

**ASIAN  
HORIZONS**

Vol. 8, No. 3, September 2014

Pages: 647-655

Second National Seminar on Moral Theology in  
India Today

**GENDER JUSTICE IN THE CHURCH AND  
SOCIETY**

**17-20 July 2014**

**Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (DVK), Bangalore 560029 India  
([www.dvk.in](http://www.dvk.in))**

The Department of moral theology of the Faculty of Theology at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram organised a Seminar on "Gender Justice in the Church and Society," from 17-20 July 2014. This was the second in the series of national seminars, "Moral Theology in India Today," organised by Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram.

**Context:** Although we believe that God created man and woman equal in dignity, almost invariably in most societies this equality has not been practised. The Church does not seem to be an exception. It is indeed praiseworthy that today in the Church and society there is a greater awareness of the equal dignity of man and woman. Yet, gender discrimination and violence against women continue in different forms. The brutal gang rape and killing of a girl in Delhi (who is given the name "Nirbhaya") in 2012 December was an occasion for the Indian society to become painfully aware of the cruelties and atrocities that women undergo in our society. Many more such incidents have continued to occur.

**Objectives:** "Gender Justice in the Church and Society" aimed at creating awareness in society as a whole, and especially in the Church, of the different forms of gender injustice that continue to exist. We believe that injustice done to any person is injustice to humanity. Any form of discrimination and violence in the name of gender contradicts Jesus' vision of man-woman relationship. We particularly reflected on the spiralling incidence of rape and violence

against women and our task as moral theologians to build a gender-just society free of violence.

**Planning Committee:** Rev. Dr Mathew Illathuparampil (St Joseph Pontifical Seminary, Aluva), Rev. Dr Mathew Coutinho, SDB (Divyadan Institute, Nashik, Bombay), Rev. Dr Prem Xalxo, SJ (Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Roma), Dr Sr Vimala Chenginimattam, CMC (Jnanodaya, Bangalore), Rev. Dr Paulachan Kochappilly, CMI, Rev. Dr Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI (Convenor) (Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram). Event Management: Rev. Dr Lucose Chamakala, CMI and Team.

The Seminar was organised in collaboration with Missio, Aachen, Germany.

**Participants:** 85 persons participated in the seminar. Participants consisted of moral theologians, women theologians, those who are working for the empowerment of women, those who are working in the pastoral field and post-graduate and doctoral students of moral theology. Two bishops participated in the seminar, presented papers and actively took part in the discussions. There were also a few experts from other religions and other Churches who presented papers and guided discussions.

### **Dynamics of the Seminar**

There were three keynote addresses, twenty six plenary papers and nine parallel session papers. Besides, ample time was given for discussion and interaction.

### **Day 1, 17 July 2014: Gender Justice and Theology**

Rev. Dr Saju Chackalackal, CMI, the President of Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (DVK) gave the inaugural message. Rev. Dr Thomas Aykara, CMI (Rector, Dharmaram College), Rev. Dr Thomas Kollamparampil, CMI (Dean, Faculty of Theology, DVK) and Rev. Dr Thomas Srampickal, one of the veteran moral theologians in India, gave messages during the inaugural function. Thomas Aykara shared some of his experiences pointing out that even some of the well educated and capable women express lack of confidence when they have to address the hierarchy, as they are not trained to do so. He said that the Church should be open to radical changes. Thomas Kollamparampil highlighted the importance given to women in the tradition of the Church. Thomas Srampickal explained how justice to women should become an integral part of Church's teaching on justice.

The first keynote address (“Gender Justice and Theology: Why is it so Hard to Move from Ideals to Practices?”) was given by Lisa Sowle Cahill (Boston College, USA). Cahill said that, Violence against women, especially domestic violence and rape, are worldwide evils. Cahill delineated four basic and interlocking reasons for the failure of the Roman Catholic Church to make its message heard: 1. The Catholic theology and ethics of gender justice is internally conflicted; 2. Hegemonic Masculinity; 3. The Catholic Theology of Gender Justice Fails to Move from Rhetoric to Reality; and 4. Too many Catholics still work with a top-down ecclesiology.

In the first plenary, there were two papers on Biblical Perspectives on Gender Justice. Joy Philip Kakkanattu, CMI (DVK) argued that though the general perception is that the Bible has a patriarchal attitude, some point out that “it is not the text, but rather the interpretation of the text that is unjust and oppressive towards woman.” He underlined the importance of “working together for the two aspects of gender justice: equality and mutuality.” X.D. Selvaraj (moral theologian), referring to various biblical passages where women appear, emphatically argued that, “if some texts of the Bible downgrade women and portray them as inferior, it is incompatible with the God of the Bible.”

