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Editorial

Gender: Theology and Praxis

The question of gender and gender justice cannot be limited to two genders, namely, male and female. Thanks to developments in various branches of science, today we understand more clearly that there exist more than two genders and that the question of gender justice pertains to all genders, though the issue of two genders is more common and conspicuous. Although this issue of *Asian Horizons* on “Gender: Theology and Praxis” focuses on the two genders of male and female, we do not limit our deliberations to these two genders.

In the twentieth century (especially during its second half) and twenty first century, women have achieved greater heights in socio-political life, in the field of science and technology and in every sphere of social and cultural life. Many laws also were enacted by the states for safeguarding the rights of women. For example, in India many such laws were enacted in the post-Independence period, especially following the struggle of women’s movements in 1970s: Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005)¹ and Criminalisation of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace (1997 and 2013)² are some of them. In spite of the continuing discrimination against women in various forms and in various parts of the world, we cannot deny the progress made towards a gender-just society and the invaluable contributions made by women in all spheres of human life, though much more is to be achieved in this regard. However, here we do not venture into a detailed description of those achievements and developments, since our main concern is an

¹http://chdsla.gov.in/right_menu/act/pdf/domviolence.pdf

²Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, Ministry of Law and Justice, Indian Parliament, April 23, 2013, <http://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/Sexual-Harassment-at-Workplace-Act.pdf>.

understanding and assessment of a theology of gender in the Catholic tradition and the gap between theology and praxis.

During the last few decades there has been a growing awareness in theology that gender justice is an essential dimension of Christian commitment to justice. This has led to considerable changes in the life of the Church and society. The Second Vatican Council reflects this vision when it acknowledges that, “Women now work in almost all spheres. It is fitting that they are able to assume their proper role in accordance with their own nature. It will belong to all to acknowledge and favor the proper and necessary participation of women in the cultural life” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 60). Moreover, Pope Paul VI, in his Closing Address of the Second Vatican Council, underscores more explicitly the role of women:

And now it is to you that we address ourselves, women of all states – girls, wives, mothers and widows, to you also, consecrated virgins and women living alone – you constitute half of the immense human family. As you know, the Church is proud to have glorified and liberated woman, and in the course of the centuries, in diversity of characters, to have brought into relief her basic equality with man. But the hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women impregnated with the spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid mankind in not falling.³

In the decades following Vatican II, gender justice and the role of women in the Church received greater attention. Particularly to be mentioned is *Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD), the Apostolic Letter by John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the occasion of the Marian Year,⁴ which is a comprehensive treatment of the dignity of women and justice to be meted out to them. MD emphasised the need of recognising the “feminine genius.” Although this concept may be considered a rather positive approach, it also needs critical evaluation. There are criticisms that “feminine genius,” like the complementarity model, facilitates gender discrimination in a subtle manner by attributing certain qualities as more feminine, and as integral to “feminine genius.”

³<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Paul06/p6closin.htm>

⁴ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 15 August 1988, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html> (10.06.2016).

For example, motherhood is often presented as a special gift and quality of the woman. This may also imply that the woman is supposed to be primarily concerned about the duties at home. Why fatherhood is not equally presented as the quality of a man? Similarly, docility, humility, patience, etc. are sometimes presented as feminine qualities, which may indirectly confine women to the traditional roles.

An important contribution from the Indian Church towards the theology of gender and gender justice is the *Gender Policy (GP)*⁵ of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), released on 24 February 2010, which according to Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil, the then president of the CBCI, "took shape from the earnest desire of the women and men of the country to bring equality and harmony to all" (GP ix). In the "Foreword" the Cardinal says: "The *Gender Policy* underlines that equality and dignity of all human persons form the basis of a just and humane society. The Policy maintains that Women's empowerment is central to achieving gender equality" (GP ix). "The Policy promotes the egalitarian message of Jesus, with the vision of a collaborative Church with Gender Justice. It envisages a world where both women and men can enjoy total freedom and equality to grow in the image and likeness of God" (GP x). Thus, Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil emphasises not only that gender equality is in agreement with the Christian vision, but also that it is demanded by Christian faith. Denial of gender equality is the denial of the possibility of growing in the image and likeness of God, a call fundamental to the Christian vision. What Bishop Thakur says in the "Introduction" also deserves special attention: "Equality between women and men is seen both as human rights issue and as pre-condition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centered development" (GP xiv). "Gender equality is a burning issue of all times. It affects not only the fifty percent of women but all of humankind" (GP xv). Gender equality is basically an issue of justice; it is a human rights issue. Without ensuring gender equality, it cannot be claimed that we are a just society. Moreover, ensuring gender equality is vital for development. When justice and development are denied to about 50% of the population, how can we claim that there is real development?

