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THE FEMINIZATION OF *HUMAN* POVERTY IN ASIA VIS-À-VIS INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
An Ethical Review of the Adequacy of the 'Equality' Agenda

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Abstract

This paper seeks to contribute to the discussions on making integral human development real for all. The feminization of human poverty is a critical issue in this pursuit for integral human development. An exploration of some social, cultural and political issues particularly in Asia shows not only the extent to which poverty is gendered, it also verifies the complexity of contexts, valuations, and approaches. Since inequalities conflate with gender, ethnicity, politics, law, and economics, the growth in perspective to the human development discourse must find a broader moral basis to anchor on. We argue here that the recognition of human dignity and moral interdependence must ground the equality agenda. The moral consideration for authentic human development goes beyond any plea for equality; it is more adequately, the consideration for the common good — the integral flourishing of women, children, elderly, and all, leaving no one behind.

Keywords: Equality, Empowerment, Human Poverty, Integral Development

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Poverty is still primarily seen in economic terms. While contemporary measures address poverty on the basis of improvement in education, health, decent standard of living, social participation and well-being, the approach to poverty in the globalized world is still only in terms of income generation. Policies for the empowerment of women, as configured through income generation, are bound within the terms of parity.

Since the 1990s up to the recent decades, a growth in perspective on development has been at play. The re-introduction of people-centred development, rather than the limited income generation model of development, reiterates the importance of the enlargement of people's freedoms and capabilities. This growth in understanding is based on development that is for all, leaving no one behind. Engagement with the *human* development agenda in various programs, goals, and policies re-shapes the deliberations on issues that mostly affect those who have been consistently left at the margins: women, children, indigenous peoples, and the environment.

Following a people-centred understanding of development is the broadening of the understanding of poverty. The feminization of poverty refers to women's increasing vulnerability and disproportionate share of the burden of poverty compared to men. A multidimensional standpoint includes the accounting of other privations homologous with income deficiency, and which accommodates other factors specific to different contexts and realities. This is the reason for this paper's explicit reference to the feminization of *human* poverty.[1] Beyond material deprivation are social deprivations that are not homologous. Thus, there is no *universal* blueprint for empowerment considering that there is no one single face of human deprivation, as people's desires, values and preferences vary, as well as social norms and customary rights. The move towards a more inclusive approach with regards to women issues involves a shift in focus from the preoccupation on the growing number of women who are living in material poverty, to an engagement with multiple forms

[1]This follows the redefinition of poverty that has come within the growth in perspective on what development entails. The 1997 United Nations' Human Development Report, in and through the on-going stress on "human" development proposes a new conceptual framework, "human poverty." Economic deprivation is only a characteristic of poverty, yet there are the denial of opportunities and choices which are basic to human life (e.g. the opportunity to lead a long, healthy and creative life, the opportunity to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem, and respect for others). United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1997: Human Development to Eradicate Poverty*, New York: UNDP, 1997.

of disadvantages of women relative to opportunities, choices, and participation in decision-making for quality life.

This paper seeks to contribute to the discussions on the imperative of integral human development for all. From this perspective of integral development, widespread programs for women empowerment are focused on gender gaps and the *equalizing* possibilities and/or opportunities to bridge them. But such programs, however, fail to put into their equation the contribution of women themselves. Referring to the increase in people's ability to generate change,[2] empowerment is an important human development criterion. Not only does it refer to having a wider spectrum of choices, but also to the capability to direct the course of one's life through participation and involvement in decision-making. Empowerment, therefore, must not fail to take account of women and girls who, due to their disadvantaged position, are missing out on the promise of full human development.

1. The Feminization of *Human* Poverty

The Beijing Conference of 1995 highlighted that 70 percent of the world's poor are women. Its official reference to "feminization of poverty" gave it "global orthodoxy" despite critical views that it was not more than a catchphrase to involve the world in women's issues.[3] That women constitute the majority of the world's poor has been highly debated due to the lack of data to substantiate the claim. This view nevertheless gained attention and evolved through time, and some attribute this growing attention to the incontestable fact that women suffer a disadvantaged position.[4] According to Sylvia Chant the three underlying conditions of feminization of poverty are the following: women are poorer than men; the poverty gap between men and women has increased; and the increase of the number of poor women is due to the rise of female household headship.[5] Feminist critics, like Cecile Jackson, argue that there needs to be a differentiation between the approach to gender and to poverty. She

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[2]United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2010: Real Wealth of Nations*, Oxford: UNDP, 2010, 66.

