

# Christian women facing persecution in India

## A review and recommendations

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### Abstract

Christian women face many forms of discrimination in India, but India is also one of the world's most troublesome countries with regard to the treatment of women generally. It is thus important to distinguish, within the double persecution that women face, when they are suffering as Christians and when they are targeted simply for being women. This article gives examples of Christian women in India who have been persecuted exclusively for their faith, for both their faith and their gender, or not at all. It then explores identifiable causes of the persecution of Christians and offers suggestions as to how the church should respond.

**Keywords** Discrimination, violence, patriarchy, Hindu fundamentalism, freedom of religion, India.

## 1. Introduction

On the 2019 Open Doors World Watch List, which identifies the 50 countries where religious persecution is most severe, India ranked tenth (Open Doors 2019). Targeted violence and hate crimes against the Christian community in India have continued unabated. The Religious Liberty Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of India recorded 325 incidents in 2018 where Christians were targeted with violence, intimidation or harassment.

Religious persecution is a complex and diverse phenomenon (Sauer and Schirrmacher 2012:14). This paper looks at one component of it, namely the persecution of women. I first consider the difficulties experienced by Indian women in general before looking at cases involving Christian women. I then analyse the causes of such persecution and offer recommendations as to how to respond to it. One purpose of this paper is to determine whether Christian women's religious faith alone is the cause of persecution or if other factors are involved.

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## 2. Discrimination and violence against Indian women in general

Discrimination against women remains a major issue in India. A 2018 study by the Thomson Reuters Foundation named India the most dangerous country for women. India was top-ranked on three of the criteria: the risk of sexual violence and harassment against women; the dangers women face from cultural, tribal and traditional practices; and the risks of human trafficking including forced labour, sex slavery and domestic servitude (Goldsmith and Beresford 2018). It is further claimed that in the extremely patriarchal northern region of India, women are discriminated against within their own families (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018).

Discrimination against women is prevalent everywhere in the world and more so in Indian society (R. Sharma 2015:141-42). Some particular types of discrimination are discussed below.

*Sex selection:* Discrimination begins at the pre-natal stage. The underlying cause for sex selection or 'son preference' is related to the difficulties involved in bearing daughters, which include significant social and economic costs (Priya et al 2014:18).

*Gender-based violence:* This problem is rooted in India's social, cultural and economic context (I. Sharma 2015:131-32). Central to this problem is the fact that Indian men and women have been trained to believe that men's dominance over women is normal and that acts of violence against women are justified. Forms of gender-based violence include psychological abuse, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and abuse, intimate partner violence, and deprivation of education, food, economic and health resources. Of the 338,924 crimes committed against women in India during 2016, the most common categories were cruelty by husband or relatives (32.6%), assault on women with intent to violate her modesty (25.0%), kidnapping and abduction (19.0%), and rape (11.5%) (National Crime Records Bureau 2017).

*Dowry disaster:* The level of violence and killings linked to dowry payments is alarming. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau suggest an increase in crimes reported under the Dowry Prohibition Act since 2008, and a significant increase in such crimes and dowry-related deaths by 2012 (National Crime Records Bureau 2013:81). One researcher claimed that 22 women per day were killed in dowry-related murders in India (Storkey 2015:79). In 2015 alone, 1,781 women reportedly committed dowry-related suicides (National Crime Records Bureau 2016:201).

*Exploitation of patriarchal culture:* According to the *Laws of Manu* (a sacred Hindu text),<sup>2</sup> "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her

<sup>2</sup> I have used the translation of the Laws of Manu available at <https://bit.ly/3ekumZN>.

husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.” This is still the case in the modern-day social structure.

## **2.1 Discrimination and violence against female Christian converts in India**

Christian women are not spared from the above-mentioned atrocities. In many cases, they experience double persecution for being both Christians and women. To what extent does being Christian influence the discrimination and violence? To help in answering that question, I classify victims into three categories: doubly afflicted female victims, unafflicted Christian women, and women clearly afflicted due to their faith.

### **2.1.1 Doubly afflicted female Christian converts**

Communal violence in India disproportionately affects India’s religious minorities – especially Muslims, but also Christians and Sikhs. While often instrumentalized for political gains, communal violence draws on and exacerbates a climate of entrenched discrimination against India’s religious minorities, with far-reaching social, economic, cultural and political dimensions. Such violence is frequently committed with impunity and sometimes even with the direct complicity of state actors, which ranges from inciting violence through hate speech to refusing to properly investigate communal incidents after they have occurred (Center for Study of Society and Secularism and Minority Rights Group International 2017:3).

