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# **WOMEN, THE 'SIN OF ABORTION' AND ABSOLUTION: FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS**

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## **Abstract**

Catholics worldwide have begun the Year of Mercy with openness and freedom as mercy is a desirable human experience bestowing healing and wholeness. All the same, the letter of Pope Francis that authorizes priests around the world to forgive women of the "sin of abortion" during the year of mercy raises critical concerns from the standpoint of women's experience. This short article looks into the complexities underlying women's experience of abortion particularly in the socio-cultural context of Asia that is inscribed by patriarchy. It problematizes the positioning of women in catholic theology as vulnerable recipients of mercy and interrogates critically the catholic pastoral praxis that is blind to the responsibility of the man/husband on questions relating to abortion and its consequences. Finally, using the key of feminist theological hermeneutics, it intends to take the discourse on the 'sin of abortion,' pro-life and pro-choice to a broader framework of life in its connectedness and relatedness.

**Keywords:** Connectedness of Life, Patriarchy, Pro-choice, Pro-life, Rape, Sexual Violence, Sin of Abortion, Year of Mercy

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The letter of Pope Francis dated 1 September 2015,<sup>1</sup> on the 'sin of abortion' and absolution has raised different reactions from people depending on their socio-religious and political positioning. In this letter written to give pastoral guidelines for the forthcoming Year of Mercy (December 8, 2015 to November 20, 2016), also declared as a Jubilee year, the Pope writes to Archbishop Rino Fisichella — in charge of organizing the jubilee celebrations — that priests around the world will be authorized to forgive those who repent, the "sin of abortion" during the jubilee year.

Even as many expressed fear as to whether this gesture would be seen in some way as "minimizing the gravity of the 'sin' of abortion," others point out that Pope's letter "highlights the wideness of God's mercy."<sup>2</sup> These reactions are significant given the fact that the penalty for procuring an abortion is automatic excommunication as made explicit in the Code of Canon Law which is reiterated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and only bishops are authorized to lift this penalty. This short article intends to address the issues raised in this letter from a feminist theological point of view, by seeing how they relate to women's concerns in the context of the socio-cultural and economic realities of Asia and in the universal ecclesiastical framework.

### **1. Women's Experience in Relation to the 'Sin of Abortion'**

There is a saying that is often heard: "If women were to speak the truth of their lives, the earth would split open." I think this applies most to the experiences that women undergo in relation to abortion and the many questions that emerge from it. First and foremost we need to ask, why women opt for the decision to abort. Do they have a voice in these decisions? In a culture inscribed by patriarchy — as true of most of our Asian countries — who has the final word about sexual relations within marriage, methods of family planning, pregnancies and its termination? How does poverty which is the lot of a great majority of Asian women, affect their concerns about repeated pregnancies? What other socio-cultural, religious and economic factors lead women to situations where abortion is apparently the only choice before them?

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<sup>1</sup>This letter of Pope Francis is available on the site [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150901\\_lettera-indulgenza-giubileo-misericordia.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150901_lettera-indulgenza-giubileo-misericordia.html)

<sup>2</sup>Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman commenting on Pope's Letter about absolving the 'sin of abortion' in the Year of Mercy as reported by Cindy Wooden, Catholic News Service, 2-9-2015.

The starting point of feminist theology is women's experience. Even as Pope's letter expresses sympathy about women's experiences of 'ordeal' before the question of abortion, Catholic discourse on this matter does not look into its complexities, particularly the gender concerns that lie beneath it. For this reason, examining critically the gender implications of the 'sin of abortion' becomes necessary for brining to surface the underlying concerns and for taking the discourse forward.

