

# Birthing a New Vision



The  
Empowerment  
of Women  
Religious  
in India

Streevani Newsletter

March 2011

## ***Editorial....***

Let me begin by giving you an analogy of cooking rice. How do we know the rice in the pot is cooked and ready to be removed from fire? We pick a spoonful of rice and press them gently between the fingers. If it's soft and pasty, we conclude the entire pot is cooked and we are absolutely right. Many men and women in India happily apply the rice- pot analogy to the emancipation of women. We pick a few influential, educated, and high profile Indian or foreign women and quickly conclude that all women are likewise - empowered, free, great! There is nothing wrong in having some legitimate pride in half the population of a nation. My difficulty is only with the naive conclusions we draw. A second even more dangerous conclusion is the retreating complacency that says: 'we have done enough as far as women's empowerment is concerned!'

This Issue of Birthing a New Vision deals with two main issues: Education and Employment for Women. "Arbeit Macht Frei" literally translated as "Work Makes Free" was inscribed on the gate to Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Today a visitor to the camp would shudder at the diabolic reasoning behind that inscription and the atrocities that occurred there. However, that work gives a person identity, freedom, confidence and dignity cannot be negated. Despite the psychological jargon "it is the being that matters, not the doing", I'm an avid believer in the theology of work and its capacity to authenticate a person. Hasn't it been our experience that whenever we needed to get something done, we approached the 'doer' rather than the 'be'-er'? One of the main reasons why the majority of Indian women face such an appalling degree of abuse and subjugation is her continued economic dependence on male members of the family.

But we are acutely aware that a profitable job is but a distant dream without the prerequisite of adequate training; hence the need for Education.

This year's International Women's Day had for its theme. Women: Equal Access to Education, Training, Science and Technology : Pathway to Decent Work. Put simply, it reads: Decent Education – Decent Work. The key to women's empowerment is education. The axiom 'knowledge is power' cannot be truer for the Indian woman

who strives to break free from the shackles of illiteracy and ignorance which keep her in constant subjugation. Many of our women are oppressed, suppressed and fettered for the sole reason they are not 'earning'. We need only to look at our families or the immediate surroundings to see the difference between women who have a regular salaried job and those who do household chores. Economic self sufficiency is not the sole answer to the problems women face, but it will certainly go a great length in defining a woman's sense of herself. In other words, give our women education and work; they will take care of the emancipation.

Birthing a New Vision March 2011 contains reflections of theologians, experiences and narratives of activists and reports and accounts of grassroots members on equal educational and employment opportunities for women. The views and ideas expressed in here reflect a vast spectrum of national and international debates on women and empowerment. The titles may appear repetitive; but each examines the intrinsic relationship between education and employment from different perspectives and capacities. Some give alarming statistics, others present accurate analysis and adequate response. Some pose questions while others set us thinking; some provoke while others appeal.

But all of them carry the dreams and hopes of women for justice and fairness in one of the most powerful sectors of the Indian society- the economy.



## Education and Employment!

At this juncture it strikes me as important that the logo of Streevani is the nib of a fountain pen. The nib symbolizes the power of knowledge that comes with education. Additionally, the nib is shaped after a female figure. This is highly symbolic as it depicts the emerging Indian woman emerging as she does through the power of the pen- the power of letters.

Allow me to pay special tribute to Sr. Helen Saldanha SSps who gave Streevani direction and leadership for the past four years. As she moves to Delhi to serve the Indian Church on a wider scale as the Secretary of the CBCI Women's Commission, we wish her God's blessings and a lot of Luck. Streevani remains ever grateful to Sr. Helen for her services.



We welcome and congratulate Sr.

Julie George SSps who will assume responsibility as the Director of Streevani from April 2011.



Sr. Mary John SSps



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## **Where Women Stand Today**

**Dr. Usha Bambawale**

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has no doubt delivered the dizzying heights reached by women in many countries. In 1947 when India got independence the average age of death of an Indian was 26 years

and that of females 19 years. This has no doubt changed drastically as the average age at death has reached 62 years, and the average life expectancy of women is 62+3 years. Yet the same number of women dies during child birth and the same number of Indian women suffers from anemia. Indian women have won gold medals in Asian Games, medals in the Olympics, are new commercial pilots serving in the military and are recognized leaders in government and industry but not in their own homes. From time to time reports on the status of women give us an idea about the oppression and suppression of women in the world. The commendable record of advancement is marred due to domestic violence, sexual abuse, gender inequality, discrepancy especially in rural areas and injustice.

In spite of these disadvantages women throughout the world today live longer, healthier lives, are better educated, enjoy more job opportunities and earn higher salaries than ever before. As women's lives get better, their families get better education, better nourishment and become healthier and productive. Yet progress has not always been even, some parts of the world have even scattered reversals. A great majority of women can neither read nor write and majority are poor, accounting for more than 70% of the world's 1.4 billion people living in poverty.

Despite having made great strides in women's rights and improving their lives, girls and women find that their access to education and employment is limited solely because of their gender. Even today in

some parts of the world, including India, it is not very uncommon to destroy the female fetus. Millions of women live in societies that adhere strictly to the centuries- old social and religious laws. In most of the Islamic countries girls and women have limited access to school and economic opportunities.

## **Women and Education**

The Indian Constitution calls for eight years of compulsory education for girls and boys aged 6 to 14. In some states primary school enrolment for girls is 100% while in others it barely reaches 60%. Dropout rates are much higher for girls than boys. Girls are often kept at home to perform house hold chores and for care of younger siblings, especially in the rural areas and among the urban poor. Of those who go to middle school, another 20% do not finish, and of the remaining girls who enter the secondary school only 10% complete school and pass the board exams. To help boost school attendance, some regions have opened courtyard schools just for girls and have started using elderly women to escort the girls to and from school and also to take care of the younger siblings.

Despite the high dropout rates girls' school enrolments have increased considerably . Correspondingly literacy rates among women have also risen. In 1993 in India women's literacy rate had become 40% of the total population whereas it was 65% for men. There is tremendous regional difference. In Rajasthan it is merely 20% while in Kerala it is 86%. In higher education women make up 35% of students in medical and health- related programme, but 95% women students are found in nursing programmes. About 25% are in commercial and business administration classes and 10-12% in law colleges.

Although women throughout the world have made tremendous progress in many areas, advance in literacy and education are perhaps the most striking. While literacy rates around the globe are climbing for both men and women, they are rising faster for women. Since 1960 the number of literate women in the world has grown more than 600 million. Education is probably the single most

important factor in improving a woman's life. The more schooling she has, the brighter her future, and freedom for herself and her family. Yet despite the long-term benefits of educating girls, parents in many parts of the world prefer to invest in educating their sons. They prefer to keep their daughters home to help with household chores and care for younger siblings. The poor echelons of society argue that sending a daughter to school is a waste of money as the advantages of the education received is of use to her in-laws and not her parents.

## **Women's Employment**

Throughout history women have been labourers. Throughout the centuries, it was the household that remained the centre of production. Changes occurred when a great transformation took place after the industrial revolution. We had moved out of the home to factories. Men and children above ten years were the main workers in these factories. Women remained at home to look after home chores and the younger children. Some women who did work in factories did so mostly in lower paying light industries, while men laboured in higher paying, heavier industries.

As standards of living for many families increased with industrialization, the more educated, young single women were attracted to white collared jobs which the educated men had deserted for better paying jobs in the industry. An emerging middle class of women started joining the labour force in greater numbers around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The World War 1 saw scores of women even married ones with children fill in positions of men who had joined the army. When the soldiers returned, large numbers among women continued with their jobs.

Women' participation in the labour force has continued to rise everywhere in the world. As their educational opportunities have improved, women have made great strides in all areas of employment. Growing numbers are entering previously male-dominated professions such as the armed forces. In 1995 women made up 36% of the total global work force. In India the percentage



of women in the work force was 25%. The average work force in Asia was 33% and here too India had a women's share in the work force at 25%. Mostly women in the age group of 15 to 64 years are in the work force and 31% women in India belong to this age group who are at work. China leads the Asian group as 80% of women in the 15 years-64 years of age group are at work. Rural women in India are more than twice as likely to work as their urban counterparts. With continuous rural-urban migration and widespread poverty, 3/4 of India's poor are women. Women's ability to work is often the only means of survival. Thus a large women force works as domestic help in the urban and as agricultural labourers in the unorganized sector.

The Indian Constitution supported by legislation, prohibits discrimination against women and endorses equal pay for equal work. In 1975 the India Government passed The Equal Remuneration Act. However, this law does not apply to agriculture- the area where most women are employed and the government has even legislated gender based pay scales with lower wages for female workers. A vast number of women who work outside the formal sector are not covered by labour laws and do not have job security or any benefits. It is estimated that women in India probably earn an average of about 50% of men's wages.

### **Areas of Employment**

A majority of working women in Rural Areas, approximately 80%, are employees in agriculture. The remaining 20% are employed in various service industries. In the Urban areas there is a large number of women in the domestic help, sales and clerical job yield. Rarely do they occupy high level positions. For every 100 male managers and administrators there are 3/4 women in position. Indian women fare somewhat better in the occupational group composed of technical and professional workers: 34/36 women for every 100 men.

One reason for this is that Indian women are poorly represented in the field of education. In most countries women predominate in the teaching profession. In India only 29% primary and 33% secondary school teachers are women. The proportion of female teachers in colleges and higher education is 21% and only 19% at the universities. This is indeed the greatest discrimination shown by the

recruiting authorities. At university convocations it has been observed that women students get the maximum number of gold medals and citations, yet only 2% to 3% find a job with the departments of the University.

Women have been allowed to enlist in the military but they are preferred in non-military jobs. The National Police Service has increased its female recruitment from 2% to 6 – 8% in recent years.

When trying to find out the reasons for few women employed in these services, what emerged was that women could not work with same intensity and dedication because of biological reasons, such as maternity leave and child care responsibility.

### **Employment and Poverty**

One of the most serious problems facing India is widespread poverty. Three quarters of India's poor live in extreme poverty. There are 8% to 10% adults and 20 % to 25% of all children who can be identified as belonging to India's poor. In poor households the women's ability to work is often the family's only means of survival. Women contribute larger shares of their earnings to support their families.

