

GENDER POLICY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH OF INDIA: A Contribution of the Indian Church for Women Empowerment

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Abstract: The *Gender Policy* of the Catholic Church of India, released on 24 February 2010, is the first official gender policy, published by a Catholic Bishops' Conference in the universal Church. Though the Indian society and the Church still continue to be predominantly patriarchal, the Bishops' Conference took the courageous step to officially declare a policy for the empowerment of women, and opening doors for more creative roles in the Church. The initiative and work for this policy was undertaken by committed women and supported by others, including the bishops. *Gender Policy* is a good starting point for the empowerment of women in the Church and Society, and if implemented, it can become a model and tool for women empowerment in India. However, it has to be studied seriously and implemented with sincere commitment, especially by those in authority. Measures to make women aware of their rights in the Church and society are also needed.

Keywords: Bishops' Conference, Catholic Church, CBCI, Gender Justice, Gender Policy, Human Rights, Indian Church, Justice

1. Introduction

There have been various documents from Popes and Vatican offices addressing gender equality. In spite of the progress and greater involvement in the social and ecclesial life that women

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could achieve in the last few decades, it seems that discrimination and violence against women are on the increase. While fighting violence and injustice against women, it is also important to become aware of the creative steps taken to empower women and to make use of them with determination and renewed hope. The *Gender Policy* (GP) of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), released on 24 February 2010, is one such instrument for the empowerment of women especially in the Church.¹

The *Gender Policy* has three parts: Part I deals with the need of gender equality, the situation of women in India, biblical and theological foundation of gender equality and the teaching of the Catholic Church on gender equality. Part II explains the vision, mission, objectives and guiding principles. Part III elaborates upon the policy and its implementation on various levels. Part III, section XI [first section of Part III] is the most detailed one, which deals with areas of implementation. Policies and strategies for a more just role of women in the family, society and Church are outlined. The difficulties women face in different areas like education, healthcare, social life, etc. are explained and strategies to overcome these problems are indicated. Part III also includes a section on "Special Areas of Concern," such as rights of the girl child, tribal and dalit women, violence against women and women in difficult circumstances. As a background, I shall begin with Appendix II of the *Gender Policy*, which outlines the evolution of the *Gender Policy*.

2. The Process of the Evolution of the CBCI Gender Policy

Appendix II of the *Gender Policy* summarises the process of its evolution in four phases (GP 50-56). This is important for understanding the long process, strenuous work undertaken through serious study, discussions and deliberations. This will

¹Catholic 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> (6.8.2016). Hereafter *GP* in the text. Though released on 24 February 2010, the official date of publication is 8 December 2009, the feast of Immaculate Conception.

also help us to understand that the *Gender Policy* is the fruit of the work not merely of some particular offices of the CBCI, but of various offices, the hierarchy and many people who collaborated in the process. Moreover, an understanding of this process will convince us that the *Gender Policy* is the result of a determined and committed work of the CBCI and the people who collaborated in it. Without such a determination, it could be abandoned at any time during its preparation.

Phase I: Selection of the theme on 'Women' for the 28th CBCI Plenary Assembly. At the CBCI Standing Committee meeting in April 2007, Bishop John Baptist Thakur, SJ, Chairperson of the CBCI Commission for Women, proposed the theme on 'Women' for the 28th Plenary Assembly of the CBCI. The Standing Committee approved the theme: "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society" and appointed a committee of Bishops for the preparation of the Plenary Assembly.

May-July 2007: The Preparatory Committee requested the CBCI Commission for Women to draw up a road map leading to the 28th Plenary Assembly. This included Development of a Concept Paper, A National Consultation, 12 Regional Consultations with the Regional Bishops and women secretaries of the Commission for Women, Conducting an all India Survey to assess the Church's impact on the empowerment of women and recommendations for a way forward, Publishing a book with articles written by bishops, women and men on the theme of 'Empowerment of Women,' designing a logo to be used at the 28th CBCI Plenary Assembly and its related activities and publications, and the participation of lay and religious women in the Plenary assembly.

