired when he refused companionship with the animal world.<sup>70</sup> As against some who think of the creation of woman as the lowest in the series of creation he states that it is “a creation that grows from Adam to woman, with the intermediate creations serving to establish the stage for the higher creation that is achieved with the modelling of woman.”<sup>71</sup> Mathew Henry’s comment comes closer to the spirit of the text: “[t]he woman is not made out of his head to top him, not out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his

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<sup>66</sup> George W. Ramsey, "Is Name- Giving an Act of Domination in Genesis 2:23 and Elsewhere?," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 35.

<sup>67</sup> Wijngaards, *The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church: Unmasking a Cuckoo's Egg Tradition*, 73.

<sup>68</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 104.

<sup>69</sup> George H. Tavard, *Woman in Christian Tradition* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1922), 6-7.

<sup>70</sup> Tavard, *Woman in Christian Tradition*, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Tavard, *Woman in Christian Tradition*, 5.



side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.”<sup>72</sup> In *Mulieris Dignitatem* Pope John Paul II states:

In the description found in Genesis 2:18-25, the woman is created by God “from the rib” of the man and is placed at his side as another “I”, as the companion of the man, who is alone in the surrounding world of living creatures and who finds none of them a “helper” suitable for himself. Called into existence in this way, the woman is immediately recognized by the man as “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones” (Gn 2:23), and for this very reason she is called woman. In the biblical language this name indicates her essential identity with regard to man-’is-’*issah*- something which unfortunately modern languages are unable to express: “She shall be called woman (*’issah*) she was taken out of man (*’is*)” (Gn 2:23).<sup>73</sup>

A critical examination of the Yahwist creation account and its various explanations suggest that woman is created as a companion corresponding to man. However since creation, there is a belief that woman was destined to be subject to man and also play a subsidiary role in society in comparison to the man. Okure argues, if this whole interpretation of Gn 2:4b-25 is correct, then this passage cannot be used as the biblical basis for the belief that woman is destined by God to be inferior and subject to man.<sup>74</sup> From the above discussions, we may conclude that this scriptural text, i.e., Gn 2:4b-25 clearly states that woman is truly equal to man. She was not created alone as the animals were created but rather, she was truly the other half. So rather than indicating the subjection of woman to man, this text proclaims the basic equality of man and woman as human beings.<sup>75</sup> However, the above observations on various terms and their different connotations facilitate us to think differently especially in the contemporary understanding on scripture. After a detailed discussion of the Yahwist account of creation, we now move to the priestly account of creation.

### 2.1.2 The Creation of Human Being as Male and Female in the Image of God

The Priestly account of creation based on Gn 1:26-27, declares the theological significance of a human person as composed of male and female. It shows unity in nature and diversity in sex, and that as an entity the human person was created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>76</sup> As the biblical scholars point out, the term adam (Gn 1:26) is a generic term for humanity defined as male and female and it is not a proper

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<sup>72</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 69.

<sup>73</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 6.

<sup>74</sup> Okure, “Biblical Perspectives on Women, Eve, the Mother of All the Living,” 86-88.

<sup>75</sup> Wijngaards, *The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church: Unmasking a Cuckoo's Egg Tradition*, 73.

<sup>76</sup> Teresa Okure, “Women in the Bible,” in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 49.



name of an individual.<sup>77</sup> Westermann also holds that adam in the creation account means ‘humanity as a whole’, and not merely male individual named ‘adam.’<sup>78</sup> Affirming the same position that adam created by God is humankind, consisting of both male and female, Maurice P. Hogan says that: “individual human beings do not exist in a sexless state, but as man and woman equal in dignity, called to be in communion, created as such by God and in accord with his design.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, it would mean that humankind is created conjointly as man and woman. Conjointly created in the image and likeness of God and conjointly given dominion over the rest of creation (Gn 1:28), both the male and the female stand equal in honour and dignity.<sup>80</sup> The term ‘*ādām*’ occurs 562 times in the Old Testament. In the Pentateuch it occurs 48 times, 24 of which are in Genesis alone.<sup>81</sup> According to Wilfong, the image of God resides not simply in the individual human being but in the community of humankind.<sup>82</sup> Clines says that Gn 1:27 specifically denies the phenomenal distinction between male and female. The image of God does not subsist in the male but in the humankind, within which women also partakes. Thus the most basic statement about man, according to

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<sup>77</sup> John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, ed. S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, and C. A. Briggs, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1910), 32-33. See also, Okure, "Women in the Bible," 49. The Anchor Bible Dictionary notes that the Hebrew noun ‘*ādām*’ generally denotes “human being,” “humankind.” It is used widely throughout the Old Testament for “humankind” or “human being.” The use of ‘*ādām*’ in Yahwist is concentrated in the primeval history of Gn 2-11. In Gn 2: 4b- 4:25, the term refers to a specific male being. Elsewhere in the primeval narrative, it refers to humankind in general, even in Gn 8:21, which recalls the curse of Gn 3:17-19. In the context of 2-11, the individuality of the figure ‘*ādām*’ in Gn 2:4b-3:24 must be seen as representative. While the individuality of ‘*ādām*’ figure in Gn 3:24 is evident throughout the story, the restriction of ‘*ādām*’ to a male individual begins clearly only from 2:18. Thus the beginning of the story addresses the issue of human beings in general in the presence of Yahweh. The disobedience that follows is not to be blamed primarily on the woman in the garden, but is the responsibility of the whole human community, as the curses (3:14-19) reveal. “In Gn 1:26-28, ‘P’ uses ‘*ādām*’ collectively as male (*zākār*) and female (*nēqēba*). A single couple is not indicated here, ‘*ādām*’ in its composite whole as male and female is the image of God.” Howard N. Wallace, "Adam," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 62-63. See also, Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, 2 ed., Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1963), 55. He says, the Hebrew word ‘*ādām*’ (man) is a collective term and is therefore never used in the plural; it literally means “mankind.”

<sup>78</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984), 158. See also, Michael G. Lawler, "Perichoresis: New Theological Wine in an Old Theological Wineskin," *Horizons* 22 (1995): 57.

<sup>79</sup> Maurice P. Hogan, *The Biblical Vision of the Human Person: Implications for a Philosophical Anthropology*, European University Studies, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1994), 95. See also Philis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 16.

<sup>80</sup> Okure, "Women in the Bible," 49.

<sup>81</sup> Maass, "Adam," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, ed. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 79.

<sup>82</sup> Marsha M. Wilfong, "Human Creation in Canonical Context: Genesis 1:26-31 and Beyond," in *God Who Creates*, ed. William P. Brown and S. Dean McBride (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 44.



Genesis chapter one, i.e., "he is the image of God, does not find its full meaning in man alone but in man and woman."<sup>83</sup> Priestly account thus leaves no doubt that 'ādām is a generic term for humanity as composed of male and female.

As has been discussed before, adam is used in the Priestly source in a collective sense of 'humankind.' Nevertheless, early Jewish interpreters understood adam in Genesis chapter one as referring to the man only, however subtle the exegesis may be. The word 'image' also faced the same fate as is applied solely to the male; God's image is apparently only a human being in a full sense, namely the man.<sup>84</sup> Tribble makes four important observations regarding Gn 1:27: (1) She notes that the shift from the singular "him" to the plural "them" shows that "man" is "not one single creature who is both male and female but rather two creatures, one male and one female." (2) The singular "man" shows that "male and female are not opposite but rather harmonious sexes." (3) The parallelism between "man" and "male and female" shows that "sexual differentiation does not mean hierarchy but rather equality. Created simultaneously, male and female are not superior and subordinate."<sup>85</sup> (4) She says that one should be cautious against assigning 'masculine' and 'feminine' attributes to the words 'male' and 'female' regarding tasks involved in having dominion over the earth.<sup>86</sup> Davidson says that there is no hint of spiritual or functional superiority between male and female in Genesis chapter one. Both share in dominion over the earth and in procreation, and both participate equally in the image of God.<sup>87</sup>

The threefold repetition in Gn 1:27 is the fact of being given dominion over the rest of creation, and the evaluation after the creation of man and woman show that humanity is the climax of God's creative activity. This fact is affirmed in Gn 9:6 where it is forbidden to take the life of another human being because "God made man [sic] in his own image."<sup>88</sup> In Gn 5:3 the same phrase 'image' is used of a human father generating his son. "The similarity in usage indicates that when God formed the first man after his "image and likeness" he created a being similar in nature to himself, a

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<sup>83</sup> J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 95.

<sup>84</sup> Helen Schungel-Straumann, "On the Creation of Man and Woman in Genesis 1-3: The History and Reception of the Texts Reconsidered," in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 61.

<sup>85</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 18.

<sup>86</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 19.

<sup>87</sup> Davidson, "The Theology of Sexuality in the Beginning: Genesis 1-2," 7.

<sup>88</sup> Edward M. Curtis, "Image of God," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 390.



being who would to some degree carry on his own role and take his place.”<sup>89</sup> According to Karl Barth, “[m]an can never exist as such, but always as the human male or the human female.” He suggests that the image of God in man is their maleness and femaleness, and that in their sexual differentiation they are related communally.<sup>90</sup> Hoekema is of the same opinion that man as created male and female is an essential aspect of the image of God.<sup>91</sup> Corona Mary observes that God created man and woman to show forth both the male and female aspects of God. These aspects are different but equally divine. Therefore, the question is not about which among them is nobler, but rather how nobly a person expresses it. Therefore, man and woman, in different ways, are equal in dignity.<sup>92</sup>

According to Clark, sexual differentiation is part of God’s original purpose for the human race since man and woman are essential for a full functioning of the human race. He observes that since 1:26-28 is about the creation of the human race everything that is said about ‘man’ is true of every human being.<sup>93</sup> The human race as a whole has a call within God’s creation and both man and woman participate in the divine call. Both are good and important to God. Another significant point to note in

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<sup>89</sup> Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Michigan: Servant Books, 1980), 12. Von Rad suggests that ‘image’ (*tselem*) implies an exact copy, while ‘likeness’ (*demut*) means resemblance – indicating perhaps that human being is created as a copy of God’s nature in some ways, but also with differences. He also points out that, as powerful kings of the time would erect images of themselves in their provinces as representing themselves, so human being is placed on earth in God’s image, as his representative and sovereign emblem. He is only God’s representative, summoned to maintain and enforce God’s claim to dominion over the earth. Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 56-58. See also Jordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 38. The divine image also enables man to be addressed directly by his creator and makes him in a real sense God’s representative on earth. The task entrusted by him is to rule over other creatures as a benevolent king. According to Miller, “*tselem* is a rather concrete term which is normally used in the Old Testament to refer to a model or idol of something and always has to do with a similarity in physical appearance. *Demut* is a more abstract term with a broader range of usage, but it too is normally used in connection with visual similarities.” J. Maxwell Miller, “In the Image and Likeness of God,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 291.

<sup>90</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1958), 195.

<sup>91</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 11.

<sup>92</sup> Corona Mary, “Woman in Creation Story,” *Jeevadhara* 21 (1991): 105. She comments that man and woman equally make God’s presence felt in the world. In Israel’s growth towards maturity, education and achievement of goals, it experienced the male and female qualities of God. For example Ps 103:13 states that as the father has compassion for his children so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. And Is 49:15 asserts, ‘Can a woman forget her sucking child that she should have no compassion on the child of her womb? Even these may forget yet I will not forget you.’ The human species, as male and female, reflect God in these two aspects.

<sup>93</sup> Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 13-14.



Priestly account is his pointed emphasis that it is both as male and female that 'ādām images God. In this entire account, there is no suggestion that the female is inferior or subject to the male.<sup>94</sup> Vogels observes that man and woman equally share the common human dignity of being created in the image of God and both as well have received authority over the rest of creation.<sup>95</sup> In the same way, Kristina La Celle-Peterson opines that both man and woman are commissioned by God to carry out God's work together in the world.<sup>96</sup>

Pope John Paul II, commenting on this biblical account, states that this concise passage contains the fundamental anthropological truth: "both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree; both are created in God's image."<sup>97</sup> Thus, with this affirmation, the Pope wants to emphasise the fact that both man and woman possess the image of God equally as human persons. Both are given sovereignty over the lower creation. Both man and woman stand as co-partners before God and are stewards of creation. This narration also points out that unlike the other living beings in the world from the beginning, the human beings both the male and the female are persons. The woman is another "I," in a common humanity.<sup>98</sup> For Gn 1:26-27 explicitly shows that both man and woman are created in the image of God. According to Elizabeth A. Johnson, "[t]his text makes a major claim: women and men together, equally, relationally, as human beings, are created in the image and likeness of God. Not one more than the other, not one over the other, but together as the human race."<sup>99</sup> This indicates that they are unique in the creation of God, as they alone possess the image of God.

Brown observes that in *Mulieris Dignitatem* the creation stories of Genesis are interpreted as clear statements of humanity's special status before God. While all other features of the created world exist for the good of humanity, only human persons exist solely for their own sake. They alone are offered an opportunity to enter into a relationship of friendship with their Creator. Each human person bears the

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<sup>94</sup> Okure, "Biblical Perspectives on Women, Eve, the Mother of All the Living," 84.

<sup>95</sup> Walter Vogels, "The Image of God," *Science et Esprit* 46 (1994): 198.

<sup>96</sup> Kristina LaCelle-Peterson, *Liberating Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 31.

<sup>97</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 6.

<sup>98</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 6.

<sup>99</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Imaging God, Embodying Christ: Women as Sign of the Times," in *The Church Woman Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 48.



divine image and likeness, not as an external brand but as a distinguishing feature of his or her essential nature making this friendship possible.<sup>100</sup>

From the above considerations on the creation accounts, we can conclude that the identity of both man and woman are in the same image of God. R. Edet and B. Ekeya confirm this when they argue that there is unity and diversity in the human image and likeness of God, but there is neither domination nor subordination.<sup>101</sup> Moreover the two creation accounts of Genesis are though different in many ways, for example, the languages used, style, date and the traditions employed, however the basic statements they employ about woman are essentially the same. Bird articulates the difference and the similarity between the two sexes aptly. She declares that woman is along with man, the direct and intentional creation of God and the crown of his creation. Man and woman are made for each other.<sup>102</sup> To sum up, objectively there is nothing in Genesis accounts, which supports the view that woman is by nature inferior and subject to man. The differences which make for complementarity are not synonymous with inferiority and superiority. So the creation accounts give no ground for believing that the woman was destined by God to be inferior and subject to the man.

### **3. Theological Dimension of the Dignity of Woman in *Mulieris Dignitatem***

We have seen that the Pope approaches the theme of the dignity of woman from the perspective of biblical anthropology. The equality of man and woman is clear from the creation narrative because both Adam and Eve are created in the image and likeness of God. Adam recognised Eve's equality by stating that the woman is "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh."<sup>103</sup> The creation account in the book of Genesis speaks about a very unique and harmonious relationship in which two distinct and individual persons are no longer "alone" but really one (Gn 2:18; 2:24).<sup>104</sup> This relationship between man and woman was intended by God to be a mutual and complementary relationship of love and respect; a relationship in which there is no

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<sup>100</sup> Susan Mader Brown, "Mulieris Dignitatem: A New Perspective on the Image of God," *Journal of Dharma* 23 (1998): 502-503.

<sup>101</sup> Rosemary Edet and Bette Ekeya, "Church Women of Africa: A Theological Community," in *With Passion and Compassion*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 4.

<sup>102</sup> Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," 276.

<sup>103</sup> Brueggemann, "Of the Same Flesh and Bone (Gn 2:23a)," 532-542.

<sup>104</sup> Walter Vogels, "It is not good that the Mensch should be Alone," *Eglise et Theologie* (1978): 9-35.



domination of one over another.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, sin destroys that relationship and introduces a power struggle and oppression. Mutual complementarity is replaced by mutual domination, intimacy is replaced by alienation.<sup>106</sup> Mutuality and equality assume the form of control and distortion.<sup>107</sup> According to Vogels, “[w]hat kills the relationship is the desire to possess, to keep, to hold, to dominate, or to crush the other.”<sup>108</sup>

In his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Pope clearly states: “Sin brings about a break in the original unity, which man [sic] enjoyed in the state of original justice: union with God as the source of the unity within his own ‘I’, in the mutual relationship between man and woman as well as in regard to the external world, to nature.”<sup>109</sup> Another important point worthy of note in this respect is the emphasis on the subjection of the woman to the man as a result of sin. This idea of Pope John Paul II is supported by the *Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith* which affirms inequality as a consequence of original sin. Therefore, this consequence can and should be remedied.<sup>110</sup> In this section, we will discuss the biblical description of the original sin and the distinguishing roles of man and woman. However, we do not intend to deal with the complete notion of the Christian understanding of the human reality of sin but rather how both man and woman are affected by this reality and how oppression of women and male domination are caused by sin. In response, we try to construct a theological reflection based on John Paul II’s teachings on women.

### 3.1 The Consequence of Sin for Man and Woman

We have already noted that sin distorted the intended relationship of mutuality between the sexes and created a wrong trend of domination of men over women.<sup>111</sup> Genesis 3:16 is of central concern here because it deals with the relationship between husband and wife and it raises the question of subordination between men and

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<sup>105</sup> George Arthur Buttrick *et.al*, *The Book of Genesis*, The Interpreter's Bible, vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), 510.

<sup>106</sup> Alan J. Hauser, "Genesis 2-3: The Theme of Intimacy and Alienation," in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*, ed. David J. A. Clines *et.al.*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 34.

<sup>107</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 51.

<sup>108</sup> Walter Vogels, "The Power Struggle between Man and Woman," *Biblica* 77 (1996): 209.

<sup>109</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 9.

<sup>110</sup> Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, "Letter to the Bishop's of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and the World," 8, 11, 12.

<sup>111</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," in *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo Christian Tradition*, ed. Kari Elizabeth Børresen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 269.



women. "The biblical description in the Book of Genesis outlines the truth about the consequences of man's [sic] sin as it is shown by the disturbance of that original relationship between man and woman which corresponds to their individual dignity as persons."<sup>112</sup> The story speaks about human sin but the most important aspect of the story is not sin in itself, but what sin does: it changes harmony into disharmony.

### 3.2 Domination in Relationship

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II identifies the roots of the original sin of discrimination. He employs the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis as his point of departure for a catechesis on the body, which turns to God's original creative intention for human life disclosed in the beginning and the rupture that sin introduced into this life.<sup>113</sup> According to Genesis, the Letter argues, God created the first couple in perfect equality.<sup>114</sup> But they misused their freedom to reject the dignity of their vocation. Baum observes that God created man and woman in equality and mutuality so they are free of subordination. Men and women have different characteristics, but they were created equal. Their relationship was not patriarchal.<sup>115</sup> Commenting on Gn 3:16 O'Neill says: "The text reveals that the subordination of women to men is a result of sin and not part of the created order portrayed prior to what has come to be known as the Fall."<sup>116</sup> In light of the above arguments, we could say that originally woman and man were equal in status and dignity. But due to sin communion is transformed into oppression, which destroys at the same time the stability of the relationship.

According to Susan Foh, "[a] proper understanding of Genesis 3:16 is crucial to the re-consideration of the Biblical view of woman. In Genesis 3:16 God pronounces judgment on the woman. Two areas of woman's life are specifically mentioned: child-bearing and her relationship to her husband."<sup>117</sup> Our immediate concern is to analyse the meaning of Gn 3:16.

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<sup>112</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 10.

<sup>113</sup> John S. Grabowski, "Mutual Submission and Trinitarian Self-Giving," *Angelicum* 74 (1997): 495.

<sup>114</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 6. Quoting Gn 1:26-28, the Pope emphasizes there is no subordination and in the creation account, both man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God.

<sup>115</sup> Baum, "Bulletin: The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*," 145.

<sup>116</sup> Mary Aquin O'Neill, "The Mystery of Being Human Together," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry Lacugna (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 142.

<sup>117</sup> Susan T. Foh, "What Is the Woman's Desire?," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1975): 376.



### 3.2.1 Pain and Suffering in Childbearing (Gn 3:16a)

In Gn 3:16, one can see two aspects of the fall related to the woman: first, her pain in childbirth, and, second, her relationship to man. To the woman the Lord said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children" (Gn 3:16a). This verse introduces great pain into the process of bearing and rearing children. The Hebrew word used for 'pain' or 'pangs' in this verse is עֲצָבוֹן ('issābôn) which is also used to denote the toil or work of Adam in vv 17-19.<sup>118</sup> The literal portrait is "your pangs and your childbearing," but the idiomatic significance is "your pangs that result from your pregnancy."<sup>119</sup> There is reference to the woman's productive work as well as to her procreative role. Carol L. Meyers translates it in the following way: "I will greatly increase your work and your pregnancies; (Along) with toil you shall give birth to children."<sup>120</sup> The woman has a double function – production (work) and pro-creation (child-bearing) that she shares with her husband. In this way, the punishment involves both the woman's contributive labour and her quantitatively increased pregnancies.<sup>121</sup> The first part of the judgement is that "maternity will be accompanied by suffering." "Your pains and your pregnancies" is probably *hendiadys* for "your pains of pregnancy."<sup>122</sup> Here it is also meant that the woman is promised "labour" in bringing forth children, so "her glory becomes also her pain." This child-bearing also meant that "immortality is replaced by progeny," opening the door to redemptive history.<sup>123</sup> The Hebrews spoke proverbially of the

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<sup>118</sup> Meyers, "Eve," 81.

<sup>119</sup> E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 24.

<sup>120</sup> Carol L. Meyers, "Gender Roles and Genesis 3:16 Revisited," in *Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 130.

<sup>121</sup> Meyers, "Gender Roles and Genesis 3:16 Revisited," 131. There are different interpretations for the Hebrew word *issabon*. One usual interpretation in English is pain, a noun apparently formed from the verbal root 'sb, which means "to upset, to grieve." From the fifteen places where the verb is used, the reference is not to physical pain, but to psychological or emotional discomfort (Ec 10:9). The mental anguish expressed by the verb is most explicit in Is 34:6. In Gn 3:17 *issabon* is used for the word 'toil.' So the most appropriate interpretation of the use of 'issabon in Gn 3:16 is as physical labour rather than an abstract condition of distress, but it also indicate not ordinary physical labour. Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 104-105. Meyers tries to explain Israel's awareness of woman's contribution to human prosperity beyond her special role in reproduction. See also, Carol L. Meyers, "Procreation, Production and Protection: Male- Female Balance in Early Israel," *Journal of American Accademy of Religion* 51 (1983): 569-593.

<sup>122</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 81. The doom of woman in v. 16 consists two elements: first the hardships of her pregnancy and second, the social position of women in the East. For Hebrew women esteemed pregnancy is considered as a blessing. A large family was a sign of God's blessing (Ps 127, 128) and also to be a joyful mother of children (Ps 113:9). The pangs of childbirth are proverbial in OT for the extremity of human anguish (Is 21:3, 13:8, Mic 4:9, Ps 48:6). Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 82- 83.

<sup>123</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 94.



severe pain of child-bearing (e.g., Is 21:3, Jer 6:24) and here it is represented as the penalty for Eve's transgression.<sup>124</sup>

According to Von Rad, "[t]he woman and the man are not cursed." But there will be hardships and afflictions in the life of women. Here the author points out a contradiction in the life of woman. On the one side, there is a hardship of pregnancy and childbirth and on the other there is a profound desire for the man.<sup>125</sup> Another important point to be considered is "the curse on the woman in Gn 3:16 relates to another aspect of the original mandate – being fruitful and multiplying."<sup>126</sup> From the above observations we could argue that bearing and rearing of children will be a blessing but it will be accompanied in and through suffering.

### 3.2.2 Partnership vis-a-vis Subjection (Gn 3:16b)

God's commandment to the woman, "Yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gn 3:16b), for a long time has been used to prove the husband's superiority over his wife. At the same time, it keeps wives submissive to their husbands, who have the right, and even the duty, to rule over them.<sup>127</sup> So the relationship is described in terms of domination. Sin is a wound inflicted by the rupture of their relationship that takes place in human relations especially in man-woman relation.<sup>128</sup> Gn 3:16 raises some questions: what is the desire of the woman towards her husband? What does this 'rule of the husband over his wife' imply?<sup>129</sup> There are differences of opinion among scholars regarding the meaning of these texts.

The Hebrew word 'desire' has different meanings. According to Susan Foh, the translation of the word desire causes some difficulty in understanding Gn 3:16b. The Hebrew word *t'shûqâ* is found only three times in the Old Testament (Gn 3:16; 4:7; Song 7:10).<sup>130</sup> The word is translated by "desire," "urge," "lust," "longing,"

<sup>124</sup> S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen & co, 1904), 49.

<sup>125</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 90.

<sup>126</sup> Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 33. "I will greatly multiply" is the same root as 'be fruitful' and 'multiply' in Gn 1:22, 28. Beverly J. Stratton, *Out of Eden: Reading, Rhetoric and Ideology in Genesis 2-3*, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 208 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 262. See also, Frank E. Gaebelen *et.al.*, ed., *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 56. The judgement against women mainly relates to two points, which is already mentioned in the role of the woman portrayed in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. The woman and her husband were to have enjoyed the blessing of children (1:28) and the harmonious partnership of marriage (2:18, 21-25).

<sup>127</sup> Vogels, "The Power Struggle between Man and Woman," 197.

<sup>128</sup> Martin, "The New Feminism: Biblical Foundations and Some Lines of Development," 149.

<sup>129</sup> Vogels, "The Power Struggle between Man and Woman," 198.

<sup>130</sup> Foh, "What Is the Woman's Desire?," 379.



“yearning” or the like. But the question concerns as to what kind of desire is implied in Gn 3:16. There are basically two classical interpretations. It has been customary to interpret this desire as the sexual desire of the woman.<sup>131</sup> In Song 7:10, the woman speaks of her lover’s desire for her. Here the word “desire” has “strong sexual connotations.”<sup>132</sup> Another interpretation of *t<sup>e</sup>shûqâ* is viewed as “the desire that makes her the willing slave of man.”<sup>133</sup> As Westermann opines, through disobedience, the woman has become a slave. Consequently, her initiative and her freedom vanish. The man also is corrupted, for he has become master, ruling over the one who is his God-given equal. The subordination of female to male signifies their shared sin.<sup>134</sup> According to Cassuto, the woman’s desires are wholly subservient to that of her husband, as a result of God’s judgment.<sup>135</sup> Though there are differences of opinion among scholars regarding the interpretation of the word *t<sup>e</sup>shûqâ*, they agree that it is because the woman’s desire for her husband, in some way, that he is able to rule over her.<sup>136</sup>

The second part of the verse refers to what the husband does: “He shall rule over you.” The foregoing discussion reveals that the woman’s desire for her husband is understood as the basis for male dominion over woman. The most common meaning of מָשָׁל (*māshal*) is “to rule,” “to have dominion.” biblical interpreters generally translate it as “and he shall rule over you” (NRSV), or “he will be your master” (NAB), or “he will dominate you” (NJB). The more common meaning of the verb is simply to rule, often in reference to political leaders and kings (Deut 15:6; Josh 12:5; 2 Sam 23:3) or to God (Is 63:19). After analysing the different interpretations, Vogels states that “[t]he woman has this psychological need to rely on a man, but he rules over her, sometimes in a brutal way.”<sup>137</sup> This term describes dominion, mastery, and

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<sup>131</sup> Lucien Ouellette, “Woman’s Doom in Genesis 3:16,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 12 (1950): 389-399. Anne Gardner, “Genesis 2:4b-3: A Mythological Paradigm of Sexual Equality or of the Religious History of Pre-Exilic Israel?,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990): 1-18. See also, Sam Dragga, “A Story of Liberation,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 55 (1992): 3-13.

<sup>132</sup> Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 75.

<sup>133</sup> Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 82.

<sup>134</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 357. “This sin vitiates all relationships: between animals and human beings (3:15); mothers and children (3:16); husbands and wives (3:16); people and the soil (3:17-18); humanity and its work (3:19). Whereas in creation man and woman know harmony and equality, in sin they know alienation and discord.” Tribble, “Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread,” 80.

<sup>135</sup> Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 165.

<sup>136</sup> Foh, “What Is the Woman’s Desire?,” 376-377.

<sup>137</sup> Vogels, “The Power Struggle between Man and Woman,” 205.



lordship but it can have rather harsh application. The significant point about the verse is that it is part of the punishment oracle for sin. However, to use it as a means to “teach submission of the woman to her husband and the loving lordship of the husband to his wife completely misses the point.”<sup>138</sup>

Another interpretation of the word *māshal* is “to be like.” According to John J. Schmitt, this verse has nothing to do with male supremacy. In his opinion, the root *māshal* employed in the text is not the root “to rule,” but a different *māshal*, “to be like, to liken.”<sup>139</sup> But most of the scholars have disagreed with this interpretation. Several scholars have noted the close parallel between Gn 3:16b and 4:7b. According to Vogels, in Gn 4:7b, after God has told Cain that sin desires to control him, he adds, “and you *māshal* him.” In his opinion, here it is clear that Cain has to master sin. So he argues that “if we apply this interpretation ‘to rule’ to the parallel text of 3:16b, the text then refers to the husband’s ruling over the wife in their relationship.”<sup>140</sup>

For Susan Foh the text, Gn 4:7 points to the woman’s desire for submission to man. Moreover, in her opinion, in this text “sin’s desire is to enslave Cain – to possess or control him, but the Lord commands, urges Cain to overpower sin, to master it.” So she argues that “the woman has the same sort of desire for her husband that sin has for Cain, a desire to possess or control him. This desire disputes the headship of the husband. As the Lord tells Cain what he should do, i.e., master or rule sin, the Lord also states what the husband should do, rule over his wife.”<sup>141</sup> Here Foh’s concern is

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<sup>138</sup> Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis*, 146. In the opinion of Val Webb, “He shall rule over you” must be read in the context of Israel. In Israelite peasant culture, extra children were considered as advantageous for their work. But the females’ hesitation for frequent pregnancies had to do with the mother’s life-expectancy. “Because of woman’s reluctance, the will of the husband to reproduce for social and economic necessity takes over, and he will insist on sex with conception in mind. This is not an eternal rule of man over woman in everything, but a shared economic necessity to reproduce.” Val Webb, *Why We Are Equal: Introducing Feminist Theology* (Missouri: Chalice Press, 1999), 139.

<sup>139</sup> John J. Schmitt, “Like Eve, Like Adam: *māl* in Gen 3:16,” *Biblica* 72 (1991): 8. In his opinion both woman and man have a sexual desire for each other. According to him, there are three possibilities for translating this verse: (1) and he will rule over you; (2) and he will mock you; (3) and he will be like you.

<sup>140</sup> Vogels, “The Power Struggle between Man and Woman,” 206. There is, however, a difference between the two parallel verses. *māshal* in 3:16b is in the third person, “he *māshal* over you” as part of the punishment after sin, while in 4:7b, it is in the second person “you *māshal* over it” as part of the admonition before sin. Cain did not master sin. God in his admonition to Cain suggests him certainly that he is capable of doing so: “you can master” (NJB; NAB). It perhaps even indicates that he has to do it: “you must master” (NRSV). The paradise story (Gn 2:4b-3:24) is followed by the story of Cain and Abel (Gn 4:1-16). Both, according to the documentary hypothesis, belong to the Yahwistic tradition. These two stories can be read and often are read independently, but they really belong together.

<sup>141</sup> Foh, “What Is the Woman’s Desire?,” 381-382. Susan Foh has argued that the woman’s urge is not a craving for her man whatever he demands but an urge for independence, indeed a desire to dominate



to show that male leadership is not something that begins only with this verse, but is rather a disposition that God intended from the beginning. But Vogels disagrees with Foh about her consideration of this verse as prescriptive and divine order. In Vogels' opinion, in Gn 3:16b God does not give man an admonition, but to the woman to tell her what will happen to her. The text, therefore, does not mean, "he must master you," as though the husband is obliged to do so, but rather "he will master you" or he is capable of mastering you." "This mastering may happen because the man is capable of dominating her." However, just as Cain did not master sin, so the man will not always and everywhere dominate his wife. In this context, it is interesting to notice Vogel's observation with an important difference. "Whereas Cain had to dominate sin and did not do it, man does not have to dominate his wife, but often does so."<sup>142</sup>

Equally, important point to be noticed in this context is the following. This ardent desire, however, is to bring the woman not into partnership but into subjection. The deepest human relationship has thus been perverted.<sup>143</sup> In the opinion of Kidner, "[t]o love and to cherish becomes to desire and to dominate."<sup>144</sup> As Lemmons observes, "original sin left woman with the desire to close her love in upon her husband and make him the lord, while original sin left man with the desire to dominate woman."<sup>145</sup> Further, she affirms that some penalties of original sin are gender specific and affecting even the spousal union of love.<sup>146</sup> The tragic aspect of sin is the division between man and woman. "Man who had recognized woman as his other self, 'bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh', now disclaims her."<sup>147</sup> As Philis A. Bird remarks, "[m]utuality is replaced by rule. Patriarchy is inaugurated as the sign of life alienated

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her husband. Such an interpretation of "urge" is required in the very closely parallel passage in 4:7, where sin's urge is said to be for Cain, but he must master it. Here in 3:16 woman's desire for independence would be contrasted with an injunction to man to master her. See also, Aubrey Malphurs, *Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Grand Rapids: Kregal Publications, 1996), 103-104. He has also the same opinion of Foh and he says the term desire seems to have the meaning of 'enslave, master or control.' So in Gn 3:16 "Eve's desire was to master, control or subdue Adam." Then he concludes that because of this judgement, throughout the relationship, Eve will be looking for opportunities to take control. "Eve's constant temptation while living with Adam will be to repeat the Fall, that is, to master, control, or have her own way." Further he says that "the idea in Genesis 3:16 is that the man will respond to the woman's desire to control him by controlling, dominating or mastering her. He will not respond positively, but negatively." So male domination enters the picture in Gn 3.

<sup>142</sup> Vogels, "The Power Struggle between Man and Woman," 207.

<sup>143</sup> Robert Davidson, *Genesis 1-11*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), 45.

<sup>144</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1967), 71.

<sup>145</sup> R. Mary Hadyen Lemmons, "Equality, Gender and John Paul II," *Logos* (2002): 115.

<sup>146</sup> Lemmons, "Equality, Gender and John Paul II," 115.

<sup>147</sup> James Plastras, *Creation and Covenant* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1968), 41.



from God. The rule of man over woman, announced in Gn 3:16, is the Bible's first statement of hierarchy within the species, and it is presented as the consequence of sin."<sup>148</sup> Osburn observes, "The essence of first sin in Eden is the desire for power."<sup>149</sup> A warning is given to the woman that her selfishness will cost her in suffering and abuse from the man who was supposed to be her protector and comforter.<sup>150</sup> In this context, Edwin notes the following crucial remark: this statement is not a license for male supremacy, but rather it is a condemnation of that very pattern.<sup>151</sup> Many scholars supported this idea; it is a statement of fact. This is not to be understood as a licence to husbands to keep their wives in submission.<sup>152</sup> Basing on the foregoing analysis of Gn 3:16b, we may validly conclude that subordination of women is the result of human sin, never intended by God.

### 3.3 Subordination of Women Due to Sin

One of the major propositions of malestream epistemology by which women are oppressed concerns the emphasis given to Eve's sin. Throughout the centuries Eve is presented as the disobedient woman who caused sin to come into the world. She was blamed for bringing the man down, tempting him to break the relationship with God. Thus "woman is regarded as a moral inferior of the male: wilful lacking self control of her passions and appetites, a temptress to the male, and therefore needing to be kept under control, both for her own good and to prevent her from subverting the higher capacities of male rationality and virtue."<sup>153</sup>

According to Goman, "the fall is not merely a story about the origin of sin, but also of the tragic entrance of distrust and misunderstanding between the two sexes and the loss of that primeval unity of man and woman that was God's intention from the first."<sup>154</sup> We may say that man's supremacy over woman is not God's intention as we

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<sup>148</sup> Phyllis A. Bird, "Bone of My Bone and Flesh of My Flesh," *Theology Today* 50 (1993): 527.

<sup>149</sup> Osburn, *Women in the Church: Reclaiming the Ideal*, 112. "He shall rule over you" (Gn 3:16) comes as a result of the Fall and was not part of the God's original intention. In today's society desire for dominance over others is the root of much moral evil – war, slavery, murder, theft, cruelty etc.

<sup>150</sup> Plastras, *Creation and Covenant*, 41.

<sup>151</sup> Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), 84.

<sup>152</sup> Wijngaards, *The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church: Unmasking a Cuckoo's Egg Tradition*, 88; Ouellette, "Woman's Doom in Genesis 3:16," 389-399; Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975); George H. Tavard, *Woman in Christian Tradition* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1922); Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*.

<sup>153</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Christianity," in *Women in World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 209.

<sup>154</sup> John Gifford Goman, *The Ordination of Women: The Bible and the Fathers* (Michigan: Microfilms International, 1980), 18.



have already seen in the creation story, but is only noted as a fact in human society.<sup>155</sup> The male domination enters in Genesis chapter three. Both Adam and Eve sin and the disastrous consequences are enormous. Before the fall both are equal partners but after the fall Adam will attempt to enslave her as he asserts dominion over her.<sup>156</sup> This domination affects future generations of men and women in their relationships with one another. Malphurs opines that “because of this judgment, there will be the predisposition in women to control and in men to dominate.”<sup>157</sup>

The Christian tradition identified Eve with evil. The traditional understanding states that Eve was deceived by the serpent and she tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. “The one who was led astray now becomes a temptress.”<sup>158</sup> The text of 1Tim 2:9-14 says that while Eve was made second, she sinned first. This is considered as a double reason for the subordination of women in patriarchy.<sup>159</sup> Ruether observes that “this establishes the natural dominance of male over female and reinforces submission on woman that is due to her priority in sin.”<sup>160</sup> Such modern comments reiterate the deeply rooted and commonly accepted notion that Eve tempted Adam to commit the first sin. It further leads to such a comment that Eve deceived Adam in such a way that he really did not perceive the seriousness of his act.<sup>161</sup> Paul Ricoeur says that woman “represents the point of weakness,” as the entire story “gives evidence of a very masculine resentment.”<sup>162</sup> McKenzie links the “moral weakness” of the woman with her “sexual attraction” and holds that the latter ruined both the woman and the man.<sup>163</sup> Nevertheless, the narrative does not say any of these things. It is a misconception that Eve tempts or seduces Adam. Tribble is of the opinion that both man and woman are tempted by the serpent and their realisation of nakedness together further reveals that they are mutually responsible for their actions of disobedience.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> N. P. Bratsiotis, "Ish," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, eds. Johannes Botterweck and Hemer Ringgren (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 229.

<sup>156</sup> Malphurs, *Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 105.

<sup>157</sup> Malphurs, *Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 106.

<sup>158</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis: A commentary*, 87.

<sup>159</sup> Sally Ann McReynolds and Ann O' Hara Gaff, "Sin: When Women Are the Context," in *In the Embrace of God*, ed. Ann O' Hara Gaff (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 168.

<sup>160</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 86.

<sup>161</sup> Jean M. Haggins, "The Myth of Eve : The Temptress," *Journal of American Accademy of Religion* 44 (1976): 642.

<sup>162</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 255.

<sup>163</sup> John L. McKenzie, "The Literary Characteristics of Gen 2-3," *Theological Studies* 15 (1954): 570.

<sup>164</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 114. The knowledge that they are naked forced them to hide away from God. It may not be the “guilt from an act of sin, but shame at the brute, physical fact



The significant question here is how Christian tradition came to suspect woman as temptress and evil? In this regard the following section, discusses on the different viewpoints of mutual responsibility of sin.

### 3.4 Is the Woman Alone Responsible for Sin?

Theresa Okure, commenting on the first chapters of the book of Genesis, objects to the tendency of attributing the sole responsibility to woman for the sin. According to her, the fall in no way attributes to Eve the sole responsibility for sin. She puts forth some arguments from the scripture to make her point: Adam personally received from God the prohibition against eating the forbidden fruit (2:16-17); the punishment which he received has universal scope – the earth is cursed because of him (3:17); finally, death is pronounced as part of his punishment (3:19).<sup>165</sup> She further argues that if Eve alone had been guilty, Adam would not have been punished. After the fall, Adam names Eve as the “mother of all those who live,” giving hope to humanity through her.<sup>166</sup> Gellman observes that the address of God both to the snake and the man begin by alluding to the sin each had committed.

Verse 3:14 begins in this way: ‘And the Lord God said to the snake, “because you have done this...”’ ‘And 3:17 opens with these words, ‘And to the man he said, “Because you listened to the voice of your woman, and ate from the tree...”’ Nevertheless, in contrast to this, in God’s address to the woman 3:16, there is no reference to her sinful act, but simply, ‘To the woman he said, “I will increase your pain [...]”’<sup>167</sup>

From the above observation, we can see that Adam and Eve both sinned and both are equally responsible for the story of the fall. There is no suggestion that Eve is guiltier or more punishable than Adam. “Both are tossed out into the mean world of struggle for existence, alienated sexuality, and oppressive relationship, with the loss of the dreaming innocence of childhood.”<sup>168</sup> As we have already seen, in Christian Tradition, Eve has been judged as the one who caused evil. But the image of Eve is changing. It is remarkable that the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* in its fourth

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of their nakedness” that motivated them to shy away from God. Bruce D. Naidoff, “A Man to Work the Soil: A New Interpretation of Genesis 2-3,” *Journal for the Study of Old Testament* 5 (1978): 9.

<sup>165</sup> Teresa Okure, “Women in the Bible,” in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 50.

<sup>166</sup> Okure, “Women in the Bible,” 51.

<sup>167</sup> Jerome Gellman, “Gender and Sexuality in the Garden of Eden,” *Theology and Sexuality* 12 (2006): 325.

<sup>168</sup> Ruether, *Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology*, 84-86. In 1 Timothy it emerges as a keystone for patriarchal Christianity. Eve was created second and sinned first. This establishes the natural dominance of male over female and reinforces submission on woman that is due to her priority in sin.



part offers a revision of the role of Eve. Eve alone is not held responsible any more. She is no longer negatively pictured as the first sinner, but positively as the “mother of the living.”<sup>169</sup> Mary C. Segers opines, the Pope minimizes the role of Eve in the story of the Fall and original sin, so as to counter the identification of women with sinfulness.<sup>170</sup> In this regard the following section will highlight some of the theological vision of John Paul II for the liberation of women as envisioned in the document.

### 3.5 Theological Vision of the Pope for Women’s Liberation

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Pope identifies the deeper root of violence against women as an effect of original sin, which ruptures the fundamental equality in the original creation of man and woman. He notes further that “this threat is more serious for the woman, since domination takes the place of ‘being a sincere gift’ and therefore living ‘for’ the other; ‘he shall rule over you.’ This ‘domination’ [...] is especially to the disadvantage of the woman.”<sup>171</sup> In line with much recent feminist biblical interpretation, the Pope concludes that this text outlines the consequences of sin, not God’s original purpose of creation.<sup>172</sup> We have already noted that the effects of sin on male-female relationships are tragic. “In place of the mutual self-giving which formed the basis for the *communio personarum* in marriage, sin deforms the perception of the other into an object to be used.”<sup>173</sup> It diminishes the dignity of both sexes. However, it has consequences that are more serious for women who are made objects of male domination.<sup>174</sup> In the same section, the Pope declares that the narrative of the fall of man in Genesis chapter 3 cannot be used to denigrate the position of woman vis-a-vis man. “This passage too has at times been invoked as subordinating women not just

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<sup>169</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 11; Anneliest van Heijst, “Beyond Dividing Thinking: Solomon’s Judgment and the Wisdom Traditions of Women,” *Louvain Studies* 19 (1994): 114.

<sup>170</sup> Segers, “Feminism, Liberalism and Catholicism,” 599.

<sup>171</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 10. In *Evangelium Vitae* the Pope considers how the structure of a materialistic society fosters the domination of the strong over the weak: “[I]nterpersonal relations are seriously impoverished. The first to be harmed are women, children, the sick or suffering, and the elderly. The criterion of personal dignity [...] is replaced by the criterion of efficiency, functionality and usefulness.” John Paul II, “*Evangelium Vitae*,” 23.

<sup>172</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 10. See also, Lisa Sowle Cahill, “The Feminist Pope,” in *Does Christianity Teach Male Headship? The Equal-Regard Marriage and Its Critics*, ed. David G. Blankenhorn, Don S. Browning, and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 46. To support the idea of the Pope, Cahill comments that the image of God in man and woman must be reflected in the “unity” of the two. Instead, “he shall rule over you” represents the threat of domination and corruption of the good order of creation.

<sup>173</sup> Grabowski, “Mutual Submission and Trinitarian Self-Giving,” 495.

<sup>174</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 10. The Pope states that desire in the service of love becomes instead twisted by the threefold concupiscence – the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life (1 Jn 2:16).



to the dominion (watchful care) of men but rather to domination (arbitrary rule) by men.”<sup>175</sup> Instead of insisting to a distorted relationship resulting from sin, the Pope refers this passage to a “mutual distortion based upon what should be mutual equality.”<sup>176</sup> The Pope further emphasizes the matter with the following words:

This statement in Genesis 3:16 is of great significance. It implies a reference to the mutual relationship of man and woman in marriage [...]. The matrimonial union requires respect for and a perfecting of the true personal subjectivity of both of them. The woman cannot become the “object” of “domination” and male “possession.”<sup>177</sup>

In this context, it is important to notice that *Mulieris Dignitatem* presents the domination of women by men as a consequence of the fall and, thus, as a situation to be overcome. For this, John Paul II has suggested some theological arguments that enhance the dignity of women.

### 3.5.1 Masculinization Vs Feminine Originality

Genesis 2:23-25 speaks of the man and the woman becoming a gift for each other through the whole truth and evidence of their own body in its masculinity and femininity.<sup>178</sup> On the basis of the anthropology found in Genesis, John Paul II insists on “the truth about the dignity and vocation that result from the specific diversity and personal originality of man and woman.”<sup>179</sup> The Pope condemns all types of ‘masculinisation’ of women and says that equal dignity is not in losing the feminine ‘originality’ but in safeguarding and realising it. He adds that difference does not mean opposition. In her own personal characteristics as woman she bears the likeness of God. Perfection for her is not to be like man by losing her specific qualities as woman but it consists in being a woman equal to man with difference.<sup>180</sup>

“The denial of difference is thus actually a denial of the feminine, which is to say that feminine characteristics are most under attack by these feminists. Gender feminists tend to eliminate sexual differences by moving toward masculine stereotype.”<sup>181</sup> Therefore, in the Apostolic Letter the Pope emphatically says, the true liberation of women must not involve masculinization in which women appropriate to themselves

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<sup>175</sup> Lawrence B. Porter, "Gender in Theology: The Example of John Paul II's *Mulieris Dignitatem*," *Gregorianum* 77 (1996): 108.

<sup>176</sup> Lawrence B. Porter, "Gender in Theology: The Example of John Paul II's *Mulieris Dignitatem*," 107.

<sup>177</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 10.

<sup>178</sup> John Paul II, "Man and Woman: A Mutual Gift for Each Other," 1.

<sup>179</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 10.

<sup>180</sup> John Paul II, "Women's Dignity Must be Respected," *L'Osservatore Romano* (22 June 1994): 11.

<sup>181</sup> Coles, "New Feminism: A Sex- Gender Reunion," 60.



male characteristics contrary to their feminine originality. Such an approach distorts the vision on women who are really rich and what constitutes their essential richness.<sup>182</sup>

Commenting on this statement, Kalbian says that the Pope affirms women's right to oppose such oppression. However, he swiftly adds that such opposition must not under any condition lead to the masculinization of women. He further explains this position of the Pope by saying that the women's right to resistance to domination makes sense in the context of the women retaining their essential femininity. He underlines that the Pope, in trying to free women from domination, also cautions that, women might "deform and lose what constitutes their essential richness."<sup>183</sup> The Pope definitely underlines the fact that dignity does not consist in woman becoming man. Since the feminists' attempt to eradicate the male-female distinction has further confused the issue, the Pope emphasises the masculine-feminine distinction more powerfully. Brown observes it in the following way:

Both genders are presented as gifts to the other and both man and woman are said to have an equal responsibility for cultivating in the "other" a capacity for a loving relationship of mutual respect and submissiveness a relationship which will ultimately enable the "other" to accept God's own loving approach.<sup>184</sup>

Indeed, as the Pope writes in his *Letter to women*, "it is only through the duality of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' that the 'human' finds full realization."<sup>185</sup> Quoting from *Mulieris Dignitatem* 10 and 29, Curran says, their masculinity and femininity allows the man and the woman to make mutual and sincere gift of self to the other. The woman in Genesis and the bride in the metaphor of Ephesians receive love in order to love in return. All human beings are first loved by God and then express love in return. But "it is precisely the woman – the bride – who manifests this truth to everyone."<sup>186</sup> Karl Lehmann comments, "the 'natural' diversity of the sexes signifies no inferiority in the value of the person; rather, complete acceptance of the difference is the presupposition for true equality."<sup>187</sup> According to Johnson, this papal position is

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<sup>182</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 10.

<sup>183</sup> Aline H. Kalbian, *Sexing the Church: Gender, Power and Ethics in Contemporary Catholicism* (Indiana Polis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 104. See also, John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 10.

<sup>184</sup> Susan Mader Brown, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*: A New Perspective on the Image of God," *Journal of Dharma* 23 (1998): 514.

<sup>185</sup> John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 7.

<sup>186</sup> Charles E. Curran, "John Paul II's Use of Scripture in His Moral Teaching," *Horizons* 1 (2004): 131.

<sup>187</sup> Karl Lehmann, "The Place of Women as a Problem in Theological Anthropology," *Communio* 10 (1983): 224.



an advance from previous official teaching for the following reason. The Pope declares that “the two sides of the masculine-feminine divide to be of equal value in the eyes of God, which must lead to equal respect in human relationships.”<sup>188</sup> The document gives a warning to women against the risk of seeking equality with men through a sort of masculinization of themselves.

