

## PLANNING A FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION

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### 1. Introduction

It is quite plain to say that all human beings are just *human*. The humanity we share at every level of existence is not exclusively decided by the physiological or psychological characteristic features we inherently possess, though they certainly qualify anybody's being and becoming a human. While each individual is unique in creation and upbringing, it is all the more so with one of the fundamental physiological differences in terms of sexual identity.<sup>1</sup> When pushed to the extremes, these identities, though fundamental to everyone, assume a negative dimension in the life of the individual as well as the society. The conscious and unconscious processes of converting the physical and psychological differences in defining the social identity of these persons result in a very strict demarcation of their roles, whether it is within a microcosmic family or in the macrocosmic society. Most of these being categorized under "gender difference,"<sup>2</sup> they are considered to be essential in our present social framework, and are not only the reflection of an inherent physical

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<sup>1</sup>It is a scientifically established fact that the presence and absence of certain genes cause a plethora of physical, hormonal, and psychological changes among human beings. They initiate an interplay of various factors that results in defining what a male or female human being is.

<sup>2</sup>While 'sex' identifies the *biological differences* between women and men, 'gender' denotes a *culturally specific set of characteristics that identify the social behaviour* of women and men, the relationship between them and the way it is socially constructed. Although gender can be an analytical tool for understanding social processes, gender roles are those learned behaviours that condition the activities, tasks and responsibilities perceived to be specifically male and female.

distinction, but also that which is imposed upon us by society and environment over a long period of time. Our realization of this fact calls us to understand and reassess the actual situation and, thus, to pave the way for a conscious and concerted effort to evolve an action plan in view of creating a healthy society consisting of healthy individual persons.

Although difference in sex is quite natural, and is the basis of founding a family, the unhealthy attitudes and practices prevalent in the society, and shared by its members at almost every level adversely affect the inner dynamics of the family itself. Ranging from an unwelcome attitude accorded to some newborn girls and the preferential treatment extended to boys, to the gruesome acts of female foeticide and dowry deaths announce the intensity of discrimination meted out to women in many of our families and the society at large. It need not be said that there is injustice in such attitudes and actions. Although, sometimes, it may seem that everything in our families is all right, all is not too well with everything. Many unjust practices, which may peripherally seem to be innocent in themselves, have resulted in malignant cancerous growths within our families. It is a fact that members of a family are segregated among themselves based on their sexual difference. This has to be remedied by our concerted efforts, so that a healthy family and a healthy society consisting of healthy individuals can be formed. For, the family is the conveyor belt by means of which a positive (as well as a negative) value system can be transmitted from one generation to the next.

In the context of Natural Family Planning (NFP), especially in the context of the Catholic Church taking a lead in preparing the future couples to have a healthy attitude and approach towards everything connected to human life, we have to give special attention to the problems arising from any type of gender discrimination as practised in our families and communities, so that proper planning of families can be made in view of healthy individual persons and healthy families. At the very outset, we must bear in mind that planning a family is not merely planning the timing of sexual intercourse, or planning the number of children alone. It goes far beyond these notions. Our thrust in family planning has to be the integral growth and life of every member of the family, including the relationship between the husband and wife, between the parents and child(ren), and among the children themselves.

The actual situation with regard to gender-related issues in India does seem to go against a healthy approach to individuals in terms of discriminations. For, caste, class, monetary, and gender discriminations are adversely affecting our Indian society and are shared by almost all communities. Natural differences are pushed to the extremes, to the extent of distorting, imprisoning and annihilating the very human nature, with a view to fulfil the vested interests of certain individuals or classes at the expense of a few or even a vast majority. The case with gender-related issues has to be addressed by everyone, as it basically affects individual persons, families, the Church, and the society at large. Only a concerned and concerted effort on the part of every person – male as well as female – can effect a better world in its local, national, and international structures. This, however, requires negatively challenging and overthrowing the existing unjust and imprisoning ideologies or structures, practices or methods. This invites us to go beyond certain cultural images and cosmologies, socially accepted customs and religious practices and, thus, to positively admit the values of respect for persons, diversity and interconnectedness among persons. It is not enough that ours is a high-tech society when it comes to technology and the related areas, but it also demands that we should reject a highly regressive attitude towards life, which, in turn, would pave the way for humane ethics and values.

## **2. Gender Discrimination:<sup>3</sup> A Colossal Mistake in Human History**

Stratification has always been part of our social life, and in many cases inequality was its main consequence. A cursory look at the caste and class divisions, whether they are motivated by a theoretical doctrine or practical need, evokes vivid images of the ways in which unjust structures have been instituted and perpetuated, most of the time, for the benefit of another group with vested interests. Examples such as the struggle for supremacy among feudal barons in Europe, practice of slavery in the Americas,

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<sup>3</sup>Discrimination, at any level, occurs when a law, program or policy – expressly or tacitly – creates a distinction between groups of individuals, which disadvantages one group based on shared personal characteristics of members of that group in a manner inconsistent with human dignity. When this is motivated and influenced largely by gender difference, it is called gender discrimination.

segregation and social ostracism among different caste communities in India, etc., abound in the history of humanity.

The discriminatory attitude and practices based on gender has existed in our society for centuries, or even for millennia. Most of the known civilizations shared a strong male-dominated and male-centred attitude, which resulted in cultivating a disdainful and condescending approach towards women. Patriarchal societies were instrumental in promoting this culture,<sup>4</sup> which naturally resulted in introducing and inculcating social behaviours through conformity and sanctions. It is a fact that a male-dominated society ordained everything for the benefit of the power-yielding group of males at the expense of a deprived and disadvantaged, but numerically equal number of females, making the realization of justice a mockery.

The gravity of this situation may be understood when we look at it from a comparative perspective of various discriminations. Although various minorities, at different periods in history, had been able to enforce discrimination upon a relative majority for the advantage of the former, the discrimination based on gender is one within which the whole humanity got involved, and at least half of it had to suffer throughout the known history of human race. It is of such a colossal stature that while the male group took advantage of the existing situation (consciously or unconsciously designed by the foregoing generations), women were made to believe that it is their *innate* nature, and that there was no point in trying to get out of this shackle of (strict) gender stereotypes. These cultural constructs were made to be the norms of femininity, which, in turn, became the tools of disciplining and 'sizing' women to suit the taste and purpose of male members. It is ghastly to learn that such a process was carried out at the pretext of *socializing* women, although the very process had been unhealthy as well as painful even from a historical perspective. As Neube puts it,

Women were shaped and socialized [in order to be] culturally accepted by males. The cultures, systems and traditions which were

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<sup>4</sup>According to Margaret Shanthi Stephens, "Culture implies a specific way of looking at the human society, the goals of life, religion and ethics, the values and attitudes that govern individual and social behaviour ..." "Inter-Religious and Inter-Cultural Work for Women's Rights," *Concilium* 5 (2002), 112-113.

created, were used to disadvantage women. Women were possessed and were men's properties in a way that never made them free to be themselves. They were privatised, in other words, they were shrunk to the size that men could handle. Women *were* and still *are* crucified for simply being born women. Women are cultured for the convenience of men.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the person of a woman did not matter for the men who dictated terms of her life and conditioned her behaviour. Either she had to accommodate herself to the standards and norms of the society established mostly by men, or she had to quit living as a normal human being.