An account by Cyrilla Chakkalakkal, a Franciscan Sister of St. Mary of the Holy Angels, is helpful. She outlined her experiences of pain in the lives of nuns arising from patriarchal attitudes at a nationwide consultation (Saldanha 2016). Referring to the murder of two sisters from her congregation in 1990, she narrated how the character assassination of the sisters in the media turned public attention to their sexuality and away from the crimes committed. The leaders of the Catholic community failed to take a stand. Their apathy and silence were painful.

Religious structures can have a negative impact on victims of sexual abuse too. Females internalize scriptural interpretations that describe women stereotypically as sinner, manipulator and temptress. This contributes to their silence when dealing with abuse. Seeing the priest as in the place of God compounds the confusion and guilt. As a result, the psycho-social and spiritual impact of abuse committed by the clergy can be immense.

The bodies of women from the Dalit or outcast community are seen as ‘available,’ and these women are portrayed as characterless, causing them to be exploited for sex. Atrocities against Dalit women are very visible and committed with utter impunity. The internalization of their social status renders them voiceless. The mindset of caste underpins culture in all religious groups, including Christians (Saldanha 2016).

### 2.1.2 Unafflicted female Christian converts

On the other hand, many female Christians in India, some of them quite prominent, have faced little or no difficulty after becoming Christians. For example, Mohini, an actress (the pseudonym of Mahalakshmi), a Brahmin born in Tanjore, Tamil Nadu, became a Christian and took on the name of Christeena, without facing any social pressures (Song on Fire 2016).

Pandita Ramabai, a prominent Christian convert, experienced hardships, but not on account of her faith; it was more caste-related. Since she was a high-caste Brahmin, her marriage to Bipin Bihari Medhavi, an untouchable, was unacceptable in the society she lived in. She accepted Christ while in England in 1889 (Jayawardena 1995:54). On her return to India, she established outstanding mission work amongst widows and the destitute (Frykenberg 2016:67). This committed Indian Christian female convert of strong character, so bold in her compassion, and with a dazzling capacity to organize relief work with selfless service and dedication, did not face pressure due to her faith.

Sister Nirmala Joshi, who succeeded Nobel laureate Mother Teresa as head of the Missionaries of Charity, was born in a Nepali Brahmin family but eventually converted to Catholicism. India's government bestowed on her the Padma Vibhushan, the second-highest award granted to civilians, on 26 January 2009 for her service to the nation. Sister Nirmala did not face any pressure resulting from her conversion (Pandya 2015).

An actress named Pusbalatha, originally Catholic, became a practicing Hindu and later married A. V. M. Rajan, an actor who had been born Hindu. She also experienced no pressure due to her conversion (Robinson 2013).

Anju Panta, of Nepali Hindu origin, is a very prominent *ghazal* and playback singer. After her conversion to Christianity, she refused to perform at a Hindu festival, saying that her faith in the true God did not allow her to worship other gods through song. This statement earned her an avalanche of criticism from the media and civil society and provoked radical Hindu elements to undertake a smear campaign against her (Rana 2014). She has said that she simply ignores the retaliation. Many continue to admire her contributions to the music world in Nepal.

Another well-known actress, Jayasudha, was born to Hindu parents but converted to Christianity in 2001. She stated that she found Jesus after suffering a water-related accident. She has not faced any pressure due to her conversion (Joy Foundations 2015). Similarly, another actress, Nagma, born of a Muslim father and Hindu mother, experienced no pressure when she declared her faith in Christ (Mundaplamoodu 2017).

Anand Mahadevan, a well-known journalist in India, and his wife are believers in Christ. They are Brahmins in the Indian caste system. Mrs. Mahadevan goes by her Hindu name. Her faith in Jesus continues with no pressure (Mahadevan 2008).

### **2.1.3 Female Christian converts afflicted due to their faith**

There are 33 pressure points in the lives of Christian women under pressure for their faith (Fisher and Miller 2018:5). The Religious Liberty Commission indicated in its report for 2018 that targeting of minorities, Dalits and women by anti-Christian fanatical forces had visibly increased; the report also listed 26 events in which women were afflicted in various ways (Religious Liberty Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of India 2019). For example, on 29 April 2018, a mob of more than 25 radicals disrupted Full Gospel Pentecostal Church and assaulted five women in Baburia Kheda, Raebareli district in Uttar Pradesh.

