

ASIAN  
HORIZONS  
Vol. 13, No. 1, March 2019  
Pages: 11-30

## GENDER EQUALITY: SLOW PROGRESS IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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### Abstract

Pope John Paul II underlined “the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men,” both in society and the family. He also praised “the great process of women’s liberation,” and condemned discrimination against women. Even decades after that, progress worldwide, and in the global Church, has been alarmingly slow. However, there are positive signs. Though Pope Francis continues to espouse a theology of gender complementarity that many find problematic, he still recognizes the need for some new thinking. In spite of resistance, some of the Catholic institutions for theological studies have made considerable progress toward an ecclesial and social praxis of gender equality. The 2010 Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India is another initiative that deserves to be celebrated; yet its implementation continues to present significant challenges. There are also encouraging models where women and men work for emancipation of women and women create networks for the empowerment of women in other parts of the world. However, even now traditional gender concepts continue to influence the society and Church. Hence, it is important that all those in the Church and society who are committed to gender justice need to set an example; and it is vital to create networks of people committed to gender justice. It is also important to remember that gender equality is not only essential to the dignity and wellbeing of women, but it is

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necessary to the dignity and happiness of men who now are pressured into inauthentic patterns of “masculinity” that are not compatible with a truly fulfilling personal identity.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Feminine Genius, *Familiaris Consortio*, (Pope) Francis, Gender Complementarity, Gender Policy of the Indian Church, John Paul II, #MeToo Movement, Sexual Abuse, Sexual Harassment, U.S. Catholic Church

Over thirty years ago, Pope John Paul II underlined “the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men,” both in society and the family (Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 22). Over twenty years ago, he praised “the great process of women’s liberation” (*Letter to Women*, no. 6), and explicitly condemned discrimination against women, violence against women, and sexual exploitation of women. He insisted on the necessity to make practices in church and society come into line with women’s theoretical equality with men, declaring that there is “an urgent need to achieve real equality in every area: equal pay for equal work...[and] equality of spouses with regard to family rights” (nos. 4-6). But he also identified the primary obstacle to truly transformational social change. “Unfortunately, we are heirs to a history which has *conditioned* us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place, this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women.” He does not place the responsibility for this only on society, however, much less blame “Western” culture, “radical feminism,” or “gender ideology” for destroying traditional respect for women. To the contrary, he admits that “objective blame” should go to “not just a few members of the Church,” adding, “for this I am truly sorry” (*Letter to Women*, no. 3).

Three decades later, progress worldwide, and in the global Church specifically, has been alarmingly slow. In February 2019, Pope Francis called bishops from around the world to a summit in Rome on the worldwide, shocking, and entrenched disgrace of abuse of women, children, and young people (including seminarians) by Catholic clergy, bishops, and cardinals. Beyond the well-publicized cases of abuse of young boys by priests in the United States, Europe, and Australia, the meeting drew attention to the pervasive and global reality of sexual abuse of religious sisters by priests and bishops. A 2018 Associated Press report verified cases in Europe, Africa, South America and Asia.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, an Indian bishop was arrested for

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<sup>1</sup>Nicole Winfield and Rodney Muhumuza, “After decades of silence, nuns talk about abuse by priests,” Associated Press, July 27, 2018,

repeatedly raping the superior general of a women's religious order over a two-year period. Despite the nun's complaints, and a petition signed by Indian women theologians and others, the bishops did not implement their own policy on sexual harassment and abuse, put into place just the previous year. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, a married laywoman and scientist who has been an advisor to the CCBI on gender issues, comments that the case "has thrown the spotlight on the subservience of women religious – masquerading as 'obedience' – and on the second class status that the pervasive clericalism of the Church imposes on all women."<sup>2</sup>

In the fall of 2018, the editor of the "Woman-Church-World" supplement to *L'Osservatore Romano*, Lucetta Scaraffia, published an article referencing substantial reports of clergy abuse of nuns, going back decades and across continents. Scaraffia identified clericalism and unquestioned clerical power as the root, along with an "ecclesiastical institution with centuries of culture focused on women as dangerous and temptresses."<sup>3</sup>

A couple of weeks before the abuse summit in Rome, reporters questioned Pope Francis about this article. He set a precedent for other church leaders by acknowledging openly that the accusations are true, that clergy abuse of nuns is a global Catholic problem, and admitting that it is not easy to solve quickly. He even characterized abuse of nuns by priests and bishops as in some cases amounting to sexual slavery, then added, "I can't say 'this does not happen in my house.' It is true. Do we have to do more? Yes. Are we willing? Yes."<sup>4</sup>

The International Federation of Superiors General followed the lead of the Vatican magazine in denouncing the global abuse of nuns by priests, breaking the silence and compliance into which Catholic women religious around the world are so often socialized. The Federation witnesses to the reality of abuse and supports resisters and reformers.

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<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-emirates-plane-women/pope-says-he-is-committed-to-stopping-sexual-abuse-of-nuns-idUSKCN1PU283>; accessed April 4, 2019, <https://apnews.com/f7ec3cec9a4b46868aa584fe1c94fb28>; accessed April 4, 2019.

<sup>2</sup>Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, "A Silence that Kills: Abuse and Harassment Covered up by the Church in India," *The Tablet*, 9/27/2018.

<sup>3</sup>Lucetta Scaraffia, "Without Any Touching: A Serious Wound," February 1, 2019, <http://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/without-any-touching>; accessed April 5, 2019.

<sup>4</sup>Phillip Pullella, "Pope Says He is Committed to Stopping Sexual Abuse of Nuns," Reuters, February 5, 2019.

