

Overcoming Violence against Women

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Introduction

Violence against women is a greatly annoying issue even in this post modern age. It is an age-old social evil which humanity has been inefficient to combat so far. The forms of violence against women are innumerable. It is not just physical harassment and abuse such as rape, molestation, battering. Violence is inclusive of all types of exploitation, discrimination, oppression, which are structurally organised by religion, culture, and socio-political spheres. Though gender violence is a kind of domination, it is structured under hierarchical and patriarchal mindsets throughout the ages. Despite the fact that we have moved away systematically from one age to another, from primitive to today's post modern age, and despite the progress in science and technology, economically and politically, we have no relevant means to curb away the social evil of **violence against women**.

Women in the post modern age claim to be no less than men, but rather to be their equal. Women have proven their intelligence, wisdom, working ability in every field that there is no need to deter them from anything. At the same time women have proven their inherent ability to silently endure all the injustice and violence against them. Despite their ability and intelligence, there is no single day without hearing or witnessing the violence against women all over the world. Has any of the violence reduced in the life of women even after observing decades, one after another, for the cause of women at both national and international level? Progress in women's life in every field – e.g. access to education, participation in decision-making processes such as in politics—has given them a place in society. Yet, violence against women has not come to a stop; instead, it is intensely growing.

A Glance at the Status of Women at Global Level

No doubt, the post modern age has witnessed the growing awareness of people as well as the zest of women to reform society's ideology on justice, dignity, freedom and equality. A good number of women have managed to get to higher positions in different fields which were once forbidden to them. It is remarkable that women in Kuwait are given for the first time in their history the right to franchise in the state's Parliamentary polls, with about 28 women candidates running for office. In Bahrain surprisingly, a woman was elected president of the UN General Assembly. Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa, 53, is the third woman to preside over the 191 member assembly after Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit of India in 1953 and Angie E. Brooks of Liberia in 1959. The first woman judge, Mona Jassem Al Kawari, has been appointed in Bahrain recently. The first woman to head the 2.3 million-member denomination, Bishop Katharin Schori has been selected in the US Episcopal Church. Air

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Force Col. Pamela Ann Melroy, 44, is the second woman picked up by NASA to be the space shuttle commander for its next mission. Elsewhere in the Information Technology field, women are trying to shake off “geeky image” through sexy poses!²

Nevertheless, innumerable cases of violence against women are going on in every sphere of life all over the world. The recent World Cup Football FIFA held in Germany proves that even at world market levels women are still considered “objects of pleasure” for men. Several brothels were set up by the organisers in major places where matches were held to meet the demands of men folk which poured in from different parts of the world as tourists, and for the sportsmen. It is believed that women were forced in from other countries to meet the demands.³ The flesh trade continues to be a very profitable trade in the world market, and women, willingly or unwillingly, are pushed into this trade all over the world. In the pretext of offering them better jobs, women are forced into the flesh trade. In almost all the countries of the world this trade is much alive today more than ever before.

Recently it was reported that at Kanpoor, India, a man sold his wife for 20000 Rupees. In China about 69 women from Myanmar were sold for 20000 Yuan each to farmers who were unable to find local wives. Nepali girls are being smuggled to the Gulf countries. Aboriginal men in Mutijulu, Australia, trade young girls even of five as sex slaves in exchange for petrol. No wonder that a nine year old girl child of Amazon, underweight below normal, gives birth to a baby. In Colorado it is legal for a girl at 12 to be given in marriage! Women are considered objects of pleasure and of the market, to be used or sold. Whereas fearing sexual harassment and rape, and in order to save their girls, relatives at West and Central Africa go even to the extent of “Breast ironing”, a process using hard or heated objects or other substances to stunt breast growth in girls.⁴ What a cruelty! Foeticide, girl infanticide, girl child abuse, sex racket, rape, and harassment of women at home and at the work place are increasing at a greater speed than that of the improvements in the life of women. At the global level these types of violence in religio-socio-cultural and economic sphere are at a shocking height.

A Glimpse at the Indian scenario

Compared to earlier times, women in 21st century India have better access to education and work. Education, development and modernisation have offered women better conditions and new roles in society. Women, especially in the urban settings, enjoy certain freedom in their personal and social life. Yet in general the situation is no better when we talk about gender justice and violence against women. Perhaps what is worse than other countries is India’s multi-religious socio-cultural background.

Whether Hindu, Muslim or Christian, all religions are shaped by the dominant patriarchal systems which have structured the socio-political, religio-cultural sphere of Indian

² *Vijaya Times*, English daily newspaper, Mangalore edition, June and July 2006.

³ *Vijaya Times*, and *Undayavani* and *Vijaya Karnataka*—Kannada daily newspaper, Mangalore Edition, June 2006.

⁴ *Vijaya Times*, Mangalore Edn., June and July 2006.

society. Moreover, it is not just political, economic, social and religious inequality and discrimination that Indian women have to confront everyday, but also the traditional, cultural evils such as dowry system, bride burning in connection with dowry, etc., in addition to other forms of abuse and harassment. Though it is not legal to pay or receive dowry, this gruesome system still prevails and haunts every female, from all classes, castes, and religions. It looks like there is no redemption from this social evil. Countless young women fall prey to this evil system especially in south India.

Every day in the news we read about harassment and abuse of women at the work place, at home and in society, while many cases go unreported. These women could be educated or uneducated, rich or poor, with high or low grade jobs. The increase in foeticide, girl infanticide, dowry deaths, sexual molestation of young girls, rape, murder of rape victims, wife battering, etc. are at high. Recent reports on dowry deaths and murder of rape victims are shocking.