From the perspective of a woman, justice was only a hollow word without having anything to do with her pitiful plight. "Justice is a most precarious dream fostered by humanity. Justice is a vision akin to the vision of heaven: many have heard about it, read about it, and longed for it, but no one has seen it."<sup>6</sup> Without any exaggeration, it may be said that this situation continued for millennia, forcing and fostering the non-personhood of women. This is a mistake of the human race at large, the responsibility for which has to be shared at least by half of the population, if women were to be excluded from it. It is a mistake that was repeatedly committed all through the history of humanity. For whose benefit was this perpetrated? What did humanity gain from it? Or, did not humanity lose its own integrity by alienating half of itself from personhood and human reality? When the group of males apparently benefited from this type of a discriminatory practice, there was an equally important – quantitatively and qualitatively – group that was losing its own identity. It must be said that it is unworthy of human beings to have involved in this type of discrimination, disadvantaging half of themselves. Men comfortably forgot that oppression of women would lead to the suppression of actual human life. This inequality prevailed all through the history in the relationship among people in segregating women along gender lines. The powerful males did not want to lose a bit of the power and comfort that

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<sup>5</sup>B. Neube, "Gender and Black Women's Struggle for Full Humanity: A New Vision," *Voices from the Third World*, 98.

<sup>6</sup>Jarl, "Women's Rights as Human Rights in a Global Context, Globalisation and the Violation of Wo/men's Rights," *Concilium* 5 (2002), 23.

they were enjoying, although that was at the cost of the life and vitality of the whole group of women.

### **3. Role of Religion and Politics in Perpetuating Gender Discrimination**

The historic mistake that the humanity as a whole has committed in discriminating people only on the basis of gender difference seems to have reached the present state of affairs by certain collaborative forces, religion and politics being the major players. As discrimination of one section can always benefit another, religious and political leaders, to a great extent, have been consciously trying to keep up the status quo of gender discrimination. While they take into account the advantage they accrue from this exploitation based only on gender, they comfortably forget the fact that the human potential of a very powerful section (certainly, half of it) of humanity is wasted and thrown out as junk. Moreover, discrimination at every level of religious as well as political spheres have consistently and systematically avoided to take into account the struggles of women as legitimate and meritorious, whereby their contributions were not merited and counted along with those of their counterparts. Even if some were to argue that certain religious and political networks have had nothing to do with perpetuating gender discrimination, they cannot absolve their collective responsibility for not initiating proper mechanisms to check such an unjust practice or tendency as they are the two powerful human systems that can not only influence attitudinal changes, but also motivate healthy and corrective actions.

It is so naïve that women are accorded not only a lower status because they are born with a sexual difference, but they are assigned religiously an inferior state. Plato, the great rationalist from Ancient Greece, in providing an account of the origin of sexes, held that it is the duty of every human being to attain a better state of existence by rationally overcoming our irrational tendencies. Attainment of such a new state is filled with scorn and disdain for women, as an unsuccessful attempt results in a person being born as a woman, this being a punishment for an unrighteous life: "He who lived well during his appointed time was to return and dwell in his native star, and there he would have a blessed and congenial existence. But if he failed in attaining this, at the second birth,



he would pass into a woman."<sup>7</sup> Implied, then, is the sense that *the best a woman can hope to become is to be reborn as a man!*

The same type of a naïveté is shared by the mainstream Indian religions, too. Although some of the earliest texts indicate a rather positive attitude and approach towards girls and women, the overall response is said to be negative. We find that along with and apart from the ills of caste system, Hinduism, in general, supported and perpetuated gender discrimination in different forms. The positive foundational perspective on the ultimate reality in terms of an integration of the female and male principles, *sakti* and *siva*, or *prakṛti* and *purusa*, does not seem to have been translated into the actual integral relationships between women and men. According to this doctrine, without the female principle, the male is static and the transcendental potency of the ultimate would remain inert. The creative and holistic perspective that we find embodied in the divine stopped short of being the actual practice among the subscribers of such a religious outlook when it came to concrete human beings who are sexually different. It is difficult to understand why a person who is ready to prostrate before an image of a female deity fails to recognize, at least, the humane element and value of femininity in the woman next to him, whether it is his mother, wife, sister, daughter, or friend. From this angle, the operative principle of these religions seems to present us a grim picture precisely because they not only neglected to take into account the positively creative principle of an integral union of the ultimate reality in embodying human relationships, but instead made use of the same religious principle to manipulate and segregate one section of devotees by emphasizing natural sexual differences to a level of extreme gender differentiation. As a result, we find the attitude of Hindu devotees towards women swinging between divinisation and dehumanisation,<sup>8</sup> both of which seem to be doing injustice to an actual human being. Tagore puts it across through one of his characters as follows: "I am Chitra, no goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth."

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<sup>7</sup>Plato, "Timaeus," in *Plato: The Collected Essays*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961, 42b.c, 1171.

<sup>8</sup>The 'Yellamma' tradition in the temples of south India is an example, in which religion perpetrates exploitation of womanhood.

Among the Hindu scriptures, the deprecation of women is explicit from the time of the *Atharva Veda* and the *Brahmanas*. With the *Atharva Veda* women not only lost their freedom in different domains, but their birth itself became an unwelcome phenomenon. The *Brahmanas* referred to the exposure of female babies, and women were put on par with dice and drink; hence, strangely, they were considered to be one of the major evils in human society. The ritualistic texts of this time not only held that only male members can officiate in religious rituals, but considered women impure, especially during menstruation and pregnancy.<sup>9</sup>

A religious perspective, whether it is healthy or unhealthy, does not remain merely on the ideological level; it is always translated into action, most of the time with much more vigour and vitality than any other ideology. The condescending attitude towards women that we find reflected in the religious scriptures becomes the norm of daily living, which results in according a very low level of recognition and respect to women in general. We must be painfully aware of the fact that the unjust disparity resulting from such an attitude and behaviour patterns received legitimising authority from the same scriptures. Such a widespread practice is being reflected in the following statement of McDonell:

Indeed daughters are conspicuous in the *Rgveda* by their absence. We meet in hymns with prayers for sons and grandsons, male offspring, male descendants and male issue and occasionally for wives but never daughters. Even forgiveness is asked for ourselves and grandsons, but *no blessing is ever prayed for a daughter*. When *Agni* is born it is as if it were a male infant. They clap their hands and make sounds of rejoicing like the parents of a newborn son. There is *no such rejoicing over the birth of a daughter*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>The special respect accorded to a pregnant woman is directly related to her capacity to bear a son, which is the essential duty of a woman as a wife. Manu states categorically: "To be mothers women were created, and to be fathers men" (*The Laws of Manu*, trans. Buehler (*Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 25), ed. Max Mueller, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886, 344). Further, "She is a true wife who hath borne a son," Shakunthala tells Dushyanta as she reminds him of his forgotten marriage vows, cited in Kakar, *The Inner World*, 77.