We stand by those courageous women and men who have reported abuse to the authorities. We condemn those who support the culture of silence and secrecy, often under the guise of ‘protection’ of an institution’s reputation or naming it ‘part of one’s culture’. We advocate for transparent civil and criminal reporting of abuse whether within religious congregations, at the parish or diocesan levels, or in any public arena.<sup>5</sup>

At the Rome episcopal abuse summit, only about a dozen women were present, but they validated the reality of abuse, and called for compassion and reform. Nigerian Holy Child Jesus Sister Veronica Openibo accused the bishops of a culture of “mediocrity, hypocrisy and complacency” that led to the abuse scandals, and hoped that more laywomen “might also be added so that the church’s voice, including women, would be there.” Irish Blessed Virgin Mary Sister Pat Murray said, “We saw also ourselves speaking on behalf of women in general...” “We didn’t just see ourselves speaking for the women religious of the world, but also for women in general.”<sup>6</sup>

Worldwide, 35% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence. Rachel Jewkes, head of the What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls global program, sees the problem as especially acute in South Asia. Public sexual harassment is an ordinary and pervasive phenomenon, because it is a mechanism for curtailing women’s freedom. In India, 44% of women have been groped in public, and gang rape is rampant. In India, rape is the fourth most common crime against women and girls (behind domestic abuse, assault, and abduction). Victims who report are likely to be humiliated and mistreated by the police. Only one in four trials results in conviction.

The rape and murder of a young student on a New Delhi bus in 2012 galvanized public attention and momentum for change, in the name of “Nirbhaya.” Yet violence continues today, with the rape of an eight-year-old by a group of neighbourhood men in 2018 as one of

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<sup>5</sup> *USIG Declaration Against Any Kind of Abuse*, <http://www.internationalunion SUPERIORSgeneral.org/uisg-declaration-abuse-kinds/>; accessed April 4, 2019. Although in far fewer numbers than victims of priests, some people have also experienced sexual abuse by nuns. See “As the Vatican addresses priest abuse, more people are reporting sexual abuse by nuns,” CBS News, February 22, 2019, [https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sexual-abuse-by-nuns-reports-growing/?ftag=COS-05-10aaa0g&utm\\_campaign=trueAnthem:+Trending+Content&utm\\_content=5c70eca51adf64001ef915a&utm\\_medium=trueAnthem&utm\\_source=twitter](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sexual-abuse-by-nuns-reports-growing/?ftag=COS-05-10aaa0g&utm_campaign=trueAnthem:+Trending+Content&utm_content=5c70eca51adf64001ef915a&utm_medium=trueAnthem&utm_source=twitter;); accessed April 5, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Joshua J. McElwee, “Sisters at abuse summit hope standard is set for more women at Vatican meetings,” *Global Sisters Report*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/equality/sisters-abuse-summit-hope-standard-set-more-women-vatican-meetings-55909>; accessed April 4, 2019.

repeated instances that bring further public outcry without true systemic change in the culture of gender inequality and abuse. In 2018, a Thomson Reuters survey found India to be the world's most dangerous place for women.<sup>7</sup> But India is not alone. As the author of a CNN report observes, "In the streets of London, Mumbai, Washington or Lagos, the recent outpouring of stories from women using #MeToo and its many iterations has showed the uniformity of the problem – irrespective of country and culture."<sup>8</sup>

In the Thomson Reuters survey, the U.S. came in at number 10 internationally in terms of rates of abuse of women. It was the only Western country to be included on the list of top offenders, partly as a result of the increased attention to sexual crimes garnered by the #MeToo movement. In the U.S., one in three women and one in six men experience some form of sexual violence in their lifetimes. 91% of victims of rape and sexual assault are female, and nine percent are male. In eight out of 10 cases of rape, the victim knew the perpetrator. 27% of college women have experienced some form of unwanted sexual contact. Nearly two thirds of college students experience sexual harassment. One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18 years old. 96% of people who sexually abuse children are male.<sup>9</sup> The same toxic mix of power, sex and violence that licenses these abuses feeds into the religiously validated culture of "clericalism" that is inspiring abusive members of the clergy.

Pope Francis has taken some steps in the right direction, calling for a new "theology of women," though some would say what we need is not a theology "of women," but of humanity, gender in general, or at least of women *and men* in relation to one another; and that women should be involved in constructing such a theology.<sup>10</sup> On the other

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<sup>7</sup>Angela Dewan, "India the Most Dangerous Place to Be a women, US Ranks 10th in Survey," CNN Health, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/25/health/india-dangerous-country-women-survey-intl/index.html>; accessed 1/25/19.

<sup>8</sup>Meera Sentilingham, "Sexual Harassment: How It Stands around the Globe," CNN Health, 11/29/17, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/25/health/sexual-harassment-violence-abuse-global-levels/index.html>; accessed 1/23/19. The #MeToo movement was initiated by African American activist Tarana Burke in 2006, but the movement gained energy and numbers in 2017, after revelations of sexual assault by President Donald J. Trump and other notable figures in U.S. politics, business, sports, and entertainment.

<sup>9</sup>National Sexual Violence Resource Center, <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics>; accessed January 23, 2019.