18 July 2007: The Preparatory Committee of the Bishops met with Secretaries of the CBCI Commissions, resource persons and the CRI Executives at CBCI Centre and studied the plan made by the Commission for Women.

24 July 2007: The Executive Secretaries of CBCI Commissions and the local Resource Team met for further study of the plan and conceptual clarity of the theme.

June-August 2007: Preparation of the All India Survey Questionnaire.

13 August 2007: Discussion on the logistics of the 28th CBCI Plenary Assembly.

14 August 2007: Meeting for the preparation of the Concept paper.

29 August 2007: Meeting for the preparation of the Plenary Assembly.

30 August 2007: National consultation for the preparation of the Plenary Assembly.

13 September 2007: Preparatory Committee Bishops met with various officials for the implementation of the plan and revision of the concept paper.

14-15 September 2007: Questionnaire was sent to dioceses, religious congregations and women's organizations.

September-November 2007: Tabulation of the responses to the questionnaire.

17-18 November 2007: Meeting to consolidate the regional committee reports.

August-December 2007: Consultation in 12 regions. Resource persons to address the Plenary Assembly were selected; programme was finalised.

Phase II: 28th CBCI Plenary Assembly (13-20 February 2008), in which 6 resource women presented papers on 'Empowerment of the Women in the Church and Society,'² and 20 Religious Women, 20 Lay Women and 7 men participated in the Plenary Assembly.

20 February 2008: The Statement of this Plenary Assembly was released which called for 12 Regional Gender Policies and a CBCI *Gender Policy* based on these to be submitted by the next biennial Plenary Assembly. "A landmark in the history of the Church - a *Gender Policy* for the Church in India!" (GP, 53).

Phase III: Preparation of Regional Gender Policies and CBCI Gender Policy - a core team for the drafting of the *Gender Policy*

²Some of these papers were later published in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* (Special Issue: "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society") 72, 6 (June 2008).

was constituted, and an outline and model of a Regional *Gender Policy* was drafted.

December 2008 - April 2009: Circulation of the Draft of the CBCI *Gender Policy* to experts for a feed back.

24 April 2009: The Draft CBCI *Gender Policy* was introduced. A Bishops' Committee was appointed for detailed reading of the *Gender Policy* and preparation of the final draft.

August 2009: The final Draft of the CBCI *Gender Policy* was included in the agenda of the CBCI Standing Committee meeting of September 2009.

Phase IV: Implementation of the CBCI *Gender Policy*

17 – 19 September 2009: CBCI Commission for Women organised a National Training for the implementation of the CBCI *Gender Policy*.

23 September 2009: CBCI *Gender Policy* was passed by the CBCI Standing Committee.

I have presented a rather detailed account of the evolution of the *Gender Policy*, especially to highlight that this task was undertaken by committed women and men, and supported by many, including the bishops. It is also noteworthy that in the discussions and in the drafting of the policy, the majority of the people who were actively involved were women. This is a very positive sign, because the Church statements, even when they deal with women had been mainly the work of men. It has to be appreciated that the bishops had the openness to bring out this policy through the active involvement of women, and the courage to declare as their own a policy on women, prepared mainly by women. In short, the *CBCI Gender Policy* is not the work of merely one section or group in the Church, but it is the contribution of people, both men and women, from various levels and regions, thus representing the entire Church in India. As Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil, the then president of the CBCI says in the Foreword, "The *Gender Policy* took shape from the earnest desire of the women and men of the country to bring equality and harmony to all" (GP ix).

3. *Gender Policy: An Overview of the Text*

The "Foreword" (GP ix-xi) by Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil, the then President of the CBCI, and the "Introduction" (GPxIV-XVI) by Bishop John Baptist Thakur, SJ, Chairperson of the CBCI Commission for Women, are noteworthy.

In the "Foreword" Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil 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?

In short, both the "Foreword" and "Introduction" emphasise that the equality of women is to be understood as integral to a just society. If gender justice is not guaranteed, it is a denial of justice to humanity as a whole. Justice to women is not an issue of women only; it is an issue that concerns both men and women, the whole humanity.

