

5. Women as an Engine of Synodality in the Catholic Church in India: A Critical Feminist Theological Perspective

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The Catholic Church, historically characterised by a rigid hierarchy, is undergoing a significant transformation spurred by Pope Francis’s call for synodality—“come let us journey together.”¹ This departure from traditional practices emphasises inclusivity, equality, and active participation among all members, challenging the entrenched decision-making power held by clergy and bishops. Pope Francis envisions a church where voices from various demographics harmoniously resonate, promoting decentralisation of power and a collaborative approach. The urgency and significance of this call underscore the necessity of embracing synodality as a fundamental shift in the church’s way of life.

Sr. Nathalie Becquart, the undersecretary of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, characterizes women as the “engine of synodality.” This injects a compelling dimension into this transformative narrative. It challenges the historical male-centric power structure of the church, introducing the idea that women possess a unique agency in propelling the synodal journey. Sr. Becquart’s perspective sparks curiosity and prompts an exploration of how women’s active participation can be a catalyst for the envisioned synodal church. It serves as a beacon, guiding the chapter towards understanding women’s specific role and impact within this evolving ecclesiastical landscape.

This chapter aims to illuminate the intricacies of Pope Francis’s call for synodality, with a particular focus on the pivotal role of women in realizing

¹ Cf. Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission (Synod 2021–2023 Preparatory Document)*, 2, synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en_prepa_book.pdf.

this transformative vision within the Catholic Church in India.² The objectives encompass an in-depth exploration of the challenges and opportunities faced by women in becoming agents of synodality, providing insights into their contributions, voices, and experiences within the church. By employing a critical feminist theological perspective, this chapter seeks to bridge the gap between the aspirational ideals of synodality and the gendered realities, providing a nuanced understanding of women's roles in the church's journey towards a more inclusive and egalitarian future.³ Furthermore, this chapter proposes multifaceted approaches to promoting women's participation and leadership in the Catholic Church in India, aiming to demonstrate how fostering inclusivity and gender equality can empower women to make meaningful contributions to synodality and the church's life.

Synodality in the Catholic Church: Its Relevance

Synodality, a significant concept in the Catholic Church, involves a participatory and collaborative decision-making approach rooted in the Greek word *synodos*, meaning assembly. It emphasises the active involvement of the entire community, including bishops, clergy, and laity, fostering shared responsibility and acknowledging the Holy Spirit's work through diverse voices. It prioritizes dialogue, listening, and mutual respect, aiming to discern God's will and address contemporary challenges. By embracing synodality, the Catholic Church seeks to foster inclusivity, transparency, and accountability by engaging diverse members of the church in decision-making, thereby cultivating a more vibrant and dynamic church with a collective sense of ownership and a shared mission among the faithful.

² I do not mean "women" as a uniform category; rather, diversity is a defining feature, given the intersecting factors of class and caste that shape gender in the Indian context.

³ A feminist critical theological perspective critiques how women have been represented theologically in the church, often through a male lens. It exposes how such representations reinforce gender stereotypes and marginalize women's voices.

In recent years, the Catholic Church has placed a growing emphasis on synodality, a concept championed by Pope Francis to enhance participation, communion, and mission within the church. Various synodal gatherings and consultations at different levels, including dioceses and the universal church, have been held to address crucial issues and chart the way forward. The 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality, convened by Pope Francis, took place from October 4–28, 2023, and involved 365 synod members who deliberated on communion, participation, and mission. The participants approved a text advocating for greater “co-responsibility” among believers in the church’s mission and proposed concrete reforms to achieve it. This marked the conclusion of the first assembly, followed by the second session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, held October 2–27, 2024, in Rome. During this session, a final document was approved and later ratified by Pope Francis. The document emphasises the greater inclusion of laypersons and women in the life of the church.

Women’s Role in the Church: A Bird’s Eye View

Women have played significant roles in the Catholic Church throughout its history, with their contributions evolving and facing challenges. In the early Christian community, women held leadership positions and actively contributed to the growth and spread of the faith. The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul from the New Testament mention women like Phoebe, a deaconess (Romans 16:1–2), and Junia, considered by some scholars to be an apostle (Romans 16:7). Prisca, along with her husband Aquila, played a significant role in instructing Apollos in the ways of the Lord (Acts 18:26). The accounts of women like Lydia, a prominent convert in Philippi who opened her home for Christian gatherings (Acts 16:14–15), and Mary, the mother of John Mark, who hosted a prayer meeting at her house (Acts 12:12), further underscore the diverse and vital contributions of women in the early church. Hence, a considerable number of women have actively participated in the initial phases of the church’s ministry.