<sup>10</sup>Megan Fincher and Colleen Dunne, "Women Resistant to Pope Francis' Call for New Theology of Women," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 4, 2013, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/women-resist-call-new-theology>; accessed

hand, he has repeatedly denounced what he considers to be a Western-inspired and radical “gender ideology,” or “gender theory,”<sup>11</sup> a term that seems merely to caricature and reject any criticism of the Catholic model of gender complementarity, and by extension, reject calls for reform. It is a mistake to think that all those who call for gender justice, criticize the complementarity model, or voice the factually correct opinion that not all people are born as clearly either a male or female, are arguing that gender is simply chosen or changed at will, with no relation whatsoever to biology. What is really at stake here is just treatment of women by men and by male-led institutions; as well as just treatment of all those who are not born with and do not have a “binary” male or female gender identity (for example intersex persons, and those whose biological sex does not “match” what they experience as the innate gender that makes them who they are). Pope Francis’s personal example of openness on this subject is more important than his views of gender theory. In 2015, he met in Rome with a transgender man, Diego Neria Lejarraga, who was born a woman. Although he was a devout Catholic, he was rejected in his hometown and parish. After his conversation with the pope, he said, “The meeting was a wonderful, intimate, unique experience that changed my life.” Mr Neria added, “Now I am in finally in peace.”<sup>12</sup>

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December 9, 2016. See also the international collection, Catholic Women Speak Network, ed., *Catholic Women Speak: Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*, New York: Paulist, 2015.

<sup>11</sup>See *Dialogo del Santo Padre con i Vescovi della Polonia (Kraków, 27 luglio 2016)*, 02.08.2016; <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2016/08/02/0568/01265.html#en>; accessed April 5, 2019. The pope seems to be motivated by resistance (valid in its own right) to demands by donors in the global North that their own culturally informed conceptions of gender equality be taught in schools in the global South. “In Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and in some countries of Asia, there are genuine forms of ideological colonization taking place. And one of these – I will call it clearly by its name – is [the ideology of] “gender”. Today children – children! – are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. Why are they teaching this? Because the books are provided by the persons and institutions that give you money. These forms of ideological colonization are also supported by influential countries. And this is terrible!” It is not correct, however, that most people in the global North – including gender theorists, educators, and theologians – believe that gender identity is a simple matter of personal choice, much less that this is being taught as part of school curricula. Instead, the primary motivation behind questioning a binary “male or female” conception of gender is that a significant number of individuals experience themselves as having an “innate” gender identity that is different from the biological sex attributed to them at birth. This identity is precisely *not* for many a matter of choice, but something they have experienced since early childhood.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/the-pope/11371770/Transgender-man-invited-to-private-meeting-by-Pope-Francis.html>

Even though Pope Francis, like Pope John Paul II, continues to espouse a theology of gender complementarity that many find problematic, he still recognizes the need for some new thinking. Even more importantly he has taken concrete steps to equalize women's role in the church. For example, he called off an investigation of American nuns begun under Pope Benedict, in 2016 appointed an American lay man and a Spanish lay woman as his top communication aides, and later that same year formed a commission composed of equal numbers of men and women, of diverse views, to study the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate.<sup>13</sup>

Extensive efforts are being made at Catholic institutions like Dharmaram College in Bangalore, and Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth in Pune, toward an ecclesial and social praxis of gender equality. Yet there is strong resistance, not just in India, but in the Church as a whole, and in virtually every culture in which Catholics exist.

### **Resistance to Change and Socialization**

The 2010 Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India is an initiative that deserves to be celebrated. Yet its implementation continues to present significant challenges. Before considering specific recommendations of the Gender Policy, let us consider its social context. In publishing this statement, the Indian bishops compare favourably to the U.S. bishops who attempted a similar initiative earlier, in the form of a pastoral letter. After five drafts, and many years of consultations, including listening sessions with women across the country, the U.S. bishops' conference failed to approve the letter.<sup>14</sup> Whereas the first draft directly quoted women and called for consideration of ordaining women to the diaconate, as well as recruiting women for other leadership roles not requiring ordination, the final draft replaced women's words with those of John Paul II, dropped any reference to the diaconate, and called instead for respect for the present teaching of the Church. To be fair, the U.S. bishops did continue outreach to women in other forms, including many initiatives at the diocesan level.<sup>15</sup> Currently more

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<sup>13</sup>See Gary Macy, William Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano, *Women Deacons: Past, Present, and Future*, New York: Paulist, 2012.

<sup>14</sup>Peter Steinfelds, "Catholic Bishops in U.S. Reject Policy Letter on Role of Women," *New York Times*, November 18, 1992), <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/19/us/catholic-bishops-in-us-reject-policy-letter-on-role-of-women.html>; accessed July 22, 2016.

<sup>15</sup>See the 1998 update, from the USCCB, *From Words to Deeds: Continuing Reflections on the Role of Women in the Church*, which mentions specific implementations, such as the development of a packet for use in parishes, <http://www.usccb.org/about/laity-marriage-family-life-and-youth/womens-issues/from-words-to-deeds.cfm>; accessed July 22, 2016.

than 39,600 people serve in American parishes as “lay ecclesial ministers,” taking on many pastoral and administrative functions. However, about 85% of these are women, and only 15% men. This signifies that a large cadre of women are serving subordinate roles as the mainstay of an institution that reserves the top and most powerful roles to the ordained clergy, who are all men. Women are not, for example, allowed to deliver the homily at Mass. If the ordination of women as deacons were allowed, this would validate these women’s ministry and allow them to preach at the Eucharistic liturgy.<sup>16</sup>

When the final draft of the U.S. pastoral letter on women failed to get approval from a majority of bishops, Bishop Rembert Weakland of Minnesota warned that unless it took action on gender equality, the Church could lose a whole generation of Catholic women. Unfortunately, that prediction has come true, as young women are leaving the Church at a faster rate than men.<sup>17</sup> Despite gains that have been made in recent years, the difficulty experienced in attaining gender equality in the U.S. Church helps us appreciate similar difficulties in the Indian context.