3.1. Part I, I: Gender Equality

The Christian understanding of gender equality is based on the biblical account of creation. Both man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God, expressing a "unity of the two" in a common humanity. This inter-personal communion mirrors the divine communion making it both a call and a task. The New Testament develops this ethos in Jesus' invitation to women's discipleship and in St Paul's exhortation that "there is no male and female, for all are one in Jesus Christ" (Gal 3:28; GP 1).

The equality and differentiation of women and men is based on their God-given, natural, biological and specific personal constitution. Gender inequality is not an exclusive "women's issue" but should concern and engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a pre-condition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centred development.

In spite of man and woman being created equal by God, unfortunately, both in history and in today's world there is gross discrimination against women. Still worse, justifications are given for discriminating between man and woman, boy and girl. Sometimes this is also done on the grounds of religious tradition" (GP 1).

Here we may be reminded of the (mis)interpretations given to scriptural passages in the Christian tradition itself to argue out that men enjoy a natural superiority in the creative plan of God itself. For example, the Yahwist creation story was interpreted in such a way that since Eve was created after Adam from his rib, as a 'helper' (Gen 2:18-22), she was to be considered inferior to Adam; or that since Eve fell into the Serpent's temptation first (Gen 3:1-6), she was to be considered responsible for all the sin in the world. Similarly, the imagery of Christ-Church relationship used by St Paul to speak about marriage (Eph 5:22-24) was used to argue that husband is the head of the family to whom the wife owes obedience. Although such (mis)interpretations have been rejected by modern biblical scholarship, such ideas find supporters even today. Thus, the above statement in the *Gender Policy* can be considered first of all as a self-criticism. However, in

the multi-religious context of India, it cannot be ignored that there are tendencies in some other religions too to argue for the superiority of man based on scriptural passages and stories. It is not rare that such statements come from religious and political leaders who claim to be defenders of their tradition.

The participation and commitment of men is required to fundamentally alter the social and economic position of women. Such an approach further recognizes the impact of gender inequality on men in terms of adverse effects on their psyche, behaviour, interpersonal relations, lifestyles and health and the corresponding benefits that come with gender equality (GP 1-2).

This adverse effect of gender inequality is often ignored. Not only women, but also men are affected by superiority-inferiority paradigm in man-woman relationship. For example, men may find it more difficult to express their emotions (except anger) as it may be considered a sign of weakness; they may ignore health issues since they are supposed to be stronger. Similarly, men may have more difficulty in accepting failures. Expressing love and affection even within one's own family may not be considered 'manly' since in such a paradigm man is supposed to be 'aggressive' and even 'violent'. Such gender roles and expectations are not healthy for man, instead may cause a lot of conflict and problems for man himself.

3.2. Part I, II: Situation of Women in India

The second part of Part I discusses the discrimination against women in the particular religious, socio-cultural context of India. The *Gender Policy* says that in most of the socio-cultural communities in India, patriarchal norms are still prevalent, denying or limiting women's human rights. Though the level of education and social involvement of women have increased, due to politicization, women are still discriminated:

Issues of culture, religion, ethnic and other forms of identity have become highly politicised due to rising religious fundamentalism that reinforces control over women, keeps them confined to roles that perpetuate their subordination

and prevents them from full enjoyment of their human rights (GP 2).

It is pointed out that despite the equality of genders provided in the Constitution of India, and various laws passed by the State, gender inequality persists. To substantiate this, the sex ratio, literacy rate women compared to men, percentage of women employed, representation of women in the parliament, courts, etc. are given. Globalization, militarization, fundamentalism, communalism, etc. have made the condition of women worse (GP 2-3).

The culture of domination, marginalization and exclusion which embody ideas, beliefs, values, traditions, rules, norms, perspectives (ideologies) that prefer males/sons has been styled in the culture of patriarchy. Through dominating social structures men own, control and manage financial, intellectual and ideological resource as well as the labour, fertility and sexuality of women, and thus perpetuate gender discrimination. Such a culture produces stereotyped notions of how a woman or man should behave (in words and actions), whereby they themselves become transmitters of the above value system. Consequently women also become both victims and victimizers (GP 4).