[3]Sylvia Chant, "The 'Feminization of Poverty': A Reflection 20 Years after Beijing," United Nations Research Institute for Social Development http://www.unrisd.org/UNRISD/website/newsview.nsf/(httpNews)/8A36603F76FE20EFC1257DF80055522C?OpenDocument accessed April 8, 2016.

[4]Valentine Moghadam, *The 'Feminization of Poverty' and Women's Human Rights*, Paris Gender Equality and Development, UNESCO, 2005.

[5]Sylvia Chant, "The Feminization of Poverty."

holds that subjugation happens not solely in situations of poverty, and thus, antipoverty solutions will not necessarily resolve gender inequities. Jackson's position does not altogether debunk the fact that more and more women are carrying a disproportionate burden of (income) poverty, contrary to the views against "feminization of poverty." Rather, she draws attention to the danger of "the collapse of gender into a poverty trap"[6] which is based on the presumption that sufficient poverty measures can also bridge gender gaps. Attention to the differentiation of gender poverty and gender inequity vis-à-vis the concern for the women's straits, holds in perspective what can be an adequate approach to poverty, gender and, the shaping of development thinking and practice.

The data and illustrative cases presented in the sections that follow are not exhaustive of the multiple considerations for human development in Asia from a feminist perspective, particularly of how lingering gender biases make it more difficult for women to escape poverty and achieve well-being. They are put forward solely to illustrate the point that the discourse is more extensive, and thus, attention to context and valuations cannot be absent in proposals for policies and actions. The aim is to show the intricacies of situations and the reality of gender bias that renders the traditional measurement of poverty and its proposed equality agenda, necessary but deficient.

1.1. On Land Rights

The gender gap is most clearly observed with regards to property rights. Bina Agarwal asserts that "the gender gap in the ownership and control of property is the single most critical contributor to the gender gap in economic well-being, social status and empowerment."[7] That only less than 15 percent of land and properties are owned by women worldwide, indicates an alarmingly large gender gap to bridge.[8] Deprivation of the right to own is considered one of the primary culprits of the continuing poverty of women in Asia. Carlos Lopes points to the close links between ownership, empowerment, and human development.[9] In the anti-poverty approach to

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[6]Cecile Jackson, "Rescuing Gender from the Poverty Trap," *World Development* 24, 3 (1996) 501.

[7]Bina Agarwal, "Gender and Command over Property: A Critical Gap in Economic Analysis and Policy in South Asia," *World Development* 22, 10 (1994) 1455.

[8]Sylvia Chant, "Cities through a 'Gender Lens': A Golden 'Urban Age' for Women in the Global South?" *Environment and Urbanization* 25, 1 (2013) 17.

[9]Carlos Lopes, "Should We Mind the Gap?" in *Capacity for Development*, ed. Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, Carlos Lopes, and Khalid Malik, Virginia: Earthscan, 2002, 128.

development, right to property is viewed as a solution to economic deprivation. It is important, however, to point out that although "ownership" is more commonly understood in economic terms, people who have lived their lives in agricultural contexts or in the so-called "grassroots" consider land not only as an economic resource but is also, more importantly, an asset that defines their rootedness, identity, and sense of belonging.[10]

A study on gender inequalities in land rights in Asia reports that the different factors that impact women's landownership are age, headship, marital status, as well as wealth, religion and ethnicity.[11] Entitlement to land rights, in case it is allowed, is not an automatic assurance of actual concession of the right of usufruct. In Bangladesh, although women are allowed to own land, they are bound by cultural norms that urge them to forfeit their share of land in favour of their brothers or male relatives.[12] In the north eastern part of India, women are allowed to own land, but they are not entitled to manage the land.[13] It is also not uncommon in India to find widows who are subjected to "property grabbing" by their dead husband's kin.[14] In Timor-Leste, both women and men are constitutionally entitled to own a property, but the common way of acquiring land is through inheritance, and since it is a patrilineal society, the men inherit the land.[15] In Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines, etc., there are legal rights in land ownership for women and yet practice is significantly affected by "weak implementation of existing laws, customary and discriminatory practices, lack of information and ineffective gender mainstreaming

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[10]Anthonette Mendoza, "Whose Is the Land? Land Grabbing within the Development Enterprise in Asia: An Ethical Reading of 'Ownership' through Negotiations in Dialogue," in *Doing Asian Theological Ethics in a Cross-Cultural and an Interreligious Context*, ed. Yiu Sing Lucas Chan, James Keenan, and Shaji George Kochuthara, Bengaluru: Dhamaram Publications, 2016, 111-123.