There are at the same time important differences between the U.S. Catholic Church and the Church in India, and in the bishops’ attempts to deal with gender inequality. The first is that the theology and goals are more radical in the Indian than the U.S. document, possibly because the Indian bishops entrusted women with the first draft, whereas the U.S. bishops gradually eliminated the direct testimony of women from the document. The second is that the status of women in the two cultures is quite different. While the U.S. bishops and Church lag *behind* the culture in accepting gender equality and protecting women’s rights, the Indian Church and bishops are, at least in theory, moving *ahead* of culture and rejecting pervasive practices such as dowry. Catholic women in the U.S. feel less social pressure and family pressure to remain in a church they perceive as unfair to women. In education, jobs, and marriage they

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<sup>16</sup>Elisabetta Povoledo and Laurie Goodstein, “Pope Francis Says Panel Will Study whether Women May Serve as Deacons,” *New York Times*, May 12, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/world/europe/pope-says-hes-open-to-studying-whether-women-can-serve-as-deacons.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/world/europe/pope-says-hes-open-to-studying-whether-women-can-serve-as-deacons.html?_r=0); accessed July 22, 2016. See also, *Research Review: Lay Ecclesial Ministers in the United States*, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University, February 2015, <https://cara.georgetown.edu/lemsummit.pdf>; accessed April 5, 2019.

<sup>17</sup>Patricia Miller, “Women are Leaving Church, and the Reason Seems Clear,” *Religion Dispatches*, May 25, 2016, <http://religiondispatches.org/women-are-leaving-church-and-the-reason-seems-clear/>; accessed July 22, 2016.



have more equal roles than they do within the Catholic Church. They can also find more equality in other Christian denominations, such as the Episcopal Church.

Catholic women in India are highly subject to family and social pressure, which more strongly validates the secondary status of women than does the Church. Positively, this means that the Indian Church has the chance to be – and I would say the Christian calling to be – a beacon of light to the culture as a whole. Negatively, it also means that recalcitrant behaviour in the Church itself is reinforced, condoned, and even rewarded by the surrounding culture. This is why 62.5 percent of Catholic Syrian women remain in abusive, violent marriages “for the sake of the children.”<sup>18</sup> These cultural patterns make implementation of the Gender Policy exceedingly difficult.

What reformers are up against of course is very strong *socialization* of Catholics, along with the rest of society, into pervasive and deep patterns of what is considered “proper” masculine and feminine behaviour, norms that are unfortunately reinforced in some of the biblical literature, such as the “household codes.” The most important examples are Ephesians 5:22-6:9 and Colossians 3:18-4:1, which set up a male-headed hierarchy of husbands and fathers, wives, children and slaves, including the exhortation, “Wives be subject to your husbands. As is fitting in the Lord” (Col 3:18). Traditional gender norms prescribe that men be assertive, rational, and sexually aggressive; while women should be demure, submissive, maternal, nurturing, and self-sacrificial. Public, political and professional roles belong primarily to men, while women’s primary role is considered to be in the home or family. In a variation on women’s role as primarily sexual-reproductive, women’s sexuality can be objectified in terms of sexual attractiveness, sexual availability, and as inviting conquest or even violence. Illustrating the sociology of “masculinity” with Indian examples, M.T. Joseph adds that “the inflated sense of entitlement can never be satisfied,” and that male domination thrives in a culture of impunity.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the influence of patriarchal cultures on the communities composing the bible, patriarchy and the subordination

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<sup>18</sup> Kochurani Abraham, “Resistance: A Liberative Key in Feminist Ethics,” in Hogan and Orobator, ed., *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014, 98.

<sup>19</sup> M.T. Joseph, SVD, “Masculinity: A Sociological Analysis,” in Varghese Theckanath, S.G. and Julie George, SSpS, ed., *Living Nirbhaya: Pathways to Violence Free Church and Society*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2013, 27.

of women in the communities transmitting it for the Church shaped how the bible was interpreted. This led to the neglect and misinterpretation of narratives favouring gender equality, for example, the Genesis creation stories and accounts involving women in Jesus' ministry. In other words, cultural expectations about masculinity and femininity have socialized the Christian religious and theological imagination, as well as practices in the Church, so that the liberating effect of the gospel has been greatly reduced and in some cases even lost. Norms of dominant masculinity and subservient femininity have defined the roles of women religious throughout history. Both women and men cooperate with pernicious hierarchies that constrain and distort the full humanity and the Christian calling of both sexes.

As Kochurani Abraham writes, "when women take an uncritical stance toward abusive and exploitative situations under the mask of 'virtue' they collude with oppressive situations without searching for alternatives."<sup>20</sup> Obviously the reason they do this is that they are socialized to think there are no alternatives, and that their dignity and virtue lie in being forgiving and tolerant of abuse. Meanwhile men are taught that true "masculinity" lies in being dominant, demanding and aggressive. Julie George, a religious sister and lawyer who defends poor women in abuse cases, is the founder of Streevani, a women's rights and legal defence organization. She diagnoses the underlying reality: "Domestic abuse as experienced by women, is an essential element of the vast male conspiracy to suppress and subordinate women," an experience that is magnified at "the intersection of multiple marginalities such as caste, class and community."<sup>21</sup>

Shiji Varghese speaks to the nearly universal plight of married women, even those who do not experience what we would define as "abuse." Varghese is a married mother of three, a higher secondary school teacher in Kerala, and holds executive positions in her local teachers' guild and archdiocesan Catholic congress. Women around the world can resonate with her complaints. For instance, "No bundles of paper and bottles of ink will be enough to write about the quantum of unquantified service that is rendered by a woman to the family"! Many women experience the following, regardless of income or class:

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<sup>20</sup>M.T. Joseph, SVD, "Masculinity: A Sociological Analysis," 27.