<sup>10</sup>McDonell, *Vedic Religion*, 165; emphasis added. Lewis O. quotes a verse from a folk-song referring to the painful memories of a girl whose birth was not accorded equal treatment: "Vidya said, 'Listen, O Sukhma, what a tradition has



All these point to the fact that the general trend swings between the two extremes of divinisation and dehumanisation, and it fails to take into account the most basic requirement of humanisation. It becomes all the more surprising because only women are eliminated from their rights connected with the humanisation process, that too for the advantage of the male section of devotees. It may be said to be deplorable to the extent that women who are deprived of their rights (which should have been on par with others) are burdened with additional duties, mostly to the advantage of their male counterparts. This gulf between the male and female members of the society was further deepened by the religious sanctions imposed upon the performance of those duties pertaining to women, and the concretisation of their *gendered* social as well as religious roles as it is, for example, reflected and documented in the *Laws of Manu*, and meticulously practised over a period of millennia. The situation, however, seems to be improving in our contemporary India, especially among the secular educated masses, who are able to critically approach religion and related issues with a view to effect changes from a humanistic perspective and, thus, to aim at establishing equality among male and female members of the society.

The dynamics seem to be more or less the same in the case of other religions, too, and Christianity is no exception at that. Christianity, in its initial community recognized the full partnership of its members, despite their sexual differences, and they were not segregated along the gender lines. However, we find the official church assuming a patriarchal structure as it moved from the understanding and practice of "Jesus' movement" to a "house-based community"<sup>11</sup> and, then, into a full-fledged

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started! Drums are played upon the birth of a boy, but at my birth only a brass plate was beaten." *Village Life in North India*, New York: Vintage Books, 1958, 195.

<sup>11</sup>Cea-Naharro, "Women's Right to Full Citizenship and Decision-Making in the Church," *Concilium* 5 (2002), 79. The author, after recalling the theological implications of the Synoptic account of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24-30; Mt 15:21-28) and the story of the Samaritan woman (Jn 4), both of which narrate the fact that citizenship in Jesus' movement was not restricted to women of any specific category, holds that "The experience of full citizenship attained by women in the Jesus movement was continued in early Christianity. This is clearly expressed in the paradigmatic text of Galatians 3:27-28: 'As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no

institution. Following the all-embracing ideology of Christ, the early Christian community was called to promote a non-discriminatory treatment of human beings, no matter what class or caste they belonged to; this is certainly the original holistic perspective that we come across in the account of the creation narrative in the book of Genesis.<sup>12</sup> The received cultural patterns and their inherent limitations in terms of social status and differentiation were questioned and rejected by Jesus, and the early community, to a great extent, shared this original biblical or Christian vision by eliminating differences between male and female stereotypes within the *ecclesia*. Despite the patriarchal background of the Jewish communities around which the original Christian community developed its nucleus, there was no room for divisions based merely on gender; instead, men and women were equal in rights and responsibilities, and their roles were equally respected and recognized by the whole community.

This picture, however, did not last long within Christian communities, as the movement was becoming more and more settled in terms of institutional structures. The original spirit inculcated by Jesus and imbibed by the early disciples gave way to the pressures of social hangovers and, in the course of time, patriarchal structures were re-introduced *damaging* the equality enjoyed by the members of the communities. The shift that we find in the worldview of the creation story in terms of a transition from Adam and Eve being the co-creators and co-pilgrims in the Garden of Eden to that of domination, alienation and enslavement<sup>13</sup> is echoed in the shift we find in the texts of St. Paul himself. The egalitarian understanding of the disciples of Christ articulated in his letter to the Galatians (3:27-28) is in stark contrast with his categorical assertion at 1Tim 2:12-13: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve." In another place he repeats in the same vein: "The woman should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home" (1Cor 15:34-35).

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longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

<sup>12</sup>Genesis 1:26-28: The image of God (*imago Dei*) belongs equally to men and women, both of them being representations of God's own image.

<sup>13</sup>It is said in Genesis 3:16: "... and he shall rule over you."

"These sentiments," according to Elaine M. Dupuis, "had quite automatically been extended to government, law-courts, universities, and all other social [and Christian religious] institutions,"<sup>14</sup> as Pauline texts assume great value in Christian theological interpretation as well as within ecclesiastical circles.

In order to reinstate equal status among members of the Jesus' community, it requires on our part to involve in a constant deconstruction along with construction of new meanings, which would take into account biblical ideals as presented and endorsed by Jesus Christ among his disciples and the early Christian community. Today we must admit the fact that an option for the poor as demanded by Christ is a universal and open option for life and everything life-giving; on the other hand, it also demands a positive rejection of everything that goes against the life principle, including discriminations based on unchristian societal norms and practices. Then, the call for communion that Jesus has inaugurated with his Good News is to involve all Christians in providing a new order of meaning, which would certainly include a preferential stand for the marginalized and downtrodden.<sup>15</sup>

Although the present organizational patterns of the churches seem to be very much androcentric and patriarchal, we must accept the fact that its inner dynamics and life-blood in terms of emotional and lively faith and effective practice are made possible mostly by the women who become followers and receptacles of Jesus' Good News. Hence, we need a mechanism that would, first of all, neither suppress the initiatives of women within the churches, nor treat their vital contributions in making the churches what they are today as sheer exceptions. It is natural that in the given situation their voices would sound extra-radical as the status quo does not support their demands, and as there exists discrimination along

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<sup>14</sup>Dupuis, "The Women's Movement: A Two Hundred Year Synopsis," *Journal of Dharma* 16,2 (1991), 129.

<sup>15</sup>Of late, the official Church apologises for the past wrongs committed by it as an organization or by its individual members. Certainly, this is a befitting gesture of a really Christian community. I feel that this gesture should be extended to further planes as well. The same Church, given the situation of gender discrimination practised and endorsed, should apologise to its own past and present women members, who constitute the largest group that has been at the receiving end of a lot of discriminatory practices over a period of two millennia.

the line of gender difference. Instead of trying to control their radicalism or to downplay the importance of their causes by asking them to conform to the established gender roles, the churches must be open according to the guidance of the Spirit. Life as well as everything connected to life has to evolve continuously, and this should be so especially in the case of Christians, as their faith is fundamentally a call to fullness of life, which shall not be the right of a *chosen* few alone, but the right as well as duty of every Christian.