This observation may not require an analysis of the past, but it is sufficient to observe what happens in the present times. Religious and cultural fundamentalist groups and political parties which sponsor them try to restrict the freedom of women by defining what they should wear, when they should go out of the house, with whom they should go out, how they should behave, etc. Such codes of conduct imposed on women claiming to be the protectors of the Indian culture, tradition and values are only new incarnations of the discrimination against women and patriarchal control imposed on them from age old times.

3.3. Part I, III: Biblical and Theological Foundation of Gender Equality

Referring to *Genesis* 1:26 it is affirmed that man and woman are "created in the image of God." On this basic biblical premise this part of the *Gender Policy* elaborates upon what the Church has

done for women empowerment, especially referring to Catholic Social Teaching from 1960's.

I have commented above how some of the verses in the Yahwist narrative in the second and third chapters of the book of *Genesis* had been used to argue for the inferiority of women. Though in the Priestly narrative in which we find the creation of man and woman simultaneously, it was almost ignored by the tradition. Often, the interpretations of the priestly narrative of creation focused on the procreative purpose, as far as man-woman relationship or marriage was concerned. Hence it is important that the *Gender Policy* has referred to this passage to affirm the basic biblical vision of gender equality. A particular point of reference for this section 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.³

3.4. Part I, IV: Vision of Christ

Quoting MD, this part underscores that, "In all of Jesus' teaching, as well as in His behaviour, one can find nothing which reflects the discrimination against women so prevalent in His day. On the contrary, His words and works always express the honour and respect due to women..." (MD, 13; GP 6).

3.5 Part I, V: Teaching of the Church

This section gives an overview of the official teaching of the Church, especially from *Pacem in Terris*, on the dignity and equality of women.

3.6. Part I, VI: CBCI Empowering Catholic Women

This section narrates the various attempts by CBCI, especially from 1974, to ensure justice to women and to empower them. Contributions in the field of education, healthcare, etc. to ensure equal opportunity to women are also mentioned.

³John 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).

3.7. Part II, VII: Vision

The Indian Church's commitment to justice and equality, based on Jesus' vision is made clear in the vision statement:

Flowing from the vision of Jesus Christ, the Champion of the *anawim*, the oppressed, exploited and marginalized of society, and inspired by His love that makes no distinction between male and female, the Catholic Church in India is committed to building a world where all human persons are free to grow in the image and likeness of God (GP 11).

Following the vision statement, the mission and the objectives are listed.

3.8. Part II, VIII: Mission

GP gives the following as its mission: 1. To deepen among women and men a sense of their dignity; 2. To stimulate reflection on discipleship of equals; 3. To contribute to a gender just Church and society; 4. To make space for a spirituality shaped by women's life experiences (GP 11).

Thus, the mission statement, at least implicitly opens door for a more creative, equal and just involvement of women in the ministry of the Church.

3.9. Part II, IX: Objectives

The following are the objectives of GP: 1. To facilitate change in the mindset of women and men; 2. To ensure human rights of women; 3. "To ensure that all Church ministries, policies, structures, procedures and programs are gender sensitive and gender balanced"; 4. To make provisions for achieving these objectives (GP 11).

3.10. Part II, X: Guiding Principles (GP 12-13)

The GP is rooted in certain principles. It is said that these guiding principles give direction also for its implementation. Equality and dignity of all human beings demand a change in the present structures in the society and the Church. An optimism that changes are possible is evident in these guiding principles as well as in the whole document.

1. Equality and dignity of all human persons form the basis of a just and humane society.
2. Human persons have the innate potential to transform themselves and their environment.
3. Women's empowerment is central to achieving gender equality.
4. Gender equality is a cross-cutting issue that needs to be integrated in all the Commissions, Church bodies, institutions, policies and programs of the Church.
5. The experiences and wisdom of women are conducive for the growth and transformation of the Church and society.
6. Achieving gender equality requires the recognition that every policy, program and project affects women and men differently.
7. Gender just structures are imperative to facilitate the equality of opportunities and justice for all.
8. Gender equality can only be achieved through equal partnership among and between women and men.
9. Networking and collaboration are crucial processes to mobilize collective action for social transformation.

