

GENDER JUSTICE: A UTOPIAN IDEAL?

A Feminist Perspective

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1. Introduction

There has been a growing awareness of the dignity and role of women all over the world since the 1980s. People are beginning to realise that the Feminist Movement is one of the signs of the times that deserves our attention. The United Nations Declaration on the Decade of Women (1975-1985) acknowledges and establishes the movement as essential to the promotion of fundamental human rights in the spirit of its motto: equality, development and peace. As Pope John XXIII rightly remarks in his encyclical, "Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life."¹

Nevertheless, in the Church as well as in the wider society, the recognition of women's dignity and capability has to be constantly claimed. For, women have to consciously demand their rights and privileges both from civil and church authorities who seemingly are often apathetic and silent. The situation is all the more serious in the context of India – with its culture, predominantly rooted in Hindu ethos that is strongly entrenched in the caste system, with dehumanising poverty and illiteracy – which assigns to women an inferior role in most spheres of social life. Set within this paradoxical context, this essay makes an

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¹John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (Encyclical Letter, 11 April 1963), AAS 55 (1963), 267-268.

attempt to address the problems related to the realization of gender justice for women in the Church, and in the society, at large.

2. Women and Gender Justice in Society

Women form part of a patriarchal society, wherein they experience a great discrepancy between the idealised concept of women and their real life situation. In both the developed and developing countries, women are victims of multiple inequalities, which are the by-products of centuries-long socio-cultural, religious, economic and political discriminatory practices.

Patriarchal (religious) ideology fosters the belief that man is superior to woman, that her subordination is derived from God's will; hence, man exercises power in God's name and he is the sole authority in all major decisions. It claims divine legitimacy for women's subordination and victimisation in the social and religious spheres. Our double standards of law and morality, which primarily protect the rights of men, are also based on patriarchy.²

These preliminary remarks help us perceive the close relationship between gender and patriarchy. It must be underlined that the existence of patriarchy mediated through structural and ideological forces determines the form of gender relations in any given society. Hence, there is need to concretise the concept and the meaning of gender and the usefulness of 'gender' as a conceptual category in understanding the problems of domination and subordination.

a) Understanding Gender

Gender is the cultural definition of behaviour acknowledged as appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time.³ It may be described as a set of cultural roles, defined by existing power relations and social practices. To put it differently, gender means how men and women are socially and

²Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan, *Some Questions on Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia*, Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986, 9. See also J. C. Brown and C. R. Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990.

³Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 238.

culturally constituted, and how these are given ideological meaning by delineating relations of power.⁴

Unfortunately, the term 'gender' is used both in academic discourses and in the media as interchangeable with 'sex'. As Lerner rightly remarks, such a usage "hides and mystifies the difference between the biological given – sex – and the culturally created – gender."⁵ Unlike the God-given physiological difference between male and female, gender roles are the creation of humans. Hence, they are "neither universal nor static." Since they are learned, they can also be unlearned. What is considered to be 'womanly' and 'manly' varies widely among different times and places, whereas the purely biological distinction of being female or male is universal.

The term 'sex-gender', introduced by the anthropologist Gayle Rubin, has found wide acceptance among feminists. It refers to the institutionalised system, which allots resources, property and privileges to persons according to culturally defined roles.⁶ Thus, it is sex that determines women's childbearing role, whereas it is the sex-gender system that assigns their childrearing responsibility. Feminist scholars argue that women's subordinate and secondary position is due to socially constructed, and not naturally occurring, patterns of gender division.⁷

The distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' as advanced by Robert Stoller represents an influential piece of analysis:

With a few exceptions, there are two sexes, male and female. To determine sex one must assay the following conditions:

⁴Anandi S. and A. R. Choudhury, "Patriarchy and Gender Relations: An Overview" in Rudolf C. Heredia and Mathias Edward, eds., *The Family in A Changing World*, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1995, 22.

⁵Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 138. See also Ann O'Hara Graff, "The Struggle to Name Women's Experience," in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, 71-89.

⁶Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 138.