As the church became more organised and institutionalised, women's roles began to change, though some have made outstanding contributions. To mention a few here, in the third century, Catherine of Alexandria,⁴ an esteemed spiritual leader, engaged in debates with fifty philosophers, facing condemnation and death on the wheel for her remarkable achievements. St. Clare of Assisi,⁵ a contemporary of St. Francis, founded the Order of Poor Ladies, known as the Poor Clares. This religious community, dedicated to a life of poverty, prayer, and service, has made a significant contribution to the spiritual landscape of the church's history. St. Teresa of Avila stands out as another influential woman who left an indelible mark on the life of the church.⁶ A mystic and writer, she made substantial contributions to Christian spirituality through her works, such as *The Interior Castle*. St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) made significant contributions to the Catholic Church, and her impact is still recognised today.⁷ Her contributions to the Catholic Church include her mystical writings, efforts towards papal unity, calls for church reform, spiritual guidance to church leaders, and her exemplary life of service and charity. Her legacy endures as an inspiration for those seeking a deeper relationship with God and a commitment to the principles of Christian living.

In addition to these prominent figures, numerous women, founders of religious orders, played decisive roles in missionary services after the seventeenth century. Consecrated women religious managed convents, hospitals, and schools, contributing not only to the spiritual growth of their communities but also to the overall mission of the church. Their

⁴ "Saint Catherine of Alexandria: A Beacon of Catholic Faith and Wisdom," *Spiritual Culture*, September 24, 2020, spiritualculture.org/saint-catherine-of-alexandria.

⁵ Rosemary Stets, "Francis and Clare: Where the Tradition Begins," *Franciscan Media*, December 8, 2023, franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-tradition-and-resources/francis-and-clare-where-the-tradition-begins.

⁶ "St. Teresa of Avila," *Britannica*, November 7, 2025, britannica.com/biography/Saint-Teresa-of-Avila.

⁷ Steve Weidenkope, "How St. Catherine Brought the Pope Back to Rome," *Catholic Answers*, April 29, 2014, catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/how-st-catherine-brought-the-pope-back-to-rome.

commitment to education, healthcare, pastoral and charitable works exemplified the broader impact of women in the history of Christianity.⁸ These women, through their devotion to prayer, exploration of theology, and active engagement in missionary activities, significantly contributed to the foundation and growth of the Catholic Church. Their legacies continue to inspire and influence the practice of faith, emphasising the vital role that women played in the development and dissemination of Christian spirituality and theology down the centuries.

With the rise of women's movements and feminism advocating for equality, there has been an increased demand for women's participation in the church, beyond the traditionally prescribed roles in areas such as education, healthcare, and charitable work. Women actively participate in various lay ministries, serving as catechists, pastoral workers, lectors, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, and members of parish councils. They contribute to the spiritual and pastoral needs of local churches and communities. Additionally, women play instrumental roles in Catholic education and formation, serving as teachers, professors, theologians, counsellors and spiritual directors, thereby contributing to the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth of the Catholic faithful. They are at the forefront of social initiatives within the Catholic Church, addressing issues such as poverty, social injustice, healthcare, and other concerns affecting the marginalized communities. More than ever, women are claiming their rightful place for active participation in the church as equal partners alongside men.

Challenges Encountered by Women in the Church

Despite the valuable contributions that Catholic women make around the globe, they encounter challenges within the hierarchical structure of the church. The following are some of the difficulties faced by women in the Catholic Church solely because of their gender.

⁸ Cf. Julma Neo, "The Role of Consecrated Women in the Church and in Society Today: A Reflection," *Vincentiana* 45, nos. 4–5 (2001).

- **Gender bias and stereotypes:** Within the Catholic Church, women frequently encounter gender discrimination and enduring stereotypes that reinforce their subordinate status. Disparities in treatment, insufficient acknowledgement of their valuable contributions, limited prospects for advancement, and a lack of respect from clergy collectively impede the full realisation of women's potential within the church.
- **Limited opportunities:** There are very limited opportunities available for women and a lack of formal theological education impedes their pursuit of higher positions and recognition as theological authorities, which perpetuate gender imbalances within the church. The painful part for women is that the men and women who enroll for theological education study the same content and get the same qualifications but are assigned to different positions in the church. Women often find themselves working under the leadership of their male counterparts.
- **Limited leadership roles:** Despite the qualifications and various lay positions available to them, Catholic women face limited opportunities for leadership within the church hierarchy. Decision-making roles, such as those held by clergy and at higher levels, including bishops and cardinals, remain exclusively reserved for men, hindering women's ability to shape church policies and practices.
- **Insufficient representation:** The under-representation of Catholic women extends to key decision-making bodies, such as the exclusively male College of Cardinals tasked with electing the Pope. This notable absence not only curtails diversity but also restricts the impact of women in shaping the church's trajectory and policies. The dearth of female voices in these pivotal roles raises questions about inclusivity

and equal participation within the hierarchical structures of the Catholic Church.

- **Exclusion from ordained ministry:** Catholic women encounter a significant challenge in the church's prohibition of their ordination as priests. This exclusion, rooted in theological interpretations and tradition, restricts women from holding authoritative positions and participating fully in sacramental leadership.

Thus, these systemic challenges confronting women in the church demand a radical transformation of entrenched gendered power dynamics. In this context, the notion of synodality emerges as a revolutionary paradigm that has the potential to dismantle hierarchical structures and create authentic spaces for women's participation and leadership.

