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**Statement from the National Consultation on
IMPACT OF RELIGION AND CULTURE ON
WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: AN INDIAN
PERSPECTIVE**

Montfort Social Institute, Hyderabad,

23rd – 26th September, 2016

Pack nothing. We bring only our determination to serve and our willingness to be free. We will not hesitate to leave our old ways behind: we fear, silence and submission.

Only surrender is the need of the time: to do justice and walk humbly with God. Though we set out in the dark. We are confident that God will be present with us in fire and in the cloud to encourage us.

Alla Renee Bozarth

Down the ages men have been perceived to be the sole recipients and transmitters of divine messages. Women on the other hand, have been socialized by patriarchal religious structures and practices to passively accept religious teachings as interpreted by men. These andocentric and patriarchal interpretations have defined and shaped the social and cultural contexts of Indian women resulting in their disempowerment and second class status. Recognizing the influence of religion and culture on Indian women's lives, Streevani took the initiative to organize a National Consultation on the theme "Impact of Religion and Culture on Women's Empowerment: An Indian Perspective" from 23rd to 26th September, 2016 in Hyderabad. The Montfort Social Institute hosted the meeting and was also a co-organizer together with the Indian Christian Women's Movement, The Indian Women Theologians Forum, and Satyashodak. 50 people, religious women and men, lay women and one diocesan priest were present.

A major flaw in the perception of religion is the assumption that it is a given. Religion is in fact a negotiated reality with each individual or community defining its own understanding, one that evolves with time and circumstance. This fluidity needs to be placed at the centre of any discourse on religion along with the recognition that many religions have their origin in protests against established exclusionary and oppressive religious structures. The institutionalization of religious movements with their unchangeable dogmas however develops a fissure between the original episteme or way of understanding these movements, and the way they are practiced. The challenge is to preserve the voices of prophetic dissent and foster the freedom necessary for change. Women have the most at stake in this process since they are the ones crushed by the life-negating dogmas and conservatism of traditional religions.

Religion is frequently manipulated to monopolize power through homogenization and ritualization. Any agenda for change must therefore pluralize religious practices to capture the original thrust of the episteme. Thus spaces must be created in our social imagination to accommodate not just a recovery of the past but also an innovation of new liberating symbols, language and imagery that challenge authorized canons. Using these spaces, women need to stake their claim visibly and powerfully for their rights, and for their perspectives and interpretations to be accepted as part of the core religious canons which also underpin culture. Unless this happens the guardians of existing religious and social structures will not be forced to move to a critical consciousness of their oppressive nature.

The key of women's involvement with religion is hidden in women's bodies. Women in fundamental ways are locked in their bodies, and their exercise of power is at the pleasure of men, whether in the family or in the religious sphere. Thus, religion is not just about spirituality, beliefs and practices alone, but it is also political. These political practices however, belong to structures of the mind that are not inviolable. They can be broken by recovering the spiritual and humane. It is on this recovery that women's survival and unfolding as humans hangs.

The gendering of body and sexuality does great violence to women and those classified as LGBTIQ persons. The male is considered as the norm, and scriptures are used to define women as defective, sinful, needing to be controlled even by using violence. LGBTIQ persons and their subjectivities are by and large excluded by authorized canons of religions.

In India violence to women, the marginalized sections of society and minorities is a disturbing issue. It is prevalent in the family, and expands to a woman's circle of known persons, even those she is taught to revere and confide in such as religious leaders, as well as public spaces. Violence is an expression of power that is hegemonic. It is used to control, dominate and enforce a system of power entrenched in cultural, religious, political and economic spheres. Laws prescribed to protect are often manipulated to inflict violence. The painful sharing by a Dalit woman who spoke of political and religious violence, and a victim of domestic violence, during our consultations, amply demonstrated the roots of such violence in culture and religion.

The politics that have emerged in the discussion of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in India indicate how the law is being manipulated to demonize one minority religion while ignoring the gender injustice in other personal laws. Women from religious minorities in favour of retaining their personal laws with the necessary amendments to ensure gender justice, view the creation of a UCC as a move to undermine their rights. As societies across nations evolve and become more plural, we realize that we need equality of rights and not equality of the law, so that equality as an outcome for women is a priority rather than equal laws for all regardless of religious and ethnic differences.

For Catholic women governed by the Code of Canon Law the major discrimination based on gender is their exclusion from ordination and all the offices contained therein. The maleness of Christ rather than his humanity is emphasized putting women on a plane lower than men. Even within the category of the non-ordained, women and men do not enjoy equal rights. Only men, including married men, can be ordained deacons and be installed as lectors. Many of the rights given to both men and women are assigned only in the absence of a priest and at the behest of the parish priest or bishop.

Church teaching while professing the equality of women also promotes the notion of complementarity that assigns fixed roles to women and men, with women usually in passive and subservient positions. With regard to sexuality procreation is viewed as the norm, ignoring love, equality, respect and mutuality that contribute towards strengthening the marriage relationship. This has led to the active/passive paradigm that legitimates violence such as marital

rape, but also emotional, psychological and financial violence that covertly controls women's sexuality. Church leadership remains silent on the issues of domestic violence and dowry but stresses the morality that condemns abortion and contraceptives, and glorifies fidelity in marriage and motherhood no matter the circumstances. There is scant recognition that "separation becomes inevitable, at times even morally necessary when it is a matter of removing the more vulnerable spouse or young children from serious injury due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference" (*Amoris Laetitia* # 241).

In fact, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the later additions such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), have a trinitarian dimension of equal but different. Woman and man created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27), the Trinity, forms the basis of all human rights. However, in the Catholic Church the ontologically different character attained by men at ordination becomes a source of power that is sacramental and hierarchal and creates unequal people. This becomes an impediment to the realization of human rights in the Church which are a reflection of Jesus' call to be a community that believes and lives the "Kingdom" values of love, justice, equality, peace, reconciliation and communion.

In the light of the above we will endeavour to:

1. Do an analysis of the 1983 Code of Canon Law in the light of the International Bill of Human Rights and Indian Civil law.
2. Facilitate the gender sensitisation of men, particularly bishops, priests, and seminarians as proposed by the CBCI Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India.
3. Continue to accompany and support victims of sexual abuse
4. Follow up on a Policy that will encompass measures to prevent and redress sexual abuse, as well as protocols and structures to ensure justice, healing and sensitive accompaniment of victims.
5. Engage in collaboration with the CRI in matters of common concern.
6. Strengthen the Indian Christian Women's Movement.