⁵Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, *Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India*, New Delhi: CBCI Commission for Women, 2009 <http://cbci.in/DownloadMat/Gender_Policy.pdf>

While acknowledging the progress in the theology of gender, we cannot ignore that in spite of the progress and greater involvement of women in ecclesiastical life, discrimination against women continues in various forms. Violence against women, including sexual violence, is on the increase. Gender-based violence, especially sexual violence can be said to be the worst form of gender discrimination and injustice. There are reports that exploitation and abuse of women, including women religious, by Church personnel are widespread.⁶ Although there is greater involvement in ecclesial life, women are denied specific roles and functions just because they are women. This is not merely about the ordination or diaconate of women – though they continue to be important questions –, but the number of women employed even in the administrative positions in the Church, especially in the higher levels, is very low.⁷ Even in the family women are often given a subservient role. In the family, though changes have taken place, in general, only the husband is considered as the head.⁸ Besides, many practices of discrimination against

⁶See for example, Tessa Kendall, "Sexual Abuse of Women in the Church," *Tessera* (blog), March 12, 2010, <http://tessera2009.blogspot.com/2010/03/sexual-abuse-of-women-in-church.html>; See for example, Lucetta Scaraffia, "Without any Touching: A Serious Wound," *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 1, 2019, <http://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/without-any-touching>.

⁷For example, John L. Allen, Jr., an NCR Vatican journalist, says that the picture is not as bleak as often thought. For example, he points out that 80% of the lay ministers in the US are women. In diocesan-level administration, 48.4% of all positions are held by women. At the most senior levels in dioceses, 26.8% of executive positions are held by women. However, we know that the top positions in the Catholic Church are reserved to the ordained, and hence only men occupy those positions. John Allen also points out that in the Vatican, women tend to be more conspicuous by their absence. Things have changed in the recent years. By the end of John Paul II's pontificate women made up 21% of Vatican personnel, even if they rarely broke through to the most senior levels. This is because those positions are held by the ordained. John L. Allen, Jr., *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*, New York: Doubleday, 2009, 195-199. A 2015 report by *National Catholic Reporter* says that "the number of women working for Vatican City State has nearly doubled in the past 10 years, while the number of women in leadership positions in the Roman Curia remains low, with only two women serving as undersecretaries." According to this report, the percentage of women employed in the office governing the Vatican City State is 19 percent; the percentage of female staff at the Holy See is 18 percent. Laura Ieraci, "Female Staff Increases at Vatican, but Women are still Minority," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 6, 2015, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/female-staff-increases-vatican-women-are-still-minority>

⁸It may be interesting to note that even today the 'headship' of the husband is supported with patriarchal interpretations of the symbolism of Christ and Church relationship as found in Eph 5:22-33.

women continue in societies like India. Dowry is a typical example of such practices. Dowry turns marriage into a union between a superior and an inferior partner.⁹ Even decades after marriage, the wife's real family is that of her parents. Domestic violence, female foeticide, etc. are expressions of the continuing inequality that women experience in the family. Unfortunately, Catholic theology of marriage hasn't been effective enough to create the awareness that marriage is a partnership of equals.

Evidently, we cannot say that Church alone is responsible for the continuing gender discrimination, or that there is gender discrimination only in the Church; however, it is pertinent to consider whether the Church facilitates gender discrimination directly or indirectly, and whether the Church is determined to change its practices at least according to the changes in its theological convictions.

The role of Women Religious in the Church also is to be critically appraised. Often, in the pastoral context, women religious are assigned a subservient role. Though in their independent ministries they have proved their abilities and talents, in the pastoral context their only role is to obey and serve the parish priest or other higher authorities. In many places they are not even the members of the parish council or other administrative bodies in the parish, though they have their religious house there, and they may be there only for the pastoral service. They are doing all such services for the good of the Christian community and for the greater glory of God. But, the Church is missing their creative talents and unique charisms.

As already mentioned, the question of gender cannot be limited to those of male and female. More than in the past, we are aware of the reality of the third gender or other genders. A lot of change in this regard has happened in the civil society, and many countries have enacted laws granting equality to different genders. Although much progress has been made in the recent decades, Catholic theology is yet to develop a profound vision of gender to extend equality and justice to 'third gender' or other genders.

In this issue we consider the gap between the theology of gender and the praxis. So, we do not limit our discussion to the theoretical

⁹For a detailed discussion on dowry and its implications for marriage and family life, see Shaji George Kochuthara, "Dowry as a Social-Structural Sin," in Linda Hogan and A.E. Orobator, ed., *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church*, Maryknoll, New York, 2014, 108-122.

aspects alone, but try to evaluate also how progress in theology is reflected in practice. Often it is felt that in spite of the developments and changes in the theology of gender, there is resistance when it comes to praxis, and much more is to be done. At the same time, we can find that a lot of changes have happened, though sometimes we would prefer to see changes happening more rapidly. The papers in this issue address some of the pertinent concerns about gender and gender justice, though the limited scope of this issue does not permit us to have an elaborate and comprehensive treatment of all the concerns.

