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GENDER DISCRIMINATION : REASONS AND REMEDIES

For the sake of clarity and convenience I wish to divide this paper into three parts. In the first part, I formulate my response to the paper by Ms. Aranha. In the second, I make an attempt to find out the reasons or alleged reasons for gender discrimination, and in the last part I intend to suggest some means to overcome this evil.

The fact of gender discrimination, specially in some countries like India, is so conspicuous and clear that it does not need any proof. This evil has been widely studied and discussed at length, and to some extent it has been condemned in the society of today.

All the same we must confess that in some societies gender discrimination has become almost an integral part of the tradition and culture. From womb to tomb, a woman is discriminated. And we could even say that, even after death, as long as she is remembered, she is discriminated against.

It seems that a woman is condemned to suffer this pain of discrimination at home, in social life, in economic, political and socio-cultural fields. One may think that in religion which is called to promote justice, her rights are protected. But a brief historical survey of religions will prove that even here some of those in authority have used their power to discriminate against women. And, what is worse, they have tried to perpetuate this evil in the name of religion and in the name of God.

North Carolina Supreme Court Justice Walter Stacy writes: "There are those who feel more deeply over religious matters than they do over secular things. It would be almost unbelievable if history did not record the tragic fact, that men have gone to war and cut each other's throats because they could not agree as to what was to become of them after their throats were cut. Many sins have been committed in the name of religion...."

The French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal adds, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction". Joseph Pappy, Professor of mathematics, asks, "However strongly your religious beliefs drive you to picket and harass the women, don't you think you are imposing your religious beliefs on others who do not share your religious convictions?"

It is at the same time true that it is the women folk who constitute most of the hard, menial unskilled cheap labour force in fields and construction projects for almost half the wages of men. It is the woman who sacrifices most and derives the least benefit.

The evil of gender discrimination has been sufficiently exposed and once this fact is established, it does not make any difference whether we have one or ten examples before us. Infact providing too many examples may be even counterproductive as the ancient saying goes, "*Qui nimis probat, nihil probat*". (He who proves too much, proves nothing).

Discrimination against women and their oppression is a heinous crime not merely against women; it is a sin against men as well. It is against humanity itself. It is a serious crime against human civilization. If the family or home is the cradle of civilization, culture and development, and if the influence of a mother in a family surpasses all other forms of influence, the pain and the groanings of that mother will not remain unresounded in the hearts of her children. It will definitely affect the happiness of the whole family.

Seen retrospectively, the evil of gender discrimination is very ancient. It is as old as human history and perhaps it is rooted in prehistoric times. But the consciousness of this discrimination is of later origin. Even today, there does not seem to be universal consciousness. I am not saying that without consciousness there can be differentiation and discrimination. What I am trying to point out is that without consciousness there can be neither pain nor the malice of discrimination. In conclusion, we could say that, what is seen as discrimination and oppression by some need not be seen or felt as such by others even if they themselves are victims of it.

Ms. Aranha has stated, "Power implies discrimination". This is not a principle; it is an existential fact. There is a difference between 'power

implies discrimination' and 'discrimination implies power'. It is not power but the misuse of power which results in discrimination. Unfortunately, such misuse of power is so common today everywhere in civil, political, ecclesiastical and religious societies that one could agree with Ms. Aranha and conclude by way of an existential induction: "Power implies discrimination - a lot of discrimination". On the other hand, discrimination definitely results from the misuse of power. There are people in power who see injustice, oppression and discrimination, yet do not have the courage to confront it even in their own circles. Even among women, we can find those who use public platforms to raise their voice against such evils, but tend to perpetuate the same whenever convenient. Thus they are not scrupulous to pay reduced wages to women even when these have done as much work as men.

