

ASSERTING AGENCY AND MAKING A DIFFERENCE

July 2026





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Editorial



Dr. Susan Thomas

Feminist Theologian and ICWM National Convenor 2025 - 27

Dear Friends,
Greetings!

This edition took a longer break for various reasons. We had our national convention in May, 2025 and our theme was 'Asserting agency and Making a difference'.

A new team of leadership was elected in this convention. We had meaningful deliberations and lively discussions and activities. This convention was conducted in collaboration with JCOR and we are thankful and appreciate their cooperation and support.

ICWM is a unique movement in its structure and goals. In India, we do not have very many Christian organizations or movements that include people from the denominational Churches, protestant, orthodox and catholic. ICWM is an inclusive movement that upholds a feminist consciousness and makes a conscious effort to implement it. Because of these unique features ICWM has its own struggle to claim our space and get our voice heard. As we struggle and strive together, we know we can achieve our goal. As Socrates said "strong minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, weak mind discuss people". Yes, we are discussing here powerful and new ideas that can and should transform attitudes and practices that perpetuate discrimination and inequality.

For the last few months, the national team leaders arranged webinars on topics that align with our objectives. 'Celebrating and Protecting our Diversities' was the first National Level Webinar organised on 29.08.2025 by the ICWM National team where the Speaker was Ms. Lara Jesani, an accomplished advocate who spoke on the need for communal harmony in the wake of the politics of hate rampant across India. She encouraged that we have an 'epidemic of love' across the nation to remind us of secular values rather than focus on our differences. Report on this webinar is a part of this newsletter.

The new leadership focus will be on reviving our existing units and organizing new units. We are launching the re-reading and understanding of the Gospel women in August, 2026 in the form of a certificate course. We encourage everyone to participate in it. This is a national level program initiated by ICWM while Continuously engaging on state and national level with issues and matters that affect the common folk and more specifically women by creating awareness through webinars and collaborating with like-minded organisations and movements. Our endeavour will be to enrich us and strengthen our fellowship.

We are prepping for the National Convention which is tentatively proposed for November, 2027. ICWM is looking for meaningful collaborations and partnerships in organising this National Convention.

Let me conclude with a Sufi story. One day after the preaching, the Sufi sat on the steps to take some rest. And he slept. He awoke very late in the night. He got up and went on his way. After some time he became hungry. He took the tiffin and found that it was full of ants. The Sufi said to himself 'Oh! It is so sad that the parents of these ants will be waiting at the steps where I sat and slept'. He then walked back to the steps and kept his tiffin on the steps. What an attitude!

All of us are familiar with the biblical story of the poor widow who offered two coins and Jesus commended her giving, because she gave her all.

It is not how much we give, But how much love we put into giving !

Wish you all God's Blessings !

Climate Justice is GENDER JUSTICE



Joycia Thorat

National Treasurer - ICWM, 2025-27, Development Professional

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals:

UNSDG -2030 Agenda, a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals, includes Gender Equality as goal 5 and Climate Action as the 13th Goal. India is one of the 193 countries who signed this agenda in 2015. The Planet, people and prosperity are the focus of the SDGs and 'leave no one behind' is the tag line. This resonates with the parables of Jesus of the lost coin and the lost sheep emphasizing that every single life matters .

World Council of Churches

The recently concluded Central Committee Meeting of the World Council of Churches held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 18th to 24th June 2025, launched the Ecumenical Decade of Climate Justice Action. As a commitment to urgent climate action - a pilgrimage encounter with creation, the WCC calls on member churches to undertake meaningful initiatives to address the climate crisis.

The Vatican :

The Vatican hosted a major international conference recently "Raising Hope for climate Justice" to deepen the vision of the encyclical Laudato si' which was published in 2015 , the same year of the launch of UNSDGs . The event brought together Vatican officials, climate experts, indigenous leaders, and youth activists to mobilize action and influence the upcoming COP30 negotiations. Both Pope Francis and the current Pope Leo XIV addressed the participants, emphasizing that ecological conversion starts in the heart and urgent action is required.

In his messages, Pope Leo XIV strongly linked environmental destruction to the exploitation of the poor and marginalized, and called nature a "battleground" for profit. He asserted that environmental justice is a "duty born of faith" and stressed the need for global cooperation and a new model of development based on solidarity and justice.



As part of Global South Appeal, Bishops representing Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean issued a strong letter to UN leaders ahead of COP30, urging them to uphold the 1.5°C climate goal and for rich nations to “pay their ecological debt” through fair climate finance (grants, not loans). They denounced “false solutions” like green capitalism that perpetuate exploitation and injustice.

Care for Creation :

As Christians, we are called to care for the earth. Today, we see the Earth in a fragile condition and crisis, causing havoc to humans and nature. As stewards of the creation, we are called upon to preserve, protect, care for, and nurture the earth and its inhabitants.

