

16. Religio-Cultural Underpinnings of Gender and Reproductive Injustice and Their Impact on Women's Agency in India

Virginia Saldanha

India is the world's most populous democracy, with a population estimated at 1.4 billion people.¹ India has a diversity of religions and cultures. Religious practice is often a source of comfort and meaning-making and forms one's identity in powerful ways. Discussions of reproductive health care, fertility, and family planning in India are deeply influenced by religious teachings and values. For many religious communities, fertility is described as a sacred blessing, and women are often praised for their role in childbearing. However, a focus on women's duty to bear children can also unfairly limit a woman's value to her contribution to reproduction. In part because of the rise of the women's movement and growing legal protections for women, fertility rates are falling in India, even as they remain higher than fertility rates of women in more affluent countries. Every religious group in the country has seen its fertility rates fall in recent decades, including the majority Hindu population and the Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, and Jain minority groups.² A holistic view of Indian life will show that declining fertility rates is not itself an indicator of justice for women. Reproductive injustice in India also includes high rates of sexual violence, high rates of infant

¹ Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, "Key Facts as India Surpasses China as the World's Most Populous Country," Pew Research Center, February 9, 2023, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/02/09/key-facts-as-india-surpasses-china-as-the-worlds-most-populous-country/.

² Silver, Huang, and Clancy, "Key Facts as India Surpasses China as the World's Most Populous Country."

mortality, and the precarity that results from poverty.³ In India, patriarchal attitudes cut across cultures and all areas of social life. While religion helps many women to cope with the drudgery and violence in their lives, patriarchal religious teachings disempower women and undermine their agency. The overarching reality of violence has impacted women's capacity to stand up for their rights and assert themselves as autonomous agents of their own destiny.

As a scholar-activist writing from India, I utilize a Catholic feminist methodology as I reveal how patriarchal religious teachings within Hinduism and Christianity empower men to dominate over women in the family, in the workplace, and in society. Catholic feminist method involves criticism of patriarchy within the tradition, attention to women's experiences, and advocacy for social transformation.⁴ This chapter begins with criticism of religio-cultural socialization, traditions that shape a culture of violence, and analysis of the reality of poverty in India. My experience of working with women for the past thirty years dealing with women's cases of violence and oppression in everyday life informs my writing on women's reality. Then I move to advocacy for social transformation, centering a claim shared by both Catholic teachings and the women's movement: the inherent dignity of women. While religious teachings exacerbate reproductive injustice for Indian women today, religious communities also carry resources for social transformation. I argue that, moving forward, religious communities must work to transform women's reality of pervasive violence that result in the sexual and reproductive injustices experienced by women throughout India.

³ According to the Pew Center, infant mortality in India in 2020 was 27 deaths per 1,000 live births, which is higher than the infant mortality rates of neighboring Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, and much higher than China and the U.S. See Silver, Huang, and Clancy, "Key Facts as India Surpasses China as the World's Most Populous Country."

⁴ Cristina L. H. Traina, "Christian Feminist Theological Ethics," *St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ChristianFeministTheologicalEthics.

Indian Women's Experience of Patriarchy in Religion and Culture

Catholic feminist theologian Anne M. Clifford explains that *patriarchy* refers to “systems of legal, economic, and political relations that legitimate and enforce relations of dominance in a society.”⁵ In patriarchal societies, the status of women and children is one of inferiority. While men tend to be the gatekeepers of patriarchy, women socialized within this ideology may also in turn normalize and validate patriarchal attitudes about their rightful submission to men. Indian scholar Kochurani Abraham explains that patriarchal attitudes are sustained by culturally inscribed language, socio-religious customs, and practices; further, “In the Indian context, religion is a major factor that still succeeds in legitimizing the gendered boundaries of culture through its precepts.”⁶ As the majority religion, Hinduism shapes Indian culture in particular ways. Naseera N.M. and Moly Kuruvilla explain the contemporary patriarchal attitudes in India by tracing their roots to the ancient legal text, the *Manusmriti*, which had a significant role in creating the Brahmanic patriarchy, caste system, and heteronormative structures of ancient India, the impact of which is still felt today across the country.⁷ They explain that religion is a potent force behind patriarchal social life and structure; further, religious voices in India “propagate male supremacy and male control over women and suppress their sexuality, mobility, and reproductive choices. They characterize women as physically, mentally, emotionally and sexually inferior to men.”⁸ Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith elaborate on the role of *The Manusmriti* in shaping Hinduism:

⁵ Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 18.