Exploring Synodality Through a Feminist Theological Lens

Feminist theological frameworks offer unique insights into synodality and collaborative decision-making within the church. These perspectives challenge the traditional patriarchal structures and provide a transformative approach to synodality by emphasizing inclusivity, empowerment, and acknowledging diverse voices.

Scholars like Elizabeth A. Johnson, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Daly, and Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz contribute valuable perspectives on power, gender, and inclusivity within religious institutions. Their works delve into synodality, urging a re-evaluation of hierarchical power dynamics. In *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (1992), Elizabeth A. Johnson emphasizes relationality and the recognition of the full humanity of all individuals within the church. Johnson advocates for inclusive decision-making processes that value diverse voices and experiences.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, a leading feminist theologian, critiqued patriarchal hierarchies in the church and society. In *Sexism and God-Talk*

(1983), *Women-Church* (1985), *Gaia and God* (1992), and *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican* (2008), she challenged structures of domination and called for participatory, collaborative communities marked by equality, inclusivity, and shared authority.

Feminist theologians insist that synodality must center the voices of women and marginalized groups rather than remain within patriarchal structures. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza envisions a “discipleship of equals,” Ivone Gebara calls for integrating poor women’s voices through ecofeminism, and Mary E. Hunt emphasizes women’s lived experience as theological wisdom. More recently, Phyllis Zagano, Cristina Inogés Sanz, and Agnes Brazal have highlighted that genuine synodality requires inclusive participation, intercultural dialogue, and renewed recognition of women’s ministries.⁹ This necessitates dismantling patriarchal structures, challenging traditional notions of authority, and embracing a pluralistic understanding of knowledge and wisdom. The feminist perspective on synodality emphasises relationality and interconnectedness, recognising the interdependence of all church members and promoting collaborative relationships based on mutual respect and equality. Within this framework, feminist theology calls for a critical examination of existing power structures that perpetuate oppression. Synodality, when viewed through a feminist lens, becomes a transformative process that advocates for social justice and strives for the full inclusion and empowerment of all individuals within the church through shared decision-making and egalitarian governance.

⁹ Cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (Crossroad, 1993); Mary E. Hunt, “Synodality and the Feminist Future of the Church,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 36, no. 2 (2020): 147–152; Phyllis Zagano, *Women: Icons of Christ* (Paulist Press, 2020); Cristina Inogés Sanz, “Women and Synodality: Toward a Church That Listens,” in *Voices of Women at the Synod: Faith, Justice, and Renewal*, ed. Donatella Acerbi (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), 45–56; and Agnes M. Brazal, “Synodality and Women in the Asian Church,” in *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church*, ed. Linda Hogan and A.E. Orobator (Orbis Books, 2014), 213–225.

Synodality Through an Indian Feminist Theological Lens

Indian feminist theology emphasises solidarity with marginalized communities, shaping a synodal perspective focused on actively tackling social injustices and advocating for the rights of those on the margins. This approach challenges patriarchal norms within the church, aiming for a synodal process that dismantles structures that sustain gender inequality.

Indian feminist theology, as articulated by theologians such as Kochurani Abraham, Virginia Saldanha, and Astrid Lobo, acknowledges the diverse cultural, social, and religious landscape of India.¹⁰ Emphasising contextual realities, these theologians highlight the intersectionality of caste and gender within the church. In the context of synodality, their focus extends to addressing the unique challenges faced by Dalit Christian women and advocating for the church's support of the marginalized. Virginia Saldanha envisions an inclusive church, while Astrid Lobo underscores interfaith dialogue and inclusivity within synodality, reflecting India's religious diversity. These theologians specifically emphasize the need for a theology questioning patriarchal understandings and standing in solidarity with all women facing various forms of violence and discrimination.

Indian feminist perspectives view synodality as a transformative process to address women's challenges within the church, stressing the need to empower women at the grassroots level and encourage their leadership in decision-making processes, challenging the prevailing notion that women should remain at the periphery.¹¹ In a nutshell, the Indian feminist

¹⁰ Kochurani Abraham, "Gender Politics of Religion: A Feminist Theological Appraisal," *Indian Journal of Christian Studies* 4, nos. 1–2 (2014): 39–56; Virginia Saldanha, "Religio-Cultural Underpinnings of Gender and Reproductive Injustice and Their Impact on Women's Agency in India," *Journal of Moral Theology* 6 (2024): 391–410, doi:10.55476/001c.124031; and Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, "Synod: Some Signs of Hope for Women," *Matters India*, November 2, 2023, mattersindia.com/2023/11/synod-some-signs-of-hope-for-women.

¹¹ Metti Amirtham, "Embracing the Wisdom of Women," *JIVAN* (2023): 19–20; "Chandrayaan-3: India's Giant Leap for Gender Equality," *The New Leader* 136, no. 18 (2023): 33; "From Tradition to Transformation: Empowering Women in Church Administration," *The New Leader* 136, no. 14 (2023): 33.

theology enriches the understanding of synodality by incorporating diverse experiences within the Indian Catholic Church, promoting a more inclusive, empowering, and culturally sensitive approach which emphasises addressing specific challenges faced by women, particularly at the intersection of gender and caste dynamics.