Moving from the religious to the political spheres, the dynamics seem to be almost on similar lines. Perhaps, this is so because there is no religion that can be separated from the society as such, and most of the societal behaviours are sanctioned and motivated by one or the other religious foundation. The subtle and complicated dynamics that are operative between religion and politics have their source in this situation. Apart from the religious sanctions enshrined in the sacred scriptures and the norms and rules of behaving promulgated by religious leaders, political leaders take their initiative in introducing and maintaining those rules and regulations (with the tags of penalty attached to them) to design everything according to their patterns and to their advantage. According to Jessie Tellis Nayak, such societies "continue to exist and thrive by using all the tools in their possession namely religion, home, schools, textbooks, legal system, mass media and even women themselves (who have [mistakenly] internalised society's values) to reinforce and continue woman's subjugation and maintenance of a second class citizenship."<sup>16</sup>

Some of the expressions and usages from the west, though coming from previous centuries, would send shocking waves through our nerves. Under the *British North America Act* of 1867, "women, along with children, criminals, and the insane, were not categorized as persons under the law."<sup>17</sup> Later in 1876, a judge in Great Britain stated that women were "equal in matters of pain and penalties, but not in matters of rights and

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<sup>16</sup>Nayak, "Why This Oppression of Women?" 15.

<sup>17</sup>Dupuis, "The Women's Movement: A Two Hundred Year Synopsis," 133. In 1928 the Supreme Court of Canada issued in a verdict that "women were not persons and could not serve in an official position such as that of Senator." Benham, *Nellie McClung*, 46, quoted in Dupuis, "The Women's Movement: A Two Hundred Year Synopsis," 134.

privileges.”<sup>18</sup> The political climate has, certainly, undergone tremendous change all over the world, and women enjoy legal personhood as well as voting rights in most of the countries today. The actual plight of women, however, is yet to undergo a catharsis even in the so-called civilized nations of the west, as well. When it comes to the actual sharing of power women are once again segregated, not because they are not capable of taking the reins but because they are women: in most of the cases, the gender role assignment in the unconscious and conscious psyche of many nations still remains incapable of accepting persons of both genders on the same footing. The recent gimmicks of the Indian politicians on the Women’s Bill point to the tip of the iceberg, as most of the leading politicians do not want to give up their political prospects by sharing parliamentary or legislative assembly seats with their female counterparts. At least, this issue points to the fact that our approach towards admitting equity or equality to women is not all well; a lot more is to be done both at the political and at the mass conscientization levels. Until and unless the common psyche is transformed to accept equality concepts along the gender lines, and until and unless the public can be mobilized for this purpose, no politician or political party will come forward to stand for the cause of equality of both genders. From a practical perspective, it is an unfounded hope that those male politicians who hold the reins of power would relinquish power on their own for the sake of equal treatment of women. Hence, only non-political movements, such as NGOs and education systems, can become the beacon lights, and lead us closer to the ideal of equality of men and women within the shackles of political power.

Humanity has to go forward in a humane and healthy manner, of course, with the assistance and guidance of religion and politics, by admitting and assimilating the value of people belonging to both genders, and especially by according women their due rights and roles. Human sexuality, which is at the basis of gender differentiation, shall not be made a tool of asserting domination and power over women and, thus, to vitiate human creativity and relationships among human beings, but has to be made an effective means of integration of humanity at all levels.

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<sup>18</sup>Benham, *Nellie McClung*, page 45, quoted in Dupuis, “The Women’s Movement: A Two Hundred Year Synopsis,” 134.

#### 4. A Philosophical Critique

Philosophy, it is said, begins with wonder, wonder at everything, including human beings. This wonder has to provoke us to ask meaningful questions and ultimate answers. If this process is conducted correctly by taking the reality into consideration the resulting data can lead us to true knowledge and right actions. On the contrary, if the process itself were wrongly conducted, it would lead us to false knowledge and wrong actions. Given the human situation, it is possible that the process of knowing can be rightly or wrongly conducted and, hence, we cannot always be absolutely sure whether an accepted understanding about any reality is absolutely true or false, and the ensuing actions right or wrong. However, it is feasible that a wrong action pattern can be made right by identifying and correcting a false conceptual data at its basis. This requires a constant and diligent going back to the processes that are consciously or unconsciously carried out by individuals and the society as a whole, critiquing them so as to rectify the methods adopted, purifying the content of knowledge arrived at and, thus, to change the patterns of human action.

In the context of the preceding discussion on gender discrimination as it prevails in our families and societies, we can try to identify a philosophising process at its background. To a great extent, it is true that the categorization of feminine and masculine traits and tasks is mostly the work of male members of our society. We can also identify that the long standing tradition and culture of setting aside female members against the male members had attracted the blessings and sanctions of the religious as well as political leaders, eminent thinkers and law makers of the society, these latter sections being constituted solely (or mostly) by male members. Every society projects its own rationale for inculcating a worldview and behaviour patterns, whether they be true or not. It is only by a constant critique of gender related issues that we would be in a position to evaluate them and, if needed, correct them both from a theoretical and practical perspective. However, it must be borne in mind that any philosophical critique is carried out by a person (or a group of people), the procedures adopted and the conclusions arrived at, would be very much influenced by various factors related to the nature and upbringing of those involved in the philosophising. In other words, we must admit that reason cannot be always neutral, even when it comes to philosophising. Philosophising carried out by a male member of the society, for example, may naturally



have its deficiency in taking into account the holistic aspect of humanity in terms of male and female; his perspective would be determined by the (male) 'being' that he is, and the (female) 'non-being' that he is not (or that which he cannot be).

In the history of philosophy, we find this type of a process being initiated at various stages of human development. Plato, for example, advocates a bio-psychological view in his *Republic*, in which he argues that deep innate differences exist among human beings and the society derives its structures from the hierarchy of talents identifiable among human beings. So the behaviour patterns adopted by different individuals may be different, and such a difference is directly proportionate to the difference in their nature itself. This, in other words, is an attempt to equate behaviour and human nature. If looked at from the perspective of discriminations (in terms of behaviour patterns and social structures) existing in our society, Plato would argue that they are directly corresponding to the difference in the nature of those among whom such discriminations exist. According to such a view, gender discrimination is a natural and acceptable practice that has its foundation in the bio-psychological diversity of human nature shared by male and female members.