⁶ Kochurani Abraham, *Persisting Patriarchy: Intersectionalities, Negotiations, Subversions* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer/Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 168.

⁷ Naseera N.M. and Moly Kuruvilla, “The Sexual Politics of *The Manusmriti*: A Critical Analysis with Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights Perspectives,” *Journal of International Women's Studies* 23, no. 6 (2022): 1.

⁸ Naseera N.M. and Moly Kuruvilla, “The Sexual Politics,” 3.

The Manusmriti is a pivotal text of the dominant form of Hinduism as it emerged historically and at least in part in reaction to its religious and ideological predecessors and competitors. More compendiously than any other text, it provides a direct line to the most influential construction of the Hindu religion and Indic society as a whole. No modern study of Hindu family life, psychology, concepts of the body, sex, relationships between humans and animals, attitudes to money and material possessions, politics, law, caste, purification and pollution, rituals, social practice and ideals, and world renunciation and worldly goals, can ignore Manu.⁹

Feminist scholars in India have amplified these concerns by explaining that the laws of Manu took steps to control reproduction by controlling women's access to knowledge and by establishing guidelines for sexuality and family life.¹⁰ *The Manusmriti* is a book similar to the Bible for Christians. In Hinduism, it emphasizes the importance of women's purity, chastity, and submission to male authority. Marriage and motherhood are upheld as natural vocations for women, and marriage customs focus on the husband's control of the family.¹¹ In Indian society, girls are trained in cooking, proper care of the home, and setting the almirah so that "they can successfully manage their husband's homes."¹² Her childhood is a preparation for service in marriage. According to the *Manusmriti*, "Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age."¹³ In other words, a woman is never fit for independence. The idea women need to be protected by a man is

⁹ Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith, *The Laws of Manu* (New Delhi, India: Penguin Classics, 1991), 5.

¹⁰ Sukumari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology from the Vedas to the Puranas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See also Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (Calcutta: Stree Press, 2003).

¹¹ Patrick Olivelle, *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9–12.

¹² Tanya Malik, "Being a Brown Daughter," *HerZindagi*, www.herzindagi.com/society-culture/brown-daughters-paraya-dhan-patriarchal-mindset-freedom-article-226481.

¹³ Olivelle, *Manu's Code of Law*, 3.

embedded into an Indian woman's psyche. Indian women are socialized to be passive and compliant in family and intimate relationships.¹⁴

Historian Gerda Lerner explains that in a patriarchal society, men and women are described as "essentially different creatures, not only in their biological equipment, but in their needs, capacities, and functions."¹⁵ Lerner explains that religious traditions describe the "social function" of women as naturally subordinate to men and "assigned to them by God."¹⁶

Christian teachings also participate in this patriarchal framing of women's divinely-ascribed roles. Scholars continue to debate how to best interpret the biblical passages that seem to adopt patriarchal attitudes (such as Exodus 20:17, Deuteronomy 5:21, Deuteronomy 22:28–29, Ephesians 5:22–24, 1 Corinthians 11:7–10, and 1 Timothy 2:12). These scriptures have been weaponized within the tradition when interpreted as the divine sanction for considering women and girls as property, focusing on women's duty to bear children, demanding wifely submission, and socializing women to accept secondary status.¹⁷ A widely-cited example of patriarchal attitudes among Christian theologians comes from the second century apologist Tertullian of Carthage, who described women as "the devil's gateway."¹⁸ Tertullian's interpretation of the fall of Adam and Eve continues to influence theology from a patriarchal perspective and

¹⁴ Indira Sharma, Balram Pandit, Abhishek Pathak, and Reet Sharma, "Hinduism, Marriage & Mental Illness," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 55, supplement 2 (2013): S243–S249, doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.105544/. In a recent legal case, the Jharkhand High Court "observed that serving elderly mothers-in-law or grandmothers-in-law is both a cultural practice and an obligation for women in India. The Court also underscored that the wife's insistence to live separately from such in-laws is unreasonable." See Sparsh Upadhyay, "Obligatory for Women to Serve," *Live Law*, January 23, 2024, www.livelaw.in/high-court/jharkhand-high-court/jharkhand-high-court-obligatory-woman-serve-mother-in-law-preserve-indian-culture-demand-live-separately-unreasonable-247457?infinetscroll=1.

¹⁵ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.

¹⁶ Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, 4.

¹⁷ Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 46–91.