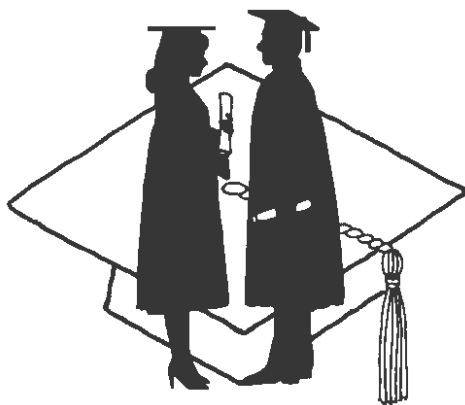
Government programmes to combat poverty have concentrated on moving more women into the workforce through massive adult literacy training projects. The *Shikhan Abhiyan* has taken into consideration child's education, with the hope that as adults this education would be useful.

One of the most successful NGO programmes has been the SEWA Bank. It is run by women for women and has enabled its customers to achieve economic independence by opening savings accounts for them and providing low interest loans.

In spite of being educated and working for a good wage, women face discrimination in the work place. Maternity leave and benefits are often denied to women especially when not covered by Employees State Insurance Plan. Dowry still remains an evil in the Marriage ceremony. It is often the major cause of accumulating debt among

the poor. In spite of the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, in India no marriage takes place without some form of dowry.

These evils seem to cut across the education women receive. It is hoped that with greater participation of women in decision making position women's status would improve. Women receiving equal access to education and training will prove their worth in years to come.



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*“I am firmly of opinion that India's salvation depends on the sacrifices and enlightenment of her women”. Mahatma Gandhi*

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## *I hear the WOMAN speak...*

Sr. Elizabeth Ello SSPS



On 8<sup>th</sup> March 2011, we celebrated the International Women's Day. The United Nations' suggested theme for this year is: ***Equal Access to Education, Training, Science and Technology: Pathway to Decent Work for Women.*** The theme highlights the significance of providing opportunities for women to have decent work. It also

brings into focus the rightful place of women in human society.

One of my favorite stories in the Gospel is that of the healing of the Syro-Phoenician Woman's daughter (Mk 7:24-30). In the story, the woman convinces Jesus to make her daughter well. Her courage to approach a Jew superior to her in gender, caste and religion and her determination to claim a blessing despite a seeming rebuke, reveal the portrait of a woman who listens and owns her inner wisdom and strength. In doing so, she asserts her place as an equal in the human community. Jesus affirms her place with the healing of her daughter.

The importance of the woman laying claim to her place in human community, can never be underestimated. Her unique contribution, I believe, stems from her inherent capacity to bear a child.

I can almost hear her say:


*I, a woman, shall speak as I listen to my core- there, where I am in touch with the wisdom that is reflected in the passing of the seasons and in the rhythm of life. I have an affinity to the whole of creation, seeing the birthing, the dying and rebirthing in my own body as my womb endeavors to provide a home to another human being. I know the demands of sustaining life and nurturing it to fullness, for my body bears the imprint of childbirth. It is my soothing breath that clears the furrowed brow of my newborn. I know the beating of the human heart because my child's heart was once connected to my own. I can grasp one's yearning to live fully, for I bear within my soul the first nine months' journey of the human life. I can sense the whimper of the frightened and the dejected. I feel the urgency to protect the defenseless and vulnerable.*

*Yet, how am I to be understood by a world that has fallen deaf to my voice? I hear a cacophony of sounds; their message is too alien for me. They speak of power to rule, control and even to destruct. I know one power - the power to nurture life.*

*I need to know the words they speak. I need to be heard and to share my message. I need to understand the systems that operate in this world, to develop the skills to navigate through these systems so that my message may not be lost. I need to remind humanity of the first voice they have heard, the one that speaks of assurance, of love and of life.*

I ask myself these questions: Should this gem remain hidden? Should her voice be silenced by ignorance? Should the beauty and nobility of her message be left unappreciated?

The Syro-Phoenician Woman's example continues to be a challenge to this day: "Count me as an equal partner in the shaping of our human story, in the healing of our wounded children and in the building of a better world for future generations."



# Jesus as Hostess

Fr. Subhash Anand SJ

(Extract from the article "The Inculturation of the Eucharistic Liturgy" by Fr. Subhash Anand SJ: originally published in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 57, (1993) PP. 269- 293).

In the New Testament we have only one text that explicitly speaks of the Early Christian practice of breaking bread together as the Lord's Supper (I Cor 11.23-24). This text takes us back to the night Jesus was betrayed and reminds us of the farewell meal he had with his disciples as reported by all the four Evangelists. But only the Synoptics give us an account of what has traditionally been considered to be the institution of the Eucharist. If we read the Greek text we notice a certain pattern in the use of words in these passages. The basic text is: "Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples...(Mt 26.26)" Thus four verbs are used:

The four verbs **'take', 'bless'/'thank', 'break' and 'give'** appear with a certain consistency in the various accounts of the many meals Jesus had with his disciples both before and after his resurrection. Reflecting on this phenomenon this is what J.D. Crossan has to say:

Verbs such as *'took', 'blessed', 'broke', 'gave'*, have therefore, profound symbolic connotations and may well stem from that inaugural open commensality itself. They indicate, first of all, a process of *equal sharing* whereby whatever food is there is distributed alike to all. But they also indicate something even more important. The first two verbs, *'took'* and *'blessed'*, and especially the second, are the actions of the master; the last two, *'broke'* and *'gave'*, and especially the second, are the actions of the servant. Jesus, as master and host, performs instead the role of servant, and all share the same food as equals. There is, however, one further step to be taken. Most of Jesus' followers would know about but seldom have experienced being served at table by slaves. The male

followers would think more experientially of females as preparers and servers of the family food. Jesus took on himself the role not only of servant but of female. Not only *servile* but *female hosting* is symbolized by those four verbs.

Three characteristics of Jesus stand out: a) His meal affirms the equality of all. b) He is more a servant than a master. c) He is more a hostess than a host. Any inculturation of the Eucharist must be the celebration of a community that affirms and lives by these attitudes of Jesus.

The Indian society witnesses different kinds of violence resulting from divisions based on caste, economic standing, differences of language and religion. Inculturation is not merely expressing the Christian faith in local cultural forms but also permeating and, wherever needed, healing local cultures and socio-economic structures. It is not without significance that the only explicit mention of the Lord's Supper is in the context of a community which experiences a division (*schisma*), not due to any doctrinal differences, but because the rich ignore and even humiliates the poor. Such a community cannot really participate in the Lord's Supper (I Cor 11.18-22). Hence a Church which is indifferent to social injustice or, and this is still worse, itself ruled by a caste mentality cannot really celebrate the Eucharist of Jesus. Hence the question of inculturating it does not arise. Harboursing a caste mentality is diametrically opposed to what the Eucharist symbolizes. In like manner, the Eucharist challenges us to work for the promotion of real understanding and cooperation among people even when they are divided by language and religion.

The Indian society is also afflicted by a deep-rooted feudal mentality. Even though some of us have a modern mind our heart continues to feel along feudalistic lines. This becomes evident if we analyze our political reality. This feudal mentality has also crept into the Church. Church leaders put on feudal colours and the faithful do not seem to mind it. This is more visible in those areas where the greater part of the laity are economically or socially backward. For John the Eucharist is fundamentally the symbolization of Jesus the humble servant. It is for this reason that he replaces the Synoptic

institution narrative with his account of the washing of the feet. We have seen how in the Church at Corinth some of the people had forgotten the real meaning of the Lord's Supper. It had already become for them some kind of ritual. John is aware of this tendency, and so he wants to remind us that the Lord's Supper is a call to be like Jesus. To do something in memory of Jesus, then, is not to repeat some ritual, but to serve with love and humility as he did. Hence the process of inculturation forces us to ask ourselves this question: Are we, especially those who lead the Eucharist, really servants of the people? Addressing his fellow bishops of Asia, this is what Cardinal Stephen Kim said: "Frequently during Mass we address the faithful as brothers, but are we truly brothers? Or do we appear as monarchs, kings or lords?"<sup>1</sup> The answer to this question is not easy. It calls for a critique not only of our personal life-style, but also the way we conceive church organization, administration, celebrations, and building. In all these do the people see us as disciples of Jesus who came to serve and not to be served?

The Indian Society is also characterized by a masculine dominance, which at times does not hesitate even to burn to death a helpless woman if that serves its selfish purpose. Different Feminist thinkers have taken up this issue, and we can feel its impact also in the Church, because the Church too is not free from the above-mentioned malaise. There is a strong relation between life and liturgy. A person who is given secondary importance in liturgy is given secondary importance also in life, because liturgy symbolizes and re-enforces life. I think the whole question of ordaining women needs to be examined again with an open mind. I say this not merely because I endorse all that is healthy in the present Feminist struggle, but also because a real understanding of the Eucharist and of inculturation requires it.

We have already noted that the words describing the meals Jesus shared with his friends symbolize not only servile but also feminine hosting. There is one instance where this feminine dimension acquires a further specification: Jesus is the mother who

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<sup>1</sup> S. KIM, "Reflections on Being a Bishop", *FABC Papers*, no. 35, p. 17.



provides for her children who return home tired and hungry after a whole night of work (Jn 21.4-14). Standing on the beach Jesus calls out to his disciples who are fishing not very far from the land: "Little children..." Here John has used *paidion*, the diminutive of *pais* (child). To me it makes a lot of sense, for this is how my own mother addresses me even today. I will have difficulty in remembering when she last addressed me by my name. The disciples were more or less the age of Jesus. Yet he calls them "little children" because for a mother that expression conveys the tender love she always has for her children, whatever be their age. The disciples come ashore and find their breakfast ready. Before she can serve the meal, the mother needs to cook it.

When we examine the Synoptic account of the multiplication of loaves also we can get some light as to who should lead the celebration of the Eucharist. The event is situated after the return of the apostles (*apostolos*, Mk 6.30; Lk 9.10) from their missionary journey. It is evening and the crowd listening to Jesus is hungry. Luke tells us that the "twelve" (*dodeka*, 9.12) request Jesus to send the people home, while Matthew and Mark say that this was done by the disciples (*mathetes*, Mt 14.15; Mk 6.35). However all the three Synoptics agree on this: the loaves were actually distributed by the disciples (*mathetes*, Mt 14.19; Lk 9.16; Mk 6.41). It will not be fair to suggest that these disciples were all men. Luke tells us that together with the "twelve" (*dodeka*) some women constantly followed Jesus and ministered unto him (8.1-3). Thus if after telling us that it was after the return of the apostles and at the request of the "twelve" that Jesus blesses and gives the loaves to the disciples to be distributed among the people, then Luke is saying that the apostles and the women helped Jesus in the meal blessed by him.