[11]Caitlin Kieran and others, "Examining Gender Inequalities in Land Rights Indicators in Asia," *Agricultural Economics* 46 (2015) 136.

[12]Caitlin Kieran and others, "Examining Gender Inequalities," 129. See also Mohammod Lutful Kabir, "Gender Considerations for Rural Poverty Reduction in Bangladesh: A Perspective from Rnfe Households," *South Asia Economic Journal* 16, 2 (2015) 310.

[13]Kabir, "Gender Considerations," 310. See also, Syeda Sakira Sahin, "Women, Law and Inheritance in the Context of Customary Laws in North East India," in *2nd Annual International Conference on Political Science, Sociology and International Relations* (GSTF, 2012).

[14]Sylvia Chant, "Cities through a 'Gender Lens,'"18.

[15]Kieran and others, "Examining Gender Inequalities," 133.

strategies."[16] In Pakistan married men can choose to jointly own land with other men, rather than with their wives.[17]

The foregoing shows the different ways of disentitlements that severely affect women's status and identity. Deprivations that discriminate against women acutely confute forces that undermine women's well-being. Although women's right to acquire land may be at parity with men, permitted or maybe even encouraged in some countries are multiple forms of disentitlements which need to be fixed like the *de facto* decision-making on land utilization and transfer, which is contrary to diverse forms of customary negotiations. Inasmuch as land ownership is in a large way gendered, there are traditional settlements that need to be critically studied relative to gender preference in ownership deals.

1.2. On Women and Household Headship

The United Nations data reports that women bear 75 percent of the burden of unpaid work in households — the care and responsibility for approximately 2 billion children; 120 million elderly beyond 80 years of age; a billion of people with disabilities; and around 37 million people suffering from HIV-AIDS.[18]

The household is where predominant customary practices defy equality. Apart from the difficulty in securing income generation, women, due to social and cultural structure, are "time poor." Their day is stretched to meet their three functions: reproductive, productive and community managing activities.[19] Their reproductive role ties them to domestic obligations such as child-rearing. Their productive role is tied with their involvement in subsistence food production. Their community-managing role entails participation in productive measures outside the home that ensures meeting the basic needs of the family. The gender-bias is operative in these three roles, but it is made more complicated by the addition of the role of household headship, especially in rural areas where the women are denied land ownership.

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[16]Violeta Corral, "Women's Land Rights, Gender Responsive Policies and the World Bank (Philippines)," Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development http://asianfarmers.org/?p=3783 accessed April 10, 2016.

[17]Kieran and others, "Examining Gender Inequalities," 127.

[18]Selim Jahan and Tanni Mukhopadhyay, "Is Gender Equality Destined to Remain Our Perpetual Aspirational Dream," United Nations Human Development Programme http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-equality-destined-remain-our-perpetual-aspirational-dream accessed April 10, 2016.

[19]Caroline Moser, *Gender Planning and Development. Theory, Practice and Training*, London: Routledge, 1993.

Comparative studies are continually undertaken which focus on weighing the differences of male and female-headed households, particularly on the effect of gender headship with regards to income and well-being. In the 1980s and 1990s the female-headed households which were poorer than male-headed households grew in number. This was attributed to the lack of capital assets of women to serve as collateral to access credit resources; the absence of insurance and labour that could protect them from economic shocks; and the constraints of women's spatial mobility on account of domestic obligations and/or informal economic activities.[20] The diverse results of the comparative studies, however, show the difficulty of establishing the aforementioned assertion about the increase of poor female-headed households as an indisputable fact, yet they have opened the necessity for further probing on how female-headed households are actually faring.

The study of Klasen, Lechtenfeld and Povel points to a differentiation of female-headed household: *de facto* and *de jure*. This differentiation opens a new way of measuring vulnerabilities. The former involves "a self-reported female head whose husband is either present (...) or who is absent for most of the time" (e.g. husband is a migrant worker). The latter involves women who "are the legal and customary heads" (e.g. divorced or separated, widows, etc.)[21] The former generally fares better in terms of income, due to remittances (whenever the husband is working abroad) and in terms of division of responsibilities. The latter on the other hand experience more vulnerabilities because the income flow is not as secured; they are found to be consumption poor and acutely vulnerable to health problems. Mobility is almost impossible for women who take the role of household headship since they are tied to their many roles and responsibilities.