Sarita, a Christian convert in central India, met and married Mohan, a Hindu. She had to experience brutality and physical and mental torment from her husband for her faith in the Lord Jesus for 13 years. She was eventually abandoned by her husband and left to raise her two children by herself.

Another report stated, “A mob had attacked around seventy believers on 24 February 2019; women in the congregation were being beaten and dragged by their hair, while they were worshipping the Lord in the state of Maharashtra” (Persecution Relief 2019b).

A 2019 report indicated that a pastor and her congregation were assaulted during a Sunday worship service, in a religiously motivated attack in Barwala, Panchkula district of Haryana, involving a mob of 20 thugs (Persecution Relief 2019a).

A pregnant woman and her five children were thrown out of their village by her husband and in-laws after she refused to renounce her Christian faith (World Watch Monitor 2018).

### **2.1.4 Context differentiates the extent of persecution**

Based on the different incidents presented, it can be concluded that the presence and extent of persecution against Christian women depends on where and in what context they live. Relevant factors include the region of India where the person resides, the religious faith of the other family members in the house, and how the converted person expresses her faith. Christian women living in provinces where religious secularism is predominant have a lower likelihood of experiencing persecution than those in a province where religious fanaticism is strong.

### **2.1.5 The church's response to persecution**

The church in India is a large and powerful force. Many Christian associations, such as the Religious Liberation Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, All India United Christian Front, Christian Council of India, United Christian Forum for Human Rights, All India Christian Minority Front, Catholic Secular Forum and others have been responding to the present adverse context. Most of them have blamed Hindu fundamentalists for all kinds of attacks on churches.

As one form of response to the persecution, about 10,000 Christians in eastern India's Jharkhand state formed a 20-kilometer human chain to protest what they called the state-sponsored harassment of Christians and a hate campaign against them (Thomas 2018). In addition, some 20,000 Christians from various denominations filled roads in at least 16 cities and towns, shouting slogans against government inaction with regard to anti-Christian activities allegedly carried out by upper-caste Hindu groups in Coimbatore on 17 April 2018 (Christian Today 2018). The Synod of Pentecostal Churches in Tamil Nadu organized protests in reaction to at least 15 cases of violence against Christians in the first three months of 2018 (Voice of South Asia 2018).

Some agencies offer assistance to the persecuted Christians, pastors and churches; however, details of their services and accomplishments are unknown or unpublished. In most cases, these actions do not address directly the particular forms of persecution and violence experienced by women.

### **3. Exploring the causes of persecution of female converts**

In light of the divergent experiences of religious converts, one cannot conclude that faith in Jesus Christ is the sole cause of the pressures that many female Christian converts undergo in India. Theoretically, faith in Jesus should not be an issue, as Hindu tradition allows "Hinduism to accommodate all other religious communities, with their own gods, beliefs, and practices" (Hiebert 2004:325). The ethos of Hinduism is expressed in the phrase "Ekam Sat, Viprah Bahudda Vadanti," which means "There is an eternal Truth, but there are many ways to achieve it" (Hindu Vivek Kendra n.d.). For this reason, many converts do not face pressure from surrounding Hindus.

The following subsections discuss some of the fundamental but not always obvious reasons why female Christian converts do face pressure, as derived from publications and first-hand sources.

#### **3.1 Fighting over membership gains and losses**

Encounters between different religions give rise to competition over the gain and loss of adherents that occur when some people reject the teachings of one religion and accept those of another. This battle generates tensions, conflicts and violence between religious groups, especially in a nation like India, which is democratic but has not firmly established secular governance. Globally, conversion in general is considered provocative, and thus precautionary measures to prevent conversions have been taken by various non-Christian religions.

Within the Indian context, forces of religious nationalism have set forth an agenda for a nationalized religion (Hinduism) to gain political prominence. These

forces intentionally breed threats against Christians to suppress their growth in order to win the political favour of Hindus. Hindu fundamentalism grew over long years of resentment stirred in the hearts of Hindus by intolerant Islamic invaders and European Christian colonizers (Shullai 2017). Muslim atrocities and Christian conversions during the colonial period generated resentment, anger, fear and defiance in Hindus toward non-Hindus (Wink 2002). This continued even after the nation's independence. The trend is exacerbated by the present political power wielded by Hindu fundamentalists.

### 3.2 Retaliation towards extraction

In the process of religious conversion, the practices of some evangelical groups cause cultural, custom-related and family clashes. Extraction of women from long years of identity and customary beliefs and practices and their replacement by a new and alien Christian identity make Hindus and the Hindutva<sup>3</sup> community angry and bitter towards Christian converts.

