

Identifying and Dismantling Patriarchy and Other Systems of Oppression of Women

Gender Analysis, Feminist Theology, and the Church in Mission

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Identifying and naming

Coming from Latin America and as a feminist theologian, I have learned that the ability or the capacity to name the reality, or to read the context, is a first step in the process of doing theology. Theology emerges from context, and naming or identifying where we stand is one important step in moving forward into the next important stages in the process of building awareness. A second step is the mediation of theological or sociological elements that help us to discern the reality. This discernment is an impulse toward the final step in the methodological spiral, which is to achieve change – to implement the action of change and transformation.

I am going through this methodological spiral as a reminder that what we really want to achieve through our theological reflections and praxis is change! Our final aim is not just solid theological analysis, but ultimately to see transformation in the lives of women and men. Naming and discerning are important then not just to learn more, or to increase our store of knowledge, but in the end to taste in our daily lives the dream that we pray for in this assembly theme: God of life, lead us to justice and peace!

A quick look at women's daily realities gives us a sense of the challenge we face: 70 percent of the poor people in the world are women, and women occupy 52 percent of the most vulnerable workforce. Moreover, while 80 percent of food in the world is produced by women and they constitute themselves as guardians of biodiversity in agriculture, unequal salaries are still the reality in all countries. For example, in

Switzerland we find an 18.4 percent pay gap between women and men; in Germany, a 21.6 percent pay gap; and in France, a woman must work 54 days more than a man to make an equal salary (2011).

According to the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report the reality for women in Korea is also quite challenging:

It ranks 111th among 136 countries surveyed and dropped down three notches from last year, despite the election of the nation's first female president in December 2012. The report is based on four categories of women's economic participation and opportunities available to them; educational attainment; health and survival and political empowerment. The overall score for Korea is 0.635, while Iceland topped the list with 0.873, with the runner-up Finland at 0.842. The data shows that women in Korea have been provided with good educational opportunities, with a score in this category of 0.973, but the political participation and distribution was 0.504 and 0.105, respectively.¹

This affirms that while the issue of poverty and exclusion is sometimes blamed on lack of education, providing education is not solving the issue of participation. The solution depends on an intersection of elements and improvements that include education, economic opportunities, and cultural changes – which means we must address the *content* of teaching. Indeed, education can serve to limit the empowerment of women instead of empowering them.

This quick overview of statistics shows that in daily life the supply or lack of access of resources is linked to the distribution of power that condemns the masses to the margins. The rigid social and cultural models and gender roles assigned to women limit their access to power and situate them as the underprivileged in the social division of labour. Access to and use of land and other social economic resources is also governed by these cultural constructions of gender that privilege men. All of this is despite the fact that, according to the most recent report of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), "Giving women the same access as men to modern seeds, fertilizer and tools could increase production on women's farms in developing countries by 20 to 30 percent – enough to feed up to 150 million more of the world's hungry people."²

We could go on and on, rolling out an endless list of realities and the experiences that each of us brings here today from our various societies and cultures: How women are

¹ *The Korea Times*, 26–27 October 2013, 3.

² Ann Tutwiler, "What Rural Women Can Do," FAO and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations website (È 'Insight' post È)", 20 March 2012.

the ones who suffer violence, at home and in public, in conflicts and in war. How women are the ones who carry the burden of an economic system that creates poverty. How women are the ones who suffer first the effects of climate change.

Defining patriarchy

These are the practical consequences in the daily life of living in a system that creates privileges and oppression³ – and this is the simple way of defining patriarchy: a system that operates by creating privileges and oppression. The task we face is to identify, name, and challenge these privileges, asking critical questions. For example: Who benefits from this system of privileges? What are these privileges? How do they lead to oppression, and who are ones who suffer? And finally, how can we deconstruct this system? What are the tools, processes, strategies, and policies needed to dismantle it?

Patriarchy is a social system in which we all participate. Using the notion of a system helps us to avoid one important risk in building a feminist critic: that is, individualizing responsibilities. It is not simply that a few bad guys plan to oppress and subjugate women in order to maintain their privileges. To avoid evaluations based on the individual level it is helpful to look critically at how “sexism is embedded in major institutions.”⁴ The issue is to understand how sexism and patriarchal systems work in order to discern resistance and build paths and movements of change. The changes do not reside in powerful individuals – women or men – but in a collaborative joining of hands and collective efforts toward change. What I am saying is that I don’t believe in an individualist approach, one that creates heroes or, the feminine counterpart, “*SHE-roes*.”