<sup>21</sup>Julie George, SSpS, "Domestic Violence and Patriarchal Bargains," in *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, in Shaji George Kochuthara, ed., Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 293, 292.

Husband comes home from work each day and tells his stay-at-home partner the amount of his stress and workload. He never bothers to ask how her day was and he cuts her off if she starts to tell him about household problems. Sometimes husband tells her about his decisions without asking for input... When the wife asks about their finance, he tells her not to worry about it.<sup>22</sup>

These attitudes invade the Church, because after all, even Christians are also members of their societies and behave according to expectations, not necessarily according to the gospels or to teachings that the bishops may put out. (In my country, many Catholics condone police violence toward African Americans, want to keep out all immigrants, engage in hate speech toward Muslims, and vote for political candidates who legitimize these behaviours. Obviously this is not Church teaching.) As Prem Xalxo assesses the situation, “any talk of gender justice will be futile,” unless there are broad-reaching changes in structures of the economy, education, religion and parenting.<sup>23</sup> John Karuvelil is quite right that there are plenty of social structures in Indian society and all societies that legitimize dehumanization, making it “normal” and acceptable.<sup>24</sup>

Using the example of the Second Vatican Council – usually regarded as a landmark in the progress of the twentieth-century Church – Stanislaus Alla incisively illustrates how structures and socialization still worked to minimize women’s importance and role in this watershed event. Only fifteen women were invited to participate as auditors, a number eventually expanded to twenty-three. A few bishops at the Council did speak up in favour of the importance of women’s concerns. Yet Alla shows that although women’s presence at the Second Vatican Council was “historic and symbolic,” their direct contribution was limited to special commissions. The tremendous reluctance to invite married women revealed that women were still regarded as “polluting or tempting,” and as “unnecessary at theological deliberations.”<sup>25</sup> Sometimes, it seems, the gospel is no match for cultural biases and preferences. However, women and their male allies still courageously proclaim

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<sup>22</sup> Shiji Varghese, “Equal Partnership in the Family,” in *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, 129.

<sup>23</sup> Prem Xalxo, SJ, “Gender Justice as an Impetus to the Renewal of Moral Theology,” *Asian Horizons* 9, 1(2015) 154.

<sup>24</sup> John Karuvelil, SJ, “Structural Legitimization of Dehumanization in India,” in Yiu Sing Lucas Chan, James F. Keenan, and Shaji George Kochuthara, eds., *Doing Asian Theological Ethics in a Cross-Cultural and Interreligious Context*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 124-39.

<sup>25</sup> Stanislaus Alla, SJ, “Women at Vatican II: An Appraisal,” in *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, 380.

the equality of women and men in the light of human dignity and Christian faith. They have always found ways to resist these norms.

Karuvelil outlines initiatives and programs through which Catholic educational institutions can become catalysts for change in favour of more equal male and female roles in society and in the Church itself. He takes as his example a major Jesuit institution in Pune, dedicated to the formation of women religious and priests. Here multiple efforts have been made to “mainstream” gender equality in the curriculum, and prepare future Church leaders to be representatives and advocates of gender equality. Women are recruited as students and as members of the faculty. There is a Women’s Forum for students, and representation on the Students’ Council, an important decision-making body, in a proportion in excess of the actual number of women enrolled. There is also a forum through which women can express grievances and pursue resolution. All students are encouraged to engage in social advocacy activities, and to especially seek out those that aim to affect women’s roles positively.<sup>26</sup>

The fact remains that even with pro-active initiatives such as these, it can still be true that old gender expectations can be difficult to eradicate. For example, not all faculty and administrators take the issue of gender equality with equal seriousness, male students may avoid enrolling in courses with women teachers, and women students may remain silent or deferential in classes, even when they are encouraged by male or female teachers to make their voices heard. Longstanding socialization is not easy to overcome.

Luckily, even the social scientists who are theorists of gender socialization believe that change is not a lost cause. One study concludes that adolescents are at a stage in their lives where they can be keen observers of their worlds, and can raise questions and imagine something better. Youthful idealism and the teen-ager’s urge to challenge authority offer an opportunity to “push back against rigid and unrealistic norms that deny opportunities to be fully human.”<sup>27</sup> Researchers from Sweden describe an emerging concept of

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<sup>26</sup>John Karuvelil, SJ, “Promotion of Gender Justice and Seminary Formation: A Conceptual Reflection from Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune,” in *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, 315-29.

<sup>27</sup>Deborah L. Tolman, Brian R. Davis, and Christin P. Bowman, “‘That’s Just How It Is’: A Gendered Analysis of Masculinity and Femininity Ideologies in Adolescent Girls’ and Boys’ Heterosexual Relationships,” in *Journal of Adolescent Research* (2015) 26, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277588395\\_That's\\_Just\\_How\\_It\\_Is\\_A\\_Gendered\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Masculinity\\_and\\_Femininity\\_Ideologies\\_in\\_Adolescent\\_Girls'\\_and\\_Boys'\\_Heterosexual\\_Relationships](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277588395_That's_Just_How_It_Is_A_Gendered_Analysis_of_Masculinity_and_Femininity_Ideologies_in_Adolescent_Girls'_and_Boys'_Heterosexual_Relationships); accessed December 9, 2016.

masculinity in which a “real man” is “less authoritarian, less violent, more emotional and more gender equality oriented than other and earlier masculinities.”<sup>28</sup>