Call to Climate Action is a Christian and Biblical imperative. The Bible begins with the Creation story in Genesis. God created the earth and all within it. God found everything that was created beautiful and laid the responsibility on humans to tend and care for the creation. Hence, it is our Christian mandate to protect and preserve God’s creation.

Care for creation is the ethical and religious principle of taking responsibility of the natural world and its well-being. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living things and the importance of protecting the environment for the

present and future generations. This concept is found in Bible, as well as in other scriptures and ethical traditions, often rooted in the belief that the natural world is a gift from God and has inherent value.

Eco-Diakonia refers to the concept of integrating ecological concerns and environmental action into the Christian understanding and practice of Diakonia. It emphasizes that caring for creation is an essential part of Christian discipleship and a crucial aspect of God’s call to serve the world

Intersectionality of Climate and Gender:

According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) women are often responsible for food, water and fuel, walking miles to collect them during drought and on normal days. Men mostly migrate on work leaving women



with the higher burden of responsibility. Increased violence against women around the world is a common trend during climate emergencies as the strain over limited resources reinforces existing power imbalances within communities and individual households. Human trafficking and sexual exploitation increase in the aftermath of climate disasters leaving young women and girls more vulnerable. Young girls are married off to reduce familial burdens and as a hope for safe spaces out of disaster situation. Many times the emergency responses also turn out not to be a safe haven. Women are disproportionately affected and more vulnerable in any disaster situation. Thus, the intersectionality between climate and gender is so close the response needs to be a closely coordinated effort.

Ground experience and realities of how caste and Gender intersect in vulnerabilities:

As an aid worker, I once was engaged in a community drought relief program in Maharashtra . As organisation we were supplying water tankers



(a temporary relief measure) in addition to our long term development efforts to address climate issues through diverse programs like tree plantation drives, climate smart agriculture, saving water and conservation efforts, organic farming etc .

As we brought a water tanker into a village in the part where Dalits were residing, a group of upper caste men blocked the vehicle wanting the water to be supplied to the upper caste area. We were very firm in our communication, 'if you need water please do come into the area where Dalits live'. We were very clear that the Dalits were the priority in the emergency services as Dalit women were trebly marginalised in drought situations or for that matter in any climate emergency. Special privileged services needed to be organized as women are more vulnerable due to climate change.

Conclusion

Recently a pastor shared with me her frustration at how the congregation was far removed from the realities of the importance of climate justice and gender justice. The pastor said that all her efforts for care for creation and talk about climate justice to her congregation was seen as irrelevant work and definitely not the work of a pastor. The role of the pastor they believed was to nurture them and the church to only think "of heaven" and not necessarily to care for earth. We forget that the earth and all in it is very critical for us to live, especially since women suffer the most .

Perspective building is so very crucial to reverse this understanding. The way we are exploiting the nature it's already boomeranging on this generation. Let's take all precautions possible to care for creation and protect nature.



Building Feminist Leadership: A Young Woman's Perspective



Rev. Samarpita Patra

Faculty,
Menninite Brethern Centenary Bible College



Leadership has often been understood using the lenses of power, hierarchy, and control. From a young woman's perspective however, feminist leadership is not merely about women holding positions of power but about transforming leadership itself, making it relational, just, and rooted in equality.

In every generation, women have risen to challenge injustice and reshape the moral imagination of their societies. Today's world continues to echo the call, inviting young women to build new models of leadership grounded in equality, compassion, and justice.

As a young woman reflecting on feminist leadership, I find inspiration both in the biblical witness and in the lived experiences of women in India who have redefined what it means to lead.

Biblical Roots of Feminist Leadership

The Bible, though written in patriarchal

contexts, contains profound examples of women who personified leadership inspired by faith and justice. The creation story itself offers a foundation for equality. In Genesis 1:27, both male and female are created in the image of God (imago Dei), signifying equal worth and shared divine purpose. The fall in Genesis 3 distorted this relationship, but God's redemptive plan continually reaffirms equality and partnership.

Throughout Scripture, women arise as leaders in times of crisis. Deborah, a prophetess and judge (Judges 4-5), stands as a symbol of wisdom, courage, and spiritual authority. Miriam, who sang the victory song after the Exodus (Exodus 15:20-21), exercised leadership through worship and prophecy. Esther risked her life to save her people, showing that moral courage is central to godly leadership.

In the New Testament, Mary, the mother of



Jesus, embodies feminist leadership through her “yes” to God’s will, a willingness to participate in divine transformation. Mary Magdalene, the first witness to the resurrection (John 20:18), is entrusted with proclaiming the good news, becoming the first apostle to the apostles. The early Church also recognized women like Priscilla, who taught alongside her husband Aquila (Acts 18:26), demonstrating that leadership is shared, not gendered.

From these biblical narratives, we learn that feminist leadership is not rebellion against God’s order but a restoration of God’s justice. It challenges systems of domination and seeks to re-establish relationships grounded in mutual service, love, and equity.