In the religious sphere women are ill-treated, with no equal status or any right. Women are considered inauspicious, impure, evil, defiled and defiling, and so on. At certain religious places, women are forbidden, barred from entering the areas of worship. The intensity of discrimination of women is such that at a particular shrine in Kerala, where 100% literacy rate is recorded, women devotees from 10 to 50 years of age are not allowed to offer worship. Their entry is a massive offence that purification rituals have to be conducted immediately upon knowing it. This prejudice against women is equivalent to practicing untouchability, which is no less of an abuse to women. According to recent reports, the case on one such incident is still going on.⁵ Though there are a few women religious leaders in Hindu religion that are given due respect and publicity, eg. *Amma* at Kerala, women are generally considered inferior to men.

The "International Women's Decade" and the "Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women" have had some impact on Indian churches. We now see certain changes in the Indian churches where women are given 2/10th representation in decision-making. Though there are many theologically educated women, they are neither given equivalent position nor status in Indian churches, seminaries, and institutions. Still they have a subordinate position in the church and institutions. A few denominations ordain women and only a small number of ordained women are given independent charge of local churches. Usually women are assigned to small village churches at some interior places, or as assistants to male senior pastors, or as in-charge of homes for the aged, destitute homes, care centres, women's fellowship, or some other insignificant tasks.

Surprisingly, unlike the village or interior rural churches, there are many well educated congregations and city churches that are not willing to accept lady pastors/presbyters. If at all a woman is invited to preach at a congregation, she is not allowed to preach from the pulpit but rather from a separate place arranged for her. The Syrian Orthodox and Mar Thoma Churches have not yet considered ordaining women, nor have they given women significant roles in the life of the church and in decision making. Women in general have no

⁵ News from *Vijaya Times*, Mangalore Edition, July 2006. The dispute is still going on in the Supreme Court.

equal rights in participation and decision making, in church and in politics. Consequently, womanhood is in question in every sphere of life. The more women struggle to achieve equal status and dignity the more they become objects of abuse and harassment. So where does the problem lie? How are we to combat injustice and violence done to women?

Causes of Violence

Feminists and feminist theologians have found and articulated that the root cause of injustice and violence done to women lies in the patriarchal systems. I would add to this the *forbearance* of women. Forbearance of women is considered their virtue, but it is equally a significant basis for violence against women. As patriarchy and religions are closely linked together, they preserve and enforce gender discrimination through various ideologies. This discrimination, whether in socio-cultural or religio-cultural spheres, is rooted in the patriarchal ideologies that dominate religious teachings, traditions, and social attitudes, and in the capitalist system which sustains violence against women. This perceived inequality between male and female leads to male domination in society which thwarts relationship and encourages stereotyping of behaviour patterns. It leads to discrimination, violence, and violation of human rights.

Feminist Theology for a Better Tomorrow

Feminism, feminist hermeneutics and theology have an important role in bringing up changes in the life of women in every country. The changes in the life of women so far are to be attributed to the contributions of feminist activists and feminist theologians irrespective of their country of origin. What has been done so far toward liberating women is no doubt an enormous and laudable work. Yet it needs to be continued with much more urgency and intensity. While much anthropological, psychological, sociological and historical research on violence against women has been done, feminist theologians also need to involve in doing research in other branches of theology, such as dogmatic, pastoral, moral, sacramental theology, ecclesiology, missiology, etc., and reflect on the condition of women and liberate women from the social evil of violence. Feminist theology should intensify its aim at eliminating societal and ecclesial patriarchy with its reflections. Only then would feminist theology be “best understood as the reflection on Christian faith experiences in the struggle against patriarchal oppression.”⁶

Jesus’ liberating movement is not confined only to half of humanity, i.e. the male members only, but rather to the whole of humanity, including women and the whole of creation itself. Otherwise his gospel of liberation is not a gospel at all and the Christ event goes meaningless. He has broken the shackles of oppression, discrimination, exploitation, slavery, and marginalisation with the principles of love, peace, justice and liberation encompassing all. Continuing his movement of liberation is to participate actively and intensively in conquering social evils.

The feminist methodology should be applied in all places—e.g. homes, churches, schools and colleges, and especially in theological institutions where the future generation is

⁶ Elizabeth Florenza, *Discipleship of Equals* (New York: Cross Road, 1993), 254.

formed to lead the church and society. This would make students aware of the gravity of issues that women struggle with. Critical awareness should also be made on the use of male images for God and of sexist and exclusive language in the Bible and liturgies. Rereading the Bible from women's perspective and deconstructing prejudiced theology must be required. Every theological college or seminary must have a department on women's or gender studies. Feminist theology and gender justice should be a required part, rather than an option, in the curriculum. Students also need to be encouraged to take up studies on feminist-liberation theology so as to be instruments of liberation. It is important for churches and Christian organisations to be liberated from patriarchal structures and to work toward the liberation of women.

In order to empower women and upgrade their status in the family, society, culture and religion, it is important to encourage women to develop self-recognition and acceptance of their worth and dignity. This is a sort of self-affirmation, a spirituality for life. While *forbearance* of women is appreciable, false humility in the name of virtue only dehumanizes them. Women must affirm their right as free-thinking subjects and not as objects to be used and abused. Their inner courage should be strengthened to oppose injustice, discrimination, exploitation and oppression. Empowering themselves and one another is very important to resist any patriarchal prejudice. Likewise, the church's movement and other social institutions, local, regional, national, and international associations and women's organisations should join hands as agents of justice and as a progressive force in combating violence together. Then will we be able to combat violence against women,