1.3. On Women and Migration

A trend of the 21st century is the rise of migration of "increasingly younger, mobile and feminized workforce."[22] In Asia, women who

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[20]Sylvia Chant, "Cities through a 'Gender Lens,'" 15. See also Stephen Klasen, Tobias Lechtenfeld, and Feliz Povel, "A Feminization of Vulnerability? Female Headship. Poverty and Vulnerability in Thailand and Vietnam," *World Development* 71 (2013) 37.

[21]Klasen, Lechtenfeld, and Povel, "A Feminization of Vulnerability," 38.

[22]UN Women, "Regional Conference Sets the Stage for Advancing Rights of Women Migrant Workers in Asia," http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2012/9/regional-conference-sets-the-stage-for-advancing-rights-of-women-migrant-workers-in-asia accessed April 15, 2016.

move are most likely not only in search of jobs. They leave their villages because they do not have any pasture for customarily they are not entitled to any land or any property due to the cumulative disadvantage of gender.[23] With the rapid rise of industrialization and urbanization, people from the rural areas move to the city, in their search for a better life. But contrary to their hope, they end up in deplorable human situations. Women are subjected to institutionalized discriminations attributed to existing gender biases. They are forced to take physically exacting jobs that the urban workers reject as degrading and low paying.[24]

We take the case of China. It is given the title "world factory" due to its large share of diverse production plants that supply the global market. It has become a hub for labour that encourages migration, especially women since they are of "nimble fingers" and are "agreeable" with 'disposable labour.'[25] Nana Zhang's study reports that roughly 158 million migrants from the rural areas of China move to the cities and approximately 36 percent of them are women.[26] Rural residents of Henan and Hebei, mostly women, move to the big cities such as Beijing and Shantou to work at the labour intensive factories and the service sectors leaving their agricultural work behind. The promise of prosperity is, however, hardly achieved, and if it is, it comes with great hardship. In the big cities, as the study of Zhang reports, women who migrate are subjected to multiple forms of oppression, making it impossible for them to escape poverty. The state has a social apparatus of differentiation called the *hokou* system, a household registrations that "differentiate rural migrants from urban residents (...) to keep migrant labour cheap and flexible, and hence remain competitive within the global market."[27] Women from the rural areas are called "blind migrants," "floating population," "peasant workers," etc. Sadly, all these denote in capitalist terms, *cheap labour.*

Furthermore, the Zhang study reports that women are not only subjected to hegemonic status defined by the state and global capital,

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[23]Sylvia Chant, "Cities through a 'Gender Lens,'" 11.

[24]International Labour Office, "Discrimination at Work in Asia," http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_norm/@declaration/documents/publication/wcms_decl_fs_89_en.pdf accessed April 5, 2016.

[25]Nana Zhang, "Performing Identities: Women in Rural-Urban Migration in Contemporary China," *Geoforum* 54, (2014) 17.

[26]Zhang, "Performing Identities," 17.

[27]Zhang, "Performing Identities," 18.

but are also subjected to "an almost homogenous representation of rural migrant women, caught up in a binary identity categories such as rural/urban and traditional/modern, leaving no room to re-examine the fluidity of women's negotiation of identity."[28] Since the rural migrant workers are classified as the new form of working class, they are regarded "low-quality" (*di suzhi*)[29] and thus, are not entitled to any of the basic social services (e.g. health, education, housing, pension, etc.). Migration from the rural area to the cities subject women to another form of subjugation as they are considered as cheap resources for increased production gains. They conform to yet another irregular transformation: "from being invisible labourers in rural households to being urban wage-earners."[30]

The illustrative case of China finds various levels of resonance in different parts of Asia. Self-esteem, identity, status and agency are challenged as women enter the so-called "urban age," which affects not only rural women but also urban poor women. The discriminations they suffer are due to the colossal power of the state and the market to gain control over them and turn them into commodified labour force. Women who find jobs outside their countries face the same if not greater challenges. The Philippine government regards Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as "*bagong bayani*" or the new heroes since they keep the economy afloat. In 2012, 61.4 percent of OFWs were female whose ages range from 15-34. They were hired in either the service sector or entertainment.[31] Domestic workers, caregivers and caretakers who are lowly regarded, are not covered by labour laws or social protection (e.g. most of them are required to stay at their employers' houses where they are always on-call). They are uprooted from the security of home and family, and thrown in situations where they are discriminated, are made to do hard physical labour, and are victimized and abused.