Historical Foundations and the Journeys of Women Leaders

When we look at women in the Church, we observe the Church’s patriarchal structures often silencing women’s voices and limiting their leadership. Yet, women throughout our Christian past have persistently witnessed God’s call to lead

and serve. In the early centuries, women such as Thecla and Perpetua challenged social norms to proclaim their faith courageously. Medieval mystics like Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena became spiritual leaders through their writings, emphasizing God’s nurturing and compassionate nature.

In the Indian context, feminist leadership has deepened through the contributions of women in mission and theology. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Indian Christian women played vital roles in education, healthcare, and social reform often challenging caste and gender hierarchies. Figures like Pandita Ramabai exemplified this spirit. A scholar and social reformer, Ramabai advocated for women’s education and empowerment through faith-based action.

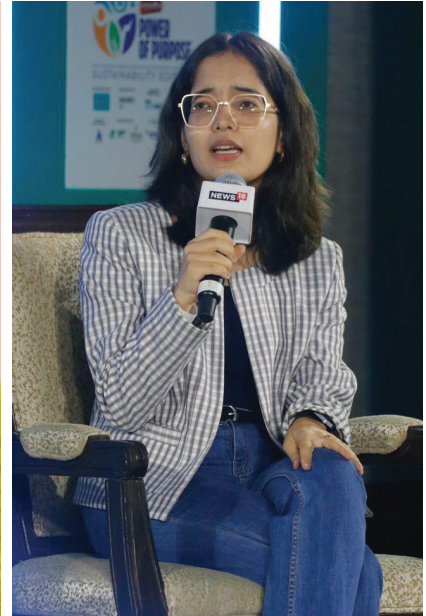
The developments of the late 20th century further strengthened this movement. Theologians such as Prasanna Kumari, Aruna Gnanadason, and Monica Melanchthon called for a re-reading of Scripture from women’s perspectives.³ They emphasized leadership as partnership rather than patriarchy, focusing on justice, inclusivity and transformation. Their writings remind us that feminist leadership must emerge from the lived experiences of women and communities.

In the present day, young Indian feminists like Trisha Shetty, founder of SheSays, work to combat gender-based violence and legal illiteracy. Amika George, an activist of Indian origin, leads the Free Periods movement promoting menstrual dignity. Kirthi Jayakumar, founder of The Red Elephant Foundation, advocates for peace and gender justice through storytelling, while Ridhima Pandey, a youth climate activist, connects ecological care with justice. These young voices embody a new generation of feminist leadership - bold, compassionate, and community-oriented - resonating deeply with biblical values of justice and stewardship.

A Young Woman Call to Reimagine Leadership

As a young woman reflecting on these biblical and historical journeys, I believe building feminist leadership today means reclaiming leadership as service and solidarity. The youth are called to unlearn inherited models of domination and embrace leadership rooted in compassion, equality, and justice.

Feminist leadership invites us to see power



differently not as control over others, but as the capacity to empower others and collaborate with others. It teaches us to lead through listening, to act through empathy, and to stand in truth even when systems resist change. In church and society, feminist leadership urges us to create inclusive spaces where both women and men can contribute freely according to their gifts.

This vision aligns with Christ's own model of leadership. Jesus redefined authority through



servanthood, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). His ministry which included women among his close circle of disciples, uplifted the marginalized, restored dignity to women, and dismantled rigid boundaries. Thus, to follow Christ faithfully is to practice leadership leading with justice, compassion, and humility.

Conclusion

Feminist leadership is not a modern invention; it is deeply rooted in the biblical narrative and the history of the Church. From Deborah to Mary Magdalene, from Thecla to Pandita Ramabai, from Prasanna Kumari to young Indian feminists today, the Spirit continues to raise voices that challenge inequality and envision transformation. Young women's perspectives on feminist leadership are particularly valuable. They are refreshing and vital. They bring urgency, creativity, and a vision of justice that refuses to leave anyone behind, ensuring that the struggle for equality is as inclusive and dynamic as the youth who lead it.