### 3.5.2 Desire Vs Self-Giving Love

As John Paul II often says, “A human being, whether male or female, is a person, and therefore, ‘the only creature on earth which God willed for its own sake’; and at the same time this unique and unrepeatable creature ‘cannot fully find himself [sic] except through a sincere gift of self.’”<sup>189</sup> According to Genesis, the Letter argues, there is a break in the original “unity of the two.” The oneness and solidarity of the original purpose of creation splits apart due to sin. “Woman is subordinated to man (Gn 3:16) and man loses the cooperation of the soil of whose stuff he was made (Gn 3:17-18). Man’s function in the creation has been fundamentally changed.”<sup>190</sup>

Rousseau comments that the Pope sees “the two main ways in which any communion of persons can be ruptured – by desire and by domination.”<sup>191</sup> Pope John Paul II uses the Genesis statement “He shall rule over you,” to make the distinction between self-giving love and desire to interpret the Adam and Eve story. The first couples were created as a “unity of the two,” but they “freely chose desire over love.”<sup>192</sup> The relationship between man and woman has become warped. Instead of leading to a life-giving union, there exist tension and conflict. An adversarial stance develops between the two and it frequently leads to domination on the part of the man and manipulation on the part of the woman.<sup>193</sup>

The Pope suggests ways and means in such circumstances to discover the unity between the two [...] through a sincere gift of self to each other. In order to protect the conditions necessary for spousal love, he proposes on the one hand the

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<sup>188</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 61.

<sup>189</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 10. Here the Pope cited “Church in World,” 24. The Pope makes it clear in this document that every individual is called to become a person by “a sincere gift of self.”

<sup>190</sup> Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 84.

<sup>191</sup> Mary Rousseau, “Pope John Paul II’s Teaching on Women,” 3.

<sup>192</sup> Mary Rousseau, “Pope John Paul II’s Teaching on Women,” 3. For self-giving love constitutes the communion of persons. Desire, on the other hand, does not, and cannot, do so. Self giving love-wishes good to the other for the other’s sake, which brings about a communion of persons.

<sup>193</sup> Mary Healy, *Men and Women Are from Eden: A Study Guide to John Paul II’s Theology of the Body* (Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005), 36.



denunciation of inequality and domination and on the other the resistance of the effects of original sin, a task addressed to everyone.<sup>194</sup> Reflecting on Gn 3:16 the Pope says that domination and manipulation in man-woman relationship not only effects to the disadvantage of women but also “diminishes the true dignity of man.”<sup>195</sup>

### 3.5.3 Liberation is Restoration of Communion

We have already pointed to sin as the root cause for the distorted relationship between men and women and the relationship of domination and manipulation as a factor that denies the equal dignity of women.<sup>196</sup> God’s decisive words to the woman after the first sin express the kind of relationship which has now been introduced between man and woman. (Gn 3:16). In the same line of thought, *The Letter to the Bishop’s of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World* remarks: “It will be a relationship in which love will frequently be debased into pure self-seeking, in a relationship which ignores and kills love and replaces it with the yoke of domination of one sex over the other.”<sup>197</sup> Weigel emphasises the communion from the beginning in the following words:

Sin fractures the community of persons that God had intended “from the beginning,” and which is the ground of the radical equality of men and women as images of God [...]. Liberation is for the restoration of communion, of free and equal self giving- the “original unity” of men and women that God intended. Unity and equality-in-diversity, not domination and not androgyny, are what has been inscribed in human nature “from the beginning.”<sup>198</sup>

Pope John Paul II writes, “woman is the one in whom the order of love in the created world of persons first takes root.”<sup>199</sup> This is because love is the inner dynamic of the life of God. Women’s dignity is to be measured not by the dominating and male order

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<sup>194</sup> Lemmons, “Equality, Gender and John Paul II,” 116; John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 10.

<sup>195</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 10.

<sup>196</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 9.

<sup>197</sup> Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” 7.

<sup>198</sup> George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (Cliff Street: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), 579. Referring to *Mulieris Dignitatem* Nos 9 and 10, Weigel states that, “The liberation of women from these patterns of domination can never be a liberation against. It must be a liberation for, one that safeguards the distinctive vocation of women and men that result from what the Pope calls their “personal originality” and destiny.” This is not acceptable to many feminist theologians. They demands sexual liberation of women, grounded in the right of abortion, and extended to women’s ordination to the priesthood. Elizabeth Fox Genovese, “Equality, Difference, and the Practical Problems of a New Feminism,” in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 300.

<sup>199</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 30.



of power, but “by the order of love, which is essentially the order of charity.”<sup>200</sup> That dignity gives rise to a vocation to love, which can be discerned in the fact that “the human being is entrusted by God to women in a particular way.”<sup>201</sup> We will come back to this point at a later stage.

### 3.5.4 Sincere Gift of Self in Communion

In *Mulieris Dignitatem* John Paul II states that to be a person in the image and likeness of God involves being in relationship – in relation to the other ‘I’. “To be human means to be called to interpersonal communion.”<sup>202</sup> Moreover, referring to Gn 2:18 he adds that a “person cannot exist alone, but rather exist only as a ‘unity of the two’ and therefore in relation to another person.” This ‘unity of the two’ is a matter of “a mutual relationship: man to woman and woman to man.”<sup>203</sup> Schumacher says,

In accord with the demands of human freedom, the image of God in the human person is thus presented as both a gift and a task, which is to say that the gift of being is accompanied by the invitation and the mission to cooperate and collaborate with the “project” the human person always already is for God. “Being a person means striving towards self-realization, which can only be achieved ‘through a sincere gift of self.’”<sup>204</sup>

Man and woman as created in the image of God who is a communion of persons can be true images only when they live in communion with each other in love. In a remarkable passage dealing with the mutual giving and receiving of man and woman the Pope said:

While in the mystery of creation the woman is the one who is ‘given’ to the man, he on his part, in receiving her as a gift in the full truth of her person and femininity, by this very reception, and, at the same time, he too is enriched in this reciprocal relationship. The man is enriched not only through her, who gives him her own person and femininity to him, but also by his gift of self.<sup>205</sup>

The primary expression of the complementary relation between the sexes is found in marriage, wherein, by means of the body, persons can make a “sincere gift of self” to one another that fully expresses the meaning of sexual difference. Woman and man

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<sup>200</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 29.

<sup>201</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 30; Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*, 580.

<sup>202</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 10.

<sup>203</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 7.

<sup>204</sup> Michele M. Schumacher, “The Nature of Nature in Feminism, Old and New: From Dualism to Complementary Unity,” in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 42.

<sup>205</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 197.



exist not just side by side, but “for” each other. Only a woman and a man, as sexual counterparts, can be wife and husband to each other; only they, together, can generate new life as the mother and father of a child.<sup>206</sup> Having spoken of the sin of the first parents and effects on women, the document proceeds to address the specific aspect of the dignity of women. We discuss this point in the next section.

## 4. Dimensions of the Vocation of Women

*Mulieris Dignitatem* speaks of the two-dimensional vocation of women as the fulfilment of the female personality: virginity and motherhood. While Pope John Paul II does acknowledge the many different roles of women in the Church and the world, he nonetheless specifically refers to motherhood and virginity as two dimensions of the female vocation.<sup>207</sup> There is an emerging awareness that women’s vocation comprises of every aspect of human life. Thus, today nobody can disregard the role of women in social, political, economic and cultural domains. Even though we intend to focus mainly on motherhood and virginity as vocations of women, we also, as part of our study, pay adequate attention to other roles of women.

### 4.1 Motherhood

According to Leonie Caldecott, Pope John Paul II’s “most compelling exposition of the social, spiritual and eschatological significance of human motherhood can be found in *Mulieris Dignitatem*.”<sup>208</sup> The original and specific gift or ‘genius’ of women is rooted in the vocation to motherhood; it belongs to their psychophysical and personal structure and to the ‘gift of self’ by which they are fulfilled. In a particular way, God entrusts the human being to the woman. Women’s unique contact with the mystery of life in its beginning makes them “more capable than men of paying attention to another person.”<sup>209</sup> Rejecting any “exclusively bio-physical interpretation of women and motherhood,” he links motherhood “to the personal structure of the woman and to the personal dimension of the gift.”<sup>210</sup> The Pope argues that sexual differences point to the ‘proper qualities’ and distinct vocations and roles of women and men. Not only the physical constitution of women, but also the psychological

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<sup>206</sup> Sara Butler, "Embodiment: Women and Men Equal and Complementary," in *The Church Woman Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 40.

<sup>207</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 17, 30.

<sup>208</sup> Leonie Caldecott, "Sincere Gift: The Pope's New Feminism," in *John Paul II and Moral Theology: Readings in Moral Theology*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 224.

<sup>209</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 18, 30.

<sup>210</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 18.



structure of women is naturally disposed to motherhood.<sup>211</sup> Again, the Pope says that parenthood is something that belongs to both men and women:

It is the woman who 'pays' directly for this shared generation, which literally absorbs the energies of her body and soul. It is therefore necessary that the man be fully aware that in their shared parenthood he owes a special debt to the woman. No program of 'equal rights' between women and men is valid unless it takes this fact fully into account.<sup>212</sup>

Therefore, the document says that men in some sense learn their fatherhood from the mother of their children, so that as the child grows, the contribution of both parents can come into play.<sup>213</sup> Women are capable of motherhood. Far from being oppressive, motherhood is one path to their fulfilment and one way they contribute to society.<sup>214</sup> The Pope seems to hold that motherhood is more central to a woman's identity than fatherhood is to a man's. Indeed, he indicates, men have to learn fatherhood from mothers, and men often have to be urged by society to fulfil their family responsibilities.<sup>215</sup> According to Pope John Paul II, relative to men, women are more oriented to persons rather than things and more interested in love than external action.<sup>216</sup> In the same way, the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith observes that a woman's nature is defined by her "capacity for the other."<sup>217</sup> In the following section we analyse the theological overview of motherhood and its implications in the lives of women.

#### 4.1.1 Theological Overview of Motherhood

Theologically, the woman through her motherhood generates human life in the image and likeness of God and as a result has a special place in the sight of God. The

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<sup>211</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 18. Feminist theologians reject the dualistic models for some reasons. There is an assumption that "the male is a better, stronger, more gifted one in the pair and that woman needs man to be complete." Another reason is "the model is naïve about the impact of culture and social factors that influence how a society views women and men." This has been seen through the ages, from denial of woman's ability to learn and thus to teach, to the refusal to admit women into professions such as law and medicine because they are 'too emotional'. Rakoczy comments, in Africa girl children are still often denied education to the same level as boy children because of cultural assumptions that educating girls would be a waste. Rackoczy, *In Her Name*, 48-49.

<sup>212</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 18.

<sup>213</sup> Leonie Caldecott, "Sincere Gift: The Pope's New Feminism," in *John Paul II and Moral Theology: Readings in Moral Theology*, 225; John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 18.

<sup>214</sup> John Paul II, "Welcome to Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women," 3.

<sup>215</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 18; John Paul II, "Welcome to Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women," 3.

<sup>216</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 18.

<sup>217</sup> Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World," 12.



Apostolic Letter states that motherhood has a dual significance. Firstly, it is seen as a great giving of self on the part of woman. She has a crucial and demanding role in caring for life. She has a special openness to the other person. Motherhood enriches this disposition even more.<sup>218</sup> Secondly, motherhood is introduced into the order of the covenant that God made with humanity in Jesus Christ. Motherhood, like the covenant, is a sign of God's action in the world and manifests God's own self-giving. Consequently, each and every time that motherhood is repeated in human history, it is related to the covenant, which God established with the human race through the motherhood of the Mother of God.<sup>219</sup> If a woman is a mother by nature, her vocation becomes a radical gift of self-giving and heroism, which is implicit in all her actions, that give, preserve and develop life. Pope John Paul II points out that the vocation to motherhood makes women sensitive to the needs and sufferings of others. When an awareness of otherness is added to this natural gift, in faith and evangelical charity, then the true and real dedication is seen.<sup>220</sup>

It is important to notice the teaching of John Paul II that a human being is entrusted by God "in a special way" to woman, that is to say, in virtue of her femininity.<sup>221</sup> In the first instance, this entrusting refers to her physical maternity through which the mystery of her femininity is manifested: woman is revealed as the one in whom human life is conceived and developed.<sup>222</sup> Such an "entrusting" of the human being to women manifests the distinction, explained above, between dignity and vocation; for human life according to the Pope is a gift that is first "received in order then to be given as a gift."<sup>223</sup> This "return of the gift" concerns, most fundamentally, that of one's own life, which is fashioned in God's image, and which includes the mission to transmit this image.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> John Paul II, *"Mulieris Dignitatem,"* 18.

<sup>219</sup> John Paul II, *"Mulieris Dignitatem,"* 19.

<sup>220</sup> John Paul II, *"Mulieris Dignitatem,"* 29.

<sup>221</sup> John Paul II, *"Mulieris Dignitatem,"* 30.

<sup>222</sup> John Paul II, *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981), 155. John Paul II goes on to speak of the woman's unique contact with the child within her as giving rise to a certain attitude of attentiveness with regard, not only to her own child, but also to all human persons. John Paul II, *"Mulieris Dignitatem,"* 18.

<sup>223</sup> John Paul II, *"Evangelium Vitae,"* 92.

<sup>224</sup> John Paul II, *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis*, 161. According to the text of Gn 1:26, the "call" to existence is at the same time the transmission of the divine image and likeness. Man must proceed to transmit this image, thus continuing God's work. The narrative of the generation of Seth stresses this aspect: "when Adam had lived a hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image" (Gn 5:3). Since Adam and Eve were the image of God, Seth inherits this likeness from his parents to transmit it to others.



Cahill comments on the Pope and says: “[t]he Pope sees women and men as identical in personality, gifts or roles. Women should have access to virtually all the social roles open to men, but they will exercise these roles in different ways.”<sup>225</sup> The Pope sees the parental roles of mother and father as cooperative and reciprocal, even suggesting that men “learn” fatherhood from women, whose experiences of pregnancy and birth enhance their predisposition “of paying attention to another person.”<sup>226</sup> Cahill’s comment in this regard is worth noting: “a feminist critique may fault the idea that women are inherently more sensitive to others than men, arguing that it consigns both sexes to constraining gender stereotypes and results ultimately in more passive and subordinate roles for women.”<sup>227</sup> Nevertheless, the Pope explicitly rejects “a wrong superiority of male prerogatives which humiliates women and inhibits the development of healthy family relationships.”<sup>228</sup>

#### ***4.1.1.1 Feminine Genius and the Order of Love***

Pope John Paul II suggests that the phrase “feminine genius,” is a “place” of the more excellent way<sup>229</sup> in the world and the Church. “In God’s eternal plan,” he writes, “woman is the one in whom the order of love in the created world of persons first takes root.”<sup>230</sup> Because love is the inner dynamic of the life of God, women’s experience has a unique dignity, and that dignity is to be measured not by the dominating and male order of power, but “by the order of love, which is essentially the order of justice and charity.”<sup>231</sup> Therefore, the Pope does not hesitate to call women and their genius as prophetic and recognise in the feminine genius a particular capacity to defend the dignity of the person. Here is a basic issue with untold and profound implications for humanity.<sup>232</sup>

The unique essence of “woman” lies in the notion that she is made for the “order of love”: “Woman can only find herself by giving love to others.”<sup>233</sup> Given her

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<sup>225</sup> Cahill, “The Feminist Pope,” 43.

<sup>226</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 18.

<sup>227</sup> Cahill, “The Feminist Pope,” 43-44.

<sup>228</sup> John Paul II, “The Apostolic Exhortation on the Family,” 25.

<sup>229</sup> St Paul had taught that the “more excellent way” and the greatest of the theological virtues was love (1Cor 12:31b-13:13).

<sup>230</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 29.

<sup>231</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 29.

<sup>232</sup> George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (Cliff Street: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), 580.

<sup>233</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 30. For a comprehensive outlook, see Richard Leonard, *Beloved Daughters: 100 Years of Papal Teaching on Women* (Melbourne: David Lovell Publishers, 1995).



orientation to love, the Pope emphatically says, the proper vocation for every woman is motherhood, or the spiritual form of motherhood that is exercised in virginity. According to Elizabeth Johnson, “[t]he masculine – feminine dichotomy, interpreted as acting versus responding, prevents women from taking initiative in love.”<sup>234</sup> The Pope conceives the dynamic in the following way: “[t]he bridegroom is the one who loves. The bride is loved. It is she who receives love in order to love in return.”<sup>235</sup>

The desire to become a gift, “to belong to another, and to possess this other being completely,” is, according to Edith Stein, the deepest longing of every woman—including those without a specific religious vocation. Unless this “other” is God, however, her surrender will be a “perverted self-abandon and a form of slavery.”<sup>236</sup> Hence, even the marital vocation should be an expression, or form, of the more fundamental vocation to offer one’s life to the divine Bridegroom. John Paul II reiterates that ‘bridal vocation is necessarily linked to the maternal.’<sup>237</sup> In the following section, we analyse the meaning and significance of maternal self-giving.

#### **4.1.1.2 Women’s Vocation: Bridal and Maternal Self-Giving**

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Pope says that a particular gift of motherhood in woman is in the following way:

The woman discovers herself through a sincere gift of self. The gift of interior readiness to accept the child and bring it into the world is linked to the marriage union, which [...] should constitute a special moment in the mutual self giving both by woman and the man [...]. Motherhood is linked to the personal structure of the woman and to the personal dimension of the gift.<sup>238</sup>

The personal aspect of woman’s motherhood participates in the personalist theme of self-gift to another and of receiving another. The historical development of this notion has been discussed above under ‘interpersonal relation.’ For John Paul II to be a person means to be open and available to receiving another person. In *Mulieris dignitatem*, the Pope refers to Vatican II (*GS* 24) to reiterate his acceptance of what distinguishes personal identity: “[t]he human being is a person, a subject who decides

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<sup>234</sup> Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, 61.

<sup>235</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 29. See also, Christine Gudorf presents clarifying background, Christine Gudorf, “Encountering the Other: The Modern Papacy on Women,” in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles Curran, Margaret Farley, and Richard McCormick (New York: Paulist, 1996), 66-89.

<sup>236</sup> Edith Stein, *Essays on Women*, 52.

<sup>237</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 22. In fact, the Pope stresses that Paul uses the image of motherhood, finding no more powerful metaphor, to express the Church’s own mission. Here the image used is “My little children with whom I am again in travail” (Gal 4:19).

<sup>238</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 18.



for himself. At the same time, man ‘cannot fully find himself [sic] except through a sincere gift of self.’”<sup>239</sup>

It is a fact that women have in every known society assumed the role of caring for the young and managing the home. This, interestingly enough, coincides with what anthropologists and sociologists have noted as superior verbal skills and more integrated personality patterns in women than in men.<sup>240</sup> Indeed, rather than referring to specific culturally and historically determined roles of women,<sup>241</sup> the Pope speaks of a specifically feminine nature, a particular “psycho-physical structure,”<sup>242</sup> which is the source of an ontologically founded vocation of becoming a gift in the form of a wife and mother or of a consecrated virgin. This is to say, women are called to make a unique contribution to society corresponding to their unique physical and psychological constitution. The experience of physical motherhood, for example, which arises out of this constitution, is thought to “sensitize” women to the dignity of human persons regardless of their “usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health.”<sup>243</sup> This is the biological foundation for the “female genius” to which John Paul II refers.

Pope John Paul II recognized the challenge of the integration of women in motherhood, of both the physical and spiritual realities. He appealed to science to make its contribution in the understanding of the psychophysical structure of women as disposed to motherhood. However, he “rejected a purely materialistic or deterministic view.”<sup>244</sup> He recognized that motherhood develops in a woman her special advantage of being more capable than men of paying attention to another person.<sup>245</sup> One great contribution here is the understanding of the gift of self: it is in the gift of oneself to another that the human person fully finds himself/ herself. This is rooted in the order of existence of a personal being. This theology is closely related to “Wojtyla’s anthropology of the acting person: as activity reveals *esse*, the gift of self

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<sup>239</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 18.

<sup>240</sup> Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 438-439. It is specifically the feminine role and its accompanying characteristics that are contrasted by Clark to that of men who have assumed in every known society a governing role, for which they are considered particularly suited due to their characteristic “aggressiveness,” “goal orientation,” and “superior visual-spatial ability.”

<sup>241</sup> The distinction is apparent in John Paul II’s “Letter to Women,” 11: “A certain diversity of roles is in no way prejudicial to women, provided that this diversity is not the result of arbitrary imposition, but is rather an expression of what is specific to being male and female.”

<sup>242</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 18.

<sup>243</sup> John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 99.

<sup>244</sup> Kathleen Curran Sweeney, “The Perfection of Women as Maternal and the Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla,” *Logos* 9 (2006): 150.

<sup>245</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 18.



reveals the capacity of the human person. It is in this person's structure of self-possession and self governance that a person can give himself or herself as a gift to another."<sup>246</sup>

Speaking of the prophetic characteristics of woman in her femininity John Paul II states: "our time in particular awaits the manifestation of that 'genius' which belongs to women, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance: because they are human and because of the greatest of these love."<sup>247</sup> A woman through her vocation to be a woman helps to realise a society and civilization of love. Again the Pope emphasises that "it is a 'sign of the times' that woman's role is increasingly recognized, not only in the family circle, but also in the wider context of all social activities. Without the contribution of women, society is not alive, culture impoverished, and peace less stable. Situations where women are prevented from developing their full potential and from offering the wealth of their gifts should therefore be considered profoundly unjust, not only to women themselves but to society as a whole."<sup>248</sup> Here we see clearly the Pope's appreciation of women for their contribution to the Church and society.

In his *Letter to Women*, Pope John Paul II paid tribute to women in all their various circumstances, recognizing 'what it means to be a woman in our time.' He gave thanks to women who contribute to the growth of culture: "[t]hrough the insight which is so much a part of your womanhood you enrich the world's understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic."<sup>249</sup> John Paul II was clear in his concern for women's need for fulfilment of their whole self, which has also to be recognized and encouraged:

What shall we say of the obstacles which in so many parts of the world still keep women from being fully integrated into social, political and economic life? We need only think of how the gift of motherhood is often penalized rather than rewarded, even though humanity owes its very survival to this gift. Certainly, much remains to be done to prevent discrimination against those who have chosen to be wives and mothers.<sup>250</sup>

Because of their innate qualities of motherliness, women make extraordinary contribution to the civilization of love; the Pope frequently referred to this element.

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<sup>246</sup> Kathleen Curran Sweeney, "The Perfection of Women as Maternal and the Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla," 149.

<sup>247</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 30. Here he referred 1Cor 13:13.

<sup>248</sup> John Paul II, "The Feminine Genius," (Angelus Reflections, July 23, 1995), in *The Genius of Women*, 1.

<sup>249</sup> John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 2.

<sup>250</sup> John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 4.



This is the 'genius of women.' The Pope finds the highest expression of both the 'genius of women' and the 'prophetic character of women in their femininity' in the Virgin Mother of God."<sup>251</sup> In the following section, we discuss the link between motherhood of women and the person of the mother of God.

#### **4.1.1.3 Motherhood in Relation to Mother of God**

The document *Mulieris Dignitatem* begins with a parallel between woman and the Mother of God<sup>252</sup> because the dignity and mission of woman is fully illumined by the singular dignity of the *Theotokos*.<sup>253</sup> Within this first parallel between woman and the mother of God, again in John Paul II's thought there are other parallels, i.e., parallel between Eve and Mary, Church as the Bride of Christ, and Mary as the prototype of the Church. The parallel between woman and the Mother of God is the most fundamental among all these interpretations contained in the Apostolic Letter.<sup>254</sup>

In the view of Elizabeth Johnson, the main focus for John Paul II's reflection is Mary's role as mother of God, which as the "ineffable truth stands at the centre of the mystery of God's plan of salvation."<sup>255</sup> The most important thing about this real motherhood is that she gave her free consent to God. "It places her in union with God, uniquely so on a physical level and also, in an archetypal way representative of the whole human race, on a spiritual level through grace."<sup>256</sup> This unique motherhood is a paradigm for the dignity and vocation of all women and the Pope writes: "[t]he dignity of every human being and the vocation corresponding to that dignity find their definitive measure in union with God."<sup>257</sup> Since all of this happens to her precisely as a woman, she also signifies "the fullness of the perfection of what is characteristic of

<sup>251</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 29.

<sup>252</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 3-5.

<sup>253</sup> The statement that Mary is *Theotokos*, Mother of God, was first introduced in the context of the 4<sup>th</sup> century Arian debate over the relation of the Son to the one God. It was given definitive approval in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Council of Ephesus. The purpose of this statement was to safeguard the understanding of Jesus Christ's ultimate identity as the Word of God, *homoousios*, or 'one in being with the Father as to his divinity,' as the Council of Nicea confessed and the Chalcedon taught again. Elizabeth A. Johnson, "The Symbolic Character of Theological Statements About Mary," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22 (1985): 314. In 431 C.E. the Bishop's at the Council of Ephesus gave Mary the Eastern title, *Theotokos*, or 'the Bearer of God.' It was to counter the arguments of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius who believed that there were two natures in Jesus – a human Jesus and a mystic divinity, Christ. Nestorius favoured the title *Christokos* to suggest that Mary bore Jesus in his humanity only. Ultimately, the title *Theotokos* was officially accepted after a heated conciliar debate presided by Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius was excommunicated.

<sup>254</sup> Angelo Cardinal Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, trans. Michelle K. Borrás (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 15.

<sup>255</sup> Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, 62.

<sup>256</sup> Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, 62.

<sup>257</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 5.



woman, of what is feminine. Here we find ourselves, in a sense, at the culminating point, the archetype, of the personal dignity of women.”<sup>258</sup> Therefore, Johnson opines, “anything true said about woman’s dignity and vocation must remain within this Marian horizon.”<sup>259</sup> Indeed, “Mary is the model of the full development of women’s vocation.”<sup>260</sup>

Accordingly, a woman is said to be a “mother,” in the Pope’s writing, not primarily for the act of giving birth, but in living the mystery whereby the love and grace that is received are not contained within herself but mediated further.<sup>261</sup> Again he says; “[t]he motherhood of every woman is not only ‘of flesh and blood’: it expresses a profound ‘listening to the word of the living God’ and readiness to ‘safeguard’ this Word, which is ‘the word of eternal life.’”<sup>262</sup> This is more clearly expressed in *Evangelium Vitae*, where this readiness implies a willingness to share in the spiritual labour of childbirth as a participation in the Church’s own labour for the spiritual birth of her sons and daughters.<sup>263</sup> Here the Pope declares that like Mary, women have motherhood – whether physical or spiritual as their true vocation.

#### **4.1.1.4 Motherhood in Relation to the New Covenant**

Pope John Paul II pointed out that motherhood is always related to the covenant God has established with humanity, for every mother continues the human race. The high point of this role is found in Mary, the Mother of God.

[Through] her maternal ‘fiat’ (‘Let it be done to me’) God begins a new covenant with humanity. This is the eternal and definitive covenant in Christ, in his body and blood, in his cross and resurrection. [...] For it is precisely those born of earthly mothers, the sons and daughters of the human race, who receive from the Son of God the power to become ‘the children of God.’<sup>264</sup>

Mary reveals the essence of motherhood as an active receptivity to the will of God. She carries out a ‘hidden life,’ in contemplation of God’s gift but her actions have immense consequences. This Marian archetype is a model for all women. It is a call to the most complete fulfilment for the female human person.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 5.

<sup>259</sup> Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, 62.

<sup>260</sup> John Paul II, *Theotokos: Woman, Mother, Disciple: A Catechesis on Mary, Mother of God* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2000), 43.

<sup>261</sup> John Paul II, “*Redemptoris Mater*,” *Origins* 16 (1987): 13.

<sup>262</sup> John Paul II, “*Redemptoris Mater*,” 19 (cf. Jn 6:68).

<sup>263</sup> John Paul II, “*Evangelium Vitae*,” 103.

<sup>264</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 19.

<sup>265</sup> Sweeney, “The Perfection of Women as Maternal and the Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła,” 150-151. More radical readings of Mary come from theologians who talk about the importance of the



The Pope teaches that the two dimensions of motherhood, physical and spiritual come together in an exemplary fashion in the virginal maternity of Mary, which initiates the New Covenant to be definitively established in the body and blood of Christ. On the one hand, Mary's "natural" motherhood is of primary significance, for it is thanks to her that this body to be offered and blood to be shed are authentically human: the eternal Word made "flesh" (cf. John 1:14) is "the flesh and blood of Mary."<sup>266</sup> On the other hand, John Paul II compares Mary's faith to that of Abraham. While Abraham's faith inaugurates the Old Covenant, Mary's faith inaugurates the New.<sup>267</sup> Hence, every motherhood, he continues, is related to God's covenant with humanity, which He established through the motherhood of Mary, the Mother of God.<sup>268</sup> John Paul II writes that motherhood is not just a biological reality, but a moral and personal reality with a dramatic religious meaning. For it is through motherhood that humanity was given its Saviour. It seems that we have to make this point clearer. Mary's motherhood raises new questions and challenges in theology concerning issues related to women.

#### 4.1.2 Impact of Mary's Motherhood on Women from a Feminist Point of View

Feminist theologians argued that the traditional construal of Mary as mother has some drawbacks. They have continued to develop a comprehensive critique of traditional Mariology. Ruether states that; "[t]he Mariological tradition functions in patriarchal theology primarily to reflect and express the theology of the patriarchal feminine. The Virgin Mary becomes the theological personification of Psyche and Mother Church as Virginal Bride and Mother of Christians."<sup>269</sup> Rakoczy comments thus: "Mary's motherhood has also not served women well. Its glorification has reinforced the perception that motherhood is the sole reason for women's existence, thus setting up an insoluble tension between Mary as virgin and as mother."<sup>270</sup>

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Bible in Christian communities of the poor and women. Mary represents both groups. For example in Luke's Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), she is the lowly servant who prophesies that the poor will be lifted up and the rich sent empty. In the gospel of Matthew and Luke, Mary is pictured as a woman under threat because of her pregnancy outside marriage. John presented the suffering of Mary because of the execution of Jesus. Chris Maunder, "Mary in the New Testament and Apocrypha," in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (London: Continuum, 2007), 35.

<sup>266</sup> John Paul II, "Redemptoris Mater," 20.

<sup>267</sup> John Paul II, "Redemptoris Mater," 14.

<sup>268</sup> John Paul II, "Mulieris Dignitatem," 19.

<sup>269</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 149-150.

<sup>270</sup> Susan Rakoczy, *In Her Name* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004), 342.



Elizabeth Johnson outlines three significant detrimental aspects of the Marian tradition. First, it has “been intrinsically associated with the denigration of women as a group.”<sup>271</sup> Johnson also points to the role of psychological factors in the universal degradation of woman through this “Madonna-whore syndrome”:

Men have divided women’s reality into good and evil elements, projecting the good onto Mary in an idealized fashion and the evil onto the rest of women who are then to be kept subject due to their low estate. The ideal of the good feminine which is projected onto Mary reflects the desire for a woman who is untroubling to the celibate male psyche, with asexuality and passive obedience being the most notable elements which characterize her image.<sup>272</sup>

Secondly, “the Marian tradition has dichotomised the being and roles of women and men in the community of disciples of Christ.”<sup>273</sup> The historical fact of Mary’s call to be the Mother of Jesus is idealised into the pattern of all male-female relationships: God calls, Mary responds – men are active, women are passive; men take initiative, women respond. The language of complementarity is used to the detriment of all women since “it is a mask for an ideology which places woman in a stereotyped role because of her gender, a role where she is praised for living at less than full capacity.”<sup>274</sup> Thirdly, “the Marian tradition has truncated the ideal of feminine fulfilment and wholeness.”<sup>275</sup> The images of Mary as handmaid, virgin and mother have not assisted women to be their full and complete selves. Thus women learn that they are also to be submissive, silent and deferential. The French feminist Simone de Beauvoir criticised Mary’s role in Christian life. She says:

For the first time in human history the mother kneels before her son: she freely accepts her inferiority. This is the supreme masculine victory, consummated in the cult of the Virgin - it is the rehabilitation of women through the accomplishment of her defeat.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, “The Marian Tradition and the Reality of Women,” *Horizons* 12 (1985): 121-122. She particularly critiques the Eve-Mary symbolism: Eve was the temptress and sinner while Mary is obedient, docile and faithful. Since “no other woman is as obedient or pure or holy as Mary, no other woman can resemble her.”

<sup>272</sup> Johnson, “The Marian Tradition and the Reality of Women,” 123-124. The Madonna – ‘Whore Syndrome,’ a classic example, “enables men to love and respect their ideal woman in Mary but to ignore and dominate concrete real women with impunity and immunity even from the searchings of their own conscience.” Instead of seeing Mary as a type, a symbol of the capacity of women, it has exalted Mary as the great exception in comparison to whom all other women are denigrated.

<sup>273</sup> Johnson, “The Marian Tradition and the Reality of Women,” 124.

<sup>274</sup> Johnson, “The Marian Tradition and the Reality of Women,” 125. The language of women’s “special” or “proper” nature is used to emphasise that women’s primary role is that of mother, either physical or spiritual.

<sup>275</sup> Johnson, “The Marian Tradition and the Reality of Women,” 126.

<sup>276</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Bantam Books, 1952), 160.



Here Beauvoir decries Mary's submission to the call of God, "I am the servant of the Lord" (Lk 1:38), as the supreme masculine victory. In the *Church and the Second Sex*, Mary Daly comments on De Beauvoir's analysis and points out that since women are encouraged to identify with this passive Mary, this has "devastating effects" on them.<sup>277</sup> Amongst them are, women's acceptance of "enslavement" which "was accomplished symbolically in the Cult of the Virgin mother of God, who is glorified only in accepting the subordinate role assigned to her."<sup>278</sup> Fiorenza has warned that Mary has almost never functioned as a symbol of women's equality and capacity to lead; adherence to her can deter women from becoming whole persons.<sup>279</sup>

In the opinion of some feminist theologians, official views on Mary have been shaped by men in a patriarchal context and have functioned powerfully to define and control female lives, which Ruether has pointed in the following words:

There is the Mary of the monks, who venerate her primarily as a virgin and shape her doctrines in an antisexual mold. But there is the Mary of the people who is still the earth mother and who is venerated for her power over the secret of natural fecundity. It is she who helps the woman through her birth pangs, who assures the farmer of his new crops, new rains, new lambs, she is the maternal image of the divine who understands ordinary people in their wretchedness.<sup>280</sup>

However, the official Marian symbol is the result of a socially powerful men's interpretation of the ideal woman. In a patriarchal society, this ideal has functioned effectively to keep women in their pre-assigned place subordinate to men.<sup>281</sup> According to Chung Hyun Kyung, "[t]he Catholic Church has exercised control over women by domesticating Mary," presenting her as a "passive, obedient, yes-woman or humble maid who does everything men want."<sup>282</sup> Boff comments: "[t]heologians who, however unconsciously toil in the service of male power interests represent Mary only as the woman who knew how to say yes."<sup>283</sup> In view of the above discussion, we say that much of the Marian piety and teaching in the Church has placed Mary on a high pedestal but in the real situation of women in the Church and

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<sup>277</sup> Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), 19.

<sup>278</sup> Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 19.

<sup>279</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation," *Theological Studies* 36 (1975): 621.

<sup>280</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Mistress of Heaven in the Meaning of Mariology," in *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 50.

<sup>281</sup> Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, 7.

<sup>282</sup> Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 75.

<sup>283</sup> Leonardo Boff, *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and Its Religious Expressions*, trans. Robert Barr and John Diercksmeier (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 33.



society her image had some negative impacts. Taking exception to some of the above arguments, we could say that Mary was a woman of faith. Mary's acceptance of the will of God is not an enslavement but a courageous response in faith to God. It was a free and responsible act of self-surrender, and not a passive, helpless submission. Her commitment to God's plan for humankind is a challenge to present day women. Almost all the Church documents have presented Mary as an idealized woman and as a model to be imitated. But we cannot ignore the fact that Mary is a woman of strength, independence, and integrity of autonomous action. In the following section, we try to put forward some of the liberative aspects of Mary's motherhood.

#### **4.1.3 Liberative Facets of Mary's Motherhood**

We have already noted that Mary's Motherhood raises new questions and challenges to the given axioms in theology towards the issues of women. It is a sign of the times that women marginalized for centuries in male dominated cultures, are becoming increasingly aware of their human dignity. In the prophetic words of Pope John XXIII, "since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as inanimate objects or mere instruments, but claim, both in domestic and in public life, the right and duties that befit a human person."<sup>284</sup> Because of this emerging awareness, women are "interpreting the figure of Mary from the perspective of their own struggle to be independent, strong, lively, and holy that is, interpreting her from their option for full human dignity."<sup>285</sup>

In one of his farsighted essay, Karl Rahner noted that the image of Mary in the Church has always been closely tied to the image of women at any given time. Since the culturally conditioned image of women in our day is undergoing radical change, this raises serious questions about the image of Mary that has not yet been adequately recognized. Consequently, he suggested that "Mariology today and in the future still has a great deal to do if it wants to have an image of Mary that will really be true for the religious existence of woman as such. It is an image that can perhaps be produced authentically today only by women, by women theologians."<sup>286</sup>

As the "exalted woman," Mary was sometimes seen as totally different from all other women. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Peter Canisius described Mary as having "nothing in

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<sup>284</sup> Vincent P. Mainelli, "*Pacem in Terris*: Encyclical Letter of Pope John XXIII on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty," 41.

<sup>285</sup> Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, 6.

<sup>286</sup> Karl Rahner, "Mary and the Christian Image of Woman," in *Theological Investigations*, vol.19, (London: Longman and Todd, 1984), 217.



common with the infirmities and failings of the female sex.”<sup>287</sup> She has often been described as the symbol of the “eternal feminine,”<sup>288</sup> the incarnation of traditional female virtues such as obedience, receptivity, submission and humility. “Through the event of the virgin birth, God shows men that they cannot control and oppress women.”<sup>289</sup> From a feminist perspective it is important to notice the following points.

Mary can remind us that God is not just masculine as a power over creation, but also feminine as a ground of being and as the foundation of each unique person. Mary can also help the male to experience his feminine side, i.e., to learn receptivity. This receptivity does not imply powerlessness or self negation, nor is it simply a passive trait. It can be understood as rather the ability to listen to and help others.<sup>290</sup>

Traditional Mariology in Latin America demonstrates the unity between great reverence for Mary as the mother of Jesus, virgin and queen of heaven and the *kyriarchy* of the culture. She has been presented as the “basic representative of women’s nature.”<sup>291</sup> As a model for women she is “obedient and passive, resigned and suffering, humbly dedicated to domestic tasks in accordance with the role that is naturally hers in the private sphere.”<sup>292</sup> This traditional Mary has not provided women with a model in their struggle for liberation.

Mary is both a humble servant and a courageous prophet, denouncing the injustice and oppression of her time and of all time, including that of Latin America, says A. M. Bidegain. Mary gives the Latin American women “the strength to fight, in solidarity and community, for the right to life.”<sup>293</sup> Luz Beatriz Arellano of Nicaragua also gives a central place to the Mary of the Magnificat as the model for women in their commitment to liberation. Mary is “the liberated woman, prophetess of the God

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<sup>287</sup> Quoted in Anneliese Herzing, “Mary - Hopeless Ideal or Sister in Faith,” *Theology Digest* 39 (1992): 210.

<sup>288</sup> Herzing, “Mary - Hopeless Ideal or Sister in Faith,” 209-213. Herzing gives an explanation of eternal feminine: Some women protest that many male theologians write about Mary and the feminine without considering the experiences of today’s women. They think that some interpretations of Mary are male projections of what they wish the image of women to be. This wishful thinking has become the highly stylised “eternal feminine.” In this tradition qualities like courage, bravery, power and dynamism are ascribed to the male sex. Obedience (passive), receptivity, submission and humility, qualities that are closely associated with self-denial and the readiness to serve, are ascribed to the female sex. The result is that “the woman” in the sense of the “eternal feminine” has been placed on a pedestal, but the woman in her concrete existence is oppressed.

<sup>289</sup> Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, 77.

<sup>290</sup> Anthony J. Tambasco, *What Are They Saying About Mary?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 81.

<sup>291</sup> Maria Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 172.

<sup>292</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 173.

<sup>293</sup> Ana Maria Bidegain, “Women and the Theology of Liberation,” in *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America*, ed. Elsa Tamez (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 35.



of the poor, who in anticipation sang of the liberating exploits of God on behalf of the poor.”<sup>294</sup> Johnson says that “singing of her joy in God and God’s victory over oppression, she becomes not a subjugated but a prophetic woman.”<sup>295</sup> She further says that in solidarity with Mary’s song, “women on every continent find a key source for their spiritual journey and practice of the reign of God.”<sup>296</sup> According to Jane Schaberg, Mary is a prophet of the poor and those who are marginalized. “She represents their hope, as a woman who has suffered and been vindicated.”<sup>297</sup> In Latin America, women in situations of poverty and violence see Mary as an example, a poor woman of the people. As Pilar Aquino makes clear, “poor women identify with her because they share the same hope and the same language as women.”<sup>298</sup>

In contrast to this woman’s received Mariology, Asian women are developing a composite portrait of a strong, liberated Mary. Her fiat at the Annunciation is “in no way the abject submission of a slave who has no choice. On the contrary, it is the creative submission of the fully liberated human being [...] who is free to serve God.”<sup>299</sup> Living in strongly patriarchal cultures pervaded with religious diversity, Asian women rediscover not the bejewelled Mary crowned Queen of heaven but the poor, courageous Mary, a West Asian woman. In a meeting in Manila, a group of women write thus: “[w]e saw Mary, the mother of Jesus, no longer a passive, ethereal being, detached from the suffering of millions in Asia. We now see her in a new light, as a strong woman who can identify and be with today’s grieving mothers, wives,

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<sup>294</sup> Luz Beatriz Arellano, “Women’s Experience of God in Emerging Spirituality,” in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 148. For a detailed study of this topic see also, Anjali Therese, *The Mary of Magnificat: A Paradigm of Liberative Evangelization in View of the Oppressed Indian Women*, unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2003).

<sup>295</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 119.

<sup>296</sup> Johnson, *Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture*, 122.

<sup>297</sup> Jane Schaberg, “Luke,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992), 285.

<sup>298</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 159. See also, Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (New York: Orbis Books, 1989). The social location of Latin American Mariology today is that of poverty, suffering and oppression, of hunger, violence and the early deaths of thousands of children. Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer of Brazil have developed a liberating Mariology which situates Mary amongst the poor.

<sup>299</sup> Marianne Katapo, *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Women’s Theology*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1981), 17. Asian reflections on Mary thus emphasises that she is a strong, courageous woman. As both virgin and mother, sharing the experiences of most women, she is close in compassionate empathy with the suffering. Through her magnificat, she inspires women to act for liberation from all that oppresses them.



daughters in the bitter fight for freedom.”<sup>300</sup> Rather than adhere to a Marian cult that vitiates her person and minimizes her partnership, these women assume the responsibility to reclaim and redefine Mary with regard to the liberation of all people, especially women.

In contrast to traditional Mariology that emphasised Mary’s passivity in the Annunciation, stressing her docility and obedience, a liberating perspective focuses on her free choice as an expression of her faith. She is not married; the child will not be the son of Joseph. She is confronted with an enormous decision and chooses freely to say “yes” to an unknown future for herself and her child. As God enters into human history, Mary’s faith makes liberation possible:

According to Luke, God enters history in the person of Christ to effect a liberating revolution in human relationships. Mary is exalted, because, through her, God will work this revolution in history [...] she herself embodies and personifies the oppressed and subjugated people who are being exalted through God’s redemptive power.<sup>301</sup>

Since it is women in every society who are the poorest of the poor, experiencing most severely the inequalities of the socio-economic relationships in which they are enmeshed, Mary’s words are a special comfort and challenge to them. These women, sisters with Mary, “can become the models of faith and their liberation becomes the special locus of the believing and liberated community.”<sup>302</sup> Thus, the Magnificat with its message of God’s preference for the poor is a central theme in the contextual Mariologies in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

#### 4.1.4 Critique of John Paul II’s Vision on Motherhood

We have already noticed that in *Mulieris Dignitatem* Pope John Paul II repeatedly says that not only woman’s physical constitution but also her “psychological structure” is “naturally disposed” to motherhood. In view of the above explanation, we say that an over emphasis on the “motherhood” has a negative impact as well. The reasoning is that the “emphasis on women’s role as biological and spiritual motherhood reduces women to one role in society. While motherhood is a sacred gift from God and thus to be celebrated, to insist that women fulfil their entire destiny

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<sup>300</sup> "Final Statement: Asian Church Women Speak (Manila, Philippines, Nov. 21-30, 1985)," in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 120-121. See also, Stella Baltazar, "Mary in the Struggles of Women," *Word and Worship* 24 (1991): 340.

<sup>301</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, 155.

<sup>302</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, 157.



through this experience is inadequate.”<sup>303</sup> Hilkert states that motherhood is “socially constructed and needs to be critically appropriated in a way that does not reinforce patriarchal roles and assumptions.”<sup>304</sup>

Baum opines that Pope John Paul II’s thought misses the point that “women no longer define themselves through their potential for motherhood.”<sup>305</sup> He also observes that women continue to exercise their motherhood but “they include in their self-definition the full human vocation, including their role as thinkers, actors, and leaders.”<sup>306</sup> Making a similar point, Marie-Therese Van Lunen Chenu offers a more caustic evaluation of the Church’s position on Gender, including that expressed in Pope John Paul II’s *Mulieris Dignitatem*, which she refers to as “a pathetic example” of the Church’s pronouncements “according to a typology of paternity/maternity which appears more and more challengeable.”<sup>307</sup> Women, she argues, passionately seek a hermeneutic, which will bridge the gap between the Church’s model of paternity/maternity and traditional sexual code, as supporting woman as procreator, and man as creator. She argues that in effect, this reduces the role of motherhood to transmitter of life, and, more importantly, limits woman’s created role and purpose to maternity.<sup>308</sup>

In the opinion of Arellano, “[p]raising mothers can serve as the best disguise for a male ideology. Sometimes we feel we are trying to strike a balance between the just claims of mothers and the male lauding of motherhood. Thus, avoiding male deception is another great challenge.”<sup>309</sup> The opinion of Maria Mies is that the problem is not women’s biological potential to be mothers but rather patriarchal dominance.<sup>310</sup> Although Pope John Paul II’s views represent a shift toward stressing the equality of women, much of his teaching “on the nature and role of women still demonstrates a romantic pedestalization of women.”<sup>311</sup> Kalbian comments on this and says that the clearest evidence of this view is that “the Pope views motherhood as not

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<sup>303</sup> Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 49.

<sup>304</sup> Hilkert, “Cry Beloved Image,” 199.

<sup>305</sup> Baum, “Bulletin: The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 149.

<sup>306</sup> Baum, “Bulletin: The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 149.

<sup>307</sup> Marie-Therese Van Lunen-Chenu, “Between Sexes and Generations: Maternity Empowered,” *Concilium* 2 (1989): 32.

<sup>308</sup> Van Lunen-Chenu, “Between Sexes and Generations: Maternity Empowered,” 34-35.

<sup>309</sup> Arellano, “Women’s Experience of God in Emerging Spirituality,” 148.

<sup>310</sup> Maria Mies, “Self-Determination: The End of a Utopia?,” in *Ecofeminism*, ed. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (London: 1993), 228.

<sup>311</sup> Gudorf, “Encountering the Other: The Modern Papacy on Women,” 70.



simply one element of being a woman but rather as its essential defining feature.”<sup>312</sup> We do agree that the idealisation of motherhood has some negative impacts in the life of women in the Church and society. In spite of all these feminist criticism on motherhood, we could say that the experience of being a mother is not an oppressive factor. We will discuss some observations on this point in the following section.

#### 4.1.5 Some Observations

In contrast to earlier papal teaching,<sup>313</sup> Pope John Paul II brings some new perspectives to the role of women in society. In his *Letter to Women*, he says that the greater presence of women in society will lead to a humanization of institutions organised “according to the criteria of efficiency and productivity.”<sup>314</sup> He states further in his Angelus reflection on August 20, 1995 that the greater presence of businesswomen in executive positions in the economy is “giving it a new human inspiration and removing it from the recurring temptation of dull efficiency marked only by laws of profit.”<sup>315</sup>

The genius of women is manifesting itself in political sphere, where they are focusing both on “basic areas of human life” and “on behalf of peace.”<sup>316</sup> Woman’s genius is extended also to the other areas of social life. Pope John Paul II notes that “women’s contribution to the welfare and progress of society is incalculable [...] (and even more needed) to save society from the deadly virus of degradation and violence which is today witnessing a dramatic increase.”<sup>317</sup> He states that women’s genius can be “more fully expressed in the life of society as a whole,” and that “the widest possible space is

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<sup>312</sup> Kalbian, *Sexing the Church: Gender, Power and Ethics in Contemporary Catholicism*, 107.

<sup>313</sup> Michael Chinigo, ed., *The Pope Speaks: The Teachings of Pius XII* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), 58. Pope Pius XII taught that, “every woman is destined to be a mother. [...] The Creator has disposed to this end the entire being of woman, her organism, and even more her spirit, and above all her exquisite sensibility.” See also, George H. Tavard, *Woman in Christian Tradition*, 136. Tavard states that, “Pope Paul clearly asserts one basic notion about woman: all her tasks, all her achievements, all her virtues, all her dreams are derived from her call to motherhood. Everything that woman can do is affected by this fundamental orientation of her being and can best be expressed in terms of, and in relation to, motherhood.” According to Pope Paul VI, the feminine vocation is essentially connected with the home and the family.

<sup>314</sup> John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” 4.

<sup>315</sup> John Paul II, “Equal Opportunity in the World of Work,” (The Angelus Reflections, August 20, 1995), in *The Genius of Women*, 1.

<sup>316</sup> John Paul II, “Women in Political Life,” (The Angelus Reflections, August 27, 1995), in *The Genius of Women*, 1, 2.

<sup>317</sup> John Paul II, “Welcome to Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women,” 5.



open to women in all areas of culture, economics, (and) politics.”<sup>318</sup> Similarly, the *Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith* writes: “[w]omen should be present in the world of work and in the organization of society, and that women should have access to positions of responsibility which allow them to inspire the policies of nations and to promote innovative solutions to economic and social problems.”<sup>319</sup> Thus the *Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith* emphasizes that women should have the opportunity to offer their distinctive insights and contributions in every part of society. The crucial point, the Congregation explains, is that in living out their vocations, whatever they may be, women should recognize their feminine gifts. The document emphasises the importance of feminine values in the life of society.

