

God and Gender: Reflections from an Indian womanist Perspective

Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar

I thank God for this privilege to attend this World Forum on Theology and Liberation and I deem it a great honour to initiate discussion on the theme God and Gender. My attempt in this paper is to highlight the issues on the theme as experienced today, and using 'a woman's body' as the lens, show how the issues of power, identity, gender discrimination on the one hand intersect with the struggle, hope and liberation of the whole humankind, along with the earth, on the other hand.

I have been teaching the courses on Women, theology, gender and feminist hermeneutics for the last 15 years and in my experience I have found the following stages of response to the theme God and Gender. First of all, there is the denial of Gender issues, giving way to trivialisation of issues. This is often followed by anger, irritation and frustration very often laced with smile, tolerance and at times mental withdrawal from the discussion on the issue. Among those who get vexed with the subject, the buoyant feelings get aired in the company of those likeminded who decide to reduce the importance of the subject to couple of vulgar sexist jokes. For those who have gained a new perspective in gender analysis, there is no going back, an excitement to discover new ways of being, an "aha" experience. Among theologians who are forced to put on a gender justice outlook, very often gender issues get reduced to use an issue of language, philosophy and thought. In many institutions, both secular and religious, gender sensitivity often goes as far to provide a women's desk, a women's department, or even offering stipulated number of seats for women in committees. With great difficulty, gender sensitivity is expressed through use of inclusive and non-sexist language in liturgy.

Thanks to all the struggles in history, of feminists / womanists, as individuals and through movements, gender issues have certainly gained more space and voice today. An attempt to analyse the above responses and attitudes to women in Church and society shows that the difficulty is centred on the 'body' of the woman. While there is no problem in acknowledging the utilitarian and instrumental value of a woman's body, major problems and resistance emerge when equal human dignity and worth is demanded for a woman as a person. Her Body is surveyed to identify the reason for her lesser worth, insignificance, silence and state. How can a polluting, leaking, bleeding, sexual, sensual body claim for equality? The dualistic philosophy has contributed to concretising patriarchy as a norm and subjected God also to the same order of thought, action and life. God was made in the image of MAN and enabled the continuation of patriarchy in history, in the Church and Society. God's name is invoked, worshipped and praised as one who blesses and maintains the status quo of a patriarchal church. God is imaged as one who condones racism, sexism, classism, casteism and ethnocentrism.

I recall a woman who shared her story in a public hearing on crimes against women that was organised in Bangalore in September 1995. She narrated how she killed her three daughters as soon as they were born, because she longed for a son. She suffered abuse and violence at the hands of her husband and his family, for her inability to produce a son. Muthupandamma performed several religious rites, like lying down on a bed of nails. But each time, she gave birth to a daughter. According to this woman, the fault was not a patriarchal society and values but God - a blind, dumb and deaf God who did not understand her plight. Why could *he* not give her a son? The God-image for the woman was a male, patriarchal God who should have granted her a son and delivered her. In my doctoral dissertation, I worked on this topic to show how God images and woman's self-esteem are absolutely connected; that God-Talk and Gender-Talk are mutually linked, inseparable and if there has to be a transformation in theology, or church or society, it becomes imperative to set gender issues right.

Making Gender issues then as a starting point to re-imagine a theology for Another possible world, let me name some of the serious gender blind and gender discriminatory situations that we have in our Church and Society today.

1. The large invisibility and silence of women in the worldwide church is considered as theological and Biblical norm that should continue in order to be faithful to the Bible and GOD.
2. The narration of creation stories in the Biblical tradition are deliberately misused, misinterpreted, legitimised and explained to create a basis for the negative and derogatory

status accorded to women. This fundamental (mis)interpretation is carried into every other text in the Bible. What follows is only an attempt to do cosmetic damage control to the status of women by using the prophetic traditions within the Bible and reference to the early Jesus Community as Community and Disciples of Equals. Because there is the crust knowledge of women, their bodies as source of sin, temptation and evil, even the Jesus knowledge is accepted as that which can save the souls of women but not their bodies. Women's bodies are projected as irredeemably impure, imperfect to reflect the Image of God, a decision Man has made and which even God is expected to comply with.

