

AN 'EXPIRY DATE' FOR GENDER INEQUALITY? A Feminist Theological Query

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India

Abstract

This paper addresses some of the concerns underlying the gender question, setting it against the backdrop of the development discourse, particularly the 2030 agenda set by United Nations in the form of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its target of achieving gender equality. While acknowledging that the basic drivers of unsustainability and gender inequality are deeply interlocked as pointed out by the SDGs, it problematizes the gender discourse and development agenda focusing on three areas that are fundamental to women's lives like their gendered experiences in relation to work, violence and religion. Taking the Indian context, it analyzes the denigration of women's labour, the persistence of violence against women in spite of the many legal provisions and the unaddressed issues underlying the gender politics of religion. On a liberative note of feminist theologizing, it recognizes the synergy between gender equality and sustainability of life.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Gendering of Work, Religion, Sustainability, Violence

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Today's women
 Born yesterday
 Dealing with tomorrow
 Not yet where we are going
 But not still where we were

— Adirenne Rich

“Women should not be viewed as victims, but as central actors in moving towards sustainability”

— Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka¹

It is an indisputable fact that women of today, particularly in Asia, find themselves at a crucial juncture. On the one hand they experience a strong impetus to move forward on the course of becoming who they are meant to be, while on the other, many impediments continue to derail their path. In India, even after forty to fifty years of relentless struggle by women's groups in addressing gender concerns through their advocacy and multiple engagements that have facilitated gender mainstreaming across the country, women do not find themselves safe and free to exercise their human agency. A recent episode of the ghastly rape and murder of a young Dalit woman² is a critical pointer to the many knots underlying the gender question. However, today's women are not intimidated by the many hurdles on their path. It is within this 'already-not yet' framework of women's struggle to reclaim their full humanity that I wish to address gender concerns, bringing into relief its complexity while not losing sight of the goal to which women are moving.

Certainly in the present times, the problematic of gender is addressed with more resolve and transparency across Asia. The 'personal' turns 'political' with greater ease as women have become freer and sharper in naming what blocks their dignity and growth as persons. However, given that 'woman' is not a monolithic concept that can be universalized, any deliberation on gender concerns needs to take into consideration women's positioning at the intersectionality of race, class, religion/caste and socio-cultural setting with gender. Consequently, a critical interrogation of gender in its particular and

¹Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director, UN Women, Preface, World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014, 7.

²The Dalit woman who became the victim of this gruesome gender/sexual violence in Kerala, the southern state of India on 28 April, 2016 was a law student. A deeply disturbing factor is that even almost a month after the incident, the culprits are not caught and justice continues to be evasive.

contextual location, gives scope for explorations both at the level of knowledge making and praxis.

The idea of an 'expiry date' for gender inequality comes from the 2030 agenda set by United Nations in the form of Sustainable Development Goals or the SDGs. Over the last four to five decades, the United Nations Organization has played a major role in awakening human consciousness on matters related to gender and related concerns. In setting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) within a timeframe of 2015, the United Nations attempted and succeeded to a great extent in creating awareness on the principles of human dignity, equality and equity, and on the urgency to free the world from extreme poverty.³ While the third MDG focused on 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment' through education, employment and political involvement of women, the SDGs take the process forward, envisioning a new Global Partnership that enables a transformative, people-centred and planet-sensitive development agenda.⁴ The fifth SDG spelt out as 'Achieving Gender Equality' is based on the conviction that empowering women and promoting gender equality is crucial to accelerating sustainable development. On identifying that the causes and underlying drivers of unsustainability and gender inequality are deeply interlocked, the SDGs advocate building up women's agency and capabilities in order to create better synergies between gender equality and sustainable development outcomes.⁵ While the goal set by SDG is far reaching and holds many promises, its realization calls for some spade work into the deeper layers of the gender question. This paper attempts to unearth some of the concerns underlying the issue and to address them critically in view of facilitating the process of achieving gender equality. For this, I take the Indian context as a case of analysis.

1. The Gendered Humanscapes of India: A Reality Check

It is an undeniable fact that in India — as could be true of many Asian countries — more and more women are gaining visibility in the public space by exercising their political agency and for their contribution to knowledge making. Women are increasingly occupying leadership positions where they can make a breakthrough

³Ban Ki Moon, *Forward, Millennium Development Goal Report 2014*, 3.