Justice – Unjustified

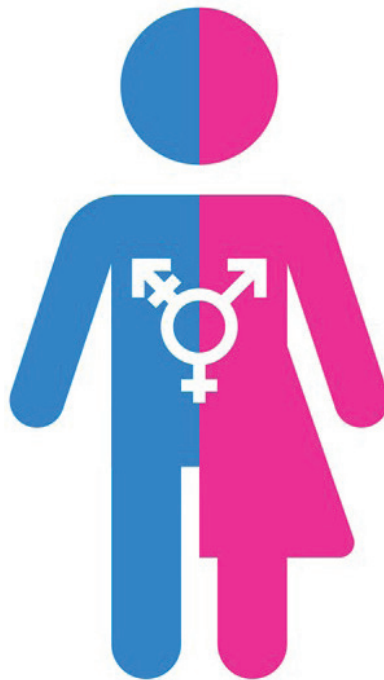


Olga Aaron

Social Activist, Motivator, Poet & Author

I grew up in a small Dalit village of Kanyakumari district, the southernmost part of India, and now when I am in my mid-fifties, jobless, homeless and lonely, though I have traveled all over the nation and to some parts of the globe, my thought process is still that of a small town person, as has been observed by many of my friends and colleagues. I, however, carry this attitude with pride, because I don't believe in being flexible to suit the situation, or just survive. As someone with gender dysphoria from childhood, and born into a family of extreme poverty, managed by a single mom, I went through several hardships in my day-to-day life. Hunger was a common part of my life, but 'no compromises to assuage the hunger', was the unwritten teaching of my mother.

My family is very regular at Sunday services at the small Salvation Army church which has barely a hundred families. We pray sincerely but never give offerings in the church due to our penniless condition. Because of this the church members mocked us. We were always excluded from the church's common feast during Christmas, because my mom couldn't afford to pay the subscription of the church. I would watch from afar, the group of fellow Christians, including children of my age group, relishing the sumptuous Christmas feast with meat, but I would control myself and not join them because of my mom's



strict warning. My elder brother however, once went and sat in the feast but he was ruthlessly dragged out and thrown out of the church premises. At home he even got beaten up by my mom. This memory still lingers in my mind.

As I grew up, during my early adolescence and teenage years I was confused with my gender non-conformity. As I grew older being bullied and ridiculed, I was worried and afraid about my future. Would I end up in street corners like other transgender women in our country? After finishing school, I couldn't continue my higher studies in regular institutions, due to my day-to-day issues of survival.

I ended up as a household assistant for a few years. I managed to continue undergraduate studies in English Literature and did my post-graduation in Public Administration through correspondence courses. In between, determined to live as a complete woman, I got my sexual reaffirmation surgery done.

After my transformation as a woman, life with dignity was a major struggle. I washed utensils and toilets to complete my education and pay for my surgery. Later I took jobs in NGOs, and have been part of several social work activities. In the HIV/AIDS sector I learned about sexuality and gender identity issues. I slugged for more hours of work than others, so that I did not end up living life like

most transwomen, begging and in prostitution. The senior church decision makers' children on the other hand are in mainstream studies and careers. Though we are very much part of society we are labeled as a separate community. Although we feel and live as complete women, we are deliberately categorized as the third gender. When participating in worship we were considered beneficiaries of church charity not as rightful members of the faith community. I was provided with what I call the "3B charity": Biryani, Bedsheet and a Bowl, but I was denied participation in the choir. I never knew why!

In scripture classes I was taught that prostitution and homosexuality are sins, but gradually the church was forced to accept different sexual orientations and sex work. As part of my social reformation, I had the understanding that the physical relationship between two people is personal. However, because I am a transwoman who is willing to accept sexual relationship only with heterosexual men and so have denied sexual favors to gay and bisexual men, I was labeled homophobic. I still face threats for not participating in pride marches and shouting 'happy pride'.

Though my mother suffered and made me and my brother suffer with hunger she never allowed men to take advantage of her. Several women friends of mine too refused to be commodified and enter the flesh trade. I have always argued that prostitution cannot be labeled as work since

girls and women are trafficked and forced into this trade. Those who admit in front of a mike and camera that they are voluntarily involved in the sex trade are mere pimps who want to trap other vulnerable women into the sex trade. As I strongly believe that 'my body is my right', women, including transwomen, shouldn't allow any man to commercially exploit their bodies and their vulnerability due to lack of food, shelter, clothes, children's education and life with a drunkard, psychotic husband. Girls and women are duped into falling in love and sold in brothels.

I am puzzled about the Christian community that used to be against homosexuality but later supported the repealing of section 377, same sex marriage and other related aspects. Due to this difference of opinion I was denied participation in NCCI meetings and some of other Christian associations.

But the state and nationwide positive gestures towards transgender persons as in the NALSA judgment, clarifications of the Supreme Court that gays, lesbian and bisexual persons are not transgender persons, and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 that is aimed at protecting the rights of transgender people and ensuring their welfare, are soothing and encouraging.

I love God Almighty and God's people and move forward with kindness and courage.





Asserting Agency and Making a Difference JCoR-ICWM National Conference 2025

Rapporteur by ICWM National Team

Pre-conference: The idea of the joint conference of JCoR and ICWM meeting was an idea both teams found worth exploring, though resources were limited. Preparatory discussions with both the ICWM national team and JCoR members were conducted for over three months prior to the conference.

The themes that emerged from discussion were exploring women's agency and leadership, addressing challenges to justice, and the role of women in peace and conflict. The preferred methodology was to maximise interactive sessions where we could listen and learn from each other within structured sessions over two and a half days. While most sessions could be common, some could be planned for ICWM and JCoR participants separately. A short note about both ICWM and JCoR was shared with participants as part of the invite, and more information was shared in different ways during the conference.