## 4.2 Virginit

When we go through the document, we get the idea that virginity seems to run parallel to other important aspects of women’s vocation, namely motherhood. Virginity is seen as another means for woman’s self-realization. It is another form of living the ‘image of God’ in the Church. While marriage is a sign of God’s love for humankind, virginity is a direct testimony to this love. A virgin is a living sign of the religious truth that the ultimate value of the human person is based on the immediacy to God.<sup>320</sup> In virginity the dignity of woman is confined to that of the Virgin of Nazareth and it is a path on which she realises her womanhood. Pope John Paul II states that “a woman is married either through the sacrament of marriage or spiritually through marriage to Christ. In both cases marriage signifies the ‘sincere gift of the person’ of the bride to the groom.”<sup>321</sup> So the Pope emphasises motherhood in a spouse-children relationship and virginity as a sincere gift to God, which we discuss below.

### 4.2.1 Virginity: Sincere Gift to God

Men and women are publicly consecrated to virginity or celibacy, in response to their vocation. They make the complete gift of self to God and others. In fact, a life dedicated exclusively to God and neighbour is a vivid sign of the ultimate vocation of every person.<sup>322</sup> In virginity, this readiness is open to all people (and not restricted to

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<sup>318</sup> John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” 10; See also, John Paul II, “The Feminine Genius,” (The Angelus Reflections, in *The Genius of Women*, 1.

<sup>319</sup> Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter to the Bishop's of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and World,” 13.

<sup>320</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 20.

<sup>321</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 21.

<sup>322</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 20.



one person), who are embraced by the love of Christ, the spouse.<sup>323</sup> According to Sandra M. Schneiders, “[c]onsecrated celibacy is the freely chosen response to a personally discerned vocation to charismatically grounded, religiously motivated, sexually abstinent, lifelong commitment to Christ that is externally symbolized by remaining unmarried.”<sup>324</sup> It is a charism, a free gift and a call from God to some people. It cannot be acquired by one’s own efforts because it is a gift of God.<sup>325</sup> Jesus’ use of the metaphor of the “eunuch” emphasizes the radicality of the choice. Jesus says: “and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19:12). It is a voluntary celibacy, chosen for the sake of the kingdom of heaven in view of human beings’ eschatological vocation for a union with God.<sup>326</sup>

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the particular relationship of the law of reciprocity to woman’s identity is specified: “[t]he dignity of women is measured by the order of love [...] Love is an ontological and ethical requirement of the person. The person must be loved, since love alone corresponds to what the person is.”<sup>327</sup> Only by entering into full relationship with others, by acting according to the commandment of love and the law of reciprocity, will a woman or a man find fulfilment and perfection: “This ontological affirmation also indicates the ethical dimension of a person’s vocation. Woman can only find herself by giving love to others.”<sup>328</sup> John Paul II states that one cannot rightly understand virginity without referring to spousal love. It is through this kind of love that a woman becomes a gift for the other.

<sup>323</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 20, 21.

<sup>324</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy and Community in Catholic Religious Life*, Religious Life in a New Millennium, vol. 2 (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 117.

<sup>325</sup> Schneiders, *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy and Community in Catholic Religious Life*, 117. *Mulieris Dignitatem* also mentions the same: “celibacy for the kingdom of heaven results not only from a free choice on the part of man, but also from a special grace on the part of God, who calls a particular person to live celibacy.” John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 20.

<sup>326</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 20.

<sup>327</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 29. This explains the command of love, known already in the Old Testament (cf. Dt 6:5; Lv 19:18) and placed by Christ at the very center of the Gospel ‘ethos’ (cf. Mt 22:36-40; Mk 12:28-34). This also explains the primacy of love expressed by St. Paul in the first Letter to the Corinthians: “The greatest of these is love” (I Cor 13:13).

<sup>328</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 30. See also, Prudence Allen, “Philosophy of Relation in John Paul II’s New Feminism,” in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, ed. Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 103. Pope John Paul II has recognised four Christian women whose lives expressed the genius of Christian feminism. Saint Therese of Lisieux, named doctor of the Church, revealed how a ‘strengthened will’ could support a vigorous contemplative love at the heart of the Church; Saint Edith Stein revealed how a ‘sharpened intellect’ could support a martyr’s gift of life in love; Mother Teresa of Calcutta revealed how an ‘increase of love for the poorest of the poor’ could transform countries around the world, and Blessed Gianna revealed how an ‘increase of love for just one unborn child’ could witness to a mother’s gift of life.



Women, called from the very “beginning” to be loved and to love, in a vocation to virginity find Christ first of all as the redeemer who “loved until the end” through his total gift of self; and they respond to this gift with a “sincere gift” of their whole lives. They thus give themselves to the divine Spouse, and this personal gift tends to union which is properly spiritual in character.<sup>329</sup>

Here the Pope gives emphasis to the evangelical ideal of virginity, in which both the dignity and vocation of women are realized in a special way. It cannot be compared to remaining simply unmarried or single, because “virginity is not restricted to a mere ‘no’, but contains a profound ‘yes’ in the spousal order: the gift of self for love in a total and undivided manner.”<sup>330</sup> More radical still is the vocation to consecrated celibacy, that virginal love that is the source of a unique fruitfulness fostering “the birth and growth of divine life in people’s hearts.”<sup>331</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Virginity: Sign of the Kingdom of God

In *Mulieris Dignitatem* the Pope says, celibacy is a “special sign of the kingdom of God to come.”<sup>332</sup> It is explained in the document with reference to the Old Testament Tradition, which is connected in some way with Israel’s expectation of the Messiah’s coming. Again the Pope says that celibacy or virginity for the sake of the kingdom is “undeniably an innovation connected with the incarnation of God.”<sup>333</sup> From the moment of the Christ’s coming, the people expected an eschatological kingdom which is coming and to which he must lead the new Israel. So there is a new awareness of faith necessary for the change of values and Mary is the first person in whom this new awareness is manifested.<sup>334</sup> According to Edith Stein, no matter what way of life a woman chooses, she must be a ‘handmaid of the Lord’ to fulfil her feminine vocation. In virginity, the dimension of spiritual motherhood is lived. It makes woman aware of the entrusting of the human person by God to woman. It is a ‘yes’ to a life ordained

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<sup>329</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 20.

<sup>330</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 20. Virginity is understood as the so-called radicalism of the Gospel that finds its expression in the Gospel dictum: “Leave everything and follow Christ” (Mt 19:27).

<sup>331</sup> John Paul II, “*Vita Consecrata*,” 34.

<sup>332</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 20.

<sup>333</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 20.

<sup>334</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 20. The Pope emphasizes Mary’s interpersonal dialogue at the annunciation: “She is truly the mother of God, because motherhood concerns the whole person, not just the body, nor even just human ‘nature.’ [...] Through her response of faith Mary exercises her free will and thus fully shares with her personal and feminine ‘I’ in the event of the Incarnation. [...] This event is clearly interpersonal in character: it is a dialogue.” “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 4, 5.



according to the will of God that leads women to full realisation of themselves in love.<sup>335</sup>

Pope John Paul II called this motherhood “according to the Spirit” and referred to the many ways women express their concern for persons, especially the most needy: the sick, the handicapped, the abandoned, orphans, the elderly, children, young people, the imprisoned, and, in general, people on the margins of society.<sup>336</sup> The most obvious and distinctive characteristic of woman’s nature is her capacity to conceive and nourish new life. But the *Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith* notes that childbirth is by no means the only way to realize woman’s vocation.<sup>337</sup> There can be some serious distortions in this area because it can extol biological fecundity in purely quantitative terms that can accompany disrespect for women.<sup>338</sup> In this regard, the Pope’s emphasis of the existence of the Christian vocation of virginity is radical with regard to the Old Testament Tradition and the demands made by many societies.<sup>339</sup> Virginity refutes any attempt to enclose women in mere biological destiny.

Just as virginity receives from physical motherhood the insight that there is no Christian vocation except in the concrete gift of oneself to the other, so physical motherhood receives from virginity an insight into its fundamentally spiritual dimension: it is in not being content only to give physical life that the other truly comes into existence.<sup>340</sup>

Some women realize their feminine vocation through a life of consecrated virginity, serving the Church and society in a radical fulfilment of their capacity to live “for the other.”<sup>341</sup> “This means that motherhood can find forms of full realization also where there is no physical procreation.”<sup>342</sup> Schneiders affirms this fact when she states that the religious tend to see their celibacy less as a renunciation of marriage and more as a commitment to growth in love dedicated to the development of a world characterized

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<sup>335</sup> L. Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, eds., *Essays on Woman: The Collected Works of Edith Stein* (Washington: ICS Publications, 1987), 53-54.

<sup>336</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 21.

<sup>337</sup> Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” 13.

<sup>338</sup> Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” 13.

<sup>339</sup> John Paul II, “The Apostolic Exhortation on the Family,” 16.

<sup>340</sup> Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” 13.

<sup>341</sup> Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” 13.

<sup>342</sup> Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” 13.



by unselfish service and mutual care.<sup>343</sup> In other words, it is a total selfless dedication to love. Love is the very basis and goal of celibacy, as it is of marriage, and it is of the whole Christian mystery. It takes place only on the basis of God's grace. It is on the basis of this divine grace that a person professes love of humankind and the world. This is not renunciation of motherhood but openness to a motherhood that is of the Spirit.

## 5. Jesus the Promoter of Women's Dignity

Chapter five of *Mulieris Dignitatem* is subtitled significantly, "[t]hey marvelled that he was talking with a woman." Pope John Paul II brings out the significance of this subtitle thus: "In the eyes of his contemporaries, Christ became a promoter of women's true dignity and of the vocation corresponding to this dignity."<sup>344</sup> The rabbinic perspective of Jesus' times considered women as inferior to men; hence, talking to them in public was forbidden. Jesus was breaking these dehumanising institutions by daring to speak with the Samaritan woman at the well.<sup>345</sup>

Jesus showed special concern to the down-trodden women in his society. His dealing with women was unconventional and even provocative. He not only speaks with strange women, which no decent Jewish Rabbi or even ordinary Jewish men would dare to do, but also takes them into his company (Lk 8:1-3; Mk 15:40-41). Jesus even allows a notorious woman to touch him (Lk 7:36-39); he shows exceptional compassion even to an adulterous woman in Jn 8:3-11.<sup>346</sup> By speaking and acting in this way, Jesus made it clear that "the mysteries of the kingdom" were known to him in every detail. He was a witness of God's eternal plan for the human persons created in his own image and likeness as man and woman.<sup>347</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem* offers a series of Gospel events that deal with Jesus and women from which we get the vision of Christ as an innovator who restores the dignity of women. This section concentrates on analysing Jesus' liberating mission for women oppressed mainly due to social status.

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<sup>343</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *New Wineskins: Re-Imagining Religious Life Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 92.

<sup>344</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 12.

<sup>345</sup> Raj Irudaya, "Significance of Jesus' Mission with the Marginalized Samaritan Woman: A Feminist Reading of John 4:1-42," *Bible Bhashyam* 32 (2006): 163.

<sup>346</sup> James Naduvilekut, "Relevance and Significance of Biblical Eschatology," in *Hope at the Dawn of a New Century*, eds. Jacob Parappally and Evelyn Monteriro (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000), 67.

<sup>347</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 12.



## 5.1 Liberation of Women by Jesus

Here we focus on some aspects of Jesus' liberating ministry in the light of the document, *Mulieris Dignitatem*. After surveying the presentation of women in the gospel, the Pope remarks that in Jesus' teachings as well as in his conduct, one can find nothing, which reflects discrimination against women. On the contrary, his words and works always express due respect and honour.<sup>348</sup> There were many women who followed him as he journeyed with the apostles through the towns and villages, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God (Lk 8:1-3). John's portrayal of women – Mary at Cana (2:1-12), the Samaritan woman (Ch.4), Mary and Martha (12:1-7), and Mary Magdalene, the first witness to the risen Christ (20:1-18), is empowering. "They are present at the beginning, the middle and the end of Jesus' ministry: at the wedding, which sets the tone of celebration, new life, and manifested glory; through the ministry, where they engage with Jesus to comprehend the life he offers; at the cross and in the Easter Garden."<sup>349</sup>

The Gospels clearly show that Jesus' relationship with many women he met during his ministry was marked by a unique inner freedom and serenity. He was not controlled by the Jewish prejudices and taboos, which was prevalent during his time and governed the dealings of men with women.<sup>350</sup> The Gospel records Jesus' distinctiveness, because this behaviour differed from that of his contemporaries. Even Jesus' own disciples 'marvelled' at seeing Jesus speaking to a woman (Jn 4:27). "They are not taken aback, like the Samaritan (v.9) to see him disregarding the barriers of race. They are thinking of the reserve imposed on all Jews, and a rabbi in particular, with regard to the female sex."<sup>351</sup> The astonishment of the disciples is due to the fact

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<sup>348</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 13.

<sup>349</sup> Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 234. According to Dorothy Lee, women are also included in the group of friends and "beloved disciples" of Jesus. The love between the mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, through the indwelling paraclete, forms the basis of the post-Easter community. The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42); Mary Magdalene, "present at the foot of the cross, who searches for the body of Jesus as a grief stricken friend, recognizing his presence when her name is spoken, and greeting him in love and joy" (19:25; 20:1-18). Martha and Mary are named explicitly as Jesus' friends (11:5, 11:3). Because of their love for Jesus, they provide a feast after their brother is restored to life. Mary responds to Jesus' love with the costly anointing of his feet (12:18). Dorothy Lee, "Friendship, Love and Abiding in the Gospel of John," in *Transcending Boundaries: Contemporary Readings of the New Testament*, eds. Rekha M. Chennattu and Mary L. Coloe (Roma: Las, 2005), 60.

<sup>350</sup> George Mangatt, "Jesus' Option for Women," *Jeevadhara* 21 (1991): 161.

<sup>351</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John*, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 443. For an elaborate study of the social position of women in Israelite society, Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social*



that Jesus is talking to a woman because the Jewish law prohibited men from speaking to women in public.<sup>352</sup> Even more a rabbi to discuss theology with a woman was unconventional.<sup>353</sup>

### 5.1.1 Liberation from Male Dominance

In the Jewish tradition, man was obviously considered to be superior to woman and consequently, there emerged an overt contempt for female sex. In the patriarchal Hebrew society, woman was identified not as a separate individual, but in relation to man in her family on whom she was always dependent. Both the socio-political and religious spheres spell out this subordination of women as illustrated in the laws regarding inheritance, sexuality and religious observance.<sup>354</sup> For example, the inheritance of property is only through the male line. A woman's sexuality belonged exclusively to her husband. Women were not allowed to study the scriptures, and they were not allowed to pray the *Shema* along with children and slaves.<sup>355</sup> As far as the ancient Judaism was concerned, women had an inferior social status on the same level as that of slaves and gentiles. It is clear from the thanksgiving prayer recited by the Jewish males: "Blessed be God that has not made me Gentile. Blessed be God that has not made me a woman. Blessed be God that has not made me a slave."<sup>356</sup> The Rabbinic literature held that women were inferior to men.

It is against this background that Jesus' relation to women must be understood. In a radical break with the Deuteronomic regulation (Dt 21:10ff) Jesus' pronouncement to his disciples in Mt 5:28 shows how differently he conceived the relationship between man and woman. Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce (Mt 19:3-10) is another

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*Conditions During the New Testament Period* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 359-376. Evelyn and Frank Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus* (Edinburg: The Saint Andrew Press, 1978).

<sup>352</sup> Kathleen E. Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins* (California: Polebridge Press, 2002), 9. See also, Maria Clara Bingemer, "Masculinity, Femininity and the Christ," *Concilium* 3 (2008): 75.

<sup>353</sup> Evelyn and Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus*, 116.

<sup>354</sup> Jyotsna Chatterji, *Good News for Women* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1979), 11. See also, Kathleen Coyle, "Tradition, Theology and Women in the Churches," *Asia Journal of Theology* 4 (1990): 213.

<sup>355</sup> Coyle, "Tradition, Theology and Women in the Churches," 213. See also, Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins*, 9.

<sup>356</sup> Bernie Silva, "The Gospels and the Liberation of Asian Women," *Jeevadhara* 17 (1987): 81. See also, Pauline Chakkalackal, "Law and Religion: A Feminist Biblical Theological Critique," *Journal of Dharma* 32 (2007): 244. The Bible itself contains many discriminatory passages, which degrade women and extol the myth of male superiority and female inferiority. For example, (a) woman treated as man's property (Ex 20:17; Deut 5:17-21; Gn 18:12), (b) laws on inheritance (Nu 27:1-11), (c) laws concerning vows (Nu 30:4-9; Gn 19:18, 20:1-14; Jdg 19:30), (d) man's right to divorce (Dt 24:1; Sir 23:22-26), laws of ritual purity (Lv 12:1-5; 15:19ff), and (f) woman confined to home (Sir 42:9-11; 2Mac 13:19; 1Sm 1:23-24; 2:19; Pr 1:8; 6:20).



instance where he upholds the original dignity of women. As women were considered to be the property of men, the right of the husband to divorce his wife was never questioned, but only on what grounds.<sup>357</sup> Jesus emphatically declared the sanctity and indissolubility of marriage by saying that God made them male and female (Gn 1:27) and “what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mt 19:6). Jesus thus condemned all kinds of injustices against women by their husbands.

Again, in the story of the ‘woman caught in adultery’ (Jn 8:1-11), while the Scribes and the Pharisees publicly accuse the woman and challenge Jesus, Jesus enters into her concrete and historical situation, a situation which is weighed down by the inheritance of sin. Here the Pope emphatically says: “[o]ne of the ways in which this inheritance is expressed is habitual discrimination against women in favour of men.”<sup>358</sup> Jesus’ final word to the woman was one of affirmation and commission: “Neither do I condemn you; go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (Jn 8:11). Through these words, he acknowledged that she had sinned, and he directed her in a new way.<sup>359</sup> He reacted to the words of the woman as well as the words of the accusers by revealing to them his profound capacity to see human conscience and action in their true light. “Jesus seems to say to the accusers, is not this woman, for all her sin, above all a confirmation of your own transgressions, of your “male” injustice, your misdeeds?”<sup>360</sup> In this story, Jesus rejected the double-standard allotted to women and turned the judgment upon the male accusers. Through his behavior the sinful woman was challenged to discover herself, which leads her to a new self-understanding and a new life.<sup>361</sup>

In this context, the Pope emphasizes that the following truth is valid for the whole human race: “A woman is left alone, exposed to public opinion with “her sin,” while

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<sup>357</sup> Mangatt, "Jesus' Option for Women," 165. See also, Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions During the New Testament Period*, 370. In the Jewish society the right to divorce belonged exclusively to the husband. General reasons for divorce are numerous. For example, a divorce can be given for “indecentcy” which could mean the discarding of the veil in public, the wife’s raising of her voice above that of her husband, gossiping, etc. Moreover a woman could not divorce her husband in Jewish law. But under certain circumstances she could approach the court, which would, if it thought fit, compel the husband to divorce her. On the other hand, she might render him certain services to induce him to divorce her.

<sup>358</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 14.

<sup>359</sup> Evelyn and Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus*, 113.

<sup>360</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 14.

<sup>361</sup> Evelyn and Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus*, 113.



behind “her” sin there lurks a man – a sinner, guilty of the others’ sin,” indeed equally responsible for it.<sup>362</sup> The document further calls attention to the fact:

Each man must look within himself to see whether she who was entrusted to him as a sister in humanity, as a spouse, has not become in his heart an object of adultery; to see whether she who, in different ways, is the co-subject of his existence in the world, has not become for him an “object”: an object of pleasure, of exploitation.<sup>363</sup>

In this context, it is important to pay heed to the words of Pope John Paul II as he cites to women abandoned with their pregnancies when men are unwilling to accept the responsibility for it; the many unwed mothers in our society are a consequent of this behaviour of men, the Pope holds.<sup>364</sup> The Pope also states that the attitude of Jesus to the sinful woman is significant; the episode is “one of the few instances in which his power – the power of truth – is so clearly manifested with regard to human consciences.”<sup>365</sup> Here we see his great sensitivity and concern for women.

### 5.1.2 Liberation from a Spirit of Infirmary and Uncleaness

The healing of woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath is highly significant (Lk 13:10-17). She was bent over and could not straighten up due to ‘a spirit of infirmity’ (v.11). “Her bent condition is a paradigm of the suppressed and disadvantageous condition of women in the male dominated Jewish society, where they could not stand straight and claim their rights.”<sup>366</sup> She slipped herself into the last place avoiding the public eye but Jesus’ compassionate eyes saw her and called her. He reaches out to cure her without any request from the woman herself. In his answer to the ruler of the Synagogue Jesus emphasises the worth of this woman by calling her “a daughter of Abraham” (v.16).<sup>367</sup> By liberating her from her “bent condition” Jesus restores her

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<sup>362</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 14. In the opinion of Jean K. Kim is remarkable in this context, “[...] the identity and absence of the adulterer has not been questioned while the woman has been treated as only an object to be forgiven by Jesus’ mercy and wisdom.” The question remains here, where was the adulterer? Jean K. Kim, *Woman and Nation: An Intercontextual Reading of the Gospel of John from a Post Colonial Feminist Perspective*, eds. Alan Culpepper *et.al.*, Biblical Interpretation Series (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 141.

<sup>363</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 14.

<sup>364</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 14.

<sup>365</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 14.

<sup>366</sup> Mangatt, “Jesus’ Option for Women,” 166. See also, Bernie Silva, “The Gospels and the Liberation of Asian Women,” *Jeevadhara* 17 (1987): 85.

<sup>367</sup> George Keerankeri, “Healing of a Bent Woman (Lk 13:10-17),” *Vidyajyoti* 71 (2007): 20. Jesus’ reference to the woman as the ‘daughter of Abraham’ shows her importance. In the book of Genesis, we could see that God made his unconditional promises to Abraham, the father of the chosen people (Gn 17:7; 22:17; Mic 7:20). Luke has already referred to these irrevocable promises of God in the song of Mary (Lk 1:55). “When Jesus whom God has sent to fulfil his promises to Abraham definitively speaks of a humble, bent Jewish woman as the daughter of Abraham he means to



dignity as the daughter of Abraham. Otherwise, in the whole Bible the title “son of Abraham” is used only of men. Here the Pope emphasizes that “Jesus’ way of speaking to and about women as well as his manner of treating them clearly constitutes an “innovation” with respect to the prevailing custom at that time.”<sup>368</sup>

Similarly, the woman with a flow of blood (Mk 5:21-34) was afflicted by this ‘curse’ for a long time. At that time a woman’s bleeding was considered as unclean. She could neither go out of her house nor touch anybody.<sup>369</sup> According to the Jewish law, this woman was unclean and her touch rendered others unclean. She was regarded an outcast. Physically, socially, psychologically, culturally and economically (v.26) she was bound due to her decease.<sup>370</sup> In such a state, she did not dare to approach Jesus publicly but at the same time wanted to be liberated. Jesus was not at all concerned about the dangerous consequences but restores her dignity by calling her daughter; he made her “whole” and worthy of a personal relationship with him. He treated her as a worthy person and did not rebuke her. The cultic code of holiness would have been a defilement of him by her.<sup>371</sup> This significant action reveals his liberative attitude towards women and acceptance of them as worthy of dignity and honour of the children of God. It is not only that Jesus healed the woman but also once again, “publicly assailed the wickedness of a law devised by men to keep woman in subjection as a creature of scarce account.”<sup>372</sup>

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underline her right to participate in the fruits of this fulfilment as a member of the Jewish people. In being liberated from her infirmity God’s promises are fulfilled in a daughter of Abraham.”

<sup>368</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 13.

<sup>369</sup> Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins*, 9. Jewish law is guided by strict purity regulations of child birth and menstruation. How miserably the women were looked down in the Jewish society is clear from the Pentateuch which stipulates that a woman is unclean for seven days after delivery if the child is male, and she shall continue for thirty three days for blood purification. But if the child is female, the woman is unclean for two weeks and she shall continue for sixty six days for blood purification (Lev 12:2-7). Here also, we see the rule of sexism applies to a woman from birth. Ahn Sang Nim, "Feminist Theology in the Korean Church," in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, eds. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1989), 130.

<sup>370</sup> Silva, "The Gospels and the Liberation of Asian Women," 85. She was physically weak because of her continuous loss of blood for twelve long years. It leads to other diseases too. According to the laws given in Lev 15:19-31, she was considered impure and debarred from social contact. She was thus considered as an outcast; she had also lost all she had by way of paying to physicians. However, her faith in Jesus was great and she decided to be liberated from her bondage whatever be the cost.

<sup>371</sup> Evelyn and Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus*, 110.

<sup>372</sup> Lisa Sergio, *Jesus and Woman: An Exciting Discovery of What He Offered Her* (Virginia: EPM Publications, 1975), 33.



## 5.2 Women: Guardians of the Gospel Message

Jesus' way of acting is a consistent protest against whatever that offends the dignity of women. Consequently, women who are close to him discover themselves in the truth of what he 'teaches' and 'does.' They feel liberated by this truth and feel loved with the "eternal love" and they are transformed. Jesus spoke to them of matters which one never discussed with women.<sup>373</sup> The most significant example of this is the conversation with the Samaritan woman. He was breaking the Rabbinic customs regarding women because Jesus knew that she too is an image of God. The dialogue between Jesus and the Canaanite woman leads to the revelation of Christian universalism, beyond the borders of Israel.<sup>374</sup> "Jesus expresses appreciation and admiration for this distinctly 'feminine response' as in the case of Canannite woman."<sup>375</sup>

On the occasion of anointing, Jesus defends the woman and her action in the presence of his disciples and says, "wherever this Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."<sup>376</sup> According to Schneiders, three points are particularly worth noticing in this context. First, the presentation of Mary as a disciple of Jesus because to wash the feet of one's master was an act of veneration by a disciple; second, Jesus' approval of the woman's original religious initiative in the context of a male objection to a woman's unusual expression of her relationship with Jesus; third, a foreshadowing of Jesus' burial and exposition of Judas' betrayal of him that precipitates the Hour by his betrayal. Throughout this anticipation of the paschal mystery women disciples play the leading roles not only as witnesses but as faithful participants.<sup>377</sup> It is a fact that women were in the forefront at the decisive moments in Jesus' own whole messianic mission. John was the only male apostle who remained faithful, but there were many faithful women at the foot of the cross.<sup>378</sup> Here we can see the most arduous test of faith and fidelity in which women proved being stronger than the men disciples. In the following section, we will discuss the liberative impact of Jesus' mission on the Samaritan woman.

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<sup>373</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 15.

<sup>374</sup> Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, "Women in Jesus' Earthly Life," in *Orthodox Women Speak: Discerning the "Signs of the Times"*, ed. Kyriaki Karidoyanes Fitz Gerald (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 54.

<sup>375</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 15. Admiring the magnitude of her faith, Jesus exclaims, "woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." (Mt 15:28).

<sup>376</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 15; (Mt 26: 6-13).

<sup>377</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, "Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 12 (1982): 42-43.

<sup>378</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 15.



### 5.2.1 Samaritan Woman: An Active Missionary

*Mulieris Dignitatem* says, “Jesus – who knows that she is a sinner and speaks to her about this – discusses the most profound mysteries of God with her.”<sup>379</sup> The Samaritan woman is considered as a marginalized, unclean and immoral woman in the society of her times. Jesus had the graciousness and goodwill to treat her basically as a respectable human person and as a child of God. His initiative to talk with the woman is not only a conversation but also a dialogue. This enlightened her and led her to theological revelations.<sup>380</sup> According to D. A. Carson, Jesus was not a hostage to the sexism of his day.<sup>381</sup> What is needful is to note that in v.27 the disciples are shocked that Jesus is talking with a woman. Schneider’s observation sheds considerable light on the meaning of 4:27 in the life situation of Johannine community:

It seems more than a little likely that this detail about the disciples being shocked at Jesus’ dealing with a woman, since it is in no way necessary to the story itself, is aimed at those traditionalist male Christians in the Johannine community who found the independence and apostolic initiative of Christian women shocking [...] Jesus alone decides to whom he will reveal himself and whom he will call to apostleship.<sup>382</sup>

The Samaritan woman is a person and she is doubly marginalized because of being both a Samaritan and a woman. In the gospel of John, she is presented as a model of faith and mission.<sup>383</sup> She is also presented as a channel of profound revelations. We see gradual progress in the dialogue between Jesus and the woman as a consequence of having accepted her as an equal dialogue partner. It leads her to the revelations on the “gift of God”, “living water”, “worship of the Father in spirit and truth” and the acceptance of Jesus as the prophet and Messiah. In this revelation, Jesus not only dared to cross the socio-cultural barrier of talking to a woman in public, but also

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<sup>379</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 15.

<sup>380</sup> Irudaya, “Significance of Jesus’ Mission with the Marginalized Samaritan Woman: A Feminist Reading of John 4:1-42,” 163-164. By beginning to talk and continuing his conversation with the woman, Jesus went beyond the three social barriers of talking to women. (1) Jesus started to talk with a strange woman in public, which was not expected of a male in his society. (2) Jesus as a Jew spoke to a woman who was Samaritan. This went against the cultural prejudice and custom where Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans (v.9c). (3) Jesus as a Rabbi talked to the woman and this was not consonant with the dignity of a rabbi of his times. Jesus’ respect for women as persons did not deter him from transcending the degrading customs.

<sup>381</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 227.

<sup>382</sup> Schneiders, “Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church,” 40.

<sup>383</sup> Robert J. Karris, *Jesus and the Marginalized in John’s Gospel*, ed. Mary Ann Getty, *Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 70.



willed to dialogue with her on theological matters. This attitude of Jesus is very significant and path-breaking in the Jewish society.<sup>384</sup>

The evangelist makes a woman the central character in this missionary episode. The fact that this event is preserved in the scripture shows the importance it had in the early Church. In the opinion of Rekha Chennattu, “[i]t seems more reasonable to suggest that there were Christian women who played important roles in the community and the evangelist wanted to authenticate and legitimise their roles as initiated, approved and appreciated by Jesus.”<sup>385</sup> The Samaritan woman initially had not grasped Jesus’ revelation; she had hoped for the Messiah who will “tell us everything.” She was looking to the future, while Jesus spoke of the present. But her religious yearnings were sincere, which provides Jesus with an occasion of revealing himself to her as the expected Messiah. In him, she finds the fulfilment of her hopes and the hopes of the Samaritans along with her.<sup>386</sup> According to v.21, the object of the worship is the Father. Thus, Jesus reveals to the woman who responded so openly and sincerely, the mystery of “the Father.” Finally, Jesus reveals himself as “I am,” which is the full revelation of Jesus’ divine identity. Women become the recipient of Jesus’ self-revelation. According to Fiorenza, “the dramatic dialogue is probably based on a missionary tradition that ascribed a primary role to a woman missionary in the conversion of the Samaritans.”<sup>387</sup>

As soon as Jesus makes the self-revelation, “I am,” the woman leaves her water jar and runs to the town to bear witness to Jesus as the expected Messiah. ‘Leaving the jar’ is symbolically seen in parallel to apostles’ leaving their boats to follow Jesus. Schneiders declares that “[w]e should not fail to note the feminine version of the standard Gospel formula for responding to the call to apostleship, namely to “leave all things,” especially one’s present occupation, whether symbolized by boats (Mt 4:19-22) or tax stall (Mt 9:9), or water pot.”<sup>388</sup> Stressing the apostolic role of the Samaritan woman, Schneiders emphasises the fact that the witness, which the woman bears is

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<sup>384</sup> Irudaya, "Significance of Jesus' Mission with the Marginalized Samaritan Woman: A Feminist Reading of John 4:1-42," 169-170.

<sup>385</sup> Rekha Chennattu, "Women in the Mission of the Church: An Interpretation of John 4," *Vidyajyoti* 65 (2001): 761-762. According to her, “the example of Samaritan woman, the critical and creative dialogue partner of Jesus, who actively participates in the apostolic ministry can be a model for the women today.”

<sup>386</sup> Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 441.

<sup>387</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), 327.

<sup>388</sup> Schneiders, "Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church," 40. This resembles the standard way of responding to the call of discipleship in the synoptic Gospels. Leaving the boats in Mk 1:16-20 and leaving the tax stall in Mt 9:9.



quite clearly apostolic in the Johannine perspective. First, its effect is that those who hear her “come to him (4:30), which is the Johannine expression for the first movement of saving faith in Jesus (6:37). In 4:39 we are told explicitly that many Samaritans “believed in him because of the word of the woman’s witnessing” (*dia ton logon*) [...] John ascribes the conversion of at least one Samaritan town (probably symbolizing the whole Samaritan mission) to this woman apostle who acts out her belief in Jesus’ self-revelatory word and whose witnessing word brings others to believe in him.<sup>389</sup> According to Raymond E. Brown, “the Samaritan villagers believe because of the woman’s word (4:39, 42: *dia ton logon pisteuein*).” Brown further opines that this expression is significant because it occurs again in Jesus’ “priestly” prayer for his disciples: “It is not for these alone that I pray, but also for those who believe in me through their word” (17:20: *dia ton logon pisteuein*). In other words, “the Evangelist can describe both a woman and the presumably male disciples at the Last Supper as bearing witness to Jesus through preaching and thus bringing people to believe in him on the strength of their word.”<sup>390</sup>

After her personal encounter with the Messiah who told her “all things,” the woman went back to the village and invited people there to come and see. Her news and her invitation evoked a response. The people went out from that city and kept coming to Jesus (v.40).<sup>391</sup> Thus, there is a magnificent climax as the Samaritan believers acclaim Jesus as the Saviour of the world. The Samaritan woman is an authentic witness and a zealous missionary who brings the villagers to faith in Jesus.<sup>392</sup>

The woman becomes a missionary to her people. She initiates the mission to the Samaritans – “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done” (v. 29a). “Come and see” is an important Johannine expression that signifies a ‘theological invitation to a personal Christ experience.’ The invitation “come and see” also implies a call to seek and find. In the Gospel of John, there is a common pattern of people brought to Jesus by a disciple. The people come to full faith in him because of Jesus’ own word to them.<sup>393</sup> She is given an apostolic role: she calls others as Jesus

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<sup>389</sup> Schneiders, “Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church,” 40.

<sup>390</sup> Raymond E. Brown, “Roles of Women in the Fourth Gospel,” *Theological Studies* 36 (1975): 691.

<sup>391</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, ed. F. F. Bruce, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 275.

<sup>392</sup> Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 188-189. The Samaritan woman becomes a medium or instrument for bringing her fellow Samaritans to Jesus. She along with her villagers becomes a witness for the proclamation of Jesus as Saviour of the world.

<sup>393</sup> Irudaya, “Significance of Jesus’ Mission with the Marginalized Samaritan Woman: A Feminist Reading of John 4:1-42,” 172. John the Baptist was instrumental in directing two of his disciples to



called the disciples to 'come and see' and others 'see' because of her word.<sup>394</sup> Fiorenza would make the Samaritan woman truly a missionary. According to her

[T]he present Johannine community reaps the harvest made possibly by the missionary endeavours of a woman who initiated the conversion of the Samaritan segment of the community. In the interlude about missionary work (4:31-39) Jesus uses the Pauline verb *kopian* to describe her missionary work, "I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour; others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour" (4:38). Since the term is used here in a technical missionary sense, the woman is characterized as the representative of the Samaritan mission.<sup>395</sup>

In all her interactions with him, Jesus did recognize her openness and growing willingness to seek more meaning and understanding of what he was expressing, which led her to a total faith in Jesus.<sup>396</sup> After identifying himself as a prophet and Messiah, she becomes a medium for bringing her fellow Samaritans to Jesus. Later on, she along with her villagers becomes a witness for the proclamation of Jesus as Saviour of the world.<sup>397</sup> It is remarkable to notice the end of this story is a 'portrayal of the evangelized as having become an evangelist.' This woman not only receives new life from Jesus but also gives it to others. She brought many Samaritans to faith.<sup>398</sup> Schneiders opined that the Samaritan woman who encounters Jesus has been understood as a female disciple. She puts forward the following reasons: (1) she shares theological discussion with Jesus;<sup>399</sup> (2) she comes to believe in Jesus through

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Jesus, the Lamb of God and those two followed him and stayed with him and believed in him (1:35-39). Andrew led his brother Simon Peter to Jesus whose encounter with him helped him to believe in Jesus and Simon became Cephas (1:40-42). Nathanael who was brought to Jesus by Philip was converted by the very words of Jesus and became his disciple (1: 43-51). This Johannine pattern is seen after the resurrection of Jesus. It was the testimony of Mary Magdalene, which prepared the disciples to recognize Jesus who appeared to them (20:18-20). The disciples who had seen the Lord tried to lead Thomas to believe in him by saying, "we have seen the Lord." When he himself encountered the Lord, Thomas began to have full faith in him, which he expressed in the words, "My Lord and my God" (20: 24-29).

<sup>394</sup> Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 188.

<sup>395</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 327.

<sup>396</sup> A. Aloysius Xavier, "The Samaritan Woman and Martha of Bethany: A Comparative Study of John 4 and 11," *Indian Theological Studies* 35 (1998): 297.

<sup>397</sup> Raj Irudaya, "The Samaritan Mission of Jesus to the Marginalized: A Dalit Reading of John 4:1-42," *Vidyajyoti* 70 (2006): 661-662.

<sup>398</sup> Evelyn and Stagg, *Woman in the World of Jesus*, 117.

<sup>399</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 188-189.



his prophetic knowledge of her past;<sup>400</sup> and (3) as a missionary, she brings her people to Jesus.<sup>401</sup>

### 5.2.2 Mary Magdalene: The Apostle of the Apostles

It is important to notice that Pope John Paul II presented Mary Magdalene as ‘the Apostle of the Apostles.’<sup>402</sup> The Gospel of John describes Mary Magdalene as the first to encounter the risen Lord. Pope John Paul II says, “From the beginning of Christ’s mission, women show to him and to his mystery a special sensitivity, which is characteristic of their femininity.”<sup>403</sup> The Gospel of John emphasizes the special role of Mary Magdalene. She is the first eyewitness of the risen Christ, and for this reason she is also the first to bear witness to him before the apostles. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’ and she reported what Jesus told her (20:18). Mary is commissioned by the risen Jesus himself to bear and proclaim the message to the disciples.<sup>404</sup>

Fiorenza presents Mary Magdalene as a forerunner who proclaims the basic tenets of Christian faith to the disciples; she also recover her role as an “apostle.”<sup>405</sup> She put forward two reasons for Mary Magdalene becoming the “*apostola apostolorum*.” The first is her discovery of the empty tomb and the second is her being the first to receive a resurrection appearance.<sup>406</sup> This proclamation has apostolic significance. Sullivan observes, “Peter and the Beloved Disciple do not know what to make of these events and seek instead the comfort of what they know. But Mary remained at the tomb vigilant.”<sup>407</sup> Here it is important to notice the comparison made by Perkins about the resurrection accounts of Luke and John. In Lk 24:34 the phrase “The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon,” is used while in Jn 20:18 Mary Magdalene

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<sup>400</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 328.

<sup>401</sup> Schneiders, “Women in the Fourth Gospel and the Role of Women in the Contemporary Church,” 40.

<sup>402</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 16. The use of “apostle” to Magdalene is frequent in her famous ninth century biography authored by Rabanus Maurus: Jesus instituted her apostle to the apostles (*Patrologia Latina*, 112, 147 AB), she did not delay in exercising the office of the apostolate by which she had been honoured (1475 A), she evangelised her co-apostles with the news of the Resurrection of the Messiah (1475B), she was elevated to the honour of the apostolate and instituted evangelist of the Resurrection (1479C). Bernard of Clairvaux also calls her as “apostle to the apostles.” (*Patrologia Latina*, 183, 1148).

<sup>403</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 16.

<sup>404</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 16.

<sup>405</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 77-78.

<sup>406</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 332.

<sup>407</sup> Mary Ann Getty Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 188.



says, “I have seen the Lord.” Perkins holds the position that “this deliberate replacement by John is an acknowledgment of Mary Magdalene’s equality with Jesus’ other disciples as witnesses to the resurrection.”<sup>408</sup> From the above arguments we conclude that Mary Magdalene’s figure can rightly be considered as an “apostle to the apostles.”

It is not only the intimacy and openness of Jesus’ relationship to women that was so significant but also the social breadth of that relationship. Women came to him from all classes and status of life. All his teachings and conducts express respect and honor due to women. He knows the dignity of man and woman in God’s eyes and he himself is the definitive confirmation of this worth. Each woman inherits the dignity of personhood as a woman. “Jesus confirms this dignity, recalls it, renews it, and makes it a part of the Gospel and of the redemption for which he is sent into the world.”<sup>409</sup> Thus, the Gospel “equality” manifested in the words and deeds of Jesus “constitutes the most obvious basis for the dignity and vocation of women in the Church and in the world.”<sup>410</sup> Presenting Jesus as the promoter of the dignity of women Pope John Paul II shows Jesus’ mission with the woman as a challenge and inspiration to contemporary Church and society. This liberative impact of Jesus’ mission reminds the Church to join the struggling women in their journey of liberation from all that dehumanizes them and to uphold their dignity and equality in every sphere of life. Against the prevailing culture of his times, Jesus courageously accepted and recognized women’s equality, dignity, and giftedness. His great sensitivity and respect for women are an invitation for a deep conversion for the Church and society.

## **6. The Church – The Bride of Christ**

In Chapter seven of the Apostolic Letter, Pope John Paul II develops the symbolic dimension of the great mystery, which we shall discuss in the following pages. Subtitled as the “great mystery,” this chapter explains the fundamental importance of the words of the Letter to the Ephesians. This encapsulates the scriptural image of the spousal love of Christ, who is the Bridegroom wedded to his Church, the Bride.<sup>411</sup> The beginning of Genesis is reinterpreted according to the text of Ephesians 5:21-32.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of

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<sup>408</sup> Pheme Perkins, *The Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 177.

<sup>409</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 13.

<sup>410</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 16.

<sup>411</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 23.



water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that he might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church.<sup>412</sup>

The Letter to the Ephesians compares “the spousal character of the love between man and woman to the mystery of Christ and of the Church.”<sup>413</sup> Then the document mentions the analogy of spousal love between God and his chosen people from the writings of the prophets of the Old Testament while describing the relation between Christ and the Church.<sup>414</sup> In the text of the Ephesians, the encounter presents itself as a great analogy and the whole text is permeated by the same analogy: i.e., “the reciprocal relationship between the spouses, husband and wife, should be understood by Christians according to the image of the relationship between Christ and the Church.”<sup>415</sup> The relationship between Christ and Church is defined in Ephesians as “*mysterium magnum*, the great mystery.” It constitutes the fulfilment and concretisation of the visibility of the same mystery.<sup>416</sup> The Pope perceives the spousal love in the Letter to the Ephesians in two ways. On the one hand, it is the relationship between man and woman “created in the image of God and called to form a *communio personarum* through spousal love, which God intended for marriage from the beginning.” On the other hand, it is seen to describe the nuptial imagery of the relationship between Christ and Church.<sup>417</sup> The Letter expresses this spousal love by saying that “Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her,” and this is the confirmation of the fact that Church is the bride of Christ. Then he affirms the “Gospel innovation,” i.e., the awareness that in marriage there is mutual subjection of the spouses out of reverence for Christ, and not just that of wife to the husband.<sup>418</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> Letter to the Ephesians 5:23-32. Here the Pope refers to the nuptial symbolism in this passage as the ‘great analogy’ which expresses the ‘great mystery.’

<sup>413</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 23.

<sup>414</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 23. The text of Isaiah 54:4-8, 10 is quoted here and it explains the nature of God’s human love. This image of the spousal love, together with the figure of the divine bridegroom is depicted as a very clear image in the text of the prophets and it finds confirmation in the Letter to the Ephesians (5: 23-32).

<sup>415</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, 475.

<sup>416</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, 502.

<sup>417</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 24. See also, Grabowski, “Mutual Submission and Trinitarian Self-Giving,” 496.

<sup>418</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 24.



## 6.1 Mutual Subjection

The Pope explains that in a husband's love of his wife, there is a fundamental affirmation of the woman as a person. Until recently papal teachings emphasized wife's duty of obedience to the husband. Pope John Paul II focuses on the notion of mutual submission. Grabowski comments, one of the most important developments of the doctrines found in the teachings of Pope John Paul II is his understanding that the proper exercise of authority between husband and wife in marriage ought to be characterised by "mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ."<sup>419</sup> This teaching has a progressive element and tries to overcome the earlier Catholic tradition "in which wives were expected to obey their husbands without any suggestion that this was to be reciprocated."<sup>420</sup>

The important theme developed by the Pope in this chapter is "not the hierarchy of the sexes in marriage, but the permanent faithfulness of love in marriage, a faithfulness premised precisely on the mutuality and equality of the spouses."<sup>421</sup> Cahill further says that the Pope's agenda is to "affirm indissolubility, not hierarchy or headship. Indissolubility is an obligatory ideal for both women and men. [...] Both marriage and parenthood are the mutual, shared responsibilities of both men and women."<sup>422</sup> The Pope goes on to argue that mutual subjection of the spouses is a gospel innovation that definitely challenges succeeding generations. Pope John Paul II's interpretation of Ephesians makes it clear that the latter is neither countenancing male domination nor imposing a one-sided subjection of wives to husbands. In the relationship between husband and wife, the "subjection" is not one-sided but mutual.<sup>423</sup> In this way, he rejected the long-standing teaching on the headship of men in marriage, which is an innovation. Then the Pope emphatically says that the measure of this true spousal love finds its deepest source in Christ-Church relationship.<sup>424</sup> Let us analyse the symbolic dimension of the great mystery.

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<sup>419</sup> Grabowski, "Mutual Submission and Trinitarian Self-Giving," 497.

<sup>420</sup> Donal Dorr, "Concern and Consolidation," in *John Paul II and Moral Theology*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. Mc Cormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 308.

<sup>421</sup> Cahill, "The Feminist Pope," 45.

<sup>422</sup> Cahill, "The Feminist Pope," 45-46.

<sup>423</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 24.

<sup>424</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 24.



## 6.2 The Symbolic Dimension of the Great Mystery

The Letter to the Ephesians mentions the Church as the bride of Christ.<sup>425</sup> Here the Church (bride) means a “collective subject and not an individual person;” more clearly, “this collective subject is the people of God, a community made up of many persons, both women and men.”<sup>426</sup> The analogy of spousal love found in the Letter to the Ephesians links what is ‘masculine’ to what is ‘feminine,’ “since as members of the Church men too are included in the concept of bride.”<sup>427</sup> When the Pope develops the symbolic dimension of the “great mystery,” he affirms that the symbol of the Bridegroom, referred to Christ, is masculine and expresses the spousal character of the love between Christ and the Church. The Church, on the other hand, is the bride, and through her, all human beings – men and women – are called to be feminine “symbol” (the bride of Christ).<sup>428</sup>

According to John Paul II, “[t]he Bridegroom is the one who loves. The Bride is loved: It is she who receives love, in order to love in return.”<sup>429</sup> As we have already seen that in no way is this to be interpreted as an exhortation to women to be submissive to their husbands, the Pope insists upon the “mutual subjection” of spouses out of reverence for Christ “and not just that of the wife to the husband.”<sup>430</sup> The significance in this passage is the fact that the love of the divine Bridegroom is always primary to his bride, the Church (and the Christian in the Church), as is expressed in the Letter to the Ephesians: “Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (5:25-26). It is the sacrificial love of the divine Bridegroom even unto death.<sup>431</sup> This love makes his bride lovable and it bestows upon her the dignity of having been chosen as beloved. This is the love that invests her with the power to love in return. So it is to say that “we love, because he first loved us” (1Jn 4:19).<sup>432</sup> Then

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<sup>425</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 25. Here the dynamics of marital love provides a uniquely powerful analogy for the Christ-Church relationship.

<sup>426</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 25.

<sup>427</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 25.

<sup>428</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 25.

<sup>429</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 29.

<sup>430</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 24. Reference here is made to Eph 5:21.

<sup>431</sup> “Christ has entered this history and remains in it as the Bridegroom who ‘has given himself.’ ‘To give’ means ‘to become a sincere gift’ in the most complete and radical way: ‘Greater love has no man than this’ (Jn 15:13).” John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 25.

<sup>432</sup> Michele M. Schumacher, “The Unity of the Two: Toward a New Feminist Sacramentality of the Body,” in *Women in Christ*, ed. Michele M. Schumacher (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 219. The presentation of Christ in Ephesians 5 as the divine “bridegroom” of the church expresses, according to the Pope, the fact that God, who in Christ has



the Pope emphasizes the fact that “the Eucharist is the sacrament of our redemption.” Again he maintains that in Eucharist, “Christ is united with this ‘body’ as the bridegroom with the bride.”<sup>433</sup>

There are differences of opinion among theologians regarding the masculine symbol of the bridegroom in relation to priesthood. As we have already seen that Christ’s relationship with the Church is like the relationship between bridegroom and bride in the Letter to the Ephesians. While explaining the relationship between Christ and the Church, the Pope says that only a male can represent Christ the bridegroom and act ‘*in persona Christi*.’ That is why Jesus has only called men to be his apostles: only they get the mission to administer the Eucharist. Sara Butler, for example, argues that the masculine symbol of bridegroom better represents the human aspect of divine love that God has for the Church. The analogy of bridegroom/bride is helpful, in her view, for understanding the two roles of the priest, who acts both *in persona Christi* and *in persona ecclesiae*. To support her position, Butler draws upon the Pope’s view of love and sexuality: she states that a “masculine mode of loving” is characterized by “self-donation,” while a corresponding “feminine mode” is marked by “active receptivity.”<sup>434</sup> In the opinion of Mary Rousseau, “male initiative and female receptivity are especially important in the Eucharist, in which the priest re-enacts the marital love of Christ the Bridegroom for his Bride, the Church, with whom he becomes one flesh in the Eucharist.”<sup>435</sup> For them the masculine character of Christ’s spousal love is of crucial importance. Against this argument Lunen Chenu opines that this is a patriarchal schema characterized by “the polarization between activity/passivity or receptivity, and precedence/equality.”<sup>436</sup> Here “the woman is presented as essentially receptive (symbolic of the Church, who is entirely dependent upon the grace she receives from her Head), whereas a man is thought of as essentially creative, and thus symbolic of Christ, who makes the Church fertile in the

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loved us “to the end” (Jn 13:1), has likewise loved us “first” (cf 1Jn 4:19). His unfathomable gift of himself becomes the measure (cf. Jn 15:13) and the source of all human love, for the bride actually “lives his life” and “shares in his threefold mission.” This she does precisely as the beloved one, as one who has first “received” the Bridegroom’s gift of love – the gift of himself – and who, in virtue of his gift, has responded with her own self-gift. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 26. See also Michele M. Schumacher, “The Prophetic Vocation of Women and the Order of Love,” *Logos* 2 (1999): 150-153.