Women as Catalysts for Synodality in the Catholic Church in India

A significant shift toward inclusivity occurred with Pope Francis's initiation of the "Synod on Synodality," providing space for individuals of all ages and genders to participate actively in dialogue and decision-making processes. While formal recognition of women's contributions in synods still leaves much to be desired, the synod on synodality represents a noteworthy step in acknowledging and valuing women's unique perspectives.¹² Pope Francis, in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, emphasized the indispensable contributions of women in the church, asserting that their presence is a matter of justice, granting them the right to full integration and the use of their gifts for the greater good of the church. For instance, he writes,

Indeed, in times when women tended to be most ignored or overlooked, the Holy Spirit raised up saints whose attractiveness produced new spiritual vigour and important reforms in the Church. We can mention Saint Hildegard of Bingen, Saint Bridget, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. But I think too of all those unknown or forgotten women who, each in her own way, sustained and

¹² The increased involvement of women in this synod gathering and the questions related to broadening women's participation in the church were evident in Pope Francis's decision to allow eighty-two women to participate in the Synod on Synodality. For the first time in history, fifty-four of them were granted voting rights. Cf. Catherine Hadro and Rachel Thomas, "Synod on Synodality: Role of Women in the Synodal Spotlight," *National Catholic Register*, October 2, 2023, [ncregister.com/news/synod-on-synodality-role-of-women](https://www.ncregister.com/news/synod-on-synodality-role-of-women).

transformed families and communities by the power of their witness.”
(no. 12)

In alignment with Pope Francis’s perspectives, the Catholic Church in India is giving increasing attention to women’s participation. This perspective is reflected in the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI), which notes: “The sessions emphasized the need for integrating women into the Church’s synodal processes to promote a more inclusive and participatory Church structure.”¹³ This demonstrates the growing recognition of women as catalysts for synodality, affirming their vital role in fostering communion, participation, and mission within the Indian Church. The National Women’s Conference in Jharsuguda, Odisha, further exemplified this commitment, bringing together 453 women leaders from 132 dioceses to discern ways to strengthen women’s active participation in the life of the church.¹⁴

Efforts are underway to address the historical under-representation of women and to strengthen their role as key contributors to synodality in the Indian Catholic Church. These initiatives include both formal institutional changes and grassroots movements led by women themselves. Several global networks of women working within the church have emerged as independent forces for change, operating outside traditional hierarchical structures. Organisations like Voices of Faith, the Indian Women Theologians Forum (IWTF), Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA), and Women’s Ordination Worldwide advocate for greater recognition of women’s contributions to church life. These networks provide vital platforms where women can share their experiences, articulate their theological insights, and advocate for transformation without relying on

¹³ LiCas News, “Conference in India Highlights Church Synodality and Women Leadership,” *Vatican News*, September 24, 2024, vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2024-09/india-national-womens-conference-church-synodality.html; Joseph Scaria Palakeel, “Journeying Together to Evangelize: A Look at the Synodal Church of Pope Francis,” *Asian Horizons* 14, no. 1 (2020): 119.

¹⁴ LiCas News, “Conference in India.”

hierarchical approval. In the Indian context, such networks are particularly significant as they create synodal-like spaces where women's voices can be heard and their leadership can flourish, even when formal church structures may not fully accommodate their participation.

In several dioceses, women are increasingly moving beyond traditional or consultative roles, actively shaping discussions and contributing to decisions that influence the broader faith community.¹⁵ However, mere participation in preparatory sessions is not enough; the impact of women's voices depends on how their insights are incorporated, acted upon, and reflected in the outcomes of the synodal process. Recognizing women as influential participants not only demonstrates a commitment to gender inclusivity but also enhances the church's discernment process, fostering richer, more holistic, and contextually grounded decision-making that benefits the entire faith community.

At this juncture, it is equally important to recognize the distinct and vital contribution of women religious. Within the synodal journey, they have actively participated in a spirit of collaboration, engaging deeply with questions of faith and mission. This involvement has enabled them to share their wisdom and lived experience, enriching the dialogue and fostering a more dynamic exchange within the wider church community. Through the lens of synodality, women religious not only share their individual voices but also collectively shape the direction and vision of their religious life, creating a vibrant and inclusive space for mutual discernment and communal growth.

Synodality has also facilitated the gathering of religious leaders from diverse Congregations, providing a platform for reflection and the sharing of their unique gifts while also fostering an environment where open discussions about vulnerabilities can take place freely. A promising aspiration for the future is the potential enhancement of relationships

¹⁵ In the dioceses of Trichy, Tanjore, Salem, Dharmapuri, and Kottar in Tamil Nadu, women play an active and integral role in the preparations for the synodal process.

among the church's hierarchy, the clergy, and the religious, creating a more positive and collaborative dynamic.