Concluding Part II, referring to the Statement of the 28th CBCI Plenary Assembly 2008, the bishops reaffirm their commitment to ensure gender justice in collaboration with the government, civil society and other religious groups.

3.11. Part III, XI: Areas of Implementation

It discusses seven areas of implementation: 1. Women and family; 2. Women and education; 3. Women and health; 4. Women and social involvement; 5. Special areas of concern; 6. Within the Church; 7. Research, documentation and dissemination of information. Each of these presents a policy followed by the strategies. Some of them have sub-divisions.

1. Women and Family: While affirming the importance of the family and the role of the woman as mother, this section outlines strategies to ensure more gender just relationships in the family: Orientation programmes to build mutual respect and equal partnership in marriage, equal right of son and daughter over family property, discouraging dowry, overcoming gender division of labour in household chores, are some of them (GP 14-

15). Particularly of interest may be the following, especially in the background of sexual violence in intimate partner relationship: "Promote a spirituality of sexual relationship perceived as an expression of mutual love and self-gift rather than an exercise of conjugal right (of the man) and duty (of the wife)" (GP 15).

In fact, each issue mentioned in the above paragraph deserves detailed comment. However, I shall limit my observations to the last point mentioned, namely, the idea of conjugal right and duty. This is in fact an insightful and profound statement, especially in the background of the Christian tradition that built up its conjugal sexual morality based on "rights" and "duties". It may not be an exaggeration to say that in the Christian tradition, the concept of mutuality in conjugal sexuality was based on the idea of "rights" and "duties". In the Christian tradition, this concept goes back to 1 Cor 7:3-4, which says, "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." In fact, St Paul is very much gender-sensitive, as he speaks specifically of the right and duty of the husband and wife. However, in the patriarchal context, the possibility of using this norm to demand an unconditional sexual availability from the part of the wife existed, whereas the wife would not have the freedom and spontaneity to express her sexual desires and needs since such expressions would be judged by patriarchy as 'abnormal' or 'perverse'. That is, in practice this norm had become a patriarchal norm to control further the woman and her sexuality. Considered in such a background, this statement given in GP reflects a cultural sensitivity and the need to develop a conjugal sexual morality based on mutuality.

2. Women and Education: The educational interventions are necessary to facilitate change in mindset, behaviour and practices. Among strategies, free education to girl children in Catholic schools, co-education in all Church-run institutions, reservation for girls from backward communities, etc. are proposed.

Of particular interest is the guidelines in the formation of priests: "Educate clergy against the imposition of gender biased

practices (i.e. covering the head with veil by women, while receiving Holy Communion, reading the gospel and at the time of adoration) (GP 11). This is of vital importance since there are priests who insist on such practices even today. Similarly, as already indicated above, it is not so rare to find clergy who continue with the traditional interpretations of the creation story or the imagery of Christ-Church relationship to argue that the wife should obey husband, since he is the 'head'. Comments and jokes which caricature women are not rare in the homilies of some priests. All these point to the need of education for the clergy to be more gender-sensitive.

3. Statistics: The alarming statistics relating to survival, nutrition and morbidity of women in India deserve special attention of the Church and civil society. Various strategies to implement this are suggested (GP 18-19).

4. Women and Social Involvement: At the very outset it is pointed out that "active presence and interventions of gender sensitised women and men are required in the public spaces (GP 19). This section has six sub-sections: i. Women and social awareness; ii. Promotion of Women's Participation in Public Life/State Political Structures; iii. Women and Economic Independence; iv. Women for Peace; v. Women and Religious Harmony; vi. Women and Environment (GP 19-25).

The Church recognises the right of the woman to work, to enter fully in the public spaces and society's progress, as well as her right to access the services provided in the public space. Her rights in the public and private spheres have to be preserved and protected and safety and security ensured at all times (GP 19).

This is particularly important, as the tendency to limit the freedom of women and her access to technology, role in public space, etc. continues, even through violence including murder. The importance of ensuring economic independence is also underlined and it is pointed out that work participation is low and that there are discriminatory low wages for women. Following this, the role of women in Peace-building, religious harmony, and in protecting the environment is highlighted.

Although problems in these areas affect both men and women, women are more adversely affected by them.