<sup>433</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 26.

<sup>434</sup> Sara Butler, “The Priest as a Sacrament of Christ the Bridegroom,” *Worship* 66 (1992): 511.

<sup>435</sup> Mary Rousseau, “Pope John Paul II’s Teaching on Women” <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/feminism/fe0013.html>, 7 (access 14.10.2005).

<sup>436</sup> Chenu, “Between Sexes and Generations: Maternity Empowered,” 38. Here the reference is direct to John Paul II’s statement that, “It is the woman who receives love, and loves in return” (MD 29).



gift of His life in the form of the Sacraments (the blood and water from His side being symbolic of the Eucharist and Baptism).<sup>437</sup>

Some theologians support the exclusion of women from priesthood through the concept of gendered loving. For example, Louis Bouyer constructs a “phenomenology of men and women based on their sexuality which would cause them to situate themselves in an essentially different manner in the world and in society.”<sup>438</sup> According to him, a sole function of man in the world is representing and in that “representation one finds the function of the priesthood.”<sup>439</sup>

Hans Urs von Balthasar reiterates the idea of Bouyer: “The man, as sexual being, merely represents what he is not and transmits what he does not really possess and so is simultaneously more and less, than himself. The woman, however, reposes in herself and is entirely her own being, namely the total reality of a created being facing God as his partner, receiving, retaining and nurturing his seed and his Spirit.”<sup>440</sup> Sexual difference, according to this view, requires that woman be assigned “being” and man, “representation.”<sup>441</sup> Butler argues that gender symbolism serves to represent the relational dimension characterized by masculine self-donation – *i.e.*, Christ “given for us,” – which marks Christ’s presence and activity.<sup>442</sup> The priest, for Butler, acting *in persona ecclesiae*, is a sign of the communion of Christ and Church, but only because he first acts *in persona Christi*.<sup>443</sup> According to her, Christ, unites the Church with himself in the action of the liturgy. David Power suggests a closer connection of the priest as both *in persona Christi* and *in persona ecclesiae*, as representing the resurrected Christ to the community and as representing the people in their celebration.<sup>444</sup>

<sup>437</sup> Schumacher, “The Prophetic Vocation of Women and the Order of Love.” 149.

<sup>438</sup> Louis Bouyer, *Mystere et ministeres de la femme* (Paris : Aubier Montaigne, 1976). Quoted in Herve Legrand, “Traditio Perpetuo Servata? The Non-Ordination of Women: Tradition or Simply a Historical Fact,” *Worship* 65 (1991): 501.

<sup>439</sup> Legrand, “Traditio Perpetuo Servata? The Non-Ordination of Women: Tradition or Simply a Historical Fact,” 501.

<sup>440</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, “How Weighty Is the Argument from “Uninterrupted Tradition” to Justify Male Priesthood?,” in *The Church and Women: A Compendium*, ed. Helmut Moll (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 158.

<sup>441</sup> Balthasar, “How Weighty Is the Argument from “Uninterrupted Tradition” to Justify Male Priesthood?,” 158. Balthasar adopts the notion that only men are capable of representation from Louis Bouyer.

<sup>442</sup> Butler, “The Priest as a Sacrament of Christ the Bridegroom,” 513.

<sup>443</sup> Butler, “The Priest as a Sacrament of Christ the Bridegroom,” 516.

<sup>444</sup> David N. Power, “Representing Christ in Community and Sacrament,” in *Being a Priest Today*, ed. Donald J. Goergen (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 97-123.



### 6.3 Eucharist: Sacrament of the Bridegroom and the Bride

“The Eucharist is the sacrament of the bridegroom and the bride and makes present in a sacramental manner the redemptive act of Christ who creates the Church, Her Body to which he is united.”<sup>445</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem* states that the sacrament of the Eucharist enacts a uniting of the “masculine” and the “feminine.” The Letter indicates that it is necessary for the priest to be male in order for Christ to be viewed as the “bridegroom” and the Church as the “bride”:

The eucharist is the sacrament of our redemption. It is the sacrament of the bridegroom and the bride. [...] Since Christ in instituting the eucharist linked it in such an explicit way to the priestly service of the apostles, it is legitimate to conclude that he thereby wished to express the relationship between man and woman, between what is “feminine” and what is “masculine.” [...] It is the eucharist above all which expresses the redemptive act of Christ, the bridegroom, toward the church, the bride. This is clear and unambiguous when the sacramental ministry of the eucharist, in which the priest acts in *persona Christi*, is performed by a man.<sup>446</sup>

In the section on the Eucharist, Pope John Paul II says that “[i]n calling only men as his apostles, Christ acted in a completely free and sovereign manner.”<sup>447</sup> More specifically, Jesus’ decision to choose His disciples from among men was not, as some have held, the product of social conditioning of the era, but a freely-made decision. The Pope refers to the Eucharist as “the Sacrament of the Bridegroom and of the Bride,”<sup>448</sup> The document says that Christ is the Bridegroom and the Church is the Bride, within the context of “the spousal love of God.” He goes on to declare: “this is clear and unambiguous when the sacramental ministry of the Eucharist, in which the priest acts *in persona Christi*, is performed by a man.”<sup>449</sup> This explanation confirms the teaching of the declaration *Inter Insigniores*. We turn to this discussion in the following section.

### 6.4 Catholic Teachings on the Ordination of Women

The debate on the possibility of women’s ordination the question about whether women can image Christ as fully as men remains problematic. In relation to

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<sup>445</sup> John M. Dermott, *The Thought of Pope John Paul II: A Collection of Essays and Studies* (Roma: Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1993), 147.

<sup>446</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 26.

<sup>447</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 26. *Inter Insigniores* argue that Christ’s reservation of the apostolic ministry to men was consciously build and not the product of “socio cultural conditioning,” 2. Pope John Paul II makes the point even more strongly, emphasising Christ’s sovereign freedom in calling of the Twelve in *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

<sup>448</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 26.

<sup>449</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 26.



priesthood, the official Roman Catholic teaching understands the priest as another Christ, *alter Christus*. Anyone representing Christ must be recognisable as a symbol of Christ, who was and remains a male.<sup>450</sup> Thus Christ is Bridegroom to his Bride the Church, and consequently only men can realistically and adequately represent Christ. In his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Pope expresses formally his opposition to the priesthood of women, with reference to the declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Inter Insigniores*.

#### 6.4.1 *Inter Insigniores*' Stand on the Ordination of Women

The 1976 Vatican "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood" (*Inter Insigniores*) declared that women were not permitted to enter the ministerial Priesthood. The arguments of *Inter Insigniores* against the ordination of women are from tradition, scripture and natural resemblance. In the argument from tradition, the document asserts that since the Roman Catholic Church has never ordained women, it cannot do so since "this practice of the church has a normative character[...]it is a question of an unbroken tradition throughout the history of the Church."<sup>451</sup> The Scriptural argument declares that Jesus had not called any woman to become part of the twelve disciples and that he ordained only men and not even Mary, his own mother.<sup>452</sup>

The "natural resemblance" argument is that only man can adequately symbolise Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist. It was the natural resemblance that only a man can act *in persona Christi*, which is the most unique part of the document's theology. Priesthood is a sacrament and thus "the priest is a sign, the supernatural effectiveness of which comes from the ordination received, but a sign that must be perceptible and which the faithful must be able to recognize with ease."<sup>453</sup> The commentary on the document says that it is "precisely because the priest is a sign of Christ the savior that

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<sup>450</sup> Paul VI, "Vatican Declaration: Women in the Ministerial Priesthood," *Origins* 6 (1977): 5.

<sup>451</sup> Paul VI, "Vatican Declaration: Women in the Ministerial Priesthood," 4.

<sup>452</sup> Paul VI, "Vatican Declaration: Women in the Ministerial Priesthood," 3.

<sup>453</sup> Paul VI, "Vatican Declaration: Women in the Ministerial Priesthood," 5. Dennis Michael Ferrara argued that the intent of Thomas Aquinas was that the priest points not to himself as representative of Christ, but away from himself, to Christ. Thus the priest's role is more instrumental, than strictly representational. In relying only on a representational understanding, Ferrara observed, the Vatican in fact relies on Aquinas's view that women are inferior to men. That is the representational approach to *in persona Christi* is itself grounded in a subordinationist conception of women's human nature in relation to men's. Dennis Michael Ferrara, "Representation or Self-Effacement? The Axiom *in Persona Christi* in St. Thomas and the Magisterium," *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 223.



he must be a man and not a woman.”<sup>454</sup> Thus, only men can represent Christ. The natural resemblance argument appears in the declaration as follows:

When Christ's role in the eucharist is to be expressed sacramentally, there would not be this “natural resemblance” which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ were not taken by a man: in such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man.<sup>455</sup>

This passage and its underlying assumptions regarding sacramental symbolism, the theological significance of the maleness of Jesus and the theology of ordained ministry are all problematic. We take up these issues in the following pages.

#### **6.4.2 *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis***

*Inter Insigniores* had not offered any practical solutions to the debate on women's ordination. Pope John Paul II in 1994 issued a second document “Apostolic Letter on Ordination and Women” (*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*). He mentioned the following points against the ordination of women. First, the Pope states that priestly ordination in the Catholic Church has always been reserved for males alone. The reasons are the example from scripture that Christ chose only male apostles. He says that it is “the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority,” which holds that women's exclusion from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan.<sup>456</sup> Second, referring to *Inter Insigniores*, the Pope asserts that the Church “does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination.” Again, he states: “Christ's way of acting did not proceed from sociological or cultural motives peculiar to his time”; rather, Christ established this particular “theological anthropology.” In the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles, it is stated to support this claim.<sup>457</sup> Third, the traditional teaching that Blessed Virgin Mary received neither apostolic mission nor ministerial priesthood demonstrates that women's exclusion from priesthood is not discriminatory. He rather states that the presence and role of women remain essential to the “life and mission of the Church.”<sup>458</sup> Finally, he puts all questions about ordination of women at rest by saying “Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed [...] I declare that the

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<sup>454</sup> “A Commentary on the Vatican Declaration: Women in the Ministerial Priesthood,” *Origins* 6 (1977), 526.

<sup>455</sup> Paul VI, “Vatican Declaration: Women in the Ministerial Priesthood,” 5.

<sup>456</sup> John Paul II, “*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: Apostolic Letter on Ordination and Women,” *Origins* 24 (1994): 1.

<sup>457</sup> John Paul II, “*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: Apostolic Letter on Ordination and Women.” 2.

<sup>458</sup> John Paul II, “*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: Apostolic Letter on Ordination and Women.” 3.



Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."<sup>459</sup>

This was followed in 1995 by a Letter from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to the presidents of Episcopal conferences which used the language of infallibility. He declared that

[...] the teaching that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women [...] requires definitive assent since, founded on the written Word of God, and from the beginning constantly preserved and applied in the tradition of the Church, it has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal magisterium.<sup>460</sup>

All these magisterial pronouncements assert that the Church does not have the power to modify the uninterrupted, two thousand year long practice of calling only men to the ministerial priesthood, inasmuch as this is directly willed by Jesus. This is the core of the thesis sustained by *Inter Insigniores* and reiterated by John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD 26) as well as *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (No.2). In the following section, we analyse some of the counter arguments from theologians with regard to tradition and scripture.

## 6.5 Arguments against Tradition and Scripture

As we have already seen, the arguments against women's ordination from tradition are prominently present in both *Inter Insigniores* and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. They insist that there have been no women disciples or apostles in Catholic heritage. Yet, historically, there is much evidence to show that women were indeed involved in the early ministries of the Church. In his itinerant ministry, Jesus was accompanied not only by the Twelve but also by a group of women.<sup>461</sup> The Gospels testify for example, that women were the first witnesses to the resurrection (Mk 16, Mt 28, Lk 24, Jn 20). All four Gospels note that women were found in the fellowship of Jesus and that they were the most courageous of all his disciples. They accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, and they witnessed his death.<sup>462</sup> Thus, according to the Gospel

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<sup>459</sup> John Paul II, "*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: Apostolic Letter on Ordination and Women." 4.

<sup>460</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, "Doctrinal Congregation/ Response to "Dubium": Inadmissibility of Women to Ministerial Priesthood," *Origins* 25 (1995): 405.

<sup>461</sup> Lk 8:2-3; "The twelve were with him as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources."

<sup>462</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Women in the Early Christian Movement," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 89-90. Here she quoted Mk 14:60; 15:40f. Fiorenza argues that from the criteria of historical authenticity, women were the first witnesses of the resurrection. But the Gospels attempt to



traditions, “women were the primary apostolic witnesses for the fundamental events of the early Christian preaching: they were witnesses of Jesus’ ministry, his suffering and death, his burial and his resurrection. They were moreover, sent to proclaim the message of the resurrection.”<sup>463</sup> According to Paul K. Jewett, these women disciples became the initial witnesses to the resurrection event which is the basis of all Christian preaching.<sup>464</sup> Fiorenza suggests that “Jesus can only be known in and through the witness of his disciples, women and men.”<sup>465</sup>

Feminist Biblical scholars have argued that in the early Christian communities it is more likely that women functioned in the capacities of apostles, missionaries and prophets and they were not marginal figures in this community.<sup>466</sup> As noted by a New Testament Scholar Fiorenza, the inclusive nature of Jesus’ message made it possible for women to become his disciples. At the same time they were able to take on leadership roles in the early Church because of the egalitarian nature of Jesus’ message.<sup>467</sup> Here it is important to notice Paul’s claim to be an apostle because he had seen the risen Jesus Christ and received a direct commission to preach the good news. This applies equally to Mary Magdalene (Jn 20:16-18). Mary Magdalene accompanied Jesus during his ministry (Lk 8:1-3), saw the risen Jesus Christ at the tomb (Jn 20:11-18) and was commissioned by him to “go and find my brothers, and tell them: I am ascending to my Father, to my God and your God” (Jn 20:17-18). Hence, she can certainly be named as an apostle. Elisabeth Tetlow points out that “it

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downplay the fact of the women’s witness, and “Luke clearly excludes them insofar he adds “maleness” as an additional qualification for apostleship.” Since the Gospels identify these women by name, this is a proof that they must have played an important role in Christian movement in Palestine. All four Gospels mention the name of Mary Magdala, whereas the names of other women may differ.

<sup>463</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Women in the Early Christian Movement,” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 90. Here she referred about the criteria of apostleship from Paul and Luke. Referring to Paul she says, Paul does not limit apostleship to the twelve. According to Paul all those Christians were apostles who fulfilled two conditions: “they had to be (1) eyewitnesses to the resurrection (2) commissioned by the resurrected Lord to missionary work (cf. 1 Cor 9:4).” Luke’s requirements for apostleship are different from Paul. He argues that “only those Christians were eligible to replace Judas who had accompanied Jesus in his ministry and had also witnessed the resurrection (Acts 1:21).” Then Fiorenza argues that according to all four Gospels, women fulfilled these criteria of apostleship that Paul and Luke have demanded.

<sup>464</sup> Paul K. Jewett, *The Ordination of Women: An Essay on the Office of Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 61. See also, Luise Schottroff, “Women as Followers of Jesus in New Testament Times: An Exercise in Social Historical Exegesis of the Bible,” in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 422.

<sup>465</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 52.

<sup>466</sup> Fiorenza, “Women in the Early Christian Movement,” 89.

<sup>467</sup> Fiorenza, “Women in the Early Christian Movement,” 88.



is no longer possible to argue that women cannot theologically serve in the ministry of the Church because all the apostles were men.”<sup>468</sup>

The Pauline communities acknowledge ministerial responsibilities for women. Paul's Letters in particular provide strong historical evidence for the leadership roles of women in the early Church. In the Letter to the Romans chapter 16, he mentions a number of Church leaders. Paul refers to Phoebe as a deaconess of the Church at Cenchreae (Rom 16:1).<sup>469</sup> Again, the report about the couple Prisca (called Priscilla in some translations) and Aquila, who were very close to Paul, and called by him as his “fellow-workers in the service of Christ” (Rom 16:3) is an important data to consider. Prisca's name is mentioned four times out of the six times used before that of her husband's name. It means that she must have been a leading figure. Paul explicitly states that Euodia and Syntyche were active at Philippi (cf. Phil 4:2).<sup>470</sup> Junias along with her husband Andronicus, is called “outstanding apostle in the Lord” (Rom 16:7). Until recently most scholars doubted whether the name Junias designated a woman. The reason being prejudice on the part of scholars who “took it as unthinkable that the title ‘apostle’ could in any way apply to a woman.”<sup>471</sup> Fiorenza says that an unbiased reading of this text provides information about the instance in the New Testament where a woman is called an apostle.<sup>472</sup> Again in Romans 16 we read, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis are called missionaries and Paul comments that they have laboured hard in the Lord (Rom 16:6, 12). In the opinion of Fiorenza, “the

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<sup>468</sup> Elisabeth Meier Tetlow, *Women and Ministry in the New Testament: Called to Serve* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1980), 120.

<sup>469</sup> Pauline Chakkalakal, “Paul a Friend or a Foe of Women,” in *Feminist Theology: Perspectives and Praxis*, ed. Prasanna Kumari (Chennai: Gurukul Summer Institute, 1998), 419. The Greek word *diakonos* (deacon) is the same for masculine and feminine genders. The term means doing a particular service. It is an office that figures the earliest days of Church history. Speaking of himself and Apollos (1Cor 3:5) and Timothy (Thess 3:2), Paul uses the same Greek word *diakonos* and there are no scriptural or theological reasons for making a distinction between a woman's function and that of male deacons. Fiorenza's study sheds further light on this. She affirms that Phoebe's office in the Church at Cenchreae is not limited by prescribed gender roles. She is not a deaconess of the women, but a minister of the whole Church. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 170-171.

<sup>470</sup> Legrand, “Traditio Perpetuo Servata? The Non-Ordination of Women: Tradition or Simply a Historical Fact,” 491. Paul also mentioned that certain women allowed their homes to become domestic Churches, like Phoebe at Cenchreae, Lydia at Phillippi (Acts 16:14, 40), and Nymphas at Laodicea (Col 4:15). In *Mulieris Dignitatem* 27 we read, these women played an active and important role in the life of the early Church.

<sup>471</sup> Byrne, *Paul and the Christian Woman*, 72; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 533-535.

<sup>472</sup> Fiorenza, “Women in the Early Christian Movement,” 90. Fiorenza argues that “there is no valid reason to understand the name Junia as a short form of the male name Junianus, since Junia was a well known name for women at the time. Andronicus and Junia is a missionary couple, like Aquila and Prisca. Both are fellow prisoners of Paul. They had been converted to Christianity before Paul and are outstanding figures among the apostles.”



missionary work of women was not initiated by Paul, but he attests that it was equal to his own.”<sup>473</sup>

Together with the above arguments it is important to notice the opinion of Herve Legrand who says that “[f]rom the absence of women from the Twelve, we can draw no valid conclusions about Jesus’ intentions concerning the presence of or the absence of women from the exercise of ministries in the Church.”<sup>474</sup> We see that historical studies show that the early Church did include women in leadership roles. Here it is important to notice the view-point of Jewett, who interprets the involvement of women in the ministry of the early Church as a result of the initiative given by the Risen Lord himself. Therefore, he argues that today the Church needs to take serious note of this gracious act of Jesus Christ who then can be the image for all men and women.<sup>475</sup> Susan Ross opines that this historical precedent is not sufficient to ground the argument for an exclusively male priesthood.<sup>476</sup>

## 6.6 Arguments against ‘the Inability of Women to be Image of Christ’ Perspective

Many scholars do not accept that Jesus’ maleness is a compelling argument against the ordination of women. Elizabeth Johnson has put forward some creative arguments against the Catholic Church’s persistence with a male priesthood. According to her, the main thrust of such persisting teachings seems to be the patriarchal dominion. She notes that man and woman share the vocation to be “christomorphic”: “The image of Christ does not lie in sexual similarity to the human man Jesus, but in coherence with the narrative shape of his compassionate, liberating life in the world, through the power of the Spirit.”<sup>477</sup> Johnson argues that the Church’s insistence that Christ’s maleness is essential to his identity and salvific mission is a *de facto* denial to women of “the fullness of their Christian identity as images of Christ.”<sup>478</sup>

Hilkert observes that “given the maleness of Jesus, however, the question of whether women can image Christ as fully as men remains problematic, particularly in debates

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<sup>473</sup> Fiorenza, “Women in the Early Christian Movement,” 91.

<sup>474</sup> Legrand, “Traditio Perpetuo Servata? The Non-Ordination of Women: Tradition or Simply a Historical Fact,” 489.

<sup>475</sup> Jewett, *The Ordination of Women: An Essay on the Office of Christian Ministry*, 62.

<sup>476</sup> Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1988), 81.

<sup>477</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, “The Maleness of Christ,” *Concilium* 6 (1991): 114. She makes reference here to Gal 3:27-28; 2Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29.

<sup>478</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” in *Freeing Theology*, ed. Catherine Mowry Lacugna (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 119.



about the possibility of women's ordination."<sup>479</sup> According to Ruether, "Although women are now said to 'image' God, they are still denied the capacity to 'image' Christ."<sup>480</sup> Brown observes that, "the primary justification given by the Magisterium for excluding women from the ordained ministry is not their incapacity to image Christ's bridegroom-like relationship to the Church. It is, rather, the desire to act in fidelity to the practice of Jesus himself who is not believed to have included women among the twelve."<sup>481</sup>

Richard Norris, for example, conflating maleness with the incarnation, subjects the divine to the limitations of the created world. In his view, because both men and women were baptized by Christ, both sexes were saved by Christ, and it follows that both men and women are capable of representing Christ in the role of the priest.<sup>482</sup> Further strengthening this line of thinking, Daphne Hampson opines that "[i]f it is to be held that both women and men find salvation in Christ, then it must be simply 'humanity' (and not masculinity) which is of significance as having been taken on."<sup>483</sup> In this same line of thought Rebecca Groothuis opines thus: "[t]he theological necessity lies not in Christ's maleness, but in a view of humanness that does not spiritually differentiate masculinity and femininity."<sup>484</sup> This brings to the fore the contentious question of Ruether, "Can a male savior save women?" Answering this question, Ruether argues that "theologically speaking the maleness of Jesus has no ultimate significance." She also notes that "his ability to speak as liberator does not reside in his maleness." Nor does it reside, she holds "in the fact that he has

<sup>479</sup> Mary Catherine Hilkert, "Cry Beloved Image," in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approach to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O'Hara Graff (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 202. See also Elizabeth A. Johnson, "The Maleness of Christ," *Concilium* 4 (1991): 108-116. Richard Camp gives a description on the discussion of Catholic Church on the issue of the ordination of women. In 1965 women's rights were first discussed by council members. In 1971, the bishops rejected a resolution favouring the ordination of women. "In 1973, Pope Paul established 'a study commission on the role of women in Church and society' but gave it the charge: 'From the onset of study the ordination of women must be excluded.'" Furthermore, the commission was urged to keep in mind the differences between the roles of men and women. On January 22, 1977, the Holy See responded to the ever-increasing requests for the ordination of women by proclaiming that Christ established a bond between maleness and the priesthood, which could not be altered." Richard L. Camp, "From Passive Subordination to Complementary Partnership: The Papal Conception of a Woman's Place in Church and Society since 1878," *Catholic Historical Review* 76 (1990): 522.

<sup>480</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," in *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo Christian Tradition*, ed. Kari Elizabeth Borresen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 269.

<sup>481</sup> Susan Mader Brown, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*: A New Perspective on the Image of God," 512.

<sup>482</sup> Richard A. Norris, "The Ordination of Women and the Maleness of Christ," *Anglican Theological Review* 6 (1976): 78.

<sup>483</sup> Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 55.

<sup>484</sup> Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 112.



renounced this system of domination and seeks to embody in his person the new humanity of service and mutual empowerment.”<sup>485</sup> She emphasizes Jesus’ liberatory role for the poor and the oppressed rather than his maleness. In the same line, Alister McGrath opined that the “maleness of Christ is a contingent element of his historical reality, not an essential aspect of his identity.”<sup>486</sup> Thus, it cannot be allowed to become the basis of the domination over females by males.<sup>487</sup> Michalle Gonzalez, corroborates this stance by arguing that Jesus’ ministry and his message and especially his accompaniment of the marginalized denounce theologies that attempt to justify any hierarchical subordination of one human group to another.<sup>488</sup> The Vatican document *Inter Insigniores* declared that women were not permitted to enter the ministerial priesthood. In this regard, Elizabeth Johnson observes that one of the given reasons for this denial was that “Christ was a man, meant not inclusively but in the gendered sense of the male sex, women, who were not men, could not act *in persona Christi* during the Eucharist.”<sup>489</sup>

According to Ruether, the Vatican *Declaration of Ministerial Priesthood* is reaffirmed by John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, which declared that “women are ontologically incapable of being ordained because they cannot image Christ.”<sup>490</sup> Now we come to note an inconsistency in the theological thinking of Pope John Paul II as far as this document is concerned. In the opening section of the document we read thus: “both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God’s image.”<sup>491</sup> Is this teaching coherently developed throughout the document? Since we know that women are absolutely equal to men in the order of creation, the argument in favour of ontological difference is invalid. Rightly, according to Ruether, there is a contradiction between this statement and his own theological starting point of equality of men and women in being the image of God.<sup>492</sup> We have already seen that the Pope emphatically declared that both man and woman to be created in the image of God. If so, how women, who are fully equal to men in

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<sup>485</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, 137. “Can a Male Savior Save Women?” is the title of the fifth chapter of this book.

<sup>486</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 112.

<sup>487</sup> McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 112.

<sup>488</sup> Michalle A. Gonzalez, *Creation in God's Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 155.

<sup>489</sup> Johnson, “Imaging God, Embodying Christ: Women as Sign of the Times,” 55.

<sup>490</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Women's Difference and Equal Rights in the Church,” *Concilium* 6 (1991): 13. Quoted *Inter Insigniores*.

<sup>491</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 6.

<sup>492</sup> Ruether, “Women's Difference and Equal Rights in the Church,” 13.



respect to the image of God, are yet incapable of imaging Christ? Here, one has to note that the Pope “ends up with a contradiction between anthropology and Christology” – ‘women image God but cannot image Christ.’ The argument of Ruether is that “[w]omen are said to be equal in the natural order of creation, but this has no implications for the ecclesial or sacramental order of salvation.”<sup>493</sup> This argument comes from the Thomistic tradition, the root of the starting statement in the 1976 Vatican Declaration, which claimed that women cannot be ordained because they do not image Christ. But there is a widespread disagreement among feminist theologians and they ask the question, “If women cannot represent Christ, how does Christ represent women? Or, to put it another way, if women cannot be ordained, then they cannot be baptised either.”<sup>494</sup> Here it is important to notice the words of St. Paul: “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God, through faith. For all of you who were baptised into Christ, have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female. For you all are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26-28). So every baptised person, including every baptised woman, carries the image of God.<sup>495</sup>

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, explanation of the calling of the twelve is given, which takes place at the last supper. The twelve alone receive the sacramental charge, “Do this in remembrance of me.”<sup>496</sup> Ruether comments on this in the following way:

Jesus’ presumed establishment of the Eucharist and the priesthood at that meal, we are told that women were excluded by Christ’s deliberate intention. This, the Pope opines, is because Christ represents the ‘bridegroom’ in relation to the Church as bride. Since this relationship is presumed to be essentially one of masculinity over femininity, women cannot play the role of representing Christ in the eucharistic ministry. Only males can represent Christ as priest.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>493</sup> Ruether, “Women’s Difference and Equal Rights in the Church,” 14-15; see also, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 1 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1946), 466-467. Q. 92, Art.1. This hierarchical ordering of nature and grace echoes the scholastic or Thomistic tradition, but it contradicts Thomas’s own understanding. In the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, women were fundamentally unequal in nature. He borrowed the false biology of Aristotle to declare that woman were defective or ‘misbegotten’ humans who lacked full normative human nature. Woman is then defined as inferior in her essential biological and psychological nature. She is weaker physically, lacking moral self-control, and inferior in reasoning powers. For this reason, they could not represent human nature in any leadership position in society. Only the male could represent full or normative human nature.

<sup>494</sup> Ruether, “Women’s Difference and Equal Rights in the Church.” 15.

<sup>495</sup> Wijngaards, *The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church: Unmasking a Cuckoo’s Egg Tradition*, 105.

<sup>496</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 26; (Lk 22:19; 1Cor 11:24).

<sup>497</sup> Ruether, “Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics,” 270. Here the author quoted “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 26.



One of the arguments against women ordination is that Jesus ordained the twelve at the last supper. But the question arises about who were present at the last supper. All four gospels state that the “disciples” – a general term for those who followed Jesus, including women – were gathered with Jesus.<sup>498</sup> The twelve are mentioned only in passages in which the betrayal of Jesus by Judas is mentioned (Mk 14:10, 17, 20). The opinion of Elizabeth Tetlow in this regard is that John’s gospel describes “those present as Jesus’ ‘own,’ a term which[...]denoted the disciples and included at least one woman, Mary Magdala.”<sup>499</sup> Here it is important to note that “there is no question of ‘ordination’ in the last supper scenes. This interpretation was read back into scripture by later sacramental theologians.”<sup>500</sup> Hence, the argument ‘Jesus intended to ordain only men’ has no historical credibility and foundation. Symbolically, both male and female celibates are “feminine” or “brides” in relation to Christ, the “bridegroom.” Pope John Paul II does acknowledge that the feminine concept of the Bride includes all human beings, men as well as women. He explains that it is symbolic of a universal vocation to respond with a complete gift of oneself to the total self-giving of Christ, the Church’s Bridegroom.<sup>501</sup> According to Ruether, the argument for an all-male-priesthood based upon the sacramental significance of Christ as head and bridegroom of the Church apparently contradicts the notion that male laity are “brides” within this symbolic pairing, that they – just as much as women – really must respond to the divine Bridegroom with a sincere gift of self.<sup>502</sup> Thus she says that “the Pope has no difficulty in claiming, however, that men, especially celibates, are symbolically ‘brides of Christ.’” Ruether asks the question, “If men can be ‘brides,’ symbolically, why can’t women be symbolic ‘bridegrooms’?”<sup>503</sup> So the notion that Christ as bridegroom is necessarily a masculine symbol and that can be represented only by males is questionable. In fact, the Pope frees the bride metaphor from sexual stereotyping when he writes: “In the Church every human being – male and female – is the ‘bride,’ by accepting the gift of the love of Christ the redeemer,

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<sup>498</sup> Tetlow, *Women and Ministry in the New Testament: Called to Serve*, 123. The author quotes Mk 14:12, 13, 14, 16, 32; Mt 26:1, 17, 18, 26, 35, 36; Lk 22:11, 39; Jn 13:5, 22, 23, 35, 18:1.

<sup>499</sup> Tetlow, *Women and Ministry in the New Testament: Called to Serve*, 123. This evidence indicates that not just the twelve but a greater number of disciples were present at the last supper.

<sup>500</sup> Tetlow, *Women and Ministry in the New Testament: Called to Serve*, 124.

<sup>501</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 25, 27. See also, Schumacher, “The Prophetic Vocation of Women and the Order of Love,” 153.

<sup>502</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, 126.

<sup>503</sup> Ruether, “Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics,” 270.



and by responding with the gift of self.”<sup>504</sup> According to this teaching, we see that the feminine is a symbol of both the Church and each of her members, male and female.

According to Natalie Watson:

The image of Church as woman and bride of Christ has been used as in recent Roman Catholic moral theology in defence against feminist theology, which is regarded by some as a distortion of Christianity. This is closely connected with concerted efforts to silence the debate about the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church by constructing a theological and ecclesiological framework that renders such a debate impossible.”<sup>505</sup>

In the New Testament, we have many images of the Church but in this Apostolic Letter the Pope used only one symbol, i.e., “the Church – the bride of Christ.” So this may be a selective symbol to introduce the bridegroom-bride metaphor in order to legitimately exclude women from the ordained ministries. Dennis Michael Ferrara argues that both *Inter Insigniores* and *Mulieris dignitatem* justify the maleness of Christ and his call of the twelve for the denial of the ordination of women. “Ironically, such arguments represent what the *magisterium* itself might call a novelty: far from restating the older theological tradition, they inaugurate as it were a new tradition.”<sup>506</sup>

Monica Melanchton opines, by being particularised, the maleness of Jesus is used to keep women away from ordination and meaningful participation in the life of the Church and community. She differentiates between the maleness of historical Jesus and the identity of the risen Christ who transcends gender.<sup>507</sup> However she realises that when people speak of Jesus the Christ they speak of a male person. But the deeper truth of Christology is that Jesus is “the representative human being – a category which includes female human beings.”<sup>508</sup> Again it is important to observe the question of Virginia Fabella: “How is that the maleness of Jesus defines the roles of both men and women when he represents only the male half of the human race?”<sup>509</sup> Sandra Schneiders points out that “the masculinity of God and of Jesus has been used,

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<sup>504</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 25,

<sup>505</sup> Natalie K. Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>506</sup> Dennis Michael Ferrara, “The Ordination of Women: Tradition and Meaning,” *Theological Studies* 55 (1994): 718.

<sup>507</sup> Monica Melanchton, “Christology and Women,” in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1989), 17-18.

<sup>508</sup> Melanchton, “Christology and Women,” 19.

<sup>509</sup> Virginia Fabella, “Christology from an Asian Woman's Perspective,” in *We Dare to Dream*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1989), 18.



in the practical sphere, to deny the likeness of women to God and to Christ and to exclude them from fully participating in the life of the Church.”<sup>510</sup>

## 6.7 Few Observations

The ordination of women is one of the most controversial issues in the Christian world today. The refusal to ordain women, claims the Church, is not discrimination. “[...] the non-admission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them. Rather, it is to be seen as the faithful observance of a plan to be ascribed to the wisdom of the Lord of the universe.”<sup>511</sup> But we have already seen many theologians, especially feminist theologians, questioning how the refusal to allow women to the priesthood is not discrimination. Thus the question about the ministerial priesthood of women remains uncertain. The explanation provided above clearly shows that the Church remains committed to her traditional prohibition on women’s ordination. The intent of John Paul II and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is clear: this matter is settled and there is to be no discussion about it. Women cannot and never will be ordained in the Roman Catholic Church.

There are many catholic theologians and especially feminist theologians who find this state of affairs unacceptable in modern, pluralistic societies. According to Susan A. Ross, refusal of the ordination of women is a sacramental discrimination.<sup>512</sup> Ruether asks; “How do we seem to have developed to a reversed view in modern Catholic teaching, in which women become equal in nature or creation (secular society), but unequal in grace (in Christ and in the Church)?” She thereby accuses the Church of promoting in practice the very contrary of what the Church teaches in theory.<sup>513</sup>

There is no doubt that the Church has come a long way from the days when women were considered as ‘inferior,’ ‘temptress and the ‘gateway to hell.’ The Church has condemned the subordination of women in the social world and denounced many forms of discrimination based on gender. Pope John Paul II urges “the whole Church community to be willing to foster feminine participation in every way in its internal life.”<sup>514</sup> He recalls “those great Christian women who have enlightened the life of the

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<sup>510</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *Women and the Word* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>511</sup> John Paul II, “*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: Apostolic Letter on Ordination and Women,” 3.

<sup>512</sup> Susan A. Ross, “God’s Embodiment and Women,” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Cathrine Mowry Lacugna (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 206.

<sup>513</sup> Ruether, “Women’s Difference and Equal Rights in the Church,” 14.

<sup>514</sup> John Paul II, “Women’s Role in the Church” in *The Genius of Women*, 1.



Church throughout the centuries and who have often called the Church back to her essential mission and service.” He urges “women of the Church today to assume new forms of leadership in service.”<sup>515</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem* explains that “[t]he moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way.”<sup>516</sup> He adds, further on, “If the human being is entrusted by God to women in a particular way, does not this mean that Christ looks to them for the accomplishment of the ‘royal priesthood’ (1 Peter 2:9), which is the treasure he has given to every individual?”<sup>517</sup> From the above arguments we see that with the exception of ordination to the priesthood women are urged to do everything that men do. So women’s leadership must be promoted in the Church. One of the major criticisms of the Church’s current position is that the Church is adopting a double-standard when it comes to the role of women within the Church.

## Conclusion

In his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II strongly speaks against the discrimination of women, in the Church and Society. The significant aspect of the document is that it attempts to show that there is a true equality between men and women. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Pope explains and justifies his theological view on women that serves as the rationale for the Church’s traditional approach to understanding and defining their functions in the world.<sup>518</sup> In this chapter, we have analysed the anthropological and theological dimensions of the dignity of women. The anthropology of *Mulieris Dignitatem* is mainly based on the biblical concept of *imago Dei*. The Apostolic Letter devotes a considerable space (MD 6, 7, 8) in discussing the theme of equality between the male and the female with a profound study of Gn 1:26-27; 2:7; 18-25. A scholarly treatment of this text from the Yahwistic and Priestly accounts of creation illustrates the fact that Pope John Paul II is open to the historical, critical and hermeneutical aspects of the biblical texts. By exploring the current studies on the biblical creation accounts (Gn 1:26-27; 2:7, 18-24), we understand that as created in the image of God both man and woman establish a relationship between them because the image in them reflects the image of God who in Himself is communion and relationship. Hence woman is created as a companion

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<sup>515</sup> John Paul II, “Letter to Mary Ann Glendon and the Holy See’s Delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women,” in *The Genius of Women*, 62.

<sup>516</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 30.

<sup>517</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 30.

<sup>518</sup> Formicola, *Pope John Paul II: Prophetic Politician*, 71.



to man equal in dignity and status. We do not think that there is hardly any hint of superiority of men or inferiority of women in the biblical texts we have considered.

Men and women are equal images of God. That is why the scripture ascribes to God masculine and feminine characteristics. God is father and mother. Thus God's generative power is neither masculine nor feminine; it is totally divine. God is spirit. God's fatherhood is free of all masculinity, it is not patriarchal; it is completely divine. The Apostolic Letter also enthusiastically treats the anthropomorphism of the biblical language, which elaborates on such feminine qualities as love, compassion, sacrifice and generosity.<sup>519</sup>

The Theological dimension of the dignity of women in *Mulieris Dignitatem* mainly concentrates on Gn 3:16. An important point worthy of note in this respect is the subjection of woman to man, which is a result of sin and that it serves as the punishment for it, not as a created order willed by God. From an exegetical study of Gn 3:16, the subordination of women, we may conclude, is the result of human sin, not intended by God. It is remarkable that the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* presented Eve no longer as a first sinner but positively as the mother of the living. Another important point we elaborated is the dimensions of the vocation of women. While the Pope does acknowledge the many different roles of women in the Church and the world, he specifically refers to motherhood and virginity as two important dimensions of the female vocation. Motherhood as women's physical and spiritual vocation is a predominant theme in Pope John Paul II's thought and this is a great challenge in this modern world.

Another significant theme examined in this chapter is Jesus' encounter with the women in the Gospels as a paradigm for the true liberative means for the establishment of the dignity of women. Presenting Jesus as the promoter of the dignity of women, Pope John Paul II shows Jesus' mission with the woman as a challenge and inspiration to contemporary Church and society. This liberative impact of Jesus' mission reminds the Church to join the struggling women in their journey of liberation from all that dehumanises them in upholding their dignity and equality in every sphere of life. Against the prevailing culture of his times, Jesus courageously accepted and recognized women's equality, dignity and giftedness. His great sensitivity and respect for women are an invitation for a deep conversion for the Church and society.

The last part of this chapter explained the symbolic dimension of the great mystery – i.e., the comparison of man's love for a woman to Christ's love for the Church. Here

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<sup>519</sup> For example, Is 49:14-15; 66:13; Ps 131:2-3; Is 42:14, 46:3-4.



we made a critical observation of the Pope's explanation on Eucharist as a sacrament of the bridegroom and the bride. Christ represents the bridegroom in relation to Church as the bride, so women cannot represent Christ in the Eucharistic ministry, only males can represent Christ as priest. After a detailed discussion of this subject, we concluded that the argument of Jesus' intention to ordain only men has no historical credibility and foundation.

A major shift in magisterial teaching about women had thus occurred during the pontificate of John Paul II – a theological and philosophical change that recognised the importance of mutuality as a major component in the understanding of human equality.<sup>520</sup> The older assertion of the natural inferiority of women has now been replaced by the anthropological model of mutual complementarity. This is an important improvement. But this Apostolic Letter cannot escape criticisms. The Pope starts by advocating the equality of women, but in the end, he decides to uphold the existing patriarchal church order. So the Letter is not consistent in some points. To be sure, the roles given to women and men are presented as mutually complementary, but in concrete reality the definition of the specific characteristic again results in a dominant position for men and subordination for women. The institutional role of women in the Church occupies only a minor portion of the document but is likely to disappoint those who feel that women have been denied an equal role in decision-making. When the Letter deals with the ordination of women, it appeals to the fact that Jesus called only men to become apostles. What the Letter seems to intend is that women are unfit for ordination. The Letter does not give much emphasis to the role of women in public life. This document is widely criticised by many feminists and others because of the strong position taken by the Pope against the ordination of women. They claim that this is a denial of the equality of women. However, we could say that Pope John Paul II has defended the equality and rights of women in the family and society to an extent far exceeding the teaching of previous pontiffs.

Departing from centuries' long tradition, Pope John Paul II teaches in no uncertain terms that women and men are equal as persons before God: "Both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree; both are created in God's image."<sup>521</sup> What makes this papal position an advance from the previous official teaching is that he declares the two sides of masculine-feminine divide to be of equal value in the eyes of God, which must lead to equal respect in human relationships. Thus, we admire the clear recognition on the part of the magisterium that God is father and mother, that

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<sup>520</sup> Formicola, *Pope John Paul II: Prophetic Politician*, 77.

<sup>521</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 6.



generativity has no gender, and that according to God's creation the man-woman relation is not patriarchal. *Mulieris Dignitatem* sets out the anthropological and theological foundation regarding the dignity and significance of man and woman.



# CHAPTER THREE

## THEOLOGICAL PROSPECTS FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF INDIAN WOMEN

### Introduction

In the first chapter, we have assessed the theology of women empowerment in context. The first part of the chapter discussed the theological contributions of a few of the Asian, African and Latin American feminist theologians, while the second part analysed the contemporary situation of women in India. In the second chapter, we have analysed in detail the Catholic vision concerning the dignity of women in *Mulieris Dignitatem*. In the light of these studies, we need a point of departure that would contribute positively towards the empowerment of women in India. This is because in our estimation, the contemporary Indian theology is not adequately attentive to the oppressed situation of women in India. Therefore, in this concluding chapter, we outline certain theological prospects for the empowerment of Indian women.

The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* of Pope John Paul II affirms powerfully the rights of women and insists on the essential equality of women with men. The Pope has been clearly trying to listen to the signs of the times. In view of this, in our first section, we will highlight some of the theological visions of the Pope about the liberation of women as envisioned in the Apostolic Letter. We do this mainly by showing that the creation narratives uphold equal dignity of man and woman. We explore the implications of being in the image of God. Here we combine the views of the Pope in his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* and the arguments of theologians, the feminist theologians in particular. We also discuss a life-affirming theology for the empowerment of Indian women. After analysing the theological vision of John Paul II on the empowerment of women, we focus on the mission of the Church towards the empowerment of women. In the year 2008 the universal Church celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*. It is significant that the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India that took place in Jamshedpur reflected on the theme of empowerment of women in the Church and society. Based on these discussions, we will try to suggest some prospects for the empowerment of Indian women.

After analysing the mission of the Church towards the empowerment of women, we focus on the feminist theology and the empowerment of women. In addition, in this chapter, we shall attempt at demonstrating how the basic principles of feminist theology help to address the issues of Indian women. Then we suggest some



theological prospects for the empowerment of women in India. In the last part of this chapter, we will explore the relationship between education and empowerment of women.

## 1. Theological Reflection on Empowerment

The word 'empowerment' frequently appears in today's discussions on human development. It is taken for granted that people, especially the marginalized need power in their struggle against forces that subjugate them, for gaining control over their destiny.<sup>1</sup> In recent times, empowerment of women has emerged as an important issue in the Church and society. The goal of empowering women is to provide an increased awareness of their rights and duties. It speaks of equal participation and status in almost all spheres with men including opportunity and freedom to develop themselves, and ending violence or atrocities committed against women.<sup>2</sup> There are differences of opinion regarding the term 'empowerment' and its usage in different contexts. In general terms, the word empowerment means, "the process by which individuals, families, groups, and communities increase their personal, interpersonal, socio-economic and political strength and influence in order to improve their well being."<sup>3</sup> In this sense, it is not given from an external source but emerges from within as persons and communities acknowledge and appreciate their gifts and their responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> For more than a decade, the concept of 'empowerment' has become prominent in development debate, and particularly so with regard to women. The term empowerment is frequently used to describe a process wherein the powerless or disempowered gain a greater share of control over resources and decision-making. Since women are generally accepted as the most disempowered members of the oppressed classes, the term 'women's empowerment' has come to be associated with women's struggle for justice and equality.<sup>5</sup> This makes it clear that empowerment is about power and changing the balance of power. However, its usage has different meanings in different contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> K. C. Abraham, "Editorial," *Voices from the Third World* 24 (2001): 7.

<sup>2</sup> J. Seshagiri Rao, "Empowerment of Women: Emerging Media Trends," in *Empowerment of Women: Language and Other Facets*, ed. Aba Gupta and Smita Sinha (Jaipur: Mangal Deep Publications, 2005), 26-27.

<sup>3</sup> Marie Giblin, "Empowerment," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (London: Mowbray, 1996), 83.

<sup>4</sup> Giblin, "Empowerment," 83.

<sup>5</sup> Kochurani Abraham, "The Place and Role of Women in the Catholic Church," *Jnanadeepa* 7 (2004): 77.



In a patriarchal society and in relationships, “power is often seen as a commodity to be used to establish control over others.” Therefore, power in this sense is “power over,” which means domination. In this kind of relationships, persons or groups gaining power over others may cause the loss of power of the other. This “power over” also can mean that “divine power manifests itself in Church and society in hierarchies of relations of command and obedience.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast to this, feminist views of power are more akin to the idea of “power to,” i.e., “power seen as creative, transformative efficacy and agency achieved through collaboration rather than domination.”<sup>7</sup> Hence, “empowerment is a transforming process that enhances the moral agency of women and other oppressed groups and enables them to act toward justice and right relations.”<sup>8</sup>

The 28<sup>th</sup> plenary Assembly of the Catholic Bishop’s Conference of India held in Jamshedpur in 2008, discussed the Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society. In the keynote address to the CBCI general body meeting, Rita Noronha explains the notion of empowerment as follows: the empowerment of women is a process that involves the development of ‘power within,’<sup>9</sup> ‘power to’<sup>10</sup> and ‘power with,’<sup>11</sup> resulting in altering the systems that are responsible for ‘power over’<sup>12</sup> other human beings – women and men. Empowerment of women is basically a process, which involves multiple strategies or programmes. It is similar to the process of gender sensitisation. The result of empowerment is gender equality. It not only ends discrimination between men and women but also ends all forms of discrimination

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<sup>6</sup> Giblin, "Empowerment," 83.

<sup>7</sup> Giblin, "Empowerment," 83.

<sup>8</sup> Giblin, "Empowerment," 84.

<sup>9</sup> It means developing ones ability to make choices even to say ‘No’ whenever or wherever a woman wants to. It is developing the potential that lies within for holistic growth – physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. Rita Noronha, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Keynote Address to the CBCI General Body Meeting 2008," *Vidyajyoti* 72 (2008): 423.

<sup>10</sup> This involves the development of abilities of woman to change her environment, acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes she requires to alter her external milieu. It is developing life skills such as those of good governance, decision-making, creative problem solving, communication and human relations and management. Noronha, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Keynote Address to the CBCI General Body Meeting 2008," 424.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Power with’ applies to the process of developing solidarity among women and men. It is the process of joining in the struggles of other marginalized, excluded and discriminated so as to influence the process by building social institutions or structures in their favour. Noronha, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Keynote Address to the CBCI General Body Meeting 2008," 424.

<sup>12</sup> It is an overcoming domination, discrimination and marginalisation. It does not mean women accessing ‘power over man.’ Empowerment of women is a process of changing those relations of power that are based on domination – ‘power over’ others. It is a process of resisting domination or exploitation and disciplining of the body, mind and soul. Noronha, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Keynote Address to the CBCI General Body Meeting 2008," 424.



based on sex, class, caste, majority or minority.<sup>13</sup> In this context, it is important to take note of Kune Biezeveld's article, 'Empowerment with Grace.' In one of the sections of this article, 'Empowerment' vs. 'power as dominance': Judith Plaskow's 'Standing Again at Sinai,' the author mentions that Plaskow distinguishes between two forms of power: 'power as dominance' and 'empowerment.' This 'power as dominance' is connected with patriarchal power, i.e., male dominance over women.<sup>14</sup> It also restrains people from their own responsibility in the struggle against oppression. Empowerment on the other hand is "the form of power we need for this struggle and for any responsible action in this world."<sup>15</sup> Biezeveld, once again in this article, says: "when Plaskow uses the term empowerment she explicitly refers to God as the source of empowerment."<sup>16</sup> With this reflection on empowerment we turn our discussion to developing a theology for the empowerment of women especially in the Indian context.

In the light of women's present situation of oppression and exploitation in general and especially in the Indian context, the task of theology is to develop a theology from the perspective of women. This theology must appreciate and promote women's cultural ethos and social awareness. Therefore, there will be change in the expectation of gender roles and an accompanying democratisation of the family.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, this theology expects not only to challenge sexual discrimination but also to provide support, acceptance and help for women in vulnerable situations where they lack social protection. In the spirit of the gospel, a response to women's needs and goals is necessary – especially with respect to their dignity and rights, which also gives importance to various other aspects, such as respect to their families, social participation, integration and daily activities.<sup>18</sup> Women have to be empowered to take responsibility for shaping their own destinies, as well as that of the world.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, our task is to develop a theology for the empowerment of Indian women.