Aristotle, the other great figure from ancient Greek philosophy, on the one hand, regarded sex difference among human beings as something non-essential and, on the other, held that there is a quantitative and qualitative deficiency among women when compared to their male counterparts. Seemingly, from a phallic perspective, he held that women are partial or mutilated males, thus assigning women a weaker and inferior position in the reproductive<sup>19</sup> and social functions. Having accepted the male as the paradigm of human beings and the male considered to be better than the female, Aristotle pictured the female in terms of an inherent lack of certain attributes of the male, thus being qualitatively different in nature and unequal in treatment. According to him, the male principle contributes form and the female principle matter in the generation of a child. This metaphysical explanation of the male and female in terms of

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<sup>19</sup>According to Aristotle, "the female, in fact, is female on account of an inability of a sort, viz., it lacks the power to concoct semen out of the final state of nourishment because of the coldness of her nature[!]" *The Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 728a8, 103.

form and matter, or potency and act, gives an apparent rational foundation for his view on sexual difference and the resulting unequal treatment. For he held that "the female *qua* female, is passive, and the male, *qua* male is active."<sup>20</sup> The natural consequence for Aristotle is that the active becomes the ruler (being rational in nature), and the passive female (assumed to be irrational) has to be satisfied with a submissive role in the societal functions.

Thus, the inferior status accorded to women is not a modern phenomenon at all; it seems to have existed all through ancient civilizations, the norms of which were mostly set by their male members. Those norms have set the pattern of behaviour on an unequal footing, leading to unequal treatment, which received rationalisation and approval from the prominent thinkers and lawmakers. However, we can identify the fact that a faulty conception of the nature of and relationship among human beings, especially regarding sexual difference, resulted in formulating unhealthy regulations and alienating practices, leading to the establishment of an unjust social structure, which was erroneously accepted to be founded on *rational* nature, *rational* being falsely equated to the *masculine* gender. This bears witness to the fact that any faulty conception accepted without proper analysis, questioning, and an ongoing evaluation can become the birthplace of lasting evils in any society.

From among the Christian thinkers, the philosopher-theologian St. Thomas Aquinas was of great influence in forming the intellectual backbone of Christianity from the medieval period onwards. Taking cue from Aristotle, Aquinas developed an understanding about the gender differences, within which he assigned an unequal status to women among believers as well as within the society as a whole. It might be said that rather than rectifying and infusing the age-old problem of gender discrimination from the perspective of Christian faith, a discriminative philosophy on sex difference got consolidated with the influential writings of St. Thomas. According to him, "... the image of God is found in man, not in woman, for man is the beginning and end of the woman, just as God

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<sup>20</sup>*The Generation of Animals*, 729 b 14-16. A parallel can be found in distinguishing the male and female in terms of active and passive principles in the Indian thought as well. According to the *Samkhya-Yoga* tradition, reality is a combination of *purusa* and *prakrti*, the former being the male and active principle, and the latter the female and passive.

is the beginning and end of every creature."<sup>21</sup> This inherent difference, and the primacy of man over woman, according to him, would remain as long as we live on this earth, and the only possibility to overcome it is a resurrected life. The physical difference of sexes was incorporated into the theological articulation of Christian faith, whereby instead of animating and perpetuating an equality conception among Christ's disciples, Aquinas was able to stabilize and theologically back up the then existing practices of discrimination based upon gender. Instead of becoming an instrument in realizing that most of the differences along the gender line are neither based on Christian principles nor inherent in human nature, but only the imposition of societal and cultural norms and practices, his genius was utilised to stabilise the status quo of inequality and injustice related to gender discrimination.

These sample discussions on the contributions of philosophers point to the fact that the so-called rational philosophy is not always a neutral instrument in the hands of philosophers. Such philosophies have perpetuated norms and stereotypes associated with gender differences, and have resulted in disadvantaging and mutilating men and women alike down through the history of humanity.

Our ideas and ideals of maleness and femaleness have been formed within structures of dominance... The male-female distinction itself has operated not as a straightforwardly descriptive principle of classification, but as an expression of values... What is valued – whether it be odd as against even numbers, 'aggressive' as against 'nurturing' skills and capacities, or reason as against emotion – has been readily identified with maleness. Within the context of this association of maleness with preferred traits, it is not just incidental to the feminine that female traits have been construed as inferior – or, more subtly, as 'complementary' – to male norms of human excellence. *Rationality has been conceived as transcendence of the feminine*; and the 'feminine' itself has been partly constituted by its occurrence within this structure.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, (*Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 19), 495.

<sup>22</sup>Lloyd, "The 'Maleness' of Reason," in *Epistemology: The Big Questions*, ed. Linda Martin Alcoff, 387; emphasis added.

Thus, "philosophy is not necessarily what it has in the past proudly claimed to be – a timeless rational representation of the real, free of the conditioning effects of history."<sup>23</sup> Every philosopher reflects the society in which he is born and bred, although some of their insights certainly take us far beyond the constraints of the present, opening up new vistas for a holistic life in the years to come. To the extent he or she becomes the mouthpiece of the existing social structures, his or her contributions can become enslaving and oppressive not only to the contemporaries, but also to the future generations. From this perspective, gender differences need not be accepted as rationally (or, least, divinely) established norms; such an understanding may lead us to identify those differences as a source of richness and diversity shared by and accessible to humanity as a whole.

Realistically speaking, however, it is difficult to hope that the thinkers who gain from the perpetuated inequalities and oppressive structures would become instrumental in proposing philosophies of liberation. The only hope, however, is the philosophies that can emerge from those who form part of the oppressed classes; for, according to Alison M. Jaggar, "their pain provides them with a motivation for finding out what is wrong, for criticizing accepted interpretations of reality and for developing new and less distorted ways of understanding the world."<sup>24</sup> If they can avoid the mistakes of the past, especially the partial understanding of reality that was mistakenly depicted as *the* reality, we can be hopeful that a holistic approach towards understanding sexual difference as well as gender difference without giving way to discriminations based upon such differences. Given the status quo of discrimination, what is called for is the readiness to involve in a process of deculturalization. That is, in order to get out of the dehumanising understanding and practices associated with gender bias, we have to involve in a process of identifying the elements contributed by socialization processes and cultural elements. Such a process can positively help us to exorcise our own society from the unhealthy and dangerous vestiges associated with socialization and culture.

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<sup>23</sup>Lloyd, "The 'Maleness' of Reason," 391.

<sup>24</sup>Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983, 370.

Positively approached, sexual difference and gender identities need not lead us to oppressive structures, and to transform them into the instruments of exploitation between man and woman. It is true that as the degree of being increases, male-female polarization becomes wider and intense. However, it is also true that as the complexity of being increases, there is a corresponding increase in consciousness, enabling this complex being to bridge or bring together those that are apparently at the opposing poles. This is also true of the male-female polarization that is at the basis of gender discrimination. We must admit that such an apparent polarization found in human nature is good and admirable, provided we are able to accept and integrate and, thus, constantly redefine our male or female identities (not as competitors but as partners and collaborators), paving the way for mutual understanding and acceptance, expressed in their ability to put together their joint experiences for the benefit of the whole humanity at individual, societal and religious levels. In other words, we are in need of a philosophy that would pave the way for an equal treatment of women and men, and would provide the avenues for a full participation of members of both sexes in all social spheres.