From the analysis of these two events it seems right to say that woman as celebrant of the Eucharist would only be natural. However, given the Jewish background of the first Christians,

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<sup>2</sup> J.D. CROSSAN, *The historical Jesus: The life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York, Harper and San Francisco, 1991), p. 395.

<sup>3</sup> R. de VAUX, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), pp 156.

<sup>4</sup> de VAUX, p. 384.

woman was pushed aside. This is very clear in the accounts of Jesus' resurrection. A careful reading shows that there is "an almost total discrepancy" in these texts.<sup>2</sup> Yet on one point there appears to be total agreement: Women are the first witnesses of the Risen Lord (Mt 28.1-10; Mk 19.9; Lk 24.1-10; Jn 20.1-18). It is they who go and proclaim the resurrection to the other disciples. But as it so often happens, these men either due to their foolishness or their arrogance or due to both, refused to believe those first witnesses just because they happened to be women (Mk 16.11; Lk 24.11). Subsequently when we have a list of the official witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, women are not even mentioned (I Cor 15.3-8). This is because in a legal process women and slaves could not appear as witnesses.<sup>3</sup> In like manner the Jewish Christians could not think of women as priests, because "no women ever held a place among the Israelite clergy."<sup>4</sup> The exclusion of women from presiding at the Eucharist is, thus, the result of accepting a cultural framework and not the consequence of sound theological reflection.

Those who oppose the ordination of women tell us that the president of the Eucharist represents Jesus, and as Jesus was a male, the president should also be a male. In as much as the Eucharist involves symbols, it is to be seen within the framework of inter-personal communication. When one person tries to communicate with another his sexuality does matter. But what matters much more is his cultural set-up. I do not know any claim made by Jesus which presupposes his maleness as such, but when he says that he is the good shepherd, the vine, the bread come down from heaven, then it is his Jewish background that is asserting itself. Were Jesus an Indian he would have said that he was the good cowherd, the banyan tree, the river come down from heaven. Or to put it differently, if the president of the Eucharist must only be a male because Jesus was a male, then, for greater reason he must only be a Jew because Jesus was a Jew.

Further, more important than a person's bodily structure is the way he understands his identity and gives expression to this

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<sup>5</sup> M. ZERWICK & M. GROSVENOR, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1981), pp. 61-62.

understanding. My body is given to me and as such it pre-exists my being as person. I become a person by the exercise of my freedom. When I understand and choose to be in a particular way and I express my choice I do so because of my freedom. There are two texts that throw light on Jesus' understanding of his own sexuality. He was a celibate, because he made himself a *eunuchos* for God's kingdom (Mt 19.12). A eunuch served a man who had a harem and was himself "usually castrated, hence... physically incapable of marriage."<sup>5</sup> Thus, in order to commit himself totally to his Father's kingdom, Jesus has renounced the affirmation of his sexuality by not marrying. In this way Jesus is also like the angels in heaven who do not marry (My 22.30). Marriage and, therefore, sexuality belong to our pilgrim state.<sup>6</sup> By his very way of life Jesus is announcing the fullness of the kingdom, when we will all overcome death and live for ever in the presence of God. Then sex and procreation will have no meaning. Thus in his own self-understanding Jesus sees himself as one who has transcended the need of being and functioning as a male. Hence it will be a discredit to this Jesus to say that because he was a male only males can represent him, because by going beyond his maleness he has made it possible for males, females and even for the real eunuchs to represent him.

The only New Testament text that explicitly talks about the priesthood of Jesus tells us that he is superior to all other priests because they were ordinary men and due to death could not continue in their priesthood, but Jesus is the Son who by his resurrection has overcome death (Heb 7.23-24). In the Eucharist the Church experiences the presence of her Risen Lord, who continues his priestly function even today (Heb 7.25). There are different ways of understanding Jesus' resurrection. For me, by his resurrection Jesus fully actualizes his humanness. To be human is to be male and female, and all of us have within ourselves, to some degree at least, the masculine and the feminine characteristics. But as our body gives expression to only one sexual dimension, we tend to be shaped by it and this is also re-enforced by the process of

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<sup>6</sup> See my "Human Sexuality: Some Theological Reflections", VJTR, 47 (1983), pp. 77-85.

socialization. I remember, for instance, as a child being told: "Boys do not cry!" To be fully human is to integrate the male and the female in a healthy balance. The full human existence is androgynous. Already before his resurrection Jesus reveals the feminine in him. Like the mother hen he wanted to gather together the people of Jerusalem (Mt 23.37). In the intimacy of the Last Supper he calls his disciples "Little children (*teknion*, Jn 13.33. This word is the diminutive of *teknon*, child). He describes his imminent passion and death using the image of a woman in travail (Jn 16.21). By his resurrection Jesus becomes fully human, fully male and female. He is the androgynous Lord, the *Ardhanarisvara*. The Eucharist is the celebration of this mystery. Any discrimination on the basis of sex will only impoverish our capacity to proclaim this mystery, the mystery of the wholeness of human life.

There are two more reasons why this discrimination must be avoided. The whole life and mission of Jesus is rooted in his experience of God as a loving father, as the Abba. It is this experience that makes Jesus reach out to all, irrespective of any distinctions. This is most powerfully brought out in the many meals he had with all kinds of people, because "Open commensality profoundly negates distinctions and hierarchies between female and male, poor and rich, gentile and Jew. It does so, indeed, at a level that would offend the ritual laws of any civilized society." By our discipleship of Jesus we have transcended the distinction between Jew and Greek, master and slave, male and female. We are all one in Jesus (Gal 3.28). Hence to deny ordination to women is a regression to our pre-Christian way of life and thinking.

The Eucharist and, for that matter, the whole liturgy give a very great importance to symbols. In fact it is the presence of symbols that makes our celebrations effective. The most effective symbols are rooted in our experience of life. Life necessarily implies a rhythmic repetition: morning and evening, day and night, summer and winter, etc. The liturgical cycle is an imitation of this rhythm of nature even when it celebrates the history of salvation. Woman feels within herself this rhythm of life. It is precisely only after this rhythm becomes part of her life can she bring forth life. Since she is so close to nature in its nurturing function she can sense the presence of new

life even when it is too tender to be noticed by others. No wonder all the four Evangelists present her as the first to witness the New Life. Her special sensitivity to life makes her also more sensitive to symbols. The Earth is the primary sacrament of God's presence, and woman who is so close to earth, is the primary symbol-discoverer and image-maker. Hence she is also the primary liturgist. Liturgy becomes effective when it expresses our faith which is more a matter of the heart than of the mind. It is in our mother-tongue, the language given to us by our mother, that we best express our heart. I have attended liturgies prepared by women, and I cannot but come to this conclusion: Liturgy dominated by men is more wordy, cerebral and studied; while liturgy shaped by women is more spontaneous, symbolic and affective.

In saying all this some may think that I am becoming poetical. I do not feel bad about it. On the contrary, I am convinced that authentic inculturation will make us realize that both liturgy and theology must primarily be poetry. Theology needs clear concepts and a good system of philosophy. But when theology is only this, we have a dead god and a lifeless Christianity. This happens for different reasons, but one very important explanation is precisely that woman is not given her due place in liturgy. This, I believe, has been the tragedy of the West. Only deep symbols and earthy (not earthly) poetry can prevent such a calamity. Liturgy and theology are intimately related in a vital circle. Only when woman gets her right place in the liturgy will she become fully a theologian, and then theology too will be more complete, more balanced, more holistic. Then theology will become more alive, and our liturgy will become more life-giving.



# Women & Education



Sr.Maria Goretti Amaladoss F.S.

On the occasion of International Women's Day I would like to express my views on the importance of Women being educated. Education is the great engine of personal development. Studies show that **when women are supported and empowered, all types of society benefit**. Past, present, future, for all times, women are the backbone of progress, the heart of the nation, the very breath of growth and development of individuals, community and society at large. The capacities of women are supposed to be greater and stronger, persevering and firm, and their sense of perception and intuition are quicker than those of the men.

"A Woman's Love and intuition often succeed where Man's logic and industry might fail". (Msgr. Francis Xavier Kroot MHM) Founder of the Congregation of Fatima Sisters.

"The best judge of whether or not a country is going to develop is its treatment of women. If it's educating its girls, if women have equal rights, that country is going to move forward. But if women are oppressed and abused and illiterate, then they're going to fall behind". (Barack Obama, *Ladies' Home Journal*, Sep. 2008).

Therefore, the level of education among women decides whether a country is to prosper or decline. Women's education in India has been one of the major issues of concern of the Government of India as well as the society at large. It is because today the educated women play a very significant role in the overall development and progress of the country. The women of India have proved in many ways that their sensibilities and leadership acumen are here to stay and pave the way for more women to make it to the top of the corporate ladder.

As people management practices in corporate India come of age, organizations today are displaying a propensity towards employing more women than men in their Human Resource Departments (HRD). After all, managing a large number of people, keeping them motivated and listening to their grievances are all part of the modern HR manager's job.

And it's a known fact that listening and empathizing come more naturally to women, from home managers to human resource managers, these top women in HR have proved that there is no one who can do it better.

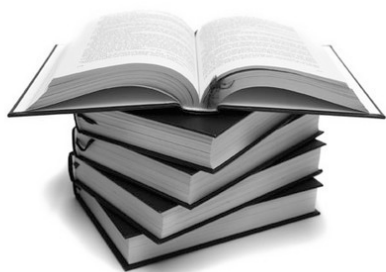
Women Empowerment is a global issue and discussions on women's political right are at the fore front of many formal and informal campaigns world wide. Literacy rate in India have risen sharply from 18.3% in 1951 to 64.8% in 2001 in which enrolment of women in education have also risen sharply- 7% to 54.16%. Despite the importance of women's education unfortunately only 39% of women are literate. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women.