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<sup>13</sup> Noronha, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Keynote Address to the CBCI General Body Meeting 2008," 424.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper Publishers, 1990): 128-134.

<sup>15</sup> Kune Biezeveld, "Empowered with Grace: Re-Thinking God's Power from a Feminist Perspective," in *Gender, Tradition and Renewal*, ed. Robert L. Platzner, Religions and Discourse (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 41.

<sup>16</sup> Biezeveld, "Empowered with Grace: Re-Thinking God's Power from a Feminist Perspective," 44.

<sup>17</sup> Virginia R. Azcuy, "Theology in the Light of Challenges of Poor Women," *Theological Digest* 52 (2005): 26.

<sup>18</sup> Azcuy, "Theology in the Light of Challenges of Poor Women." 26.

<sup>19</sup> Virginia Saldanha, "The Church in the New Millennium: Learning to Be in Solidarity and Dialogue with Women," in *FABC Papers 92c*, ed. FABC (Hong Kong: FABC, 2000), 7.



For this as a first step, we discuss how to restore the dignity of women. In order to do so, we delve into the aspect of man and woman as created with equal status and dignity. Thereafter we will discuss the implications of being created in the image of God.

## 2. Restoring Women's Dignity and Power

The foundation for the dignity of every person is the fact that they are created in the image and likeness of God. In *Mulieris Dignitatem* Pope John Paul II invites us to a deeper understanding of the anthropological and theological roots of the dignity of women. We have already seen that man and woman have equal dignity from creation because both are created in the image and likeness of God. That was the starting point for demanding one's rights and opportunities.<sup>20</sup> Feminist exegetes have worked intensely and for a long time on the position of woman in the creation story. Scripture tells us that God created humankind in God's own image and likeness, male and female God created them (cf. Gn 1:27). The reason for the close attention paid to this text is due to its great significance in the early Jewish and Christian history of interpretation and their anthropology, which is hostile to women.<sup>21</sup> Several biblical texts from the Old and New Testament refer to the God-given image and speak of the dignity and the mutual relationships between men and women. We have already established in the previous chapter that man and woman together are the image of God. Gn 1:26-27 asserts that both men and women are made in God's image. There is no hint of the superiority of men or of the inferiority of women. This text is the centrepiece of the Christian understanding of the human person, which continues to guide us today. In the following section, we shall outline how being in the image of God has implications for the empowerment of women.

### 2.1 Implications of Being the Image of God

To say that a human person is the very 'image of God' has profound theological implications. A person who sees a statue or a painting of him or her recognises himself or herself in it. It is similar to a reflection of self in the mirror. When God decided to make a creature in God's image, God made it as if it were his own

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<sup>20</sup> Luz Beatriz Arellano, "Women's Experience of God in Emerging Spirituality," in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 139.

<sup>21</sup> Prasanna Kumari, "God's Image and Women," in *Feminist Theology: Perspectives and Praxis*, ed. Prasanna Kumari (Chennai: Gurukul Summer Institute, 1998), 384.



reflection.<sup>22</sup> The social implication behind such an understanding is that all human beings are to be treated equally irrespective of their gender or class because all possess the image of God in the same manner. The Second Vatican Council drew upon the same passage in discussing the dignity of the human person.<sup>23</sup>

To be created in God's image means that human beings can know and love God. The ultimate aim of human intelligence and freedom is the vision of God and union with God in time and eternity. The ability to know and to love shapes the very personhood of men and women from the beginning to the end of life. This proclaims that they are subjects and not objects. Every person has intrinsic dignity and can never be treated as a thing or as a means.<sup>24</sup> The 'image' makes humans God's representatives on earth. In the Oriental (mainly Egyptian and Assyrian) view, a king is accepted as made in the divine image and is thus God's representative on earth. Being created in God's image further affirms that not just a king, but every man and woman, bears God's image and is his representative on earth.<sup>25</sup> Habel is of the same opinion that the image of God characterizes the underlying relationship between God and humans which makes them representatives of God on the earth.<sup>26</sup> If it is accepted that Gn 1:26-27 delineates the first man and woman as created in the image of God, then the question is, what is it exactly that the concept 'image of God' wants to communicate.

### 2.1.1 Complementarity

The term 'complementarity' shows the relationship between man and woman in Genesis. It implies equality and correspondence between man and woman. At the same time it implies a difference too. "Their complementarity allows them to be partners in which each needs the other, because each provides something different from what the other provides. The partnership of man and woman is based upon a community of nature and interdependence due to a complementarity of role."<sup>27</sup> They

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<sup>22</sup> Kumari, "God's Image and Women," 382. Gn 1:26 affirms that when we see a human person, we see a picture of God or a living statue of God. Every human person, created by God, is in the image and likeness of God.

<sup>23</sup> Norman P. Tanner, "Church in World," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils Trent to Vatican II* (Sheed and Ward: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 12.

<sup>24</sup> "One in Christ Jesus: Fourth Draft of U.S Bishop's Response to the Concerns of Women for Church and Society," *Origins* 22 (1992): 234.

<sup>25</sup> Phyllis A. Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them: Gen 1:27b in the Context of Priestly Account of Creation," *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981): 140.

<sup>26</sup> Norman C. Habel, *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 24.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Michigan: Servant Books, 1980), 23. The verb "to complement" means to "supply mutual needs and offset mutual lacks." This definition highlights both positive and negative aspects of the complementarity model of gender relations. "It suggests more



complement each other in a way that is mutual and reciprocal. Pope John Paul II maintains that complementarity requires different feminine and masculine gifts. The Pope has expanded on the philosophical and theological bases of gender complementarity. In his Letter to Women, he has presented the essential principle of complementarity in the following way:

Woman complements man, just as man complements woman: Men and women are complementary. Womanhood expresses the “human” as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way. When the Book of Genesis speaks of “help,” it is not referring merely to acting but also to being. Womanhood and manhood are complementary not only from the physical and psychological points of view, but also from the ontological. It is only through the duality of the “masculine” and the “feminine” that the “human” finds full realization.<sup>28</sup>

According to this view, gender roles are necessary for human fulfilment and they are more than mere biological or psychological differences between male and female.<sup>29</sup> According to Sara Butler, “[t]his is a new move, and the pope makes it by regarding the body as a constitutive part of divine image in humanity.”<sup>30</sup> This complementary relationship is clearly expressed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Man and woman are made ‘for each other’ - not that God left them half-made and incomplete: he created them to be communion of persons, in which each can be ‘helpmate’ to the other, for they are equal as persons [...] and complementary as masculine and feminine.”<sup>31</sup> Butler comments on this by saying that the complementarity engenders self-giving love and new life; man and woman together are a human image of the Blessed Trinity.<sup>32</sup> The narrative symbolism of Gn 1:27 is also aimed to construct the original unity, the unity of the two, through the experience of reciprocal communion. Pope John Paul II says that it is precisely because a woman is different from a man that she can be his helper. This help is not one-sided but mutual.<sup>33</sup>

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positively that male and female are helping each other and providing what the other cannot provide.” Aline H. Kalbian, *Sexing the Church: Gender, Power and Ethics in Contemporary Catholicism* (Indiana Polis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 97.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” 7.

<sup>29</sup> Kalbian, *Sexing the Church: Gender, Power and Ethics in Contemporary Catholicism*, 101.

<sup>30</sup> Sara Butler, “Embodiment: Women and Men Equal and Complementary,” in *The Church Woman Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 39.

<sup>31</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 372.

<sup>32</sup> Sara Butler, “Why the Church Cares about Women’s Issue,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (November, 2004): 9.

<sup>33</sup> John Paul II, “Culture of Equality Is Urgently Needed Today,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, (28 June 1995): 1.



We have already seen that man and woman are created for each other and they complement each other in a way that is mutual and reciprocal. "Whatever violates the complementarity of men and women, whatever impedes the true communion of persons according to the complementarity of the sexes offends the dignity of both women and men."<sup>34</sup> Pope John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, and the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith in *the Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Women*, argues that in the society and in the Church, man and woman play distinct roles equal in dignity, complementing each other.

John Paul II's idea of the complementarity of man and woman raises some problems and many feminist theologians reject such a theory of complementarity. Feminist criticism on complementarity is that it often "involves subordination and stereotypical feminine roles. The emphasis on woman as the one who receives love in order to love in return emphasizes the passive role of women."<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Johnson rejects the notion of complementarity because it represents according to her "an unrelieved binary way of thinking," which casts men and women as polar opposites, each bearing unique characteristics from which the other is excluded."<sup>36</sup> Ruether comments that the Pope affirms full equality of men and women in the image of God. Both sexes are said to possess rationality and share dominion over the rest of the creation. God's original intention for humanity is one of egalitarian mutuality between man and woman. However, she observes further that, the Pope's meditation on gender and theology is a confused mixture of egalitarian and complementarian models of relationship of men and women. He is unable to sort out the difference between 'masculinity' and 'femininity' as symbols and real human men and women.<sup>37</sup> Baum notices John Paul II's failure to specify the differences between male and female characteristics. He argues that the Pope only hints at what the differences are, and yet says that they do not imply inequality between the sexes, constitute a hierarchical subordination, or interrupt mutuality.<sup>38</sup> Further he observes that the Pope "does not escape the contradictions of every discourse that defines the spiritual characteristics of

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<sup>34</sup> John Paul II, "The Rights of Women," *Origins* 18 (1988): 243. This is an address by Pope John Paul II to United States' Bishops. See also *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Charles E. Curran, "John Paul II's Use of Scripture in His Moral Teaching," *Horizons* 31 (2004): 132.

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 154-155.

<sup>37</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," in *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo Christian Tradition*, ed. Kari Elizabeth Borresen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 269.

<sup>38</sup> Gregory Baum, "Bulletin: The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*," *Concilium* 2 (1989): 148.



masculinity and femininity.”<sup>39</sup> According to Ruether, Pope’s anthropology of complementarity “divides males and females into two opposite psycho-symbolic ontologies.”<sup>40</sup> Susan Ross opines the same; she describes the characteristics assigned to the gender are receptivity and maternal nurturing are female qualities, and initiation and activity are male qualities.<sup>41</sup> Here it is important to note the comment of Cahill: “The Pope still maintains that women and men have different ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ personalities, but he does not interpret this complementarity as hierarchy, either in society or in marriage.”<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, she says that this complementarity principle of John Paul II shows that motherhood as women’s highest vocation.<sup>43</sup>

There are positive remarks on the complementarity of man and woman in the writings of Pope John Paul II. In the opinion of Butler, the recent teaching of Pope John Paul II offers a theology of sex complementarity that does full justice to maintain equality as well as difference.<sup>44</sup> John Paul II acknowledges on many occasions the identity and equality of women with men. At the same time, he proposes their diversity and a necessary complementarity.<sup>45</sup> This suggests that women are understood by the Pope to be persons who are equal to men in many respects but distinct as well. FABC says that the whole human community needs to be enriched by the complementarity of men and women in governance, decision-making, politics, development, economics, etc. Today we suffer immensely due to the lack of this complementarity and balance because of which women cannot contribute to all spheres of life.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Baum, "Bulletin: The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*," 148. His argument is “Since masculine and feminine characteristics are found in all people, in men and women, it does not seem logical to refer to these characteristics as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. Virtue has no gender. Intelligence has many manifestations, but they cannot be classified as masculine or feminine.”

<sup>40</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Women's Difference and Equal Rights in the Church," *Concilium* 6 (1991): 13.

<sup>41</sup> Susan A. Ross, "The Bridegroom and the Bride: The Theological Anthropology of John Paul II and Its Relation to the Bible and Homosexuality," in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung and Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 40. Ross bases this characterization on John Paul II’s interpretation of Gender complementarity and it is mainly expressed in his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

<sup>42</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, "The Feminist Pope," in *Does Christianity Teach Male Headship? The Equal-Regard Marriage and Its Critics*, ed. David G. Blankenhorn, Don S. Browning, and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 47.

<sup>43</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Gender and Christian Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 122.

<sup>44</sup> Butler, "Embodiment: Women and Men Equal and Complementary," 35.

<sup>45</sup> John Paul II, "Complementarity and Reciprocity of Man and Woman," in *The Genius of Women* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996), 1.

<sup>46</sup> Virginia Saldanha, "The Church in the New Millennium: Learning to Be in Solidarity and Dialogue with Women," 6.



From the above arguments, we can conclude that men and women are equal but different in many ways. In a society like India man and woman have different roles in the family, society and Church. We have already seen in the first chapter that men are always considered superior and women as subordinate. Therefore, there needs to be complementarity among men and women in family, society, and Church; in decision-making and governance as well. The Pope holds to the different masculine and feminine personalities of men and women but he has not clearly defined what is masculinity and femininity. However, it is important to notice the point that both man and woman are equal in dignity, so there is no superiority of men or inferiority of women in the Church and society. Here I would declare that the Pope's idea of complementarity does not hinder the equal dignity of man and woman. But I do agree with feminist theologians Elizabeth Johnson and Ruether that there is confusion in the Pope's teaching of complementarity especially the difference between masculinity and femininity.

### **2.1.2 Reciprocity**

As has been stated earlier, human being is a relational being; he or she exists in interpersonal relationships. This relationship, which respects the uniqueness and autonomy of subjects, is called reciprocity. Reciprocity implies mutual openness between man and woman, an openness that accepts the differences and reciprocal responsibility. This reciprocal difference is a reflection of God, his image and likeness. God's image is expressed fully in the integration of the two sexes. Their union constitutes the first form of communion of persons.<sup>47</sup> They stand each in need of a substantial infusion of the other's qualities in order to achieve harmony and balance in the human person.

The most intense expression of this reciprocity is found in the spousal encounter in which the man and the woman live in a relationship which is strongly marked by biological complementariness, but which at the same time goes far beyond biology. Sexuality in fact reaches the deep structures of the human being, and the nuptial encounter, far from being reduced to the satisfaction of a blind instinct, becomes a language through which the deep union of the two persons, male and female, is expressed. They give themselves to one another and in this intimacy, precisely to express the total and definitive communion of their persons; they make themselves at the same time the responsible co-workers of God in the gift of life.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 7.

<sup>48</sup> John Paul II, "The Complementarity and Reciprocity of Man and Woman," 2.



Commenting on this passage Curran remarks that: “[t]heir masculinity and femininity allow the man and the woman to make the mutual sincere gift of self to the other.”<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, men and women do not become the image of God through sexual unity but through a relationship of love that may or may not be expressed through sex. “There is no dominant and no subservient half, no leader and no led, no superior and no inferior, no intellectual and no sensitive and passive, no reasoning and no intuitive section of humankind.”<sup>50</sup> The Second Vatican Council teaches that: “[t]he human, the only creature on earth whom God willed for its own sake, can attain its full identity only in sincere self giving.”<sup>51</sup> In his 1981 Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, Pope John Paul II insists that: “[i]t is important to underline the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men.” He further explains that: “[t]his equality is realized in a unique manner in that reciprocal self-giving by each to the other and by both to the children which is proper to marriage and the family.”<sup>52</sup> The Pope clearly points out that the question here is about the mutual relationship between man and woman. Being a person in the image and likeness of God, also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other ‘I.’ Man can exist only as a “unity of the two,” and therefore in relation to another human person.”<sup>53</sup> In this ‘unity of the both,’ man and woman are called not only to exist one near the other or together, but also to exist reciprocally one for the other, according to the Word of God. Reciprocity is understood only in the relational nature of the human person. It is a relationship to be with and to be for. In it both discover the true self as persons and experience the affirmation of personal dignity, rights and responsibilities.

Here one may ask how reciprocity is applicable to the empowerment of women. Reciprocal interaction in relationships is helpful for empowerment. Both sexes are equal, but different. Their functions are different, but neither superior nor inferior. Both are called to reciprocity and mutuality and work together as partners. Both are called to be rational and emotional, gentle and strong; both can be affectionate and loving, and both can exercise power and leadership with sensitivity. Respect for otherness, a sense of equality, mutuality and inter-dependence are important.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Charles Curran, "John Paul II's Use of Scripture in His Moral Teaching," 131.

<sup>50</sup> Tavad, *Woman in Christian Tradition*, 206.

<sup>51</sup> Norman P. Tanner, "Church in World," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils Trent to Vatican II*, (Sheed and Ward: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 24.

<sup>52</sup> John Paul II, "The Apostolic Exhortation on the Family," *Origins* 11 (1981): 22.

<sup>53</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 7.

<sup>54</sup> Inigo, "Scriptural and Theological Foundations," *Vidyajyoti* 72 (2008): 469.



### 2.1.3 Difference

Genesis 1:27 expresses the difference between male and female sexes. Both were created in perfect equality as human persons but in their respective beings as man and woman. Identity is the same but the image is reflected in two ways as male and female. Pope John Paul II remarks:

The personal resources of femininity are certainly no less than the resources of masculinity: they are merely different. Hence a woman [...] must understand her fulfilment as a person, her dignity and vocation, on the basis of these resources, according to the richness of the femininity which she received on the day of creation and which she inherits as an expression of the “image and likeness of God” that is specifically hers.<sup>55</sup>

Commenting on this passage Lawrence Porter remarks that the expressions, “personal resources of femininity,” and “the resources of masculinity” are never clearly explained.<sup>56</sup> Although men and women share some characteristics (same species, capacity for rationality, etc.), there are some important aspects in which they differ from each other.<sup>57</sup> So the fruitful collaboration of men and women must be based on the truth about the human person. Two sexes, different and equal, are a revelation of the image and likeness of God and are part of the goodness of the creation of God.<sup>58</sup> Sexual difference is neither irrelevant nor additional, nor is it a social product: it originates in the very intention of the Creator.<sup>59</sup> In the same Apostolic Letter, the Pope speaks about a distinctly feminine response to Christ in the light of the gospel examples<sup>60</sup> and the indication of biology and psychology regarding gender difference.<sup>61</sup> The Pope further says that “equality of dignity” does not mean

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<sup>55</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 10. Brown observes that the Pope is not like some ancient Church writers. They do not understand gender differences to arise because women are in certain respects deficient in the gifts, which men have. It is clear that the Pope wants to honour women by seeing their differences from men as assets rather than liabilities. Brown, *Mulieris Dignitatem: A New Perspective on the Image of God*, 505.

<sup>56</sup> Lawrence B. Porter, “Gender in Theology: The Example of John Paul II’s *Mulieris Dignitatem*,” *Gregorianum* 77 (1996): 111. The author notices that the Pope more often prefers to speak of “the personal structure of the woman” (MD 18), “the psychophysical structure of women” (MD 18), and “the female personality” (MD 17).

<sup>57</sup> Brown, *Mulieris Dignitatem: A New Perspective on the Image of God*, 505. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 20-21.

<sup>58</sup> Dale O’ Leary, “The Problem of Gender Feminism,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, (14 November 2004): 7.

<sup>59</sup> Jutta Burggraf, “Commentary on the Relationship Between Men and Women” <http://www.ewtn.com/library/issues/comenwom.htm> (access 08.10.2005), 2.

<sup>60</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 15.

<sup>61</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 18.



“sameness with men,” because “this would only impoverish women and all of society, by deforming and losing the unique richness and the inherent value of femininity.”<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, some feminist scholars have found that Pope’s dualistic anthropology is deficient. Johnson argues that: “[i]n this line of thought a person’s characteristics and vocation are not predetermined by sex, vital though this is as a component of personal identity. Rather, human aptitudes exist across a wide spectrum for women and men.”<sup>63</sup> On this comment, Mary Rousseau remarks as follows:

There are, then, genuine differences between the sexes that are natural, not just cultural, and sexual, not just individual differences that might be found in people of either sex. They are differences in perceiving, judging, and choosing; differences in the exercise of self-giving love; differences for forming communion of persons.<sup>64</sup>

According to Butler, “sexual difference is uniquely important. Because sexual difference shapes one’s capacity to love and to give life, it has profound relevance for personal identity and for the social order.”<sup>65</sup> The differences between men and women are not meant to divide them but to summon them together in the communion of love.<sup>66</sup> While the Pope emphasises the equal dignity accorded to man and woman as of “God’s image and likeness,” he does not stop from saying that there are differences in which each gender reflects the image of God.

Men and women are equal, yet they are also different. The Letter argues that masculinity and femininity have been given distinct characteristics by the creator. But these differences should not be seen as one sex being inferior to the other, or that the different capacities and skills of one sex are inferior to those of the other. These differences should not discriminate women from entering into public functions. There are also differences between men among men and women among women.

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<sup>62</sup> John Paul II, “Welcome to Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women,” in *The Genius of Women* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996), 37.

<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Imaging God, Embodying Christ: Women as Sign of the Times,” in *The Church Woman Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 54-55. Johnson argues that “women can be rational and great at leadership; men can be loving and nurturing. And rational women and nurturing men can form beautiful mutual relationships. In fact, the range of differences among women themselves ends up being just as great or even greater than differences between some women and some men.” She adds that social roles are not to be pre-assigned according to gender but engaged according to person’s gifts, and education.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Rousseau, “Pope John Paul II’s Teaching on Women”, <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/feminism/fe0013.html> (access 14- 10- 2005).

<sup>65</sup> Butler, “Embodiment: Women and Men Equal and Complementary,” 41-42. In the opinion of Butler sexual difference is an ‘invitation to communion,’ it should not be for competition.

<sup>66</sup> John S. Grabowski, “Mutual Submission and Trinitarian Self-Giving,” *Angelicum* 74 (1997): 512.



### 2.1.4 Communion

In the Christian concept, both man and woman are called to mutual communion. We have discussed above that both man and woman are persons with equal dignity and they are images of God. The image of God is reflected also in the interpersonal communion of man and woman. In *Mulieris Dignitatem* Pope John Paul II teaches that man becomes the image and likeness of God not only through the proper humanity, but also through the communion of persons, i.e., communion of man and woman from the beginning. Created as man and woman, the Pope maintains, they are not only individually like God as rational and free beings, but also a “unity of the two” in their common humanity, “called to live in a communion of love” reflecting the Trinitarian communion of love.<sup>67</sup> In the same way, *The Letter to the Bishop's of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and the World* explains that God made each sex to live in communion with the other, thus reflecting the life of the Trinity. “This is the humanity, sexually differentiated, which is explicitly declared ‘the image of God.’”<sup>68</sup>

In his elaborate analysis of the biblical text from Genesis and moving further to Eph 5:21-32, the Pope concludes that wife is “subject to” husband in the same sense as husband is “subject to” wife. Each is called to be self-gift to the other.<sup>69</sup> For, “only the equality resulting from their dignity as persons can give to their mutual relationship the character of an authentic ‘*communio personarum*.’”<sup>70</sup> Referring to the biblical view of man and woman the Second Vatican Council underlines the concept that both man and woman are ordained to bring out the primary form of interpersonal communion: “God, however, did not create the human person a solitary: from the very beginning male and female he created them (Gn 1:27), and their coming together

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<sup>67</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 7.

<sup>68</sup> Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and the World,” 5.

<sup>69</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 7, 10. See Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*, Revised Edition ed. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992), 325. The Pope’s “nuptial” understanding of human nature as a “unity of the two,” leads to communion of husband and wife in their “mutual subjection.” For the Pope, “mutual subjection” is the innovation of the Gospel. Leonie Caldecott thinks that the Pope’s emphasis on “mutual subjection” forms the basis for his “new feminism.” Leonie Caldecott, “Sincere Gift: The Pope’s New Feminism,” in *John Paul II and Moral Theology: Readings in Moral Theology*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 221-222.

<sup>70</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 10.



brings about the first form of communion of persons.”<sup>71</sup> Man and woman are called to live in an interpersonal communion.

The Bible accords equal place for man and woman as God’s image. Furthermore, the full meaning of humankind is realized only when there is man and woman. “*Communio* is an essential dimension of man as part of his being in the image of God.”<sup>72</sup> In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Pope suggests that human being is not only in the image of God because of his/her being free and rational, but also because he/she is a being who is fulfilled in communion, as relation.<sup>73</sup> Another important point to be noted here is that the creation of man and woman in the image of God also reflects something of the community of the divine persons. In his divine nature as a spiritual being, God transcends biological sexuality.<sup>74</sup> Some of the feminist theologians do not see any reason for inequality or gradation of the human persons on the basis of their gender. But gender is an indication of the invitation given to the humans to transcend our historical selves and social institutions in recognizing the Creator-God, who should not be limited to either sex nor to a combination of both, but to a God who is ‘invisible.’<sup>75</sup> Therefore whatever we understand by the concept of the human person as the image of God, it is to be applied equally to man and woman. From the above discussion, we notice that Pope John Paul II has suggested some theological arguments to enhance the dignity of women. In the following section, we will discuss the application of Pope John Paul II’s anthropological and theological principles to the Indian context for the empowerment of women. In view of this, in the following section, we discuss the dignity of women and the enhancement of the same for the empowerment of women.

## 2.2 ‘Respect the Dignity of Women’

In order to empower the women in India we suggest respecting their dignity. As a result of the findings in the second chapter, we conclude that the basis for the dignity of women is that they are created in the image and likeness of God. It has got profound theological implications in the Indian context. According to the traditional

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<sup>71</sup> Norman P. Tanner, ed., “Church in World” *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Trent to Vatican II*, 12.

<sup>72</sup> Angelo Cardinal Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, trans. Michelle K. Borrás (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 9.

<sup>73</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 7.

<sup>74</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 7. See also, Grabowski, “Mutual Submission and Trinitarian Self Giving” 503.

<sup>75</sup> Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 200-202; Maryanne Cline Horowitz, “The Image of God in Man - Is Woman Included,” *Harvard Theological Review* 72 (1979): 205.



teachings, women are inferior by nature, temptresses and gateway to hell. Christian tradition identified Eve with evil and compared women with eve's role. Patriarchy and its perpetuating the notion that men are superior to women have shaped Christianity. In this context, we could say that the dignity of women is not human made, it is God given because she is created in the image of God. So those who deny the dignity of women also deny God himself or God's image in them. Respecting the dignity of women means respecting their life, freedom, aspirations, visions etc. Here one may ask the question how to enhance the dignity of women. We delve into this question in the following section.

In dealing with the issue of enhancing the dignity of women, we elaborate three areas that necessitate working for the empowerment of women. Respecting the dignity of life is important for the empowerment. Respecting the dignity of life, first of all, means respecting the female foetus and infants. From conception onwards, they are denied the right to life by way of female foeticide and infanticide. The rejection of a female child forced many women to undergo amniocentesis tests and to abort their female foetus. The girl child is considered a liability in most of families. She is conditioned to believe that she is inferior and subordinate to her brothers.

Respecting the status of women is the other side of enhancing their dignity; respecting and seeing them as persons and not as commodities. If we accept this as a principle there will not be cruelties of dowry system and bride burning. If we respect the dignity of women, there will not be any violence against women. Rape is a serious problem facing women in many parts of the country and it continues to be used as a tool of war. The religious communities take revenge on each other by assaulting their women.<sup>76</sup> In a recent attack on Christians in Orissa, women were raped and burnt to death. If people and society is able to respect the dignity of women, there would be no exploitation and sexual abuse of women; neither would the women be left abandoned to an impoverished existence.

Another point for respecting the dignity of women is to accept women's access to public functions. Equal rights become signs of human dignity because man and woman equally reflect the image of God. One of the important measures to get rid of the patriarchal culture is for women and men to build relationships where both are equal partners. This would change the patriarchal paradigm and restore women's

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<sup>76</sup> Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: At the Dawn of the Millennium*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: ISPCK, 2003), 169.



inborn dignity.<sup>77</sup> Pope John Paul II affirmed that the original relationship of man and woman, not as hierarchical but as equal. He teaches that the domination of women by men is the result of sin and that in the redeemed world, men and women are equal. Another important point to uphold the dignity of women is to respect their motherhood. We shall now discuss the need for a life affirming theology for the empowerment of women.

### 2.3 Life-Affirming Theology for the Empowerment of Women

We have discussed, in the previous section, the importance of restoring and respecting the dignity of women. In this section, we propose a life-affirming theology for the empowerment of women. Here we come back to Pope John Paul II's vision of motherhood that we have already discussed in the second chapter. In this section, we further elaborate its implications in the Indian context.

In a country like India, the family unit and family relations are vital. Women can contribute significantly to the promotion and growth of human life, human relations and spiritual values. This has been adequately proved down through the ages in woman's role as mother, sister, wife and daughter. However, to keep these skills of women confined to the home is to limit the influence and scope of women to enhance their life in wider and equally effective areas of political, economic, social and religious life.<sup>78</sup> Statement of the CBCI in the 28<sup>th</sup> plenary assembly quotes Pope John Paul II's Letter to Women and says that the Church continues to uphold the dignity of women especially the uniqueness of motherhood.<sup>79</sup>

The role of women as mother is held in highest honour in the Indian religions and cultures. The ancient lawgiver Manu approves the same when he advocates: "By honouring his mother he gains this (nether) world [...]"<sup>80</sup> According to him, a mother should never be shown disrespect or treated with contempt even when one is offended. Hence, he is of the opinion that forsaking a mother is a crime deserving punishment, whereas obedience to her is the best form of austerity.<sup>81</sup> The neo-

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<sup>77</sup> Han Soon Hee, "A Method of Theological Reflection for Empowerment: An Eco-Feminist Perspective According to Asian Religious and Cultural Values," in *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced*, ed. Evelyn Monteiro and Antoinette Gutzler (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 321.

<sup>78</sup> Virginia Saldanha, "The Church in the New Millennium: Learning to be in Solidarity and Dialogue with Women," 7.

<sup>79</sup> "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Statement of CBCI in the 28<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the CBCI, Jamshedpur, 13<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup> February 2008," *Vidyajyoti* 72 (2008): 303.

<sup>80</sup> G. Bühler, *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), II. 233.

<sup>81</sup> Bühler, *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries*, VIII. 225.



*brahmachari* receives his first alms from his mother, indicative of the honour and position she holds vis-à-vis father.<sup>82</sup> Motherhood is cherished as the ideal of the life of a woman. Manu observes that women were created to be mothers. He grants several concessions to her, such as pregnant woman is exempted from paying toll-tax, no punishment to her if the path of the King is made unclean by her [...] On the contrary, a barren woman is looked down as impure and Brahmins are not allowed to take food from her.<sup>83</sup> The duties assigned to mothers (women) by Manu are quite clear. She is the caretaker of her children and as such, they are not permitted to separate from them on any account.<sup>84</sup> She is not granted independence and existence of her own and has to live under the supervision of her own sons after the death of her husband.<sup>85</sup> She is expected to uphold and not to discredit her own family as well as her father.<sup>86</sup>

Manu highly praises motherhood but the rules he has given to women are more restrictive and this is one of the reasons for the oppression of women in India. The cultural tradition of India considers women's role as mother to be exclusively that of wife and mother and it is highly praised in the ancient literature of India especially in *Manu Smṛti*. This prevents her from adequate access to public functions and the cultural concept is that it has been generally reserved for men. The root of social inequality of women in India is the Laws given by Manu.

Woman's role as wife and mother is a noble and Christian vocation which is an expression of her femininity. It is a universal call to holiness. To fulfil their roles, women receive a diversity of gifts or charisms among which the "gift of self for love,"<sup>87</sup> is important. According to Michele Schumacher, "In an age in which pro-choice has become a battle cry against life, [however] the very meaning of motherhood has been transformed from the seemingly passive role of receiving life, to that of actively choosing it, and all Christians are exhorted to do both: to recognise that their children, even when chosen, remain a divine gift, a gift which requires a response, that is, 'a sincere gift of self.'"<sup>88</sup> In the same way, in *Mulieris Dignitatem*,

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<sup>82</sup> Bühler, *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries*, II. 50, 133, 145.

<sup>83</sup> Bühler, *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries*, VIII. 407, IX. 283, IX. 213.

<sup>84</sup> Bühler, *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries*, V. 149.

<sup>85</sup> Bühler, *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries*, V.148, IX.3.

<sup>86</sup> Bühler, *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries*, V.149.

<sup>87</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 27.

<sup>88</sup> Michele M. Schumacher, "The Prophetic Vocation of Women and the Order of Love," *Logos* 2 (1999): 162. See also, John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 18.



the Pope emphasises the particular gift of motherhood in women. The Pope believes that a woman's special way of being an image of God is to care for persons with love and sensitivity especially as mothers.<sup>89</sup> From the above discussion, we could say that the Pope sees motherhood as the primary vocation of women but he has also defended the equality and rights of women in the family and society. We further elaborate this point in the following section.

### 2.3.1 Mutual Recognition of Men and Women in the Family and Society

Pope John Paul II says that both parents should share the responsibility in child-rearing, but "the mother's contribution is decisive in laying the foundation for a new human personality."<sup>90</sup> Though men and women are essentially equal as both are created in God's image, women bear the primary responsibility for parenting and for the welfare of the family.<sup>91</sup> With regard to the family, Pope John Paul II considers women's role as mothers to have a special value that even manifests par excellence the "special genius of women."<sup>92</sup> In his Letter to Women, John Paul II expresses thanks not only to wives, mothers and members of religious communities, but expresses gratitude to them. He said, "Thank you women who work! You are present and active in every area of life – social, economic, cultural, artistic and political."<sup>93</sup>

Many feminist theologians have criticised Pope's idea of motherhood; they consider it as a traditional conception of women primarily as wives and mothers. Some of the feminist evaluation of motherhood is negative. Some feminists seek to achieve the maximum choice for women, which they equate with liberation or freedom. But it would affect the relationship in the family, for example, divorce, abortion etc., will cause to damage the relationships.

From a detailed research of the Pope's teachings on motherhood in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, we could say that the Pope is willing to draw out the policy implications of this traditional view of women's special role as mother. For example the Pope declares that a man has to learn his own fatherhood from the mother. I think this argument of the Pope is against patriarchy, because by patriarchy is meant the rule of the father; it implies that the fathers are not to dominate over mothers. The Pope also

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<sup>89</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 20-21.

<sup>90</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 18.

<sup>91</sup> Mary C. Segers, "Feminism, Liberalism and Catholicism," in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick, Readings in Moral Theology No.9 (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 600.

<sup>92</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 30-31; "Letter to Women," 9-11; Cahill, "The Feminist Pope," 43.

<sup>93</sup> John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 2.



sees the parental roles of father and mother as mutual and reciprocal. But this cannot be stressed enough for the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*. We cannot ignore the role of women as mothers in the modern society because families are facing lot of problems with lack of responsible parenthood. Pope connects the dignity of woman to her motherhood. He says that the specific gift of woman is rooted in motherhood. The Pope further explains that the uniqueness of the dignity of woman is not to be measured by the dominating male order of power but by the order of love. Nevertheless, in a certain way Pope idealises the concept of motherhood and hence, it is not fully applicable to the context of Indian women.

The traditional Indian society considered the important role of women as mother and identified womanhood as motherhood. The society was also matriarchal and mother had a very important role in the family and society. The Pope also mentions the importance of motherhood; however, the problem is that now the society considers that motherhood is meant only for child bearing and for rearing activities. Women's duty is considered as household activities, taking care of children etc. It is our contention that motherhood is not to be limited to these narrow aspects. For motherhood has a special kind of dignity in the society. If we uphold this dignity of women, it would be helpful to empower them. True partnership between men and women is the need of the hour in every family. It is necessary that for children to grow up to be better citizens both parents must participate equally in family life. In this context, it is important to discuss the Catholic Social teachings on Motherhood. In the following section, we will try to answer whether motherhood hinders women from public functions.

### **2.3.2 Does Motherhood Hinder Women's Public Functions?**

In order to answer the above question, we gather information both from feminism and Catholic social thought. Both feminism and Catholic social thought recognise the role of women as mothers. However, they have different views with regard to this issue. We refer to the opinion of Maria Riley who argues that Catholic social teaching has a limiting approach to women as a result of this reality. They consider women's potential and nature according to one reality that is the ability to bear children. So, the nature of woman is defined by one function as mother. But the nature of man is never defined according to his narrow function as father. Therefore, feminism asserts that women should not be defined by this single reality.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Maria Riley, *Transforming Feminism* (Washington: Sheed & Ward, 1989), 91.



Feminists in India are not against motherhood. However, some believe that to combine motherhood with a career is a near impossibility. They feel that perfection is not achieved with these two. The Church's focus on the value of motherhood and its essential role in defining the vocation of women does not, of course, mean that it is the only vocation appropriate for women. But what the Church insists upon is that public work not be deemed more important than the household activities, nor that the household activities be sacrificed for public work. As *Familiaris Consortio* says,

There is no doubt that the equal dignity and responsibility of men and women fully justifies women's access to public functions. On the other hand the true advancement of women requires that clear recognition be given to the value of their maternal and family role, by comparison with all other public roles and all other professions. Furthermore, these roles and professions should be harmoniously combined if we wish the evolution of society and culture to be truly and fully human.<sup>95</sup>

Edith Stein also expresses a similar view while she declares that: "there is no profession which cannot be practiced by a woman."<sup>96</sup> She also insists that the gifts of femininity should be brought to the workplace: "Basically the same spiritual attitude which the wife and mother need is needed here also, except it is extended to a wider working circle and mostly to a changing area of people; for that reason, the perspective is detached from the vital bond of blood relationship and more highly elevated on the spiritual level."<sup>97</sup> Women are called to motherhood, whether it is physical or spiritual.

Pope John XXIII has pointed out that: "[w]omen are now taking part in public life," "becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity," and thus they "demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life."<sup>98</sup> In his Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II, speaks of women "having to abandon" their tasks as mothers as something wrong from the point of view of society and the family. He further insists that "true advancement of women requires that labour should be structured in such a way that women do not have to pay for their advancement by abandoning what is specific to them and at the expense of the family, in which women as mothers have an irreplaceable role."<sup>99</sup> The *Puebla Document*

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<sup>95</sup> John Paul II, "The Apostolic Exhortation on the Family," 23.

<sup>96</sup> L. Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, eds., *Essays on Woman: The Collected Works of Edith Stein* (Washington: ICS Publications, 1987), 47.

<sup>97</sup> Gelber and Leuven, eds., *Essays on Woman: The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, 48.

<sup>98</sup> Vincent P. Mainelli, "Pacem in Terris: Encyclical Letter of Pope John XXIII on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty," in *Official Catholic Teachings, Social Justice* (Wilmington: Mc Grath Publishing Company, 1978), 41.

<sup>99</sup> John Paul II, "Laborem Exercens," *Origins* 24 (1981): 19.



identifies the marginalisation of women from political, economic and social life as the result of “cultural atavisms – male predominance, unequal wages, deficient education, etc.”<sup>100</sup> The document also calls the Church to “consider” the equality and dignity of women and recognise the mission of women in the Church and in the world. It recognizes women’s aspirations for liberation as an “authentic sign of the times,” while specifically underlining “the fundamental role of the woman as mother, the defender of life and the home educator.”<sup>101</sup> John Paul II speaks more specifically of the equality of the sexes, similarly defending women’s “rights and role within family and society.” He endorses “real equality in every area,” including “equality of spouses with regard to family rights.”<sup>102</sup>

Riley says that with regard to the economic rights of women Catholic social thought remains ambiguous. She opines that both men and women enjoy “equal economic rights and opportunities and that their relationships in all other dimensions of life such as homemaking and childrearing, can indeed move toward mutuality.” She continues by saying that “the concept of the “family wage,” rooted in the patriarchal model of the family, needs to be re-defined as economic co-dependence within an egalitarian model of family.”<sup>103</sup> With regard to the political rights and political participation there are also different views. Riley points out that “theoretically, Catholic social thought would argue for women’s inalienable right as a human person to political participation at all levels. However, practically, by insisting that women’s “proper role” is motherhood and by defining that role as including the primary responsibility for childrearing, the Church limits women’s participation in political processes.”<sup>104</sup> From the above discussions we would suggest that a solution has to be worked out for combining motherhood with a career. Equal sharing of responsibilities within and outside the home is obligatory.

Latin American feminist theologian Maria Pilar Aquino takes women’s reproductive power as a “biological fact,” and regards maternity as an appropriate and important female role, but refuses to let motherhood override women’s other roles. She insists that the social and political interpretation of women’s reproduction is the source of their historical and universal domination, even when, as in Western Catholic tradition, that role is idealised. “The problem lies in the politico-ideological treatment of

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<sup>100</sup> John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, eds., *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 834.

<sup>101</sup> Eagleson and Scharper, eds., *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, 841, 846, 848.

<sup>102</sup> John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” 4.

<sup>103</sup> Riley, *Transforming Feminism*. 90.

<sup>104</sup> Riley, *Transforming Feminism*. 91.



women's power to bear children, not in the power itself."<sup>105</sup> Here the author notices two fundamental points. First, that "human motherhood cannot be considered as simply one biological experience among others – like eating, which is also a social matter." Second, that motherhood cannot be "reduced to an instinct – as happens in non-rational species."<sup>106</sup> Hence, we conclude that motherhood and biological condition of women cannot be used as arguments to justify women's subordinate role.

Responding to the keynote address of the 28<sup>th</sup> plenary assembly of the CBCI, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala says that the importance lies in the "recognition of women's contribution to resource-generation, for it is housework which makes possible the so-called 'productive' and reproduction, which creates new generations of workers."<sup>107</sup> Recognition of the contribution of women in the family, society and the Church is important for their empowerment. Again, she suggests that it is important to "recognise the home as a work place and provide women with safer and more efficient means for performing household tasks. Women's labour must also be valued by giving them access to the family's resources and opportunities for their own development. Husbands must be encouraged to take consistent responsibility for child care and the home so that women enjoy more freedom."<sup>108</sup>

Pope John Paul II commends women for their "indispensable contribution" to "social, economic, cultural, artistic and political" life.<sup>109</sup> The Pope proclaims that men and women are equal as witnesses and actors "in regard to the mighty works of God."<sup>110</sup> He insists that women can and should be able to work in various capacities, including taking executive responsibilities. Their role as mothers should not be used as an excuse to deny them "equal opportunity" for work outside the family.<sup>111</sup> Their right to active involvement in all areas of public life should be guaranteed by law.<sup>112</sup> For the

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<sup>105</sup> Maria Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 32. Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Feminist Ethics, Differences and Common Ground: A Catholic Perspective," in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick, Readings in Moral Theology 9 (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 198.

<sup>106</sup> Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 32.

<sup>107</sup> Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, "Response to Keynote Address: 28th Plenary Assembly of the CBCI, Jamshedpur 13-20 Feb. 2008," *Vidyajyoti* 72 (2008): 455.

<sup>108</sup> Gajiwala, "Response to Keynote Address: 28th Plenary Assembly of the CBCI, Jamshedpur 13-20 Feb. 2008," 455.

<sup>109</sup> John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 2.

<sup>110</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 16.

<sup>111</sup> John Paul II, "Equal Opportunity in the World of Work," in *The Genius of Women* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996), 32-33.

<sup>112</sup> John Paul II, "The World Day of Peace Message," in *The Genius of Women* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996), 16.



Pope, it is “profoundly unjust” to prevent women “from developing their full potential and from offering the wealth of their gifts.”<sup>113</sup> Any restrictions on roles is not to be “the result of an arbitrary imposition, but is rather an expression of what is specific to being male and female.”<sup>114</sup> Pope John Paul II argues for the equality of women against those who would subordinate or needlessly restrict women and resist the loss of the “unique richness and inherent value of femininity.”<sup>115</sup> Again the Pope says that while women have made a contribution to science and technology, their ‘genius’ is much more important in areas of social and ethical life because these areas are the principal measures of human progress.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, he holds that women characteristically have a special sensitivity for Christ and the gospel.<sup>117</sup> By these qualifying statements, Pope John Paul II implies that women’s genius does not restrict her role only to motherhood, but it broadens a wider radius of women’s participation in society. From the above discussion, we notice that Pope John Paul II has suggested some theological arguments to enhance the dignity of women through her motherhood. Therefore, the Church needs to teach her members about the dignity and worthiness of men and women and protect them from all oppressions. In the following section, we will discuss the mission of the Church towards the empowerment of women.

### **3. Mission of the Church towards Empowerment of Women**

We have already seen that the present day situation of Indian women is described as oppressed and exploited. Women in India experience diverse forms of oppression in their socio-economic and religious-cultural milieu. They are denied of their basic rights to life, equality, dignity and personhood. The Church has the responsibility of continuing the mission of Jesus. This mission urges the Church to get herself immersed in the struggle of women and empower them to build a better and fuller human community. A relevant theology is needed to initiate, sustain and push forward the movement towards the liberation of women.

To better the present situation of women the mission of the Church in India is to become a prophetic voice that protests against evident and obvious discriminations and cruelties that women suffered in society. In a particular way, the FABC IV recalls

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<sup>113</sup> John Paul II, “The Feminine Genius,” in *The Genius of Women* (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996), 27.

<sup>114</sup> John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” 11.

<sup>115</sup> John Paul II, “Welcome to Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women,” 39.

<sup>116</sup> John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” 9.

<sup>117</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 16.



the special responsibility of the laity “to uphold and defend the dignity of women, and to change attitudes, policies, practices and legislation that lead to the discrimination and repression of women.”<sup>118</sup> The Bishops affirm that the recognition of the woman’s full personhood must equally be evident among the people of God.<sup>119</sup> In this context, the BIMA II recommends that: “[t]he role of women in the Church’s life and mission be fully acknowledged and promoted.”<sup>120</sup> Women are “at the heart of the Asian family.”<sup>121</sup> They play an important role in carrying and transmitting faith in the family and formation of values and attitudes for upbringing of the family.<sup>122</sup> “There will never be a new emerging laity without new emerging women.”<sup>123</sup> Experience shows that the empowerment of women in the Church takes place in many ways. In this third millennium, the Church is going through a special phase of her life. The Apostolic Letter *Ecclesia in Asia* states that: “[t]he Synod Fathers were most concerned that the Church should be a participatory Church in which no one feels excluded, and they judged the wider participation of women in the life and mission of the Church in Asia to be an especially pressing need.”<sup>124</sup> The Church in India is called to become an instrument of women’s liberation.

The Church in India has a great role in liberating women from their oppressive states. As Shalini states, “the mission of the Church is to walk ahead, to break new grounds, to be a sign of hope for the hopeless, to give voice to the voiceless and thus empower the powerless women of India.”<sup>125</sup> Certainly, there are indications of the Church’s responsibility to women’s reality in the official documents. The opening words of

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<sup>118</sup> "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia: Statement of the Fourth Plenary Assembly," in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishop's Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, eds. Gaudencio B. Rosales and C. G. Arevalo (Quezon: Claretian Publications, 1997), 3.3.4.

<sup>119</sup> "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia: Statement of the Fourth Plenary Assembly," 3.3.5.

<sup>120</sup> "BIMA II: Letter of Participants of the Second Bishop's Institute for Missionary Apostolate," in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishop's Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, eds. Gaudencio B. Rosales and C. G. Arevalo (Quezon: Claretian Publications, 1997), 11.

<sup>121</sup> "Being Church in Asia: Journeying with the Spirit into Fuller Life: Final Statement of the FABC International Colloquium," in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon: Claretian Publications, 1997), 22d.

<sup>122</sup> "Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church," in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, eds. Gaudencio B. Rosales and C. G. Arevalo (Quezon: Claretian Publications, 1997), 91.

<sup>123</sup> FABC, "The Christian Community as the Bearer of the Good News: The Second Bishop's Institute for Missionary Apostolate of the Federation of Asian Bishop's Conferences," *FABC Papers* 27, 14.

<sup>124</sup> James H. Kroeger and Peter C. Phan, *The Future of the Asian Churches: The Asian Synod Ecclesia in Asia* (Quezon: Claretian Publications, 2002), 45c.

<sup>125</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," 814.



*Mulieris Dignitatem* consider 'the dignity and the vocation of women – a subject of constant human and Christian reflection'; they express awareness of 'the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved – the 'hour' is at hand, a *kairos* that calls for new responses.<sup>126</sup> Therefore, we shall look at the place and role of women in the Church in the light of the awareness of this 'hour.' An Asian theologian Peter C. Phan believes that the responsibility of the Church towards liberation includes liberation from all forms of socio-political oppressions on the one hand and on the other promotion of economic well-being.<sup>127</sup> This means that people should be liberated from the clutches of evil society. On the theoretical level, the Church acknowledges that men and women are equal, but this equality does not permeate the everyday lives of women. Although Pope John Paul II has given repeated exhortations that women be given their rightful place in Church and society, this has not effectively taken place in the context of India. Nevertheless, the Church in India has played a significant role in the empowerment of women through education, health programmes, relief works, developmental activities, mobilization of the marginalized and many more such initiatives. In the following section, we shall discuss different ways for the empowerment of women in the Indian Church.

### 3.1 Indian Church and the Empowerment of Women

The Catholic Church in India is a communion of three different individual Churches, the Latin Church,<sup>128</sup> the Syro-Malabar Church<sup>129</sup> and the Syro-Malankara Church.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 1.

<sup>127</sup> Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 20.

<sup>128</sup> The present Latin Church in India has its origin from the missionary work of the Portuguese. In 1886 the hierarchy for India was established with eight ecclesiastical provinces, with 19 dioceses and 3 vicariates as suffragans. Today this is the biggest Church in India with 114 dioceses, and a membership of about 10 million. Latin Church Catholics are concentrated in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Mumbai, Mangalore, Goa and the Tribal areas of central and North-eastern India. Kuncheria Pathil and Dominic Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, Indian Theological Series (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2005), 194.

<sup>129</sup> The Syro-Malabar Church is the most ancient Church in India always maintained communion with Rome and thus communion with all other Catholic Churches in the world. It has about five million members, and it is present mainly in Kerala. Its immigrants are found all over India and all over the world. In recent times, this Church has become a Major Archiepiscopal Church with its own Synod and legitimate autonomy. Pathil and Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, 191.

<sup>130</sup> Syro-Malankara Church is the outcome of a reunion movement, and was formed in 1930 when a small group from the Jacobite Church, led by Mar Ivanios and Mar Theophilus, entered into communion with the Roman Catholic Church. They continue all the traditions of the Jacobite Church, especially its Antiochean liturgical tradition. This Church has about five hundred thousand members today. It is a Metropolitan Church with the Council of Bishops to deliberate on the Church matters. Pathil and Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, 192-193.