Another author points out that at least at the level of academia (seminaries and universities), men themselves are becoming more critical of stereotypical masculinity and more supportive of progressive men. They are creating a new type of masculinity, in which status or dominance is not based on physical aggression or on structures that systematically violate the human dignity and rights of other people. Instead, status and respect depend on “expertise,” that is, one’s proficiency in a field of endeavour, and one’s ability to do a job well. When true masculinity means expertise, then men’s peer group or status group is not defined as much by gender, class, race, or clerical-lay status, but by the circle of peers who recognize one another’s professional or vocational excellence. This circle need not exclude women. Even when men are critical of some aspects of feminism, they can still be empathetic and committed to support women.<sup>29</sup>

### **2010 Gender Policy**

Now let us return to the specific process and provisions of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI) Gender Policy, which was signed by the 163 Indian bishops present at their 2008 CBCI Plenary Assembly.<sup>30</sup> Before this meeting, hundreds of women in local communities participated in consultations, and their views were circulated among the bishops. At the plenary assembly itself, there were forty women present, and five women speakers. Finally, three of these women were invited to join the bishops’ drafting committee. The first draft was prepared by a team of women, then revised by the bishops. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala was on the drafting committee and writes and speaks frequently about the Policy. She comments that, while some changes did revert to a patriarchal mindset, “for the most part the document remains faithful to the women’s insights, visions, and strategies, and the Indian bishops have claimed these as their own.”<sup>31</sup> The level of commitment behind this claim is subject to the test of implementation over the long term.

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<sup>28</sup>Jeff Hearn, et al., “Hegemonic Masculinity and Beyond: 40 Years of Research in Sweden,” *Men and Masculinities* 15/1 (2012) 47, <http://jmm.sagepub.com/content/15/1/31>; accessed December 9, 2016.

<sup>29</sup>Judith Newton, “Review: White Guys,” *Feminist Studies* 24, 3 (1998) 580-82.

<sup>30</sup>For an overall description and discussion, see Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, “CBCI Gender Policy: A Tool for Gender Justice,” in *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, 169-82. The Gender Policy can be accessed at [cbci.in/downloadmat/gender\\_policy.pdf](http://cbci.in/downloadmat/gender_policy.pdf).

<sup>31</sup>Gajiwala, “Gender Policy,” 169-82.

Let me briefly share a few key points of the Gender Policy. First, the Policy presents a theology of gender equality that is very much like the one I have presented here. It refers to creation in the image of God, the ministry of Jesus, and the baptism of all in Christ. Second, it refers to the “feminine genius,” but also notes that in practice, women have been treated unequally in both Church and society. Third, it attends specifically to the situation of women in India, and calls for an end to practices such as dowry, preferring sons in family inheritance, domestic abuse (for which there should be “zero tolerance”), and discrimination against Dalit and tribal women in education and employment.

Within the Church, the Policy calls for greater participation of women in decision-making, and greater involvement of women in ministries, as well as formation in gender equality and gender sensitivity for both seminarians and women religious. The Gender Policy follows up description of various policies about gender equality, with more or less concrete implementation strategies (Part III). For example, the policy on women’s participation in Church bodies states, “The integration of voices of women is imperative to ensure the wholeness of the Church. Non-representation of women will result in the exclusion of the perspectives, experiences, strengths and needs of half the Church.” One of the strategies is, “Ensure adequate representation of women as office-bearers and members in parish/Diocesan councils and financial committees, marriage tribunals, the Church’s Commissions at all levels, and the Diocesan Social Service Societies and Regional Forums.”

However, Astrid Lobo Gajiwala questions the fact that the Policy fails to specifically state what percentage of women in ministries and Church administration constitutes an “adequate” number. The Policy also seems to limit the roles of women to traditional stereotypically feminine duties when it stipulates that women should participate according to their “special charisms,” and mentions “‘distinctive roles of men and women in ministry’ and governance.”<sup>32</sup> A survey done by Streevani, Pune, in 2014 found that four years later implementation had been disappointing. “Conducted among 1000 parish councillors from 99 dioceses, the survey showed that only 16% of the respondents had read the document. 40% had heard of it but not read it and 44% had not even heard of it.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Gajiwala, “Gender Policy,” 180.

<sup>33</sup>Gajiwala, “Gender Policy,” 169-70.

## Changing Hearts and Minds

From this we see just what a large challenge gender equality is up against. As we celebrate and publicize successes, it is no less important to seek out more and better ways to live out the gospel of Jesus by empowering women and all who are unjustly silenced. In *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, a collection of papers originally presented at Dharmaram College, we find witness and leadership of institutions of theological education and ministerial formation; as well as those responsible for educating women novices; and from organizations such as Streevani in Pune. Faculty and even students are well-represented among the authors of this book. The gospel brings new identities for women and men in Christ, and requires a common effort toward the empowerment of women, and of men who are allies in the struggle for gender equality. Everyone engaged in Catholic ministries can have tremendous impact because of the number of people reached in their work – in education, in parishes, in social services, in health care, and in family apostolates.

Pearl Drego, who is a Catholic psychotherapist, educator and social services provider in Delhi, gives some concrete examples in her chapter in *Gender Justice*, including materials that could be used with young people and children. One exercise asks students to imagine that they are ten years old and it is tea time for the family but the mother is out. It continues, “You are thirsty and hungry, so you request your father to make the tea and other snacks. Does he agree? If you are a man, do you ask yourself, ‘Do you know how to make and serve tea? And do I think it is a privilege to do so?’”! Drego provides drawings, poems and songs to use with children. One of them is called “Papa’s Chai,” and begins, “Papa make the water hot, Papa make the water hot, Papa make the water hot, We all want chai!”