The final schedule included three sessions with speakers with distinct and extensive experiences that aligned with the theme; an introduction to SDGs, one experiential session on use restorative justice practices, one on challenges faced by Christians as minorities; and six sessions which

included group discussions and activities that allowed us to individually and collectively explore the idea of consent, agency, decision making, leadership and tangible forms of assertion in personal and public spheres be it in economic, social and political facets. Majority of the sessions were based on listening to participant experiences and opinions as we are all experts and leaders in our own journeys, and have much to contribute to our collective sisterhood.

We had close to 60 participants 30 each from ICWM and JCoR, from nine states of India and an age group varying from 20-80 years, including Catholic religious from sixteen congregations, Christian women theologians, teachers, social workers, leaders, doctors, trainers, pastors, writers, members representing several Christian denominations

Conference

Day 1: 9th May 2025

In keeping with the theme and intent of the conference, from registration onwards, elements of sisterhood were prioritised. To meet as equals it was requested that all participants write their name on the cards they pinned on. Just names, no prefix and suffix, no organization, no congregation

or marital status. The idea was that addressing each other by name will help building bonds and listen better and learn from multiple perspectives more openly without a sense of hierarchy.

The **introductory session** games and spiritual connect brought us together. We took time to ponder on the theme, centre ourselves and prepare ourselves for the time we planned to spend together. We made eye contact, shared a little about each other, and moved together to lose inhibitions and establish a basic sense of trust and familiarity. **Raynah weaved into the programmes songs and reflections** that aligned with our theme, and uplifted the group.

The first **key note was by Jean D'Cunha moderated by Joycia Thorat**. The session pondered deeply on how life 'happens' to women: often marked by a lack of agency and choice, and social norms that are challenging to negotiate in one's favour, especially when it comes to sexual and reproductive health. Family support was seen to be a critical factor in the security and comfort women experience time and again. Institutions, both formal and informal, are linked in complex ways to marginalise women survivors of sexual assault, rape and abuse. At an individual level too, we normalise some of the same attitudes. A woman's agency over her body, and her decisions related to sexuality, sex, choice of pregnancy are also marred by the taboo in most social circles to speak openly about it. Her agency is further affected by pressure from her family to conform to social norms, the violence that is often normalised under the garb of tradition, of culture and respectability. Our options are also limited to by our knowledge, resources and support. As part of 'Indian culture', women are also made dependent, reducing our capacity to assert and make choices, especially choices to be self-reliant. In the absence of social and institutional support, laws, both national and international, don't add up to real protection for a survivor of domestic or sexual violence.

Next was an **interactive session led by Winnu** on practising to say 'No'. The session was marked with hesitation and became lively as we began unpacking the emotions involved in saying and taking 'no' as an answer. We explored how every 'no' has two sides, and how every no is a 'yes' to something else, which need not be about the request, but could be about so many other priorities. We were left with thoughts to

reflect: Is 'yes' always positive? Is 'no' always negative? Can we pause before responding rather than immediately react? As we are exploring agency and assertion it is important to explore these dynamics. As women in leadership, do we enable those around us to respond with agency? Especially from those younger or weaker among us, are we comfortable to take 'no' as an answer? How are we mentoring leadership and decision making in our sphere of influence?

The next session was on **contextualizing challenges**, reviewing existing laws and systems of safeguarding and support for vulnerable people within our churches, community and country. Below are some of the key points mentioned.

- **Brinda Adige** spoke of leadership and constant engagement opening new ways to address patriarchy, the options to intervene that come from being part of the church and speaking up.
- **Celin Thomas** spoke of practical accompaniment possibilities, and how timely information and mentoring can make a world of difference to reestablishing oneself and enjoying a sense of wellness.
- **Jacquelin** spoke of how assertion, confidence and patience were needed to break gender stereotypical roles as a CSI pastor, to find acceptance, exercise leadership and gain the trust of the community.
- **Seena Abraham** shared simply and clearly what really mattered when it came to journeying against the flow, how family support and a strong sisterhood helped smoothen rough patches.

This session also covered the systems that exist in our church communities to support those in distress and informed us on the attitude, skills, and ways in which church, state, family and sisterhoods can either come together to support, to ignore or to destroy victims and survivors of violence—both in church and religious life.