⁷For further detailed description, see Elaine L. Graham, *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood and Theology*, London: Mowbray, 1995. See also M. Gatens, "A Critique of the Sex/Gender Distinction," in S. Guneru, ed., *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1991, 139-157.

chromosomes... One's sex, then, is determined by an algebraic sum of all these qualities, and, as is obvious, most people fall under one of the two separate bell curves, the one of which is called 'male', the other 'female'. Gender is a term that has psychological and cultural rather than biological connotations: if the proper terms for sex are 'male' and 'female', the corresponding terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine'... Gender is the amount of masculinity and femininity found in a person, and obviously, while there are mixtures of both in many humans, the normal male has a preponderance of masculinity and the normal female a preponderance of femininity.⁸

Joan Scott's definition of gender involves two interrelated but analytically distinct parts. Gender is "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and a primary way of signifying relationships of power."⁹ This definition has far-reaching implications. Power does not merely manifest itself in and through gender relations but gender is constitutive of power itself. It points, among other things, to the contingency of the association of gender with a sexed body and to the gendered nature of all power-relations.¹⁰ Kandiyoti maintains that the concepts we employ to designate the working of power and domination never seem to fully capture the specificity of their manifestations through historically and culturally contextualised forms of gender-relations.¹¹ The task of gender analysis is to reveal how all forms of social hierarchy are ultimately gendered. This has contributed to the gender-based division of labour, a point that will be discussed in the sequel.

⁸Cited in A. Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society*, Aldershot: Gower, 1972, 158-159. See also S. L. Bem, *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality*, London: Yale University Press, 1993 and R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Power and Sexual Politics*, London: Polity, 1987.

⁹J. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 42.

¹⁰Deniz Kandiyoti, "Gender, Power and Contestation," in C. Jackson and R. Pearson, eds., *Feminist Visions of Development: Gender, Analysis and Policy*, New York: Routledge, 1998, 145.

¹¹Kandiyoti, "Gender, Power and Contestation," 145.

b) Gender-based Division of Labour

Many of the gender roles ascribed to men and women are largely due to the existing structure of the society and the attitudinal predispositions, which perpetuate patriarchal power relations.¹² At its simplest, the gender division of labour can be seen as the allocation of particular tasks to particular people. It becomes part of a social structure to the extent that this allocation poses a constraint on further practice. For example, in most cultures, women look after children because they have *always* done so. Similarly, motherhood is such an essential component of women's gender-identity that it is seen as the 'natural' expression of womanhood. Equally, there are powerful norms about masculinity that work against men taking on the role of 'mothering' and domestic work, to do so would constitute a violation of the prescribed gender roles. As Naila Kabeer rightly observes, "what may have started out as a way of organising labour takes on a normative significance so that values become embodied in the tasks and in who does them."¹³

As these divisions of labour become an accepted norm, they form the basis of new constraints on practice. What exists in most societies are what Connell calls "hegemonic forms" of masculinity and femininity which constrain the actual practices of men and women, but do not determine them. Some societies are relatively flexible with regard to their rules and practices that shape gender relations. Others, on the other hand, enforce them severely and punitively. Nevertheless, most societies have set their normative standards, which exercise greater or lesser pressure for conformity. Obviously, "gender-related processes influence behaviour, thoughts and feelings in individuals; they affect interaction among individuals; and they help determine the structure of social institutions."¹⁴

Along with individual gender identities, family and kinship relations are systems for organising rights, responsibilities and resources for

¹²B. Bhattacharya and G. Jhansi Rani, "Defining a Framework for Gender Analysis in Development Planning," *Journal of Rural Development* 13 (April-June, 1994), 244.

¹³Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996, 59.

¹⁴Mary Crawford, *Talking Difference: On Gender and Language*, London: SAGE Publications, 1995, 13.

different categories of members in different social groups. Whitehead characterises relationships within the familial domain as gender-ascriptive: "in them, to describe the position is to describe the gender."¹⁵ Thus, to be a husband, a wife, a mother, a father, an uncle, or a niece, is to be either a man or a woman. These relationships are governed by social 'rules' that determine how assets are to be distributed between the occupants of the different relationships, how authority and status are to be assigned, and how labour is allocated. Familial relationships are a primary mechanism through which social meanings are invested in, and social controls exercised over women's bodies, labour, sexuality, reproductive capacity and life choices.¹⁶