⁴Cf. *A New Global Partnership: The Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, New York: UN Publications 2013, 3.

⁵United Nations, *Gender Equality and Sustainable Development: World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*, 2014, 11.

of the glass ceilings that have blocked their growth. In the corporate sector, it is observed that companies are now beginning to appreciate the role of women in organizational growth. According to a study by Development Dimensions International (DDI) — a global leadership development consultancy — organizations that have 30 per cent of women in leadership roles are 12 times financially more successful. However, even as more and more companies are investing considerably in grooming their women employees for leadership roles, DDI reports that women form less than 20 per cent of C-suite executives though they comprise half the workforce today in the IT sector, and only five percent of CEOs are women.⁶

While entry into the corporate sector is a realizable dream only for the creamy layer of society in a country like India, we get a better picture of India's genderscape from the Global Gender Gap Reports of the World Economic Forum, which quantifies the magnitude of gender-based disparities and tracks their progress over the years. As per the Global Gender Gap Index 2015 that has assessed how different countries are leveraging their female talent pool based on economic, educational, health-based and political indicators, India ranks 108 among the 145 countries considered. Even though India has moved up six positions in this report compared to the previous year mainly because of improvements in the health and political empowerment categories, the country ranks 139th when it comes to economic participation and opportunity pillar, which according to analysts, is due to a decline in female labour force participation and for the question of unequal wages for similar work.⁷

On the evaluation of the MDGs, India shares the success story of being among the countries of South Asia that have achieved gender parity in enrolment ratios.⁸ This has become possible for the different moves taken by the Government to promote the education of the girl child like the *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalyaya Scheme* (KGBV) launched in July 2004; the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) or 'education for all' movement operational since 2000-2001 making free and compulsory education to children of ages 6–14, which has many schemes to foster the growth of female education; and the Right of children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) 2010, which

⁶Cf. *The Hindu*, 4 May 2016, 15.

⁷Yasmina Bekhouche, "India in the World Economic Forum's 10th annual Global Gender Gap Report 2015" *Business Today*, November 23, 2015.

⁸United Nations: *The Millennium Development Goals 2014*.

enforces children's right to education as a fundamental right has strong implications on the education of the girl child. Nevertheless, in spite of these Acts coming into force, the opportunities available for girls to move ahead through higher education and meaningful employment are restrained, and even among those women who do receive the benefits of health and education, many are unable to contribute fully and productively to the economy because of socio-cultural barriers.⁹

Focusing on 'achieving gender equality', the SDG targets ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere. It addresses a whole range of issues related to gender like eliminating all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation; recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate; ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life; adopting and strengthening sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and so on.¹⁰ Over the last few decades, India has addressed the gender question from different perspectives like women and violence; issues of sexuality and reproductive health; political participation of women; legal issues in relation to gender justice; the political economy of gender in relation to the employment question, wage discrimination and unpaid work; the importance of gender budgeting and the like. Yet, achieving gender equality is a long way off. It calls for a multipronged approach that addresses critically and facilitates undoing the many layers of socio-cultural and religious conditioning of people, so that movement on the path of achieving gender equality can be made easier.

2. Key Issues and Linkages Underlying the Gender Question

The usage of the expression 'gender' goes beyond man/woman categories and is inclusive of the identity and rights of those who are

⁹Cf. *The India Gender Gap Review 2009* published by the World Economic Forum in partnership with the Confederation of Indian Industry available on the site www.weforum.org, accessed on 25 March 2015.

¹⁰See the Open Working Group Proposal for the Sustainable Development Goals, available at <http://undocs.org/A/68/970>, accessed on 4 April 2016.

trans-persons in our societies. Gender equality then, entails that human beings irrespective of their differences are free to develop their personal abilities and to make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices. This means that rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on their bodily differences.¹¹ Nonetheless, we see that in most of the development discourse, the concept 'gender' is used as a synonym for women and so it fails to explain the issues underlying social constructions of difference and the conflict ensuing from it. In depoliticizing the concept, 'gender sensitivity' gets interpreted as encouragement to use gender-disaggregated statistics in development planning but without consideration of relational aspects of gender, of power and ideology and how patterns of subordination are reproduced.¹²

In this discussion I deploy 'gender' in a political sense, focusing on man-woman relationships. The 'political' approach entails examining critically the socio-cultural conditioning of women and men as expressed in their roles, responsibilities, constraints and opportunities in a given social context, in view of bringing about transformation in gendered power equations. This paper addresses the issue focusing on three areas that are fundamental to women's lives like gendered experiences in relation to work, violence, and religion.