1.4. On Women and Human Capital

Studies show that 70 percent of the world's working hours are taken up by women and yet they earn only 10 percent of the world's

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[28]Zhang, "Performing Identities," 17-18.

[29]Zhang describes that the peasant workers are "depicted as a homogenous mass, and a problematic 'other' with low quality (di suzhi) that needs to be fixed." See Zhang, "Performing Identities," 18.

[30]Zhang, "Performing Identities," 21.

[31]Philippine Commission on Women, "Statistics on Filipino Women and Men's Overseas Employment," http://www.pcw.gov.ph/statistics/201405/statistics-filipino-women-and-mens-overseas-employment accessed April 5, 2016.

income.[32] Wage differentials in Asia are despicable, as the women continue to earn 70-90 percent less than the men.[33] Multi-national companies choose Asia and other countries in the South as production sites due to the availability of low-cost wo-man power. Women are the preferred labour force for any type of job in sweatshops.

Women from ages 16-25, from the income poor, rural and urban, take jobs that yield subsistence wages for extensive labour hours in unhealthy and unsafe conditions. The collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh is an example. Factories that supplied garments for Canadian and European high street retailers were housed in the Rana building. A day before the tragedy, the owner of the factory insisted that production continue, despite cracks in the building. Its collapse caused the death of around 1,100 people. 80%of the 3,000 workers were women from 18-20 years of age, who were earning a deplorable .12 dollar cents an hour on a standard shift of 13 to 14 ½ hours per day.[34]

Women and men in the Philippines, China, India, Pakistan, etc. also work and live under unjust conditions. Although there should be legal provisions for social welfare of workers, owners of companies and factories find their way around labour regulations through diminution of workers' benefits to keep the low cost of manual labour (e.g. contractualization). That women are now employed in jobs which traditionally hired only men, is held as an achievement of "equality." Yet women are still subjected to the long hours of work with meagre pay, coupled by the domestic chores that await them after work.

Economic growth is viewed as corollary to poverty reduction and human development. Yet crucial to the promotion of economic progress are the questions on the kind of growth, and who bears the costs and enjoys the benefits. Sylvia Chant gives a sober reminder that "it is important to bear in mind that although mobilizing investments in women can have huge impact on the generation of wealth, there is also a serious danger of instrumentalizing gender to

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[32]United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1995: Gender and Human Development*, New York: UNDP, 1995, 36.

[33]Asian Development Bank, "Gender Equality and Discrimination in Asia and the Pacific: 12 Things to Know," September 18 2012, http://www.adb.org/features/12-things-know-2012-gender-equality accessed April 20, 2016.

[34]Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights, "Rana Plaza. A Look Back and Forward," http://www.globallabourrights.org/campaigns/factory-collapse-in-bangladesh accessed April 15, 2016.

meet those ends."[35] Investment in human capital does not address gender disparities. If these disparities are to be overcome, equality in opportunities in education, vocational and skills training, and wage commensurate to labour, should be ensured for women, to develop their capacities, to build their self esteem and their ability to exert agency.[36]

2. Equality and Integral Human Development

The brief and non-exhaustive Asian narrative above gives a glimpse of the complexity of addressing human poverty, especially when women are concerned. They cannot be met by truncated solutions. Most development programmes posit gender equality to respond to the "feminization of human poverty," but is it enough? We argue to the contrary.

2.1. The Equality Agenda and MDG no. 3

The MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) received a good (critical) following in view of their impact on women's disadvantaged condition. They were praised for *advancing gender equality and women empowerment*, as stated in Goal No. 3.[37] They commit to the empowerment of women in social, political and economic spheres. Their target is the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 and in all levels of schooling no later than the 2015 deadline. Their set goal is gender parity in schools, in jobs in the non-agricultural sector, and in the proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament.