¹⁸ Serinity Young, ed., *An Anthology of Sacred Texts by and about Women* (Crossroad: New York, 1994), 46.

therefore Church teachings and attitudes towards women. John Chrysostom, a fourth century theologian, explains that “among all savage beasts, none is found so harmful as women.”¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas described woman as a “misbegotten male” and naturally subject to man.²⁰ In contemporary Catholic theology, gender complementarity focuses on gender difference as key to a proper understanding of human anthropology and sexuality.²¹ Gender complementarity reinforces patriarchy when Church teachings assign men to roles of power in family life and ecclesial life, such as describing the father as the head of the family and an ordained clergyman (priest or bishop) as one who represents Christ, who acts through him.²²

Kochurani Abraham documents the real-world impacts of such patriarchal assumptions about men’s power. Abraham points to the quantitative data in her research with Catholic women in Kerala which indicates that 62.5 percent of the women acknowledge that they tolerate abusive behaviour for the sake of the children and family peace. Scriptures are quoted to support the subservience of women and endorsing the

¹⁹ As cited in Leonila V. Bermisa, “Facing the Reality of Clergy Sexual Misconduct in the Church,” in *Body and Sexuality: Theological-Pastoral Perspectives of Women in Asia*, ed. Agnes M. Brazal and Andrea Lizares Si (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007), 221. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

²⁰ Young, *An Anthology of Sacred Texts*, 68–69. See also Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 30.

²¹ XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report of the First Session* (October 4–29, 2023), 9a, www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf. See also Congregation for Catholic Education, *Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education* (Vatican, 2019), 4, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf. See also Mary Ann Case, “The Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementarity,” *Religion and Gender* 6, no. 2 (2016): 156.

²² Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*, no. 5, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html.

headship of men over women.²³ Abraham elaborates on women's strategies for survival and self-care in such relationships, explaining that "women adjust their behaviour" in order to minimize violence. But "in doing so, their ability to insist on monogamy, negotiate safer sex or refuse sex is limited. For most of the women regardless of economic state, patriarchal control was felt very strongly in the area of sexuality and conjugal relations, where the decisions about how to plan the family are also taken mostly by the husbands."²⁴

Catholic traditions of Mariology can also be tools of patriarchal oppression, as when the Mother of Jesus is described as pure, docile, and pious. Catholic women are socialized in a way that makes them compliant victims of violence and abuse. In my own work, I have observed that messages regarding women's natural capacity for love, forgiveness, and humility can be used against women who face abuse, as they are told that they have special capacities to forgive their abusers. Such theologies seem to unjustly tolerate the abuse of women by men. In other cases, women are blamed for the abuse they suffer, drawing on such characterizations of women as seductress or temptress, much like Tertullian's description of Eve. Women who experience abuse can then feel guilt and shame, thinking they caused the abuse themselves.

A further concern within Christian theology is the Christological claim that redemption only comes through suffering. A distorted interpretation of Jesus's suffering and his admonition to "take up your cross" can be unfairly applied to women suffering from abuse, which disempowers vulnerable women and distorts the message of Christ's suffering. Abraham's research confirms this distorted pattern, as when she explains:

Women tend to believe that the suffering that is intrinsic to their gendered condition is virtuous and divinely ordained. Thus religion serves to mask the basic concerns of gender power equations that

²³ Abraham, *Persisting Patriarchy*, 114.

²⁴ Abraham, *Persisting Patriarchy*, 108–109.

underlie women's exploitation by making them believe that God is at work in their lives and their suffering is redemptive.²⁵

A closer look at the suffering that Indian women experience in daily life can help us to see the layered nature of structural violence they face, whether from coerced sex, the structural injustice of the legal system, dowry-related violence, poverty, or clerical abuse. Religious culture inscribed by patriarchy is biased in favor of the male; it has created a society where women face violence from the womb to the tomb. Both Christian and Hindu religious teachings create a culture that exalts the status of a married woman and mother, requires women's submission to men, and praises her silence in the face of violence. We see evidence in survey data from 2018 in which a majority of respondents (86.4 percent) felt it was acceptable to harshly criticize or beat a woman. Other instances where violence was perceived to be acceptable include the following cases: if she left the house without permission (54.4 percent); if she failed to prepare meals for men in the family (41.2 percent); if she disobeyed men in the family (24.3 percent); and if she spent money without asking (26.3 percent).²⁶ Most Indian women at some time in their lives have experienced some form of physical or psychological violence in their own family, on the street, or at work. According to the crime data for the year 2021, there was a rise of 26 percent of crimes against women in India over a period of six years. With tens of thousands of rape cases reported annually, India has gained the moniker, "the rape capital of the world."²⁷ Julie George explains that "systemic misogyny, caste and class biases, religious and political interests together protect and reinforce the imputing of power-holders," and that these structural factors lead to a situation in

²⁵ Abraham, *Persisting Patriarchy*, 146.

