

# Empowering the Church for Gender Justice

Liza B. Lamis<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Empowering the church for gender justice. What a complicated topic this is! Is the church (both institutional and the people, its members) disempowered to make gender justice real today? Isn't the church supposed to have gender justice as a central feature in its mission? What exactly do we mean by gender justice?

A fresh graduate of Pag-asa School of Theology of Brokenshire College in Davao City, or a pastor from the hinterlands of Davao must have shared the above questions with me. So together we wrestle with the topic in an attempt to create a basic framework in understanding and doing gender justice in the church, in the context of our present social reality and location.

My assumption is that there are ideas and concepts we experience and hear about but we really do not understand what it is and what it means, or how it feels or looks like in daily life. As we go along and to give us some organization, I propose to discuss Sex and Gender, the 'Woman Question' in the Philippines, and Gender Justice: Issues and Challenges. This outline may help us make sense of gender justice, and find out some clues how the church could make it a reality now.

## Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological part, those functions in women and men associated with reproduction; to reproductive genitals and the reproductive processes. It is also associated with maternal and nurturing traits in women. Sex is inborn, natural and given, a fact of human biology. Men impregnate, women conceive, give birth and breastfeed. On these biological differences we construct an edifice of human attitudes and assumptions, behaviors and activities we call *gender roles and identities*.

Gender refers to culturally defined system of behavior deemed appropriate to biological females and males in any given society. It is learning to be boys and girls to become men and women – defining what is feminine and masculine behavior, and how we relate to each other as men and women. As a social and cultural construct (therefore it is de-constructible), gender is unstable, changes over time due to surrounding material conditions. Since it is unstable and considers into account roles, biology, sexual preference and orientation, it logically destabilizes our heterosexist framework of thinking that there are only two ways of being human; that is, to be a man and a woman. To speak, therefore, of gender justice is bearing in mind others like gays, lesbians, transsexuals and bisexuals. For the sake of

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<sup>1</sup> Ms. Liza B. Lamis hails from Iloilo City, Philippines. She is coordinator of the women's desk in the program unit on Ecumenical Education and Nurture of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines. This presentation was part of the CCA-PST Ecumenical Lecture Series that was launched in the Pag-asa School of Theology in Brokenshire College, Davao City, Philippines in March 2007.

focus, I shall deal only on women as I hold an explicit bias for them, particularly for the majority of the poor and marginalized Filipino women. There will be other spaces to deal with the other genders later.

## **Aspects of gender differentiation and discrimination**

Gender differentiation and gender discrimination helps us in understanding differentiation and discrimination on other grounds (race, class, ethnicity, age, education, etc.), and vice versa, thus making it clear that every woman experiences her being woman and her oppression as a woman, differently.

**Women's work.** Women's productive work is seen as an extension of their reproductive work (like giving birth and nurturing children) which is considered not 'real work' because these functions goes with their being female, therefore this work is undervalued or underpaid, and most often unpaid because it is women's work.

All mothers are working mothers, except perhaps for those rich mothers who are able to get other women to do the housework for them. A mother who goes to Hong Kong to become a domestic helper is paid a low wage for doing the same work she does at home, for which she is not paid or valued. Already more than half of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) are women doing women's work abroad, and these OFWs brought in 12B USD in 2006 to government coffers. Now government is overly recognizing this domestic work, insulting women further, with the 'Supermaid' program designed to train world class domestic helps for export.

Women's share in the world's resources looks like this:

- Women perform 2/3 of the world's work
- Women earn 1/10 of the world's income
- Women are 2/3 of the world's illiterate
- Women own less than 1/100 of the world's property

This is an old data. It may be worst now. Nevertheless it shows that women are, indeed, the poorest of the poor in the world.

**Human rights.** Women's rights are human rights. Violence against women (VAW) is an abuse of human rights simply because women are human beings. No one deserves abuse. Every one deserves respect as a human being.

**Culture and religion.** Religions teach equality, but practice subordination or exclusion. Some cultures sanction practices that are harmful to women, e.g., genital mutilation and preferential feeding of the boys. Many protestant churches now ordain women and have overcome or dismantled legal and theological barriers to women's ordination. Yet, in reality, churches would still prefer a man to a woman pastor or woman priest.

Women's experience of male domination is felt by women in every sphere of life. One does not have to look far. Look at women around you and check this out for its validity.

## **The Woman Question**

The Woman Question in the Philippines is a fact of a phenomenon, and not just a thesis or hypothesis of the discrimination, subordination and exploitation of women **as** women, differing in degrees or extent, but cutting across class, race, creed and nationality.