Plenary 2 focussed on the continuing discrimination against women in India, analysing it from Hindu, Muslim and Tribal perspectives. Prof. Dr Kiran Prasad (Sri Padmavati Mahila University, Tirupati) traced the spiritual journey of Hindu women through the ancient period of excellence and leadership to their subsequent disenfranchisement and discrimination in modern times. She said that despite intellectual attainments, gender discrimination persists within the Hindu family. Prof. Waheeda Sultana (Mangalore University) argued that there is an increase in the enrolment of Muslim girls in educational institutions. Though she mentioned about the changing perspectives in the Muslim community, her paper focused more on the discrimination against Muslim girls due to the use of burqa, and argued that more understanding will help Muslim girls to become educated. Sr Lalita Roshini Lakra, DSA (BEACON, Ranchi) examined the discrimination against women in the tribal societies, especially on the following areas: 1. Customary laws and women’s land rights; 2. Land and demonization of women; 3. The economic and physical exploitation of tribal women labourers; and 4. The tribal domestic working women.

## Day 2, 18 July 2014: Gender Relations in the Church

The second day began with the Keynote address by Bishop Felix Toppo, SJ (Bishop of Jamshedpur), on "Building up a More Gender Just Church." He said that building up a more gender just Church "is one of the most challenging, urgent and relevant issues for the Church and Society in the third millennium." He underscored that we are invited to acknowledge the "God-given dignity and vocation of women, "to remove any form of discrimination against women and build up a collaborative Church." According to him, "in Christian Community, gender justice means encouraging men and women to exercise the gifts of the Spirit in the Church's ministries like, worship, teaching, preaching, giving leadership, celebrating, etc." He acknowledged that patriarchal culture and structures are present in the Church as well.

Plenary 3 was on "Gender and the Family." Rev. Dr Matthew Coutinho, SDB (Divyadaan, Nasik), in his paper *Mulieris Dignitatem*: Tracing Elements for Building a 'Gender Just' Ethos in the Family," examining *Mulieris Dignitatem* said that, "The way we view and treat women has a profound impact on family life and in turn on the social fabric." In her paper, "Equal Partnership in the Family," Shiji Varghese, opined that though most couple say they prefer an equal partnership, studies show that few couples live up to that rhetoric. According to her, "in an equal partnership, Independence is equal, Dependence is mutual and Obligation is reciprocal." She pointed out that often women feel the entire responsibility of preserving the family and hence she is compelled to endure domestic violence in silence. "Is the Church's Family Apostolate Programme Gender Sensitive?" by Arul Raj Gali, CSC (Bangalore) emphasised that one of the ways to empower the family is through gender sensitivity. He proposed some concrete ways to integrate gender sensitivity into marriage preparation courses as well as family apostolate programmes in various phases. Bishop Joshua Mar Ignathios (Bishop of Mavelikkara), in his paper, "Role of Women in the Church," explored the role of women in the Church in three broad approaches: The Ideal, the Actual and the Consequent Challenges. On the one hand, the Scriptures are full of evidence for the equal role ascribed to women; on the other hand, the church has remained deeply patriarchal in its attitudes and behaviour. Female leadership is conspicuous by its absence, pointed out the bishop.

Plenary 4 focussed on "Building Bridges." Virginia Saldanha (Women's Rights Activist and Theologian, Mumbai) presented the

paper on “Gender-Relations in the Tradition of the Church, Women’s Ministries in the Church.” According to her, “unequal gender relations and harmful manifestations of hegemonic masculinity governed by patriarchal beliefs, institutions and systems have kept women from achieving their full potential in Church and society.” In India, many women play active role in the Church. But, few of them have titles or recognition for their committed services in the Church, she pointed out. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, presenting the CBCI Gender Policy (24 February 2010), showed how it is a tool for Gender Justice. Though it is a landmark document, it is rather ambiguous on women’s role within the church. She also suggested that gender sensitivity programmes must become mandatory at all levels of formation across all ages. “Status and Role of Women Religious towards a Gender Just Church,” by Sr Dr Vimala Chenginimattam, CMC dealt with the gender status of women religious in the Catholic Church. Women religious have played a variety of roles in the Church and society, but when it comes to participation in ecclesiastical authorities and decision making body women are marginalized miserably, she opined. The injustice of downgrading women to mere co-operators is not done by nature but by the society and patriarchal tradition, argued Sr Vimala.