²⁶ Manya Rathore, "Attitude Towards Acceptability of Violence against Women in India in 2018, by Social Norms," July 10, 2023, *Statista*, www.statista.com/statistics/1127335/india-attitude-to-acceptability-of-violence-against-women-by-social-norms/.

²⁷ Geeta Pandey, BBC News, Delhi, "Rising Crimes against Indian Women in Five Charts," September 13, 2022, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-62830634.

which women who experience sexual violence “are unable to use the justice system successfully.”²⁸ Women’s experience in reporting crimes indicates structural injustices within Indian society, especially given that the conviction rate is abysmally low. Julie George explains:

India has enacted new laws and policies to empower women; yet, its actions often have tended to reinforce patriarchal norms and values and put women’s concerns in jeopardy. India still continues to witness incessant episodes of rape, sexual abuse, honor killings, and other such atrocities against women. These incidents reveal the diverse ways in which all the dimensions of a woman’s identity, including caste, class, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, geography, and personal history overlap and determine how a woman experiences womanhood and confronts violence.²⁹

Further, married women do not have bodily autonomy in Indian law, which does not recognize marital rape as a criminal offense. The penal code prohibiting rape includes an exception for “sexual acts by a man with his own wife.”³⁰ This gives the man control over his wife’s body, meaning he can demand sex. This attitude of male entitlement to women’s bodies is too often defended on both religious and cultural grounds. Girls are taught from a young age to accept intrusion of their body-space. Rape myths persist. Commenting on the rape of two young women (one in Delhi in

²⁸ Julie George, SSsS, “Intersectionality at the Heart of Oppression and Violence against Women in Law: Case Studies from India,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, Special Issue 1 (2023): 108–131, 119.

²⁹ George, “Intersectionality at the Heart of Oppression,” 108–109.

³⁰ Government of India, Section 375 of the Penal Code, exception 2. “Sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under fifteen years of age, is not rape.” New Delhi: National Informatics Centre: www.indiacode.nic.in/show-data?actid=AC_CEN_5_23_00037_186045_1523266765688&orderno=424. See also Lauren Frayer, “Marital Rape Is Still Legal in India. A Court Decision Could Change That,” *National Public Radio*, February 8, 2022, www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2022/02/08/1047588035/marital-rape-india.

2012 and the other in Mumbai in 2013), a senior female government official remarked: “Rapes take place because of a woman’s clothes, her behaviour and her being at inappropriate places.”³¹ Since women are often blamed for attracting violence, many prefer to remain silent about violence inflicted on them. Some women choose not to disclose their experience of sexual violence because of shame-based discourse. Lawyer Seema Sammriddhi explains that “people continue to have such regressive thoughts that a woman who has been raped is ‘impure.’”³² In some cases, rape survivors agree to marry their rapists, since the damage to their reputation (despite their victimization) may prevent them from finding a suitable partner in the wake of their experience of rape; in some cases, this also enables the rapist to avoid jail.³³

Dowry-related violence also speaks to the toxic culture that undermines women’s flourishing in India. Dowry is the tradition of giving money or durable household items to the groom’s family by the bride’s parents. A girl child is called “*Paraya dhan*” in Hindu families, which means she is a liability. Money spent on her education and well-being is considered a contribution to another family. The dowry given to her when she marries is seen as wealth leaving the family. Dowry has given rise to much greed that has spurred violence done to wives/daughters-in-law resulting in violent death, or driving young wives to take their own lives. Statistics released in 2022 by the National Crime Records Bureau reveal an average of twenty dowry related deaths every day reaching upwards of seven thousand deaths per year, despite the fact that India passed a law in 1961

³¹ “Indian Official Blames Women for Rapes,” *Al Jazeera News*, January 29, 2014, www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/1/29/indian-official-blames-women-for-rapes.

³² Poorvi Gupte, “How India’s Rape Survivors End Up Marrying Their Rapists” *Article 14*, August 25, 2020, www.article-14.com/post/how-india-s-rape-survivors-end-up-marrying-their-rapists.