We then had a power packed second **keynote address by Lucy moderated by Margaret Gonsalves** who very innovatively introduced Lucy through a song. Lucy, the founder director of Maher (mother's home in Marathi), kept us spell bound as she narrated her life journey, the choices she made, and the challenges she faced in her choice to be a religious, and to start Maher. Lucy shared Maher's distinct approach and intent in creating a

safe welcoming space for women who are victims and survivors of violence at home, and who need a safe space to heal and thrive. It is a space that is welcoming for all, the gates of Maher are always open, never locked. She was convinced that it needed to respect all faiths and so Maher follows an interfaith culture, none of which is a norm when it comes to institutions led by catholic religious. While their first centre is based in Pune, at present they run over 70 centres across India, including homes for homeless women and men, young girls and boys and people with disabilities. All Maher homes provide space to heal and rebuild lives through counselling, accompaniment that is non-judgemental, skill training, schooling, ensuring that house members are able to pursue life with agency and a sense of security and belonging.

The interfaith mandala – which includes symbols of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Christian faiths is part of their festivities, and in their centres along with the sacred books is included the Constitution of India. Here is a link from their website on the practice: <https://maherashram.org/interfaith-association/>

From Lucy's sharing of her personal journey, the many times she had to say no to present traditions to make space for new more inclusive Maher traditions, was inspiring. The journey of being told 'no' and having to say 'no' was evidently challenging but worth it when one hears about the many thousands who found their home in Maher and are thriving not just to support themselves, but now are the strength and leadership of Maher. A small but precious moment of her being invited to meet Pope Francis, and her mother's joy and pride in it, made us rejoice with her.

The last session was a **sharing circle facilitated by Winnu**, where we listened to mini stories from each other that spoke of experiences of assertion, and hope, and disturbing realities, and a call for support. The exercise of stepping in and stepping out gave us a chance to observe variations in pace, in confidence, volume, nervous laughter, that each one of us exhibited while stepping in and out of the centre. As we got comfortable with the game, the stepping in and the stories took a lighter turn. We laughed and let go some heaviness that sat on our shoulders from our day long deliberations. None of these insights and experience would have been felt or experienced without each one of us actively participating.

Day 2: 10th May

We started with the **spiritual connect led by the Chennai ICWM team Jacqueline, Maria Aiswarya, Hannah, Vedahakani, Beril and Clare**. With no pulpit, the wisdom and revelations shared made us experience a pride in our sisterhood. Insights from the Bible by Veda set the tone for the day. One message that stayed and forced us to think was to differentiate between the idea of religion and of spirituality and following Jesus. Each is a choice we make with distinct implications and possibilities. And as a women's collective, the fact that the canonical bible used some women to overshadow other women, ex. the story of Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus, was also a dynamic that called for attention. It is a reality one needs to keep acknowledging in order to address and build shared leadership. For many of us these were new and liberating perspectives to understand bible stories and narratives.

This was followed by the third **keynote session led by Susan Thomas and moderated by Kochurani** that made for an organic flow of thoughts and learning. Susan's theological reflection on the life of Christ took us forward on a personal journey of assertion, self-discovery, interspersed with stories that reflected concerns for feminist theology, the fact that many women are not named in the Bible, that their suffering is not just un-recognised but their narratives are also corrupted due to a combination of politics and ignorance.

She shared several instances when Jesus is seen involved in counter-cultural acts to transform society like engaging and closely associating with women, beggars, lepers, and tax collectors, all unbecoming of a leader of those times. When it comes to the cross and resurrection, there is an acknowledgment and ritual we associate to his suffering. She prompted us to compare Jesus suffering with instances of women suffering. Susan analysed the story of a Levite and His Concubine from Judges 19-21. The fact that she is referred to as a 'concubine' and not by name, as well as her suffering not being valued is a strong contrast. We have brutal text, evidence of women being silenced in the text written two thousand years back, and a reality even today.

In the next session **Anita introduced the**

SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) as a tool. We started with game of finding partners who had cards mentioning the same goal, and then each group came up with indicators for their goal. Through the 17 goals, we explored the context of the goal and how the indicators could help us sharpen our social engagement, support in documentation and communicating our work, and help us with advocacy both locally and internationally for the causes we are committed to.

Anita facilitated the next session, **Contextualizing Challenges-2** which drew from our collective experiences of challenges and possibilities in exercising agency. After a short context setting, we discussed specific challenges within the church and in society in groups after which we came together for a common plenary.

The idea was to gain insights on our individual experiences of successfully asserting our opinions and choices, supporting others, and the challenges that came our way when we tried. We took up the case story of a recent death of Shiney, a mother who died by suicide along with her two daughters. Reports on her death amply demonstrated the lack of support and agency that women seem to face in spite of being 'professionally trained' and from so called 'good Christian families'. Many instances of personal and collective challenges were discussed, as well as the security one experiences if we are supported when we assert. Supporting someone asserting for her rights and justice can be just as challenging as asserting our own choices and voicing our own needs, be it at home, at work, or in institutions like church and congregational forums.