Women hold a prominent position in the Indian society as well as all over the world. However, since the prehistoric times women were denied opportunities and had to suffer for the hegemonic masculine ideology. Women bear almost all responsibility for meeting basic needs of the family, yet are systematically denied the resources, information and freedom of action they need to fulfill this responsibility. The vast majority of the world's poor are women. Two-thirds of the world's illiterates are female. Of the millions of school age children not in school, the majority are girls. And today, HIV/AIDS is rapidly becoming a woman's disease. In several Southern African countries, more than three-quarters of all young people living with HIV are women. The current world food price crisis is having a severe impact on women. Around the world, millions of people eat two or three times a day, but a significant percentage of women eat only once. And, now, many women are denying themselves even that one meal to ensure that their children are fed. These women are already suffering the effects of severe malnutrition, which inevitably will be

their children's fate as well. The impact of this crisis will be with us for many years.

Thus, this unjustifiable oppression had resulted into a movement that fought to achieve equal status for women all over the world. Women Education in India is the consequence of such progress and this led to the tremendous improvement of women's condition throughout the world. Nevertheless eradication of female illiteracy is considered to be a major concern today. In the recent era, the Indian society has established a number of institutions for the educational development of women and girls. These educational institutions aim for immense help and are concerned with the development of women.

Real education should educate us out of self into something far finer-into a selflessness which links us with all humanity. Education, in its largest sense, is a thing of great scope and extent. It includes the whole process by which a human being is formed to be what she is, in habits, principles, and cultivation of every kind. Education increases her self esteem. When she joins her carrier she has a status in life. She is respected and recognized by the society. ■



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*"I have never let my schooling interfere with my education".*

~Mark Twain

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## *Women Cry in Wilderness*

# Practice Equality, Stop Preaching

Dr. James Kottoor

**T**he cry for equal opportunities for women reminds me at once of the famous speech: “Preaching equality and practising inequality” of the well-known writer, speaker and social activist, Sr. Joan Chittister OSB, at the first international Dublin Conference on Women's Ordination held in 2001, to which I happened to be an invitee.

In the same vein I would like to roar like a John Baptist in the desert to say: Give the female child equal opportunity at least to first enter this world of wonder, of light and sound. Stop selective guillotining of the female foetus in the dark dungeon of the mother's womb. Guillotine first this barbaric brutal male mindset. Otherwise we shall soon have a Garden of Eden with Adam wandering in vain all over to find a lady love to make a proposal. What will a God, who found it “not good for man to be alone”, do then?

### **Prophetic Voice**

When Catholics all over the world organised the first ever Women's Ordination World Wide (WWW) Sr. Joan happened to be the invited Star Speaker. But Vatican didn't want her prophetic voice thunder in Dublin. So a plan was hatched to deliver that order to her through her Prioress. Tired of the heat from Vatican for 3 months the Prioress wrote back: Sr. Joan “has lived her monastic life with faith and fidelity for fifty years” and she must be allowed to “make her own decision based on her sense of the Church”. I don't find her participation in WWW “a scandal as Vatican alleges” and therefore “I cannot be used by the Vatican to deliver an order of silencing.”

She went further to get 127 members of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, USA, sign a letter supporting St. Joan to speak. When the time came she spoke at Dublin Conference and the much dreaded

Damocles' sword (excommunication) failed to fall on her neck and the Irish Press celebrated the nun's triumph over her male rivals with roaring headlines.

This is a clear instance of the unequal way women are treated – like immature kids who can't think and decide for themselves and so have to be ordered around by all-knowing male leaders -- even in the Church which is supposed to set an example to follow for a male dominated world. Hence the world makes fun of the Church calling it a “Holy Father Church” to highlight that male domination is worse in the Church than in the world.

### **Which Jesus to Imitate?**

In this case it is the Prioress of Sr. Joan whom the fair sex, the world over should imitate. Literally she was setting an example of how one should imitate, not always the “sweet Jesus meek and mild” but “the rough Jesus tough and wild” telling without batting an eye to his own high priests: “Sabbath is for man, not man for Sabbath” and hurling much more painfully piercing epithets like “you brood of vipers, white washed sepulchres, ravenous wolves etc. etc.” Which man or woman would ever dare today to hurl such rebukes against any living high priest in any religion? Jesus did it. He needs you to do it today.

Can you imagine, the epitome of non-violence exploding like a terrorist's bomb to shower words sharper than shrapnel at his own priestly Lords? World of sisters, sacred and secular, therefore take note when and where to change tactics, if they are serious about getting their pound of flesh called “equal opportunities for women”, from their detractors who are determined not to part with them.

The only major achievement of the Vatican II was to make the church accept principles of collegiality and subsidiarity, advocated by Cardinal Suenens of Belgium. It made the Pope share his authority with bishops of the world. That process has to continue to include the priests and religious in the concept of the church, then the entire lay people, until the church is understood and accepted as

the fellowship of all believers in Jesus and finally all believers in any god and even unbelievers. Only then can we in all honesty say the prayer Jesus taught: "Our Father" (meaning Father of all humanity) and mean it. Every individual – man, woman and child – has to fight for it until he or she achieves it.

### **Jesus' Foot-washing Ministry**

That is the lesson Jesus taught us especially with his foot-washing ministry which took him beyond the confines of the lost sheep of Israel to embrace a whole world of "unholy heathens, Samaritans, the last, least and lost." To reach that ideal he had to run away when someone wanted to make him king. In utter contrast, many of his so called followers run after (not run away) to accept and revel in all kinds of imperial honours offered by a Constantine of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.



It is the biggest roadblock to a true following of Jesus. But like Jesus who on earth will ever say goodbye to position, possession or authority when they come in the guise of offices or titles like that of a Pope, Cardinal, Archbishop, Bishop, Monsignor, Most Rev., Rt. Rev., Chevalier, Mother General etc.? Where is room for Generals, one may ask, among the people of God? Kingdom of God can't be made up of such inequalities—of first class, second class and third class citizens. It has to be the prerogative only of those who run for the last place, not first.



### **Jesus and Women**

To be more specific, in the life of Jesus can we find any instance of inequality practiced in his dealings with women? He freely consorted with all sorts of women, even with shady characters of his times like Mary Magdalene who anointed his feet, the woman caught in adultery, the

woman at the well drawing water, the woman who touched his garment and got healed, the sisters of Lazarus whom he visited often, Veronica who wiped his face, the women who stood bravely at the foot of the cross, Mary who first spoke to the risen Lord and became the first preacher of the Good News.

In fact his public life of miracles had to be kick-started with the command of a woman, his mother asking the servants at Cana to take orders from him to change water into wine. Jesus' critics must have wanted to calumniate him even as a "womaniser". What else was meant when they called him a "friend of prostitutes and drunkards"?

### **Company of Jesus**

To bring about a healthy radical change in the Church towards half of humanity called the fair sex, what is needed is an organised movement to wipe out gender bias. When a Sr. Tisy Jose and group were sought to be silenced by male chauvinists in the *Indian Currents*, I suggested the formation of a "Company of Lovers of Jesus" (CLJ) with Mary Magdalene as the patron to withstand such onslaughts and to get the Hierarchy move towards a culture of equality.

It could be similar at least in name to the "Company of Jesus" (SJ) not to compete with it but to cooperate, emulate and excel. When it comes to excelling it was Mary Magdalene who excelled all the sleepy apostles at Easter. So if there is to be a "High Command" or "Politburo" in the Catholic Church it should be led by a lady of the CLJ. After all who presided over the Birth of the Church at Pentecost? That took place in the Cenacle presided over by Mary, not Peter. And don't be scared by the phrase "Politburo of communist party". Like the hen gathering the frightened chicks under her wings, the first communist party was organised by a Lady (Our Lady) in the Cenacle which produced the chick called the Church.

That community lived an egalitarian life during the apostolic times, practising the principle: "to each one according to his need and from each one according to his capacities". So there was no one

in need in their community which attracted outsiders to join them out of admiration. Prayer meetings and table fellowships were conducted in homes headed by the father or mother. We know of instances of lady deacons presiding over worship sessions. This church had to go underground into catacombs in Rome during the time of persecution until the time of Constantine who turned that community topsy-turvy giving it a hierarchical, pyramidal structure with imperial titles and worldly look, which continues to this day.

### **Back to Roots of Equality**

Now it should be the aim of the lovers of Jesus (CLJ) to take the church back to its historical roots of equality. To do that let all those who have leadership qualities in speaking, writing, organising activities for various target groups come forward to join the CLJ. One sole principle that should guide them individually and collectively would be to ask: "What would Jesus want me (or US) to do here and now?" and do it irrespective of consequences. News bulletin of *Streevani* called "Birthing a New Vision", Indian Currents or other accessible ones could be the forum to meet and exchange notes. Since we are in the internet age, let those who write give their e-mails if any, so that others can get in touch with that person to make CLJ a worldwide movement of women to wipe out all inequalities between men and women in every sphere of human activity. Conviction produces action, and action results. The question is to convince every member of the CLJ that it has a worthy cause to fight for. If the enlightened women, both religious and secular, are not going to be fired up to lead the way ahead, nobody else will.

**The writer now in Chicago, can be contacted  
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# THE ONUS IS ON HER

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her  
To save the family's *izzat*/honour  
So that proud heads can be held high.  
Even if she is molested, raped and even enslaved

He decides and desires,  
But the onus is on her.  
To pleasure and to entertain  
So that the good humour lingers on.  
Even if she's called the temptress, the prostitute.

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her,  
To clean, cook and to feed  
So that the family stays strong  
Even if she's underfed, anemic and malnourished

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her  
To give birth and to nurture  
So the *parivaar* continues  
Even if she's an economic burden, the *parāyadhan*

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her  
To impart faith and to pray along  
So that the young ones believe.  
Even if she's 'polluted' to be the priest who proclaims

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her  
To reduce the family size  
So that there's no population explosion

Even if she undergoes tubectomy or fatal abortions

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her  
To continue life after his death/suicide  
So that the family doesn't perish  
Even if as a widow she is inauspicious.

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her  
To bring in the wealth through dowry  
So that they can live in comfort  
Even if her life is endangered, easy fuel to the flames.

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her  
To make a home, to be family  
So that he can be the bread winner  
Even if she becomes the educated unemployed.

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her  
To sell and to promote brands  
So that there is growth and profit  
Even if she's called the item girl, the sex bomb.

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her  
To sweat and to struggle in a project  
So that the outcome has her perfect touch  
Even if she's always the nuisance, the perennial underdog

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her  
To save and to tuck away  
So that the lean times are comfortable

Even if she's named the consumerist  
who shops until she drops.