³³ Agence France Presse in Mumbai, “India’s Top Judge Tells Rapist to Marry Victim to Avoid Jail,” *The Guardian*, March 4, 2021, www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/04/indias-top-judge-tells-accused-rapist-to-marry-victim-to-avoid-jail.

called “The Dowry Prohibition Act” which prohibits giving or taking dowry.³⁴

A further threat to the girl-child in India results from pregnancy terminations for reasons of sex selection. One rationale for aborting a female fetus (*female feticide*) is the prospect of having to pay a dowry to the future bridegroom of a daughter.³⁵ Too often, religious worldviews exacerbate the hardships of parents of girl-children. As Nehaluddin Ahmad explains, “While sons offer security to their families in old age and can perform the rites for the souls of deceased parents and ancestors, daughters are perceived as a social and economic burden.”³⁶ This attitude is reflected in the sex ratio of the Indian population, where the sex ratio in 2024 was 106 males per 100 females, while in 2011 the sex ratio was 943 girls to every 1000 boys.³⁷ A decline in the 0–15 age group indicates the lack of health care and nutrition received by girl children. In urban areas, the female/male sex ratio (929/1000) compared to rural areas (949/1000) indicates that education and economic status of families increases the risk for elimination of girl children.

³⁴ Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt. of India, “Dowry Prohibition Act 1961”, wcd.nic.in/act/dowry-prohibition-act-1961. Examples of dowry deaths include such devastating stories as: “Three sisters found dead in a well with their children after leaving disturbing messages: Our in-laws are the reason,” AFP news, June 8th 2022, www.cbsnews.com/news/3-sisters-found-dead-with-children-dowry-violence-india/. See also Clement Campos, “Doing Christian Ethics in India’s World of Cultural Complexity and Social Inequality,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, ed. James Keenan, SJ (New York: Continuum, 2007), 82–91; Shaji George Kochuthara, “Dowry as a Social Structural Sin,” in *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church*, ed. Linda Hogan and Agbonkhanmeghe Orabator (New York: Orbis, 2014), 108–122.

³⁵ Manvir Singh, “How Dowries are Fuelling a Femicide Epidemic,” *New Yorker*, June 12, 2023, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/06/19/how-dowries-are-fuelling-a-femicide-epidemic.

³⁶ Nehaluddin Ahmad, “Female Feticide in India,” *Issues in Law and Medicine* 26, no. 1 (2010): 13–29, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20879612/.

³⁷ United Nations, “World Population Prospects 2022,” population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/. See also “2011 Census in India,” *Statistics Times*, statisticstimes.com/demographics/country/india-sex-ratio.php.

A further example of the ways in which patriarchal religious teachings undermine health and safety for Indian women can be found in the examples of violence against women by Catholic clergy. Until recently, such violence has been shrouded in silence. I have previously explained how clericalism reinforces male domination in cases of abuse: “Religious sisters have been impregnated by priests/bishops. The sisters are asked to abort, or if discovered late, sent away to have the baby who is given up for adoption and the sister dismissed. She pays the price, maybe even the child too, but never the clergyman.”³⁸ Patriarchy persists in the structures of the Catholic Church when women who joined religious life to live a life of service are unwittingly tricked into sexual relations by clergy.³⁹ As Catholic theological ethicist Shaji George Kochuthara explains, the hierarchical structure of Indian society, gender relations based on patriarchy and postcolonial attitudes provide a “fertile ground for abuse.”⁴⁰ Women who want to continue to live their religious vocation have been compelled to remain silent about their abuse. If they choose to flag the abuse, they are also punished by being marginalized in their congregations for tarnishing the good name of the priesthood. Women’s subservient position in the Church makes her a victim either way. Jaisy A. Joseph explains that the

³⁸ Virginia Saldanha, “When Spiritual Power Destroys Life—Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church,” in *Abuse in the Church*, ed. Michelle Becka, Huang Po-Ho and Gianluca Montaldi. *Concilium*, 402 (2023): 125–136, 125.

³⁹ Lucetta Scaraffia, “Without any Touching: A Serious Wound,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, February 1, 2019, www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/without-any-touching. In a widely publicized case, Bishop Franco Mulakkal was arrested for the rape of a religious sister. See “In a First, Bishop Franco Mulakkal to Go on Trial in Nun Rape Case,” *Times of India*, April 10, 2019, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/chargesheet-filed-in-nun-rape-case/article-show/68802284.cms. The bishop was subsequently acquitted and submitted his resignation. The bishop was allowed to retire, according to news reports. See “Bishop Franco Mulakkal, Acquitted in Rape Case, Steps Down,” *Outlook India*, June 1, 2023, www.outlookindia.com/national/bishop-franco-mulakkal-acquitted-in-rape-case-steps-down-not-disciplinary-action-says-pope-representative-news-291354.