A person is said to be male or female not merely because of the physiological differences, but in every aspect of life, like thinking, feeling and actions. The whole person is said to be male or female. It is true that "Sex alone is a certainty"; other capacities and powers are to be proved. Neither man should be seen as endowed with superior powers nor a woman be condemned as inferior. Hence to decide a priori the capacities of male or female definitely will result in gender discrimination. It is rightly said that both historically and at present, society has vested power in the male sex. A fair distribution of powers would be in order.

Family relationships which are normally the main security of a woman, get strained if she begins to question the existing set up. "The burden of fish out of water becomes too heavy for her to bear". The prestige of a family gets personified with the mother of the family. And often she is prepared to endure any pain in order to uphold this honour.

We are in a transition period. For ages woman has been discriminated against. We have built up a culture and tradition where this system seems to be normal and anything contrary to it abnormal. What is done in the course of thousands of years cannot be undone in a few years. If one tries too hard to forget this time factor, one will definitely end up oneself being undone.

Reasons for Gender Discrimination

There are many reasons why a woman is discriminated against. Earlier, when physical strength and stature were given much importance, it was perhaps the man who symbolized them and not woman. But today, when machines can surpass men in physical strength thousands of times, the exultation of physical strength becomes irrelevant. All the same this changed situation has not been fully absorbed by the society of today and even by women themselves.

There is a certain kind of domination of the male over the female in the animal kingdom mainly based on physical strength. But this need not be a model for human beings because, endowed with intelligence, they need not depend very much on their physical strength.

Dowry, which is also a cause of suffering for a woman, was given originally as a part of inheritance. But unfortunately, it was given in terms of movable goods so that the family property might not be divided. And the portion of inheritance given was not always just. All this made a woman constantly dependent on the husband and on her in-laws.

Sometimes dowry became for the husband a quick means of becoming rich. Sometimes the greed for riches has gone to such an extent that in order to get dowry again, the woman is eliminated in the first years of her marriage and the in-laws look for another bride, better another dowry. Crimes like this cannot always be taken to court either because our legal system is weak or because there is no sufficient evidence for the crime. The woman victim, either because of her hopes to survive even at the moment of death, or because of her compassion for her children, or because of bad consequences if she confessed the truth, is forced to say that she suffered an accident rather than that a crime was committed against her.

Dr. Kevin Fullin from Wisconsin writes, "A third of all women's injuries coming into our emergency room are no accident. Most are the result of deliberate, premeditated acts of violence. And frequently they occur over and over until the woman is killed..."

Yet society repeatedly sweeps it under the rug. There is a tendency to rationalize this as a personal problem they should settle themselves. And tragically, the victim returns home to be beaten again".

In marriage the woman was often taken as a means of pleasure or a means of progeny rather than as a partner in life. This concept is no more acceptable. The need of sex-pleasure in a woman is as much as in man. But the man who seeks his fulfilment with the cooperation of woman seldom realizes that she is also in need of this fulfilment and that she cannot have it without his cooperation. Her sexual fulfilment is taken for granted, while he actually has it.

In her book, *Possessing the Secret of joy* (1992), Pulitzer prize-winning author Alice Walker describes the excruciating ritual of female genital mutilation. She believes the more than 100 million women in Africa, Asia and Middle East have been subjected to this ritual by men trying to impose on women their code of conduct in order to derive more sexual pleasure.

Ignorance of one's own religious teaching and right interpretation have also resulted in gender discrimination. In the Book of Leviticus we read, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death" (Lv. 20, 10). In John we read, "The scribes and the pharases brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery and, placing her in the midst, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now, in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such'" (Jn 8, 3-5).

Now let us ask: if the woman was caught in the act of adultery, what about the man who was caught in the same act with her? Or, rather, was the man not caught at all? Did the men who caught the woman in the act set the man free? Why did the Pharisees want only the woman to be stoned to death? Could she commit adultery alone? But Jesus was very fair in his judgment. He made men accountable not only to the act of adultery but for every act of sin they had committed.