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her  
To pass on the knowledge  
So that there's enough wisdom to survive  
Even if she's had no education – illiterate and ignorant

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her...  
Since the onus is on her  
Why can't she desire and decide in the first place?

He decides and desires  
But the onus is on her  
To challenge this unequal alliance:  
'Let's become equal as partners  
Re-visioning and rebuilding our common future.

It's only common sense (or better business sense?)  
'Coz my Grandma told me:  
"The left-over is always the best  
The left-over was part of the Whole"  
Becoming Part of the Whole is Partnership.

Why can't we dream, desire and decide together  
As we touch and heal a hurting world  
Our magic together can make the world a better place  
Where he and she are partners and co-equals?

She is able. Let her decide.  
She has desires. Let her dream on.  
She has wisdom. Let her proclaim.  
She has vision. Let her lead.

Anonymous



# **Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India**

## **(Reflections on a Recent CBCI Document)**

Fr. Kurien Kunnumpuram, SJ

On December 8, 2009, Catholic Bishops' Conference of India issued a document titled "Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India."<sup>1</sup> The 28<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the CBCI, held in Jamshedpur in February 2008, had called for the drafting of a Gender Policy. After many consultations among bishops, priests and lay people, the final draft of the Policy was submitted to the CBCI Standing Committee, which approved it on September 23, 2009.

In this paper I shall first summarize the document and then make some reflections on it.

### **2. The Context**

Gender Policy has taken into account the situation of women in India while formulating the policy. The document is convinced that women, irrespective of their culture and race, face systematic and structural discrimination. It points out:

In most socio-cultural communities in India, women's human rights are limited by religious, cultural and traditional practices that are based on patriarchal norms. Issues of culture, religion, ethnic and other forms of identity have become highly politicised due to rising religious fundamentalism, that reinforces control over women, keeps them confined to roles that perpetuate their subordination and prevents them from full enjoyment of their human rights.<sup>2</sup>

Gender Policy notes with satisfaction that the Constitution of India provides for the protection of human rights, gender equality and affirmative action and empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. And the State has enacted many laws to prevent the violation of the rights of women. In spite of all this flagrant violations of the dignity and rights of women are quite rampant.

These are some concrete manifestations of the discrimination against women. The sex ratio of India is 933 women for 1000 men (2001 census). This is the result of the widespread practice of female foeticide and infanticide. Generally speaking, women's work is not recognized nor valued. They work for longer hours and are paid less than men for the same work. In the organized work force there are fewer women than men. More women than men are unemployed. "One indicator of the same is that only 41% females above the age of 15 are economically active vis-à-vis 86% males".<sup>3</sup> Gender policy highlights the fact that there are very few women in governance and decision-making positions:

Only 9% of Parliament seats, less than 6% in Cabinet positions, less than 4% of seats in High Courts and the Supreme Court and less than 3% of administrative and managerial positions are with women. Women do get elected to positions of power in the grassroots governance institutions due largely to reservations, but are mostly proxy candidates, and the husbands, sons or other elite men actually continue to perform as leaders.<sup>4</sup>

Recent developments in the country in the areas of economics, politics and culture have adversely affected the interests of women. The process of globalization and faulty developmental models adopted by India have increased the incidence of discrimination against women. "Women bear the burnt of the structural adjustment policies and are burdened with the responsibility of meeting the essential needs of the family in the face increasing economic hardship and displacement from their lands and communities".<sup>5</sup> Besides, "Globalization which is market-centred and profit-driven, leads to the further exploitation of women as cheap labour resulting in their increasing pauperisation and increased human trafficking where again women become the most affected".<sup>6</sup>

The prevailing culture of patriarchy is a culture of domination, marginalization and exclusion which embody ideas, beliefs, values, traditions and ideologies that prefer males. "Through dominating social structures men own, control and manage financial, intellectual and ideological resources as well as the labour, fertility and sexuality of women, and thus perpetuate gender discrimination. Such a culture

produces stereotyped notions of how a woman or a man should behave (in words and actions), whereby they themselves become transmitters of the above value system. Consequently, women also become both victims and victimizers”.<sup>7</sup>

Further, we are witnessing the growth of fundamentalism and communalism which reinforce the subjugation of women to men, destroy women's movements by dividing women along religious lines and intensify violence against women. Besides, atrocities against women, domestic violence, rape and dowry-related violence are on the increase. As the document points out, “Violence against women is the most universal and unpunished crime of all”.<sup>8</sup>

It is in this context the CBCI has chosen to issue a Gender Policy for the Church of India.

### **3. Theological Perspectives**

Gender Policy makes it quite clear that “the Christian understanding of gender equality is based on the biblical account of creation”.<sup>9</sup> As Genesis 1: 26-27 indicates, both women and men are created in the image and likeness of God, “expressing a unity of the two in a common humanity”.

The life and teaching of Jesus advanced the cause of women. Gender Policy quotes with approval the words of John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD):

In all of Jesus' teaching, as well as in His behaviour, one can find nothing which reflects the discrimination against women so prevalent in His day. On the contrary, His words and works always express the honour and respect due to women...(His) 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” (MD 13), and a “consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women” (MD 15).

It is obvious that in a male-dominated society where women were counted for nothing “Jesus heals them physically, emotionally and spiritually”.<sup>10</sup> Jesus' attitude to and relationship with women is to be seen in the context of his Messianic mission.

In this connection Gender Policy cites a passage from the Statement of the 28<sup>th</sup> CBCI Plenary Assembly held in 2008:

In a culture where women were seen only in relation to men, Christ not only liberated them from their oppressive traditions but upheld their dignity, e.g., the Samaritan Woman (Jn 4:7-42) and Mary and Martha (Jn 11:20-40). He used the life-experiences of women as a paradigm of God's love and Christian discipleship for all: woman and the lost coin, woman and the dough and woman at birth pangs. Even at his death and burial, women were among those who bore testimony. Jesus entrusted to women that they announce the Good News of Resurrection to his disciples.<sup>11</sup>

The early Church seems to have preserved Jesus' vision. In his letter to the Galatians Paul declares: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). In the earliest Christian communities, there was genuine collaboration between men and women in the life and mission of the Church (Acts 16: 11-15; 40; Rom 16:1-2; 5-7, 12, 15; Col 4:15).

During the last fifty years the universal magisterium of the Church has sought to promote the dignity and rights of women. Thus Pope John XXIII in his *Pacem in Terris* (1963) states: "Since women are becoming more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and public life" (PT 41) He also declares: "Man and woman are called to work in a relationship of equality towards the attainment of universal common good (Ibid.)

The Second Vatican Council took a firm stand against injustice. It condemned "every type of discrimination...whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion" and declared it to be contrary to God's intent (GS 29). In the Closing Day Message to women, the Council declared:

As you know, the Church is proud to have glorified and liberated woman, and in the course of the centuries, in diversity of characters, to have brought into relief her basic equality with man. But the hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman

acquires in the world an influence, an effect, and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women impregnated with the spirit of the gospel can do much to aid humankind in not falling.

You women have always had as your lot the protection of the home, the love of beginnings, and an understanding of cradles. You are present in the mystery of a life beginning. You offer consolation in departure and death. Our technology runs the risk of being inhuman. Reconcile men with life and above all, we beseech you, watch carefully over the future of our race. Hold back the hand of man who, in a moment of folly, might attempt to destroy human civilization.<sup>12</sup>

Pope John Paul II was a great promoter of the cause of women. In his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* he defended the equality of men and women. He based his teaching on the creation account in Genesis. Referring to Gen 1:27, the Pope declared: "This concise passage contains the fundamental anthropological truths: man is the highpoint of the whole order of creation in the visible world; the human race, which takes its origin from the calling into existence of man and woman, crowns the whole work of creation; both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God's image (MD 6).

John Paul II finds support for his position in the life and message of Jesus Christ:

It is universally admitted—even by people with a critical attitude towards the Christian message—that in the eyes of his contemporaries Christ became a promoter of women's true dignity and of the vocation corresponding to this dignity. (MD 2)

In his Letter to Women, written in 1995 on the occasion of the Fourth World Conference on Women, he stated:

When it comes to setting women free from every kind of exploitation and domination, the Gospel contains an ever relevant message which goes back to the attitude of Jesus Christ himself. Transcending the established norms of his own culture,

Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness.<sup>13</sup>

In this letter the Pope calls for a campaign for the promotion of women:

But I am convinced that the secret of making speedy progress in achieving full respect for women and their identity involves more than simply the condemnation of discrimination and injustices, necessary though this may be. Such respect must first and foremost be won through an effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women, concentrating on all areas of women's life and beginning with a universal recognition of the dignity of women. Our ability to recognize this dignity, in spite of historical conditioning, comes from the use of reason itself, which is able to understand the law of God written in the heart of every human being. More than anything else, the word of God enables us to grasp clearly the ultimate anthropological basis of the dignity of women, making it evident as a part of God's plan for humanity.<sup>14</sup>

#### **4. Vision and Objectives**

Gender Policy has projected the vision of a just and egalitarian society on earth:

Flowing from the vision of Jesus Christ, the Champion of the *anawim*, the oppressed, the exploited and the marginalized of society, and inspired by His love that makes no distinction between male and female, the Catholic Church in India is committed to building a world where all human persons are free to grow in the image and likeness of God.<sup>15</sup>

Gender Policy has spelt out some objectives the attainment of which will lead to the realization of the vision it has projected.<sup>16</sup> These objectives are of two kinds: Some of them are meant to bring about an attitudinal change while others aim at structural transformation. To the former belong the following:

1. To deepen among women and men a sense of their dignity as human beings created in the image and likeness of God.

2. To facilitate change in the mindsets of women and men so that they relate to each other with respect and dignity.
3. To stimulate reflection in the Church on its mission to form a discipleship of equals.
4. To make space for a spirituality that is shaped by women's life experiences and creative expression.

The following aim at structural change:

1. To contribute to the process of creating a gender just Church and society with a special focus on the marginalized.
2. To ensure fulfilment of the human rights of women especially of the marginalized groups.
3. To ensure that all Church ministries, policies, structures, procedures and programmes are gender sensitive and gender balanced.
4. To make provisions for adequate human and material resources to achieve the objectives.