The jargon of gender is liberally used, but if one deconstructs the language further, one realises that the term is used more in a descriptive sense to refer to social differences in roles and responsibilities of men and women in society, rather than the relationship of power between men and women.¹⁷ The gender and women's issues in India are unique as they are bound up with caste-class factors and with sexism *per se*. Empirically, class and gender tend to be mutually constituted; biological differences are always highlighted in the context of intersecting social inequalities. As R. K. Murthy aptly observes, forms of discrimination through which these power relations manifest themselves most strongly like violence against women, male control over women's sexuality and reproduction, as well as over mainstream political processes, etc., fall outside the ambit of most of these frameworks.¹⁸ When we examine gender relations as power

¹⁵A. Whitehead, "Some Preliminary Notes on the Subordination of Women," *IDS Bulletin* 10, 3 (1979), 11.

¹⁶Kabeer, *Reversed Realities*, 58.

¹⁷Ranjani K. Murthy, "Power, Gender Relations and Development Organisations," *Madhyam* 13, 2 (December 1998), 26.

¹⁸Murthy, "Power, Gender Relations and Development Organisations," 26-27. Murthy continues: "The dominant frameworks which emerged in the decade 1985-1995 include the Gender Analysis Framework... The fact that gender relations are closely intertwined with relationships of race, class, caste, religion, ethnicity, age and other social variables is also not recognised by any of these frameworks." For a critique of the dominant frameworks, see pages 26-27.

relations,¹⁹ it is evident that men are favoured by the rules of the institutions within which gender relations occur and that they enjoy and exercise power in commanding these resources. Gender inequality is, therefore, an outcome of an asymmetry in power, where men are in a position of privilege and women in subordination.²⁰ As Jyotsna Chatterji observes,

The types of discrimination and oppression of women fall into two categories, one practised on the basis of caste and class, and the other on the basis of sex. When these two combine as in the case of Backward Caste, Scheduled Caste and tribal women, the oppression becomes all the greater. Within each of these areas there are different sections of women who are subjected to oppression, such as the rural and urban poor belonging to the above sections, the working women and the educated and economically better off women. These specific sections have their own concerns and areas of struggle that will involve all women.²¹

It should be noted that the patriarchal ideology and its gender-based division of labour affect poor women more severely than upper class women. Their workload is doubled as they shoulder the major part of the burden in agricultural production, along with domestic chores. The majority of women work 14 hours a day, but their contribution is not recognised as they are always paid lower than men. Bina Agarwal observes that agricultural growth strategies pursued, since the mid 1960's have not made any significant dent on the incidence of absolute poverty.²² Instead, male-female differentials in employment and earnings among the poor in many states have increased. There has been a preoccupation with

¹⁹See N. Kabeer and R. Subrahmanian, "Institutions, Relations and Outcomes: Framework and Tools for Gender-Aware Planning," Discussion Paper 357, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, September 1996.

²⁰For further information, see Women's Policy Research and Advocacy Unit, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, "The Status of Rural Women in Karnataka Study: A Summary Report of the Preliminary Findings," September 1997.

²¹J. Chatterji, "Perspectives of Joint Women's Programme," *Religion and Society* 40, 1 & 2 (March-June 1993), 57.

²²Bina Agarwal, ed., *Structures of Patriarchy-State, Community and Household in Modernising Asia*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991.

growth at the cost of both distributional and ecological considerations. This has deepened class and regional disparities.

A large number of women in India are employed in agriculture and the rest in non-agricultural works, working in organised as well as unorganised sectors of the economy.²³ It is estimated that most Indian women work in the unorganised sectors. Whether they work in organised or unorganised sectors, women are subjected to various forms of exploitation. The State entitlement to benefits such as health insurance, pensions and welfare payments are looked into only through women's relationship with men. The police and the law treat the rape of women and their physical and sexual assaults lightly. Even appointments to public office in the judiciary, the civil service and industrial planning are not shared equally between men and women.