Pearl Drego shares the reflections of some of her teacher trainees. One of them tells how her mother used to serve the youngest brother all his food, even though he was ten years old – not only at meal times but whenever he wanted a snack. After the young teacher questioned her mother about why she served the younger brother and never the girls, her mother got the point. Now the brother “simply goes in the kitchen and eats whatever he wants without disturbing Mamma or anyone else.”

V.S. Elizabeth, a professor of law at National Law School of India University, Bangalore knows the importance of small changes. She says, “unless girls and boys, women and men, are equal in every sense within the home, how do we even expect that there will be

changes in the status of women in the society at large?...If a boy learns early in his life that he is here to be served and it is the duty of the females to serve him," how will he know that women and girls have a right to their own lives?<sup>34</sup> Pastoral ministers and educators at all levels need to find ways to intervene in families, to educate and to convert – as Pearl Drego teaches her student teachers to do.

To bring change, more is necessary than to talk about gender equality in general terms. Saying, as does the CCBI Gender Policy, that "Women must be included on parish councils" does not start at a basic enough level. It is important to be very concrete, starting with children, families, schools, marriage preparation, marriage renewal, and daily relations among priests and sisters working together in parishes and dioceses, and even teaching and studying in programs of religious and theological formation. In 2014, during the conference on family and religious life that led to the publication of *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, in the discussion after Vimala Chenginimattam's challenging presentation on the socialization of Indian girls and the ecclesiastical control of women, Joy Phillip Kakkanatu, the Dharmaram Theology Dean stood up and asked, "Why are the sisters always serving tea and refreshments during breaks, and not the seminarians?!" I am gratified to report that in 2015, my male students at Dharmaram brought me hot water during a class break to address my sore throat and disruptive coughing. In 2016, as I delivered the Jonas Lectures at Dharmaram, Fr. Joy assisted the sisters graciously serving us refreshments in the faculty lounge. These may seem like small steps, but they are harbingers of the kinds of concrete personal investment and attitudes that will be needed to replace old assumptions with new expectations.

It is necessary to challenge people's imaginations and horizons more profoundly, so they appreciate how it is possible and even appealing to do things differently in daily life. According to Bishop Joshua Mar Ignathios, "the key question is, can the church get involved in movements of gender justice in families, schools, colleges, health centres, development agencies... Can they be models of gender justice so that women's equality... becomes a natural reality for the Church"?<sup>35</sup> What this would mean is the empowerment of women themselves, and the courage of women not to be content with the rewards of being a stereotypical "good woman," a woman who is

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<sup>34</sup>V.S. Elizabeth, "Gender, Violence and the Law in Indian Society," *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, 261-62.

<sup>35</sup>Bishop Joshua Mar Ignathios, "Role of Women in the Church," *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, 154.



ultimately dependent on the good will of men. Women and men are *interdependent* and depend equally on each other. Mathew Illathuparampil, professor of moral theology at St Joseph Pontifical Seminary in Aluva, names a key truth when he says, "Creating gender justice in seminarians does not mean making future priests providers of gender justice... They need to help women to help themselves. Otherwise, women will not be empowered. They will be left perennially to depend on benevolent male figures."<sup>36</sup>

### **Women Empowering Other Women**

Margaret Farley is a U.S. Catholic feminist ethicist and Sister of Mercy. Her work with religious sisters in Africa provides a model of the connection between theology and action, especially solidarity with the poor. The possibility that Christian theologies of gender equality can bear fruit at the practical level finds eloquent expression in the international Sister-to-Sister Project. This project is an illustration of the gospel based and socially transformative ministries of today's women religious.<sup>37</sup> First envisioned in 2001, this project is led by Farley and an Irish Sister of Mercy, Eileen Hogan. It uses funding from the Sisters of Mercy and other donors in the U.S. and Europe to empower African women religious to resist the patriarchal norms that allow spread of HIV/AIDS on the continent.

In Africa, HIV infection is spreading most quickly among married women. This happens because men are not expected to be faithful, and women have little control over the sexual demands of their husbands, even if the husbands have HIV. Therefore women frequently are infected by their husbands. Since 2003, the Sister-to-Sister Project has brought together African women religious from all over the continent to share experiences and develop their own strategies to help other women avoid this disease. Women religious in Africa are respected and trusted, and they have tremendous reach through their ministries. In the background of their efforts are women and men from other continents, who are not trying to solve

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<sup>36</sup>Mathew Illathuparampil, "Gender Sensitive Seminary Formation," in *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, 299.

<sup>37</sup>George M. Anderson, "Sister-to-Sister: A New Approach to AIDS in Africa," *America*, August 4, 2003, <http://americamagazine.org/print/146579> ; accessed July 27, 2016; Anisha Sud, "The All-African Conference: Sister to Sister, A Success Story," March 4, 2007, <http://amrif.blogspot.com/2007/03/all-african-conference-sister-to-sister.html>; accessed July 27, 2016; Jamie Manson, "Confronting AIDS in Africa, one sister at a time," *National Catholic Reporter*, December 15, 2011, <https://www.ncronline.org/print/blogs/grace-margins/confronting-aids-africa-one-sister-time>; accessed July 27, 2016.

African women's problems, but empowering them to do so themselves.