Plenary 5 was on “Gender and Healthcare.” In her paper, “Gender Bias in Healthcare,” Dr Jyothi Idiculla (St John’s Medical College, Bangalore), explored facets to gender biases in healthcare for males, females and transgenders. In every stage of their life, women face discrimination which restricts their rights to health and wellbeing, Dr Jyothi pointed out. She also said that while women’s issues are being sharply focussed, the gender issues in healthcare in men and transgenders cannot be ignored. “Female Infanticide in India: Bioethical Appraisal” by Rev. Dr Scaria Kanniyakonil (Paurastya Vidya Pitham, Vadavathoor) highlighted one of the most tragic consequence of gender discrimination, namely, sex selective abortions. Kanniyakonil identified prejudice, discrimination and economic reasons as the main causes for female infanticide and proposed the integration of justice with virtue of charity. Rev. Dr William Eronimoose, MI presented the paper on the “Revolution of Commercial Surrogacy in India.” According to him, surrogacy has become commercial in nature and a woman’s womb is being rented for money, thus becoming a form of exploitation of women.

### **Day 3, 19 July 2014: Gender and Violence in the Indian Society**

On the third day, the keynote address, “Gender, Violence and Law in the Indian Society,” was delivered by Prof. Dr V.S. Elizabeth

(National Law School, Bangalore). She argued that violence in various forms against women is quite widely prevalent, but “society’s response has been to hold women responsible for the violence they are subjected to.” According to her, all the crimes against women are gender-based violence and gender-based violence is merely reflective of the unequal power relations between women and men in the world today. While appreciating the changes in law, she underscored that “law can be an instrument of social change but not until changes in attitude and practices have been ushered in along with the changes in the economic and social relations between women and men.”

Plenary 6 dealt with “Gender and Law.” The New Rape Law: Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 - An Overview and Some Ethical Reflections,” by Rev. Dr George Kodithottam, SJ (Vidya Deep Regional Seminary, Gujarat) said that the inadequacies in the Indian laws dealing with sexual violence against women were long felt. The most important new provision is that the definition of ‘rape’ is broadened to include actions other than penile-vaginal penetration. Lavanya Devdas (“Talk It Over”; Christ Junior College, Bangalore) presented the paper on “Drawing the Line: Arresting Sexual Violence at Workplace.” She presented the salient features of the landmark *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013*, which has come into force in the backdrop of heinous acts of sexual violence on women in the country. She said that if true women’s protection is to be achieved, every workplace must ensure a safe workplace for women. This is necessary, especially because women are taking employment in areas that were earlier thought to be out of reach or belonged to men. Sr Julie George SSpS (Advocate, Activist and Director Streevani, Pune) addressed the burning issue of “Domestic Violence and Patriarchal Bargains.” She said that domestic violence is a matter of serious concern not only because of the trauma which they engender in the victim, but also because these are practices which are being tolerated by society. Due to patriarchal mindset, often the husband feels completely justified in physically abusing the wife. In the case of Domestic violence and matrimonial disputes, the women are eyed with suspicion. The legislature did a commendable job of enforcing the ‘Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005’. However, contradictory opinions from the Courts on cases under Domestic Violence Act can be seen. Religious beliefs reinforce the commitment to marriage and in practice, the whole responsibility is given to the wife.

Plenary 7 included a paper on Dowry and experience sharing of dowry related violence and workplace harassment. Donna Fernandes (Vimochana, Bangalore), in her paper, "Investigating Kitchen Accidents," drew the attention of the audience to the continuing horrible incidents of dowry related killing and violence. She said that just in the city of Bangalore over 100 women die (are killed) every month in dowry related violence. The majority of the women killed or driven to suicide are between the ages of 18 and 25, barely married for a period of three months to a year. "Marriage has become a virtual death trap where women are subject to all kinds of violence largely because of unfulfilled demands of dowry," argued Donna Fernandes. Often, patriarchal attitudes of the investigation agencies and judiciary hamper the process of justice. She also pointed out that "in almost all crimes against women it is now an established fact that the disconnect between women's lives and law is so wide that the time has come for us to reject its absurdity" and called for a system where women are heard and their experiences of violence validated. The paper presentation was followed by the experience sharing of a young medical doctor, who had a narrow escape from an attempted murder by her husband and family who continued to demand even after her marriage money and gifts from her family. Lavanya Devdas shared experience of women who had to undergo sexual harassment and violence in the workplace.