The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) is the assembly of all the Catholic Bishops of India, which was established in 1944. But in keeping with the New Code of Canon Law for the Oriental Churches, the two Oriental Catholic Churches in India are entitled to functional autonomy and they have to form and function as separate Episcopal bodies or synods. Consequently, as per the instruction of Pope John Paul II in his letter of 1987, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India met in 1988 and restructured the CBCI by forming three separate Episcopal bodies representing the three Catholic individual Churches. However, the CBCI still remains and functions as an overarching body of the three Churches for common planning and decision-making.<sup>131</sup>

Here it is important to ask some questions that need to be addressed especially in view of the Synodal document states that: "[t]he Church should be a participatory Church in which no one feels excluded, and judged the wider participation of women in the life and mission of the Church in Asia to be an especially pressing need."<sup>132</sup> Does the structure of the Church lend itself to be supportive of the place and role of women in the life and governance of the Church? Is the Church of India women-friendly? Is the Church, the Body of Christ, in solidarity with women through participatory opportunities and through empowering and entrusting with full and creative leadership responsibilities?<sup>133</sup> In the following section, we discuss the role of Christian women's organisation in the empowerment of women.

### **3.1.1 Empowerment of Women through Christian Women's Organisations**

In many parts of India, women have been actively involved in the life of the Church both as individuals and as members of women's groups/people's movements, etc. The Christian women's organisations have actively involved themselves in the empowerment of women in the Church and society through various activities. A glance at some of the leading women's organisations may be helpful to value their effort for the empowerment of women. The Council of Catholic Women of India (CCWI) came into existence in 1964 in Bombay as a result of the Eucharistic Congress that brought Catholic Women all over India together. In this large gathering, the Catholic Women were encouraged to visualise the mighty power they could become for the Church and Nation if they were properly organised. They adopted the motto: 'In the service of Church and Nation.' The CCWI was given sanction by the

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<sup>131</sup> Pathil and Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, 195.

<sup>132</sup> Kroeger and Phan, *The Future of the Asian Churches: The Asian Synod Ecclesia in Asia*, 45c.

<sup>133</sup> Evelyn Monteiro and Antoinette Gutzler, eds., *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering of the Voices of the Silenced* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), XXI.



Archbishop Eugene D'Souza, Chairman of the Lay Apostolate Section of the CBCI, in September 1966 and it was inaugurated the same year in Nagpur.<sup>134</sup> The CCWI has 57 units in different dioceses of India and has been active in welfare work and vocational training for women.

The organisation has greatly contributed to the empowerment of women in Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and North Eastern parts of the country through the establishment of *Mahila Sanghs*. The formation of *Mahila Sanghs* has served to build up women's self-confidence and solidarity.<sup>135</sup> The vision of the CCWI is to empower women from all walks of life. The aims of CCWI are "to coordinate the activities of Catholic women in the civic, social, cultural, educational, economic fields. It strives to serve as a medium by which women can speak on matters of public and personal interest."<sup>136</sup> It is the official national organisation of Catholic women, represented in the National Advisory Council as well as in the commission for the laity of the CBCI.

The Young Women's Christian Association of India (YWCA) is over a hundred years old and forms part of the Christian women worldwide. The main purpose of the YWCA in India is to provide women a safe haven and respectable place of living in big cities and also to unite women for prayer, mutual help, sympathy and instruction in spiritual life. It seeks to develop a membership that is responsive through service to the changing needs of the whole community in a changing world.<sup>137</sup> Their network of services throughout India has provided opportunities for women's empowerment to a certain degree.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Khurram Shah Durrany, *The Women's Movement in Religious Communities in India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 112-113.

<sup>135</sup> Virginia Saldanha, "Towards the Empowerment of Women in India," in *Christian Contribution to Nation Building*, ed. Selvister Ponnunathan (Cochin: Documentary Committee of CBCI - KCBC, 2004), 327. Women have learnt self-employment skills which have helped to create some degree of economic independence for them. Many national level women leaders have emerged from these areas. The fact that they travel to different parts of India for National meetings of the CCWI is indicative of their growing independence and confidence. Today the CCWI Executive Committee has four tribal women as its members. These women are assertive and articulate in their participation at meetings at the National level.

<sup>136</sup> Pauline Chakkalackal, *Discipleship-Space for Women's Leadership: A Feminist Theological Critique*, 171.

<sup>137</sup> Durrany, *The Women's Movement in Religious Communities in India*, 70-71. Young Women's Christian Association of India is just old as the world YWCA. The initial date goes back to 1887 and 1893 when the founders of the first YWCA established it in India in Bombay and in Calcutta respectively.

<sup>138</sup> Saldanha, "Towards the Empowerment of Women in India," 326. Their hostels situated in the different metropolitan cities of India, have helped many women from the smaller towns to come to the cities to take up employment or higher studies. The hostels provide security to travelling women



The Women's Institute for New Awareness (WINA) was born in 1982 in an effort to build a network of women's associations in the Third World. WINA stood for women's cause in India, Asia and Africa. It promotes awareness among women through education, research, oral histories, investigations, studies, publications, consultancy and a woman's library.<sup>139</sup> *Satyashodhak* is a Catholic Women's Organisation started in 1984 when the CBCI sponsored a National Consultation on "Women in Society and the Church." It takes a keen interest in the religious and cultural traditions of the country and upholds human rights.<sup>140</sup> They form a resource group that helps in conducting awareness programmes at all levels in the Church and society. The members of this group work in different spheres of action in favour of women. Some members of the group were involved in the struggle for the reformation of the Christian Personal Laws to make them gender just.<sup>141</sup>

The religious women's contribution to the empowerment of women has been significant especially among the less privileged in rural, tribal and urban areas. Numerous religious personnel work in the remotest areas with the tribal and the poorest women. The formation of co-operative credit societies or self-help groups for women has been an important tool of women's empowerment. The creation of *Mahila Mandals* for awareness and action has proved very fruitful. Many women in slum areas have come forward to assert themselves and take control of their lives. Religious Sisters have been particularly active in empowering *dalit* women to improve their status and stand up for their human rights.<sup>142</sup> In the rural areas, they conduct awareness programmes to women regarding their empowerment.<sup>143</sup> The secular institute of women came forward, engaging in all kinds of works which they were

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executives as well. Their activities include vocational training for women as well as community organisation in slum areas of cities. They now focus on addressing the issue of violence to women through various awareness programmes and services offered by members in different towns and cities.

<sup>139</sup> Durrany, *The Women's Movement in Religious Communities in India*, 116-117.

<sup>140</sup> Durrany, *The Women's Movement in Religious Communities in India*, 119.

<sup>141</sup> Saldanha, "Towards the Empowerment of Women in India," 328.

<sup>142</sup> Saldanha, "Towards the Empowerment of Women in India," 324. The many attacks on religious sisters are backlash of their work of empowerment in the rural areas. The murder of Sr. Rani Maria in Madhya Pradesh is one such example.

<sup>143</sup> Dolores Rego, "Consecrated Women at the Service of the Nation," in *Christian Contribution to Nation Building: A Third Millennium Enquiry*, ed. Selvister Ponnuthan (Cochin: Documentary Committee of CBCI - KCBC, 2004), 251.



capable, sharing the risks and toils of everyday life, and promoting justice, love and the common good to everyone.<sup>144</sup>

### 3.1.2 Contribution of CBCI to the Empowerment of Women

The Catholic Bishop's Conference of India has involved itself in the cause of women in many ways. In 1984 a CBCI initiated Consultation on Women was held in Mumbai specifically on the "Role of Women in the Church and Society." In 1992, the concerns of women were taken up again at the general assembly of the CBCI in Pune and in their concluding statement, the bishops said:

Discrimination against women seems to be embedded in the structure of our society. Violence against women sometimes starts from the very moment of conception of the girl child and is experienced by them at all the stages of their life. Violence that is physical, sexual, psychological and practiced against women is the result of inhuman and unchristian attitudes. With a sense of sorrow we must admit that women feel discriminated even in the Church.<sup>145</sup>

The bishops as quoted above, gave importance to the secular well-being of women, as against discrimination and the variety of crimes committed against them. The bishops emphasized that the plan of action should be to change our attitudes and "to make us see the dignity of persons irrespective of their sexes."<sup>146</sup> Followed by this statement, there was a plan of action in each region in order to foster respect for human dignity irrespective of sex, promote the rights of women in family, in the Church and in society, and ensure adequate representation of women in decision-making bodies of the Church.<sup>147</sup>

Caritas India<sup>148</sup> has worked over the years for promoting the empowerment of women through various programmes focusing on the socio-economic and politico-cultural aspects. The various components of the programmes are capacity building activities, gender sensitisation, non-formal education, Self-Help formation for economic empowerment, income generation programmes, and training on legal awareness and human rights. The programmes have encouraged women to stand for election to the

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<sup>144</sup> Crescy John, "New Wine in New Skins: Secular Institutes," in *The Emerging Christian Woman: Church and Society Perspectives*, eds. Stella Faria, Anna Vareed Alexander, and Jessie B. Tellis Nayak (Pune: Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra, 1984), 183.

<sup>145</sup> Eugene D'Sousa, *Guidelines for the Working of the CBCI Commission for Women, 1997*, (New Delhi: CBCI Commission for Women, 1997), 8.

<sup>146</sup> Durrany, *The Women's Movement in Religious Communities in India*, 107.

<sup>147</sup> Anjali Therese and Mathew Ilathuparampil, "Indian Theology: Towards Voicing the Concerns of Oppressed Women," *Indian Theological Studies* 41 (2004): 164.

<sup>148</sup> Caritas India is the official National organisation of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India for social concern and human development.



*Panchayat*, which indicates the political empowerment of women at the grassroots. Caritas attempts at empowering women in rural areas through self-employment programmes, water management programmes and capacity building; these have helped in particular in empowering the poor women.<sup>149</sup> Another important step in the field of women's emancipation is the CBCI Commission for Women. This is a forum of women in the Catholic Bishop's Conference of India.

### **3.1.2.1 CBCI Women's Commission**

This CBCI Commission for Women came into existence on 1 June, 1992 through the intervention of *Streevani*,<sup>150</sup> Pune, under the leadership of Frances Yasas, and a few other feminists in collaboration with Augustine Kanjamala, who was the local organiser of the General Body Meeting of the CBCI held at *Ishvani Kendra*, Pune. Sister Cleopatra was the first Secretary of the Commission. This Commission has been contributing to the empowerment of women in the Church and society through conscientisation and animation programmes.<sup>151</sup> The important aims of the Commission for Women are the empowerment of women and social transformation to bring about justice to women and to all the weaker sections of the society. Through the network of Regional and Diocesan Women's Commissions, training programmes are arranged to reach every woman in the Church. They are encouraged to move out into the larger society of India for creating awareness, taking up women's issues, and in general working towards social transformation. Catholic women are encouraged to network with secular women's organisations for programmes of awareness and action. The newsletter of the Commission is an important link for providing information and awareness to women at all levels in the Church and society.<sup>152</sup>

The Women's Desk has established contacts with different Catholic Women's Associations like the CCWI (Council of Catholic Women of India), WINA (Women's Institute for New Awareness), *Streevani* and *Satyashodhak*, and has ensured their co-operation. Contacts have also been established with YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association), Joint Women's Programme, both Non-governmental organisations and National Alliance of Women's Organizations and Government

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<sup>149</sup> Saldanha, "Towards the Empowerment of Women in India," 330.

<sup>150</sup> *Streevani* is a sister institute of *Ishvani Kendra*, Institute of Missiology and Communications. Its main thrust is the integral liberation of women within the framework of the Indian society. It works for the empowerment of women to establish justice, fraternity and fellowship.

<sup>151</sup> Pauline Chakkalakal, *Discipleship a Space for Women's Leadership: A Feminist Theological Critique*, 172.

<sup>152</sup> Saldanha, "Towards the Empowerment of Women in India," 328.



organisations like the National Commission for Women.<sup>153</sup> International contacts have also been established with the Vatican Women's Desk and Laity Commission, FABC Laity Commission and New York Tribune for Women's Affairs.<sup>154</sup>

The commission prepares resource material for use at the grassroots level to create awareness of social attitudes that oppress women. There is a steady increase in awareness taking place and women are becoming aware of their dignity and status. Through the celebration of the special days for women like Women's Day, Day of the Girl Child and Day against Violence to Women, the Commission has helped to spread awareness on these issues throughout the country.<sup>155</sup> The study of Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* has been promoted by the Women's Desk. Thus, the major focus of the Women's Desk has become the promotion of dignity of women as propounded by the Pope in his Apostolic Letter.<sup>156</sup>

There were some suggestions for strengthening the Women's Commissions in the keynote address to the CBCI general body meeting in 2008. There was a suggestion for strengthening the Women's Commissions at the CBCI regional and diocesan levels with human and material resources. It also suggested that support should be given to form and sustain Women's Commissions at the diocesan level. In addition, it proposed that each parish should have a Women's Cell to address the problems of women and a vigilance cell against violence.<sup>157</sup> It should be part of women's prophetic mission to denounce such evils as rape, gender violence, gender exploitation, sexual abuse, dowry, etc., both in society and in the Church, at all levels of the educational system and Christian formation.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Durrany, *The Women's Movement in Religious Communities in India*, 109.

<sup>154</sup> Durrany, *The Women's Movement in Religious Communities in India*, 109. The National Consultation of Catholic Women Leaders was organised from October 16-18, 1992 at Bombay and was inaugurated by Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Mrs. Margaret Alva, the Minister of State, gave the concluding address. It was at this consultation that a Plan of Action was drawn up wherein, "It was also resolved to get Christian Marriage Law amended in favour of Women. Use of inclusive language in hymns, prayers, Bible reading and the liturgy is to be promoted." It was during this National Consultation that a Core Team was elected under the chairmanship of Bishop Bosco Penha.

<sup>155</sup> Saldanha, "Towards the Empowerment of Women in India," 329. The Celebration of the Day of the Girl Child since 1997 was a pioneering effort by the CBCI Commission of Women to bring the attention of the society to the plight of the girl child in the country where the very birth of the girl child is looked upon as a burden or even a curse. Modern technology has ironically helped in the elimination of girls from the population in India. The government only woke up to this reality after the statistics of the 2001 revealed the dismal male/female ratio in the country, and began to push for awareness on the importance of the girl child.

<sup>156</sup> Durrany, *The Women's Movement in Religious Communities in India*, 110.

<sup>157</sup> Rita Noronha, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Keynote Address to the CBCI General Body Meeting 2008," 442.

<sup>158</sup> Inigo, "Scriptural and Theological Foundations," 474.



### 3.1.2.2 CBCI for the Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society

Even when the Church and society undergo rapid changes, women continue to experience marginalisation. Their concerns are not adequately addressed both in the Church and in society. Therefore, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India discussed the theme of the Empowerment of women in the Church and society on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*.<sup>159</sup> The CBCI searched for ways and means to empower women in the Church and Society. This was a continuation of the efforts of the CBCI in the past decades to understand the situation of women in India better and to respond to the same through analysis and positive action. This was in response to the call of the Church to find meaningful and appropriate ways for the empowerment of women. The call of the Church is to create a favourable atmosphere through positive economic and social policies for the development of women.<sup>160</sup> In the following section, we discuss a few of the means that were proposed in the keynote address of Catholic Bishops' Conference of India for the empowerment of women.

### 3.1.2.3 The Promotion of a Gender Just Culture

In order to build a culture of gender justice women and men need to acknowledge their own dignity and equality and that of others as beings created in the image of the Divine. In the keynote address to the CBCI general body meeting 2008, Rita Noronha suggested a few measures to promote gender-just culture. The reason for this is that the patriarchal cultural ambience is not favourable to make a change in the subordinate situation of women in India. Hence, she suggested that in order to change the cultural ambience of patriarchy "there is a need to collect, develop and use gender sensitive literature and other media products."<sup>161</sup> The Church has to promote the empowerment of women through eliminating the discrimination and violence against women; to providing women and girls access to decision-making and changing societal attitudes and community practices. Moreover, there should be initiatives such

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<sup>159</sup> "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Statement of CBCI in the 28<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the CBCI, Jamshedpur, 13<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup> February 2008," 301. There were 160 Bishops belonging to the three individual *sui juris* Churches of the Catholic Communion in India gathered in Jamshedpur, from 13<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> February 2008. There were 40 lay and religious women and 7 lay men representing all the 12 ecclesiastical regions of the country as invitees for the meeting.

<sup>160</sup> Rita Noronha, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Keynote Address to the CBCI General Body Meeting 2008," 439.

<sup>161</sup> Noronha, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Keynote Address to the CBCI General Body Meeting 2008," 435.



as the inclusion of gender and human rights education. It is also important to remove the references derogatory to the dignity of women from public documents and legal instruments. The use of media to spread gender awareness, and the establishment of resource and studies centres in the national planning may result in positive outcomes if such attempts are effectively sustained.<sup>162</sup> For this purpose we suggest a relationship of mutuality, reciprocity and partnership between men and women in family and society.

Empowerment of women is not against men and it does not aim at replacing patriarchy by matriarchy. "It aims at humanisation of persons, relational milieus, institutions and society in general."<sup>163</sup> To empower women there should be a shift from the traditional patriarchal attitudes and practices in the Church and society to a participatory form of governance and decision-making. Women are also responsible for their empowerment. They should have confidence in their own abilities and they should come forward to accept responsibilities in the Church. Women have a specific contribution to make in liberating the structures from the constraints of patriarchal domination and monopoly. They should refuse to be the silenced half in the Church and assume their rightful place.<sup>164</sup>

#### ***3.1.2.4 Women's Participation in Decision-Making Bodies***

At the ecclesial level, the Church has to move towards the emancipation and empowerment of women and eradicate the fundamental causes of the exploitation of women. The stance that the Church has to do more towards the liberation of the oppressed women prompt us to suggest what is crucial to accord equality of women at all levels. Shalini states:

In concrete terms, equal participation means that both women and men as believers will interpret the word of God, participate in framing the laws of the Church and in decision making, contribute to the development of doctrine, do the ministry of spiritual guidance. They will evangelise and dare more in the Church for the life of the world, for freedom, dignity and responsibility.<sup>165</sup>

In order to give equal status to women, the Church has to teach that patriarchy is a sinful social structure. Through conscientisation programmes starting from the parishes, the Church can free the lives of women from the cruelties of the patriarchal

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<sup>162</sup> Noronha, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Keynote Address to the CBCI General Body Meeting 2008," 439-440.

<sup>163</sup> Noronha, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Keynote Address to the CBCI General Body Meeting 2008," 425.

<sup>164</sup> Inigo, "Scriptural and Theological Foundations," 474.

<sup>165</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," *Vidyajyoti* 61 (1997): 812.



system. Shalini recalls that Christians believe in the basic equality of all the faithful. In her teachings, the Church accepts that both man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>166</sup> Basic equality of all is the faith affirmation of Christians. The Church has to accept that a woman is initiated into Christian faith through baptism just like a man. She professes the same faith, receives the same sacraments, reads the same scriptures, follows the same commandments and laws, and shares the same mission and vision of life in her striving after eschatological fulfilment.<sup>167</sup>

The Church has to recognise women's leadership competence, intellectual capacity and creative potentiality and include them as co-workers and co-leaders in the life of the Church. Dioceses should train and empower women for canonical and judiciary undertakings, marriage and family counselling, formation and leadership training. Women's active involvement and their leadership are essential for the Church to deepen and enrich its own identity and legitimise its mission as a community of equals. This is a process which cannot take place meaningfully as long as the males alone constitute the decision-making bodies of the Church.<sup>168</sup> Women are encouraged to be more effectively involved in pastoral programmes, in diocesan and parish pastoral councils and in diocesan synods.<sup>169</sup>

There is a need of fostering equal representation and participation of women in decision-making bodies in the Church, for example, parish or diocesan councils and financial committees, marriage tribunals, the Church's Commissions at all levels, and the Diocesan Social Service Societies and Regional Forum. There has to be gender exclusivity and equality in the decision-making processes so as to incorporate women in the Church's mainstream. Bishops, priests and the laity should support such

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<sup>166</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," 813.

<sup>167</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," 813.

<sup>168</sup> Maria Pilar Aquino, "Women's Participation in the Church: A Catholic Perspective," in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 159. It is heartening to note that in a welcoming break with all-male tradition of the Vatican, Pope John Paul II has appointed Mary Ann Glendon, a law professor to head the pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, making her the highest ranking woman to occupy an advisory position in the Catholic Church. He has also appointed for the first time in the history of the Church two women theologians, Sister Sara Butler and Barbara Hallensleben to the International Theological Commission, a Vatican Advisory Board.

<sup>169</sup> Kroeger and Phan, *The Future of the Asian Churches: The Asian Synod Ecclesia in Asia*, 45c.



policies. As stated by the 1998 CBCI Assembly, women's leadership must be promoted in the Church.<sup>170</sup>

A greater participation of women in the life of the Church should also be encouraged by their appointment as lay ministers and pastoral agents in various fields, such as catechists, lectors, acolytes and even deacons. They could also become pastoral assistants in all parishes and take part in common decision-making process. Women's participation in public life has to be promoted by supporting the Bill for 33% reservation for women in the parliament and State Assemblies, eradication of exploitative and marginalizing mechanisms and creation of platforms for women in villages and parishes.<sup>171</sup> In the previous section, we discussed the mission of the Church towards the empowerment of women and some of the ways and means for the empowerment of women in the Indian Church. In the following section, we further elaborate evangelisation as a means towards empowerment of women.

#### **4. Evangelisation as a Means for the Empowerment of Women**

The term Evangelisation can be summarised as the proclamation of the Good News. Etymologically, the term 'evangelisation' is associated with the concept of gospel, from the Greek (*euaggelion*) and Latin (*Evangelium*). Therefore, the word evangelisation means the process of making the gospel known.<sup>172</sup> The Proclamation of the Good News is the central element of evangelisation. The example of life and verbal proclamation complement each other. The evangelising mission of the Church also includes the commitment to justice and involvement in creating a better world.<sup>173</sup> Max L. Stackhouse explains the word evangelisation as giving information to individuals through which he/she gets benefits.<sup>174</sup> In God's kingdom, every human person is respected as the living image of God and the equality of all people is

<sup>170</sup> CBCI Commission for Women, "Empowerment of Women in the church and society: Summary of the National and Regional Consultations 17<sup>th</sup> August to 9<sup>th</sup> December 2007," Catholic Bishops' Conference of India 28<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly 13<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> February 2008, 1-14, 11.

<sup>171</sup> CBCI Commission for Women, "Empowerment of Women in the church and society: Summary of the National and Regional Consultations 17<sup>th</sup> August to 9<sup>th</sup> December 2007," Catholic Bishops' Conference of India 28<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly 13<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> February 2008, 1-14, 11.

<sup>172</sup> Three important meanings of Evangelisation are: (1) God's good news to humans or good news as proclamation; (2) details relating to the life and ministry of Jesus or good news of Jesus; and (3) a gospel account that deals with the life and teaching of Jesus. Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek - English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Third ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 402-403.

<sup>173</sup> Paul Vadakumpadan, *Evangelisation Today: Understanding the Integral Concept of Evangelisation in the Light of Contemporary Trends in the Theology of Mission* (Shillong: Vendrame Missiological Institute, Sacred Heart College, 1989), 306.

<sup>174</sup> Marx L. Stackhouse, "Missionary Activity," in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1987), 568.



affirmed. The mission of the Church is to continue the mission of Jesus. In the present context of the denial of freedom and equality to women, the Church is called upon to be the agent of social transformation and empowerment.<sup>175</sup> In what follows, we shall discuss very briefly how Evangelisation could be a means for the empowerment of women.

#### 4.1 Evangelising Mission of Jesus and the Empowerment of Women

The Apostolic Letter of John Paul II *Mulieris Dignitatem* brings out beautifully Jesus' openness to women.<sup>176</sup> In the second chapter, we have already discussed the liberation of women by Jesus. We have seen how Jesus acted for liberating and empowering women from their oppressed social status. Here we discuss how this evangelising mission of Jesus is a model for the Church today. The evangelising mission of Jesus extended to the liberation of women and the oppressed section of the society during his time. We have already discussed the marginalisation of women during Jesus' time particularly in his own community. Even today, the situation is not much different in India or the world over. Jesus empowered women. He considered the situation of women seriously by giving them equal status with men in his gospel. Often the teachings on the secrets of the kingdom during his proclamation paralleled 'his' stories with 'her' stories.<sup>177</sup> The oppression of women in the Indian society is a contradiction against the liberative mission of Jesus. If someone says that, 'women do not deserve freedom,' that is a rejection of the all-encompassing mission of Jesus.<sup>178</sup>

Jesus' attitude and dealings with women stands in contrast to that of his society.<sup>179</sup> In Jesus' time, women were considered inferior to men and talking to them in public was forbidden. Jesus allowed women disciples and they followed him as he journeyed with the apostles through towns and villages, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God (Lk 8:1-3). Jesus talked to women in public, discussed theology with them (Lk 10:38-42; Jn 11:21-27; Jn 4:3-42).<sup>180</sup> At the tomb, they were the first to be

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<sup>175</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," 811.

<sup>176</sup> Virginia Saldanha, "The Church in the New Millennium: Learning to be in Solidarity and Dialogue with Women," 4.

<sup>177</sup> Cyril Mar Baselios, "Jesus of Asia and Jesus for Asia," in *Christian Contribution to Nation Building: A Third Millennium Enquiry*, ed. Selvister Ponnuthan (Cochin: Documentary Committee of CBCI - KCBC, 2004), 407.

<sup>178</sup> Abraham Kunnatholy, "The Lucan Jesus: The Indian Missionary Model," *Vidyajyoti* 61 (1997): 343.

<sup>179</sup> In the patriarchal culture of the Jewish society, women could not speak to a man in public and were denied reading the scriptures. In a situation Jesus talked to women in public, discussed theology with them (Lk 10:38-42; Jn 11:21-27; Jn 4:3-42) and entrusted them with the proclamation of his messiahship (Jn 4:25-26) and his resurrection (Jn 20:16-18).

<sup>180</sup> Carroll D. Osburn, *Women in the Church: Reclaiming the Ideal* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2001), 125.



appointed to proclaim the good news of Jesus' resurrection even to his men disciples. They were empowered to work as the messengers of new life. They were symbols of the new dawn. Jesus worked for empowering women individually and collectively. They were equal to men in so far as receivers and workers of the gospel.<sup>181</sup> Contrary to the traditional view that saw woman as the cause of sin Jesus pointed out man himself as the cause of his sin before woman (Mt 5:27-30). With regard to the issue of divorce, Jesus advocated equality of both men and women (Mt 5:32, 19:9, Mk 10:10-12).<sup>182</sup>

By birth Jesus was a member of the community whose every devout male member was trained to thank God every morning for not creating him as a woman or animal. Jesus trained women to thank God for creating women (Lk 11: 27-28).<sup>183</sup> Jesus' call to freedom was not only to the women of his time but also to the women of all future centuries. He frees them from the system of dominance that diminished their personhood and imprisoned their womanhood. Jesus desired that each woman be able to live a full human life with dignity that was hers at creation.<sup>184</sup> This sheds light on Leonard Swiddler's statement that "Jesus may have been history's first feminist."<sup>185</sup> Jesus accorded women dignity through his teachings and actions. Jesus' liberating and humanising message has meaning for all women struggling for full humanity and their rightful place in history, for Jesus' message not only liberates but also empowers. Today from the Church, women expect this attitude of Jesus towards women. Jesus' life-giving relationship with women stands as a heart-warming example for his Church. The all-embracing evangelisation for which Jesus set out, aimed at liberation from all kinds of bondage and oppression. In order to uphold the dignity of women we have to discover Jesus' attitude towards women. We have already seen that in *Mulieris Dignitatem* Pope John Paul II emphatically taught to respect the dignity of women and accept their feminine genius in all aspects of life.

## 4.2 Evangelisation as a Means for Cultural Transformation

Evangelisation understood as an invitation to new relationship among humankind and with God in Jesus Christ necessarily includes a conversion, a transformation of one's

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<sup>181</sup> Baselios, "Jesus of Asia and Jesus for Asia," 408.

<sup>182</sup> Osburn, *Women in the Church: Reclaiming the Ideal*, 126.

<sup>183</sup> Baselios, "Jesus of Asia and Jesus for Asia," 408.

<sup>184</sup> Lillita Lewis, "Religious Traditions and Attitudes Towards Women," in *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced*, ed. Evelyn Monteiro and Antoinette Gutzler (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 396.

<sup>185</sup> Leonard J. Swidler, *Jesus Was a Feminist: What the Gospels Reveal About His Revolutionary Perspective* (Lanham: Sheed and Ward, 2007).



basic attitudes that are brought about by the encounter with the Risen Lord. This also implies a new pattern of life that is expressed concretely through the medium of one's own social milieu and cultural and religious heritage.<sup>186</sup> One of the major themes of evangelisation today is that of the encounter between Gospel and culture. All cultures contain elements which may be good, indifferent or even bad.<sup>187</sup> Jesus' proclamation of good news leads to the transformation of people from their oppressed cultural situation. This transformation could be identified as liberation. Human promotion and liberation are intimately connected with the evangelising mission of Jesus.<sup>188</sup> Leonardo Boff proposes an integral evangelisation and this evangelisation must basically be aimed at the defence of the life and culture of the people especially the poor and the oppressed.<sup>189</sup> In the same line of thought, Gutierrez opines: for Jesus liberation was not just liberation of the people from hunger and thirst but a total holistic liberation from the unjust attitude of the people.<sup>190</sup> Therefore, evangelisation aims at a total liberation of people in the society.

The vision, values, symbols and traditions of a culture affect the way the people relate to each other and these have an important effect in their life. This cultural conditioning is evident in gender-relationships.<sup>191</sup> As we have already seen, the Indian culture is very much oppressive of women. Indian culture and society have contributed remarkably, in shaping the oppressed social status of its members, especially of its women. As we have seen in the first chapter, through art, literature, myths and beliefs India has given images to her women and in many ways it can be restrictive and set limits on her development. The oppression of women is to be understood as a result of many cultural, religious and traditional factors. So this kind of cultural values, traditions and practices needs a radical transformation in the Indian society. To empower women in India without disclosing the injustices in the tradition and culture is fruitless. So the Christian response to the empowerment of women should give due reverence to the culture, and at the same time challenge the distortions of culture. Evangelisation which draws from an inner experience of the Gospel, addresses itself to the transformation of cultures in their social dimension, and

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<sup>186</sup> Duraiswami Amalorpavadass, *Theology of Evangelisation in the Indian Context*, Mission Theology for Our Times, 4 (Bangalore: National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1971), 23.

<sup>187</sup> Paul Vadakumpadan, *Evangelisation Today: Understanding the Integral Concept of Evangelisation in the Light of Contemporary Trends in the Theology of Mission*, 307.

<sup>188</sup> Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, "Evangelisation in Context: Human Promotion and Liberation," *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991): 275.

<sup>189</sup> Leonardo Boff, *New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 119.

<sup>190</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 207.

<sup>191</sup> Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: At the Dawn of the Millennium*, 165.



works in dialogue with all religions. So evangelisation must be seen as a dialogue, an encounter between faith and cultures that it addresses.<sup>192</sup> The transformation of Indian culture from the perspective of women is an urgent need of today. Indian Church and society has to rethink critically the traditional approaches to women.<sup>193</sup> It is important to have a culture that provides equal dignity and freedom for all, both men and women.

### 4.3 Evangelisation as Counteraction to the Male-Dominant Anthropology

One of the reasons for the continued oppression of women is the dominant conception that the male is the ideal human. It seems that every culture develops a particular image of such an ideal. "The Puritan tradition added new contours to it by projecting the human ideal as that of an ascetic, hard-working and not caught up in the vagaries of life."<sup>194</sup> In Asian tradition too, the approaches of the ideal exclude women from the picture. For example in modern times, the picture of the liberal individual presented a self-assumed and rationally motivated type of the ideal person, which were characteristics associated with the male. Often the emotional, affective and expressive aspects were considered to be secondary in order.<sup>195</sup>

Indian Theological Association reports that the basis of liberative evangelisation is our faith in Christ as well as our responsible existence in history.<sup>196</sup> Therefore, according to this report, liberative evangelisation would mean a holistic aspect of human development. According to Gutierrez, "[e]vangelisation is liberating because it is a message of total liberation which necessarily includes a demand for the transformation of the historical and political condition in which men [sic] live."<sup>197</sup> Reflecting on the same topic, he mentions that in the Bible, Christ is presented as the one who brings liberation. Christ makes humankind truly free.<sup>198</sup> Gospel values should be the guidelines for our evangelisation. Gospel is a message of total liberation and it transcends the historical structures, the fullness, which is beyond the reach of any structures of human beings. The proclamation of the Gospel from the standpoint of identification with the poor including women, summons the Church to solidarity

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<sup>192</sup> Boff, *New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor*, 67.

<sup>193</sup> Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: At the Dawn of the Millennium*, 165-166.

<sup>194</sup> Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: At the Dawn of the Millennium*, 160.

<sup>195</sup> Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: At the Dawn of the Millennium*, 160.

<sup>196</sup> Indian Theological Association, "Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation," *Jeevadhara* 16 (1986): 197.

<sup>197</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, "Liberation Theology and Proclamation," *Concilium* 2 (1974): 74.

<sup>198</sup> James B. Nickoloff, ed., *Gustavo Gutierrez: Essential Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 195.



with the lower classes of society.<sup>199</sup> The Gospel acts as a leaven in society, transforms the prevailing ethos, challenges the sinful structures and seeks to change situations of institutionalised violence including the oppression of women. The Gospel is concerned about the total well-being of humanity, transforming it from within and making it new.<sup>200</sup> The Gospel does not allow women to be blind to gender injustice, power of patriarchy, and other kinds of oppression and exploitation.

After years of reflection, Christianity has acquired the awareness that the equality of male and female as persons can be asserted only by affirming the differences, and that humanity is exhausted neither in the world of males alone nor unilaterally in the world of females. But by examining the situation of women in India we understand that the male world has constructed a culture, a civilization starting from man himself, from his schema, and from his judgements and prejudices, making the feminine world as functional and instrumental. The Christian reflection in this regard has not taken root in India yet. If women have to have an enhanced position in India, it is necessary to go beyond an individualistic and male dominated anthropology. Therefore, the Christian response to the empowerment of women should challenge these distorted ideas.

It continues to be a challenge, especially for the Church in India, to realise the reciprocity of male and female in family, society, work, Church, etc., and to model the human life on the original design of being 'created in the image and likeness of God.' The Church in India has to undoubtedly take greater commitment to realise this principle and translate it into the lives of the people. The truth that man and woman are equal in dignity has to be first of all reflected in the lives of the Church. In the attitudes of the leaders of the Church, those involved in catechetical teachings etc., this truth must shine by taking extreme care to put into their lives the Christian anthropological truths and inviting the younger generation to live according to the nobility of this Christian teaching. Moreover, in a country, where there is plurality of religious beliefs, if the Christian teachings are not reflected in the life-style of the believer, evangelisation in India can never be successful.

The Holy Scripture is the central point of discussion in Christian anthropology; as God's inspired Word, it contains the account of God's creation of humanity as male and female, and its contents have a divine authority behind them. The Bible is also God's word expressed in human language by sinful and limited human beings. The Bible and its interpretations embody both a divine and a human element with respect

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<sup>199</sup> Gutierrez, "Liberation Theology and Proclamation," 75.

<sup>200</sup> Thomas Menampampil, "What Is New About the New Evangelisation," *Vidyajyoti* 61 (1997): 366.



to women. "The liberative elements in the Bible with respect to women stem from the divine perspective, the oppressive ones from the human perspective."<sup>201</sup> This is true also of interpreting the Word of God in various cultures. Remaining in a patriarchal culture, one tends to interpret the Word of God within the framework of the patriarchal structure and thereby, if not dehumanising at least downgrading the status of women. The patriarchal viewpoint colours its entire portrayal of women in relation to men. In our study, we noted that India continues to be a patriarchal society. Being a patriarchal society, there is the possibility that the biblical message also is communicated as man-centred. But the Christian anthropological truths have to be communicated to all the people in India so that women may be recognised as human persons and be treated as full human beings.

As we have already noted in the first chapter, every patriarchal religion and culture assumes different forms of the oppression of women. The Christian response to the emancipation of women should take into account their dignity as human being. In India, it is the Church herself, which has to take adequate measures to put forward the Christian message of equality of persons. "The experience of women in its plural contemporary expressions sincerely demands the attention of the Church in its theology, preaching and pastoral care, its liturgical and institutional life."<sup>202</sup> Church could be a sign of hope for the empowerment of women. Greater sensitivity to the oppressed situation of women and violence against them should lead to adopt innovative kinds of ministry from the part of the Church.<sup>203</sup> The pastors of the souls should take adequate care in presenting the biblical anthropological truths in their preaching, avoiding the patriarchal framework. In the same way, more and more Indian theologians should come forward to transcend the cultural structures that bind the position of women. After this detailed discussion on the mission of the Church towards the empowerment of women our next concern is to address the empowerment of women from a feminist perspective – how are the feminist theological discussions helpful for the empowerment of Indian women. Our concern is to draw up the criteria, which would enable us to formulate a theology for the empowerment of women.

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<sup>201</sup> Teresa Okure, "Women in the Bible," in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 52.

<sup>202</sup> Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (New York: Continuum, 1988), 128.

<sup>203</sup> Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: At the Dawn of the Millennium*, 170.



## 5. Feminist Theology and the Empowerment of Indian Women

In general, feminism is a movement that seeks to overcome the discrimination against women. It affirms that woman is an individual with dignity, not an adjunct of man. It is a movement for women which aims at uplifting women but not exclusively of women alone. It is a struggle and protest undertaken by both men and women towards a new understanding of humanity, who conceive that human development includes women's development. Thus, feminism aims to overcome any form of oppression and discrimination against women.<sup>204</sup> Feminist theology in general aims at the overall liberation of women. Ursula King states that "feminism seeks a change of consciousness and a change of organization, power structures and fundamental values in our society – a new culture and civilization."<sup>205</sup> It is an opposition to any form of discrimination, whether it is personal, social or economical, which women suffer because of their sex.<sup>206</sup> However, the word 'feminism' often creates a negative understanding such as not conforming to traditional values, religion, customs, and cultures and as hostile towards male members of the community.<sup>207</sup> Here it is important to notice the statement of Joan Chittister who clarifies that "feminism is a world view that revisions the world from the perspectives of the equality, humanity and dignity of every living thing. It requires ecology. Feminism assumes globalism. It dismantles patriarchy, hierarchy and dualism. Feminism gives Christianity the opportunity to be Christian perhaps for the first time since Jesus."<sup>208</sup> In this section, we will analyse how far the so-called feminist theology can contribute for the empowerment of women in India. For this aim first, we discuss the relevance of feminist theology in the Indian context. Then we discuss some of the feminist hermeneutics and their implications for the empowerment of women.

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<sup>204</sup> Christina Manohar, *Feminist Critique and Reconstruction* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), XI. See also, Shalini Mulackal, "Pen Theology from the Margins: A Pilgrimage from the Eclipse to Identity," in *Concerns of Women: An Indian Theological Response*, ed. Evelyn Monteiro and Kochurani Abraham (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2005), 73-74.

<sup>205</sup> Ursula King, *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise* (London: Macmillian Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>206</sup> Manohar, *Feminist Critique and Reconstruction*, x.

<sup>207</sup> Manohar, *Feminist Critique and Reconstruction*, x.

<sup>208</sup> Joan Chittister, *The Fire in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life* (Mumbai: Pauline Publications, 1999), 151-53. Chittister maintains that feminism is a very holy, very Christian thing. Feminism follows the Jesus who raised women, who sent women to proclaim his messiahship to foreigners and announce his resurrection to men. Feminism follows the Jesus who, conceived by the Holy Spirit but born of a woman, makes plain the essential role of women in the divine mystery of salvation.



## 5.1 Feminist Theology and its Relevance in the Indian Context

Feminist theology is understood and explained differently by different people all over the world. There is not a specific definition of feminism that could be applied to women of all times. What feminism meant in the 17<sup>th</sup> century is quite different from what it means now.<sup>209</sup> Feminist theology in India has begun to take shape only in recent years.<sup>210</sup> Here arises a question as to whether feminism in India is a Western import? We could answer this question by stating that it was partly influenced by the West but it is not a Western concept. The word itself may be imported, but the affirmation of faith from a women's perspective is rooted in Asian cultural traditions.<sup>211</sup> Indian feminist theology is also a theology from the margins. It has originated from the context of Indian women suffering from domestic violence, dowry practice, female feticide, caste system etc. It has been said that Indian feminist theology has more affinity with liberation theology in general or *dalit* theology in particular.<sup>212</sup>

Feminist theologians in India are trying to do theology from the perspective of women in oppression and exploitation. It emerged as part of women's struggle against oppressive structures in society. Moreover, feminist theological movement in India emanated not due to the force of renewal within the Church structures, but from secular movements in society.<sup>213</sup> Those movements had raised new questions and had formulated new paradigms in research and interpretation of the problem.<sup>214</sup> But

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<sup>209</sup> Crystal David Singh, "Feminism: Its Relevance to the Indian Context," in *Feminist Theology: Perspectives and Praxis*, ed. Prasanna Kumari (Chennai: Gurukul Summer Institute, 1998), 24.

<sup>210</sup> Kumari, "Theological Formation: A Feminist Critique," 366.

<sup>211</sup> Gabriele Dietrich, *A New Thing on Earth: Hopes and Fears Facing Feminist Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 88. See also, Jean D' Cunha, "Feminism in India: A Western Import?," *Vidyajyoti* 58 (1994): 79.

<sup>212</sup> Sharmila Rege, "Caste and Gender: The Violence against Women in India," in *Dalit Women in India: Issues and Perspectives*, ed. P. G. Jogdand (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1995), 18-36.

<sup>213</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, "Feminist Theology: An Indian Perspective," in *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves (Cambridge: SPCK, 1993), 61. The emerging women's movement in India gave the necessary impetus to small groups of Christian women to re-read the Bible from a feminist perspective. While Christian women are still largely found in the traditional women's fellowship groups, feminist movements effort to retell the biblical faith heritage of women from their own experiences. In November 1984, the All India Council of Christian Women with the Association of Theologically Trained Women in India and Catholics women organised a national level consultation on the theme 'Towards a theology of humanhood: Women's perspective.' The aim of this Consultation was to "reconstruct women's early Christian history and recapture the dimension of both the resurrection of past sufferings and defeats, and open a new path into the future."

<sup>214</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, "Towards an Indian Feminist Theology," in *We Dare to Dream*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1989), 117.



Feminist theology is not much recognised in India. Clouded in controversy and viewed with suspicion, it has in fact no deep roots in India.<sup>215</sup> Gispert Sauch argues that women theology is relevant to India at least in two different ways.

First, because no less than Western society, Indian society needs a conversion, a radical change towards a wholesome view of woman and man and their relationship to one another. The new understanding must admittedly be Asian, Indian, rooted in our cultural ethos, and incorporate many of the forgotten insights of the Indian tradition. It cannot be imported from a foreign culture. But it must not thereby cease to be a challenge to what is evil in our male-dominated society and its undeniable oppression of woman.<sup>216</sup>

It emerges as a critical response to the recognition of androcentric and misogynist biases in theological tradition.<sup>217</sup> Feminist theology has a threefold task in this context (1) establishing a convincing demonstration of the androcentric and misogynist bias of the tradition; (2) establishing alternative norms and sources of traditions to challenge the biases; and (3) reconstructing theological themes that will free these biases against women and their subjugation.<sup>218</sup> According to Prasanna Kumari, Feminist theology is a gift and a task. It is also a challenge to write about its dynamism and complexities. Then she further explains: "[i]t is a gift because it is overwhelmed by the riches of God experience of women dialoguing with Indian realities and cultures." "It is a task to comprehend its depth and promise, a struggle to break loose from preconceived notions inherited from the Greco-Roman world propagated by male masters and almost entirely internalised by women." "It is a challenge to present this wealth of insight coherently, faithfully and critically and to foster its growth and acceptance in the male chauvinistic and misogynistic world of theology."<sup>219</sup> Crystal David Singh says that Feminism in India must work for the emancipation of women. Women must be liberated from male-domination and exploitation by the family and society at large. Feminism must work for 'upgrading' the status of women in the family, at work, in society, culture and religion. In short feminism in India must not only fight against discrimination but must also try to emancipate and empower women.<sup>220</sup> In the following section, we will discuss some of the feminist hermeneutics and its implications in the Indian context.

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<sup>215</sup> Gnanadason, "Feminist Theology: An Indian Perspective," 59. See also, Gabriele Dietrich, "South Asian Feminist Theory and Its Significance for Feminist Theology," *Concilium* 1 (1996): 101.

<sup>216</sup> Sauch, "Meditation on the Bank of Yamuna," 75-76.

<sup>217</sup> Prasanna Kumari, "Theological Formation: A Feminist Critique," in *Feminist Theology: Perspectives and Praxis*, ed. Prasanna Kumari (Chennai: Gurukul Summer Institute, 1998), 366.

<sup>218</sup> Kumari, "Theological Formation: A Feminist Critique," 366.

<sup>219</sup> Kumari, "Theological Formation: A Feminist Critique," 368.

<sup>220</sup> Singh, "Feminism: Its Relevance to the Indian Context," 31.



## 5.2 Feminist Hermeneutics

The experiences of marginalisation and subjugation of women as well as struggles for legitimate freedom in all spheres of life, and participatory action for justice are central to feminist consciousness and hermeneutics. There is the need to emphasize that women's experience includes the biological and cultural experiences of being female and the feminist experience that calls for equality and inclusiveness of women and men.<sup>221</sup> It also extends to the "re-structuring of thought and analysis in view of developing a holistic approach to Divine-human realities. With regard to the Bible, it stands as a critique of androcentric biblical interpretation and theological articulations presented as eternal truths."<sup>222</sup> It is an attempt to read the Bible from women's perspective. Fiorenza observes that "women's words are censured, misrepresented, ridiculed, and eliminated in a male dominated society" and then women are "blamed because no great thinkers, scientists, artists or theologians have emerged among women."<sup>223</sup> She suggests developing a hermeneutics of suspicion in order to perceive what is said and what is not said about women's reality under patriarchy and women's historical struggle against oppression.<sup>224</sup> In the following section, we attempt to articulate the means and aims of hermeneutics of suspicion.

### 5.2.1 Hermeneutics of Suspicion

One cannot speak of feminist hermeneutics without mentioning the "hermeneutics of suspicion." According to Fiorenza, the biblical texts were not only recorded from an androcentric point of view but also interpreted from androcentric perspective. So she starts with a 'hermeneutics of suspicion.' Hermeneutics of suspicion recognises the patriarchal nature of many biblical texts. Therefore, for Fiorenza concrete life experiences of women serve as significant sources in theological reflection. Fiorenza says that we are taught to approach the Bible with a hermeneutics of respect, acceptance, consent and obedience. Instead of developing a hermeneutics of appreciation and consent, she suggests: "a critical feminist interpretation for liberation develops a hermeneutics of suspicion that places on all biblical texts the warning caution could be dangerous to your health and survival."<sup>225</sup> The patriarchal texts are

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<sup>221</sup> Pauline Chakkalakal, "Re-Reading the Bible from a Feminist Perspective," *Jnanadeepa* 7 (2004): 110.

<sup>222</sup> Pauline Chakkalakal, "Re-Reading the Bible from a Feminist Perspective," 110.

<sup>223</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Breaking the Silence- Becoming Visibile," *Concilium* 182 (1985): 13.

<sup>224</sup> Fiorenza, "Breaking the Silence- Becoming Visibile," 13.

<sup>225</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Orbis Book, 2001), 175. In this book, Fiorenza has developed a process of hermeneutics in



approached with suspicion to investigate the ideological functions underlying in a text in favour of male domination.<sup>226</sup> She opines that: “[f]eminist theory insists that all texts are products of an androcentric patriarchal culture and history.”<sup>227</sup> Fiorenza has introduced a methodology which calls for a revolutionary re-structuring of the Christian faith in terms of equality and human dignity. She uses a hermeneutics of suspicion in reading the scriptures from a feminine perspective.

Women are pictured in many of the patriarchal teaching as virgins, temptresses, seducers, but not real women. This experience makes women suspect the validity of a ‘biblical revelation’ that has come only through male categories. Therefore, a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ should inform any reading of biblical texts and commentaries, and reconstruct them in terms of a praxis for liberation of all. Many of the theological articulations are based on a particular understanding of the Bible; feminist scholars emphasise the need to scrutinise the androcentric and patriarchal elements in biblical texts and retrieve the position of women and their partnership with God in the story of salvation.<sup>228</sup> To put it differently, “the hermeneutical principles that we choose to employ are determined by our theological stands operative in exegesis and interpretation.”<sup>229</sup>

In order to move from androcentric text to the social-religious life of women, historian must seek the social reality that produced those texts.<sup>230</sup> Fiorenza affirms that a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ can be used in interpreting scriptures. She holds that

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seven interlinked steps, namely, a hermeneutics of experience, a hermeneutics of domination and social location, a hermeneutics of suspicion, a hermeneutics of critical evaluation, a hermeneutics of creative imagination, a hermeneutics of re-membering and reconstruction and a hermeneutics of transformative action for change. In *Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, she outlines a feminist critical hermeneutics. In *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, she outlines a four-fold method: a hermeneutics of suspicion, a hermeneutics of proclamation, a hermeneutics of remembrance and a hermeneutics of creative actualisation. She expands this perspective in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* by delineating the historical, political and theological steps of her hermeneutics and by engaging with particular texts. Her *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context*, 77-78 adds a contextual perspective which builds on her insistence that “a critical feminist perspective must focus on those wo/men who struggle at the bottom of the kyriarchal pyramid of domination and exploitation.”

<sup>226</sup> Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 175.

<sup>227</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), xv. Through her work in biblical studies and her many theological reflections, Fiorenza has made an enormous contribution to feminist theology. Her influence is great even in the Indian theological world.

<sup>228</sup> Chakkalakal, "Re-Reading the Bible from a Feminist Perspective." 111.

<sup>229</sup> Monica J. Melanchthon, "Indian Women and the Bible: Some Hermeneutical Issues," in *Feminist Theology: Perspectives and Praxis*, ed. Prasanna Kumari (Chennai: Gurukul Summer Institute, 1998), 281.

<sup>230</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 59.