As the National CRI President of India and a Synod participant representing the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), Sr. Nirmalini says,

From my experience in India, the preparation for the Synod has been a spiritual process, paving the way for a new beginning. The dedication of the organising teams was commendable, with some members making long journeys into remote villages to strive for the deadline. The efforts by the teams of lay faithful, religious, and priests touched the hearts of those they met, and vice versa. The consultations were an eye-opener for many who were not accustomed to being invited to speak out openly and freely.¹⁶

During a webinar hosted by the World Women's Observatory September 13–14, 2023, participants from around the world, including women and women religious from India, shared their hopes and concerns ahead of the Synod on Synodality in Rome. Some of the women religious were engaged in advocacy efforts, pushing for increased recognition and participation of women in decision-making bodies, including synods. They work towards breaking down barriers and promoting a more inclusive church structure. It is important to note that the specific involvement of Catholic women in synodality in India varies across dioceses and communities. Yet, women face challenges and obstacles in promoting synodality.

In my address to the diocesan synodal gathering, I unequivocally advocated for synodality, emphasizing the imperative inclusion of women in leadership roles and decision-making within the church. While expressing my joy at being invited, heard, and involved as important signs

¹⁶ Maria Nirmalini, "Inclusion of Women in Synod is an 'Opportunity to Share from Our Sacred Spaces,'" *Vatican News*, November 3, 2023, vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-11/sisters-project-synod-nirmalini-xvi-ordinary-general-assembly.html; cf. Xavier Lawrence, "Shared Responsibility as a Pathway to Synodality: A Canonical Study," *Vaiharai* 27, no. 1 (2022): 16–30.

of growth in the church, I also asserted the necessity of attentively listening to the voices of the lay faithful, diminishing clericalism, and integrating care for nature into every celebration and ritual.¹⁷

Obstacles and Resistance Faced by Women in Promoting Synodality in India

While Pope Francis has made considerable efforts to promote synodality within the Catholic Church, women in India encounter numerous obstacles in their advocacy for synodality. When discussing women in the Indian Catholic Church, it is crucial to acknowledge its diversity. This diversity extends beyond the presence of three *sui juris* churches, encompassing a wide range of linguistic and socio-cultural realities. The church in India is faced with three persistently challenging features, namely, clericalism, gender inequality, and the insidious presence of caste. Addressing these issues and similar challenges during the synodal process remains an ongoing challenge for the church in India. Some of the trials and resistances that women encounter in their efforts to promote synodality are presented here.

The Catholic Church's historical patriarchal traditions have entrenched decision-making and authoritative roles predominantly within men. These deeply rooted norms pose a substantial impediment for women seeking a more participatory role in the church's synodal processes. Overcoming this formidable barrier requires a transformative shift in the church's institutional dynamics to promote greater inclusivity and gender equity within the realm of synodality.

Some parts of the church resist synodality because of doctrinal conservatism. In these areas, religious texts and teachings are often interpreted in traditional ways that limit women's roles and prevent them from participating in synodal processes. This conservative approach

¹⁷ Metti Amirtham, "Empowering Catholic Women Towards Inclusiveness," presented at the Diocesan Synodal Gathering, Diocese of Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, September 22, 2023 (unpublished address).

creates a significant obstacle and necessitates careful, open discussions to bridge the gap between traditional interpretations and the evolving needs of synodal participation.

The challenges faced by Indian women within the church are deeply intertwined with the broader fabric of societal and cultural norms. For instance, Sr. Dorothy, CRI, President of Trichy Diocese, Tamilnadu, said, “The local church faces the challenge of a local culture that tends to restrict the spaces of action for women. The church needs to help us to open up spaces where women can be actively involved.”

Across various regions, deeply ingrained societal expectations and cultural practices play a key role in perpetuating the marginalisation of women, creating formidable barriers for them to penetrate traditionally male-dominated spaces within the church. For instance, prevailing gender stereotypes often dictate predefined roles for women, constraining their agency and influence within religious circles. Furthermore, societal expectations limit women’s opportunities to pursue leadership roles or actively engage in decision-making processes. These deeply rooted norms present a complex web of challenges that intersect with religious structures, making it a nuanced struggle for women seeking to contribute meaningfully to synodal initiatives within the Indian Church.

Despite women making substantial contributions to various facets of church life, their efforts are frequently overlooked or inadequately acknowledged. This dearth of formal recognition not only diminishes the value of women’s contributions but also serves as a deterrent for them to pursue leadership roles within synodal structures actively.

For example, women in India play crucial roles in grassroots community and church initiatives, namely, in organising Basic Christian Communities, Small Christian Communities, Legion of Mary, other sodalities, prayer groups, educational programmes, or pastoral care, yet their efforts are not officially acknowledged in the hierarchical structures of the church. This absence of formal acknowledgement creates a sense of undervaluation, hindering women’s enthusiasm for participating in synodal processes and assuming leadership responsibilities actively.

Recognising and celebrating the specific contributions of women at all levels of the church becomes crucial for fostering an environment that encourages their meaningful involvement in synodality.

In some instances, women face limitations in theological education and training, which creates a barrier to their effective engagement in theological discussions within the church. This challenge highlights the importance of empowering women to study theology and teach in theological institutions.