### **5. A Healthy Family to Overcome Gender Discrimination**

A family is the basic unit of a society, and is constituted by the coming together of a pair of male and female persons united by the socially or religiously accepted rite of marriage. As the formation and maintenance of a family normally involves persons of two different sexes whose psyche would be influenced by the cultural and social constructs, discriminations that we find in the society as a whole are very much prevalent in the family, too. Some sociologists are of the opinion that these discriminatory attitudes and practices have their initial budding within the family. Hence, the very first step in eliminating gender discrimination has to begin from the family itself.

An important problem within a family is that the members take it for granted that whatever they think and do, in no way involves any type of discriminatory attitude or practice. Mostly, no one finds anything defective with the man-woman relationship of domination and subordination as it is practised in our families: whatever the past generations had been doing and that which is continued in the present is

the 'right' and the 'normal'. New generations are born and trained in this situation that they take the status quo for granted; it is very seldom some one comes up to challenge it, even when he or she has to suffer its brunt.

Except for a few matriarchal traditions, the prevalence and influence of which is on the wane in our traditional societies, the domination of the male members of the family is conspicuous all over. Although interdependence is a practical factor that pushes and pulls the family unit together, it is the dependence of the female on the male that is being stressed and overstressed, as the male is considered to be the bread-winner in a traditional family. The cultural and social constructions of gender roles, from a negative perspective, have bequeathed to us, especially in the Indian society, passivity and dependency on the part of women against the active and dominating nature of the male. Although women enjoy a relative freedom and independence within their private domains,<sup>25</sup> the situation seems to undergo a drastic change in the social realm: a discriminatory attitude is very strong as women are made to be passive spectators when it comes to a decision making even on the most basic issues or common concerns within the family. The situation is not altogether different even in those families where women are increasingly educated and independent. Although many have considerable freedom as how to manage the household, discriminatory attitudes and practices prevail among them as well.

Children born and brought up in such a situation naturally imbibe this as the value that they have to cherish and practise, which, in turn, make them the passive abiders and active perpetrators of the same value system. Discrimination along the gender lines becomes a major element in their training at home, as many a time a boy is given preference over a girl. The attitudes of domination on the part of the father, and that of subordination on the part of the mother that prevail in any family are gradually and meticulously, though most of the time unconsciously, transferred to the children; as a result, it is the son who enjoys all rights

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<sup>25</sup>Kakar points to the influence a wife can have on her husband in matters of importance: "Although the wife of the family patriarch may indeed pay a formal, and often perfunctory deference to her husband, especially in front of strangers, she may exercise considerable domestic power, not merely among the other women of the household, but with her husband, and she often makes many of the vital decisions affecting the family's interests." Kakar, *The Inner World*, 118.



and privileges as against the duties and responsibilities imposed upon the daughter. This being the rule of the day in a traditional family, no one challenges or questions such apparently *innocent* practices; it must be added that in truth they are not at all innocent, but subtle mechanisms through which discrimination against women is practised and perpetuated in our society. Undue importance and privileges enjoyed by anyone – whether it is a boy or girl in a family, or anybody in the society, for that matter – will gradually lead him or her to the comforts of individualism at the expense of those who are underprivileged. An attitude of individualism would damage the fabric of a family, when it surfaces among the married couples or among little children, sometimes even in matters that seem to be too negligent.

The age-old ideal of autonomy has won currency in the modern age, especially in the context of realizing freedom from the fetters of oppressive social structures, including gender discrimination. Although autonomy of the individual is a worthy ideal from the perspective of the blossoming of individual persons, especially from the perspective of those male and female members who have been liberated from the clutches of cultural and social stigmas associated with gender distinction, in the context of planting and nurturing a healthy family as the cradle of healthy gender relations, it cannot be understood as the assertion of an individual's personhood as against everyone else in isolation. Autonomy is not an isolated exercise of one's individual powers, but a power that has to become a powerful ingredient in laying the platform for the communion of everyone in a family or society, where persons belonging to both sexes can continue to flourish without being threatened by the so-called autonomous actions of others; in fact, any autonomy is human autonomy only when it is seen from the perspective of the communion of human beings.

In this context it must be said that our orientation to form a healthy society, where gender roles and their differences shall not motivate the practice of gender discrimination, should begin in the small unit of a family. It shall not be the mere coming together of "two [autonomous], successful careerists in the same bed" to involve in "a prolonged and impassionate negotiation as to how things shall be *divided*" in consuming

"a large quantity of merchandise and a large portion of each other."<sup>26</sup> This is a typical representation of the individualistic (certainly, not autonomous as I understand it) attitude that prevails in our modern technocratic society. Gross continues to draw a picture of a family typically different from the former as follows:

There are, however, still some married couples who understand themselves as belonging to their marriage, to each other, and to their children. What they have they have in common, and so, to them, helping each other does not seem merely to damage their ability to compete against each other. To them, 'mine' is not so powerful or necessary a pronoun as 'ours'.

This sort of marriage usually has at its heart a household that is to some extent productive. The couple, that is, makes around itself a household economy that involve the work of both wife and husband, that gives them a measure of economic independence and self-employment, a measure of freedom, as well as a common ground and a common satisfaction.<sup>27</sup>

A family shaped on a shared platform between the wife and husband, between the parents and children would naturally inculcate a positive attitude of dynamic cooperation and active sharing among the children. The total involvement of father and mother in everything pertaining to the family life, from the boring but taxing daily routines to the planning and vital decision makings, would set the trend for the children who would naturally be influenced by the caring and sharing attitude that exists between the man and the woman, i.e., the parents. Certainly the children observe and understand the value of interdependence between the parents who lay the foundation of a society.<sup>28</sup> Such a family is also the ideal place to nurture equality and sharing among male and female members of the family and the society.

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<sup>26</sup>Gross, "What Went Wrong? Feminism and Freedom from the Prison of Gender Roles," *Cross Currents*, Spring 2003, 34; emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup>Gross, "What Went Wrong? 34-35.

<sup>28</sup>Hence, Aristotle holds that the family has the unique distinction of being "the first community." *Politics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross, ed. Richard McKeon, New York: 1941, 1138-39 (1257).

## **6. Planning a Family for Better Gender Relationships**

In general parlance, Natural Family Planning (NFP) concerns primarily with the timing of sexual intercourse between married couples so as to avoid an imminent pregnancy, and the planning of the family in terms of the number of children. The immediate response that can surface from a student of philosophy is: why should our discussion about family planning, which should be by all means natural, be restricted to the issues of sexual intercourse and number of children, although they are certainly of importance? Isn't the purview of a family wider and broader than sexuality and sheer number of children? From the perspective of gender difference and the consequent discrimination prevailing in our society, I am of the opinion that our discussion about natural family planning should include all members and dimensions of a family, which, then, can lead us toward the formation of healthy individuals, and through that the realization of an integrated and balanced society.