This is our task here in this pre-assembly – to build a movement of change. It is to join our hands and minds in order to create a collective, ecumenical movement of resistance against this system that operates in privilege and oppression. It is difficult, because to identify oppression we need to have the courage to identify privilege – and then the most challenging movement is to dismantle advantages that we think are rights! We believe they are rights because we have gotten used to the system. Our bodies fit into the forms and we hardly recognize privilege as part of the system of oppression anymore. And here is the task for women and men. And here is the critical question we need to

³ I am working with a definition and critique taken from Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

ask as women: How do we benefit from this system? Are we able, willing, and courageous enough to name the privileges and to dismantle injustices and inequalities?

Communities of women and men in a patriarchal system

When it comes to approaching this enormous task of dismantling patriarchy as a common mission for women and men it is fundamental that we maintain a critical approach in order to avoid misunderstandings. And let me carefully – because I know that this is delicate terrain – touch upon this nice definition of “communities of women and men” that we are using and that we are trying to build. In order to use the critical point of view that feminist theology offers us we need to analyze this community in a safe way – where women and men can discuss, reflect on, and put on the table what really matters in the path of living out justice. This cannot be a place where conflicts are avoided or where differences become inequalities.

Continuing on this path of asking the critical questions, trying to be together in building safe places, I need to ask another question: How do we participate equally in this process of building *just* communities of women and men? If our task of identifying and dismantling patriarchy leads us to identify places, roles, and positions of privilege, how do we do this from our respective roles, defined by gender stereotypes and expectations, which place women and men in power relations that are *not* equal. Sometimes the discrimination is open for all to see; but sometimes it is a tiny line of subtle and elusive discrimination that is hard to name because it is camouflaged in such a way that it seems it is just your individual feeling. An example of this “in-between-the-lines” type of discrimination is provided by professor Berit Ås, who unveils some “master suppression techniques”: such as making women’s voices and participation invisible or withholding information.⁵

In the common task for women and men of facing systems of privilege and oppression, it is useful to recognize that changes cannot be based on creating an atmosphere of shame and guilt. Change will not happen by blaming others. This strategy will fail because it relies on a false model of how social life works and it disempowers people from acting.

In this spirit of creating just communities of women and men, it is positive to have men as mutual partners, addressing the issue of how gender roles are embedded in social systems and institutions and reproduced in daily life, creating inequalities. But it is also

⁵ See Berit Ås, “Hersketeknikker,” *Kjerringråd* (Oslo) (1978:3): 17–21.

very relevant to acknowledge that power relations are still among us. Even if they disagree with the system, men are still in privileged positions and continue to benefit from these inequalities. This reality can be faced and finally changed not by creating guilt about it, but by developing a common sense of mutual responsibilities.

And it is in this sense that WCC pre-assemblies of women and men create a common responsibility to address how the patriarchal system affects each person's life. We create safe spaces to talk about how this social and cultural system determines the expectations for women to be feminine as well as how it constructs masculinities – and consequently how to resist it – and this is putting us in solidarity.

And let's add one element more to this already complex system: Let us take a critical look at the role of religion and faith in maintaining or dismantling this patriarchal system.

Religion and faith in a patriarchal system: A feminist critique

A critical view of religious structures in general shows that they are very hierarchical – specifically, androcentric – mirroring the social and cultural systems in which they exist. Within the hierarchical and sacred order, men have power over all things and people. This hierarchical scheme needs a God who has power over, determines, limits, and imposes “His” wishes, legislations, and orders – both punishing and saving.

But faith and religious discourse can also play a leading role in the discussion of gender equality by cooperating positively toward redefinition of roles and structures. The work of churches and church-based organizations in preventing and overcoming violence against women, based on an ethic of resistance to injustice, is one example of this active role. The churches' practice, diaconal work, and theological reflection are part and parcel of the critical approach to faith and religion, which can help to dismantle the frequently dangerous connection between religion and culture that relegates women to the private sphere where violence most frequently occurs.

Faith-based organizations can challenge prejudices and support the full participation of women in political, economic and social life by refuting attitudes that perpetuate inequality. Women are often central to the life of faith-based organizations, and they possess enormous potential to promote conflict resolution and peace building. There are numerous inspiring examples, including Nobel Peace Laureate Leymah Gbowee, who brought together Muslim and Christian women in an effective peace movement in Liberia.⁶

⁶ Secretary general's message to symposium on “The Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Peace building and Women Empowerment,”

Here it is useful to introduce the concept of gender justice – which follows the line of gender equality but builds in the theological vocabulary of JUSTICE and is rooted in biblical and theological ethical notions:

Gender justice implies the protection and promotion of the dignity of women and men who, being created in the image of God, are co-responsible stewards of creation. Gender justice is expressed through equality and balanced power relations between women and men and the elimination of the institutional, cultural and interpersonal systems of privilege and oppression that sustain discrimination.⁷

The concept of gender justice is one of the main emphases in the process of mainstreaming and implementing gender equality in the context of faith-based organizations or churches. The operation and mechanisms of power relations need to be addressed in a biblical and theological perspective. In the effort to put in practical terms the theological concept of an inclusive communion, we need to problematize the access (or not), the use (or misuse) of power manifested through the hierarchical and androcentric structures of the church.