⁴⁰ Shaji George Kochuthara, “The Sexual Abuse Scandal and a New Ethical Horizon: A Perspective from India,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 4 (2019): 931–949, doi.org/10.1177/0040563919874517.

“pervasiveness of shame transforms survivors into scapegoats” and undermines justice-seeking work for survivors of sexual abuse by clergy.⁴¹ I have argued elsewhere that the Catholic category of “sin” is used by clerics to cover criminal offenses. Their abuse is then regarded as “a sin to be forgiven,” but not as a crime.⁴² Such a framing enables them to control the response and limit public disclosure, given canon law’s protection of the seal of the confessional.

Finally, both poverty and caste distinctions compound the suffering faced by Indian women in daily life.⁴³ While experts praise the reduction of extreme poverty in the past ten years, poverty in India remains pervasive and is influenced by a combination of historical, economic, social, and political factors.⁴⁴ The rigid caste system practiced in India where upper caste hegemony controls the lives of the lower castes (who form the cheap labor base in India) perpetuates poverty for millions. It is important also to recognize the gendered dimension of caste-based injustice, as low-caste women have reduced access to equal educational opportunities. Many women in poverty take up highly exploitable domestic cleaning work as it is the only work within their skill set. Though the caste system is officially not part of Catholic culture, the attitudes towards those in poverty are similar to the majority in Indian society.⁴⁵

Poverty and caste create social conditions that undermine reproductive justice. Women in poverty face limited access to prenatal care, reduced access to contraceptives, and reduced power in intimate relationships,

⁴¹ Jaisy A. Joseph, “Responding to Shame with Solidarity: Sex Abuse Crisis in the Indian Catholic Church,” *Asian Horizons* 14, no. 2 (2020): 381–392. See also Daniel J. Fleming, James F. Keenan, and Hans Zollner, eds., *Doing Theology and Theological Ethics in the Face of the Abuse Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2023).

⁴² Saldanha, “When Spiritual Power Destroys Life,” 125.

⁴³ On caste distinctions in Hindu society, see Gail Omvedt, “Caste System and Hinduism,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 13, 2004, www.epw.in/journal/2004/11/discussion/caste-system-and-hinduism.html.

⁴⁴ World Bank, “Country Profile: India,” Poverty and Inequality Platform, 2023, pip.worldbank.org/home.

⁴⁵ George, “Intersectionality at the Heart of Oppression,” 123–124.

especially when she is dependent on her partner for her material wellbeing.⁴⁶ India accounts for a shocking 20 percent of all maternal deaths globally.⁴⁷ Poor women who lack basic literacy are not aware of their rights or government programs that are available to them to access health facilities to maintain their sexual and reproductive health. The Center for Reproductive Rights explains that a focus on demographic targets within population policy discussions has failed to prioritize a human rights-based framework. India's National Population Policy focuses on state incentives and opens up the possibility of coercion instead of securing reproductive rights and equity for women in Indian society.⁴⁸ Women's situation of poverty robs them of their agency. When women are socialized within religious communities to put other people's needs before their own, this can undermine women's reproductive decision-making and health care. Her priority is to feed her family. Her husband's and children's needs are put before her own. She will not even eat if the food is not enough to go around. She has been socialized to think of everyone else's needs before her own. So she does not have the time, energy, or the little money needed to get to a health care facility.

Towards Social Transformation: The Women's Movement in India

The threats to women's flourishing in India are complex and rooted in ideologies of patriarchy as well as concrete systems of legal, political, and religious inequities. If we are to move towards reproductive justice for women in India, we have to think about the role of social movements creating sustainable change in culture, laws, and practices. Such a social

⁴⁶ Center for Reproductive Rights, "Reproductive Rights in Indian Courts," 2, reproductiverights.org/sites/default/files/documents/Reproductive-Rights-In-Indian-Courts.pdf.

⁴⁷ Dumeetha Luthra and Susan Meiselas, "In Silence: Maternal Mortality in India," Human Rights Watch, October 6, 2009, www.hrw.org/video-photos/photo-essay/2009/10/06/silence-maternal-mortality-india.