“there is a methodological mistake to take androcentric-patriarchal texts at face value. It has to be complemented by a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion that understands androcentric texts as ideological articulations of men expressing as well as maintaining patriarchal historical conditions.”<sup>231</sup> Fiorenza makes a comparative articulation of the how and what of hermeneutics of suspicion; she says, it is like the woman in the biblical parable who searches the whole house for a lost coin. In hermeneutics of Suspicion, feminist critical interpretation searches for the lost traditions. It tries to discover that lost ‘feminist coin’ from the biblical tradition by critically investigating traditional interpretations.<sup>232</sup> “A feminist hermeneutics of suspicion also questions the underlying presuppositions, androcentric models, and unarticulated interests of contemporary biblical interpretation.”<sup>233</sup> Hermeneutics of suspicion is concerned with the distorted ways in which woman’s presence and practices are constructed. Christian feminists in India realize that they have the authority to reflect on God’s liberative activities in India and articulate their own theology through new myths, stories and symbols. This would necessitate a reinterpretation of the scriptures and understanding traditional doctrines.<sup>234</sup>

Rosemary Ruether, one of the first Christian feminist theologians to reflect explicitly on methodological issues, contends that the crucial principle for any adequate feminist hermeneutics or theology is its promotion of the full humanity of women. In *Sexism and God-Talk*, she states: “[w]hatever denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of women is appraised as not redemptive.”<sup>235</sup> She compares this critical principle with the ancient principle of the *imago Dei* or Christ as goal of human destiny. The uniqueness of feminist interpretation or theology lies in the fact that women claim this (*imago Dei*) principle for themselves.<sup>236</sup> Ruether’s critique of biblical patriarchalism and androcentricism has led her to the conclusion that the Bible can be appropriated

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<sup>231</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 60. See also, Aruna Gnanadason, "Feminist Theology: An Indian Perspective," 65. Gnanadason observes that our early Christian sources are in fact theological interpretations, argumentations, projections and selections rooted in a patriarchal culture. For example, the four Gospels are not historical or comprehensive chronological accounts of what Jesus did; they are “paradigmatic remembrances,” “invitations to discipleship” and therefore each Gospel writer gives priority to certain events and selects certain events that are of importance to him.

<sup>232</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 15-16.

<sup>233</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 16.

<sup>234</sup> Statement of the Indian Theological Association, "Women's Concerns and Indian Theological Responses," *Vidyajyoti* 68 (2004): 698.

<sup>235</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, 18.

<sup>236</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, 19.



as a source of liberation only if correlation between the feminist critical principle and that of the “prophetic messianic” tradition can be established.<sup>237</sup>

From the above discussion we could conclude that the feminist theologians hold that the Bible is written and interpreted from the socio-cultural perspective of male authors; it has legitimised women’s subordination in Christian tradition. Therefore, we are called to unearth the liberative message of biblical tradition with a view of enhancing women’s empowerment in the Church and society.

### 5.2.2 Hermeneutics of Re-membering and Reconstruction

In order to facilitate a genuine and radical restoration of women, we must understand the past. Remembering and re-membering thus become important moments in theologising for the future of women in the Church.<sup>238</sup> As Peter Hayes reflecting on the holocaust rightly remarks: “[e]veryone must remember the past and act to prevent such things happening again. The preservation of memory is important. It is a distressing thought given the tendency of people to forget and of history to repeat.”<sup>239</sup> Fiorenza evoke the memories of New Testament women, very important to the Jesus event, as a significant type of empowering memory. Fiorenza suggests that “a hermeneutics of re-membering and re-construction works not only to increase the distance between us and the time of the text but also to increase our historical knowledge and imagination.”<sup>240</sup> She further says, “Reconstruction of early Christian origins in a feminist perspective is not just a historical but also a feminist theological task.”<sup>241</sup>

Fiorenza outlines three hermeneutical assumptions which can correct the andro-kyriarchal perspectives of historical sources. (1) An assumption that women were present and active in history unless a text explicitly states that women were not present. (2) Texts that censure or limit wo/men’s behaviour must be read as prescriptive rather than descriptive of reality. She holds that if women are forbidden

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<sup>237</sup> To arrive at her goal, Ruether proposes a method of correlation which she expounds as below: (1) women’s experience and feminist hermeneutics and (2) the correlation of feminist and biblical critical principles. For a comprehensive view, see *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. See also her article, Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russel (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 111-124.

<sup>238</sup> Pushpa Joseph, “Remembering and Re-Membering: The Past, Present and Future of Women in the Church,” *Jeevadhara* 36 (2006): 317.

<sup>239</sup> Peter Hayes, *Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of Holocaust in a Changing World* (Illinois: North Western University Press, 1991), 7.

<sup>240</sup> Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 183.

<sup>241</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 31.



from a certain activity, it probably means that they were doing so and it became threatening to the kyriarchal order. (3) Texts and information must be recontextualised not only in terms to the biblical ethos but also in ways that describe alternative movements for change.<sup>242</sup>

Here it is significant to notice Fiorenza's wisdom Sophia movement is an alternative for kyriarchal structures. Fiorenza makes a distinction between patriarchy and kyriarchy. Patriarchy is understood as the domination of all men over all women equally. But in kyriarchy, "its structures of domination and exploitation always are determined by propertied, educated, powerful elite men and not by all men."<sup>243</sup> Such a systemic analysis of kyriarchy provides a different hermeneutical lens for feminist Jesus studies. "Feminist Christological re-construction cannot limit itself to an investigation of text about wo/men and Jesus or simply focus on gender relations. Rather, it must conceptualize early Judaism and early Christianity in such a way that it can make marginalised wo/men visible as central agents who have shaped Jewish and Christian history and religion."<sup>244</sup> Fiorenza says that we need a shift from this kyriarchal frame of reference to that of the Sophia discipleship of equals. For this, she suggests a reconstructive model which consists of some basic theoretical assumptions. Jewish women who followed Jesus had a dream and a vision of the liberation of every woman in Israel. These women might have been inspired by the vision of the Divine Wisdom Sophia which is found in wisdom literature (Pr 9:1-3, 5-6). This house of wisdom has no boundaries and nobody is excluded from this community.

Wisdom-Sophia imagination presented Jesus as prophet of Divine Wisdom and not as ruling King and Lord. Jesus not only proclaimed *basileia* of God but also made it experiential to the people. This Sophia Wisdom community embraced all people. Jesus is the God of the poor, the outcasts and all those who are suffering from injustice. In this Divine Wisdom movement all are equals and Jesus is '*Primus inter pares*, first among equals.' Fiorenza suggests this prophetic Wisdom Sophia movement as a historical frame of reference against kyriarchal oppression.<sup>245</sup> This Wisdom Sophia can be used as a tool to reconstruct the present day Indian society by reconstructing its oppressive structures.

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<sup>242</sup> Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 185.

<sup>243</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Prophet of Divine Wisdom-Sophia," in *Negotiating Borders: Theological Explorations in the Global Era*, ed. Patrick Gnanapragasam and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 63.

<sup>244</sup> Fiorenza, "Prophet of Divine Wisdom-Sophia," 63.

<sup>245</sup> Fiorenza, "Prophet of Divine Wisdom-Sophia," 67-71.



The central vision of this movement is the *basileia* of God. There are differences of opinion among scholars with regard to the translation of the Greek word *basileia*. It can mean kingly rule, sovereignty, dominion and reign. Fiorenza uses the words such as ‘world’, domain’ or commonwealth’ in order to avoid the translation of *basileia* with kingly reign. This *basileia* or common wealth of God envisioned an alternative world free of hunger, poverty and domination.<sup>246</sup> It summoned the people in the local villages, sinners, tax collectors, debtors, beggars, prostitutes and all those women exploited and marginalized there was no exclusive bureaucracy, but by welcoming all, as the children of the Divine Sophia Wisdom. It was a vision of alternative discipleship community of equals. This theological discipleship of equals is not merely a vision or an ideal but rather it is an active process, involving greater equality, freedom, and responsibility as well as communal relations free from domination.<sup>247</sup> In a similar way Elizabeth Johnson opines, the characteristics of this community of disciples are not domination and subordination rather inclusive mutual relationship of brothers and sisters.<sup>248</sup> This emancipatory – liberative reading of the Bible and the non-kyriarchal relationships in the discipleship of equals enables the empowerment of women from its theoretical structure.

A hermeneutics of remembrance searches the texts for traces of women’s history in early Christianity to reconstruct the activity and centrality of women. It is an attempt to recover women’s religious history and the memory of their victimization, struggles, and accomplishments as women’s heritage.<sup>249</sup> Remembering and reconstruction thus affirm women’s historical existence and claim women’s historical subjectivity by a revalorisation of women’s participation and agency.<sup>250</sup> To build women’s self-worth, the feminist hermeneutics of remembrance and reappropriation of our past seem the appropriate tools.<sup>251</sup> We develop below this particular dimension further.

Instead of abandoning the memory of woman’s past, one ought to reclaim and remember it. Fiorenza also uses the well known concept of “subversive memory,” of

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<sup>246</sup> Fiorenza, "Prophet of Divine Wisdom-Sophia," 72-73.

<sup>247</sup> Fiorenza, "Prophet of Divine Wisdom-Sophia," 72-73. See also, Jojo Varakukala, "Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Towards Equal Discipleship in a Global Context," *Bible Bhashyam* 32 (2006): 253.

<sup>248</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Feminism and Sharing the Faith: A Catholic Dilemma," in *American Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. Thomas J. Massaro and Thomas A. Shannon (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 118.

<sup>249</sup> Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 183.

<sup>250</sup> Shalini Mulakal, "Politische ökonomie der Partizipation: Frauen im Leben und Auftrag der Kirche," in *Das Schweigen brechen: Asiatische Theologinnen ringen um die befreiende Dimension des Glaubens*, ed. Hyondok Choe and Annette Meuthrath (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 161-175.

<sup>251</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 20.



Johannes Metz, which “not only keeps alive the suffering and hopes of Christian women in the past but also allows for a universal solidarity with all women of the past, present and future who follow the same vision.”<sup>252</sup> Again Fiorenza says: “[s]uch a remembrance of women’s suffering and their history of patriarchal oppression must be kept alive as an inner moment in a feminist Christian history and biblical theology.”<sup>253</sup> Mary Gray says: “[m]emory is dangerous when it is a memory of conflict and exclusion, of suffering and oppression and of the degradation of women. Memory can also be empowering, when it is memory of something other than humiliation.”<sup>254</sup> In the Indian context, many women have got unpleasant memories of their miserable life due to patriarchal oppression and the exclusion they have suffered. Such memories are to be given due place while doing theology.<sup>255</sup>

The hermeneutics of remembering and reconstruction asserts the historical existence and subjectivity of women.<sup>256</sup> Agreeing with Fiorenza we argue that a similar hermeneutical strategy must be developed in the Indian context as well. Because the Sacred scriptures of various religions function as the foundational catalyst of the oppressed status of women in India, it demands a re-reading of the scriptures.

### 5.2.3 Re-Reading the Religious Scriptures from a Feminist Perspective

Feminist exegesis and feminist hermeneutics is a completely new intellectual and religious enterprise. This scholarship has several dimensions. “It is a scholarship that is compensatory,” which means a “scholarship that fills in the gap in our knowledge about women.” It is also revolutionary because “it challenges the accepted meanings and interpretations of text in a most radical way.” At the same time, this also rejects the view that “women’s experiences, religious participation and cultural contributions are less important than men’s.”<sup>257</sup> Therefore, they asked the question ‘What is the good news for women?’<sup>258</sup> “The Bible itself had been written by men, preached by

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<sup>252</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 31.

<sup>253</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 32.

<sup>254</sup> Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prahash, 2000), 9. Experiences of humiliation and suppression must be memorised and brought to theological texts, so that we let them not to happen again. Paul Ricoeur also shares similar ideas. “There are perhaps crimes that cannot be forgotten, victims whose suffering cries less for vengeance than for narration. The will not to forget alone can prevent these crimes from ever occurring again.” Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 189.

<sup>255</sup> Anjali Therese and Mathew Ilathuparampil, “Indian Theology: Towards Voicing the Concerns of Oppressed Women,” *Indian Theological Studies* 41 (2004): 167.

<sup>256</sup> Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 186.

<sup>257</sup> Mary T. Malone, *Women and Christianity*, vol. 1 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 58-59.

<sup>258</sup> Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 61.



men, interpreted by men and translated by men.”<sup>259</sup> Indian feminist theology began with the pressing need to re-read the Bible in order to relate the Christian faith to the harsh realities of women’s oppression in Church and society.

Feminist theology demands the re-interpretation of scriptures, stories, myths, rituals, and festivals from the standpoint of the life experience of women.<sup>260</sup> As a Christian, it is specifically meant the re-reading of Bible from the perspective of women to create a contrast society, inclusive of both men and women. The Bible is a source of inspiration for women to continue their struggle for freedom.<sup>261</sup> According to Samuel Rayan, “the Bible has both a liberative thread and an oppressive thread running through it with regard to women. The biblical background of Jesus’ ministry is an interplay of lights and shadows as far as the feminist question is concerned.”<sup>262</sup>

Very often, the Bible has been used to legitimise the low status of women. The main arguments against the women’s movement and feminism are often derived from the Bible. For example whenever women have protested against the discrimination faced by them in the Church and society, the Bible has been used to highlight and support the secondary status of women. For this purpose, it has been argued that according to the Bible, woman was made after man, she has brought sin and death into the world, that Christ had no women disciples, Paul demanded that women be silent in the Church and be obedient to their husbands etc.<sup>263</sup>

We need to re-read the Bible identifying the contexts of different human situations. The biblical tradition of the Church has accepted the cultural conditioning of biblical context. For example, according to Rose Paul, the passages in Col 3: 18-25, 1Pet 2:

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<sup>259</sup> Malone, *Women and Christianity*, 60.

<sup>260</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," 815.

<sup>261</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," 815. A careful and scientific analysis of the Bible provides clues for the historical discipleship of equals in Old Testament times, in the time of Christ and in the early Church. Gnanadason says, these brave women of exceptional deeds are to be remembered and celebrated. For example, Shiphrah, Puah, Miriam and the Pharaoh’s daughter are some of the women who played a crucial role in the Exodus story. Pauline literatures and the Acts of the Apostles record how women were among the most prominent missionaries and leaders in the early Christian movement. Priscilla, Phoebe and Junia are some of the examples. Gnanadason, "Feminist Theology: An Indian Perspective," 69. See also Margaret M. Beirne, *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel: A Genuine Discipleship of Equals* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 18. There is an example of the women disciples in the missionary journey of Jesus (Lk 8: 1-3) and it involves the unique Lukan group of women disciples. For a detailed discussion on this topic see also, Virginia Rajakumari Sandiyagu, *The Galilean Women in the Redaction of Luke: An Exegetical Study of Luke 8:1-3*, unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit, 2008).

<sup>262</sup> Samuel Rayan, *In Christ: Power of Women*, (New Delhi: All India Council of Christian Women, 1986), 5.

<sup>263</sup> Aruna Gnanadason, "Feminist Theology: An Indian Perspective," 59. See also, James Gurudas, "Gender Justice in the Bible," *Journal of Dharma* 29 (2004): 136.



11-3:12, 1Tim 2:12-14, 1Cor 11:18, Eph 5:21-33 are based on the patriarchal arrangements in the late first century Greco-Roman households, with their hierarchal values of husband and wife, children and slaves. She states that this cultural assimilation is done in order to reduce tensions between the Christian and pagan society. She holds that this cultural compromise was contrary to the vision of Jesus about the Christian community.<sup>264</sup> Again she comments, the Bible has traditionally been interpreted by men, from their own experience and from the male perspective. Often the Church used the First Corinthians chapters 11 and 14 against women to keep them silent in their inferior position; but Galatians 3:28 and 5:1 are not used as counter arguments.<sup>265</sup>

Tissa Balasuriya calls for a new hermeneutics to connect feminism and the liberation of theology itself. "The Scriptures themselves are to be subject to a transforming influence. They are not total revelation of God to humanity: they are only one such revelation. We cannot limit God and God's message to the whole of humanity only to a few from a male dominated society. We cannot limit God to one generation or impose silence on God after the death of the last apostle."<sup>266</sup> Through a critical feminist interpretation, the Bible can offer a spiritual vision and resource in the struggles for women's emancipation and liberation. Today we need to re-read the Bible and listen to the Word of God in different human situations.

Fiorenza points out that in biblical interpretation, many times current patriarchal attitudes are read into the texts. Because the biblical texts themselves reflect androcentric language and culture, it is important that feminist hermeneutics approach the Bible with caution. As seen before, feminist methodology points out those biblical texts and their interpretations that have served patriarchal functions. "Androcentric texts and linguistic reality constructions must not be mistaken as trustworthy evidence of human history, culture and religion."<sup>267</sup> In religious terms, the scarcity of female imagery for God means a lower self-image for women in the Judeo-Christian tradition. It implies that female experiences are non-normative and therefore women have less ownership over that tradition. In order to overcome the exclusive male images and languages, feminist theologians have translated the Bible using inclusive

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<sup>264</sup> Rose Paul, "Educated Women in the Marriage Market," in *Dalits and Women*, ed. V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research, 1992), 174-175.

<sup>265</sup> Paul, "Educated Women in the Marriage Market," 175.

<sup>266</sup> Tissa Balasuriya, "Feminist and the Liberation Theology in God Woman and the Bible," *Logos* 22 (1985). Cited in S. J. Samartha, *Search for New Hermeneutics in Asian Christian Theology* (Bangalore: Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College, 1987), 41.

<sup>267</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 29.



language, searched for new metaphors for the divine, and drawn on sources other than the scriptures as references.<sup>268</sup>

God is the lover and giver of life as well as liberator of the oppressed people. The Bible speaks about God's redemption, God's act in history. The final document of the Mexico Conference on doing theology from the Third World women's perspective states: "[t]he Bible plays a vital role in the lives of women and in our struggle for liberation, because the Bible itself is a book about life and liberation. This liberation is rooted in God's action in history, particularly in the Christ-event. The Gospels restore to women our dignity as persons loved and cherished by God."<sup>269</sup>

Here we examine some of the hermeneutical tools and typologies proposed by Carolyn Osiek for rereading the Bible. Osiek identifies five responses of women who recognize and acknowledge the role the Bible plays in the oppression of women in a patriarchal Church and society. She categorizes the women who respond as rejectionists, loyalists, revisionists, sublimationists and liberationists. The rejectionists are those who do not detect any usefulness or authority in the Bible and hence do not find anything of value in it for women. The loyalists are those who on the other end of the scale believe that the Bible being the "Word of God," is not and cannot be oppressive. Rather, it contains the divine plan for true human happiness. The revisionists consider the tradition worth saving and hence seek to "rehabilitate the tradition through reform." The sublimationists endorse a form of separatism by emphasizing and glorifying the "otherness" of the feminine as manifested especially in feminine imagery and symbolism found in the Bible such as Israel as the bride of Yahweh, Christ as the child of Sophia, Mary the virgin, the Holy Spirit and the like. Liberationists consider the central message of the Bible to be human salvation and liberation found either in the prophetic tradition or other texts that go beyond androcentrism and patriarchy and witness to the transformation of society.<sup>270</sup> In the context of India, we suggest to read the text in the viewpoint of liberationists.

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<sup>268</sup> Wanda Deifelt, "Feminist Methodology as a Critique and Renewal of Theology," in *Feminist Theology: Perspectives and Praxis*, ed. Prasanna Kumari (Chennai: Gurukul Summer Institute, 1998), 207.

<sup>269</sup> "Mexico Conference: Final Document on Doing Theology from Third World Women's Perspective," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 38.

<sup>270</sup> Carolyn Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (California: Scholars Press, 1985), 97-105. See also, Serene Jones, "Bounded Openness: Postmodernism, Feminism and the Church Today," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 55 (2001): 53.



It must be underlined that a critical feminist hermeneutics does not just aim at understanding the biblical text, “but also engages in theological critique, evaluation and transformation of biblical traditions and interpretations from the vantage point of its particular socio-political religious location.”<sup>271</sup> The feminist perspective thus poses a radical question to the religious and theological thinking stuck in patriarchal moorings. It shows that scripture, tradition and creeds are in need of scrutiny if they are to be authenticated for women.<sup>272</sup> The feminist approach, therefore, provides a clear paradigmatic shift in biblical interpretation and Church doctrines. To use the emphatic statement of Letty M. Russell, “no interpretation of authority that reinforces patriarchal structures of domination would be acceptable for feminist interpretation.”<sup>273</sup>

In the context of India’s multi-religious and pluri-cultural reality, it is imperative that we search also in the scriptures of other great religions and engage in dialogue with women and men of other faiths who are as eager as we are to “move into a healthier, more just world after patriarchy.”<sup>274</sup> Therefore, it is important to re-read the non-Christian scriptures as well from a feminist perspective, because patriarchal system is well supported in the Hindu scriptures as well. For example, *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* the great Epics of India praise women for being devoted to her husband.<sup>275</sup> The *Bhagavata Purana* (3. 31. 39-42) goes to the extent of considering woman as the door to hell. It charges woman for deceiving man like grass covered well, which leads man to sure death or as a hunter who attracts the prey into trap. According to *Bhagavata purana*, Brahman (the creator-God) created woman precisely to arouse desire in man (6. 18. 30). The Hindu lawgiver Manu taught that woman was created for the sake of procreation.<sup>276</sup> Another important religious symbol that women are trying to reconstruct is the masculine image of the biblical God. Already as far back in 1973, Mary Daly articulated the deep-seated belief that “where God is male, male is

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<sup>271</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Hermeneutics," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 785.

<sup>272</sup> Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, Second ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 80.

<sup>273</sup> Letty M. Russell, "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 140.

<sup>274</sup> Lina Gupta, "Kali, the Savior," in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, ed. Paula M. Cooley, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. Mc Daniel (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 15.

<sup>275</sup> Denise L. Carmody, *The Story of World Religions* (California: Mountain View, 1988), 304-305.

<sup>276</sup> Bühler, *The Laws of Manu: Translated with Extracts from Seven Commentaries*, IX, 96. Subhash Anand, "Women in Hindu View and Way of Life," *Jeevadhara* 17 (1987): 56-57.



God.”<sup>277</sup> God and man belong to the same order from which women are excluded. So in the following section we discuss this point.

#### 5.2.4 Recovery of Biblical Images that Value Feminine Qualities of God

Christian tradition has used predominantly masculine images in its language about God. Various theological attempts have been made to develop a meaningful language about God, which is inclusive of both masculine and feminine images. Here we raise some questions. Is there not a need to liberate our theology from patriarchal chauvinism? Are there really sound reasons to speak of God only in masculine terms? Feminist theology emerges in reaction to the androcentric bias of theology wherein God is imaged as male and the male experience is made normative for Christianity and religion. It makes women excluded from the sacramental system and ecclesial decision-making, leaving them subordinate to men and marginalized. It challenges the Church to examine its use of language and images and to refrain from everything that is demeaning and destructive of the full humanity of women.<sup>278</sup>

Feminist theology is critical of the masculinist conceptions of God. God's relation to the world is conceived as man's relation to woman. If God is male, the female is not fully in the image and likeness of God. In scriptures and in theological tradition no support is found for the exclusive application of the male images and names to God.<sup>279</sup> Elizabeth Johnson remarks, often it is forgotten that the names attributed to God are only relationship rather than essence in itself.<sup>280</sup> There is the great preponderance of the male imagery for the divine in Christian tradition so that naming of God in feminine terms is difficult. Hence many feminists affirm that Christianity is irredeemably patriarchal and androcentric.<sup>281</sup> There is widespread criticism among women theologians against the exclusive centrality of the male image of God and its influence on the denigration of the human dignity of women.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 19.

<sup>278</sup> Anne Hunt, *What Are They Saying About the Trinity?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 22.

<sup>279</sup> Hunt, *What Are They Saying About the Trinity?*, 23.

<sup>280</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 33-34.

<sup>281</sup> Hunt, *What Are They Saying About the Trinity?*, 24.

<sup>282</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 443. See also, Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, 22-27; Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Female Nature of God, God as Father?," *Concilium* 143 (1981): 66. Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity and Catholic Vision," in *Womanspirit Rising*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harpper & Row, 1979), 139; Rita Gross, "Female and God Language in a Jewish Context," in *Womanspirit*



Masculine images of God are ample throughout the Old Testament. For example, God is described as king, warrior, father, shepherd, and husband. However, these images are also complemented by a number of feminine and female descriptions, which are often ignored.<sup>283</sup> The Christian image of God as Father is experienced as very patriarchal, but a careful reading of the Bible shows that feminine images are also used in talking about God. Sexually exclusive language is offensive and discriminatory. Therefore, we suggest a shift from exclusive language to inclusive language, in relation to persons, God and worship. So we seek to recover the feminine face of God. The following biblical references are often quoted to show the feminine aspect of God. The strongest female image of God is that of mother. For example, Is 42:14 uses a simile of Yahweh's experiencing labour pains, the one who cries out like a woman in labour. Again the prophet refers to God as the one who has carried Israel "from the womb" (Is 46:3-4). God is portrayed as mother eagle in Ex 19:4. God is portrayed as a mother hen in Mt 23:37 and Lk 13:34.<sup>284</sup> There are also other passages in the Old Testament that speak about the feminine aspect of God. In Num 11:12, Moses depicts God in the image of mother and wet nurse in a conversation between God and Moses. In Dt 32:18, the people of Israel are accused of forgetting the God who "gave you birth." In the prophetic books there are many passages of feminine and female imagery. Hos 11:3-4 uses the image of Yahweh as mother, performing the many tasks that a mother performed in Hebrew society, for example, "feeding a child, teaching it to walk, healing its injuries."<sup>285</sup>

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*Rising*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 169-170; Anne Carr, "Is a Christian Feminist Theology Possible?," *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 296; Gail Ramshaw, "De Divinis Nominibus: The Gender of God," *Worship* 56 (1982): 117-131. Aruna Gnanadason, "Women's Oppression: A Sinful Situation," in *With Passion and Compassion, Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 74.

<sup>283</sup> Barbara J. MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 10. R. J. Raja summarizes a survey of feminine imagery with reference to God in the Old Testament. R. J. Raja, "God as Mother in the Old Testament," *Jeevadhara* 21 (1991): 117. Israel saw her God not only as father (Is 63:16, 64:7), husband (Is 54:5, 62:5), protector (Is 41:14, 43:14), warrior (Ex 15:3), king (Ps 98:6, 99:4) etc, but also as a mistress (Ps 123:2), a mid wife and a nurse (Ps 22:9-10, 71:17; Is 46:3-4; Hos 11:3-4), a woman in travail (Is 42:14; 46:3-4) and a mother (Num 11:12, Jer 31:20, Is 49:14-15, 63-9, 66:12-13; Hos 11:3-4, 8-9, Ex 19:4, Dt 32:11, ps 27:10; 131:2). Should we not then accept Yahweh as the Mother and Father of our very being and acclaim Her/Him and pray to Her/Him as such?

<sup>284</sup> Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: CrossRoad, 1994), 83. There are two types of wing images in the Bible. In one type, a human being images himself/ herself snuggled herself safely under God's sheltering wings. In other type, a human being images himself/herself being lifted upon divine wings. Mollenkott says both of these wing images are depicting God as female.

<sup>285</sup> MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition*, 11.



Transcendent image of God the Mother occurs in Acts 17:26, 28. There Paul's speech to the Athenian Council of the Areopagus depicts the "transcendent image of God as the Mother." Paul declares that "God is not dependent on anything, since God is the one who has given life and breath to everyone." Further, he says that "this God is not far from any of us, for it is in God that we live and move and exist." In a more clear way, "Paul pictures the entire human race – people of all colours, all religions, all political and economic systems – as living, moving and existing within the cosmic womb of the One God."<sup>286</sup> It is more relevant that Paul's implicit womb-image in Acts 17:28 shows his awareness that the "Hebrew word *rachum* or *racham*, usually translated compassion, is closely related to the word for womb (*racham* or *rachem*)."<sup>287</sup> Thus, as Phyllis Trible has suggested, Hebrew references to God's compassion could meaningfully be translated "God's womb-love."<sup>288</sup> Acts 17:28 can therefore be understood as assurance that all human beings exist not only within the womb, but within the yearning womb-love, of God the Mother.<sup>289</sup> According to E. R. Achtemeier, the noun form *rahumim* 'mercy' or 'compassion,' is derived from the term *racham*, meaning 'womb.' Its original meaning was 'brotherly' or motherly feeling.' The word would also mean the love among brothers or the love of the mother towards her child.<sup>290</sup> Furthermore, in Hebrew, a most frequently used verb form is *rhm*, which means 'to have compassion.' Its noun form is *rechum*, which also mean 'compassion,' and its adjective *rachmanity* 'compassionate or merciful.'<sup>291</sup> Thus, the word represents Yahweh's love towards the people interpreted as that of a mother's towards her child (Is 63: 15-16; Jr 31:20).

Maria Clara Bingemer, in her essay, *Reflections on the Trinity*, seeks to find the feminine in God. This is an example of the feminist way of doing theology. Bingemer observes that the mystery of God has been polarized by markedly masculine images. The traditional images of God take on a masculine body form: father, king, husband, lord. Yet despite these images, reflecting the patriarchal society of the authors of the Bible, God is revealed in scripture as one with "feminine" qualities, as one who consoles and protects. God is not a solitary patriarch, but a trinity of persons in which

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<sup>286</sup> Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*, 15-16.

<sup>287</sup> Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*, 16.

<sup>288</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 31-59.

<sup>289</sup> Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*, 16.

<sup>290</sup> E. R. Achtemeier, "Mercy," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 352.

<sup>291</sup> Achtemeier, "Mercy," 352.



the 'masculine force is enriched and complemented by the feminine tenderness.'<sup>292</sup> Gebara observes: "[t]he image of God is no longer that of the father to whom one owes submission; rather God is basically the image of what is most human in woman and man, seeking expression and liberation."<sup>293</sup> So we would argue that these reflections on the feminine symbols of God challenge the maleness of traditional theology and seek to bring to theology a distinctive and different perspective of woman's experience of God.

Elizabeth Johnson makes an attempt for a feminist critical retrieval of the Trinitarian theology. She holds that speaking of God in male categories hinders women from equal participation in the life of the Church. Hence, female symbols must be inserted into our reference of God in order to bring to light the existence of the feminine in him. She does this by reclaiming the biblical image of Sophia for referring to God. It functions in a radically liberating way in contrast to the traditional Trinitarian theology, which is oppressive of women.<sup>294</sup> Unlike the traditional approach to Trinitarian theology, Elizabeth Johnson begins the treatment of the three divine persons with the Holy Spirit. Spirit's activities are primarily directed towards the creation of new life and the renovation of what has been damaged. She notes that the freely moving, life-giving, non-violent nature of the Spirit has affinity with the feminine values. Sophia or Wisdom of the Old Testament is taken as a female personification of God's own being in creative and saving work of the world.<sup>295</sup> Sallie McFague considers the image of the divine as Mother, Lover and Friend. She explains that these metaphors are more adequate for today, because they consider the power of love and express better the articulation of unity and interdependence.<sup>296</sup>

Recovering the feminine images of God is important and embracing the feminine metaphors of God has significant implications in the Indian context. If we focus only on masculine images of God in scripture, we may gradually begin to think that God is male and this will make it difficult to consider women as being equally made in God's

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<sup>292</sup> Maria Clara Bingemer, "Reflections on the Trinity," in *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America*, ed. Elsa Tamez (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 60-61. She also noticed God's "mercy" (*rachamim* in Hebrew), which is a dominant concept in scripture, has as its root meaning 'mother's womb.' There are many articles written on this theme. For example, Leonardo Boff, *The Maternal Face of God*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987); Rosemary Haughton, "Is God Masculine?" *Concilium* 134 (1980): 63-70; Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Female Nature of God: A Problem in Contemporary Religious Life," *Concilium* 143 (1981): 61-68.

<sup>293</sup> Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," 44.

<sup>294</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 5.

<sup>295</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 91.

<sup>296</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (London: SCM Publishers, 1988), 117.



image. In other words, “if God is male, then men are by nature more closely formed in the image of God, and therefore represent God more fully in this world.”<sup>297</sup> Such thinking will lead to men claiming that they have the divine justification for ruling over women, who are naturally inferior; an argument used for centuries to justify unjust relations between men and women.<sup>298</sup>

Here it is important to note the feminine divine concept in the Indian tradition. In the Indian Shaivite tradition, when the absolute is seen as male and female – god Shiva and Shakti, the female is the active, dynamic principle.<sup>299</sup> Shakti means energy and power. This power in the form of goddess Kali or Durga can also be salvific because it is destructive of evil.<sup>300</sup> From this point of view, when we think of the feminine in God, the focus is not merely on the birthing, nurturing and compassionate aspects, but also on god’s creative and salvific powers. This may correspond to some contemporary reflection on the Spirit as feminine in God.<sup>301</sup> The Old Testament also portrays the Spirit of God as the principle of life and vital activity on earth.<sup>302</sup> Again we find that in the Bible the Spirit of God is associated with air, wind, breath, fire, etc.<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Kristina LaCelle-Peterson, *Liberating Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 29.

<sup>298</sup> LaCelle-Peterson, *Liberating Tradition*, 29.

<sup>299</sup> For the general Indian tradition, see John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff, *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1982).

<sup>300</sup> Subhash Anand, “The Lady and the Demon,” *Vidyajyoti* 50 (1986): 454-468. See also, Felix Wilfred, *On the Banks of Ganges: Doing Contextual Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 202. In this image the feminine is the conqueror of the demons, or evil forces. Many Hindu mythologies are connected with this aspect. The divine feminine in the form of Kali represents the chaotic and violent forces, disorder as well as its conquest. The widely popular image of goddess Durga Mahisasura Mardini is that of a valiant woman. In a patriarchal society, the image of this goddess who rides on a lion and vanquishes the buffalo demon offers resources for the liberation of women.

<sup>301</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 49-50.

<sup>302</sup> Gn 6:17; 7:15, 22; Sir 38:23; Wis 15:11, 16; 16:14. The Spirit of God is also perceived by the people of Israel through natural and human elements, like the pillar of cloud by day and tower of fire by night (Ex 13:21-22), and also as arm (Is 63:11-12), hand (Ps 139:10), face (Ps 34:16), bird (Deut 32:11), etc. God’s Spirit is seen as the efficacious divine power which liberated Israelites from Egypt (Ex 14:21), formed them into a community of God’s people, perfected them by changing their hearts (Ez 32:26f), and converted the wilderness into fruitful field for them to live in (Is 32:15ff) and thus cares for them by being always present with them. (Joseph Sebastian, *God as Feminine According to Subramania Bharati Seen in the light of Christian Tradition* (Rome: Gregorian University), 1994, 24.

<sup>303</sup> As a dynamic creative force, God’s Spirit brings life to the formless chaos in the beginning of all things (Gn 1:2) and acts as the agent by whom God made the heavens (Ps 33:6). Humanity receives the breath of life from God through his Spirit (Gn 2:7). It is also stated in the book of Job 33:4 that the Spirit of God made human beings and gave them life. God’s Spirit is also experienced as surrounding everyone (Ps 139:7) and guiding all in their lives (Ps 143:10). The same Spirit of God is spoken of as inspiring prophecy (Is 61:1), oracles (2 Sam 23:2), and warning Israel of danger (Neh 9:30). The outpouring of God’s Spirit also symbolizes the beginning of a new life (Is 32:15; Ez



From this context Michael Amaladoss says that: "it is best to speak of God as masculine and feminine."<sup>304</sup> The best image of this is the Indian *ardhanarisvara* –half male and half female god, for example, the figure of Shiva with both male and female components. To state in a more clear way, Parvati is not merely the consort of Shiva but also part of him.<sup>305</sup> Hinduism for that matter, conceives two halves in God, one masculine and the other feminine, whereas Christianity does not accept such a view, rather it speaks of God as feminine through metaphors, symbols and images.<sup>306</sup> Again Amaladoss says that in terms of language and symbol, one should feel free to use both masculine and feminine symbols, as occasion suggests. Such a free use of symbols would also conscientize us about the fact that all our talk about God is always symbolic.<sup>307</sup> In Christian terms, the importance of the feminine in the image of God, leads us to a greater appreciation of the Spirit and Sophia (wisdom) viewed in tradition as the feminine.<sup>308</sup> This will serve as a corrective to the overly patriarchal and male image of the Divine mystery. Acceptance of the feminine in the divine has a lot of contemporary relevance in Asian women's theology especially in Indian theology.

After the detailed discussions on the masculine-feminine images of the divine and its implications in the Indian context, we deem it necessary to pay attention to Fiorenza's specific way of writing God as G\*d and theology as the\*logy. The account of God as G\*d, she holds is meant to indicate the brokenness and inadequacy of human language to name the divine. The framing of theology as the\*logy is intended to suggest the inadequacy to speak about God for theology is speaking about G\*d or G\*d-talk and this God is male in the mainstream theology.<sup>309</sup> In her book *Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, she further explicates this issue by asserting that 'via negativa' of classic theology says that human beings are not able to say properly who God is but must say who God is not. For example, "God is not man, not white,

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11:19; 36:26; Joel 3:1). Joseph Sebastian, *God as Feminine According to Subramania Bharati Seen in the light of Christian Tradition*, 26.

<sup>304</sup> Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 39.

<sup>305</sup> Wilfred, *On the Banks of Ganges: Doing Contextual Theology*, 201. See also, Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom*, 39.

<sup>306</sup> Joseph Sebastian, *God as Feminine According to Subramania Bharati Seen in the Light of Christian Tradition*, 26.

<sup>307</sup> Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom*, 39-40.

<sup>308</sup> Walter Gardini, "Women in the World's Religions: Past and Present," in *Women in the World's Religions: Past and Present*, ed. Ursula King (New York: Paragon House, 1987), 59-60.

<sup>309</sup> Fiorenza, "Prophet of Divine Wisdom-Sophia," 59.



not father, not king, not ruler, not Lord.”<sup>310</sup> However, Christian theology and tradition mainly use masculine language for the Divine. Therefore, Fiorenza argues that: “theology must focus on the inadequacy of such masculine language, imagery and titles and reject their exclusive use for speaking about God.”<sup>311</sup> Hence, this new way of spelling God as G\*d seeks to indicate that ‘God in a religious sense is unnameable,’ and belongs to the realm of the ineffable.’ God is not God’s proper name. This can be corroborated from the biblical tradition wherein Yahweh means ‘I am who I am’ (Ex 3:13). Rebecca Chopp further elaborates on the issue by stating that: “[t]here is not a literal name of God, a correspondence of God with a reality which in any positive sense signifies God.”<sup>312</sup> J. Severino’s comment on this subject is worth noting. Referring to Fiorenza’s position, she contends that ‘G\*d’ expresses God’s transcendence. This is a way of expressing the unnamability of God as in negative or *apophatic* theology. This expression also would imply that God is beyond the sexual realm.<sup>313</sup>

The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* that we have analysed in the previous chapter supports the above argument. To Pope John Paul II, God’s generative power is neither masculine nor feminine; it is totally divine. God is spirit. God’s fatherhood is free of all masculinity, it is not patriarchal; it is completely divine.<sup>314</sup> The Apostolic Letter also enthusiastically treats of the anthropomorphism of the biblical language and elaborates on such feminine qualities as love, compassion, sacrifice, and generosity.<sup>315</sup> With respect to language and terms such as “the fatherhood of God,” the Pope contends that anthropomorphism is characteristic of biblical language, that maternal imagery was sometimes used to depict God, and that, in any case, God as pure spirit is beyond language and gender.<sup>316</sup> From the above discussions, it becomes

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<sup>310</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 179.

<sup>311</sup> Fiorenza, *Jesus Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, 179.

<sup>312</sup> Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 32.

<sup>313</sup> J. Severino, "Reflections on God-Talk," in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honour of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 47.

<sup>314</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 8. See also, Baum, "Bulletin: The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*," 145. Susan Mader Brown, "Mulieris Dignitatem: A New Perspective on the Image of God," *Journal of Dharma* 23 (1998): 504. Referring to *Mulieris Dignitatem* 8, she comments that the emphasis in *Mulieris Dignitatem* is that God cannot be understood as having ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ qualities of a physical sort. For example fatherhood in God must be understood as “completely spiritual and divine in essence.”

<sup>315</sup> For example, Is 49:14-15; 66:13; Ps 131:2-3; Is 42:14, 46:3-4.

<sup>316</sup> John Paul II, “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” 8; See also, Mary C. Segers, “Feminism, Liberalism and Catholicism,” 599.



clear that both feminist theology and Pope John Paul II agree upon the feminine concept in the divine. In line with the argument of Pope John Paul II and feminist theology, we strongly recommend that God be addressed as both Father and Mother knowing fully well that the masculine and feminine aspects of God are beyond language and Gender.

We have examined some important aspects of feminist contributions that would assist the empowerment of Indian women: the feminist reconstructions and methods that challenge the oppressive social structures and patriarchal systems. It has immense potential and wide possibilities but it is not fully applicable in the Indian context. Generally speaking, feminist thoughts are often viewed with suspicion in India, probably because the Indian psyche is rooted in the religious and cultural myths and legends, which downplay the role of women generally. The mental constructs, ways of life and spirituality of the Indians are radically different from those in the West. Therefore, we would suggest that a theology towards the empowerment of women must presume a comprehensive approach to the reality of women. For constructing a theology open to the concerns of women, we must critically evaluate and reject the traditions that contribute to the oppression of women. Our attempt is to overcome the exclusion of women on the basis of gender, race, religion or language.

## **6. Theology for the Empowerment of Indian Women**

The empowerment of women in India calls for an adequate and relevant theology that gives new shape, form, content and direction to the mission of the Church.<sup>317</sup> Theology has been the prerogative of males for almost 2000 years. This theology mirrors rational thought, male experiences, images and ideas.<sup>318</sup> Male-stream religions in general and Christian theology in particular classically viewed gender and roles assigned to it as part of God's created order and therefore it is to be universal and eternal.<sup>319</sup> Theology should pay special attention to the voice of women, who constitute 48.3% of Indian population. They are not adequately represented in the decision-making bodies and have been the victims of patriarchal society. In order to formulate a theology for the empowerment of women, we make the following proposals.

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<sup>317</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," 815.

<sup>318</sup> Mulackal, "Pen Theology from the Margins: A Pilgrimage from the Eclipse to Identity," 79.

<sup>319</sup> Prasanna Kumari (ed), *Feminist Theology Perspectives and Praxis*, iii.



## 6.1 Transformation of Androcentric Theology to Inclusive Theology

We have already seen that the Church Fathers and Medieval theologians justify the cultural and religious segregation of women. The androcentric mind of the Church Fathers became the mind of the Church. St. Augustine held the view that an ideal society demanded a harmonious order of relationship between a superior and an inferior. He identified femininity with inferiority and masculinity with superiority. He taught that God made the souls of the both sexes in His image, but made man the only true image of God in both body and soul. Augustine, while affirming that woman is equal to man in her soul, denied the fullness of the image of God to woman because of her body and her social role. He wrote:

The woman together with her husband is the image of God, so that whole substance is one image. But when she is assigned as a helpmate, a function that pertains to her alone, then she is not the image of God; but as far as the man is concerned, he is by himself alone the image of God, just as fully and completely as when he and the women are joined together into one.<sup>320</sup>

In Augustine's interpretation of the creation, women are not complete humans or image of God unless joined with men. Resorting to the Aristotelian argument for the androcentric order of household and state, Thomistic theology argues that female sex cannot signify any superiority of rank for "woman is in a state of subjection."<sup>321</sup> The normative character of maleness was accepted by Thomas Aquinas when he defined females as "misbegotten males."<sup>322</sup> According to this dualistic thinking, one reality is considered as higher, superior, dominative and active and the other is considered as lower, inferior, subordinative and passive.<sup>323</sup> For centuries, in the Western setting, the basis for such discrimination was women's alleged physical, mental and moral weakness. Women were generally placed on the side of irrationality, nature, silence, privacy and the body. Men, on the other side, were identified with reason, culture, discourse, public and the mind. This dualistic comprehension of the world establishes a hierarchy in which men are believed to be superior to women.<sup>324</sup> Therefore, men are presented in the media as bankers, doctors, and lawyers and women do the unpaid

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<sup>320</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity: Books 8-15*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews, trans. Stephen McKenna, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 89-90. See also, Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine's Writing on Women* (Darton: Longman and Todd, 1995), 131-157.

<sup>321</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 3 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), 2698. Q. 39 Art. 2 Suppl.

<sup>322</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 1 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1946), 466. Q. 92 Art.1 Pt.1.

<sup>323</sup> Manohar, *Feminist Critique and Reconstruction*, 15.

<sup>324</sup> Deifelt, "Feminist Methodology as a Critique and Renewal of Theology," 202.



domestic work of cleaning, cooking, and rearing children. In theology, the male stream epistemology expresses the experience of those privileged groups.<sup>325</sup> We see a contradiction here – that women are presented as house-wives in India and men are never presented as house husbands; they are known by their profession.

Some of the negative impacts of male-stream epistemology are the following. Until recently, most women were taught that they were more desirable if they were passive and dependent. They gave up their powers of thinking and decision-making in order to be submissive to others. Under the auspices of such patriarchal system, the rights and dignity of women were ignored. Unless women actually experience that their life has the same dignity as that of men, they cannot realise the value of their life and live accordingly. Without a proper sense of dignity, women are unable to pass down a sense of dignity to others, including their children.<sup>326</sup> In the words of Elizabeth Johnson, “given the negative assessment of women’s humanity under patriarchy, this self-naming has the character of a conversion process, a turning away from trivialization and defamation of oneself as a female in person and a turning toward. This conversion amounts to nothing less than a rebirth [...]”<sup>327</sup> There is an assumption that the only normative experience is white-male-Christian experience, which perceives itself as the representation of universal humanity. This dualistic pattern of thinking in theology and philosophy is the cause of the oppression of women. This dualistic thinking pattern along with some scriptural injunctions and conditioned by the historical context (cf. 1Cor 11:3-10; 1Tim 2:11-14) seemed to justify women’s subordination and silencing, domestication and exclusion from leadership.

This classical dualistic principle is applied to Christianity during the scholastic period and it is applied to man and woman relationships. The Greek dualistic philosophy identified rationality and the mind with man and the emotions and the body with woman, thus contributing to a Christian theological anthropology which concluded that as the body must be controlled by the mind, so should women be controlled by men. According to Ruether, dualistic model is a model of domination. “Sexism of Christian tradition is integrally related to the dualistic model of traditional religion. Christianity inherited this dualistic and hierarchical mentality from the classical

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<sup>325</sup> Chopp, "Eve's Knowing: Feminist's Theologies Resistance to Malestream Epistemological Frameworks," 117-118.

<sup>326</sup> Hee, "A Method of Theological Reflection for Empowerment: An Eco-Feminist Perspective According to Asian Religious and Cultural Values." 318.

<sup>327</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 62.



world.”<sup>328</sup> Various aspects of life are patterned according to dualistic model, thus creating an unhealthy distinction between soul and body; spirit and flesh; rationality and matter; culture and nature; transcendence and immanence.<sup>329</sup> In this dualistic principle, God is identified with the positive side and the world with the negative side.<sup>330</sup> Protest against patriarchal theology is more than a protest against male dominance. Protest is not directed against men, but against one-dimensional theology and its forms of oppression. One-dimensional theology is bound up with a God who is Father. How does it affect our lives and thoughts? Besides projecting God as Father, it looks down and discriminates God who is mother.<sup>331</sup>

It can be further noted that the “classical dualism also became the model for the oppression of women when the culture-creating males identified the positive sides of the dualism with themselves and identified the negative sides with the women over whom they claimed the right to rule.”<sup>332</sup> Until recently, “female” or “feminine” has the meanings given to “passive, emotional, intuitive, and more closely related to nature and matter than to spirit and culture.”<sup>333</sup> This perception has kept reserved the role of leadership to men. This dualistic pattern of thinking creates discrimination, exploitation and oppression of women in the Church and society. So we suggest a theology which is inclusive, all embracing and affirming the other. In other words, this theology calls for a shift from dualistic model to inclusivistic model.

This dualistic thinking we can see not only in theology but also in society related to social and economic life. The labour market favours men over women and the division of labour within the occupation is highly sex-biased. As we have already seen, it is not nature that says, the public world is for men, and the private world is for women; on the contrary it is culture that does it. From very early age, girls are trained to be housekeepers, to care for children and to do domestic work. At the same time, boys are trained to be good workers, professionals, and to have public responsibilities.<sup>334</sup> From this, we conclude that the superiority of man and the

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<sup>328</sup> "Introduction," in *Womenspirit Rising*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 4-5.

<sup>329</sup> Manohar, *Feminist Critique and Reconstruction*, 16.

<sup>330</sup> "Introduction," in *Womenspirit Rising*, 5.

<sup>331</sup> Elisabeth Moltmann, "Toward a Wholistic Feminine Theology," *Theology Digest* 33 (1986): 241.

<sup>332</sup> "Introduction," in *Womenspirit Rising*, 5.

<sup>333</sup> Joann Wolski Conn, "Dancing in the Dark: Women's Spirituality and Ministry," in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 10.

<sup>334</sup> Ana Maria Tepedino, "Gender and New (Re-Newed) Images of the Divine," *Voices from the Third World* 24 (2001): 87.



subordination of women in the Church and society, education and employment and other fields are the result of cultural construction; hence, it can be deconstructed. For this we have to recover and reconstruct history from women's perspective, which forms the key point of our discussion. The following section deals with this problematic.

## **6.2 Recover and Reconstruct History from Women's Perspective**

In a patriarchal theology, women were excluded from the mainstream of history and literature. They were silenced, marginalized, and perceived as being unessential to the making of civilization. Women's deeds have been left almost entirely unrecorded, leading to historical and literary invisibility. Traditional male scholarship perpetuates the exclusion of women by making men the normative and dominant representation of humanity and placing women as subordinate and secondary to men. As a result, the record of the past is not only a partial record, since it omits the past of half of the human species, but it is also distorted, because it gives the wrong impression that women have never done anything that is worth mentioning.<sup>335</sup> So there is a need for the critical evaluation of how the women are presented in the scripture, Church fathers and the theology in general.