3. I will not go into the details of how women and some men scholars in history, took upon themselves the onus of bringing to light, the deep rooted connections between worldviews, interpretations, distortions in meanings and translations in scriptures. Letty Russell put it beautifully to say, The Word of God has to be recovered from the Bible in order that it becomes the Liberating Word of God for us. While we are grateful for this liberation task through rewriting of theologies and re-reading of the Bible exercises that happen in the Church, this process is not catalysed enough as a priority in the process of Liberation because it is often written off by the church as an issue "of the women, for the women and by the women". I have been told often: Oh Evangeline, we knew you would raise your voice on that issue, Next time we will take note of that, (It doesn't really change, only I decide not to repeat and repeat the same as my energy levels also simmer after sometime. The Church ought to own this task of gender justice as a core faith task and treat it as a priority issue if it truly *wants* transformation. I have a serious question to the Whole Church at this point. Why is it that the Church does not make gender justice and equal partnership of women and men in all levels as a theological faith mandate to become a member of the Church? While there are Creeds like the Nicene Creed and the Apostle's Creed (or even the Athanasian Creed which I as a faithful Lutheran confess on Trinity Sundays,) to say that you belong to the Christian family, I do not see any reference in the confession of Faith to the absolute equality of human beings as women and men, as those created in the image of God, regardless of their caste, class, sex, race. The confessional Creeds very safely describe one's faith in the nature and function of God in the universe, and tells us how one could possibly be included in the Christian community and through that confession shape our faith as a Christian. However, I do believe that the time has come for us to Rewrite these Common Christian Creeds for today including elements that would underline the relationship of God with the whole cosmos, the earth, the sea, the sky the oceans and of course the human beings, and how they are all interrelated to one another as co-creatures in this world. We need a creed that underlines the utter common equality of human beings, created in the image of God, regardless. Why do we wait for natural disasters like tsunami to teach us that in death, it is clearly proved that there is no difference in the worth and dignity as human beings? I wonder how many churches will remain within the family if this prerequisite of gender-justice is stipulated as a core faith mandate. Perhaps we will find churches calling upon the name of the Bible, Tradition, History and even God - to reject such a condition. This suggestion brings to the fore, the bare truth that the Church would rather prefer Gender issues to remain on the agenda, treated probably in terms of instituting a desk or a study or even mark a decade but will not deal with it as a core theological issue. For on this depends the nature of the church that is constructed more on power than on the Word of God, more on patriarchal values than on Gospel values, focussed more on welfare and charity than on justice. What do we do as women and men who find it difficult walk with such a patriarchal Church but also find it difficult to walk to without the church?
4. Am I being unreasonable or too critical when I speak about the level of gender sensitivity/justice exhibited by the Church through its programmes? When we dream of a theology for another possible world, engendering of theology, our mission, our administration, leadership and our whole way of life becomes a core necessity. Engendering process cannot be a concept. It has to take concrete root, and involves critical engagement in struggle for liberation and justice. With the help of an example of engendering process set within Indian context, I would like to propose some crucial steps that could bring life and meaning to a gender-just theology, a gender-just community.

Listen to the Experience of Women who gained a new sense of “self” after they were considered as women who are worthy to be considered as women, as leaders:

1. Deviramma, a 50 year old woman from a cowherd community in Karnataka, the state in South India. For most of her life, she kept cattle and sold curd for her livelihood. She was elected as a member of the village council in the year 1993 and went on to become the President of a village council. This elevation and importance in society became a reality because of *Panchayat Raj* Act that was passed first in Karnataka. According to this act, 33% of seats were to be allotted for women in the village councils for self-governance. Initially women were hesitant to join the political process because they had no experience, no education, no power, low self-esteem and many thought this was going to be a tragic political disaster in history. The experience of Deviramma and the 14000 women who were elected with her, was truly an experience of transformation. The sheer number of women coming together in public to participate in decision making, to voice out their wisdom, to take charge of the lives of their families, did wonders to their construction of self. All the women who were elected were given training in leadership development, gender awareness to take up their roles and responsibilities seriously as women leaders. Initially many of the women were subjected to criticism from all sides. Many called them as substitutes of males, puppets and as those who have accidentally strayed into the public. However, when the women completed their five year term, the next election saw even more number of women getting elected. About 43% of women were elected democratically to the posts in the village governing council. Several studies and reports focussed on this very interesting phenomenon of women in leadership and discovered several vital changes that happened in society. Women changed the nature and priorities in governance. They addressed issues such as abolition of liquor, access to clean water and sanitation, child labour, sexual harassment, domestic violence and several other issues that have changed the quality of life in their families in every village. The earlier practice of nominating women as representatives did not give them this kind of power and identity. The *Panchayati Raj* Institution was given the status of a constitutional body. One of these women leader says: “the Men have always ridiculed us, and perceived us as incapable of the management of public affairs,. We now make up one third of the councils. This adds to our sense of strength. We must become 50 or more ...”

After the experience of starting Panchayati Raj in Karnataka, the Government passed the 73rd constitutional amendment making it mandatory for all the states in India to follow the Panchayati Raj system. Today it is a reality where common women, dalit women, women from Scheduled castes and classes are also found in the village governing council. A concrete attempt towards gender justice with a novel approach of first of all giving them their due number and visibility. When I study the phenomenal change that happened in the status of women with the introduction of the Panchayati Raj, I ask myself the question: Why cant the church pause for a minute, confess to the crime of gender blindness in history and first of all return to the women their due presence and participation in the church. For too long we have said:

- let us reformulate and reconstruct our theologies with gender perspectives,
- let us get the church ready for this transformation
- let us give gender awareness in small doses, in mild ways
- let us introduce gender sensitising programmes in the church, schools
- Let us read the Bible with new eyes and bring gender awareness and bring a slow change among the people.

All these are necessary and important, I do not counter that. However, what we need today is there is a possible bold theological initiative that the church and the theologians can take in redefining the basic principles of Christian faith. Is it too difficult to make a basic non-negotiable faith mandate to confess that women and men are created in the image of God, regardless and therefore women and men are called to be equal partners in every aspect of life? If the identity, role and nature of the Church was redefined and reformulated within a gender framework, the implications an engendered Church and Theology would mean sharing of resources, power, mutual affirmation of the body, sex and sexuality. This would lead to a relationship that is truly based on equality that is given as a gift by God to humanity. This is the dream I have of an alternate theology where God Talk and Gender Talk would intersect to give birth to Another New Possible World.