⁴⁸ Center for Reproductive Rights, "Reproductive Rights in Indian Courts."

transformation cannot happen overnight. We need to change not only the ways that we think about gender and power but also the ways we address sexual violence, poverty, health care, and more. The women's movement in India has been at the forefront of such social change activism. Since the 1970's women's groups have focused on issues of sexual violence and domestic violence in particular.⁴⁹ All of the laws that have been promulgated to protect women have come into being because of the strong advocacy of women activists. This work must continue and should have the explicit support of the Catholic Church in the years ahead. For this to happen, Catholic leaders need a new way of talking about the inherent dignity of women that supports women's agency. As Catholic scholar Sandra M. Schneiders explains, "If feminism is defined as an intellectual, spiritual, and practical commitment to the full personhood of every human being and right relationships among all creatures, it must be espoused by Christians as a Gospel imperative."⁵⁰ She goes on to explain that while the world changes, "the gospel call to prophetic engagement in the transformation of the world into the Reign of God has not changed."⁵¹

Pope Francis has initiated a renewed urgency in tackling complex social issues and affirming the sacred dignity of all.⁵² In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis describes an ecclesiology rooted in social action. Francis invites readers to "go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel" (no. 20). Francis described the "inescapable social dimension of the Gospel message" (no. 258). He

⁴⁹ Sophia Powers, "Contextualizing the Indian Women's Movement, Class, Representation and Collaboration," Tate Research Publication, 2021, www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/seven-lives-dream-sheba-chhachhi/contextualising-indian-womens-movement.

⁵⁰ Sandra M. Schneiders, *With Oil in Their Lamps: Faith, Feminism, and the Future* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist, 2000), 122.

⁵¹ Schneiders, *With Oil in Their Lamps*, 122.

⁵² Throughout his pontificate, Francis has taken on complex issues and sought to inspire and empower the faithful to discern a way forward rooted in the common good. See Conor M. Kelly and Kristin Heyer, eds., *The Moral Vision of Pope Francis: Expanding the US Reception of the First Jesuit Pope* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2024).

straightforwardly declared that “the dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies” (no. 203). Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia* denounces violence to women in families:

Unacceptable customs still need to be eliminated. I think particularly of the shameful ill-treatment to which women are sometimes subjected, domestic violence and various forms of enslavement which, rather than a show of masculine power, are craven acts of cowardice. The verbal, physical, and sexual violence that women endure in some marriages contradicts the very nature of the conjugal union. (no. 54)

Francis appreciates the women’s movement, saying, “We must nonetheless see in the women’s movement the working of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women” (no. 54). He also refers to “the reprehensible genital mutilation of women practiced in some cultures and also of their lack of equal access to dignified work and roles of decision-making. History is burdened by the excesses of patriarchal cultures that considered women inferior” (no. 54). Catholic theologians have noted key themes that Francis addresses in his approach to family and gender justice, including accompaniment, personalism, discernment, and gradualism.⁵³ These are especially important in the Indian context, where the call to advance synodality can empower women to have a seat at the table in new and creative ways. Francis brings hope as he advocates for a listening Church. His penchant for compassion also moves him to understand the reality of people’s situation. Francis names as relevant the “concrete complexity of one’s limits” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 303) and demands attention to dignity and justice within everyday realities.

For too long, Catholics in India have restated patriarchal interpretations of Sacred Scripture, which seemed to give divine support

⁵³ Emily Reimer-Barry, “*Amoris Laetitia* at Five” *Theological Studies* 83, no. 1 (2022): 109–132, 112.

to cultural practices that see women as naturally subservient to men.⁵⁴ But feminist biblical hermeneutics has radically reshaped the way that biblical texts are interpreted today and has opened up creative and constructive approaches to reconsidering how Jesus treated women and what it means to follow Jesus in our own context today.⁵⁵ Examples abound of liberationist approaches to the gospel narratives, including what Natalia Imperatori-Lee explains as Jesus's interactions with women, including "in friendship with women, in defense of women, as a healer of women, and as a student of women."⁵⁶ If we interpret Scripture as a resource for the contemporary women's movement in India, we can find surprising resources within the gospel narratives. In the story of a woman "caught in adultery" (Jn 8:1–11), Jesus said to the men, "He who is without sin can cast the first stone." No one stoned her. Jesus actually pointed to the sins of the men who are complicit in the sin of adultery. Jesus did not condemn her but liberated her and empowered her to live her life anew. Within the story of the woman suffering with the flow of blood (Lk 8:43–48), Jesus's powers heal the woman who touches him. In the Asian context, this healing miracle speaks as well to the power over blood taboos. In Luke 10:38–42, when Martha complains to Jesus that her sister Mary is not helping her in the housework but sitting at his feet listening to him teaching his disciples, Jesus reminds Martha that housework is not the center of a woman's life; like her brothers, she also is entitled to learn from

⁵⁴ Monica J. Melanchthon, "Toward Mapping Feminist Biblical Interpretations in Asia," in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2021): 105–119.