We argue the need to read history from women's perspective. Accordingly, Christian feminist historians have engaged themselves either in recovering or reconstructing history. It is an attempt to reconstruct history from women's point of view. If history is reconstructed, we will have a new, transformed history. This means that one needs to question the categories of history as well as periodisation of history.<sup>336</sup> In order to achieve this task, the first step is to "deconstruct and critique what has been received in the Christian theological tradition."<sup>337</sup> For example, it means to find out the reasons for women's absence and silence in the Church history and theological writings and make it visible in history and literature. In this deconstructive stage, there are two aspects: (1) a critical analysis of what has been written in the past; (2) a search for the causes of the exclusion of women and the distortion of their reality. For instance, there is a great deal of misogynist writing which declares that women are dangerous and seductive by their very being.<sup>338</sup> The second step is to search for an alternative

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<sup>335</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4.

<sup>336</sup> Manohar, *Feminist Critique and Reconstruction*. 17-18. Categories of history meant that the categories of historical analysis. For example a life history differs both from autobiography and biography.

<sup>337</sup> Susan Rakoczy, *In Her Name* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004), 17.

<sup>338</sup> Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 17.



history and tradition to support the inclusion of women as full human beings. The history of Christian community reveals new sources in the writings of women which have been lost and forgotten for centuries. The final step is to reconstruct and reformulate the teaching of Christianity. Thus, feminist theology can bring new and original insights into the Christian tradition as women speak the truth.<sup>339</sup>

Thus, the feminist methodology needs to question this historical exclusion of women from historical and religious leadership. This is possible through the critical evaluation of the literature taken as normative and accepted by religious and educational establishments. For example, the Pauline letters depict women as apostles, missionaries, theologians, leaders, co-workers and prophets.<sup>340</sup> Several women were in positions of leadership in the early Church. In our second chapter, we saw that there were women disciples during the earthly ministry of Jesus. Women were recognised and they had active participation in the early Church. In the patristic period their role was restricted, and they were turned out to be victims of misogyny and thus finally were condemned to silence. Emphasis should be given to the recovery of lost or forgotten traditions of women's leadership and writing.

One of the suggestions of the keynote address of Catholic Bishops' Conference of India in 2008 for the empowerment of women was to reconstruct the history of the Church. For this purpose, early Christian traditions have to be unearthed from the buried memories of the history of the Church. It is also important to rewrite and disseminate the life-histories of women who have rendered exemplary contribution to the services of Church and society since early biblical times. Such measures are necessary to promote gender-just culture, which facilitates the empowerment of women at all levels of the Church.<sup>341</sup>

The Indian history reveals that once women enjoyed very good position in the society. But with the passing of time they have been discriminated against and victimized by the norms created by the male dominated society. Women have been discriminated and suffered a lot for a long time as they were in disadvantaged position on account of

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<sup>339</sup> Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 18.

<sup>340</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Women in the Early Christian Movement," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 90. See also, Barbara E. Reid, "Women and Paul: Was Paul an Egalitarian or a Chauvinist," *America: The National Catholic Weekly* (2008): 20-21. Ronald D. Witherup, "Paul and Women," *The Pastoral Review* 4 (2008): 11.

<sup>341</sup> Rita Noronha, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society: Keynote Address to the CBCI General Body Meeting 2008," *Vidyajyoti* 72 (2008): 435.



social barriers and impediments.<sup>342</sup> There is also the need to reconstruct history from the point of view of traditional Indian society. Here it is important to notice the matriarchal system prevalent in India during the early period. The original culture of the indigenous Indians was matriarchal before the advent of the Aryans in India. It was the Aryans who brought in the patriarchal system which marked the beginning of male domination and female subjugation and oppression.<sup>343</sup> In pre-Vedic period, the society in India was matriarchal and women occupied superior place as compared to men. Women enjoyed considerable freedom in the Vedic period too. In 'Gurukulas',<sup>344</sup> women studied with men and many women were well versed in the Vedas. They were actively associated with men in every social and religious ritual and ceremony. In this era, woman was considered an equal partner and she enjoyed equal status and prestige. It is evident from the fact that many religious rituals were regarded as incomplete unless women were present. Women are rather considered indispensable for certain rites as men cannot be a spiritual whole without her participation.<sup>345</sup>

During those days, man and woman had equal opportunities in the various professions in the society. But in course of time, man reserved for himself respectable works and woman was restricted to less important and undignified jobs. In fact, the society originated and evolved from matriarchy. In this evolution, motherhood was considered to be one of the founding pillars of the society.<sup>346</sup> There was no question of dominance in the matriarchal society. From the above arguments, we could see that both in the early Church and the Indian society women enjoyed a good position. However, during the course of time, both in the Church and society they are subordinated. So here, we suggest recovering and reconstructing the past history of women both in the Church and society in order to empower them.

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<sup>342</sup> Hari Mohan Mittal, "Domestic Violence against Women in India: A Study in Its Legislative and Judicial Trends," in *Women Empowerment: Today's Mission for Tomorrow's Mission*, ed. Meenu Agrawal (New Delhi: Mahamaya Publishing House, 2007), 75.

<sup>343</sup> Katti Padma Rao, *Woman in Indian Culture*, trans. D. Anjaneyulu (Chennai: The Gurukul Luthern Theological College and Research Institute, 1999), IX.

<sup>344</sup> *Gurukulas* is a traditional Indian name for a place where a 'guru' or teacher used to live together with his disciples while training them.

<sup>345</sup> R. Letha Kumari, *Women in Politics: Participation and Governance* (Delhi: Author Press, 2006), 21. All sacred rituals are to be "Sapatnika" (with wife), otherwise these rituals are useless. Scholars like Asthana and Majumdar accepted her role in society as the measuring rod in assessing the standard of culture. See also, Pratima Asthana, *Women's Movement in India* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1974), 150., Dharendra Nath Majumdar, *Races and Cultures in India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961), 104. U. B. Singh, "Empowerment of Women in Urban Administration," in *Women's Development in India Problems and Prospects*, ed. Lalneihzovi (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2007), 124.

<sup>346</sup> Rao, *Woman in Indian Culture*, XV.



### 6.3 Experience Based Methodology for the Empowerment of Women

In order to develop a methodology for the empowerment of women, Feminist theology intends to bring about a renewal of theology. To develop a methodology for a feminist theology, which is consciously and definitely Christian and feminist at the same time is an important task. "The methodology of a biblically rooted feminist theology will share basic principles with traditional theology while destructive elements will be challenged."<sup>347</sup> At the same time, the concerns for women's liberation call for a creative transformation of methodology. It can enable theology to integrate insights from women's experience and feminist scholarship. Its constructive task is to reflect upon the whole of Christian faith and praxis from a feminist perspective. The important dimension of this constructive work is to take women's experience seriously and to make women's issues visible.<sup>348</sup> We cannot deny the experience of women and it is fundamental to understand feminist theology.<sup>349</sup> According to Barbara Brown Zikmund, "The ultimate aim of feminist consciousness is to make the experience and insights of women available to the entire world, not simply to know more about women in and of themselves."<sup>350</sup>

Feminist methodology starts with the experiences of women and it mainly takes two roles. The first one is "criticizing and deconstructing the male cultural paradigms." The second one is "formulating and constructing new perspectives in an attempt to change traditional androcentric values."<sup>351</sup> Cahill says that "Feminist theology is thoroughly particular and historical: its beginning point is the experience of women, and that experience is diverse."<sup>352</sup> The reason why major theological trends degraded women seems to be that for the most part, theology has been and is rooted in male experience.<sup>353</sup> At the same time, traditional theology has ignored the experience of women.<sup>354</sup> This observation raises the question, as to what is meant by the "experience of women?" Experience is a very general notion. Hence for the sake of

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<sup>347</sup> Kumari, "Theological Formation: A Feminist Critique," 371.

<sup>348</sup> Kumari, "Theological Formation: A Feminist Critique." 371-372.

<sup>349</sup> Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 97.

<sup>350</sup> Barbara Brown Zikmund, "Feminist Consciousness in Historical Perspective," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 27.

<sup>351</sup> Deifelt, "Feminist Methodology as a Critique and Renewal of Theology," 198.

<sup>352</sup> Cahill, "Feminist Ethics, Differences and Common Ground: A Catholic Perspective," 184.

<sup>353</sup> Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *The Journal of Religion* 40 (1960): 100.

<sup>354</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Towards a Liberating and Liberated Theology: Women Theologians and Feminist Theology in the USA," *Concilium* 115 (1978): 28.



intelligibility, it may be better to speak of patterns of experience, such as biological, psychological, dramatic, aesthetic, artistic, practical, social, intellectual and mystical.<sup>355</sup>

This methodology gives due importance to the life experiences of women. In many ways, women's experiences are marked by discrimination, insults to their dignity, and violence. Even though these experiences vary from country to country and according to women's social strata, it is, obvious that violence against women is the motive for seeking a different theology. The contribution of feminist theology to the themes of theology, ethics and the Church should be seen primarily in terms of what that theology has done to overcome violence against women.<sup>356</sup>

Experience defines one's perception of God, oneself, others and nature. It starts with the particularity of female experience and thus challenges the neutrally universalistic formulations presented by androcentric theology. We have already seen that in the patriarchal theology, the male experience is normative and he is representative of humanity. "The female is seen as subordinate and auxiliary to the male."<sup>357</sup> Experience is neither neutral nor global but is particular and thus women's experience differs according to race, class, education, country of birth, religion etc. Feminist theology now gives much attention to difference and diversity in women's experience.<sup>358</sup> Because women do not share the same experiences and there is no homogenous group called "women," it is necessary to avoid generalisations and insist that particularity be acknowledged.<sup>359</sup>

One of the self-critiques of the feminist movement is that the notion of experience, at least in the written material comes primarily from a white, middle-class, first-world perspective. Speaking as an Afro-American woman, Jacquelyn Grant criticizes the feminist movement because the issues addressed are not always pertinent to non-white and poor women. She proposes a womanist theology that starts from the experience of

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<sup>355</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, "Difference as a Category in Critical Theologies for the Liberation of Women," *Concilium* 1 (1996): 144.

<sup>356</sup> Sabine Plonz, "Feminist Theology and Overcoming Violence," *Theology Digest* 53 (2006): 25. Phyllis Zagano, "The Question of Governance and Ministry for Women," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 348-367.

<sup>357</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Future of Feminist Theology in the Academy," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (1985): 704.

<sup>358</sup> Rakoczy, *In Her Name*, 18. See also, Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1980), 11.

<sup>359</sup> Deifelt, "Feminist Methodology as a Critique and Renewal of Theology." 200.



black women.<sup>360</sup> In the same way Delores Williams also challenged the use of white middle-class women's experience as the starting point of feminist theological reflection. The key concept of Delores is more on survival than on liberation. She says that the African-American women and the black community trying to survive in today's world. She further explains the similarities between Hagar's story and the story of African American women. God's response to Hagar's story in the Old Testament is not liberation rather He participates Hagar's and her Child's survival on two occasions.<sup>361</sup> Feminist theologians agree that women's experience must be the centre of theological reflection. Renuka Singh says that we need to learn through women's "experiential awareness rather than merely through conceptualisations, which convert everything into quantifiable, static data. In observing the lives of women, it becomes apparent that the qualitative dimension is integral to the experience of women. They correlate women's experience with other sources of theology."<sup>362</sup>

Christian feminism renders immense contribution to the theological reflection. Their sincere attempt to make theology credible to women needs to be taken positively. Experience is a key term in feminists' reconstruction. It is a basic source in theological reflection. But this has been heavily criticized. Women's experience is seen as subjective and distant from the objective source of truth.<sup>363</sup> Women's experience is very difficult to define. Experience may be defined as the "fabric of life as it is lived."<sup>364</sup> But women's lives have been shaped according to the standards and norms set by men. "[...] women have not shaped or even known their experience. What they have known is the false consciousness created by male ideology."<sup>365</sup> When we speak about women's experience, we need to recognise the two poles that emerge within women's understanding of experience. Women's feminist experience denotes women's reflection upon their lives as oppressed and that it needs liberation.<sup>366</sup>

Since Indian society is pluralistic with its multifaceted cultural and religious diversity, an integral theological approach to women's issues must be pluralistic in its approach.

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<sup>360</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 195-222.

<sup>361</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 5-6.

<sup>362</sup> Renuka Singh, *The Womb of the Mind: A Sociological Exploration of the Status Experience of Women in Delhi*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1990), 1.

<sup>363</sup> Manohar, *Feminist Critique and Reconstruction*, 42.

<sup>364</sup> "Introduction" in *Womenspirit Rising*, 6.

<sup>365</sup> "Introduction" in *Womenspirit Rising*, 6.

<sup>366</sup> Manohar, *Feminist Critique and Reconstruction*, 43.



As Ursula King holds, such an approach should include and express the voices, experiences and approaches of many different women in different situations and societies. It need not be a systematically developed body of received knowledge handed down in traditional institutions of learning. Rather, the emphasis falls on “doing theology.” For it means, “suffering and seeking, listening and speaking, voicing and questioning, encountering and sharing, responding and being responsible for action.”<sup>367</sup>

An integral analysis is needed to have a comprehensive understanding of the oppression of women in India. Women’s experiences need to be submitted to a careful economic-political, personal-social, religio-cultural analysis. This will help one to notice the interconnectedness of oppressive factors at work in women’s experiences and their root causes.<sup>368</sup> When we speak about the experience of women in India, they have the experience of oppression, discrimination and exploitation in their daily life situations. Their experience leads them to confront the situations of patriarchy, sexism and androcentrism. So women’s experience is valuable and it gives them an insight to criticize and reconstruct tradition.

#### **6.4 Community Based Theology for the Empowerment of Women**

We argue that a theology ought to be born out of a community where men and women enjoy equality and freedom. We propose this kind of theology in the context of a society where women experience non-freedom, a subordinate position, and discrimination. For this purpose, men and women need to come together, listen to one another, understand the problem and work together for the liberation of both genders. Women cannot experience liberation without the simultaneous liberation of men from the patriarchal values and attitudes.<sup>369</sup> In the effort of empowerment, women and men should join hands together. In this process, there is complementarity and not contradiction with men.<sup>370</sup> Here it is worth noting the words of Gustavo Gutierrez that spell out clearly the interconnectedness between humans - “[t]here is no such thing as individual, personal salvation. Our fates, our lives, and the meaning of our lives are intimately linked. I can no longer perceive and value my own life as having meaning simply through personal gains, success, and possessions. Rather, my life has its value

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<sup>367</sup> Ursula King, "Introduction," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, ed. Ursula King (New York: SPCK, 1994), 4.

<sup>368</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," 814.

<sup>369</sup> Shalini, "Liberation of Women Some Indian Issues," 814.

<sup>370</sup> Prasanna Kumari, "Women's Studies: Insight into the Challenge of Women Power," in *A Reader in Feminist Theology*, ed. Prasanna Kumari (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, 1993), 159.



in relation to others' lives."<sup>371</sup> It is also important to note the argument of Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan who claim: "[f]eminism is not about making the world woman-centred, but about bringing the world into balance, offering a world out of age-old dualism and discrimination to achieve inclusion and mutuality."<sup>372</sup>

In this community-based theology, we propose a new mode of relationship based on the principle of mutuality. It is neither a hierarchical model that diminishes the other group nor an 'equality' defined by a ruling norm drawn from the dominant group, but rather a mutuality that affirms both man and woman. Ruether also stresses this point and clarifies that "women cannot affirm themselves as created in the image of God and as subjects of full humanity in a way that diminishes male humanity."<sup>373</sup> Feminist theology should not isolate the male members of the community or the society from its fold. Gispert Sauch's view on this thought is inspiring as well. He states as follows:

The women's theology movement must be studied and seen not just as corrective to a history of almost exclusive male theology and a protest against the subordination of women in so many contemporary societies. It must also be seen as an integral dimension of the wholesome Christian understanding of reality as it is. In other words, a Christian anthropology will not be authentically Christian or theological if it does not fully integrate the insights and valid claims of the feminist movement. And we shall not understand God or Christ or the Church, unless our anthropology is wholesome and integral.<sup>374</sup>

We argue that male and female are two sides of the same creative principle and both are two ways of being human and called to develop their full humanhood. Both man and woman are equal but each is different, there is neither superior nor inferior. Both of them are called to reciprocity and mutuality and to work together as partners. Both can be rational and emotional, gentle and strong, affectionate and loving. Both are created in the divine image of relationality and communion. Therefore, both should exercise power and relationship with sensitivity and purposefulness.<sup>375</sup>

## 6.5 Spiritually Oriented Theology for the Empowerment of Women

The empowerment of women in India must give space for the spirituality of women. There is a profound understanding of spirituality and prayer akin to the Asian soul.

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<sup>371</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Cardidad Inda and Eagleson, Revised edition (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 31.

<sup>372</sup> Isherwood and McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 92.

<sup>373</sup> Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation," 116.

<sup>374</sup> G. Gispert Sauch, "Meditation on the Bank of Yamuna," *Jeevadhara* 17 (1987): 75.

<sup>375</sup> Philomena D'Souza, "Birthing of a Spirituality from Women's Perspective," in *Concerns of Women: An Indian Theological Response*, ed. Evelyn Monteiro and Kochurani Abraham (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2005), 171.



Spirituality and life-style must be sensitive to the religious and cultural heritage of the people. In this regard, "spirituality for Asian women must be an Emmanuel experience, a God-with-women experience."<sup>376</sup> This implies exploring women's unique experience of God in the realities of life and discovering unique relationship with the divine.<sup>377</sup> In *Mulieris Dignitatem* we read that the dignity of women corresponds to her union with God.<sup>378</sup>

Here it is important to take note of the context of oppression in which the spirituality and theology from women's perspective began to be articulated. A long period of discrimination, exclusion and exploitation wounded the women's psyche. Women face a common pattern of violence in almost all parts of India beyond all divisions and barriers. Their identity is derived from the male. They are both 'silent or silenced,' and 'easy targets of physical and sexual assaults.' They are also invisible in decision-making processes at home, in religious institutions and in political circles.<sup>379</sup> Therefore, there is the need for a spiritual source of power and strength in the midst of powerlessness and survival has been at the heart of women's effort to struggle for justice and violence-free lives. Because of this, a transformative spirituality and theology slowly began to be articulated, as women started to reflect on their experiences both personal and social, as well as on their common struggle against their diverse forms of oppression.<sup>380</sup> Spirituality has often been a source of strength and support for women who are facing sufferings due to manifold restrictions and distortions that they are subjected to.<sup>381</sup>

In order to liberate and empower women from the oppressive patriarchal system in India, serious theological reflection about these oppressive experiences is needed. "The western way of reflection is more oriented to a systematic analysis and critique of events and is not suited to the Asian mentality. Asian theological reflection needs to be suited to the rhythm of an Asian psychology. The Asian woman needs time to reflect in silence in order to become aware and in turn enlightened."<sup>382</sup> As John Paul

<sup>376</sup> Monteiro and Gutzler, eds., *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering of the Voices of the Silenced*. XXII.

<sup>377</sup> Monteiro and Gutzler, eds., *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering of the Voices of the Silenced*. XXII.

<sup>378</sup> John Paul II, "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," 5.

<sup>379</sup> D'Souza, "Birthing of a Spirituality from Women's Perspective," 185.

<sup>380</sup> D'Souza, "Birthing of a Spirituality from Women's Perspective," 185.

<sup>381</sup> Deepti Priya Mehrotra, "Bridges between Spirituality and the Women's Movement in India," *Vidyajyoti* 60 (1996): 508.

<sup>382</sup> Hee, "A Method of Theological Reflection for Empowerment: An Eco-Feminist Perspective According to Asian Religious and Cultural Values," 324.



II writes in *Ecclesia in Asia*, “the people of Asia take pride in their religious and cultural values, such as love of silence and contemplation, simplicity, harmony, and non-violence [...] They hold dear the values of respect for life, compassion for all beings, closeness to nature.”<sup>383</sup> All of this indicates an innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul, which is the core around which a growing sense of ‘being Asian’ is built. This ‘being Asian’ is best discovered and affirmed, not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony.<sup>384</sup>

Schneiders stresses that Christian spirituality is essentially Trinitarian, Christocentric and ecclesial.”<sup>385</sup> For Christian women, these central themes of the Christian tradition must be interpreted in ways which nourish their faith and not increase alienation. The symbols for God, Church and Christ are pathways to the sacred and must “make present authentic characteristics of the sacred for women.”<sup>386</sup> In a spiritually oriented theology, women perceive life in terms of relationships especially in terms of relationship with others. It is from this ‘traditional asset’ that women have begun to weave a network of relationships and alliances that can transform the dominant or subordinate hierarchical paradigm into a relationship of interconnectedness, interdependence and mutuality. Women’s emerging spirituality is, therefore, not just a vertical relationship with God, but an integral one. It is shaped not only by prayer, but especially by relational experience. In fact, spirituality can be rightly summed up as harmonious circles of relationship with God, who dwells deep within, with oneself, with those around us and with the entire creation.<sup>387</sup> Here it is important to notice Mananzan’s articulation of spirituality:

It is holistic rather than dualistic. It is risk rather than security. It is a spirituality that is joyful rather than austere, active rather than passive, expansive rather than limiting. It celebrates more than it fasts; it let go more than holds back. It is an Easter rather than Good Friday spirituality. It is vibrant, liberating and colourful.<sup>388</sup>

This spiritually-oriented theology of women in a religious and cultural pluralistic context of India, we may have to think about the emphasis of interreligious dialogue.

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<sup>383</sup> Kroeger and Phan, *The Future of the Asian Churches: The Asian Synod Ecclesia in Asia*, 6c.

<sup>384</sup> Kroeger and Phan, *The Future of the Asian Churches: The Asian Synod Ecclesia in Asia*, 6d.

<sup>385</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, "Feminist Spirituality: Christian Alternative or Alternative to Christianity?," in *Women's Spirituality: Resource for Christian Development*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 31.

<sup>386</sup> Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 182.

<sup>387</sup> D'Souza, "Birthing of a Spirituality from Women's Perspective." 174.

<sup>388</sup> Mary John Mananzan, "Redefining Religious Commitment in the Philippine Context," in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 112.



Women from different faith communities are increasingly getting in touch with each other to share their experiences of oppression under the patriarchal structures of their religions and develop collaborative strategies of resistance and empowerment. They are also in dialogue with each other to share their visions of liberation, trying to work out together a new praxis for personal and social transformation. It aims at not only an academic method which envisages how religions are studied, but also it embraces a new social and religious vision which affects what religion is and how religions are lived and practiced.<sup>389</sup> The lively debate of interreligious dialogue helps to draw on theological and spiritual resources from different religious traditions. Amongst feminist theologians, it is particularly those from the non-Western world, especially from Asia, who are more open to reflect on the challenge of religious pluralism.<sup>390</sup> This spiritually-oriented theology includes respect for otherness, equality, mutuality, interdependence and nurturance. Hence, it is a spirituality that does not divide people into endless categories: by sex, age, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, height, weight, class, caste, religion and physical ability. It draws larger circles to include those at the margins.<sup>391</sup> Therefore, we suggest this all-embracing spirituality for the empowerment of Indian women.

## **7. Education and Empowerment of Women**

One of the important factors determinative of the empowerment of women is education. It would play the most crucial role in empowering women.<sup>392</sup> To have a better future for women both in the society and in the Church in India, their education is of vital importance. Lack of education and training among women in the past centuries has been to a great extent responsible for the decline in their social status. If we go back to the discussions we have had in the first chapter, we get a clear picture of the effects of the lack of education among women in the past centuries.

Education liberates women from ignorance and enhances their self-esteem. At the same time, it enables them to choose their own way and look after their families in a better way. Therefore, empowerment of women is directly linked with education.<sup>393</sup> Educational empowerment implies equipping women with knowledge and information. Education is the agent of basic change in the status of women. Education helps women to empower themselves with employment. An educated woman need

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<sup>389</sup> Ursula King, "Gender and Interreligious Dialogue," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 44 (2007): 55.

<sup>390</sup> King, "Gender and Interreligious Dialogue," 61.

<sup>391</sup> D'Souza, "Birthing of a Spirituality from Women's Perspective," 173.

<sup>392</sup> Rao, "Empowerment of Women: Emerging Media Trends," 27.

<sup>393</sup> Singh, "Empowerment of Women in Urban Administration," 130.



not be confined to the house. She can get involved in employment and widen her horizon. There is a direct link between education, employment and social status enjoyed by a woman in society. According to Selma Pinto, "[e]ducation holds the key to opening the doors of parity for women. It needs to be such that it seeks to empower and liberate women."<sup>394</sup> Education has been identified as the major instrument for raising the status of women. It is a key factor in creating awareness about injustice and discrimination, of unequal distribution of power between sexes and above all, in bringing about a much needed social change. Education would involve attitudinal change regarding the status of women. However, educating women alone is not enough to improve the situation of women. The education of women with a definite vision and purpose is an important means for their empowerment. Maria Mies' hints at reasons for the distraction of education to women:

Concerning the goals and purpose of women's education two divergent views have emerged in the course of its development. The one can be summarized as a demand for equality, including equal opportunities for women. The other conception, which came up later, stresses the need of the development of human resources in the development process. In the actual education policy of India constant effort was made to harmonise these two conflicting tendencies, but sometime the one, sometimes the other had the upper hand.<sup>395</sup>

Education plays a vital role also in shaping the destiny of women especially in rural areas. In fact, the inequality and exploitation imposed on women have to be seen in the social context of a society where large sections of the population, male and female, adults and children suffer under the oppression of the exploitative system. It is not easy to eliminate the inequalities of women alone. With men and women working together, the gap between the rich and poor, the high and the low castes can be reduced, which paves the way for an egalitarian society. With education, not only equality between man and woman will be fostered but also the traditional notions of higher class and caste considerations, are likely to disappear.<sup>396</sup> Relevant and quality education prepares the community to participate itself and decide on various issues of development.<sup>397</sup> Education helps also to decrease the inequality between man and woman. In fact, the crucial link between widespread education and social justice relates to gender equality.

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<sup>394</sup> Selma Maria Pinto, "Homes Could Be Havens: Confronting Wife Battering," *Vidyajyoti* 67 (2003): 62.

<sup>395</sup> Maria Mies, *Indian Women and Patriarchy* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1975), 131-132.

<sup>396</sup> H. C. Upadhyay, *Status of Women in India*, (New Delhi: Anumol Publications, 1991), 7.

<sup>397</sup> Nair, "Women Development and Policy: Changing Feminist Perspectives in India," 448.



According to Vasanthi Devi, one of the important issues in the present day education is the gender question. The rise in enrolment of women in higher education in India is impressive. But India failed in formulating an education that would empower women and in turn would ensure justice, equality and continuous growth.<sup>398</sup> Vasanthi rightly points out that education has failed to enhance and empower women because even the educated women are falling prey to a lot of domestic violence and dowry deaths. In this context, critical education is necessary. The students should not be mere passive recipients of knowledge. They have an active role in constructing knowledge. For example in the women studies courses, students ought to have a living experience of the living conditions of women. These experiences ought to include the injustices they suffer, the kind of violence they face, the utter destitution and deprivation that many of them live with, their daily life-struggles etc.<sup>399</sup> That is the way they can understand the reality, gain insights, and thereby evaluate those realities critically. Wilfred supports this idea and says that in India, what is needed is awareness-raising among women which would lead them to critical thinking. This does not seem to happen with formal education.<sup>400</sup>

Educational institutions, moreover, should be serious and dedicated supporters and defenders of women's rights and empowerment. The issue of the basic inequality between men and women, the oppression and violence suffered by women as well as the valuable contribution made by women at home and in society should be standard areas for discussion and study in educational institutions.<sup>401</sup> The deep foundations of inequality of the sexes are built in the minds of the men and women through a socialisation process which continues to be extremely powerful. The best way to challenge this system is through educational strategy of imparting knowledge that can transform individuals, institutions, relationships and ultimately the whole of society.<sup>402</sup>

The central and state governments have recently initiated efforts to bridge the gap between the educational levels of men and women and to increase literacy overall. For example, the national Literacy Mission has been successful in a number of districts in India. In areas where this organization has implemented programmes, literacy level

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<sup>398</sup> Vasanthi Devi, "Higher Education and Women Opening a Window to Reality," *Jeevadhara* 33 (2003): 60-61.

<sup>399</sup> Devi, "Higher Education and Women Opening a Window to Reality," 67.

<sup>400</sup> Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: At the Dawn of the Millennium*, 174-175.

<sup>401</sup> Gnana Patrick, "Religious Nationalism Makes Its Way to Higher Education: A Secular Critique," *Jeevadhara* 33 (2003): 22.

<sup>402</sup> Kumari, "Women's Studies: Insight into the Challenge of Women Power," 159.



has increased significantly, especially among women.<sup>403</sup> India needs to use education as basic agent for change in the social status of women. Women studies should be promoted as part of various courses, and educational institutions should be encouraged to take up active programmes to further women's development. Major emphasis should be laid on women's participation in vocational, technical and professional education in different levels.

Woman's empowerment starts at home. Parents and teachers have to conscientize children about gender equality. Husbands are to be conscientized so that they give freedom to women for involvement in feminist movement. In the context of the devaluation to women's life caused mainly due to lack or even absence of education as seen in the first chapter, we recommend that mothers should be educated about the value of life and the dignity and worth of human life. We create a society should welcome to the female children and protect their life. All those who are involved in the formation of conscience have to spread awareness regarding women oppression.

## Conclusion

This chapter was a culmination of our attempt to formulate theological prospects for the empowerment of Indian women. Our attention in this chapter was to develop a theology for the empowerment of women, especially in the Indian context. For this as a first step, we clarified the different meanings of the word empowerment in its diverse contexts. Then we discussed on the restoration of the dignity of women on the basis of a deeper understanding of the anthropological and theological roots of the dignity of women in *Mulieris Dignitatem* and in the light of the discussion we had in the previous chapters. In view of the implications of being in the image of God, we further discussed the dignity of women and on how it has to be enhanced for the empowerment of women. Those who deny the dignity of women are also denying God himself/herself or God's image in her. When we really respect the dignity of women, it means freeing women from situations of abuse, violence, constraint and control and also recognising, affirming and appreciating them for what they are and what they do.

We suggested a life-affirming theology for the empowerment of Indian women on the basis of *Mulieris Dignitatem*. The role of women as mother is held in highest honour in the Indian religions and cultures. We noted that the ancient lawgiver Manu and Pope John Paul II, both were highly appreciative of the role of women as mothers. Nevertheless, it was observed that the concept of motherhood in *Manu Smriti* and the

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<sup>403</sup> Geeta Tiwari, *Role of Women in Family* (New Delhi: Sumit Enterprises, 2006), 184.



laws therein were restrictive and was the cause of the inequality of women in India. Pope John Paul II sees motherhood as the primary vocation of women and he has defended the equality and rights of women in the family and society. The Pope also sees the parental roles of father and mother as mutual and reciprocal. Many feminist theologians have criticised Pope's idea of motherhood; they assert that women should not be defined by this single reality of motherhood alone. The Pope also insists that women's genius does not restrict her only to motherhood, but he says that the specific gift of woman is rooted in motherhood. Our argument is that Pope's view of motherhood does not prevent her from entering into public functions.

Subsequently we discussed the mission of the Church towards the empowerment of women. The Church has the responsibility to continue the mission of Jesus. The Church in India has a great role in liberating women from their oppressive status. In this section, we also discussed the empowerment of women through Christian women's organisation and the contribution of Catholic Bishops' Conference towards the empowerment of women. Here we found that the Christian women's organisations were and are actively involved in the empowerment of women in the Church and society through various activities. The Catholic Bishop's Conference of India also was involved in the cause of women in many ways. The establishment of the CBCI women's commission is an important step in the field of the empowerment of women. This commission has been contributing towards the empowerment of women through various programmes. Another important development in this field was the CBCI Conference for the empowerment of women in the Church and society. The 28<sup>th</sup> general body meeting of the CBCI held in Jamshedpur discussed this theme and this was an important landmark in the history of the Church in India.

In the last part of this section, we further elaborated that in view of the empowerment of women, the Indian Church needs a liberative evangelisation. First, we tried to demonstrate Jesus' evangelising mission for the empowerment of women. Here we suggested the evangelising mission of Jesus as a model for the Church today. Then we made it clear that in the particular context of India, evangelisation has to address the issue of cultural anthropology, which often undervalued the role of women. To empower women in India without disclosing the injustices of the tradition and culture, we argue would be fruitless. Implementation of Christian principles through evangelisation can contribute towards the realisation of Christian anthropology. Realising the Christian principle that men and women are equal in dignity, we suggest that this equality must be reflected in the life of the Church. So the major thrust of evangelisation in India must be directed towards respecting the dignity of women.



In the second part of the chapter, we discussed feminist theology as a means for the empowerment of Indian women. Here we mainly discussed some of the hermeneutical principles of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and proposed the criteria for the empowerment of women. First, we discussed the hermeneutics of suspicion, which is concerned with the distorted ways in which woman's presence, and practices are constructed. Thereafter, we suggested a second criterion; the hermeneutics of remembering and reconstruction. Here we saw that Fiorenza's Wisdom Sophia movement is an alternative for kyriarchal structures. Agreeing with Fiorenza we suggested a shift from kyriarchal frame of reference to that of the Sophia discipleship of equals. This Wisdom Sophia can be used as a tool to reconstruct the present day Indian society by reconstructing its oppressive structures. Then we affirmed the need to give due space to women's memory, both collective and individual. In the Indian context, many women have got unpleasant memories of their life due to patriarchal oppression and the exclusion they have faced. Such memories are to be accorded due place while doing theology. Subsequently we recognised the fact that some of the content of the Bible and other religious scriptures are highly patriarchal, and that they require a reading of them from women's perspective. There is the widespread criticism among feminist theologians against the exclusive use of the male image of God and its influence on the denigration of the human dignity of women. We made a detailed discussion on the feminine images of the Divine and our argument is that God can be addressed as both father and mother knowing fully well that the masculine and feminine aspects of God are beyond language and gender.

Focusing on the theme empowerment of women, we have suggested some theological prospects for the empowerment of women in India. First, we spoke of the need for the transformation of androcentric theology into inclusive theology. The classical dualistic principle identified rationality with men and emotions with women. So man is considered as superior to woman. This creates discrimination, exploitation and oppression of women in the Church and society. Our argument against the dualistic pattern of thinking in theology and philosophy is that it is a cause of the oppression of women. Therefore, we suggest an all-embracing theology that calls for a shift from dualistic model to inclusive model. Then we argued that the superiority of man and subordination of woman is a cultural construct and therefore it can be deconstructed.

Furthermore, we see that there is the need to recover and reconstruct history from women's perspective for the empowerment of women. Our argument is against the exclusion of women from the mainstream of history and literature in patriarchal theology. We affirmed that women were highly recognised and that they actively participated in the early Church. Therefore, emphasis should be given to the recovery



of lost or deliberately forgotten traditions of women's leadership and writing. We also observed the need to reconstruct history from the point of view of traditional Indian society. We observed that traditional theology has ignored the experience of women. So we argued that feminist methodology should give due importance to the life experience of women. This experience is different according to the circumstances. Feminist theology gives much attention to the difference and diversity of women's experience. Then we affirmed that the empowerment of women in India must give space for the spirituality of women. This implies exploring women's unique experience of God in realities of life and discovering this unique relationship with the divine. This spirituality has a harmonious circle of relationship with God, with others and with the entire creation. Then we argued that given the cultural and religious pluralistic context of India, emphasis should be given to interreligious dialogue. In the last part of this section, we proposed education as a means for the empowerment of women. The education of women with a definite vision is an important means for the empowerment of women in India. However, educating women alone would not lead to their empowerment, so we discussed different aspects of education. We argued that gender education should be given to both men and women and the society as a whole in order to remove inequalities and oppression faced by the women.



## GENERAL CONCLUSION

Our aim in this dissertation was to formulate a relevant theology of women empowerment in the contemporary Catholic Church and society in India with special reference to *Mulieris Dignitatem*. At the final phase of our work, we sketch an overview of this dissertation and the major conclusions we have derived from our study.

### 1. An Overview of the Dissertation

We developed this study in three chapters. The first chapter was devoted to the theology of women empowerment in context. As a preliminary step of our study, in the first section of this chapter we articulated the context for the emergence of Third World feminist theology. We analysed the Asian, the Latin American and the African contexts. This led us to identify Third World feminist theology as a theology of struggle and hope. The theological reflection of Third World feminist theology has emerged as a response to their suffering. It was discovered that women's experience of poverty, oppression and suffering are the starting point of Third World feminist theology.

The second part of the first chapter was an analysis of women in Indian society; it investigated the five major areas of women's concern, namely, social, economic, educational, political, and religious. Majority of the Indian women belong to the oppressed and the exploited segments of the society. The contemporary Indian society is patriarchal in character. For many centuries, women in India had been subordinated to men and were oppressed through various means of patriarchally structured society. Indian family structure is mainly based on the patriarchal system of domination, which is disreputable for the subordination of women. We noticed that violence against women is very severe in the family and society. After describing the manifold expressions of the social degradation of women, we concluded that dowry system is one of the main causes for the degradation of women. In describing the economic degradation faced by women, we noticed that the Indian society has largely failed to recognise the economic value represented by women.

We noted that, often, women were denied of equal opportunity in education and the reasons for this denial of equal opportunity are mostly cultural and social. The position of women in political field has always been marginal and we noticed that women are ignored in the decision-making process and in legislative bodies. Subsequently we examined the influence of the patriarchal notion of the social structure advocated by the major religions and how it tends to subordinate women. We noted that through the use of patriarchal language and a selective interpretation of



scriptures, myths, rituals and other practices, religions tend to authenticate and sustain the subordinate status of women.

The second chapter of this work was a detailed study of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II, on the Dignity and Vocation of women. We began with the context of the publication of this Letter. In this chapter, we mainly discussed the anthropological and theological dimensions of the dignity of women. The Apostolic Letter devotes considerable space (MD 6, 7, 8) for discussing the theme of equality between the male and the female with a profound study of Gn 1:26-27; 2:7; 18-25. We do not think that there is hardly any hint of superiority of men or inferiority of women in the biblical texts we have considered. The theological dimension of the dignity of women in *Mulieris Dignitatem* mainly concentrates on Gn 3:16. From an exegetical study of Gn 3:16, we concluded that the subjection of woman to man is the result of human sin and not intended by God. The relationship between man and woman was intended by God to be a mutual and complementary relationship of love and respect; a relationship in which neither one dominates the other.

We devoted a major section of this chapter to study Pope John Paul II's vision of motherhood. We noticed that motherhood as women's physical and spiritual vocation is a predominant theme in Pope John Paul II's thought and this is a great challenge in this modern world. We agreed that women's role as mother has a special value in the family. However, it should not restrict her entry into public functions. After discussing the positive and negative impacts of motherhood, we suggested that the liberative facets of the motherhood of Mary the mother of God is more relevant in the Third World countries especially in India. We identified that the idealisation of motherhood has a negative impact in the lives of women. This document brings beautifully Jesus' openness to women; Jesus includes them in every area of ministry. Presenting Jesus as the promoter of the dignity of women, Pope John Paul II shows Jesus' mission with women as a challenge and inspiration to contemporary Church and society.

In the last part of this chapter, we discussed the symbolic dimension of the great mystery, i.e., the comparison of man's love for a woman to Christ's love for the Church. Pope John Paul II's interpretation of the Ephesians 5: 21-32 makes it clear that in the relationship between a husband and a wife the subjection is not one-sided but mutual. But our study revealed that until recently papal teachings emphasised wife's duty of obedience to the husband. Pope John Paul II rejected the long-standing teaching on the headship of men in marriage; and, this is an innovation. Nevertheless, here we made a critical observation on the Pope's explanation of Eucharist as a



sacrament of the bridegroom and the bride. We also discussed the Catholic teachings on the ordination of women. The arguments against the ordination of women are from tradition, scripture and natural resemblance. Against the arguments of scripture and tradition we discovered that historical studies show that early Church did include women in leadership roles. The study confirmed that the Church has condemned the subordination of women in the social world and denounced many forms of discrimination based on gender. We suggested that women's leadership must be promoted in the Church. Not only that we could not find any substantial reason why women should not be included as decision-makers, administrators, and executive members in the Church and in parish communities, with certain kind of equal power, freedom and authority, but also, on the contrary, we could raise theological arguments in favour of an equal distribution of powers and responsibilities.

In the third chapter, we examined some theological prospects and possible ways for the empowerment of Indian women. In the light of our study in the previous chapters, it became clear to us that women in India do not enjoy the dignity of being created in the image of God, equal to men. Given this conviction, we tried to analyse some major concerns for the empowerment of women. In the first part of the chapter, we gave a brief description on the theological reflection for women's empowerment and the means to restore women's dignity and power. Then we proposed a life-affirming theology for the empowerment of women. Here we discussed Pope John Paul II's vision of motherhood and its implications in the Indian context.

In the subsequent section, we examined the mission of the Church towards the empowerment of women. Here we discussed the approach of the Indian Church towards the empowerment of women. The Church in India today is involved in the cause of women in many ways. The Catholic Bishop's Conference of India discussed the theme of the empowerment of women in the Church and society in the 28<sup>th</sup> general assembly held in Jamshedpur in 2008. We analysed some of the measures suggested by the CBCI for the empowerment of women, in particular, measures to promote gender just culture. There is a great need for drawing up a Church policy for the empowerment of women. We suggest that in India, the Church herself has to take adequate measures to put forward the Christian message of equality of persons.

We further elaborated on the need for a liberative evangelisation for the Indian Church in view of the empowerment of women. We focused on elements such as an evangelising mission of Jesus, which leads to the empowerment of women; and an evangelisation in a context like India that addresses the issue of cultural anthropology, which often undervalued the role of women. The evangelising mission of the Church leads to a cultural transformation. Implementation of Christian principles through



evangelisation can contribute to the realisation of Christian anthropology. Realising the Christian principle that men and women are equal in dignity, we suggest that this equality must be reflected in the life of the Church. So one of the major thrusts of evangelisation in India must be directed to respect the dignity of women.

Then we analysed feminist theology as a means for the empowerment of Indian women. Here we mainly discussed some of the hermeneutical principles of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Firstly, we suggested a hermeneutics of suspicion for reading the scriptures from a feminist perspective. Secondly, we proposed hermeneutics of remembering and reconstruction. Here we suggested to give due space to the memory of women both collective and individual. In the Indian context, many women have unpleasant memories of their life due to patriarchal oppression and the exclusion they have faced. Such memories are to be accorded due place while doing theology. Fiorenza's critical reading of the kyriarchal structure of the society over and against the Sophia Wisdom movement can give a new rationale for the Indian society in terms of theologising women empowerment. This reminds us of Jesus' community in which there was 'discipleship of equals.' This vision gives way for the theologisation as a participatory process of both men and women. We confirmed that the Bible is written and quite often interpreted from the socio-cultural perspective of male authors, and has legitimised women's subordination in the Christian tradition. We suggested unearthing the liberative message of biblical tradition with a view of enhancing women's empowerment in the Church and society. We also suggested the need of re-reading the non Christian scriptures from a feminist perspective, because patriarchal system is well supported in the Hindu scriptures as well.

We confirmed that in scriptures and theological tradition, no support is found for the exclusive application of male images and names to God. But Christian tradition has used predominantly masculine images in its language about God. So we suggest reconstructing the masculine images of the biblical God. We argued that recovering the feminine images of God is important and embracing the feminine metaphors of God has significant implications in the Indian context. In this connection, we noticed Fiorenza's specific way of writing God as G\*d and theology as the\*logy. This indicates the brokenness and inadequacy of human language to name the divine. Then we suggested that God can be addressed both as Father and Mother knowing fully well that the masculine and feminine aspects of God are beyond language and gender.

In the last part of this chapter, we made an attempt to suggest some of the theological prospects for the empowerment of women in India. First, transformation of androcentric theology to inclusive theology: In the classical dualistic theology man is considered higher, superior, dominative and active and woman is considered lower,



inferior, subordinate and passive. This dualistic pattern of thinking creates discrimination, exploitation and oppression of women in the Church and society. Therefore, we suggested a theology which is inclusive, all-embracing and affirming the other. Second, to recover and reconstruct history from women's perspective: We acknowledge the need to read history from women's perspective, because the traditional historiography is male-oriented and exclusive of women. Third, an experience-based theology for the empowerment of women: This has been suggested because traditional theology ignored the experience of women. An integral analysis is needed to attain a comprehensive understanding of the oppression of women in India. Fourth, community-based theology for the empowerment of women: For this purpose, men and women come together, to listen to one another, to understand the problem and to work together for the liberation of both genders. Finally, a spiritually-oriented theology for the empowerment of women in India: In a spiritually-oriented theology, women perceive life in terms of relationships especially in terms of relationship with God and others. This can transform the dominant or subordinate hierarchical paradigm into a relationship of interconnectedness, independence and mutuality. This spiritually-oriented theology includes respect for otherness, equality, mutuality, interdependence and nurturance. We noticed that the education of women with a definite vision is an important means for the empowerment of women. To have a better future for women in both the Church and society their education is of vital importance.

## **2. Major Conclusions**

1. We emphasise the context or the experiences of women in the Third World as one of the sources for doing theology. Everyone who is engaged in serious theological endeavour has to take the context seriously. Third World feminist theologians are trying to formulate a theology from their context. The emphasis of Third World feminist theology is on doing theology from within the context of women's experience and of their struggle for liberation. Third World feminist theology is a theology of struggle and hope.

2. Majority of Indian women belong to the oppressed and exploited segments of the society. In our study, we noted that India continues to be a patriarchal society. The patriarchal nature of the Indian family and its hierarchical distribution of power, leads to the subordination of women. Liberation from the patriarchal culture is necessary for the empowerment of women in India to become a significant reality. In the matriarchal system that was prevalent in the ancient Indian society women enjoyed a very good position in the family and society. Nevertheless, we are not proposing the replacement of the patriarchal culture with the matriarchal one. We rather propose an



inclusive structure where both men and women enjoy freedom and where there is mutual co-operation.

3. The foundation of the dignity of every person is that they are created in the image and likeness of God. From a detailed discussion of the Yahwist and the Priestly account of creation, we arrived at the conclusion that there is no superiority of man or inferiority of woman in the creation narrative. The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* of Pope John Paul II emphatically establishes the equal dignity of man and woman in the creation. By examining the situation of women in India, we understand that the male world has constructed a culture, making the feminine world as functional and instrumental. If women have to have an enhanced position in India, it is necessary to go beyond an individualistic and male dominated anthropology. For the empowerment of women in India, we suggest to restore the dignity of women in the Church and society on the basis of the anthropological principle of *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

4. In the context of the diverse forms of oppression faced by women in India, the Church has the responsibility of continuing the mission of Jesus. To overcome the oppressed situation of women, the Church in India must become a prophetic voice. The evangelising mission of Jesus extended to the liberation of women, the oppressed section of society during his time. Jesus acted for liberating and empowering women from their oppressed social status. We suggested this evangelising mission of Jesus as a model for the Church today. So the major thrust of evangelisation in India must be directed towards the empowerment of women.

5. We identified that from the ancient times India upheld the ideal of motherhood. The role of mother is held in highest honour in Indian religions and culture. Pope John Paul II considers motherhood as the primary vocation of women and women's role as mothers as having a special value, but he does not limit women's place to the domestic sphere. We agreed that motherhood is an important vocation of women but we argued that women's vocation is not exclusively to motherhood. Motherhood and biological condition of women cannot be used as an argument to justify women's subordinate role. The recognition of the contribution of women in the family, society and the Church is important for their empowerment.

6. We suggested the need for an application of some of the feminist hermeneutical principles to the Indian context for the empowerment of women. They are hermeneutics of suspicion, hermeneutics of remembering and reconstruction, rereading of religious scriptures from a feminist perspective, and a critical evaluation of the exclusive use of the male images of God and its influence on the denigration of



the human dignity of women. Acceptance of feminine in the divine has a lot of contemporary relevance in Asian women's theology especially in Indian theology.

7. Theology towards the empowerment of women must presume a comprehensive approach to the reality of women. We recognize that women are victims of domination and exploitation in religion, culture and society. For constructing a theology, we must critically evaluate the traditions that contribute to the oppression of women. We tried to reflect the socio-cultural measures to deal with the oppression of women. We identified that culture has been a very strong determinant factor in the oppression of women in India. The oppression of women is to be understood as a result of many cultural, religious and traditional factors. To empower women in India without disclosing the injustices in the tradition and culture is fruitless. So the Christian response to the emancipation of women should give due reverence to the culture and at the same time challenge the distortions of culture. We suggest that evangelisation should lead to the transformation of one's basic attitudes. Culture should provide equal dignity and freedom for all, both man and woman.

8. The third chapter discussed the theological prospects for the empowerment of women in India. Our study confirmed that theology should pay special attention to the voice of women, who constitute half of the Indian population. We found that the dualistic pattern of thinking in theology and philosophy are the cause of the oppression of women. The root cause of this discrimination is the identification of rationality and mind with man and emotions and body with woman. Influenced by this Greek dualistic philosophy, Christian theological anthropology concluded that the body must be controlled by the mind, so should men control women. Based on this perception, the role of leadership is meant for men. We suggested a shift from the dualistic model of theology to an inclusive theology for the empowerment of women.

9. We identified that the superiority of men and subordination of women is a cultural and religious construct and therefore it has to be deconstructed. This study confirmed that women are excluded from the mainstream history and literature. Therefore, we argued for the need to read history from women's perspective. We suggest the need to question the exclusion of women from history and religious leadership. There were women disciples during the earthly ministry of Jesus. Women were highly recognised and they had active participation in the early Church. Several women were in positions of leadership in the early Church. In the patristic period, their role was restricted; they were turned to be the victims of misogyny. Therefore, we suggest that emphasis be paid to the recovery of lost or forgotten traditions of women's leadership and writing and that the egalitarian Jesus movement including male and



female followers of Christ be revived and reconstructed. We also suggest the need to reconstruct history from the point of view of traditional Indian society.

10. We noticed that traditional theology has been rooted in male experience ignoring the experience of women. We suggested giving attention to difference and diversity of women's experience because in the patriarchal theology male experience is normative. Women in India experience oppression, discrimination and exploitation in their life situations. Their experience leads them to confront the situations of patriarchy, sexism and androcentrism. Therefore, women's experience is valuable and it gives them an insight to criticize and reconstruct tradition.

Writing this dissertation, we became convinced that a community-based theology is important for the empowerment of women. We saw that women cannot experience liberation without the simultaneous liberation of men from their patriarchal standards and attitudes. For the empowerment of women, we suggested complementarity and mutuality rather than contradiction and competition with men.