## 5. Guiding Principles

Gender Policy has enunciated nine guiding principles.<sup>17</sup> It has made it clear that the CBCI Gender Policy is rooted in these principles. Besides, they provide direction for its implementation.

1. **Equality and dignity of all human persons form the basis of a just and humane society.** Women's issues impact society at large. Recognition of their equality as well as the equality of all the marginalized sections of society is necessary for the creation of a just and egalitarian society.
2. **Human persons have the innate potential to transform themselves and their environment.** Such transformation calls for a cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral change as well as a change in the patterns of our relating to one another.
3. **Women's empowerment is central to achieving gender equality.** Empowerment will enable women to become aware of unequal power relations, gain control over their lives and resources as well as to acquire greater strength to overcome

inequality in their homes, workplaces, community, Church and society, Real social transformation will take place only when women themselves take a lead in the fight for the cause of their dignity and rightful place in the Church and society.

4. **Gender equality is a cross-cutting issue that needs to be integrated in all the Commissions, Church bodies, institutions, policies and programmes of the Church.** Education, social development, health care, doctrine, liturgy, ecumenism, Interreligious dialogue and work for justice and peace either promote or hinder the achievement of gender equality.
5. **The experiences and wisdom of women are conducive for the growth and transformation of the Church and society.** Women have unique experiences and deep insights which can enrich deliberations in the Church and society and must be allowed to influence the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes.
6. **Achieving gender equality requires the recognition that every policy, programme and project affects women and men differently.** Hence it is necessary to design and implement action plans in such way that it results in equality of outcome and impact.
7. **Gender just structures are imperative to facilitate the quality of opportunities and justice for all.** This calls for the establishment in the Church and society structures which are women inclusive, participatory, accountable, transparent and sustainable. It is important that women participate in the decision-making processes in Church and society and that their contribution be formally acknowledged. In order to promote equality in the family and in the areas of economics, politics and religion women's skills and needs must be seriously taken into account.
8. **Gender equality can only be achieved through equal partnership among and between women and men.** A partnership of equals is possible only when there is a clear recognition of women's equal right to articulate their needs



and interests as well as their vision of the Church and society and to shape the decisions that affect their lives.

**9. Networking and collaboration are crucial processes to mobilize collective action for social transformation.**

There are many women's organizations and other groups and associations working for the liberation and empowerment of women and the ushering in of a just and egalitarian society. We need to network and collaborate with them.

## **6. Implementation**

Gender Policy lays great stress on implementation. The document has chosen eight areas of major concern: 1. Women and Family; 2. Women and Education; 3. Women and Health; 4. Women and Social Involvement; 5. Special Areas of Concern; 6. Within the Church; 7. Research, Documentation and 8. Dissemination of Information. Of these three areas have some sub-sections. Thus Women and Social Involvement is divided into six sections; Special Areas of Concern deal with five sub-sections; and Within the Church consists of four significant sections.<sup>18</sup> What is quite noteworthy about Gender Policy's approach to implementation is that it has systematically dealt with each of the areas of concern.

## **7. Reflections**

1. It is a bold step on the part of CBCI to issue the *Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India*. This is a well worked out document: It begins with a discussion of its theological foundation; it then goes on to the project the vision of a just and egalitarian society in the world; it has enumerated nine Guiding Principles which are quite revolutionary; and it has clearly spelt out the areas of implementation. All in all this has been a praiseworthy achievement.
2. The process through which the Gender Policy was formulated was quite admirable. There was widespread consultation not only among bishops and priests but also among lay people, both men and women. The views of experts in different fields were also sought. In many ways the Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India has been formulated by the Catholic Church of India.

3. I am pleasantly surprised to find in an official document of CBCI such expressions as “the culture of patriarchy”, “unequal power relations”, “the empowerment of women”, and “the discipleship of equals”. One usually comes across such phrases in the writings of feminist theologians.
4. It seems to me that the treatment of the theological foundation of Gender Policy is quite meagre. But then Gender Policy is perhaps not the place to develop a lengthy theological argument for gender equality.
5. I am quite disappointed that Gender Policy has nothing to say about the ordination of women to the priesthood. Here it is not a question of whether women should be allowed to preside over the liturgical celebrations of the community. But rather, whether women have a share in the decision-making power in the Church. If ever there is a question of unequal relations in the Church it is this. Some five thousand men – the pope and bishops – make all the major decisions in the Catholic Church.

By way of conclusion, I wish to point out that Gender Policy of the Catholic Church is a precious document. If this Policy is courageously and effectively implemented it will pave the way for the emergence of a new Church and a new society in this our dear land.

## Notes

1. CBCI Commission For Women: Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India, New Delhi, 2009.
2. Gender Policy, p. 2.
3. Ibid., p. 3.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 4.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 1.
10. Ibid., p. 6.
11. Statement of the 28<sup>th</sup> CBCI Plenary Assembly, n. 4, cited in Gender Policy, p. 6.
12. As reproduced in W.M. Abbot, The Documents of Vatican II, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1966, p. 733.
13. This Letter is available on the Internet.
14. Ibid.
15. Gender Policy, p. 11.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., pp. 11-13.
18. Ibid., pp. 14-38



# Equal Education, Equal Opportunity

**- Lida Jacob I.A.S. (Retd.)**

Commission for Right to Education Act, Kerala

**H**ow does one go about measuring equality or equal access to services that would result in a fair and equitable space for women in Indian society? For this, we need to look at the existing situation in terms of male/female ratio, maternal mortality, anemia among girls and women between 15 and 49 years, infant mortality, literacy levels, formal school education, work participation and incidence of violence against women especially domestic violence, rape trafficking, kidnapping etc. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) statistics show that India fares poorly on all these parameters. Although Kerala scores favorably on maternal and infant mortality, literacy and male/female sex ratio, it still has a long way to go before it can claim to be a gender-friendly state. The recent study on Global Gender Gap Index 2010 shows that India stands at a poor 112<sup>th</sup> position among 140 countries, with nations like Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia ranking much higher. Evidently, the statutory reservation for representation of women in the local self-government institutions have served to keep India at least at the 112<sup>th</sup> position, which is not really a good report for the country. As is well known, access to political power and due representation in decision-making bodies are still not within the reach of even the elected women representatives.

Clearly, there is a crying need to do justice to our women at least in this- the sixth decade of independent India. It is a universally accepted fact that education in a formal school for the girl-child is absolutely essential to enable her to become a confident woman who is capable of taking decisions that can further her own growth and development and that of her family and the community. Education also has a significant impact on the standard and level of work

participation which in turn leads to alleviation of poverty and enhancement of the status of women in society. However today in India, barring a couple of states, women who constitute 50% of the population, are still seen as passive recipients of the fruits of development rather than as active engines of growth and development in all spheres of human activity. It is heartening that the Government of India as also the majority of state governments, are now focusing on basic areas like improvement of health parameters of women and children, ensuring 100% enrolment and retention of girls in formal schools, providing supplementary nutrition for women children and adolescent girls, poverty alleviation programmes especially through the national employment guarantee schemes, improved housing and sanitation measures, among others. The flagship programme that calls for universalization of elementary education, the *Sarva Siksha Abhiyan* and the affirmation of the right of children to free and compulsory education through the landmark legislation in 2009 on Right to Education, are gradually showing tangible results by bringing in large numbers of children, especially girls from marginalized and disadvantaged groups into the ambit of elementary education. As a nation with the largest number of out-of-school children and the majority being girls, it is imperative that India moves speedily towards bringing all its children to school if the world is to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of universal elementary education by 2015.

My personal interest and involvement in the education sector, besides having worked as Director of Public Instruction and later as Secretary, General Education to Government of Kerala, has given me valuable insights into the education system in my own state and other states of India. With the adequate funding now available, I am deeply convinced that given the political will and an efficient and committed bureaucracy, India can achieve its goal of universal elementary education within a span of just two years. Of course this should be in tandem with vigilant yet supportive local communities. I have the privilege to again serve the State government as Commission for the Right to Education Act. The main components of

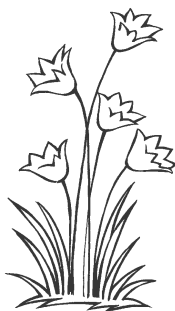
this assignment are:- (a) formulate Draft State Rules for implementation of the Central legislation, "The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009" (b) prepare the implementation plans for the important activities required under the Act (c) determine the administrative and financial implications of implementing the actions under this Act, (d) recommend measures for an enhanced role for training and research institutions relating to school education, (e) draw up a scheme for a child-friendly pre-primary care and education system etc. One of the remarkable features of this central legislation is to ensure accessibility of schools within one km. for lower primary classes and three kms. for upper primary classes, from the habitations of the children. Local bodies and state governments have the bounden duty to ensure availability of such neighbourhood schools. A number of free entitlements like uniforms, text books, note books, mid-day meals, transportation facilities and even residential facilities wherever required, are assured to the children studying in classes 1 to 8. Besides this, private un-aided schools are required to give admission in 25% of the seats in pre-primary class or class 1 to children from weaker sections and disadvantaged groups. The state government would have the responsibility of meeting the expenditure of such children. Several provisions in the Act are progressive steps aimed at making learning an enjoyable and stress-free journey of discovery and all-round development of the individual child.

This brings me to the next important area that needs attention, viz. access to training to improve one's skills and thereby transform traditional means of livelihood into better income-earning ventures. Statistics show that women are generally employed in occupations that are monotonous, physically taxing and poorly paid. And this is so in all sectors-primary, secondary and tertiary. The fruits of technology are yet to reach the poor women particularly in rural India. This means that we should make technology work for human development, to eradicate poverty and deprivation. And poverty, as we are well aware, has a feminine face. Therefore it is the women who are to be equipped to use technological innovations in their work to increase

productivity. Here, the criteria of any technological application-affordability, accessibility and appropriateness-need to be kept in mind.

A multi-pronged strategy is required to develop women-friendly equipment and gadgets that can reduce drudgery and enhance incomes. Government, the *Panchayati Raj* institutions, technical universities and the industry, in consultation and collaboration with the women concerned, should develop technological devices and train women in their use. Some of the critical areas on which these agencies should focus are, (i) appropriate building technologies for the poor, using locally available materials as far as practicable, (ii) low-cost benefits of bio-technology for sustainable agriculture, (iii) improved technologies for efficient energy supply especially bio-mass fuels and renewable energy, (iv) research and development for improving manufacturing and processing techniques of local produce and goods, (v) low-cost transportation to reach markets and access services. Non-governmental and civil society organizations have a major role to play here, in bringing in all the players together and in ensuring sustained use and utility of the innovative devices.

