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**Third National Consultation on Gender Relations in
the Church and Society**

**“LIVING NIRBHAYA: TOWARDS A
VIOLENCE FREE SOCIETY”**

Report

The third National Consultation on Gender Relations in the Church and Society organized by Streevani Pune, in collaboration with Satyashodhak, IWTF (Indian Woman Theologians Forum) and Montfort Social Institute from 9th – 11th August at Atmadharshan, Andheri (E), Mumbai was on the theme “Living ‘Nirbhaya: Towards a Violence Free Society’”. There were 44 participants consisting of Priests, Women and Men Religious and Laity from across the country. Archbishop Dominic Lumen of Imphal, Chair Person of the CBCI office for Women and Bishop Agnello Gracias, Auxiliary Bishop of Mumbai Archdiocese and Sr Rita Pinto RSCJ, National President of CRI Sister’s Section encouraged the group with their participation.

The Consultation was a follow up of the 1st consultation organized by Streevani in 2010 and the subsequent one jointly organized by Streevani, Montfort Social Institute, Satyashodhak, and IWTF (Indian Women Theologians Forum) 2011. These consultations were prompted by two important contemporary events in the Church: The publication of The Gender Policy of the Catholic Church in India by the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (2010) and the unprecedented crisis in the universal Church triggered by revelations in the public sphere of cases of sex abuse.

In line with the vigorous public discourse and protest following the brutal gang rape of the 23-year-old in Delhi and many such incidents, the consultation focused on change of mindset and asserted that equality between women and men is a human right issue and a theological imperative.

The specific topics that led our discussions were the follows:

1. Opening Liturgy on violence and healing: Shalini Mulackal, PVBM
2. Sharing experience: Virginia Saldanha
3. Opening messages: Bishop Agnello Gracias, Auxiliary Bishop of Mumbai; Sr Rita Pinto, RSCJ, CRI National President, Sisters Section

4. Situating Theme: Helen Saldhanha, SSpS
5. Psycho-social Aspect of Masculinity: Dr M.T. Joseph, SVD
6. Theology of Power: Women's Perspective: Dr Kochurani Abraham
7. Masculinity and Power in Scripture, Theology and Tradition: Dr Subhash Anand
8. Law Related to Rape and Domestic Violence under Misogynist Court Rulings: Julie George, SSpS
9. Healing from Brokenness: Dr M.C. Abraham, CSC
10. An Analytical Study on the Child Abuse Policy of the Church and the Draft Policy on Sexual Abuse: Bro. Varghese Theckanath, SG
11. Respecting Victims of Gender Based Violence: The Church and Social Change: Dr Lisa Cahill (Boston College, USA)
12. Mutuality and Reciprocity as Fundamental Norms in Sexual Relations: Dr Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI
13. Gender Policy as Vehicle to Bring Change: Dr. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala
14. Strategies for Living Nirbhaya: Dr Jacob Parappally and Noella D'Souza, MCJ

All the 44 participants agreed that the consultation has reignited a sense of commitment in us to the cause of gender justice as a follower of our LORD. The group felt that there is an urgency for consciousness-raising on gender equality and mutuality in the church. Some of the suggestions came up are:

- Introducing sex-education/gender education in the educational Institutions and other faith formation programs for children, youth and adults.
- Gender sensitized priests could use the pulpit to create awareness on issues of gender-violence and sexual violence so that the people can address these issues in their families, work place, etc.
- It is highly recommended that the Gender Policy is brought into the formation program in seminaries and other formation houses as part of the curriculum.
- It is important that every parish has some mechanism to identify the cases of abuse and deal with the issues. The community centres, family commission, youth commission, women's cell, etc. can give a lead on this and these can network with other NGOs or groups that have greater competence on this.
- Ecumenical and interreligious groups comprising women and men who want to address gender-violence and create mutuality and partnerships in man-woman relationships can be initiated outside the church circles and these can network with other secular groups committed to the cause of gender-justice.

- Ensure marriage preparation programme with one or two follow-ups after marriage. Expand the issues dealt with to include gender sensitivity, compatibility, mutuality-reciprocity, etc.

- It is important to create/initiate alternative spaces for consciousness-raising and interventions. Movements linking individuals, groups, organizations with a feminist thinking in to a larger network can facilitate this. A grass-roots based movement 'Women for Change' which is already initiated can be a platform for this.

- *Most important is Change of mindset* through personal commitment, dissemination of information, making use of existing forums like seminaries, superiors' forum and women commission to talk and discuss about the issue wherever possible.

Statement of the 3rd National Consultation: Gender Relations in Church (9 – 11th August 2013)

We, a group of Catholic women and men — laity, religious, priests and two bishops — gathered for the Third National Consultation on Gender Relations in the Church and Society, from 9 to 11 August 2013 at Atmadarshan, Andheri (E), Mumbai, to reflect and deliberate on the theme "Living Nirbhaya: Towards a Violence-free Society".