Plenary 8 was a Panel Discussion on "Does Moral Theological Formation in the Indian Seminaries Promote Gender Justice?" Rev. Dr Mathew Illathuparampil (St Joseph Pontifical Seminary, Aluva) dealt with the promotion of gender sensitivity in the formation in his own seminary as well as in other seminaries in Kerala. At the very outset he observed that, "Seminaries have been generally considered an exclusively male domain. The young celibates are trained to keep themselves aloof from the female world in body and spirit. Therefore, it is not quite surprising that Seminaries have become largely gender insensitive." He dealt with the following three issues: Why gender sensitivity is important in the Seminaries? What is the current situation in Seminaries? What can be done to further gender sensitivity in the clerical formation programs? Illathuparampil underscored that women must become a part of decision making in the Church and society. "Gender Justice In The Context Theological Formation," by Rev. Dr Paulachan Kochappilly, CMI (DVK) dealt with the topic, mainly based on the formation in Dharmaram College and Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram. He recalled the pioneering step

taken by Dharmaram to admit women for theological studies, already from 1970's. He outlined various programmes offered for the theological education of women, and the emphasis given in moral theology subjects for a more gender sensitive theological formation. Rev. Dr John Karuvellil, SJ (Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune), presented the paper on "Does Moral Theological Formation in the Indian Seminaries Promote Gender Justice? A Response from Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune," prepared especially based on interviews with women students of Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth. He highlighted the following areas where gender justice issues is reflected: the JDV environment in general, the academic curriculum, the female staff in JDV, the women's forum and the JDV Students' Council, Scholarships for women, the women's grievance cell, and, finally, special commitment to women's issues through collaboration with organizations and institutions that address women's issues.

Plenary 9 discussed a few other important concerns. Prem Xalxo, SJ (Gregorian University, Rome), in his paper, "Pursuit of Gender Justice and Equality in Mass Media," probed the following pertinent questions: Are the media really responsible for gender-based violence? Do the media present a distorted version of socio-cultural and ethical life as far as the gendered crimes are concerned? He pointed out that most of the media machinery is run by men and it seems natural to them "to reproduce and portray habitually, systematically and continuously the unequal gendered social relationships within a particular culture and community." He said that the predominant Indian culture has always considered women as sex objects and media exploits this perception. Subordination of women is a subtle form of gender injustice being portrayed continuously by the media. "Gender Equity in Education Ministries," by Pearl Drego (New Delhi) showed that gender education should be integrated with a value-based enlightened scheme of learning and training within which both sexes are sensitised to the issues of equality, justice, support of the voiceless and neglected. Rev. Dr Saji Kanayankal, CST (Aluva), in his paper, "Healing the Wounds: Gender Discrimination, Ecological Crisis and Shifting Paradigms," in his paper addressed some of the most significant concerns of gender discrimination in relation to the ecological crisis. He pointed out that many would accuse patriarchal religion for the separation between human and nature as well as women and men.

The Following papers were presented in the parallel sessions: Rev. Dr Stanislaus Alla, SJ (Vidyajyoti, Delhi): "Women at Vatican II: An



Appraisal"; Rev. Dr Michael Peters, CPPS (Goa): "Goddess and Women in Hindu Religion and Culture"; Kochuthresia Puliappallil, OSS (DVK): "Feminine Virtues and the Ethical Necessity of Attitudinal Changes"; Rev. Dr Charles Davis (Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune): "Gender Matters in Stem Cell Research"; Anandita Ghosh and Tissy Mariam Thomas (Christ University, Bangalore): "Impact of Rape on Secondary Survivors: A Psychosocial Perspective"; Jijo T. Varghese (DVK): "Woman: Man's Property or God's Gift?" Rev. Dr Lourdhu Jeevaraj (St Paul's Seminary, Trichy): "A Need for a Redemptive Paradigm in Conjugal Morality in Empowering Women from Spousal Abuse"; and Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI (DVK): "Sexuality, Gender and Sexual Violence."

The presentation of papers was followed by lively discussions. Some of the issues proposed during the discussions:

- Take a stand on dowry. Church should not celebrate marriages where dowry is exchanged.
- Is it possible to ensure free education to at least a few women in the theological institutions in India?
- Often, just wages are not given to women religious who work in Catholic institutions. Can the Church ensure just wages to them?
- To ensure a more gender sensitive formation, can the seminaries think about having "Spiritual Mothers" like Spiritual Fathers?
- Can there be an open discussion at least with regard to the diaconate of women?
- Gender discrimination is not an issue of women only, but it is a human issue. Patriarchy does harm to men as well.

The seminar was an occasion, especially for interaction among people who work in varied fields. Those who are in active ministry told that it was enlightening for them to listen to and interact with those who are teaching theology, a rare occasion that they get. Those who are engaged in teaching ministry said that it was an enriching experience to listen directly to the concerns of people who are in the field. The seminar also led to concrete decisions. For example, a few who teach moral theology in the theology faculties said that they would make the Gender Policy of the CBCI part of their courses and an obligatory reading material for students. Some others said that they would try to sensitize against dowry, especially in their parishes and among their family members.

**Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI**  
**Convenor**