In conclusion, it must be reiterated that for women in India, the pathway to development and progress is education in the formal school system, timely health care and nutrition, protection from violence, capacity building and training in appropriate and accessible technology that is both sustainable and affordable. This will ensure that the intrinsic resilience and strength of our women will serve as an impetus for building a bright today and an even brighter tomorrow for the nation.



# Women in Search of Equality: Equality through Education

Fr. Tom Karimundackal SJ

## **The Indian Scenario**

In India, women, who are about the half of the total population, receive a meager share of developmental opportunities. Much is discussed in various committees, commissions and conferences on equality, development and empowerment of women. But reality is far from speculative truth. Women do not have equitable access to literacy, education, food, nutrition, health, employment or in political and economic decision-making processes. An analysis of the social, economic, political and educational panorama reveals the fact that a girl child is born into indifference and inferiority. She is caught in the web of cultural deprivation and social prejudices that influence her individual growth and moulds her into a submissive and self-sacrificing entity whether she is a daughter, wife, mother or sister.

Actually speaking, women's suppression is rooted in the very fabric of Indian society. The patriarchal nature of the Indian society has always stood as an obstacle in the path of women being made to feel cornered by the harshness of gender discrimination. Women's duties as good daughters, good wives and good mothers are well defined by the male dominated Indian society. Wifhood and motherhood are accepted as pivotal roles for patriarchal society implying that these roles are complete in themselves and women need not pursue any specialized discipline of knowledge or profession. As a result, in a patriarchal society women are in a subordinate position, a symbol of fun and entertainment. In the traditional orthodox society a female child is considered a liability and a male child a fortune. The beginning of the civilization must have been based on equal contributions from both men and women, but somehow during the voyage of time, women were left behind. It seems that during the Vedic era there was a golden period as far as the equality and dignity

of women were concerned. Gradually their status deteriorated and declined.

The situation of women is very pitiable in rural areas: they are shackled to traditions, customs, age-old superstitions and beliefs, orthodoxy, dogmatism and conservatism. They remain suppressed by their husbands, spend most of their time in kitchen work and remain economically dependent. They are crowded into low-skilled and low-status jobs due to a lack of access to education and information. In the industrial sphere, they are mostly engaged in the house-hold industries which offer uncertain and low-paid seasonal jobs. Due to their engagement at home and child rearing they are forced to work part-time or on a temporary basis. More interestingly, wage discrimination is a common phenomenon in almost all arenas of their work. Truly speaking, until now, the average Indian woman has no choice in relation to various important events in her own life. Therefore the entire social system needs a radical transformation for improvement. Only then, women will enjoy equal social status who bear primary responsibility for their families.

As we know, empowerment is characterized by (i) knowledge and competence, (ii) ability to take rational decisions and control, and (iii) a strong self-esteem. In all these Indian women have been overpowered by men due to various socio-cultural reasons. This unequal gender relationship manifests itself in different ways. Their skill, knowledge, and contribution to the economy and their abilities are undervalued or outright dismissed. They are portrayed as being vulnerable, weak and thereby dependent on men.

There is no doubt that India today is striving out into the modern world looking ahead to new science and technology, new types of employment and a new dynamism in economic growth; but can we say that we are giving adequate education and training to women to grasp these opportunities? Though male and female literacy rates have increased over the period, there is an undesirable continuance of gender disparity. There is a long and wide gap (i.e. 21.70 per cent in 2001 census) between male and female literacy rates, which is serious enough to cause concern. The female literacy rate which is



54.16 per cent (2001 census) is not a great achievement after sixty years of independence. The girls enrollment in higher education is meager (i.e., 39.9 per cent). In spite of having a massive system of higher education, reports show that only six percent youth of the relevant age group of 17 to 24 years is receiving higher education as compared to France (50%), U.S.A. (81%) and Canada (99.8%). Here there are 933 women for every 1000 men. However, only 54.16% of women are literate as compared to 75.3% men. They occupy less than 10% of Parliament seats, less than 15% cabinet positions, less than 4% of seats in High Courts and the Supreme Court and less than 8% of administrative and Managerial positions. When women's enrolment in Universities/Colleges is currently 39.94 per cent, there are only 5 exclusively Women Universities and 1578 Women Colleges. This means that women are less represented in the literacy sphere, employment in public and private sectors, political spheres, administration, science and technology, self-employment etc. Therefore, the country badly stands in need of an accelerated pace of literacy transition and job distribution.

To realize the women empowerment goal under the social, political and economical situation that prevails in India, it is essential that women should be organized, trained and educated. Although the education system has expanded rapidly since India achieved independence in 1947, the gender gap continues to be substantial. In other words, women who constitute less than half the Indian population are deprived of the right to education, information, knowledge, skills and thinking associated with formal education.

### **The Christian Scenario**

While Christianity has undoubtedly furthered the emancipation of women in certain ways, it has not done so within the church structures themselves, nor probably enough within the societies within which it operates. John Angell James identified the essential paradox of women's position within Christianity as:

*Christianity has provided a place for woman for which she is fitted, and in which she shines; but take her out of that place, and her lustre pales and sheds a feeble and sickly ray. Or, to*

*change the metaphor, woman is a plant, which in its own greenhouse seclusion will put forth all its brilliant colors and all its sweet perfume; but remove it from the protection of its own floral home into the common garden and open field, where hardier flowers will grow and thrive, its beauty fades and its odor is diminished. Neither reason nor Christianity invites woman to the professor's chair, nor conducts her to the bar, nor makes her welcome to the pulpit, nor admits her to the place of ordinary magistracy.'*<sup>i</sup>

Although women were perceived as upholding and exemplifying the virtues of the church, they were excluded from active participation in institutional power. John Angell James simply expressed the dominant perception that women's relation to Christianity was essentially passive. That is to say, women have often been omitted from true community within contemporary church structures. Many of them are caregivers but not carerecipients within their church families. They are taught about redemption but not given the opportunity to experience it fully.<sup>ii</sup>

## **Education for Gender Equality**

However, over the past few decades, women have become more vocal and assertive in the Church and in the society. They themselves have become aware of their rights and are spearheading movements across the country against all sorts of social evils. This consciousness is due to an increase in women's literacy and higher learning. Provision of educational opportunities to women has been an important programme in the education sector since independence. Between 1951 and 2001 the percentage of literacy amongst women improved from 7.93 per cent to 54.16 per cent. That is to say, the entire education system geared to play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women. Therefore, it is the need of the hour to realize that education is a milestone for women empowerment because it enables them to respond to opportunities, to challenge their traditional roles and change their lives. It empowers them with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process. It opens the door to opportunity and choice for women. Therefore, education becomes an imperative to

empower women so that they can make the right choice in every sphere of life. It helps them to develop self-confidence, self-esteem, a positive attitude and equity. The programmes for women empowerment should be carried out with great vigour and sincerity. Consequently it would empower women to achieve social, psychological, economic and political dreams which are denied to her traditionally.

As Shoma A. Chatterji rightly articulated, *“A woman can recognize her own worth, can identify the need to be an individual in her own right, and can assert herself in her own independent capacity only when she is educated. Education is the weapon she can use to fight the war of inequality between the illiterate and the educated. Education is the ticket that allows a woman to proceed on the journey towards economic independence and is the book that opens the pages of her civil rights to her”.*<sup>iii</sup>

The International Women's Conference at Nairobi in 1985 defined “women empowerment” as “a distribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women”. Can this be achieved without proper education? Can a woman be recognized without education and awareness? Can she achieve economic independence and freedom of choice without being educated? Women empowerment has invited women's participation in vocational, technical, and professional education at various levels and it has become an effective means to counter gender discrimination. It is now generally accepted that education, as a source of social mobility, equality and empowerment, both at the individual and at the collective level, is imperative for women. Consequently their dependence disappears, self awareness increases leading to integral development and helping themselves as well as the nation to prosper. What Napoleon said holds true even for today “Give me an educated mother and I shall promise you the birth of a civilized Nation”. So it is rightly said that if you educate a man, you educate an individual and if you educate a woman you educate a family.

The Interim Report of the Indian Statutory Commission stated: “It is only through education that Indian woman will be able to contribute

in increasing measure to the culture, the ideals and the activities of the country".<sup>iv</sup> Empowerment through education implies: (i) promoting self-recognition, a positive self-image and self-actualization, (ii) stimulating critical thinking, (iii) deepening understanding of the gendered structures of power, including gender, (iv) enabling access to resources, specially to an expanding framework of information and knowledge, (v) developing the ability to analyze the options available, and to facilitate the possibility of making informed choices, and (vi) reinforcing the agency of women to challenge gendered structures of power and take control of their lives. Women's education and successive empowerment have altered India's social and political landscape. They have moved from being objects of legislation to initiators. For many women the family no longer exercises total control over their destinies. A general awakening has begun and it cannot be permanently suppressed.

## Conclusion

Today, women have realized that they cannot remain forever confined to the kitchen and the four walls of a room. They want to play multifaceted rolls to offset the challenges emerging out of the socio-economic changes taking place in society. To this achievement the contribution of education of girls and women cannot be overrated. The education of a girl is the education of a mother and through her education of a society. It is for men to get out of their system of convenience and supremacy to stand for the cause of women. Let every woman get the chance she deserves to realize her God-given potential.

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<sup>i</sup> John Agnell James, *Female Piety: or The young woman's Friend and guide Through Life to Immortality* (New York 1854), p.90. Though his view reflected the Victorian church of the 19th century I think his observation is still valid even when the church has gone through various transformations and rapid changes over the century especially in the understanding of lay participation.

<sup>ii</sup> Cfr. Paula Buford, "women and Community: Women's Study Groups as Pastoral Counseling", in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insight for Pastoral Care*, (ed.) Jeanne Stevenson (Mineapolis 1996), p.285.

<sup>iii</sup> Shoma A, Chatterji, *The Indian Women in Perspective*. (New Delhi 1993), p. 55.

<sup>iv</sup> Interim Report, Indian Statutory Commission, (India, 1929), p. 151.