5. Special Areas of Concern:

i. Rights of the Girl Child speaks about the 'missing millions of females' in India, who were never born, or died of chronic malnutrition.

ii. Tribal and Dalit Women are particularly oppressed and exploited. "Work towards the development of tribal, dalit and disadvantaged women, with respect to their education and opportunities for employment especially through Church institutions (GP 28).

iii. Violence against Women: "The Church will work towards elimination of all forms of violence against women and advocate zero tolerance to any act of violence against women and children." It is also underscored that, "The Church will establish institutionalised mechanisms to end gender related violence in all arenas of social and religious life (GP 29).

I would like to highlight two strategies proposed: 1. "Set up structures and evolve mechanisms for effectively combating violence and sexual harassment against women in families, workplaces and Church Institutions" (GP 29). Besides what is said in the *Gender Policy*, it has also become mandatory according to civil law that redressal committees are formed in public institutions, though they are run by the Church. However, it seems that many institutions are still reluctant to form such committees. 2. "Condemn domestic violence through church documents, pastoral letters and homilies and formulate vigilance and grievance cells in Church institutions especially in rural areas" (GP 29). It is not rare that even today, women who may suffer domestic violence may be advised by Church personnel to accept all sufferings unconditionally to safeguard the indissolubility of the marriage, and as a sacrifice for the well-being of the family. Instead, an uncompromising objection to violence is demanded by Christian faith.

iv. Women in Difficult Circumstances:

These include, women afflicted by destitution, women affected by natural calamities, women with disabilities, unwed mothers,

widows, dependent single women, women heads of marginalised households, women displaced from employment, migrants, victims of marital/domestic violence, trafficked women, HIV/AIDS victims, sexually abused women and prostitutes (GP 30).

It is important to notice that instead of considering women in such circumstances as culprits and sinners, the basic approach is that of considering them as victims, and hence in need of compassion and support. This section also speaks about the need of setting up grievance redressal cells, and the need of supporting men and women to undertake legal and canonical studies so as to assist women in difficult circumstances.

v. Trafficking and Sexual Violence: "The Church as a symbol of human liberation has a definite role and responsibility to take strong measures to end these extreme forms of violence against women and children (GP 31).

6. Within the Church:

i. Women and CBCI: "Aware of 'feminine genius' of women, every effort will be made to ensure that women regain full respect for their dignity and role (GP 32).

The concept of "feminine genius" needs a critical evaluation. In the Catholic context, this usage is attributed to the writings of John Paul II, especially to *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Though it is considered to be a recognition of women, there are many who criticise that the concept "feminine genius," like the complementarity model, facilitates gender discrimination in a subtle manner by attributing certain qualities as more feminine, and as integral to women and hence as belonging to "feminine genius". 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 or as "masculine genius"? Similarly, docility, humility, patience, etc. are sometimes presented as feminine qualities, which may indirectly confine women to the traditional roles. As strategies, inclusion of women in the various CBCI offices, gender

auditing, gender budgeting in the Commissions, etc. are proposed.

ii. Women and Diocesan Social Service Societies: It is proposed that to ensure inclusiveness of women and men and facilitate gender mainstreaming, the Directors of these societies could also be women (GP 33).

iii. Women's Representation and Participation in Church Bodies: It asks to ensure women's representation in Church bodies, administration and governance, in decision-making, and ministries.

iv. Formation of Consecrated Women and Seminarians: Consecrated Women (Religious/ Secular) and Seminarians could be formed and trained with gender perspective. "Include gender sensitivity courses and feminist theology among the main subjects in seminaries and as ongoing formation of bishops, major superiors, formators and priests." As a strategy, it also proposes to "Provide scholarships, to lay and religious women for theological, biblical and canonical studies that promote gender justice and an ecclesiology of partnership (GP 33).