⁵⁵ Classic texts in this regard include Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse, 25th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Crossroad, 2017), and *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

⁵⁶ Natalia Imperatori-Lee, *Women and the Church: From Devil's Gateway to Discipleship* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2024), 141.

the teacher. Imagine how such an interpretation can uphold a more just approach to inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for girls and young women in India today. John 20:11–18 narrates the encounter of Mary Magdalene with the risen Jesus and his command to her to go and tell all his disciples that he has risen. Mary Magdalene has been given the honor of being called “apostle to the apostles,” yet women are kept out of leadership in the Church today.

As we have seen, there are considerable resources within the Catholic tradition for advancing prophetic engagement in social transformation. Women in India have begun to engage with religion by resisting patriarchal worldviews and exercising what Abraham calls “spiritual agency.”⁵⁷ Such an approach is not free of conflict. But we must creatively move through this conflict in order to build a more just world. Evelyn Monteiro points out that “any effort to free women from the shackles of tradition is bound to create division and disturbance in a male-dominated society. Such divisions and turbulence are signs that the reign of God is at hand and that the subjugated and marginalized are also rightful beneficiaries of fullness of life.”⁵⁸

Women religious and feminist activists in India are already leading the way in these important projects. Christianity empowers women through education and their many hospitals and healthcare centers in rural areas.⁵⁹ Women religious in India work in the rural areas with the poorest of the poor, running healthcare centers to provide mother and child care to women, especially during pregnancy and in the postpartum period. The Catholic Health Association of India (CHAI) is a Network of 3,572 Healthcare and Social Service Institutions across India. By serving twenty-one million (approximately 1.5 percent of India’s population) patients

⁵⁷ Abraham, *Persisting Patriarchy*, 212.

⁵⁸ Evelyn Monteiro, SCC, “Re-imaging Woman and Reshaping Her Destiny,” in *Body and Sexuality: Theological-Pastoral Perspectives of Women in Asia*, ed. Agnes M. Brazal and Andrea Lizares Si (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007), 149.

⁵⁹ Christian Connections for International Health, “Faith-Based Healthcare in India,” January 2021, www.ccih.org/faith-based-healthcare-in-india/.

annually across the country, most of them poor, the people of CHAI—sisters and non-religious alike—translate the core values of compassion, affordability and quality care into their daily work. CHAI has 2,345 primary healthcare centers which are based in rural settings.⁶⁰ Their work is but one example of the strong, proactive women’s movement in India, which provides examples of women’s capacities for leadership and social change even in a patriarchal culture and religious climate. While some feminist activists in India have distanced themselves from their religious communities and some even from their families to be able to exercise their agency in freedom, this speaks more to the exclusionary frameworks of patriarchal religious institutions than to the deficiencies of women. In my work, I have had the privilege of witnessing the strength and resilience of women throughout the feminist movement in India, women who affirm the gospel values of mercy and justice as they use their professions as lawyers, social workers, teachers, and doctors to bring freedom and justice to all women, especially women from the lower castes and the poor. The women’s movement in India has an important role to play in engaging religious voices in a critical and constructive way, now and in the future.



Virginia Saldanha is a feminist theologian, activist, and independent scholar with extensive experience in grassroots organizing and service. Saldanha has previously served as the Executive Secretary of the Commission for Women in the Archdiocese of Bombay; on the Commission for Women, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India; and in the Office of Laity, Family and Women’s Desk in the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. In these roles, Saldanha worked for the empowerment of women in Church and society and worked as a peer navigator in cases involving violence against women. Saldanha has worked

⁶⁰ Catholic Health Association of India, “Who We Are,” 2023, www.chai-india.org/overview_who-we-are/.

in various leadership capacities in women's organizations, including as founder & secretary of the Indian Women Theologians Forum; as founding member of Indian Christian Women's Movement; as founder of Rainbow Catholics India; as board member of Catholic Women's Council; as board member of Majlis Legal Centre, Mumbai; and as advisory board member of Streevani, Pune, India. Saldanha's contributions to academic discourse include her monograph, *Woman: Image of God* (2005), two edited volumes and two co-edited volumes.