### 3.3 Misperceptions

Astrid Lobo Gajiwala (1998), a Christian activist who writes regularly on Christian issues, asked her Hindu husband and other educated Hindu friends why so many people express anger about people's religious conversions. She described her findings in this way: "They just don't see Christians as Indians; they see us as an alien 'other,' minions of a white Christian world that is synonymous with spiritual and racial chauvinism. Our cathedrals, our culture, and our worship set us apart." Conversion is a threat for them as it is considered a renunciation of Hindus' cultural and spiritual heritage for the purpose of adopting a Westernized religious identity.

### 3.4 External responses of converts

Conversion encounters in India do not merely involve a sinner's prayer, but a conscious 'response ... to the invitation, love, and work of God in Christ' (Cawley 2016:165). Internal and external elements are involved in the conversion process; belief, repentance, assurance of forgiveness, and devotion are internal components, whereas baptism, church affiliation, and participating in evangelism and mission are external and openly visible ways of acting out one's faith. Such responses usually generate pressures on new female converts especially.

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<sup>3</sup> The Hindutva ideology contends that the Indian nation is nothing but the physical and emotional outcome of Hindu aspirations. The question of identity for them, therefore, is naturally settled in favour of a clearly delineated Hindu identity, while Muslims and Christians are 'outsiders' and can be considered part of India only if they accept the national culture (I. Sharma 2015:4).

### 3.5 Frigid relationships between religions

Misconceptions of Christians about other religions and vice versa, unfavourable propaganda produced by other religions, and other mutually offensive acts have strained the relationship between Christian and non-Christian religions. Increasing religious intolerance is another factor. A 2016 report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom cited deteriorating religious tolerance and increasing violence in India (PTI 2016). As non-Christians see the number of Christians growing in India, existing bitterness and fury can become manifested in pressures on new female converts.

### 3.6 A spirit of patriarchalism

Though numerous positive changes have occurred among women, chronic social issues such as gender inequality and bigotry keep many women trapped in a second-class status. One common manifestation of these problems in India is domestic violence; many other women are subject to discrimination and pressure relating to their family members' religious affiliation.

For example, Ravi, an alcoholic Hindu husband, brutally abused his wife, Rani, when she became a Christian and was baptized without his knowledge. Given his low view of women driven by his patriarchalism, his wife's personal decision to become a Christian was unacceptable to him, even though he himself believes that Jesus is one of the gods and he said he did not oppose Rani's faith in Jesus.

### 3.7 Unethical practices of mission agencies

The practice of unethical mission methods (Ariyaratnam 2015:172) and conversion efforts by certain agencies, churches and individuals is undeniable (Bird 2016:298). Post-conversion practices that extract women converts from their families, as well as psychological or material inducements that agencies offer to women in vulnerable population sectors, trigger anger among Hindus and fanatics. This anger results in pressure against converts – particularly women, who tend to convert in greater numbers than men.

### 3.8 Other factors

Some other less noticeable factors can contribute to unfortunate situations. Parentally arranged marriages can negatively impact first-generation Christian believers. One young lady, the first Christian in her family, accepted Christ in September 2005, but was compelled to marry a man from her former faith. Her life turned out to be miserable, as her husband was one of the leading anti-Christian fanatics in his region. Eventually, their marriage fell apart.

In other cases, anti-Christian employers pressure female Christian employees. For example, a middle-age, married Christian woman, a recipient of a best-teacher



award from the President of India, works in a school owned and managed by a Hindu company. Accordingly, she is expected to adhere to the school owners' religious beliefs, values and practices. She declines to adhere to some of them due to her Christian faith, resulting in intentional humiliation by her employer. Other Hindu teachers influence students to behave rebelliously towards her.

#### **4. Suggestions to counter persecution**

Having described a variety of apparent or plausible causes of persecution, I now turn briefly to a biblical understanding of violence and persecution. This can help to provide a nuanced understanding of persecution and how we should respond to it.

##### **4.1 A biblical understanding of violence and persecution**

Religious persecution is a painful reprisal against a community or group of communities that is viewed as impinging upon the values of the faith and practices of another religious community (Ramachandran 2010:333).

Persecution against Christians can serve in a wonderful way to build up believers in their individual faith, as well as to strengthen the church. God designed the church to function as the salt and light of the world and he sent His people into the world as lambs sent among wolves. Hence, persecution and the Christian life are interwoven. Persecution of the church is a predicted reality and a payment that disciples of the Lord Jesus are expected to offer as a mark of their commitment to the Word.