Post lunch, we all got engrossed in **listening circles facilitated by Arlene Manoharan**. It was a labour of love with much attention to details. We transformed from conference mode, to a restorative listening circle which was built around a beautiful centre with objects from nature. After an introduction to the concept, and consolidating around a common understanding of shared values we went on to experience listening circles in five groups of ten each. It was an hour of intimate sharing supported by one facilitator. Personal stories were shared and heard without judgement. It was an experience that many found sacred, safe and inviting. The facilitators held a safe space for all, keeping track of time and gently prodding and encouraging members in the circle to share.

This was followed by a discussion on **Christians in conflict areas. The session facilitated by Cinthia Pinto had Rini Ralte and Nirmala as the lead speakers.**

Rini shared the situation of Manipur, Rini highlighted the fact that the continued violence is destroying the community. If there is a strong state intervention, violence could be stopped in few days, like in 2002 riots in Gujarat. People are trapped in hate politics, each one isolated, ghettoed and living in fear. Both Meitei and Kukis are impacted, but clearly the Kuki and Naga community have faced more losses. Rini also talked about the formation of chapters of ICWM in Manipur, Nagaland, and Mizoram.

Nirmala shared insights on caste conflict and its impact on Dalits both within churches and beyond. Churches uphold caste hierarchy and, in most cases, have not taken on themselves to bring about truly just inclusion as a priority. Another less talked about fact is how Dalits are directly and indirectly the most impacted by wars at the borders and by local conflict. During wars, it is mostly jawans who get killed, and they are mostly from the Dalit community. The coffins that come decorated in the tricolour signify the loss of a critical earning member of the family, and in most wars, it is families in Dalit communities that pay this price most heavily.

In the North-east, the state is using the youth to satisfy their vested interests by getting them to involve in the conflict. Free Movement Regime (FMR) was a unique arrangement between India and Myanmar that allowed residents within a certain radius of the border to cross freely without visas or passports was withdrawn in 2024. FMR was a recognition to facilitate the movement of people with shared ethnic and familial ties and to support local trade and economic activity. Now people cannot go to their river and forest anymore in the name of national security. The traditional strength of women's collectives, like the Meira Paibis, is seeing a downward trend. They too are being misused by right-wing hate mongers and are drawn into conflict of the Meitei community. While there are efforts by women to come together, these are still developing conversations. The role of women in vulnerable communities, be it Dalits, Adivasi, Transgender people or migrant workers, are mostly limited to efforts of survival. Rarely are they able to exercise agency and set goals for

resolving issues.

The last session of the day was a group discussion to share experiences of **challenges in asserting choice in different spheres of life:** economic, social, emotional, spiritual, religious. The many differences in Christian denominations when it comes to leadership, priesthood, family cultures, and practices of dowry gave us insights into the institutions and the actions that we could take. Efforts to strengthen the agency of women in terms of amplifying voices from the pulpit in the church was one. Another was the experience of being at the receiving end of Gender Based Violence and sexual harassment. Women are unable to speak about it as the aggressors are often men in positions of power. These violations are usually labelled as 'consensual sex' and justified. The normalizing of such violence, and the lack intent to nurture robust grievance redressal mechanisms was a common concern.

Another challenge that was highlighted was the limited agency of women over financial and economic decisions. Finance is often managed by male members of the family. One way to support assertion is to support women to handle their own financial decisions, build skills, claim inheritance and disallow dowry. One needs to take on a wholistic approach rather than a fragmented one. Often, while laws may say that the daughters and women in the family must inherit a share of the property, there is pressure on the women to sell it or give it to male siblings and relatives.

Another concern was women's reluctance to question and negotiate wages and salary. Be it within the church, among religious institutions, or in secular institutions and other jobs, there is a uneasiness in asking. We felt that when it comes to payments be it daily wages or monthly salaries, as women we should make it a practice to question and demand just and equal payment. Pursuing union membership, being part of progressive collectives and sharing best practices are possibilities to support these demands.

One of the best practices shared was from the orthodox church in Kerala. It has a session on financial management, with an emphasis on women understanding their inheritance and nature of property, as part of marriage counselling.

Other instances of relevant supporting information were that some Catholic

congregations have safe guarding policies; there are guiding documents from the Vatican for the Catholic church, and from the CCBI at the national level.

There was a request to share these and other best practices so that we could learn from each other. Women need to be socially supported to assert rights, and not blamed for breaking up the family when insisting on their rightful share. Basic information is much needed.

Day 3: May 11

Starting with songs and a brief silence to get centred, we started the day with an activity facilitated **by Winnu to imagine a world that was ours to create.** On a blank sheet, we each brought in one building block to create a family, a church or community of our dreams. Additionally, we needed to trust that in our collective strength, that our one building block would be complemented and supported by the building blocks brought in by the rest to make the unit complete.

Many of us found both challenging, firstly to step out of 'protest mode' (of bringing in blocks to 'address violence' or 'accompany survivors'). The second given was the collective and so we needed to factor in the contribution of fellow participants bringing in supporting blocks which together with ours would make another world possible.