It has been argued that the use of gender-related categories has obscured patriarchy and politico-economic contents of this power relationship. The relationship between State and colonialism, etc., becomes fully visible only in the analysis of patriarchy while gender tends to reduce the problem to the social sphere. This fear can be overcome when gender is treated as one of the factors by which patriarchal power is maintained. In a study on "Power, Gender Relations and Development Organisations," R. K. Murthy states succinctly:

Empirical evidence across the globe and in South Asia indeed supports the viewpoint that organisations reflect and reinforce gender hierarchies through their substantive, structural and cultural features... The substantive elements (rules and policies) of development organisations are also shaped by the belief that the gender issues are women's issues. Decision-makers of organisations often evolve separate gender policies and separate programmes for women; leaving a majority of policies and programmes gender-blind.²⁴

²³For a discussion on this, see Malavika Karlekar, *Poverty and Women's Work: A Study of Sweeper Women in Delhi*, New Delhi: Shakti Books, 1982. See also Rosamma George, "Women's Endless Struggle Continues," *Indian Currents* (March 12, 2000).

²⁴Ranjani K. Murthy, "Power, Gender Relations and Development Organisations," *Madhyam* 13, 2 (December 1998), 23.

Both within and across institutions, gender operates "as a pervasive allocational principle, linking production with reproduction, domestic with public domains, and the macro-economy with the micro level institutions within which development processes are played out."²⁵

Locating gender relations as a power-laden category, we see how women have been co-opted into the patriarchal system. Institutions provide the framework for specific organisational forms²⁶ which, through the impact of tradition, custom or legal constraint, tend to create "durable and routinised patterns of behaviour."²⁷ As Naila Kabeer asserts, gender is always interwoven with other social inequalities, such as caste, class and race, and has to be analysed through a holistic framework if the concrete conditions of life for different groups of women and men are to be understood.²⁸

Patriarchy, the system by which women are minimised, trivialised, and made invisible, "sucks power to the top or passes it down in gradual decreasing doses." Aimed at systematic disempowerment of women and other marginalised sections of society, this male-dominated structure safeguards the rights and privileges of upper class and caste men, as well

²⁵Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities*, 62. Although I have not included a discussion in the main body, the role of the State in consolidating patriarchy cannot be ignored. India's developmental policies, technological innovations, various legislations, codifications and implementation of personal laws have been, by and large, influenced by patriarchal norms. Religious identity and state power are used to push women into domesticity and to control their sexuality. A typical example is the argument of the BJP Mahila Morcha: "We conceptually differ from the feminist movement in the West. We require a sort of readjustment in the social and economic set up, while no fundamental change in the existing value system is desirable. Women in India have a pride of place within the household and society." Cited in K. Ratna and B. Crossman, "Communalising Gender? Engendering Community: Women Legal Discourse and Saffron Agenda," *EPW*, 23 (April 24, 1993). For a critique of this position, see Arundhati Roy Chaudhury, "Communal Politics and Women's Rights," *Women's Link* 5, 1 (January-March, 1999), 3-7.

²⁶Kabeer, *Reversed Realities*, 61. Kabeer draws our attention to the class factor, along with other forms of social inequality whose significance is context specific. Gender oppression cannot be understood apart from class oppression.

²⁷G. M. Hodgson, *Economics and Institutions*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, 10.

²⁸Kabeer, *Reversed Realities*, 65.

as of those women who function within its male-defined boundaries. Built on the powerlessness of a section of people by the powerful, the system helps the powerful to take "all power to themselves, public, intellectual, and religious."²⁹

3. Women and Gender Justice in the Church

What has been discussed so far is applicable also to the church that operates on patriarchal norms. Although the teaching church has long upheld, at least in principle, the biblical revelation enshrined in Gen 1:26-28 and Gal 3:26-28, its practice contradicts its belief. Despite its declaration on equality and co-responsibility, for all practical purposes, the Church still remains a hierarchically structured institution, firmly established on the rock of patriarchy. It also perpetuates gender discrimination through its androcentric theology, biblical interpretation and an all-male Church leadership.³⁰

To grapple with the problem, it is necessary to look at (i) the influence of gender ideologies on Christian theology and (ii) to suggest alternative forms of theology and leadership which are oriented towards man-women partnership, mutuality, co-responsibility, inclusiveness and participatory decision-making in the Church. However, an elaborate discussion on the same is beyond the scope of this Paper.

a) Gender-biased Theology

We are inheritors of a theology that has been shaped by Western patriarchal norms and values. As we saw, patriarchy regards males as essentially superior to females, and this division of the sexes according to the superior-inferior category results in the imposition of male authority upon the so-called 'weaker sex'. We see this exemplified in Aristotelian political philosophy. In her analysis of Aristotle's thought on this point, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza notes:

²⁹Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men*, Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998, 26-27.

³⁰For a critique of western-oriented male theology with its sexist language, male concepts of God and doctrine, see E. Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Biblical Interpretation*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1984, 9ff.

Aristotle did not define patriarchy simply as the rule of men over women but as a graded male status system of domination and subordination, authority and obedience, rules and subjects in household and state. Wives, children, slaves and property were owned and at the disposal of the freeborn Greek male head of the household... The patriarchal relationship in household and state, according to Aristotle, are based not on social convention but on 'nature'... Marriage ... [is] defined as the 'union of natural ruler and natural subject'. Slaves and freeborn women ... are not 'fit to rule' because of their 'natures'.³¹

Aristotle's motive for assigning an inferior nature to women is based on biological concepts that modern scientific developments have rendered unacceptable. But the fact that for many centuries these concepts were taken seriously, and influenced the view on women held even by such great scholars like Thomas of Aquinas, explains partly why the notion of women's inferiority has been difficult to be uprooted in the Church.

As far as ancient Judaism was concerned, women had an inferior social status on the same level as that of slaves and Gentiles. A thanksgiving prayer recited by Jewish males ran thus: "Blessed be God who has not made me a Gentile. Blessed be God who has not made me a woman. Blessed be God who has not made me a slave."³² The Bible itself contains many discriminatory passages, which degrade women and extol the myth of male superiority and female inferiority. For example, (a) woman treated as man's property (Ex 20:17; Deut 5:17-21; Gen 18:12), (b) laws on inheritance (Num 27:1-11), (c) laws concerning vows (Num 30:4-9; Gen 19:18, 20:1-14; Judg 19:30), (d) man's right to divorce (Deut 24:1; Sir 23:22-26), (e) laws of ritual purity (Lev 12:1-5; 15:19ff), and (f) woman confined to home (Sir 42:9-11; 2 Macc 3:19; 1 Sam 1:23-24; 2:19; Prov 1:8; 6:20).

³¹Aristotle believed that woman was a biological mistake. The male seed, when perfect, tended to produce a male; only when its potency was somehow flawed and subverted by the female matter did it produce an inferior and defective person: a female.

³²Cited in Marie de Merode de Croy, "The Role of Woman in the Old Testament," *Concilium* 134, 4 (1980), 74.

In the New Testament, Pauline texts, particularly 1 Cor 11:2-16 (women's head covering) and 1 Cor 14:26-40 (women's silence in the church) have been misinterpreted in favour of women's subjugation. In fact, they have been locked out of their contexts, and applied to totally different situations, or to issues, which lie beyond their concern. It is amazing to note how Pauline authority has been invoked in favour of female domestication in the churches through the centuries. This has not only deteriorated women's position but also contributed to the development of patriarchal theology as exemplified in the teachings of the prominent Christian thinkers in the patristic era.

We have a classic example in the writings of Tertullian, a real rigorist, particularly in his treatment of women. As a matter of fact, he provokes the most vehement and spontaneous defensive reaction in feminist circles. Like Augustine and Aquinas, Tertullian too puts the blame on the woman for the "fall" in Genesis 3. The belief that the first sin passed on from Eve to all other women became a commonplace in early Christian literature.³³ Tertullian was particularly passionate in his condemnation of women. In his treatise on the *Dress of Women*, we have the most shocking statement on women, which has been summed up in the following:

You are the devil's gateway, you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first forsaker of the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the devil was not brave enough to approach; you so lightly crushed the image of God, the man Adam; because of your punishment, i.e., death, even the Son of God has to die. And you think to adorn yourself beyond your 'tunic of skins'? (Gen 3:21)³⁴

The above text reveals the intensity of male chauvinism with its denigration of female intellect and character. The woman is portrayed as the cause of sin and death, hence deserving severe punishment. Indeed,

³³In fact, Augustine's views on the original sin of Adam and Eve transmitted through generations contributed greatly to the development of western theology. For current debates on original sin, see Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation*, Colombo: Logos, 1990, 66-68.

³⁴Cited in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (CSEL)* 70.59. In *De Cultu Feminarum* C.197-202, Tertullian condemns the use of jewellery and other feminine ornaments. For a defence of Tertullian, see E. Carmelley, "Tertullian and Feminism," *Theology* 92, 31-35.

such disgraceful statements have played their role in the distortion of woman's image.

No wonder then, humanity as *imago dei* (Gen 1:27) has been equated more with man who is made to represent the higher part of human nature (reason), and humanity as fallen, more equated with woman who in her physical sexual nature symbolises and incarnates the lower part of human nature (body). Rosemary Radford Ruether points out that "patriarchal theology stressed... (woman's) 'greater aptness' for sin and her lesser spirituality. As an 'inferior mix', woman can never as fully represent the image of God as man..."³⁵ Moreover, it was held that even if the Fall (Gen 3) had never happened, woman would still have been made subject to man, "who represents, in greater fullness than herself, the principle of 'headship', mind or reason... The male alone possesses the image of God normatively; the woman possesses it only secondarily."³⁶

Stated briefly in this way, these observations may appear exaggerated, but when we come across certain statements by the Fathers of the Church, even the more influential ones like Augustine and Aquinas, we realise how powerfully the patriarchal society of their time moulded their thought in this matter. Here below are listed two of such statements:³⁷

Woman, together with her own husband, is the image of God, so that the whole substance may be one image, but when she is referred to separately in her quality as a help-mate, which regards the woman alone, then she is not the image of God, but as regards the male alone, he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman too is joined with him in one.

(Augustine, *De Trinitate* 7-7-10)

Woman is an occasional and incomplete being ... a misbegotten male. It is unchangeable that woman is destined to live under man's influence and has no authority from her Lord.

(Thomas Aquinas)

³⁵Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1983, 94.

³⁶Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 95.

³⁷The passage from *De Trinitate* is quoted in Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* 95. The other passage is quoted from Joan Chittister, *Women, Minister and the Church*, New York: Paulist Press, 1983, 6-7.

Amazingly, both Augustine and Aquinas stress in unmistakable terms that conception and birth are the two unique "help" expected of a wife. It is her role in procreation that makes the woman man's "help-mate." In other spheres of life, Aquinas suggests, "man can be more efficiently helped by another man."³⁸ For him, a woman does not symbolise an inferior form or lesser presence of rationality. "But her meaning is bound up with the reproduction of human nature, in distinction from those operations – including noble intellectual functioning – which define what human nature is."³⁹ Citing Augustine as authority, Aquinas insists that the image of God is found in both man and woman; it is in the mind, "wherein there is no sexual distinction... Man was not created for woman, but woman for man."⁴⁰

One would have expected from such men of wisdom and knowledge, a more Christ-like attitude towards male and female alike. From a feminist point of view, the exegesis and biology of Augustine and Aquinas seem outdated, and have been responsible for their negative attitude toward women. Surprisingly, the teaching Church has not taken adequate measures to correct the patristic views on women.

Although Christianity as a religion and as a social institution upholds the values of equality, justice and freedom, we are confronted with the question: how far has this ideal been translated as far as women are concerned? Our study of women in Jewish and Christian traditions reveals an ambiguity, characterised by conflict between the biblical notion of human dignity (Gen 1:26-27) and "the oppressive misogynistic ideas as arising from cultural conditioning. There is a tension between the pseudo-glorification of 'woman' and the degrading teachings and practices concerning the real woman."⁴¹ It is no exaggeration to say that the "record

³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q.92, art.1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, London: Burns, Oats & Washbourne, 1922, vol. 4, 275.

³⁹ Genevieve Lloyd, "Augustine and Aquinas," in Ann Loades, ed., *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, 96.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q.93, art.4, reply to obj. 1, vol. 4, 289.

⁴¹ C. Arockiasamy, "Women in Christianity," in Sebasti L. Raj, ed., *Quest for Gender Justice*, 174.

of Christianity with regard to the status of women is a record of contradictions.⁴²

4. Is Gender Justice Possible?

In order to overcome the man-made male domination and female subordination, both man and woman must first of all be clear about the way that sexism⁴³ has distorted relationality so that they can begin to work against these distortions.

The fact that men and women are equal sharers of a common human nature signifies equality of rights, mutual respect of each other's personhood, a common vocation to the image of God and to take on responsibility for the rest of creation so that all may attain the fulfilment willed by the Creator. This vision of a common humanity lays the groundwork for a 'holistic' approach to all reality, whereby, as Galiardi says, the unity and interrelatedness not only of men and women but of all creation is established as the decisive value for civilization, as against the tendency of patriarchy to separate, divide and organise reality according to the criteria of competition and hierarchical structures.⁴⁴

Education has been identified as the major instrument for raising the status of women. It is a key factor in creating awareness about injustice and discrimination, of unequal distribution of power between sexes and, above all, in bringing about a much needed social change. While concentrating on women's education, no secular or ecclesiastical women's group can neglect conscientisation programme for men. This is essential for helping them to undergo a change in their approach to and treatment of women. Denial of proper education as well as early marriage has prevented the development of woman's personality and her ability for self-assertion. A direct link exists among education, employment and social

⁴²Arockiasamy, "Women in Christianity," 174. See also Susanne Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?* London: SCM Press, 1987.

⁴³'Sexism' may be defined as the economic exploitation and social domination of members of one sex by the other, especially of women by men. Fundamentally, in present context, sexism is discrimination and exploitation of women.

⁴⁴Margaret Galiardi, "Bonding: The Critical Praxis for Feminism," *The Way* (1986), 138.

status enjoyed by women in any society. It has been noted that, traditionally, the education of women was meant to improve their role-functionality assigned by tradition, and not for assuming any social role outside the family by themselves. Thus, the absence of an economic or broader social motif is recognized as the main cause for the slow development of women's education in India.⁴⁵

Next in importance is the networking of women's organisations. The emergence of women's groups has been one of the most significant achievements of our time. Surprisingly, as Vibhuti Patel observes, this solidarity has probably never been used systematically to examine the dependent and disempowering nature of women's lives.⁴⁶ Autonomous women's groups and organisations are in great demand, but they have to actively link themselves to the wider socio-political movement. To combat sexism, casteism and communalism, and to effectively counter the attempt of the ruling class to perpetuate the status quo, women's networks must evolve strategies to ally with other protest movements, and work in collaboration with justice-based mass organisations.

Though the Indian polity recognises equality of rights between men and women, society implicitly accepts a sharp distinction in their roles and spheres of activity. Decision-making for the community and the exercise of political power is still regarded as an almost exclusive male preserve; this is clear from the entirely male composition of the traditional *panchayats*, either of villages or of caste groups. Despite women's movements in the secular and the ecclesiastical levels, the change in attitude to women's participation in public life has been slow and uneven.

⁴⁵Education of women has a continued setback in the hands of various fundamentalist groups. The present-day *saffronisation* move has ominous implications particularly for women and, hence, writes Vasanta Devi, the former Vice-Chancellor of Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu: "Emphasis on Hindu fundamentalism and going back to discover our Hindu traditions would certainly push women back into a traditional role. Wherever religious fundamentalism has reared its head, there women have lost out very heavily." "Higher Education and Women: Opening a Window to Reality," *Jeevadhara* 33, 193 (January 2003), 70.

⁴⁶Vibhuti Patel, "Emergence and Proliferation of Autonomous Women's Groups in India: 1974-1984," in Rehana Ghadially, ed., *Women in Indian Society: A Reader*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1988.

For, "they are related to deep-rooted prejudices about a woman's inherent aptitudes and capacities, her proper sphere of work and man-woman relationships."⁴⁷ These prejudices, which are operative also in the Church, help the clergy to maintain a system that keeps women under subjugation.