To begin this reflection, I take some experiences of Indian women which could be representative of other Asian countries as well, that illustrate the suffering women encounter in relation to body and sexuality. For very many Indian women, irrespective of their class, caste or religion, their worth particularly in their marital families is dependent on their capacity to produce a male child. The consistently falling sex-ratio in India (the latest census showing 914 females to 1000males) regardless of the many legal measures taken by the State over the last few decades like the banning of Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) and other consciousness-raising programmes have not really succeeded in curbing the menace of son preference. While in the economically backward families girl children tend to be an economic liability due to the appalling burden of dowry that is demanded at the time of the girl's marriage, among the rich, it is often that they need a male heir to pass on their family name and inheritance. In these situations women, particularly those who are economically dependent on their husbands face extremely vulnerable situations and have no say on their pregnancies.

In situations where patriarchy has its way, the gendered dimension of women lacking voice is most striking when it comes to the questions concerning their body and sexuality. In a research that I undertook on Catholic Syrian Christian women of Kerala, India, 74.2 percent of the respondents expressed that they feel obliged to satisfy every need of their husbands on bed. The religious teachings that persuade women to be 'submissive' to their husbands become like hegemonic codes that oblige women to give into their husbands' sexual demands in all circumstances. Further, women with alcoholic husbands or partners stand at a greater vulnerability as the threat of violence in such situations is very strong and this forces them to yield sexually to their husbands or partners. In such situations, the Catholic position on contraception becomes an added burden on women who are practicing Catholics. Repeated pregnancies in short intervals amidst economic pressures persuade women to opt for abortion,

often against their own will, and at the cost of having to undergo tremendous psychological trauma and at times even physical dangers to their health.

The interplay of patriarchal gender norms with sexuality manifests all the more in the problem of rape. In a pluri-religious country like India, the question whether marital rape can be considered a crime is still being debated as almost all the religions attribute a sacred status to marriage. Outside of marriage, in many circumstances where caste is a defining factor of relationships between communities, or in situations of communal violence, rape is even used as a weapon to extract vengeance or to teach the other community a lesson. Besides this, situations of extreme poverty and unemployment also become occasions triggering reactions of sexual violence in the form of rape of women, as reported in the context of December 2012 Delhi gang rape in India, that the men who shamed the nation lived a life of deprivation, their horrific brutality being symptomatic of India's dark underbelly.<sup>3</sup> In all such situations it is the woman's body and her sexuality that bear the consequences of this violence, besides being victimized with culpability if the situation leads to an abortion.

## **2. Emerging Questions Relating to Abortion and Absolution**

What is problematic about Catholic stand on the question of abortion and related concerns is the fact that Church tends to see these issues primarily as the problem of women and forget the man who has greater responsibility particularly in patriarchally conditioned cultures. Pope's letter also reflects this position of the Church as it refers to women being in need of mercy. As in the case of the woman caught in adultery and condemned by a religiously fanatic mob, the question that needs to be raised in the case of abortion is: *Where is the man?* Why is it that Catholic pastoral praxis becomes blind to the responsibility of the man/husband on questions relating to abortion and its consequences? Is he counted among those who 'procure' abortion and are in need of God's mercy?

Still more, the papal letter of 1 September offers a concrete illustration of the awkwardness of policy making and its effects on the Church, against the backdrop of the Church's gender configuration. While the Pope meant in all good will to facilitate the mediation of mercy by authorizing priests worldwide, what is ironical is that the mediators of God's mercy are all men and its

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<sup>3</sup>Bhuvan Bagga, "The Unforgiven" ([indiatoday.intoday.in](http://indiatoday.intoday.in)), December 28, 2012.

recipients mainly women. This whole episode gives a very distressing picture of women being totally at the mercy of the all male teaching and policy-making authority of the Church, to receive the mercy of God when and how the male leadership wishes it to be mediated. In addition, what is communicated through the letter can be read also as an expression of condescension on women who have become the object of sympathy for all the 'pressure' they endure while being in situations that lead them to take steps like that of abortion. The Papal letter, seen as "a concession to the sinner" by some Church leaders, betrays this attitude.

While the letter is appreciated by many as a demonstration of Pope Francis's compassionate outlook towards those on the margins of mainstream Catholicism like gays, lesbians and divorced Catholics, questions can be raised whether this would impact in any way the policy of the Church on these issues. No. 1398 of the Canon Law decrees automatic excommunication to those who procure abortion and no. 2272 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ratifies this. Would the celebration of mercy as stated in the Papal letter make a difference to the Church's stand on questions related to contraception or abortion? While priests are authorized to absolve the repentant sinners during the jubilee year, what happens to the mediation of mercy before and after the jubilee year? Can the mercy of God be conditioned or restrained by human decisions and calculations?

Taking the question beyond the Church, on matters related to abortion, people are divided and apparently at odds with each other based on the position they take. While the political and religious conservatives engage in anti-contraception and anti-abortion campaigns worldwide, feminist groups clamour for 'choice' as they insist that women need to have a say on their body and sexuality. It is important to look into the contradictions and polarizations that mark the different positions while bringing the discourses to a common platform so that there is a better hearing of diverse opinions and consequently a better understanding of the underlying concerns. Since abortion is about the denial of the possibility of life, it cannot be seen in isolation or as a predominantly Catholic concern, but needs to be addressed setting it against the backdrop of the manifold expressions of life.

A major contradiction that needs to be addressed is the fact that while some 'pro-life' campaigners insist on protecting the life of the foetus above everything else, they are apparently indifferent to the life of millions who find themselves in situations of acute

vulnerability. Life is sacred, be that of the foetus, the refugee, the migrant worker, those who have become victims of human trafficking, those who encounter different forms of violence, those who come under the category of minorities and those who experience extreme forms of poverty and related deprivations. Equally sacred is the earth and the manifold expressions of life in it, be that of water, air, plants, animals or the so called inanimate matter. Indifference to these concerns of life while taking a strong 'pro-life' stance betrays incongruence. Also 'pro-life' or anti-abortion campaigns cannot be taken together with a position that supports war and death penalty or the marginalization of humans who belong to sexual minorities like the LGBTQIA groups.

Respecting women's right over their bodies and their freedom to self-determination is also important as it becomes an expression of recognizing women as human persons in their own right. Equally important is that women avoid aberrations in this regard and their assertion of 'choice' is seen in relation to the concerns of the web of life. As some feminists observe, abortion needs to be seen not just as a specific moral question, but a political issue of relational justice.<sup>4</sup> Relational justice is about seeing life in its connectedness and inter-relatedness. This implies that the harm done to one form of life affects other forms of life negatively, so also the holistic health of a part has a positive impact on the well-being of the whole. Relational justice then demands that problems are not seen in isolation and that the search for solutions takes into consideration the visible and invisible linkages of existence, which means to say that both problems and their remedies become the shared responsibilities of those concerned. Realization of this truth is crucial for sustaining the integrity of life.

### **3. Conclusion**

Certainly time has come to look into the problem of abortion in its complexity and depth. The letter of Pope Francis extending the experience of mercy in the jubilee year offers scope for examining critically some of the established patterns of catholic thought like the tendency to overlook the role of men in the crime of terminating life at its very initial stages; the positioning of women as mere recipients of mercy and not as its mediators; and the danger of seeing 'sin' in isolation and 'mercy' as something that can be prescribed by

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<sup>4</sup>Denise and Elise Couture, "An Antiracist, Ecofeminist and Theological Perspective for a Sustainable Life and a Sustainable Choice," in Gerald Boodoo, ed., *Religion, Human Dignity and Liberation*, Sao Leopaldo: Editora Oikos Ltd, 2016, 73-83, at 74.

practitioners in specific times. The letter is also an indication that the Church has a long way to go for evolving as a community of partnership of equals. In this context, the challenge before Catholic leadership and theologians is to open up the theologizing, pastoral planning and policy making tasks beyond the structures of the Church hierarchy. Engaging the laity, particularly women in an open and creative dialogue will facilitate seeing humanity, God and the world from a wider perspective. This will help to understand better the sacredness of life in its inter-relatedness, as brought out rightly in *Laudato S<sup>i</sup>* and for channelizing the flow of mercy beyond the time frame of the jubilee year.

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<sup>5</sup>Francis, *Laudato S<sup>i</sup>*, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)