The reality in India reveals a significant disparity in women's participation in theological education. The theological domain remains predominantly controlled by male clergy, with more institutions lacking women on their staff than those that actively recruit them. The presence of women professors on permanent faculty remains very limited, and in most cases, women are engaged only as visiting or guest faculty members. Even when women are invited to teach, their contributions are often restricted to one or two subjects, a single-credit course, or an elective.

The vast majority of women, particularly women religious who undertake theological studies, return to their former apostolates or assume responsibilities within their congregations rather than pursuing academic theological careers. This pattern not only curtails the breadth of women's voices in theological formation but also diminishes the possibility of integrating women's perspectives into mainstream academic theology. Consequently, theological education in many institutions risks being shaped predominantly by male experiences and interpretations, depriving the church of the richness that women's scholarship and lived realities could contribute to its teaching and leadership.

Shaping Synodality: The Impact of Women's Participation

The exploration of women as engines of synodality delves into the transformative role they can play in shaping and enriching synodal processes within the church. The following discussion highlights the unique contributions and perspectives that women could bring to enhance the dynamics of synodality.

The inclusion of women in synodal discussions broadens the spectrum of perspectives within the church. Women, drawing from their varied life experiences and roles, contribute rich insights that illuminate contemporary challenges and opportunities. For example, a woman involved in community outreach may offer unique perspectives on social issues faced by the faithful, while a female theologian might bring nuanced theological understanding. This multifaceted input ensures comprehensive consideration of matters, ultimately enhancing the quality and depth of decision-making within the synodal framework.

Women often bring heightened pastoral sensitivity and holistic problem-solving approaches that could significantly impact the synodal landscape. Their experiences can lead to more inclusive and caring pastoral practices within the church. For instance, women in pastoral care might emphasize community-building initiatives, mental health support, or outreach programmes that foster deeper connection and understanding among the faithful. This pastoral sensitivity promotes a more compassionate and empathetic approach to addressing the diverse needs of the church community.

Women's contributions to community building can profoundly impact synodality within the church. Women who have led church community events, fostered dialogue, and promoted collaboration among diverse groups bring valuable skills that strengthen the synodal process. Their experience in building relationships within local congregations equips them to create atmospheres of unity and cooperation. By drawing on these experiences, women can support processes that emphasize shared values, mutual responsibility, and inclusive participation, nurturing a more interconnected and supportive community capable of addressing challenges collectively.

Women's engagement with social justice issues lends a powerful voice to synodal discussions on justice, equality, and human rights. A woman with a background in social advocacy can bring forth insights into addressing systemic injustices within the church. For instance, she might advocate for policies that promote gender equality in leadership positions,

drawing from her experiences in advocating for women's rights in the broader societal context. This infusion of perspectives can catalyse a more socially conscious and responsible church, actively addressing contemporary issues through synodal deliberations and shaping a path towards justice and equality.

Women and women religious are at the forefront of educational initiatives and they play a pivotal role in cultivating a culture of continuous learning and spiritual development within the church. A woman who is actively engaged in organising workshops, study groups, or online courses can foster spiritual growth among the church members. Her commitment to educational initiatives may result in a more informed and spiritually mature community wherein individuals can be equipped with the knowledge and insights to deepen their faith. Through these educational endeavours, women contribute tangibly to the formation of a church community that values lifelong learning, nurturing a sense of intellectual curiosity and spiritual enrichment.

The heightened involvement of women in synodality could serve as a compelling model for younger generations within the church, inspiring them to engage actively. When young individuals witness women taking prominent roles in synodal discussions, leading initiatives, and shaping the direction of the church, it serves as a motivating factor. This first-hand exposure can inspire a new generation of leaders who inherently value gender equality and inclusivity. Young girls, seeing their senior counterparts actively contributing to decision-making processes, may envision themselves as future leaders, fostering a culture that recognises and encourages diverse leadership roles. In this way, the increased participation of women in synodality becomes a transformative force, laying the groundwork for a church where future leaders embrace the principles of equality and inclusivity.

Recommendations for Promoting Women's Participation and Leadership

Empowering women in the Catholic Church in India requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses theological, cultural, social and structural barriers. The following pages present concrete suggestions designed to promote women's greater participation and leadership within the church community. These recommendations aim to establish meaningful pathways for women to contribute their gifts and talents at all levels of church life and ministry.

Inclusive Theological Education

Ensuring inclusive theological education is vital for justice and equality in the church, recognising the diverse gifts of both men and women. Jesus himself exemplified this inclusivity through his revolutionary approach to women in his ministry. He welcomed women as disciples and learners, as seen when he defended Mary of Bethany's right to sit at his feet and learn, declaring that "she has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). This involves providing equal opportunities, such as establishing scholarship programmes to encourage women to undertake studies in theology, Scripture, canon law and pastoral ministry.