Nature has designed human beings (along with the rest of the biosphere) with a duality of sex, affecting the inner personhood of each individual. Sex, as well as the physical and psychological differences along with it, certainly has a great influence in making a person what he or she is, and the way each one will be relating to the other – whether of the same sex or of the other. The primary requirement of being a man or woman is to accept the natural fact that one is either a man or a woman – not both – and the need for their intimate partnership and mutual collaboration in all facets of life. The failure to accept one's own sexual identity, and the consequent attitudinal immaturity may lead a person to an unhealthy alienation of oneself from others, and an oppressive and unhealthy treatment meted out, especially to the members of the opposite sex. It may also turn out to be the cause of either a dominating or a subservient attitude, both of which are unhealthy as far as a human being is concerned. This type of an attitude stemming from sexual difference – influenced and motivated by social and cultural forces – can generate a bias among such individuals. It has the gender-related issues at its core, and such a gender bias will permeate everything that the individual is and becomes, vitiating the person himself or herself by involving in unhealthy discrimination against persons of the opposite sex. This is actualised in our society in varied forms, and our foregoing discussion points to the fact that men seem to be the primary agents in and beneficiaries of perpetuating

such discriminatory attitudes and practices. This, however, being a tendency that acts against the very complementary nature of human beings created as male and female, it is the responsibility of people involved in deliberating upon such issues to unveil its deficiencies, and chalk out an action plan to come out of such a ghetto mentality. A family set up seems to be the ideal place an individual can be trained in this healthy and holistic approach towards gender difference and integration. This, in turn, calls for imparting training to the individuals who form the family, so that they would consciously strive after the realization of a healthy attitude towards persons of both sexes.

The practice of gender discrimination prevailing in our society is reflected in various practices within families, including the sexual intercourse that may lead to a pregnancy and childbirth. The preference for a son and the dislike for a daughter, consciously or unconsciously resulting from the gender bias of the couples concerned (motivated mostly by social and cultural factors), instigates the latter to look for ways and means to assure themselves about the birth of a son. Even among those who practice NFP, some say, it is only a question of timing the sexual union to relatively make sure that the resulting foetus is male.<sup>29</sup> That is, an intended couple can observe the ovulation cycle, and decide to engage in the reproductive act in such a way that they can negatively avoid the birth of a girl, and positively be assured of a son. Although this may not be considered as a cent per cent foolproof method in birth control and planning the sex of the child, those who resort to it – even if they claim to be following the nature's own way – are influenced by a gender bias, and motivated by a deliberate preference for a boy against a girl. Although this does not involve anything strictly artificial, except for a conscientiously arranged timing, this seems to go against nature itself, and natural morality, as the couple involves in a deliberate act to avoid the birth of a girl.

Another important area of gender discrimination is the ghastly treatment meted out to female foetuses. In most Indian families, especially among the lower income groups, the birth of a girl child implies "utter despair and doom" for the family. The considerations may vary from

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<sup>29</sup>According to medical findings, the life span of a non-united female zygote is, approximately, only 48 hours, while that of a male zygote is 72 hours.

religious to economical. Whatever they are, the news of the birth of a baby girl is not accorded the same welcome as it is done to a boy.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, female foeticide and infanticide are still prevalent in many regions in India. Although in most of the cases the termination of the life of a female foetus or girl child is being carried out by women themselves – by the grandmothers, mothers, midwives, nurses, or lady doctors; finally, in this case, they are responsible for pulling the string at the end of the whole issue of gender discrimination. Of course, it is the society that is morally responsible for motivating these women to resort to such a drastic step of taking the life of a girl, as gender distinction is equivalent to social and cultural discrimination at every level. They have been fed by our male-dominated society that girls are a burden in terms of cultural and economic factors.

The same is to be stated about the amniocentesis, to the extent it is considered to be a diagnostic procedure to determine the sex of an unborn child. Although originally it was designed to detect genetic abnormalities in the foetus with a view to possible early treatment, the socio-cultural bias of the Indian society has transformed it into a perfect and quick method to eliminate the 'unwanted' daughters even before they were born. Despite the government ban on sex-determination clinics and their services in conducting sex-determination procedures all over the country, the method is being *effectively* practised. Is this part of planning a family? Certainly, many (wrongly) feel so. Apart from the whole procedure being dangerous to the health and life of the mother (when it comes to the medical termination of pregnancy, MTP), in effect it also enforces a discrimination against fifty per cent of our human race, women, just because they are wrongly and unjustly considered to be a liability, and inferior to men! While legal protection of the female foetuses is a must and a welcome step, in itself it is not sufficient to eliminate this evil practice from our society. It requires effective measures and popular movements to conscientize our general public<sup>31</sup> and, thus, eliminate the underlying causes of gender discrimination that have reached such a colossal stature.

The gender discrimination is visible in many other forms within the family set up. It starts at a very early age, and can be observed even in the

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<sup>30</sup>See footnote 10.

<sup>31</sup>Lobo, "Women's Rights and Reproductive Technologies," 25.

habit of serving food at home. While the 'goodies' are often served first or reserved for the sons, the daughters have to take the second place in terms of order, quantity and quality. The discrimination that the girls experience at home is not limited to the food-serving habits alone; it reaches all the inner recesses of family life. If any sacrifice has to be made, even when it comes to the issue of imparting basic education, the choice naturally falls on the girl child. The implicit assumption is that she has to be sent away to another house and, hence, it is not a worthy investment!

From an economic perspective and in the light of the dowry system existing in the Indian society, daughters are considered to be a burden on the family exchequer. The birth of a daughter means an unmitigated expense to the family, who will take away a considerable part of family's wealth as dowry at the time of marriage. Or, in the case of a poor family, the same situation will lead to a huge debt in making provisions for the dowry. Perhaps this is the context within which the following proverb has its origin: "If he begets more than five daughters even a king will become bankrupt ultimately." Thus, the woman who takes a dowry, which her family cannot afford to, seems destined to crush the family with marriage and related expenses and, hence, she is regarded with neglect from birth. Now the pertinent question is, whether the system of dowry shall be continued unchallenged, or shall not we dream and work towards a society that is free from dowry hazards? In the context of overcoming the gender bias and discrimination in Indian families, especially against women, and the equality that both genders have to enjoy, can't we have a system of sharing the parental property equally among the children, whether they are male or female? The interdependence and integration that we have been speaking about require that these temporal matters are also given sufficient consideration and positive response so that male as well as female members would not feel being a burden on the family property. Daughters being their children, parents (as well as the sons) do have a bounden responsibility to extend equal treatment to them, and that has to be done without the negative stigma of the society in terms of dowry; it shall not be out of the 'mercy' of the parents and brothers, but shall be the right of all daughters (or sisters) to claim their legitimate share from the parental property. This, to my mind, is a concrete step in realizing the ideal of equality within the family, although this may, for some time, lead to tensions between daughter(s) and son(s), as the sons are not used to



sharing the parental property in a proportionate manner with their sisters. Once an accepted practice, certainly this will give way to a better acceptance of women in our families and in the society as whole, and the discrimination meted out to them will certainly be lesser.