This is an important step to be taken if the Church sincerely wants to benefit from the contribution of women theologians. However, it is not sufficient that women are provided scholarship for their studies; they should be given equal opportunities in the theological institutions once they complete their studies. In India, except a few, all theological institutions are run by dioceses or bishops' conferences or men's religious congregations. Most of these are basically for the theological studies of seminarians as required for priestly ordination. So, unless the Church decides to reserve a certain percentage of teaching posts for women, women theologians may not find any teaching positions in these institutions. Or, at the maximum they may be invited only as visiting faculties. There are signs of change – some institutions have assumed women as full time teachers. However, a more determined effort is required in this regard.

7. Research, Documentation and Dissemination of Information: This will facilitate a deeper understanding of gender realities in various socio-political regions of India (GP 36).

8. **Networking movements** at local, national and global levels to end gender discrimination, sharing of models and best practices, etc. will be helpful (GP 37).

3.12. Part III, XII: Implementation Mechanism

For the implementation of the *Gender Policy*, collaboration between institutions and commissions of CBCI is required. Besides, it should be ensured that sufficient fund is allocated for the work of the Commission for women. Awareness and publicity for the *Gender Policy* and regular reviewing of its implementation are also necessary (GP 38).

3.13. XIII: Conclusion

The *Gender Policy* concludes with a prayer to Blessed Virgin Mary, the highest expression of the "feminine genius".

4. Observations

4.1. Unique Contribution

We may not be able to claim that *Gender Policy* is a perfect or comprehensive document. However, it cannot be disputed that it is an original contribution, especially in the pluralistic context of India. Gender discrimination and gender violence continue to be disturbing problems in India. In such a context, this policy, especially from a religious institution, which is considered to be predominantly patriarchal, is a bold step.

The *Gender Policy* asks to collaborate with the government bodies, voluntary organisations and other religions in the promotion of gender justice. This is a welcome suggestion since it has opened up new avenues for collaboration with others in the pluralistic context of India.

The *Gender Policy*, if implemented with due commitment and seriousness, can become a model for other religions as well as for government bodies and the civil society. Though Christians are a minority, implementation of this policy can thus exert great influence. As already said before, *Gender Policy* is first of its kind as far as the Catholic Church is concerned. Its meticulous implementation in the Indian Church can inspire the universal Church, and thus it can become a model for the whole Church.

4.2. A Few Missing Areas

Although it is a *Gender policy*, still there is a reluctance to use inclusive language in some places, especially when there is reference to God, or to the bible. There may be differences of opinion on this. But, it may be a sign of the continuing resistance to changes in the mindset.

Although the Catholic Church has its own limitations, more determined efforts in bringing women to active ministry in the Church could be explored.

Based on my studies, a stronger condemnation of the practice of dowry is necessary. Dowry, though it may appear as only one among various forms of oppression of women, it is one of the root causes of the discrimination against women. So, a stronger condemnation would have been helpful.

Women religious are usually used as an 'unpaid workforce' in the institutions of the Church. It is not that any service has to be valued in terms of money. But, if men receive wages/stipend for their service in the Church, women are to be paid equitably. The policy needs to be more emphatic on these areas.

5. From Policy to Implementation

One of the difficulties that we often face is the gap between the theory and practice. With regard to the *Gender Policy* also it seems to be true. In the Introduction, Bishop Thakur says: "A policy is a present decision for future action. If action does not follow, a policy remains a dead letter, however well-worded" (GP xv). So, it is time to evaluate how far this policy has been implemented. In a study undertaken by Streevani, Pune, in 2014, it was found that almost 44% Church members/leaders never heard that such a policy existed.⁴ So, more committed action is needed in this regard. GP has to be studied and discussed at the parish level. Unless the bishops give clear directives, the parish priests may not take interest in reading and understanding the GP and in educating the parishioners accordingly.

⁴Streevani, *Gender Justice and Catholic Church: Beliefs and Behaviours. A Scientific Study*, Pune: Streevani Publication, 2014.

Another difficulty arises from the very structure of the CBCI. Regarding many issues and policies, the decision of the CBCI may not be binding, since decisions of binding nature are to be taken by the Bishops' Conferences/Synods of the individual Churches. That is, unless the Individual Churches own the GP, it may remain just as a policy, which is not implemented at all.

6. What Do I Do? What Do We Do?

The question still remains, "what do you do to implement and disseminate GP if you are convinced that GP is to be studied and implemented?" We may not be able to change everything all of a sudden, but even small steps taken to make this policy known and to implement it are important.