It is a personal, as well as a social, global, systemic and ideological question, the solution of which does not lie in the ability of individual women to break through the system, but in a women's movement interested in personal, structural and systemic transformation.

**Multiple burdening of Filipino women.** Filipino women experience multiple levels of oppression. In our church language, majority of women are three times removed from the throne of God's grace and goodness.

Centuries of colonization rendered the Philippines a neo-colonial and feudal society. Philippine society is likened to a triangle, where the elite rich rules and the majority who are poor, comprising the basic sectors such as the farmers, workers, urban poor dwellers, students and professionals, are ruled. The elite comprise five (5) percent, the middle class of around fifteen (15) percent, which is actually shrinking these days, and the rest, in poverty. According to government standards, a family of six (6) must have a combined daily income of PhP600+ to live in the poverty threshold. Below that threshold, a family would be already considered poor. This threshold sets the divide that gives shape to the triangle. Seventy-five (75) percent or more than the majority are living in poverty by virtue of economic deprivation. In the world arena, the Philippines is considered a 'developing' country, where its economic policies are dictated by capital and interests from rich countries. As such, Filipinos belong to the two-thirds people of the world who are poor.

Colonial mentality still thrives strongly that even many Filipinos themselves think we are an 'inferior' race. As a colored people, we all experience racial discrimination abroad, but here we also have our own brand of racial and ethnic discrimination. For example, urbanites look down on people from the north and call them 'mountain people' or the 'uncivilized'. Not only are we Filipinos looked down as of inferior race, we also think we are indeed of an inferior race; and that the superior one is the Caucasian.

Majority of Filipinos share these two binds of economic deprivation and racial discrimination. But only Filipino women experience a third by virtue of their being women. In other words, majority of Filipino women are triply (even more) burdened by class, race and gender. This is starkly seen in an overseas Filipino woman working as domestic help in Hong Kong or in Singapore. It should also be said that Filipino women in their particular socio-cultural location experience other forms of oppression. For example, an indigenous, uneducated, young woman from Mindanao would be more vulnerable to the lure of being trafficked.

### **Issues confronting Filipino women**

The Philippine Constitution is one among the few constitutions in the world with an equal rights provision, yet Filipino women in reality are discriminated against and subordinated in the home, in church and in society.

**Discrimination and subordination.** Sons are preferred to daughters, and given the priority in education in situations where financial resource for schooling is limited. Most girls are socialized to know how to do household chores while the boys are not simply because they are boys. Girls are overly protected while the boys have much freedom of mobility any time of the day and night. Daughters are expected to take care of their parents in their old days. A gainfully employed mother is still largely expected to run the household and oversee children's education and social upbringing, and as the main caregiver of the baby. A domestic helper who comes home after two years for vacation is still expected to serve her husband upon his demand, even if the husband is without paid work (and philandering, in the case of my cousin).

Society still holds the idea that women are responsible for their men's sexual behavior and satisfaction. A woman with a man other than her husband, brother or relative is always suspect as having an illicit sexual affair.

Women are treated as tools for profit in marketing, even in non-government organizations working for economic empowerment of the poor. Use of women's bodies abounds in the advertising of consumer goods. Women's wages are below par with the men doing the same kind of work. Still few women assume decisive government posts. (Even if the country's president is a woman, her political disposition is anti-Filipino women, majority of whom live below poverty line.) Women are still expected to take up caring and service-related education and work.

**Violence against Women.** If you are a woman or a girl, you are always a potential victim of any form of abuse. One only needs to hear the facts of violence against women everyday, everywhere.

**Women OFWs.** Presently there are 8 million Overseas Foreign Workers (OFWs). About 3000 leave the country everyday to work abroad, 70% of which are women, mostly as domestic helps and entertainers. In 2006 there were 1,083,568 documented OFWs in 192 countries. Mindanao is the biggest source of OFWs, with SOCSARGEN region as the leading sender.

**Women in the churches.** In some churches, women are still not ordained or elected into leadership positions even though ordination and women's leadership is justified theologically and legally. Women's organizations in the churches mostly assume auxiliary and service roles, and do not have much say in church decision-making. Theologically-trained women married to pastors usually are considered adjunct to their husbands by the churches calling them to serve.

## **Gender Justice: Issues and Challenges**

Of the five who are hungry people in the Philippines, three of these are women. They are the most vulnerable to abuse and exploitation because they are poor, and they are women. Obviously, the majority of the poor and the oppressed Filipinos are women. These women are the poorest of the poor, the oppressed of all the oppressed. Our option for the poor is an option for women. Here I will stress that we (the church) are called to make gender justice central in its ecumenical agenda. In so doing, we do not allow our 'Christianity to serve simply as an ideological justification for the gender injustice of the patriarchal status quo.'