In India, the church must promote the inclusion of gender issues in the theological curriculum, creating a supportive learning environment through mentorship programmes and adopting a gendered approach to theology. Jesus demonstrated such supportive mentorship when he engaged the Samaritan woman in deep theological discourse about worship and salvation (John 4:7–26), treating her as a capable theologian despite cultural barriers. This approach will reveal the true status of women in the church, society, and the family. This will also bring to light the biblical depictions of men and women's relationships, leading to the emphasis of the distinction between cultural practices in the Bible and contemporary cultures, underscoring the equal creation of men and women in God's image. Jesus consistently challenged cultural limitations placed on women,

as demonstrated when he allowed Mary Magdalene to be the first witness and proclaimer of his resurrection (John 20:11–18), entrusting her with the most important theological message in Christian history. Besides, encouraging Catholic women to pursue theological education, regardless of ordination, underscores its relevance for the entire people of God.

Gender-Inclusive Language and Imagery

Gender-inclusive language and imagery play a crucial role in creating a more equitable environment within the church. By revising liturgical practices, religious texts, and visual representations, the church can actively recognise and honour the dignity of both men and women. This foundation is rooted in Jesus’s own ministry, where he consistently used diverse imagery in his parables—speaking of both the woman searching for her lost coin (Luke 15:8–10) and the shepherd seeking his lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7) to describe God’s love. His teaching that “there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28) provides theological grounding for such practices. Jesus demonstrated this equality when he chose to reveal his resurrection first to Mary Magdalene, commissioning her as “apostle to the apostles” (John 20:17–18).

The Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes* affirms that “every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent” (no. 29). This shift towards greater participation resonates with the evolving understanding of gender roles in contemporary society and within the synodal church.

Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, emphasizes that “the Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution which women make to society through the sensitivity, intuition and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess” (no. 103). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “man and woman have been created, which is to say, willed by God: on the one hand, in perfect equality as human persons; on the other, in their respective beings as man and woman” (no. 369). Practical implementation involves using gender-

neutral language in liturgical practices, updating religious texts to ensure universal applicability, creating balanced visual representations, adopting neutral pronouns in religious communications, and revising liturgical songs. The recent Synod on Synodality emphasizes that “a synodal Church is a Church of participation and co-responsibility,” calling for “the full involvement of all the baptized” regardless of gender.

Mentorship and Leadership Training

In the context of Indian Catholic women, establishing mentorship and leadership training programmes is imperative to empower women for prominent roles within the church. Jesus himself exemplified this mentorship model when he guided Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many other women who “provided for them out of their resources” (Luke 8:2-3), preparing them to become witnesses and leaders in the early Christian community.

By creating such initiatives, the church can nurture capable women leaders, ensuring their active participation in synods and ecclesiastical life. Saint Teresa of Avila, a Doctor of the Church, exemplifies how proper spiritual mentorship empowered women to assume significant leadership roles, reforming the Carmelite order and contributing to church renewal. A practical approach involves pairing experienced female leaders with aspiring women seeking guidance. For instance, a seasoned theologian or respected leader could mentor young women studying theology or entering pastoral ministry.

Leadership training initiatives for women within the church should prioritize equipping them with essential skills to face the complexities of leadership roles. Tailored workshops and seminars covering effective communication, pastoral care, organizational leadership, and theological discourses are crucial. Since women’s identities are constructed by their society and culture, taking a critical approach to culture is essential for developing leadership in women in a manner that liberates them from patriarchal constraints.

Promotion of Women to Decision-Making Bodies

In the ongoing discourse surrounding synodality, a concerning trend persists within the church where women remain largely confined to traditional roles such as singing, conducting choirs, arranging flowers, decorating altars, organizing sodalities, or working in diocesan offices primarily within family and women's commissions. This limitation contradicts the Gospel witness where women held significant leadership positions in the early church.

Scripture reveals women in authoritative roles: Phoebe served as a deacon and "benefactor of many" (Romans 16:1-2), while Priscilla instructed the eloquent Apollos in theology alongside her husband (Acts 18:26). Jesus himself broke cultural barriers by commissioning Mary Magdalene as the first herald of his resurrection, earning her the patristic title "apostle to the apostles."

The church must recognize and tap into the immense reservoir of talent within women, empowering them to assume influential administrative and leadership roles. Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, acknowledges that "demands that legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity" (no. 104). Breaking from restrictive traditions, the church must integrate women into positions of authoritative influence within religious institutions.

Empowering women by appointing them as chancellors in dioceses and secretaries for various regional or national commissions within the Catholic Church in India infuses diverse perspectives into administrative processes. This shift fosters comprehensive approaches to addressing community needs. The resulting transformation positions the church to build an equitable ecclesiastical community, demonstrating the invaluable richness that diversity contributes to the collective journey of faith.

Encouragement of Dialogue and Listening

To create a more synodal and participatory church environment, it is crucial to encourage open dialogue and active listening, particularly

towards women. This involves establishing spaces where women's voices are valued and actively sought out, ensuring their perspectives play an integral role in synodal discussions. This approach finds its foundation in Jesus's ministry, where he engaged women in profound theological dialogue. His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7–42) demonstrates revolutionary listening, as he not only heard her questions but entrusted her with evangelizing her entire community.

The synodal process places strong emphasis on listening rather than preaching from its inception. It recognises that listening is indispensable, and the purpose of the Synod, as stated in the Preparatory Document, “is not to produce documents, but ‘to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands’” (no. 32). This ideal is actualised through mutual listening, learning, and the demonstration of collegiality in the way the church lives.

Saint John Chrysostom praised women's capacity for theological discourse, noting how women in the early church “philosophized” about divine matters and contributed to doctrinal understanding. Contemporary theologian Ivone Gebara argues that women's experiential knowledge offers essential insights for theological reflection and informed decision-making within the church.¹⁸

An effective method for fostering this dialogue is through dedicated forums or roundtable discussions, providing women from diverse backgrounds with platforms to share their experiences, insights, and aspirations. These gatherings serve as genuine conversation spaces, allowing women to express their thoughts on theological and practical aspects of church life. The Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes* affirms that “all the faithful, clerical and lay, possess a lawful freedom of

¹⁸ Elaine Nogueira-Godsey, “A History of Resistance: Ivone Gebara's Transformative Feminist Liberation Theology,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 26, no. 2 (2013): 89–106.

inquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about those matters in which they enjoy competence” (no. 62). By actively seeking and valuing women’s input, the church demonstrates its commitment to recognizing their unique perspectives in ecclesiastical discussions.

Recognition and Celebration

To promote a culture of appreciation and inclusivity within the Catholic Church, it is essential to recognise and celebrate the significant contributions made by women formally. This involves actively showcasing their achievements, disseminating success stories, and publicly acknowledging the crucial roles they play across various ministries. By doing so, the church validates women’s valuable work and creates an environment that inspires and encourages their active participation in synodality. A concrete manifestation of this recognition involves establishing annual events or ceremonies dedicated to honouring women in the church. By spotlighting women’s achievements, the church demonstrates a commitment to appreciating and celebrating women’s diverse talents and contributions. Additionally, incorporating women’s success stories into church publications, newsletters, TV channels, or online platforms could amplify their visibility and impact, serving as inspirational narratives for other women to engage in synodal processes actively.

Moreover, leveraging social media platforms offers an effective means of reaching a broader audience. Regularly featuring stories, testimonials, or video interviews of women engaged in various ministries can create an online space that celebrates their contributions, bringing visibility to women’s roles within the church and fostering a sense of connectedness and inspiration among the larger Catholic community.

Pastoral Support for Work-Life Balance

The Catholic Church acknowledges women’s varied roles in families and communities, advocating for proactive pastoral support to foster harmonious work-life balance. The church must implement measures

empowering women to engage fully in synodal processes without compromising their responsibilities.

Practical support includes flexible meeting schedules for synodal discussions, allowing participation without straining family commitments, and providing childcare services during gatherings to enable active participation in decision-making processes. These accommodations reflect the church's dedication to creating environments where women's voices are actively sought.

Additionally, embracing technology through virtual attendance and remote contribution options promotes accessibility and inclusivity. This approach values the diversity of women's experiences within the church, fostering a more participatory and representative synodal process.

Sustained Advocacy for Gender Equality

The Catholic Church can significantly advance gender equality by actively encouraging and supporting advocacy groups and movements within its community. One concrete way to achieve this is through fostering partnerships with organizations dedicated to promoting women's rights and empowerment. For example, the church could collaborate with non-profit organizations specializing in women's education and healthcare, aligning its efforts with broader societal movements striving for gender inclusivity and raising awareness about gender-based violence.

Establishing and endorsing initiatives focusing on gender equality within the church is another impactful approach. By supporting and promoting internal advocacy groups that address gender-related issues, the church demonstrates its commitment to fostering an environment where women are valued and treated with equity.

By addressing gender issues through sermons, workshops, YouTube videos, and study groups, the church can actively engage its members in conversations that challenge traditional gender norms and contribute to fostering a culture of gender equality. By implementing these recommendations, the Catholic Church can empower women as engines of synodality,

creating a more inclusive, vibrant, and responsive community that reflects the diverse gifts and talents of all its members.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that women constitute indispensable engines of synodality within the Catholic Church in India, a reality that demands recognition through a critical feminist theological lens. St. Catherine of Siena's prophetic call for acknowledging women's God-given mission echoes with urgent contemporary relevance in the Indian context, where women's transformative ecclesial contributions have been systematically undervalued.

Critical feminist theology reveals that excluding women's voices and leadership diminishes the church's capacity for authentic synodal discernment. Women's wisdom, pastoral sensitivity, and theological insights are essential, not supplementary, components of genuine communal discernment. The path forward requires structural transformation: moving beyond tokenistic inclusion toward genuine participation in decision-making, theological reflection, and pastoral leadership. In a rapidly changing Indian society, the church's witness depends significantly on embodying the Gospel's inclusive vision.

For the Indian Catholic Church, women's full participation represents a profound opportunity for renewal and growth. This transformation promises not only greater fidelity to gospel values but also a more vibrant and responsive ecclesial community that truly reflects the diverse gifts of all God's people.

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