Personally, I refer to the *Gender Policy*, whenever I speak or write on a related topic. In one of the courses that I teach at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, I have included gender justice as a topic, and *Gender Policy* as an obligatory reading material.

Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram was one of the pioneering Catholic theological institutions in India, which welcomed women for theological studies. Since then, a number of women, mainly women religious, have undergone theological and philosophical training at DVK. Now also there are many women students undergoing various courses at the doctoral, post-graduate, undergraduate and diploma levels. In every batch/class there are women students. This gives the possibility to seminarians and priests to interact with women (most of them religious) as equals. This will have a direct influence on their attitude towards women when they engage in various ministries. To encourage more women to take up theological studies, as far as possible, scholarships also are made available for them. Besides many women who are visiting staff, there are also a few women who are full time teachers here.

At Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, we have organised a few conferences and seminars on Gender Justice and Feminist Theology. In 2014 July under the auspices of the Department of moral theology, DVK organised a conference on "Gender Justice

in the Church and Society."⁵ There was a paper on the CBCI Gender Policy.⁶ Many theologians who participated in the conference said that they would make this Policy an obligatory part of their courses in the seminaries. Another important conference, "Feminine Genius: Women Leadership for a Just and Compassionate Society" was organised by *Journal of Dharma* in July 2016 (during which this paper was originally presented). In the conferences or seminars we organise there will be usually a few papers from the Gender Justice and Feminist perspectives. We also try to have women scholars speaking in the conferences, writing in our journals and other publications. During the academic year 2016-2017, the annual lectures for the Faculty theology was on "Women Empowerment," and the lectures were delivered by Prof. Lisa Sowle Cahill, a world renowned moral theologian and feminist theologian teaching at Boston College, USA.

7. Conclusion

Although the Indian constitution recognises the equality of men and women, and grants equal rights to men and women, discrimination against women continue in various forms. Reports of violence against women are on the increase. Though the "Nirbhaya"⁷ incident was a turning point in Indian society's attitude towards violence against women, almost every day we

⁵The papers of this seminar have been already published: *Gender Justice in the Church and Society. Second DVK National Seminar on Moral Theology*, ed. Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2016.

⁶Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, "CBCI Gender Policy: A Tool for Gender Justice," *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, ed., Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 169-182.

⁷"Nirbhaya" is the nickname given to the girl who was gang-raped by six men in a moving bus on 16 December in Delhi. She succumbed to death on 28 December 2012. The incident led to mass protests and public outcry against violence on women. This incident, though among one among thousands of cases of violence against women, led to public discussion on violence against women, and greater awareness of the need for a more gender-just society in India.

hear about violence against women. Moreover, political and religious ideologies which try to limit the freedom of women are being reinforced. In such a context, concerted efforts to fight injustice and violence against women are all the more necessary.

In the Christian vision, equality of man and woman is not only a matter of natural justice, but also an obligation springing from the basic faith vision. God created human beings male and female, in his image and likeness, equal in dignity and freedom. Any attempt of denying equality to women is a denial of justice; any attempt to deny or limit this equality is contrary to the Christian vision. The Gospels witness to Jesus' recognition of the equality of men and women. He welcomed women as his disciples and respected their dignity. In the Christian history we may find distortions of this vision. Fortunately, in our times, there is a greater recognition of the equality of men and women, and the conviction that gender discrimination is against the vision of Jesus. Though we cannot deny the fact that forms of discrimination continue, there is a renewed commitment and determination in the Church to fight discrimination and injustice based on gender and to create a just and compassionate society, rooted in the vision of Jesus. Commitment to this vision also demands to transform the society as a whole, establishing justice and a society free of gender-discrimination.

The *Gender Policy* is a good starting point in this regard, for the empowerment of women in the Church and Society, especially in India, and thus it is a contribution of the Church to the Indian society. However, it has to be studied seriously and implemented with sincere commitment, especially by those in authority. Measures should be taken to make women aware of their rights in the Church and society. If implemented, GP can become a model for the empowerment of women in the Church and society.