Some elements of our experience in the Lutheran World Federation in the process of developing a gender justice policy are useful for this critical analysis of faith interlinked with gender justice. In building a theological framework to establish gender markers in the itinerary toward more just and equitable relationships and institutions it is important to remark that processes, strategies and policies are crucial.

What are these processes, strategies, and policies?

Processes are needed because we need to overcome the idea of event, or of results based on a specific moment. As we already know, change is not achieved by electing one woman to a leadership position. Rather, it is only by building movements, itineraries, roadmaps, and paths of transformation that we can, slowly but surely, experience cultural paradigm changes. This perspective ensures that these changes are integrated not only in personal attitudes, but also in the organizational arrangements that reflect equality. This can be seen in not simply increasing the number of women in leadership positions, but critically asking what roles these women are playing, so that we go beyond normal, and often stereotypical, gender expectations. For example, we can see whether

delivered by Mrs Lakshmi Puri, Assistant Secretary General for Intergovernmental Support and Strategic Partnerships, UN Women, New York, 12 February 2013, at <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=6598>

⁷ *Gender Justice Policy*, ed. Elaine Neuenfeldt (Lutheran World Federation, 2013), 7, at https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-WICAS_Gender_Justice.pdf

women are active in ordained ministries in the churches, or are limited to normally defined women's tasks in fields of care, education, and diaconal work.

Strategies and policies are the agreed common tools to be used as markers in the process of developing gender justice in the church. These are rules that provide concrete steps toward implementing gender justice. They ensure that measures are intentionally built into programmes and structural arrangements. Policies provide a frame to orient the work on gender, to express values, and to project visions of how to better implement inclusiveness. Policy provides a framework of intentions.

In building this movement, another theology is needed: a theology that is embedded in daily life and a theological word that brings life to suffering bodies. This is a word of justice, for women and men.

Building a different faith grammar

Another theological word is urgently needed. Women's voices and words are required to build a public role of theology. A word that is free from punishment, guilt, and accommodation that justifies violence, especially against women. The way to produce these other words is through a feminist theology or a theological perspective crosscut by gender justice: words that are open, in dialogue, enriched, and motivated by women's experiences.

This is the public and prophetic role of theology and religion: it is helping to produce sense in real life. It is helping women to rise up and walk their own ways. It is helping women and men to flourish. It is working to recognize the system of privilege and oppression and, despite the limitations and suffering, to take courageous steps in building just communities of women and men, assuming the radical consequences of this attempt.

What I am advocating is that religion and theology should interact in public spaces to help promote transformation of unjust and exclusive structures. Gender analysis and feminist theology can be helpful tools for churches to break symbolic barriers that delimit female bodies and fields of action, that bar women from being protagonists of their own lives. The voices and knowledge of peasant and landless women from the margins are useful: what we want is agrarian reform of our bodies – as we come up against fences and boundary markers.⁸

⁸ See Nancy Cardoso Pereira, "Tempos de salvação," in *Amantíssima e só* (São Paulo: Olho d'água, 1999), 91.

Eduardo Galeano's story

Marcela was visiting the snowy North. One night in Oslo, she met a woman who sang and told stories. Between songs, she would spin yarns, glancing at slips of paper like someone telling fortunes from crib notes. This woman from Oslo wore an enormous dress dotted all over with pockets. She would pull slips of paper out of her pockets one by one, each with its story to tell, stories tried and true, of people who wished to come back to life through witchcraft. And so she raised the dead and the forgotten, and from the depths of her dress sprang the odysseys and loves of the human animal for whom speech is life.⁹

This is my wish and desire! That our reflections and discussions should be like in this story: that we do theology as we sing and tell stories. Our space could be enormous and open, like this woman's dress. Our reflections would have no other motivation than to bring life to the forgotten, to the excluded, and to the marginalized. This should be our missiological commitment, in prayerful whispering: God of life, lead us on this pilgrimage of justice and peace!

⁹ From Eduardo Galeano, "Abrazos," trans. Cedric Belfrage, *Grand Street Magazine* 37; available at grandstreet.com.