The idea that we are not alone, and all contexts may not demand protest took time to accept and sense. The challenge to imagine that we had agency to set the goals came easier to younger participants. The diversity of the participants brought in immense richness and insights. Some blocks suggested are listed below.

Social

- Be inclusive in society and reach out to people in need
- Practice positivity and kindness in daily interactions
- Respect, dignity and accountability
- Equal opportunities and responsibility for all
- Positive energy and cheerfulness
- Emphasis on civic sense
- Free of caste & religious biases

Individual and Family

- Give & support children for their education
- Everyone is free to form a family they are

comfortable with, Family based on love

- A cosmic home founded on kinship among humans and other beings.
- Everyone chooses peace and peaceful negotiation... only love
- Celebrate individuality appreciate differences and different opinions
- Taking care of personal health in order to lead a group as well being of self is v imp.

Work, Wages and Ownership

- Care work be shared equally by all in the household and community
- Engage in activities that bring happiness and equality for all, and one's own enhancement
- Resources will be shared by all in trusteeship, no private ownership, all held as commons.

This was followed by an intense and detailed road map on the use of **restorative justice practices** by Arlene. She shared the importance of preparations, rituals and shared values in order to create a safe space for conversations. Listening circles are safe and conducive to healing. Restorative Justice is not about compromising with situations, but enabling all stakeholders to sit together and find ways to build trust, share thoughts, and pursue healing collectively.

To quote from Arlene's presentation:

"Beyond the opening and closing ceremonies, the Circle itself is a **ritual** that communicates meaning. **Sitting in the round** says that everyone is included equally without regard to rank, status, or hierarchy. Shedding titles gives a further message of equality and of looking beyond outer roles to who we are in our hearts. Joining hands expresses community. The **opening** ceremony invites reflection and a spiritual sense of connectedness. The **talking piece** cultivates a capacity both to listen and to speak with respect. The **guidelines** convey shared ownership of the process and responsibility for its outcomes. And the **closing** ceremony inspires gratitude for the good achieved. **Together, these rituals create a secure space where we can share personal stories, express emotions, be honest, take risks, and seek solutions to very difficult issues.**"

This was followed by separate sessions for participants of ICWM and JCoR to discuss the way forward for each group.

The [ICWM group](#) discussed the elections of their new leadership team and challenges to strengthen the network units and the national team.

The session with JCoR members had a more detailed introduction on JCoR as a collective of Catholic religious at the UN to work together for social concerns. JCoR uses the SDGs as a way to acknowledge different concerns and engage with advocacy at various UN forums. At the core of the vision of the SDGs is the idea of 'leaving no one behind'. The framework enables JCoR members to share best practices and challenges through active conversations. Some features that are useful are participation in '[the Global community hour](#)' held on the second Friday of every month; and a vibrant [website](#) that lists resources, region wise contact points, a calendar and links to upcoming meetings. One can also subscribe to the newsletter, follow JCoR's social media handles, or contact the JCoR team. There was a diversity of congregations and members represented at the meeting—religious and secular institutes, young novices to former generals of congregations, social workers, teachers, formators, superiors, those with expertise in the area of health, education and community outreach, also locations spread across the breadth of the country.

There was interest among congregations to check if they were already members, and if not, how could they connect. The great concern shared was regarding the decline of numbers and quality of vocations to religious life and the context of congregations engaging with formation of a handful of formees in religious houses. There is a need to revision formation, may be move into synodal style, support formation structures where formation is for the mission of Christ and not restricted to a particular congregation's ministries but a preparation for inter-congregational pastoral collaboration. [There was a mention of common formation house in Pune shared by few congregations]

There was also interest to map possible collaborations and learn from best practices on governance, leadership, redressal and safeguarding, climate change and use of SDGs. A suggestion to possibly look at options for expanding JCoR to places like Shillong as it is a hub of Catholic institutions was made. Some proposed organizing a mix of online and in-

person meetings that can build more horizontal collaborations based on interest and location. Issues like climate change, leadership, restorative justice, and listening circles were mentioned as important to the group. While collaborations should be organic, there was a commitment from JCoR to facilitate such sharing.

All participants, ICWM and JCoR came together for the **closing session of the conference together with a beautiful closing prayer led by Eunice, Kathy, Manisha and Nirmala.** It started with songs, reflection, lighting of candle and all of us sharing one word, and adding individual lamps to form a circle of light. We concluded with the following **Collective Affirmation:**

We are women of agency.

We claim our voice, our strength, our story.

We do not wait for change; we are the change.

Blessing: *Let us go, lit from within. The world is*

waiting, not for perfect women, but for present ones. For women who show up, speak up, and rise up. That's who we are. That's what we carry. And we will never walk alone."

Now go!

with your head held high and your spirit grounded in grace.

Go, not in fear, but in faith.

Go, knowing you were made for this moment.

Speak with truth. