



# A Question of Gender Justice

The role of women in decision-making in  
different areas of Church and Society

Summary of Proceedings and Insights INSeCT 2017 Bangalore



## Introduction

At the meeting in Belo Horizonte 2014 INSeCT decided to push forward a three-year research project dedicated to the issue of gender justice, especially the participation of women in decision making processes in church and in society. In this way INSeCT aimed to answer Pope Francis' call in "Evangelii gaudium" (Nos 103-104) "to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church" as well as in society.

At this year's meeting in Bangalore INSeCT dedicated part of its meeting to this research project. Presentations from all five regions, (Asia-Pacific, South America, Africa, Europe and North America, respectively) followed by two sessions of reflection and discussion enabled us to map a way forward. This brief document presents:

1. The main points of these presentations
2. Reflections, insights and challenges that they provoked;
3. Possible ways forward

### I. Five presentations

Representatives of the five regions each gave an overview of their research projects and shared the main insights as follows – the three main issues of each region are given below:

#### ***Asia Pacific [Kochurani Abraham]***

- Women of Asian-Pacific societies, within the wide diversity of contexts which the area includes, are finding their voices heard in the secular sphere in spite of the patriarchal cultural conditioning of their particular contexts.
- The Church in much of the Asia-Pacific Region Church lags behind the secular sphere on the question of gender justice. There is a wide gap between its statements and praxis, which often lack clarity of process in its work towards inclusive partnerships.
- The potentially prophetic role of INSeCT's member societies in the Church as a catalyst for change, in providing theological insights into

reimagining gender justice is being explored by some of the local associations (ACTA).

### ***South America [María Marcela Mazzini/Virgina R. Azcuy]***

The representatives of South America chose the approach of a biographical perspective, which points out the nexus between some of the milestones of their lives with the proposed topic for this INSeCT Conference:

- Feminism seems inseparable from an appropriate theological understanding of and debate on gender issues. Such refers firstly to the dignity of women and to the fundamental equality of all human beings. The feminist debate, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean as regions noticeably marked by inequality in distinctive ways, must be located in the field of social justice and the wider struggle for human rights.
- Based on these fundamental assumptions, feminism can function as a global and local historical movement, theoretical and practical, diversified, in the search of promoting women's human dignity – such aims related to the wider care of every creature and of creation in general.
- Within the feminist framework, the gender category emerges to explain how a gender-dominated understanding of women operates as a cause of oppression and subordination in a patriarchal or androcentric vision of the socio-cultural system. The structures and teaching of the Catholic Church reflects these in a unique, sometimes even paradoxical way: we encounter the use of gender perspective as well as criticism of alleged “gender ideology”

### ***Africa [Nontando Hadebe]***

The African representative focused on the intersection and mutual dependence of Culture, Constitutions (human rights), and Christianity (Religion) in the lives of African Catholic women, in the light of which she affirmed that

- All questions regarding the welfare and status of women in Africa are explained within the wider framework of culture, which includes conceptions and constructions of masculinity as entailing dominance over women. This makes it more difficult to question the patriarchal

culture from a human rights perspective which is regarded as “western” and “neo-colonial”.

- The triple oppression of women in the constitution, due to their identity as black Africans, as women whose legal status was that of minors, within an economic system based on mining, industry and large scale farming that favored men over women, is a result of colonialism. Therefore, a critical analysis of culture that takes into account the historical past of colonization and its ongoing effects on the lives of the people and particularly women is necessary.
- The complicity of Christianity to the oppression of women in Africa needs to be recognized.

### ***Europe [Gunter Prüller-Jagenteufel]***

From a European perspective the main insights are as follows:

- Overcoming the gender bias in the Catholic Church requires a multi-dimensional approach in analyzing the structures of the church, especially clericalism (the latter understood not only as a personal weakness but also as an oppressive system).
- On the theological level we have to overcome the theory of complementarity between men and women which can entail that men define the “place” for women, i.e. their “fitting” roles in family as well as in society.
- This means there is a need to develop a post-essentialist anthropology where human persons are not categorized according to their “essence” as man or woman, but as equal beings with equal potential (autonomy, reason, and relation) as well as equal rights.

### ***North America [Nancy Pineda-Madrid]***

From the basis of a reminder of the broad and diverse reality of the continent of North America and the countries it includes, the North American representative presented:

- A definition and description of the current situation in terms of gender impasse experienced as the invisibility of women and the reality of conflict with ecclesial authority, with two case studies that exemplify this impasse:
  - Femicide/feminicide and forms of resistance to this found, for example, in the public protests of the people, as well as in

- artistic works (artworks such as the re-imagination of Pietà and Guadalupe) – in contrast to the scandal of the silence until now of the church(es) in denouncing this ongoing feminicide;
- The (US) Leadership Congress of Women Religious (LCWR) investigations by two curial congregations and subsequent apostolic visitation, along with the LCWR response of contemplative solidarity.
  - A theological response to gender impasse and the women’s resistance and/or engagement of it – through the development of a theological understanding of fear as “sin” as well as a theology of hope.

## II. Reflections, Insights and Challenges Provoked

Major themes:

- Gender Justice is not a new theme: the “tiredness” felt by those involved in this theme was found across the board, in all present, which invites to a reflection on the underlying issues that hijack any process of implementation. What happened to the feminism of the eighties?
- One of the problems we have to deal with is ecclesial culture, theology and accountability. There is a huge gap between official statements and policies and the actual practice of clerical non-accountability (e.g. in sexual abuse cases), and its link with the lack of structural accountability of the church.
- The question of authority and power in the church: We identify the need for a robust theological reflection on Baptism so as to untie the knot between power and ministry in the area of the three munera [priest, prophet, king], and develop areas of responsibility that will broaden the base of ecclesial governance.
- The gender issue cannot be limited to being viewed as only a women’s issue. Men’s voices on the issues of women’s participation, gender equality and masculinity have to be taken into account. At the same time men need to understand that justice and human rights are indivisible and that men are as much affected by patriarchal structures as women. How the image of masculinity is lived out in relation to women and how the structures of power in the Church affect both merits attention.

- We identify the need for a holistic theological anthropology that factors in the gender issues (relationality, intersectionality, the effects of colonization, masculinities, LGTBQI, etc.). This implies that the church and differing groups working for gender justice must be attentive to the need to avoid binary oppositional thinking and all gender stereotype and overt generalizations of any kind.
- We identify the need for theological reflection on the fact that we do not choose our sexual orientation or gender identity but rather discover and need to develop it. From here the need for church and theology to foster acceptance of the sexual identity and orientation of each individual as well their respective sexual autonomy.
- It was noted that the gifts of women religious to the church can be prophetic and problematic at the same time, stretching from conservative submissiveness to intelligent contemplative resistance.
- We identify and lament the lack of theological literacy of contemporary clerics, especially in the episcopate, and we assume the responsibility of collaborating with and (in)forming them;
- We lament and call for theological reflection on the “sin” of fear – personal, institutional and cultural – as one of the main underlying obstacles to changing the church’s structures, in particular the fear of losing power, of challenging power and of bearing the consequences of disobedient behaviour or dissent.
- We recognize the danger of ideological “anti-genderism” as well as the problematic nature of some aspects of the so called “New Feminism” and call for the clarity around the culturally biased nature of some of its grounding principles.
- We see the need to listen to and tell the narratives of our marginalized brothers and sisters who live on the edge of our social and cultural milieu, so as to better understand the current situation of the world.

### III. Possible Ways Forward

At our meeting there was a general consensus in the realization that the question of gender justice is not a theme that is finished and dealt with but that as theologians we have the duty to continue the struggle for justice for all. At the same time we see the challenge to work out how to move forward intelligently in a way that allows each society work and make a genuinely positive impact in their respective contexts and therefore collectively

together in a global sense, while also addressing other broader issues that face the church and the world and that are often the ones that underpin the structures impeding gender justice in the first place. Some of the areas that emerged in that discussion were:

- How, given the difficulty of bridging policy and practice, can we get everyone around the table for an open and honest discussion of these issues, in particular those who lead the church? We see the need for a nuanced approach and careful use of language so as not to alienate those who think differently from ourselves;
- We recognize Pope Francis' papacy as a *kairos* moment, a time of opportunity for a bigger step forward towards a truly pastoral church and theology – an opportunity not to be wasted.
- *Theological-Ecclesial Dialogue*: We need to discuss and clarify with representatives of the hierarchy our common understanding of Magisterium and the calling of the theologian. Magisterium could be better considered as a verb, not a noun, and in this way shift our understanding of who exercises magisterium. There is no “the” magisterium but different persons with different roles in the church who exercise it differently. Theologians also have magisterium; and so do women. We can, as part of our vocation, exercise the ministry of magisterium and prophetic leadership in partnership and communion with ecclesial leaders.
- Lastly, we identified the need for the translation of theology: How are we making our theological discourse accessible to the wider public, Church and world (young people, minorities, artists...etc.), so that we are not closed upon ourselves? At times, our calling is to stand between structural church and the people, and translate both to each other.

In the light of all the above, the Assembly proposed that the best way to move forward into the next three years was to do so in the following ways.

In terms of the theme of gender justice, the Assembly wishes to encourage regional and national member societies to consider what steps can be taken by their members to help overcome the problems, disparities and injustices he project has brought to light, and how INSeCT can incorporate and offer ongoing and periodic attention to such promotion. To that end, INSeCT will:

- Send a summary of the work of the 2017 Assembly to each of the member associations and societies for them to reflect and deliberate upon how each one should and can move forward in their particular

regional and national contexts. This is the document you are now reading.

- Investigate the possibility of publishing the five regional presentations, for which the Steering Committee could coordinate a sub-committee, from representatives of the various associations, to coordinate that work.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of the focus of the focus of the next three to six years, in the light of the discussions of the Assembly, and in response to the overwhelming awareness of the need to open a broader forum on the underlying issues this research project has unveiled, as well as the exceptional opportunity afforded us in and through the papacy of Pope Francis, the Assembly voted to take on and address the following theme over the coming three years:

***“A Kairos for Catholic Theology: Serving the Church, Serving the World”.***

Following the INSeCT General Council discussions in Bangalore (July 2017), the incoming INSeCT Steering Committee, comprising of representatives from five global regions, has agreed the shared intention to plan the next two General Councils (2020 and 2023) in a continuum, to be held in Rome and Africa, respectively, and in the coming years to strengthen INSeCT’s network and funding, to raise its profile, expand and develop further its network and to better serve the church at differing levels, at grassroots, leadership and authorities as a facilitator of dialogue and discernment, a collaborative partner and critical friend in theologically reflecting on the opportunities and challenges of the current times, for the good of the church and the world.

*Edited by Maeve Heaney, Nontando Hadebe, and Gunter Prüller-Jagenteufel*

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<sup>1</sup> These five reports will also be sent to the executive committees of each society/ association, to discern the implementation of this second step.