Towards a Change

Any person will be able to see the unjust situation in the society of today with much discrimination against women. He will also see the necessity of eradicating this evil. But how?

This evil is not merely against women; it is against humanity itself and against human civilization. We need to reach this conviction so that all, both men and women, fight against this crime. On the contrary, if it is seen only as a crime committed by men against women, there will be less chance of overcoming it.

There has to be a thorough drive in conscientizing humanity both men and women alike about this evil and the necessity of eradicating it. Though there is discrimination against women, this is so deeply rooted in our culture that very often we may not see it. Even the persons who are victims of this crime are not always able to see it. Hence we need to conscientize humanity on this evil and on the necessity of eradicating it.

While conscientizing ourselves, we need to keep in mind that, by convention, culture or consent, different roles are played by different people in our society. This differentiation of roles cannot be condemned straightaway as discrimination. Though in convention and culture there can be the seeds of discrimination, in free mutual consent the spirit of complementarity, love and harmony can be the underlying principle. Those who are guided by this principle though are able to see differentiation in the role play and make a lot of sacrifice, yet may not accept it as discrimination.

The man-woman complementarity is so essential to human life that without the one the other seems to be incomplete in her/his identity. Ruth Burrows adds, "Every woman is only a half woman without the complementarity of man". And I would say, "Every man is only a half man without the complementarity of woman". This complementarity, which involves a lot of differentiation, is to be promoted if human life is to be wholesome.

In the name of complementarity, however, injustice, oppression of women and gender discrimination are not to be perpetuated. The role play in human beings is not governed only by instincts as in animals, but can be freely accepted in the spirit of love and harmony. The more this spirit is imbibed, the less discrimination will be felt. Even then, seen from without, especially by the people who do not have this spirit, the complementarity may be interpreted in terms of discrimination. At the same time, it will be naive to conclude that there is no gender

discrimination in our society and what we lack is only the spirit of complementarity in love and harmony.

We need to keep in mind that time is a real factor in human life and what is done in thousands of years cannot be undone in a decade without the risk of violence, controversies and even without the risk of being totally rejected. Patience and prudence are very much needed here.

Education is one of the surest means to overcome this evil in human life. Our institutions and our sisters do well in imparting education to our girls. However, we must be aware that some of the demands we make in our institutions forbid the children from taking advantage of our service. Our educational service could be accessible also to the less privileged. We need to work out syllabi at different levels of education starting from the primary till university programmes and highlight the evil of gender discrimination, condemn it and show the ways and means to overcome it.

Through income-generating projects and through voluntary contributions, funds could be raised to make more scholarships available to deserving girls. There have to be boarding and hostel facilities for girls who attend schools and colleges and for working girls.

Non-formal means of education, like mass media, television programmes and news papers could be used for eradicating this evil. We should encourage professional training, like the study of law, engineering, polytechnics for women. Thus sufficiently trained, they can work also in those fields which are generally monopolized by men.

We hear that women are discriminated against even in religious matters here in India. This might be true. But how many women, including religious sisters, get trained in canon law, sacred scripture, theology, philosophy and other allied subjects. We have more than seventy thousand women religious and many more times intelligent and able women. But how many women theologians, canonists, philosophers and scripture scholars do we find among them?

In order to defend the rights of women and to protect them from oppression, we need to have a better and more effective legal system.

In every sensitive area where women are vulnerable there could be a women's police station fully staffed by women constables. Crimes against women could be brought under their jurisdiction. Similarly, there could be special courts to deal with the crimes against women where women could be judges and advocates.

Though there are special reserved seats for women in elections for civil bodies, often our women are reluctant to contest them. They need to come forward also in political life. All this will become much easier if women could organize themselves a little more in different kinds association, all aiming at women's welfare. They could form watch dog and effective action cells. With this and other means crimes against women could be confronted and fought on war footing. For when our mothers are happy, our families will be happier and thus we will be able to build a wholesome human society.