On the other hand, religious violence against adherents of the Christian religion is a brutal outcome of the animosity of certain intolerant segments of non-Christian religions. This animosity could, at times, be valid from human and ethical perspectives; even so, it still is often deemed irrational. Wars of religion are not uncommon occurrences. Today's religious violence against Christian settlements is nothing but an undeclared religious war by certain fanatical communities of Hinduism. Political power triggers religious violence (Ramachandran 2010:334).

As one biblical example of religiously oriented violence with a complex background, the violently enraged Herod, who was Idumean by origin and foreign in race and faith to the Romans, used his authority to call for the brutal killing of young babies for his own safety and to secure himself against a presumed rival. Though enmity towards Israel was bred in his bones due to his place of birth, his bloody and barbarous work was not intended as persecution of the Jews for their messianic hope. It was not persecution on account of the community's beliefs, but rather religious violence by an Edomite against the Jewish community.

To differentiate between persecution and violence, it is important to consider the meaning of the word “persecution” in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit used two key words in the New Testament, *dioko* and *tblipsis*, to distinguish between faith-related persecution and eschatology-related afflictions. There are 44 occasions of the word *dioko* in the New Testament; on 31 occasions both the King James Version and the New American Standard Bible (NASB) translate the word as persecution. The contexts of most uses of this word are exclusively related to believers experiencing pain due to their faith in the Lord. Persecution, in these cases, is the systematic attempt to suppress or to exterminate Christianity by social pressure to the point of violence (Harrison 1978:403).

*Tblipsis* is translated in the NASB as affliction 14 times, afflictions (plural) 6 times, anguish once, distress twice, persecution once, tribulation 16 times, tribulations 4 times and trouble once. The use of this word is mostly in the context of eschatological predictions. *Tblipsis* does not necessarily imply a hostile outcome due to someone’s faith in the Lord Jesus, as *dioko* does.

Mark 4:17 exemplifies the distinction between *tblipsis* and *dioko* by using both words, in the Parable of the Sower, to describe people who fall away. Mark connects *dioko* with suffering “on account of the Word,” or persecution as a Christian. Premillennial believers use *tblipsis* as a technical theological term for the great tribulation of the end times, primarily for unbelievers (Richards 1985).

The New Testament thus distinguishes between persecution and tribulation. The former is mostly associated with faith-related afflictions, whereas tribulation is the common pain that both believers in the Lord Jesus and unbelievers undergo.

## 4.2 Suggestions

Overall, the response to this challenge by local churches has consisted of one-time events. They have not significantly prepared the congregations in dealing with persecution. To supplement existing efforts, I offer the following suggestions, which are designed to accomplish three desired results: (1) preventing the possibility of persecution, (2) preserving believers’ faith in the midst of adversity, and (3) preparing the church to grow.

### 4.2.1 Educate Christians and churches to prevent violence and harassments

India is constitutionally described as a sovereign, secular, democratic country. Accordingly, the rights of citizens from different religions should be protected. Presently the legislative, judicial and religious atmosphere is not in favour of Christians, as the country is yielding to religious nationalism. The church’s response to violence needs more prevention and less protesting as Christians are a minority population living in a pro-Hindu atmosphere.

There are four areas in which Christians and churches need to be educated:

(1) Erasing animosity against people of other faiths: Christians should be taught to pay respect to people of other faiths, not using offensive words about them and their faith and practices.

(2) Peace building with people of other faiths: Both individuals and congregations can initiate this work with others in their neighbourhood. Peace building is not exclusive to the Christian faith.

(3) Understanding of the constitutional provisions concerning “freedom of religion” and “secularism” in an unbiased manner: Christians should also be well instructed on the Indian Penal Codes related to conversion and practising one’s faith.

(4) Recognizing the psychology of the opposing community among whom they need to testify to their faith. Unbelieving people are likely to be subject to three psychological trends:

(a) Inertia – being simply unresponsive to anything Christians offer. They do not want to change. It’s nothing against Christians or their offer. They have a fear of making choices or of committing to anything, a phenomenon related to a resistance to change (Alos-Ferrer 2016:1).

(b) Reaction – an unpleasant motivational arousal that emerges when people experience a threat to or loss of their freely chosen behaviours. It serves as a motivator to restore one’s freedom (Steindl 2015:205).

(c) Scepticism – grounded in suspicion. In religious terms, it means being suspicious of any Christian who makes approaches, his or her presentations of any kind, and his or her source itself. A person under the grip of suspicion would not yield to anything, whatever Christians say or do.