In this context, therefore, feminist theologians find no valid reason for linking ordination and decision-making power. The one who presides over at the Eucharist may not necessarily possess the gift of leadership, a fact that can be verified today. Moreover, Schillebeeckx argues that ordination was originally for the purpose of teaching and preaching, while the Eucharist offered by a man or woman in a house-church did not seem to create a problem to be discussed.⁴⁸ Yet, today it is the Eucharist that has become the monopoly of the ordained ministers in the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches, and the whole ordination debate in the Church revolves around the Eucharistic minister. According to Mary E. Hunt, ordaining a few women to join a few men who, because of their ordination, automatically possess authority and jurisdiction pales before the whole sea change needed in the models of Catholic community governance.⁴⁹

5. Conclusion

An egalitarian society or church is possible only with the cooperation of both women and men who are committed to social justice. In order to ensure gender justice for women in the civil as well as ecclesiastical society, we propose the following:

- i. Affirm the personhood of women and their right to dignified way of life as guaranteed by the Indian Constitutions.
- ii. Educate women and men to acknowledge that women too are subjects of human rights, hence, deserving dignity, liberty and equal opportunity for development in all spheres of life.

⁴⁷Raj Pruthi and B. R. Sharma, eds., *Trends in Women Studies*, New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1995, 146.

⁴⁸E. Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry*, New York: Crossroad, 1985, 119.

⁴⁹Mary E. Hunt, "'We Women are Church': Roman Catholic Women Shaping Ministries and Theologies," *Concilium* 3 (1999), 113.

- iii. Conscientise people to value women's contributions in building up family, society and the nation.
- iv. Initiate and promote programme for economic empowerment of women by way of self-help groups and self-employment schemes.
- v. Foster political awareness and art of self-governance at the local, regional and national levels with a view to enhancing women's leadership.
- vi. Organize and strengthen nationwide literacy drive among women and girls, particularly in the most backward regions of the country.
- vii. Ensure that women's education is aimed at their empowerment and not at enslavement to oppressive customs and traditions which cripple their intellectual, psycho-spiritual and emotional growth.
- viii. Empower women with sound knowledge in all disciplines: social, cultural, economic, political and religious, in order to effectively participate in discussions and deliberations.
- ix. Initiate structural changes in the existing all-male hierarchical systems by allowing women to participate in all (including *ordained*) ministries and at all levels of decision-making within the Church.
- x. Lobby for 50 percent representation of women with a *feminist vision* in parish and diocesan pastoral councils.
- xi. Ensure the inclusion of competent women in the doctrinal, biblical, liturgical and other Commissions in the Church at the local, national and international levels.
- xii. Make conscious efforts to replace exclusive masculine symbols and vocabulary for divine-human realities with an inclusive model capable of "breaking through narrow, rigid, and restrictive structures of the past,"⁵⁰ in moving towards an all-embracing community. Neither male nor female alone can presume to be representative of God or humanity.

⁵⁰S. D. Isvaradevan, "God Language and Women," in Aruna Gndason, ed., *Towards a Theology of Humanity: Women's Perspectives*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1986, 75. See also Pauline Chakkalakal, "Linguistic Apartheid," *Indian Currents* 14, 11 (March 17, 2002), 30-31.

- xiii. De-clericalise the Church institution by de-linking authority and leadership with priesthood, thereby allowing the laity to participate in its bodies of power.
- xiv. Strive for a participatory Church that is people-centred, and is open to other churches, religions, scriptures and ideologies, a Church that allows the poor and marginalized to evangelise its structures and ministries.
- xv. Motivate Church leaders to be deeply involved in people's struggle, especially at the grassroots, for a just socio-economic and religious-political order.

Today, when we are faced with a polarization of two extremes – the principles of inclusion of equality and justice as enunciated by Human Rights groups and present feminist biblical and theological research, on the one hand, and the mechanisms employed by patriarchal Church and theology distancing women from men, on the other – one way of breaking down old divisions is by networking with like-minded groups and movements. It is, therefore, of vital importance to develop strategies, which help promote the acceptance of new research findings, the feminist method and the egalitarian model of Church. As a community in the discipleship of Jesus, the Church should further the partnership of women and men for the benefit of all God's people and creation.