Lisa Sowle Cahill, points out that even decades after John Paul II's emphasis on "the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men," both in society and the family, and in the global Church, progress worldwide has been alarmingly slow. Pointing out various examples especially from India, the United States of America and Africa she describes the progress made in the last few decades in spite of resistances. She also underlines the need of more networking for taking forward the cause of gender justice and equality, especially as traditional gender concepts are deeply embedded in the society. Moreover, she emphasises how gender equality is essential to the dignity and happiness of men as well. Kochuthresia Puliappallil points out the need of a paradigm shift from over-emphasis on submissiveness and obedience to reciprocal responsibility, interdependence and collaboration. She proposes the virtue of justice that prompts one to do good to others by a constant and perpetual will as an antidote to the continuing patriarchy and gender-based violence. According to her, just persons will respect the dignity of others, their fundamental rights and responsible freedom. She also emphasises the need of formation in virtues from the early stages of one's life, especially in the virtues of justice, non-violence and truth.

James McTavish discusses the correlation between gender identity confusion and the use of pornography. Drawing our attention to Pope Francis' criticism of "gender ideology," which is described as a new form of ideological colonization, McTavish, based on some studies conducted in the Asian context, argues that the growing gender identity confusion is matched by a concurrent increase in internet pornography, since pornographic presentations give a confusing message to young people. He underscores that "We would do well to be aware of the dangers of both internet pornography and the ideology of gender as well as the potentially

alarming connections between them.” Rachel Joyce Marie O. Sanchez evaluates from the perspective of the gender minorities in the Philippines how inclusive is the final document of the Roman Catholic Bishops’ Synod on the Youth in 2018. Taking cue from the Synod’s emphasis on compassion and listening she gives an overview of some studies about some concerns of the Philippine youth regarding virginity and queer experiences of gender and sexuality. Based on these experiences she analyses the final document of the Synod. Sanchez argues that improvements need to be made not only in terms of pastoral recommendations but also in terms of trends, religious symbols, and consciousness.

Virginia Saldanha discusses women’s rights in the Church in the context of sex abuse. She points out that the concept of rights for women and of women’s autonomy were absent in the patriarchal Indian society about fifty years ago, but towards the end of the 20th century greater awareness of women’s rights has led to a critique of culture, tradition and practices responsible for depriving women of their rightful place in the family and society. She observes, however, that in the Catholic Church women are still kept submissive. She criticises that the Church has failed in protecting women from sex abuse by the Church personnel and emphasises that the Church has to do much more to become the Good News to survivors of sexual abuse and the world. According to Anthonia Bolanle Ojo, gender-based violence remains one of the most serious threats to women, most especially the widows in Africa, who have to often face traumatic experiences. The inhuman treatment meted on the widows are carried out as part of culture, and the rituals vary from culture to culture. She establishes that widowhood rituals are a form of gender-based violence against women and one of the most prevalent violation of human rights experienced today, and that widowhood rites demean the dignity and rights of women. After describing some of the harmful widowhood rites in Africa and how gender and its attendant problems hamper the woman’s human rights, she analyses the teaching of the Catholic Church on human rights. Finally, she explains how women can be empowered through education aimed at improving their knowledge about their rights.

We have also one article on another relevant theme, namely, how ecumenical dialogue can be enriched with the help of feminist theories. Delfo C. Canceran deals with the problematic of ecumenical dialogue by deriving ideas from feminist theories.

Feminist theories, according to him, have explored and proposed ideas on identity which can be used in ecumenical dialogue. Canceran proposes *Reflective solidarity*, a mutual expectation of the churches' responsible orientation to ecumenical movement, as an appropriate way of dealing with the tension posed by ecumenical dialogue.

In spite of the progress made in creating awareness of gender equality and ensuring gender justice, discrimination based on gender continues in various forms. It is not rare that even after so many years of theological studies, the clergy and others in the administrative roles of the Church continue to hold traditional patriarchal attitudes and behaviour in their ministry. Educational interventions are necessary to facilitate changes in mindset, behaviour and practices. Besides, it is of utmost importance that the clergy, religious and seminarians are educated on the importance of a gender-just Church and society, especially as they have a leadership roles in the Church. For this, gender sensitivity courses are to be included among the main subjects in the seminary curriculum and in the formation programmes.

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