Moreover, the dynamics of conversion are a reflection of primal forces within the human personality. The id, ego and superego engage in constant conflict. Human proclivities propel persons to seek gratification of urgent and powerful desires, but culture, religion and the conscience (superego) serve as constraints (Rambo 1999:266). Understanding this psychology is useful in helping Christians to act with wisdom and be careful as they testify and demonstrate their faith in the society.

#### **4.2.2 Edify Christians and churches to persevere in the midst of adversities**

Long-suffering faith comes through perseverance. Persecution and Christian faith cannot be separated. There is an immediate need to raise a community of men and women who display faith and confidence in the Lord, as did Daniel and his three friends who persevered in the midst of acute adversities in their day.

Since faith in Christ and persecution cannot be separated, pressure on women converts is inevitable. Christians in general, but pastors and church leaders in particular, need to learn (1) the theology of suffering, (2) eschatological predictions,

(3) persecution in church history, (4) case studies of faithful victims and martyrs, and (5) biblical teaching on enduring hardships.

#### **4.2.3 Equip Christians and churches to face adversities positively**

Witnessing for Christ in the midst of adversaries demands skill and wisdom. A level of preparation is needed that has not been attempted by the church at large in India. Most military forces prepare their special troops for battle against their enemies. For example, the United States Navy offers Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) training for their key commandos. Training focuses primarily on how to accomplish assignments successfully as they pass through various trying experiences in the enemy's territory. In the same way, training is also useful for the church. This training should help to make the congregation optimistic, patient, capable of endurance under hardship, wise, brave and less vulnerable.

Disaster management could be another useful type of training. In the context of the persecution of Christian women, disaster management could entail preparation for facing possible atrocities, equipping women for safe responses, and teaching them to work promptly towards recovery so as to lessen the impact.

#### **4.2.4 Eradicate the influence of social customs, practices and patriarchal culture**

The church in India in general is polarized along caste lines. As a Hindu construct, the caste system does not value all humankind equally. Historically, the church has frequently tolerated the injustices of the caste system (Raja 1999:30-31). Acceptance of the caste system should be eradicated. As a deeply-seated construct in the Indian social imagination, this cannot take place through mere teaching and writing. An intentional drive to abolish casteism among Christians should be encouraged. Christians can help to move Indian society toward this goal through supporting inter-caste marriages, non-caste identities in names, renouncing caste-based special privileges, encouraging casteless, inter-mingled community dwellings, and casteless churches.

In 2018, 90 Christian women came together to discuss the topic of gender equality in the church for two days. This event was organized by the Indian Christian Women's Movement in Pune, which had expressed concern regarding obvious gender discrimination in the churches. Churches need to educate their own people on gender issues and solutions. Since paternalism is present in Bible narratives, many Christians continue to reinforce paternalism in their own society. Understandings *of masculinity and femininity vary from culture to culture, and their boundaries are often blurry, sometimes even in the Bible. Women in the Bible are of limited normative value in a different cultural context, since they are of necessity laden with specific cultural beliefs about gender identity and roles.* Christian

faith-bearers should analyse culturally situated biblical statements about men and women and their characters and roles in order to reconstruct biblical relationships between them in contemporary contexts is the ideal way. First Corinthians 11:11 and Galatians 3:28 can be a helpful start to this analysis as they suggest that men and women have equally strong personalities, combining toughness and gentleness, assertiveness and nurturing behaviour, as called for by the situation. Men and women are equally saved, equally Spirit-filled, and equally sent (Volf 1966:181-82).

#### 4.2.5 Extend ministry among the afflicted women in one's region

Finally, churches can offer human resources and personal development programs for women, conduct awareness programs on welfare schemes available for women from governments and non-governmental organizations, and provide legal and counselling assistance for female victims.

## 5. Conclusion

Although this brief study is delimited only to Christian women in India, its suggestions are relevant to women in most countries of south and southeast Asia. It can also be relevant to patriarchal societies where Christianity is a religious minority.

Of course, the persecution of Christian women cannot be fully stopped. Since Christian faith is anchored on Christ's second coming and since seasons of suffering on the earth are part of eschatological truth, sufferings of Christians will undoubtedly continue. This paper affirms the sovereignty of God, but it also calls for human responsibility. The challenge facing Christian women in India and similar contexts is how to be strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit and function effectively as God's witnesses (Acts 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:16). Christians have been sent like lambs among wolves; Christian women need to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves as they witness for Jesus (Matt. 10:16).

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