# Voice of Women Domestic Workers

Kirti Lohar  
Streevani

**T**he Women Domestic Workers' Movement began three years ago as an initiative of Streevani in order to organize the otherwise unorganized and often exploited section of the work force. The movement has spread to working areas in and around Pune like Yerwada, Ramwadi, Kharadi, Goregaon Park, Lohogaon, Viman Nagar, and Vishrantwadi to mention a few. Today it has a membership of 1200 domestic workers and around 35 ground leaders. Streevani networks with The National Domestic Workers' Movement and all awakened individuals and groups in its efforts to materialize the dream of a dignified life to the most marginalized of all labour forces.

## Who is a Domestic Worker?

A Domestic Worker (DW) is a servant who is paid to perform menial tasks around the household like cleaning, washing and kitchen shopping. Not infrequently is she asked to render patient care and care of children. Occasionally domestic workers also assist at cooking. *Servant* is an older english term for domestic worker, though not all servants worked inside the home.

## What Does the National Domestic Workers Movement Do?

The Movement aims at awakening the DW to her rightful place in the world of labour. The movement is geared towards achieving

- Recognition of Domestic worker's dignity and rights like any other workers.
- Just payments and legitimate holidays and leaves
- Freedom from abuses of all kinds particularly sexual
- Leadership development among DWs
- Solutions to their problems through self help and solidarity
- Legal protection from violence

- Social Security schemes of the Govt. for all domestic workers.

The following success story may sound insignificant to many readers who today are hearing news of major revolutions in several parts of the world; but for the illiterate and vulnerable women it indeed is a ray of light and hope.

In May 2010 in Kharadi - a suburb of Pune, some 30-35 women domestic workers who were paid poorly decided to ask for a pay rise. The Gulmohar Archid Society which employed them refused to listen to their just and legitimate demand. Instead, sensing trouble, the Society decided to dismiss the three women leaders who initiated the move in the first place.

At this juncture all the women domestic workers of the said Society decided to sit in front of the Society until their demand were met.

After days of failed meetings and repeated brush with the bureaucracy, the Police and the Gulmohar Society, the women took to strike and demonstration to make their voices heard. They now had two demands. Reinstate the dismissed women and raise the wages. The Society consented to take back the women without raising their wages. The police arrested the striking women because they had “no permission” to strike; but by sheer strength of their solidarity and support, the women stood their ground even to the extend of going to the police station. After days of negotiation, the Society decided to take back the three dismissed women and raise the wages on an individual basis. The event gave all women domestic workers a first hand experience of what it means to stand together in solidarity and support. It gave the women an added impetus to push for their rights, besides giving them confidence in their power to organize for a worthy cause. Throughout the entire saga Streevani stood by them in solidarity and support.

In February *Streevani* organised a Signature Campaign of 2000 or more men and women to press for the rights of the domestic workers. The large banner of Signature and Thumb impression (not an altogether welcome sign for an issue on education) was sent to New Delhi in time for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention in June 2011. It aims at getting the Nation to recognise domestic workers in the National Employment Laws and Social Security Schemes.



## ***Don't Wait for the Leaders to Act; ACT YOURSELF!***

Sr. Petra Bigge SSpS

This was the urgent message I heard at two recent events I attended: The World Social Forum (WSF) and the 55<sup>th</sup> Commission on the Status of Women (55<sup>th</sup> CSW). The WSF was held in Dakar, capital city of Senegal, February 6 to 11. The Commission on the Status of Women took place in New York City February 22 to March 4. Both events featured many grassroots organizations that shared their experiences and work. The events were also opportunities for networking—forming new alliances and/or strengthening alliances already existing.

Because the WSF was held in Senegal at the time of political uprisings in various North African countries, the organizers faced special challenges. An example is what happened when the director of the University called *Cheikh Anta Diop* - the venue for the Forum, was changed. The new director rescheduled exams for the same days as the Forum, meaning there was no room for Forum participants. The resourceful Forum coordinating team handled the situation quite well by providing tents. Translators and participants developed flexible ways to work together without the usual translation equipment.

In these two events, the WSF and the 5<sup>th</sup> WCW, I noted the main challenges addressed as these:

- Agrarian reform
- Environmental concerns
- The “green markets” or “green capitalism” or “green economy
- Gender related issues

### **Agrarian Reform**

From what I heard and learned at the WSF, there are a growing number of suicides among farmers worldwide and a growing number of people being displaced from their land. Half of the displaced people are the indigenous poor. 80 % of farming is done by women, even though in many countries women do not, and cannot, own land. They are completely dependent on men: husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles. I felt an urgent need to empower these women through collaborative efforts with NGOs, to advocate for laws

granting women the right to own land. It seems multinationals, with support of local and national governments, are gaining possession of the farmland, and thus displacing the poor and indigenous. Similarly, governments that support these multinationals do not admit the long term effects of their agreements with multinationals on the people. And the multinationals, in turn, are not sensitive to the environmental impacts of their actions; for example the use of fertilizers that destroy the soil and contaminate the water, that affect the health of workers and the surrounding population. Might this be a modern form of “slavery”?

One action aimed at returning land to the local farmers is the Ekta Parishad Movement initiated in India in 2007. Called the “march of the despised,” it had more than 25,000 landless farmers walking to New Delhi to fight for their rights. This groups is planning a similar march for this coming year with an expected participation of 100,000 landless farmers. Wouldn't it be wonderful if VIVAT International members, (a religious NGO of about 25,000 men and women) with their rural communities throughout the world, participated in this non-violent action?

### **Environmental Concerns**

Another sign of hope was the Bolivian government's stand on the rights of Mother Earth. Bolivia presented a discussion paper in preparation for the 2012 Rio +20 summit. In this presentation, Bolivia emphasized that we cannot only talk and fight for Human Rights, but we also have to acknowledge the rights of Mother Earth and the rights of Water. Some governments have already put in place legislation to protect the environment; some have started legal procedures against companies that are polluting the environment.

It came very clear to me that if we do not start now as “one world” to combat climate change, our earth will be depleted. This could lead to conflicts and wars over limited resources.

During the discussions, the seriousness of the environmental situation was emphasized. Figures given indicated that, in 2007, 71% of the world's population believed in Climate Change. Two years later that percentage was down to 51%. Some believe that “the idea of climate change is a socialistic idea circulated by people who want to take away our standard of living.” Other interesting figures I picked up are 16% of the world's population consumes 78% of its resources; 70% of the world's population consumes less than



what is need to live; the world's population is consuming 30% more of the natural resources than the world can reproduce.

### **Green markets-green capitalism-green economies**

In speaking of ecological concerns, a new term was used: “green market” or “green capitalism” or “green technology.” Is “green technology” an answer to our ecological questions? Is green technology or green capitalism really green? From my point of view, the so-called “green technology” is delighting us with false promises. We cannot have unlimited economic growth. The real solution is for the rich population, by changing its habits and limiting consumption, to share more with those that have less.

One can say “bureaucracy and hunger don't match” for someone can starve to death while the aid to feed him still goes through the process of approval. The same can be said regarding the environment. We cannot wait any more for nations to find some solutions; each of us is called to do his/her part on a daily basis.



### **Gender Related Issues**

Violence against women was another major area of focus. Perhaps we could all join the campaign to counter violence by adding as a line at the bottom of our emails this message: “I don't forward violence. Take a stand; the violence stops with you.”

The sessions on violence included topics like violence against the girl-child, violence in families, trafficking especially against women and girl-children, sexual violence in war situations, and more. Worldwide there are between 60 million and 110 million missing women. Many are believed to have been brought into prostitution or into forced labor. There are groups working for the legalization of prostitution, a real act of violence.

Participants were urged to focus not only on the victims but also on the perpetrators. Unanswered questions were raised: Why do our sons behave like this? Why are they going into brothels? Why is rape used as a war operation? One answer is because it is cheap and available 24 hours a day. In armed conflict there is more danger to be a woman than a soldier. Women are targeted in wartime

because of their unequal status in peacetime.

Early and qualitative intervention is needed to counter gender inequality. This intervention can begin already in the schools with equal curricula for both boys and girls, with equal treatment of both girls and boys, with disavowing abuse of girls by boys, adolescent and younger, and with encouraging girls to advance in school.


Early in the educational process, it is important to provide equal opportunities for girls in the fields of science and technology. Female role models in these areas exist; they need to be presented to the younger generations. Girls and women can be encouraged to go into traditionally male dominated professions.

Although there is participation of women in politics, they are far fewer than men. And even though some women are in politics, there is no guarantee that automatically they will work for women's rights. Often they are used for achieving men's agenda.

I end my sharing with a story which was narrated to us:

Once there was a tribe. And together with this tribe there lived a foreigner. They went together for hunting on a regular basis. In the beginning the foreigner kept pace with the tribe in the hunting expedition. Then the person became slower and slower, began to lose interest in the hunting, spent time looking here and there. Eventually the person could not any longer walk with the rhythm of the group. At one point, the group had to stop and ask the person "Do you want to go together with us? If you do, keep pace with us; otherwise we have to leave you behind."

And together with this tribe there lived a foreigner. They went together for hunting on a regular basis. In the beginning the foreigner kept pace with the tribe in the hunting expedition. Then the person became slower and slower, began to lose interest in the hunting, spent time looking here and there. Eventually the person could not any longer walk with the rhythm of the group. At one point, the group had to stop and ask the person "Do you want to go together with us? If you do, keep pace with us; otherwise we have to leave you behind." The international community of awakened individuals and groups are walking together to make our world more just and more peaceful. Where are we as religious in this walk? Are we walking together with the society?



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**Streevani welcomes your feedback to this bulletin.**

**We also request you to kindly send  
your  
subscription to Streevani to receive  
copies of**

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**Thank you**

# STREEVANI

## VISION

The integral liberation of women in view of restoring her dignity as a person and as an equal partner with man within the framework of the Indian society.

Formation of a world wide community awakening to the possibilities of women's contribution to all aspects of development and liberation.

## OBJECTIVES

- Exploring women's experiences particularly in the context of their struggle for humanhood.
- Enhancing women's self-awareness and educating them concerning the causes and solutions of their problems.
- Awakening Women Religious towards the path of empowerment.
- Development of human resources in view of building up a gender - just society.
- Networking and collaborating with like-minded organizations.
- Legal Cell to assist women in crisis.
- Empowering domestic workers.



## STREEVANI

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