Following the MDGs timeline, East Asia and the Pacific projected the achievement of gender equality and women empowerment in 2020, which means five years beyond the 2015 target, owing perhaps to the difficulty of its pursuit. Its single target, gender parity at school, drew critical opposition, mostly due to the question of its feasibility, given the immensity of gender disparities at present in multiple other areas, such as work, household, health, etc.[38]

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[35]Chant, "Cities through a 'Gender Lens,'" 24.

[36]Chant, "Cities through a 'Gender Lens,'" 15.

[37]United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2003: Millenium Development Goals. A Compact among Nations to End Human Poverty*, Oxford: UNDP, 2003, 50.

[38]Ashwani Saith, "From Universal Values to Millennium Development Goals: Lost in Translation," *Development and Change* 37, 6 (2006) 1174.

The 2012/2013 Asia-Pacific Regional MDGs Report,[39] highlighted the persistence of the bias against women. Women are still experiencing severe shortfall in health, education and in their access to power and rights. The opportunities for non-agricultural wage employment remain low — a disadvantage caused by the abiding problem of limited skills and mobility, as well as, prevailing gender norms. Given this situation, income generation remains through informal work. Although parity in school attendance increased in the primary level, there were other critical issues that needed to be addressed such as the number of school drop-outs, the quality of education and the issues of violence in school.[40] There is also the issue of boys being given priority over girls in terms of educational opportunities. In the rural areas of Southeast Asian countries, for instance, when the family's income drops, the girl child is pulled out of school for the boy child to continue studying.

What could be the reasons for the poor response to the pursuit for gender equality in Asia? We have argued that although important, the aim for equality falls short in approaching the issue of the feminization of *human* poverty. This is because the language of equality has its own poverty.[41] We draw three of its limitations from the foregoing appraisal of contexts and response.

First, equality requires a specific spectrum of chosen variables and measurements that are not free from bias. Development policies and platforms for action like the MDGs posit variables for the promotion of gender equality that are drawn from particular mindsets, and which are necessarily driven by particular notions of the good life. Adela Cortina points out that

> (t)here is no axiologically neutral human activity; development work is, like other activities, impregnated with values of one type of ethics or another. They may be values of economic efficiency, competitiveness, economic growth, and a high level of consumption, or they may be

[39]UN ESCAP, ADB, and UNDP, *Asia-Pacific Aspirations. Perspectives for a Post -2015 Development Agenda. Asia Pacific Regional Mdgs Report 2012/2013*, New York, 2012/2013, 2. We are using this regional report instead of the 2015 MDG Report because the latter uses 1990 as the base year instead of 2000.

[40]UN ESCAP, ADB, and UNDP, *Asia-Pacific Aspirations,* 2.

[41]Amartya Sen contends that "we have to recognize the variety and extensive reach of the demands of equality, without seeking in it a completeness of considerations that cannot possibly be there." See Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 138.

intended to reduce inequalities, meet the basic needs and foster basic capacities of people and reinforce self-esteem.[42]

The MDGs represent a global compact to eliminate poverty. They serve one purpose, which is defined according to a specific understanding of poverty. Despite the people-centred view of MDGS of development, their anti-poverty approach is largely focused on income poverty.[43]

Second, the achievement of specific conditions for gender equality does not automatically overcome other institutionalized inequalities. It is not able to fill the moral gap. Gender equality for gender justice must address institutionalized inequalities in the economic, political, legal and social domains of societies that are deleterious to the achievement of well-being (e.g. the commodification of women and resources and systemic and social exclusion). "Women hold up half the sky," was how Mao Zedong construed gender equality and women participation in society. Feng Yuan, a women's rights activist, however, states "If we talk about power-sharing, they don't want women holding up half the sky — or even one-third of the sky."[44]

And third, the MDG notion of gender equity does not cover all the dimensions of women empowerment, and conversely, of human development. The pursuit of gender equality, as a platform for action, should bridge the gap of the participation of women and men in society. This equality, however, only achieves its full measure if it acknowledges women as women and their capacities, and if it upholds human rights founded on human dignity, intrinsic worth of people, and common good.

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[42]Adela Cortina, *Development Ethics. A Road to Peace, The Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies*, 2007 https://kellogg.nd.edu/publications/workingpapers/WPS/339.pdf accessed April 20, 2016.

