

Statement of the Indian Women Theologians' Forum (IWTF)
Annual Meeting, 28 April to 1 May 2019

We, the members of Indian Women Theologians Forum, gathered for our annual meeting from 28th April to 1st May 2019 at Good Shepherd Convent Bengaluru, and deliberated on the theme, "Towards a Gender Just Church".

In India, and across the globe, we see more and more women reclaiming their voice and agency in the secular sphere. Their subjugation, marginalization and exploitation are increasingly being exposed, countered and challenged. Inclusion and diversity are now an essential part of any discourse on gender. The emergence of new movements like the #MeToo campaign, the moves for temple entry, the triple talaq debate and the many initiatives by ecumenical churches that are creating platforms for a collective assertion of the rights of women and sexual minorities are indicative of the decisive steps taken by women on the path towards greater freedom and affirmation of their personhood.

The notion of gender justice still remains an ambivalent concept or, more accurately, a mismatch within the framework of the institutional Church. While the Christian doctrine affirms equality between women and men on the biblical foundation of the creation of humans 'in God's image' (Gen.1: 26-28), women's experience of discrimination, silencing and exclusion within the ecclesiastical sphere point to the contrary. We note with pain the indifference and silence on the part of Church leadership to victims/survivors of sexual abuse such as children and women, including religious women down the ages, even when it is brought to surface in the recent times. We are deeply disturbed by the double standards by which the survivors and their supporters are further victimized while the alleged offenders are supported and defended in various ways.

This context impelled us to explore critically the various manifestations of ecclesiastical patriarchy. We reflected on religious life and questioned whether it is lived as a prophetic call or remains merely an establishment preoccupied with survival and security concerns. The servitude that is the lot of a great majority of women betrays male privilege that is normalized in families and in the Church. This situation makes us interrogate whether the '*Gender Policy of the Catholic Church in India*' acclaimed as the first of its kind, has remained a failed promise even after 10 years of its existence.

Engaging in critical conversations on the predicament of women in the Church and in society, we are challenged by Spirit/ Sophia to address the situation with a sense of urgency.

Gathering the liberative voices of biblical women and examining its significance for today's Church, we resolve to create alternative spaces to exercise our theological and spiritual leadership as ecclesia.

Speaking truth to power like the Syrophenician woman of the Gospels, we reclaim our position, voice and rights as disciples of Jesus in the Church.

Stepping beyond the boundaries of gendered identity constructions that have devalued us over the ages, we wish to retrieve our full humanity as persons created, graced and commissioned by the empowering God to build a new Church and social order which is egalitarian and inclusive.

We resolve to continue our struggle to build a GENDER JUST CHURCH by exercising our collective agency and networking with individuals and communities committed to realizing the vision of the Reign of God in this world.