This Consultation comes as a follow up of the 1st consultation organized by Streevani in 2010 and the subsequent one jointly organized by Streevani, Montfort Social Institute, Satyashodhak, and IWTF (Indian Women Theologians Forum) in 2011. The earlier consultations were prompted by two important contemporary events in the Church: The publication of The Gender Policy of the Catholic Church in India, by the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (2010) and the unprecedented crisis in the universal Church triggered by revelations in the public sphere of cases of sex abuse. The vigorous public discourse and protest following the brutal gang rape of the 23-year-old in Delhi and the persistent occurrence of such incidents sets the backdrop to this consultation.

The recurrence of sexual violence in India reveals that we are living in a sick society. Violence hurts not only the victim but everyone, male and female including the perpetrators of violence. We call for change. With prophetic courage we denounce violence in all forms, whether in society or Church. The protest marches and the cry for justice all over India following the Nirbhaya gang rape and death, show that it is possible to awaken right-thinking people to stand together in denouncing the evil of violence especially against women. We affirm that equality between women and men is a human right issue and a theological imperative and assert the need to challenge the power-structures and the system of patriarchy that breed

violence against women and children and all those who are unable to defend themselves.

We are painfully aware that despite the God-given image of being human as women and men, our religious, cultural and social upbringing has created a mindset that gives men power to control and dominate women. Many women internalize their subservient position to men instead of their equal dignity, partnership and responsibility to grow and unfold themselves as human persons. The legitimization of the dominance of men with power to be in control, excludes women from having legitimate autonomy in organizing their life using their God-given freedom. This is one of the main reasons for violence against women.

In this consultation we focussed on sexual violence which had taken on unimaginable proportions. One way of analysing the root causes of such mindless violence is to see it as an expression of masculinity. More than defining maleness, masculinity is a metaphor for a sense of entitlement and power which is often internalised by men as part of their gendered socialisation. As a constant claim to power masculinity is always in a state of crisis as the need constantly arises to maintain its power by performance. The spiralling incidents of rape and other forms of male violence can be seen as expressions of such masculine power. We need to raise consciousness of the extent of masculinities to reverse this spiral of violence and construct alternative and humane ways of being men and women in the world today.

Analyzing other forms of power operating in society, we identify cult as power, those who control cult control society. Spirituality, when lived in a hegemonic mode inculcates powerlessness in women. Compliance is promoted as a virtue.

All our systems are overwhelmingly patriarchal. Coercion or threat is explicit in these systems. Often women are active collaborators of patriarchal power. In cases of sexual violence, there is a tendency of society to defend an offender because of his position and status in society. Often such defence goes to the extent of casting aspersions on the character of the woman. Rape is said to destroy the dignity of the woman, but does not destroy the dignity and integrity of the man who commits the crime.

Enough is not being done for the cognitive and emotional development and maturity of people. There is a need to address sexual aggression in programs of formation. Pathological abusers can walk away with no emotions or regret. Violence in our sacred texts should be highlighted and condemned and those texts that promote non-violence, peace and harmony based on justice be stressed. We also need to address aspects of our culture that promote or condone violence.

Today women are refusing to remain silent but continue to be victimised. They are survivors of violence who need healing. Hurt and angry feelings

that are not released properly become toxic. Healing involves deconstructing the old and reconstructing new meanings and responses; a repertoire that gives one the power of choice.

It is important to clarify our perceptions of and attitudes toward victims/survivors of abuse. Do we look at them as victims who need to be rescued and rehabilitated, as sick people who need treatment, damaged people who need mending or as whole-persons in pain needing wholesome accompaniment as they self-transcend through self-transformation? God gives us the ability to take ahead the past, add something new and transcend it to enter the future.

As in our earlier national consultations on the issue of gender relations in the Church and society, we re-affirm our commitment to the mission of the Church in proclaiming wholeness and liberation brought about by Jesus. The effective proclamation of the values of the Gospel calls for an awareness of the equal discipleship of both women and men, and of the urgency to respond to its implications in mission as disciples of Jesus.

As a way forward we see the need to explore new forms of being men and women which dwells on the commonalities of being human. We need to promote a culture of respect, mutuality and reciprocity in sexual relations and gender roles, where there is a give and take in man-woman relationships in a spirit of inter-dependence.

We uphold the Gender Policy of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India and its commitment to take a zero tolerance stand on the issue of violence against women and stress on the need to disseminate it at all levels.

Drawing up a plan of action to counter violence, we stress the need for widespread awareness and conscientization; dissemination of information of Policies, Laws and Acts/Bills that help in protection of women and children; addressing issues of discrimination with regard to dalits, tribal persons, economic class and gender; creating platforms/ advocacy cells to move towards equality and change; collaborating with NGOs and ecumenical groups especially at the national level; addressing the issue of corporal punishment in homes and schools and promoting crisis intervention at grassroots level through sharing information about resources/ shelters/ rehabilitation centres/ help-lines, etc.; and working with existing structures and movements and setting up new ones if needed.

Energized by the consultation the participants renew their commitment to address the issue of violence to women, children and all marginalized people, so that we take steps towards the realization of Christ's vision of God's reign of justice, peace and wholeness.