[43]The MDGs evoke the anti-poverty approach that permeated the development discourse in the 1970s. Caroline Moser's seminal work, *Gender Planning and Development Theory*, maps the different approaches of Women in Development, and explains the anti-poverty approach which gained popularity in the 1970s. The focus is directed towards the alleviation of poverty and on women's productive role. It posits that gender inequality is due to income inequality, and therefore, to resolve the latter, is to achieve development. Caroline Moser, *Gender Planning and Development,* 67-68. See also, Ashwani Saith, "From Universal Values," 1174.

[44]Keith Richburg, "In Communist China, Women Officially Equal but Lagging far Behind Politically," *The Washington Post*, November 2, 2012 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-communist-china-women-officially-equal-but-lagging-far-behind-politically/2012/11/01/4af037a8-21da-11e2-92f8-7f9c4daf276a_story.html accessed April 20, 2016.

2.2. Integral Human Development

The majority of women in Asia are subjected to situations, both customary and institutional, which do not respect their agency in deciding for themselves. Even their identity is defined for them, as in the case of the "blind migrants" in China. The parameters within which we have tried to understand the feminization of human poverty is through its link with human development. We contend that empowerment refers to people's ability to generate change through participation and decision-making which direct the course of their lives as individuals in community. Given that inequalities involve issues of gender, ethnicity, politics, law, and economy, the human development discourse must find a broader moral basis to anchor on. If the cycles of bias — gender bias or any other bias that causes social divisions and conflicts — are to be reversed and transformed, there must be an alternative vision, communal denunciation, and collective action.

The encyclical *Populorum Progressio* reiterates that authentic development cannot be less than what is integral, involving the whole person and every person.[45] Basing on the insights of the document, Albino Barrera stresses that development is neither merely economic nor is it significantly economic, rather it is about the whole person (integral: body, mind and spirit) and about every person (human: no one is excluded).[46] These dimensions posit the following points : *first*, that human development is not only limited to material progress but is conditioned by the transcendent nature of people, with the capacity for self-fulfilment; and *second*, that human development is about being and becoming together. In the light of the first point, any human development approach must broaden its understanding of poverty from merely income poverty to human poverty. And based on the second point, the building of human relationships and the fostering of communal solidarity is necessary for human development.

Barrera stresses that what binds people is rooted in a natural and constitutive responsibility to secure each other's well-being. Integral human development as such cannot allow anyone to be left behind.[47] This view of our natural and constitutive responsibility for each

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[45]Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967), 14. Church document citations are take from David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon, ed., *Catholic Social Thought. The Documentary Heritage,* New York: Maryknoll, 2005.

[46]Albino Barrera, *Modern Catholic Social Documents and Political Economy*, 34.

[47]Albino Barrera, "Globalization's Shifting Economic and Moral Terrain: Contesting Marketplace Mores," *Theological Studies* 69 (2008) 306-307.

other's well being underlines the reflections of Pope John Paul II on solidarity as *moral* interdependence (SRS 1987:26), challenging *unequal interdependence* which violates a just recognition of the human dignity of persons.[48] In this light, the fight against the discrimination of women (e.g. deprivations, reification of their worth as persons, citizens, workers, mothers, wives, etc.), warrants a strong and continuing commitment to the principles of dignity, equal opportunity, mutuality, and democratic participation.

The enabling matrix for moral interdependence, in the promotion of integral human development in the Catholic social thought perspective, is the common good. The encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, as frequently quoted, defines common good as "the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby men are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection."[49] It "insists on the conditions and institutions necessary for human cooperation and the achievement of shared objectives as decisive normative elements in the social situation, elements which individualism is unable to account for in theory and is likely to neglect in practice."[50] As the bishops of England and Wales reiterate, "[b]ecause we are interdependent, the common good is more like a multiplication sum, where if any one number is zero then the total is always zero. If anyone is left out and deprived of what is essential, then the common good has been betrayed."[51]

3. Concluding Statement

Equality, as an ethical value, seeks proportionate allocation of costs and gains. However, the equality agenda, particularly concerning women issues, is not free from influential axioms on addressing poverty or from predetermined notion of what constitutes development. The recognition of human dignity and moral interdependence, as well as the pursuit of the common good, must ground the equality agenda. Any plea for equality should be for the integral human flourishing of all — women, children, elderly, and all, leaving no one behind.

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[48]David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 189.

[49] John XXII, *Mater et Magistra* (1961), 65.

[50]*The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, s.v. "Common Good."

[51]Statement by the Bishops of England and Wales, "Choosing the Common Good," London: Alive Publishing, 2010, 8.