2.1. Gendering of Work

For women in the Indian context, gendering of work is a common experience since gender roles define the everyday allocation of labour. Gendering comes to play in the domestic/public divide whereby reproductive tasks and the associated caring/nurturing roles in the domestic space are allocated to women and the public productive tasks to men. While activities performed in the public space get visibility and social recognition, women's work within the household is taken for granted. The Gender Gap Review, for instance, indicates a woman-shaped gap in the Indian workforce. A mix of social constraints and dearth of employment opportunities has kept women out of the labour market, leading to a huge opportunity cost to the nation. Even as women dedicate a great amount of time to

¹¹Adapted from *ABC of Women Worker's Rights and Gender Equality*, ILO, Geneva, 2000, 48, to make it inclusive of transgender persons.

¹²Cf. Sally Baden and Anne Marie Goetz, "Who Needs Sex When You Have [Gender]? Conflicting Discourses on Gender at Beijing," *Feminist Review* 56 (1997) 3-25.

domestic duties like the nurture and care of the family members and a range of other activities that are crucial for the upkeep of the family, this work is not counted as an economic activity, and does not get reported in the national income statistics.¹³ In addition, many women who are 'mere housewives' have no economic claims within or outside the household.

Feminist theorists observe that this division of activities and their spatial separation are essential elements of the social and symbolic construction of gender, and the systematic "non-valorization of women's labour" contributes to their subordination. While perceptions of visible, gainful work importantly shape intra-household bargaining and well-being outcomes, the gendered nature of labour markets, which restrict women's earning potential, alongside gendered expectations of women's household responsibilities, become ideological tools for controlling their labour and constraining them from acting in their own self-interests. Disadvantages in well-being outcomes get transmitted over generations by solidifying men's material advantages in education and employment.¹⁴

What is evident here is that when development is assessed in terms of socio-economic indicators such as education, income, and labour force participation alone, these quantitative measures do not capture the nuances of gendered power equations. This gap in assessment can be illustrated by my study on the power negotiations of Catholic Syrian Christian women of Kerala, who rank high on human development indices such as higher education, life expectancy and employment opportunities. But for reasons of being positioned within a framework of religion mediated patriarchy, many of these women do not have the autonomy or the socio-economic agency that befit their positioning at the higher parameters of development.¹⁵

¹³As per the National Sample Survey reports of 2009-10, out of every 1,000 females in India's rural areas, 347 were attending to domestic duties. In the case of urban females, this number was even bigger: 465 per 1000. In comparison, the number of men attending to domestic duties were only 5 per 1,000 in the rural areas and 4 per 1,000 in the urban setup.

¹⁴Nitya Rao, "Caste, Kinship, and Life Course: Rethinking Women's Work and Agency in Rural South India," *Feminist Economics* 20, 3 (2014) 78–102.

¹⁵See the study, *Between Patriarchy and Development: Power Negotiations by Catholic Syrian Christian Women in Kerala*, an unpublished doctoral thesis by Kochurani Abraham done under the guidance of Prof. Dr Felix Wilfred, in the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, May 2011.

In India, it is acknowledged that “inclusive development cannot be attained unless women participate equally in the development process.”¹⁶ However, stating that women’s multiple and all-pervasive roles in the economy is critical, does not mean recognizing the crucial linkages between care economy and paid work and between the formal and informal economy. Mere ‘add women and stir’ type policies do not address the deeper socio-cultural undercurrents of the development question. A new approach to development needs to take into consideration the denigration of feminized labour, the structural privileging of men and masculinity, and the increasing pressure on women to work a triple shift in familial, informal and formal activities.¹⁷ This new approach implies challenging gender stereotypes and related roles, besides addressing the interconnectedness of hierarchies and associated power equations while paying more attention to the voices/perspectives of those from marginalized locations. Unless the inter-linkages between work, recognition, and agency are problematized and unpacked, it is difficult to understand changes in women’s status or empowerment and how they shift through the life course.¹⁸

2.2. Gendering of Violence

The experience of gender/sexual violence is an acknowledged reality for women across the globe. In cultures inscribed by patriarchy, it is a common denominator that marks women’s experience beneath the apparent normalcy of their lives. In India, as per the annual reports of the National Crime Records Bureau, crimes against women have more than doubled over the past ten years,¹⁹ regardless of the fact that over the last three decades, a number of legal provisions have emerged in the country. These include the 1983 Amendment of Sections 375 and 376 of the Indian Penal Code on rape which states that the question of consent should be based on the victim’s statement; the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) 2005 that redefines the notion of domestic violence to include physical, mental, economic and sexual dimensions of

¹⁶Government of India, *India Human Development Report 2011: Towards Social Inclusion*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2011, 31.

¹⁷V. Spike Peterson, “How (the Meaning of) Gender Matters in Political Economy,” *New Political Economy* 10, 4 (December 2005) 499-521.

¹⁸Rao, “Caste, Kinship and Life Course: Rethinking Women’s Work and Agency in Rural South India,” 81.

¹⁹For the latest reports of the National Crime Records Bureau, visit <http://ncrb.gov.in>

violence; the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, that defines 'sexual harassment' to include any unwelcome sexually determined behaviour (whether directly or by implication) such as: physical contact and advances, demand or request for sexual favours, sexually coloured remarks, showing pornography, and any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature; and finally the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 that has revised laws related to sexual violence in the Indian Penal Code, extending the definition of rape to include new offences like, acid attack, sexual harassment, voyeurism, and stalking.

Even with these legal provisions, gender violence is not countered effectively for the many loopholes in the existing laws. To give an example, though PWDVA (2005) addresses sexual violence in the domestic space, marital rape is not recognized as a crime in the country. Though the Justice Verma Committee constituted by the Government following the Delhi gang rape of 2012²⁰ recommended that the exception to marital rape in the Indian Penal Code should be removed, this is not recognized in the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013. What is evident is that marital rape will neither be criminalized nor punished, until legislators and the society acknowledge women's individual rights within marriage.²¹

The persistence of violence against women in India points a finger at the need to look critically into the manner in which gender relations are defined and how this is embedded socially in the state mechanisms who are guardians of the law. The obstinacy of the crime goes hand in hand with the breeding of impunity fostered partly by the state and partly by the class and caste inscriptions of patriarchy on gender, based on the identity of the offender and that of the victim. The problem persists as interpreters of law and upholders of the social order follow the same patriarchal dictates and are subject to the same biases and prejudices as the larger social world.²²

²⁰A three member committee headed by former Chief Justice of India, Justice Verma was constituted to recommend amendments to the Criminal Law for faster trial and proper punishment for criminals accused of committing sexual assault against women.

²¹B. Gupta and M. Gupta, 'Marital Rape: Current Legal Framework in India and the Need for Change', *Galgotias Journal of Legal Studies* 1, 1 (2013) 16-32.

²²Cf. N. Rao. "Rights, Recognition and Rape," *Economic & Political Weekly* 18, 7 (February 2013) 18-20.

Patriarchal underpinnings of impunity come to the fore also in the way masculinity is understood and exercised. In a culture where capacity for violence is taken as a sign of manliness that enables putting women forcibly 'in their place', sexual assault becomes another site on which to prove the masculinity of men.²³ In such societies, marital rape also becomes a non-issue, as patriarchy grants men rights over women's bodies, their sexuality and their minds, making impunity an unwritten law operative in the domestic space. Having internalized the patriarchal myth that their supreme duty as wives is to be unconditionally at the service of their husbands, women themselves perpetuate this impunity. In the case of a sexual assault, they think that they are to be blamed for being in the wrong places at the wrong times, or for their dressing that violates prescribed norms. The hegemonic codes of femininity consider modesty and chastity as the epitome of virtue for women and when these codes are violated, women think that they have lost their sense of self and dignity...²⁴

As observed by noted Indian feminist lawyer Flavia Agnes, domestic violence continues unbridled in many societies because of the subordinate status of women within their natal and marital homes, the issue of property ownership and control of women's sexuality, and the stigma attached to divorce and the lack of support for the girl in her natal home after she is "married of. Moreover, in situations where women are ready to confront situations of violence, most of the pre-litigation counselling is based on a patriarchal premise and is laden with anti-women biases. Women are advised to return to their husband's home on terms dictated by him and his family members and they are advised to "save the marriage" even at the cost of danger to their lives. Capitulating to this ill advice, many women are trapped in violent marriages. As Agnes opines, only when courts function as a viable and credible institution for protecting the rights of violated women and when women's decisions are backed by social and economic support systems, would they be able to explore options beyond the "save the family" formula.²⁵

²³R. Chowdhary, "Male Sexual Violence: Thoughts on Engagement," *Economic & Political Weekly* 48, 7 (December 2013) 14-16.

²⁴See Kochurani Abraham, "The Saga of Sexual Violence in India," in Regina Ammicht Quinn, Lisa Sowle Cahill and Carlos Susin, ed. "Corruption," *Concilium* (2014/5) 40-47.

²⁵Cf. Audrey D'Mello and Flavia Agnes, "Protection of Women from Domestic Violence," *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, 44, 31 October 2015, 76-84.

Addressing violence against women is a difficult yet essential element of achieving gender equality. Since violence is a method used to assert power and control over women and aims at strengthening traditional gender relations within marital and wider social institutions as it is embedded within social, cultural and economic structures, ways of addressing it must be comprehensive. This involves the development and implementation of strong legislation, gender sensitive law enforcement policies and protocols, awareness raising at the grassroots level, support for individuals and families experiencing violence, realization of women's social, economic and political rights and initiation of gender sensitizing education at different levels.²⁶

2.3. Gendering of Religion

In addressing the goal of gender equality, it is important to note that SDGs do not consider religion directly though they are very comprehensive in their proposals in moving towards this end.²⁷ However, in a country like India where religion is an intrinsic element of the social fabric, gender plays a key role in upholding the religious establishment. The gender politics of religion is evident by the fact that while women are generally the faithful practitioners of religious precepts and loyal transmitters of religious traditions, men hold the reins of religious power.²⁸ In this situation, while not denying the liberative potential that religion holds, I would like to point to the dangers that women ought to be cautious of, while being under the canopy of religion. In this context, a warning tag that says: 'Religion is "injurious" to women's growth' would be befitting as women engage in religious practices blissfully ignorant of the damage it can cause to their growth as human persons in their own right. The danger lies in their blindness to the tactics of patriarchy that uses their 'religiousness' to keep them subjugated and well contained within the restricted spaces allotted to them.

²⁶Ranjana Kumari and Sophie Hardefeldt, "Gender Inequality: The Cross-Cutting Implications of Domestic Violence in India," at the Global Thematic Consultation of UN Women, 2012.

²⁷See the Open Working Group Proposal for the Sustainable Development Goals at <http://undocs.org/A/68/970>.

²⁸For a detailed analysis of the gender politics of religion in ideology and praxis, see Kochurani Abraham, "Enlisting in the Struggle to be Free: A Feminist Wrestle with Gender and Religion," *Horizonte, Revista de Estudos de Teologia e Ciências da Religião*, 13, 39 (July/Sept 2015) 1296-1314.

A critical examination of religion using a feminist lens unveils the violent ambiguities of religious genderscapes, as manifest in religious ideology and praxis. While the ideologies of mainstream religions are all androcentric in character for their male imagery of God and the mediation of God by males, misogyny becomes evident in the distorted portrayal of women as shadows of men, as weak and in need of male protection, and as dangerous to the extent of causing the fall of humanity. Most of the established religions function on a dualistic thinking pattern, whereby the 'spiritual' is set against the corporal and is taken to be superior to the material or earthly realities of life. Even as women are expected to be religious in the practice of piety, women's body and sexuality are identified with the *flesh* as positioned against the *spirit* and taken to be impure and polluting. Given this dualistic view, women remain spiritually infantile, conditioned by the male — mediated belief systems and spirituality. In all the established religions which are inscribed by patriarchy, women are positioned at the lowest rungs of the hierarchical structures of religions and are excluded from leadership and decision making roles. Where religions see women primarily through a gendered lens, their exclusion from leadership and decision-making roles is countered by their greater inclusion in the service ministry marked by care-nurture roles which in turn reinforce gender stereotypes.

The problematic interplay of gender and religion is grave for the power it holds in shaping women's consciousness. The irony of the situation is that even when the hegemonic codes of religion delineate women's social boundaries through the notions of purity and pollution, and serve to define their status in terms of dependency on male protection, women perceive religion as positively providing them succour and relief. As opined by social theorists, the most insidious form of power is the force or ideology which shapes one's mindset in such a way that one uncritically accepts t one's role in the existing order of things and is prevented from having grievances.²⁹ Religious indoctrination tends to shape women's perceptions in such a way that they assimilate the 'contradictions of the social order'³⁰ as

²⁹See Steven Lukes, *Power a Radical View*, London: Macmillian Education Ltd, 1974, 23-24.

³⁰Marx regarded religion as the product of alienation inflicted on human life by the contradictions of the social order: Cf. Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation: A Theological Reading of Sociology*, New York: Paulist Press, 1975, 32. This verdict

natural or as divinely ordained and fail to see or imagine any alternative to it. This is most evident in the manner in which women who are 'religious' endure a lot of domestic violence and other abuses in marriage for reasons of the religious indoctrination that call wives to be submissive to their husbands.

Even though the patriarchal grip of religions continue to be strong, some tremors are being felt, thanks to the emergence of feminist theologizing that is beginning to have an impact. Feminist theology critiques the religious legitimization of women's subjugation and exploitation, and redefines religious/theological meaning making systems and knowledge in ways that are liberative for women and for other forms of life in this universe. Through feminist theologizing women are asking critical questions about themselves, their world, their God and life at large, and this is posing a serious challenge to the gendered socio-cultural systems of thought and practice. Personal and collective engagement of women in this questioning is already triggering a *genderquake* that is shaking the established foundations of religious patriarchy while creating enabling spaces for women.

A concrete example of this *genderquake* is the recent phenomenon of temple entry by women in India. Breaking centuries-old tradition, women are stepping into the Sanctum Sanctorum of temples that were earlier accessed only by men. This move has been met with strong reactions — the courts of justice in the country defending women's right to enter places of worship on constitutional terms, while conservative religious groups of men and women are resisting it vehemently. Even as the debate continues on the issue whether the 'secular' has authority over the 'sacred' spaces, women have made a breakthrough of religious gender barriers. The Bhumata Ranragini Brigade's "temple entry" movement in Shani Shingnapur in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra (central India), the demand to allow women to offer prayers at all stages of their lives at the Sabarimala shrine in Kerala, and the demand to allow women entry into the Haji Ali Dargah in Mumbai are all recent instances of challenges to the status quo that prevails in a patriarchal society.³¹

apparently finds realization in women when they deal with the unresolved and shadowy side of their lives with the strength they find in religious beliefs and rituals.

³¹For an analysis on the recent temple entry movement in India, see T.K. Rajalakshmi, "Quest for Equality," *Frontline* 13 May 2016, 4-7.

Conclusion

An expiry date for gender inequality may not be possible by 2030, but certainly the momentum set forward by the SDGs goes a long way towards its realization. Achieving gender equality implies building a society where human beings irrespective of their sexual/gender differences share rights and responsibilities and have equal access to resource and opportunities in every aspect of life. To reach this state, a lot more of de-gendering groundwork needs to be done, which means undoing the many layers of conditioning that have cast women and men in gendered moulds. The changing consciousness of women over the last few decades indicates that women are thinking differently from their mothers whereas rethinking masculinities³² continues to be a challenge for a great majority of Asian men.

In this challenging context, the imaginative and farsighted words of Adrienne Rich about women being on the move signal to the impetus that many 21st century women are experiencing in Asia today. Women have begun walking beyond the limiting boundaries of their yesterdays and are engaging creatively in the dialectic of the 'already-not yet' processes of their growth. As envisioned in the SDGs, it is time to recognize the synergies between gender equality and economic, social and environmental sustainability, since women's emergence as persons would have strong implications for the rest of humanity and for the web of life. Addressing inequality being the key note of the post-2015 development agenda, setting an 'expiry date' for gender inequality becomes imperative for protecting the sacred dignity of life.

³²Many works on Masculinities have emerged since the 1990s. See Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman, ed., *Theorising Masculinities*, Thousand Oaks et al.: Sage Publications, 1994, 82-83. See also Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001; R. Connell, *Masculinities*, Sydney: Polity Press, 1995; R. Connell and J.W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, 6 (December 2005) 829–859.