The above discussion points to some of the concrete issues in connection with gender discrimination and the realization of the equality concept, as its solution has to begin within the context of a family. Certainly these are only pointers, and much more could be done if the basic attitude of interdependence and equality is accepted and practised. Certainly, whether it is among the individuals, or within the family set up, or on the wider horizons of the society, any tradition that tries to suppress the dignity of human beings, especially of women in the context of millennia-old gender discrimination, should be questioned and condemned, and corrective measures introduced.

In order to facilitate this, nothing shall be accepted uncritically, even when it comes to the issues of daily living if it were to involve any type of discrimination. Women should be more and more encouraged to challenge and change the status quo if it were to result in discriminating against them, merely because they are women. May be, the beginnings have a revolutionary outlook, as most of the feminist movements are universally labelled today. It can certainly have the quality of a reaction, which, when put in practice, will have a negative tone and outlook; however, in the course of time, a reaction will turn out to be a proper response, or a positive response, in that it would be an attitude and approach that could be (and should be) adapted by everyone in the family and society, both women and men. Our target shall be the generation of healthy individuals who would constitute healthy families as well as healthy societies, which would result in the building up of a creative network of sharing and cooperation within which independence and interdependence of all individuals shall be the hallmark, cast against the framework of a community.

## **7. Conclusion**

The ideal of partnership and collaboration among the members of different genders is an ideal, posed against the reality of gender discrimination prevalent in various spheres of our personal as well as societal life. We

are familiar with the contrasting expressions such as real and ideal, legal and ethical, and material and spiritual. Even when we have realized total integration, these distinctions may remain in our articulation. However, it becomes necessary that we move from the real to the ideal, from mere legal to ethical, and from a discriminatory existence to an existence of equality and sharing despite individual difference and preferences. From a legal perspective, it is quite sufficient that all of us subscribe to what is being enacted by the legislature, admitting variations from state to state, or from nation to nation. Certainly, these legislations are external, as they are deliberated and enacted by an external body, although they are constituted by a democratic election – choice of the people – and have only their limited value. As the founder of Existentialist school of thought, Kierkegaard has opined, ethical level is quite distinct from the legal; growth of a person, according to him, has to be clearly a movement from the latter to the former. The ethical is distinct from the legal in such a way that the former does not consist in adapting ourselves to any external norms, rules and regulations, but precisely in being autonomous, and in charting out a life with responsibility and generosity. It does not stop merely in being and becoming ethical; it is not the final stage. It has to move towards the religious or spiritual, and it is all the more so from a Christian perspective. Despite the frequency of failures in fulfilling the legal regulations and ethical norms, they are lighter compared to the demands of the spiritual. In the realms of the spiritual, one has not only to fulfil the legal and the ethical, but must go beyond all the set patterns and accepted modalities. It is a call to change one's individual and societal perspectives to one of communion fostered by the spirit of *agape*, that which demands unconditional, non-profitable, and life-giving and life-enriching self-giving.

Proper education shall be considered one of the essential means to combat gender discrimination.<sup>32</sup> Gender bias would keep on breeding

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<sup>32</sup>True, education, especially when we understand it in terms of the technical education imparted today, alone is not the answer. P. Amalorpavamary records an incident from Punjab in which education does not matter at all when it comes to female infanticide: "According to a study conducted in Punjab and Haryana, the most affluent states in India, the second and subsequent girl children experience 32% higher mortality than their siblings if their mothers are uneducated but this gap jumps to 136% if the mothers are educated. It is shocking that it is not due to poverty these annihilations take place. In this age of globalisation and consumerism, even educated

gender bias, until and unless this vicious cycle is brought to an end. First of all, it requires that the educators themselves are liberated from the gender bias; only then they can be the instruments in mobilizing the whole society to cultivate a healthy attitude towards members of both sexes, accept and cherish the different gender roles as contributory to the growth and flourishing of the humanity as a whole. Our present educational system that gives more importance to technological and professional training, therefore, has to be recast in such a way that along with and apart from the technical expertise and professionalism that the students attain, there should be an effective mechanism to inculcate humane values. The discrediting attitude that prevails in our present educational system against humanities also has to be rectified. Let there be ample opportunities for everyone to nurture those values that should be part of the integral development of any normal person. Moreover, from the perspective of gender equality, we have to insist on the fact that education has to be done in a natural set up, where both boys and girls grow and learn side by side, understanding each other, imbibing the common platforms and values that they share. Schools and colleges have to be not a different plane altogether but an extension of the family situation where all can learn and grow together, understanding and accepting natural differences in terms of sex and age, performing the respective gender roles to the extent they are meaningful and helpful for the flourishing of the personality and, thus, becoming persons of integrity.

Another area of interest in this regard would be the official set up of the decision-making bodies within the Catholic Church. If we were genuinely concerned about establishing gender equality, the official church has to take the initiative to give equal representation to men and women in parish and diocesan councils. Given the present situation, it may not be an easy step, because most of the ecclesiastical bodies are the exclusive domains of men. Without challenging the present structure of ordained ministries, why can't we think of re-structuring the ecclesiastical bodies? Why can't women also deliberate and decide about the policies and temporal matters of the church, which involve the life of all the faithful including themselves? They are equally competent in any field, provided

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rich women want to lead a comfortable life with less female babies and they do not hesitate to do away with them in the event of conceiving them." "What Makes a Woman a Woman?" *Satya Nilayam* 3 (February 2003), 104.

they are given ample opportunities and training. If the church is ready to fight gender discrimination in any form, then we have to be open, and involve in introducing structural changes as well.

Legislation, civil as well as ecclesiastical, shall be introduced to make the equality of genders a reality. The realization of this ideal, however, shall not be brought about merely by legislation. In most of the cases, laws along with different coercive measures, and law-enforcing machineries are helpless, until and unless the concerned individuals are ready to imbibe the spirit of the law, and translate it into practice. For, law can demand and create only the minimally required or acceptable condition. From an ideal or moral perspective, apart from the laws, there should be other incentives – most of which would be non-coercive in nature – in the form of personal support as well as explicit encouragement for those who engage in promoting and perpetuating gender equality.

Our target is not the emancipation of women alone at the cost of men and their lives. Taking the reality of gender discrimination at all levels into account, it is the responsibility of everyone to see that justice is done to all. A long-standing history of oppression resulting from discrimination on the gender lines meted out only to women of all cultures and traditions, religions and nations calls forth a preferential option to support their causes so that reparation shall be done to the past mistakes. An option for the oppressed need not be at the exclusion of those who were at one time the oppressors, but can certainly be an option for life, and for a life in its fullness shared by men and women alike. Let the human commitment to the fullness of life be made visible in getting positively involved in concrete issues related to any type of discrimination against life by standing for life and for life alone.