Similar examples could be taken from cultures around the world, involving faith-based organizations, men's and women's religious congregations, and social service agencies such as those belonging to the network, Caritas Internationalis. A representative instance from India is the work that Catholic organizations, especially religious sisters, do with tribal women. There are estimated to be about 65-70% of Indian Christians who are Dalit, and another 15-20% who are from a tribal (*adivasi*) background (a total of 80% or more). This is by far the majority of Christians in India. Dalits in India have traditionally been viewed as polluting the higher castes, and as deserving to be socially marginalized. Unfortunately these cultural patterns are more powerful in shaping the attitudes and behaviour of most Christian communities than the gospel.<sup>38</sup>

Yet the change in status and living conditions of tribal communities, especially in Northeast India, has been transformed by the activity of Christian missionaries and religious sisters.<sup>39</sup> Mother Mary Bernadette Prasad Kispotta, a tribal woman, founded the Roman Catholic Congregation of the Daughters of St Anne in 1897, and in 2016 was the first tribal nun in India to be declared a Servant of God. Mother Mary worked extensively to empower tribal peoples through education and travelled across the country, often through forested areas without roads, to reach and teach villagers. Courageously countering these powerful forces of ethnic, class and gender inequality, the Daughters of St Anne dedicate their resources to changing the lot of Dalit and *adivasi* peoples.

A present-day illustration of the work of this congregation of is provided from Jharkhand by Sr. Lalita Roshni Lakra.<sup>40</sup> This is how the DSA sisters define their identity: "we are mainly Adivasis, we are poor, obedient, dutiful, sociable, honest, ready for manual labour, and we co-operate closely with the Parish Clergy."<sup>41</sup> These sisters bravely and with determination work to reduce poverty, increase the

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<sup>38</sup>Leo D. Lefebure, "Catholics on the Margins in India: Dalits and Adivasis," *Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 2, 1 (2013) 33-49.

<sup>39</sup>Tanka Bahadur Subba, Joseph Puthenpurakal, Shaji Joseph Puykunnel, ed., *Christianity and Change in Northeast India*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2006, 328.

<sup>40</sup>Lalita Roshni Lakra, "Continuing Discrimination against Women: A Tribal Perspective," in *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, 90-103.

<sup>41</sup>The Congregation of the Daughters of St Anne, <http://dsaran.com/main.php?mid=social>; accessed December 12, 2016.

status of women, and maximize outreach and resources by uniting efforts of the Church to those of the government and NGO's. Lakra has coordinated social work programs for four provinces of her congregation, and is the director of BEACON, Hulhundhu-Ranchi, a social development centre. She is also the Vice-President of Signis India, an association for tribal and folk media. Lakra points out that the plight of tribal women is compounded by the discrimination they face within their communities, on top of that suffered by tribals in general.

Although tribal women play an important part in the local economy, their dignity and power are diminished by customary laws and restrictions on women's ownership of land; the demonization, harassment, and murder of women as witches; the exploitation of women labourers, who are overburdened with family duties; and the trafficking of tribal domestic workers, especially young girls.<sup>42</sup> Today, in addition to services in education, health care, and vocational training, the DSA sisters establish women's self-help groups, for example, to increase expertise and participation in agriculture and animal husbandry, and to encourage collaboration and mutual empowerment among women.<sup>43</sup>

### *Laudato Si'*

In the last line of *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, the editor, Shaji George Kochuthara, insists that Christians can and must communicate a new vision of gender relations in all their ministries and "above all through their life style."<sup>44</sup> Beginning even with very small actions day to day, all those in the Church and society who are committed to gender justice need to set an example. And it is vital to create a network of many people committed to the same example.

Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* illustrates this very point. It does not talk only about Catholic social teaching, science on climate change, or the preferential option for the poor. It begins the actual process of changing hearts and minds to start a social movement. How does it do this? First it reaches down into the grassroots and across cultures for support. It cites at least seventeen local bishops' conferences, including those in areas most affected by environmental disasters. Second, it calls to the imagination as well as the intellect. It

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<sup>42</sup>Lakra, "Continuing Discrimination against Women," 90-99.

<sup>43</sup>The Congregation of the Daughters of St Anne.

<sup>44</sup>Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI, "Sexuality, Gender and Sexual Violence: Can Christian Ethics Prevent the Culture of Sexual Violence in India?," in *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, 468.

incorporates prayer and poetry, uses colourful language to describe the natural environment, and was even released with a YouTube video portraying the beauty of nature across the globe as well as the ugly effects of pollution, water shortages, and desertification.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, it explicitly reaches out to other religious traditions, a most important move for social change in a multi-religious country like India. The encyclical concludes with a prayer for all Christians, and one for all those who believe in a Creator. Without a doubt this encyclical raised consciousness about ecology globally, inspired protest movements and movements of commitment on climate change, and evoked positive responses from leaders of other religious groups. What kinds of similar initiatives and approaches could be developed on gender equality and justice?

## Conclusion

Gender equality is not only essential to the dignity and wellbeing of women and girls, it is necessary to the dignity and happiness of men and boys who now are pressured into inauthentic patterns of “masculinity” that are not compatible with a truly fulfilling personal identity. Gender stereotypes, female or male, do not foster the kind of deep and enduring relations of care and trust that sustain us in good times and bad. More importantly, we as Christians find meaning by following Jesus Christ – who was courageous, a leader, and a man of honour. When asked what is the most important quality, he answered love – love shown in concrete acts of generosity, service and compassion (Lk 11:25-37). From Jesus’ perspective, we need to reconceive Pope John Paul II’s definition of “feminine genius” – a follower of Jesus is a woman *or man* who “sees persons with their heart,” and acts in solidarity to embody the transforming presence of Christ’s Spirit in the world.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’ (On Care for Our Common Home)*, June, 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html); accessed December 12, 2016. See also the accompanying video released by the Vatican: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tYdOIqvpqg>; accessed December 12, 2016.

<sup>46</sup>John Paul II, 1995 *Letter to Women*, nos. 10, 12.