As Filipino women, we experience patriarchy not merely as women, but also as women of color from the Third-World. This is further compounded by other levels of oppression by ethnicity, age, etc. Patriarchy is an overarching term under which the various forms of women's oppression are placed. As a social hierarchical system, it builds on male dominance - female subordination social arrangement to include other forms of dominance like classism (rich over poor), racism (white over colored), imperialism (rich countries over poor ones). Patriarchal society though is not everywhere and at every time the same.

**Gender analysis** asks not only who does what, but who decides and who benefits, who uses resources or power and do not benefit from these goods. In this sense, to do gender justice is to, first of all, take on the critical perspective of the majority of the poor and the oppressed who are women. Through this lens, we interpret reality and will be guided correctly and clearly on what it tells us how to achieve gender justice.

**Gender justice** is the ending of and, if necessary, the provision of redress for inequalities between women and men that results in the subordination and oppression of women. It is fostering radical justice and equality for all human beings. Gender justice thus includes justice for the gays, lesbians, transsexuals, and bisexuals. It is therefore important to have a women's (or gays', etc.) movement, not just organizations, in the task of realizing gender justice.

**The 'F' Word.** If the Woman Question is a personal, social, global, systemic and ideological question, and its solution lies in a women's movement interested in personal, structural and systemic changes called FEMINISM, who, then, is a 'feminist'?

A feminist is one who answers the following questions positively:

1. Are you aware of the woman question?
2. Are you committed to eradicate these forms of discrimination, exploitation and subordination of women toward a more egalitarian and just society?

A feminist can be a man or a woman. Not all women are feminists, and not all feminists are women. After all, we realize that feminism is not a bad word or idea. A feminist is one who works for gender justice because it is mandated by her or his faith in God who is the God of Justice, and by her or his faith tradition in which radical justice is central to its mission and ecumenical agenda.

**Women in the churches.** There are various pressing issues and challenges that churchwomen face today. My particular passion at this point in time of my ecumenical work with the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) with women is on sexual abuse of women in the churches. Sexual abuse of women in the churches has been the most secret of *secrets*. But not anymore. Sexual abuse of women, committed by male clergy and leaders in the churches, violates the humanity of women. Voices of women victims and survivors are silenced and denied. The churches thus abdicate their responsibility for upholding and promoting the value of every human being, especially those who are abused, neglected and victimized.

It is therefore crucial for women victims and for the church community that the voices of these women survivors and victims be heard and their humanity restored to wholeness. It is also important for the churches to be true to its calling of making justice especially for the abused women, and to be a haven of compassion and care for the victims and survivors.

**Breaking the Silence.** What does it imply to 'break the silence' that surrounds abuse of women in the church? For one, it is empowering women victims and survivors of abuse to speak, tell of pain and suffering, shame and humiliation for being victimized. It is also raising women's voices to resist abuse, and beginning the journey to healing and wholeness for both the church and the women victims and survivors, no matter how long and arduous.

"When a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility for more truth around her." Truth telling facilitates increased awareness, consequently proportionately decreasing secrecy. As a form of contesting the status quo, truth telling creates solidarity among victims and survivors. Thus, breaking the silence about sexual abuse of women in the church is a crucial beginning in making gender justice happen within the church.

## **Conclusion**

Empowering the church for gender justice is being clear about sex - our biological functions and differences; and gender — a socially constructed edifice of human norms and activities. It is a fact that women experience oppression and discrimination in every sphere of life. The woman question in the Philippines is a fact of a phenomenon of the discrimination, subordination and exploitation of women **as** women, differing in degrees or extent, but cutting across class, race, creed and nationality.

It is a personal, as well as a social, global, systemic and ideological question, the solution of which does not lie in the ability of individual women to break through the system, but in a women's movement interested in personal, structural and systemic transformation.

Gender justice, as a radical demand of justice for all human beings, requires the ending of gender injustices and providing redress for inequalities. As Christians, we commit to do gender justice by eradicating all forms of oppression of women, beginning with a critical understanding of the daily and particular experiences of women characterized by subjugation, oppression and exploitation. As Christians, we are challenged to confront sexual abuse of women now, which is only one of the many issues we face in the church,

by breaking our silence about it, and discerning further what it implies for the church to do.

Empowering the church for gender justice starts in liberating ourselves from our being blind and deaf to women's plight. By creating a simple framework in going about gender justice, hopefully we are empowered to transform our selves as men and women, and as church. Gender justice, after all, is doing what is just for women human beings.

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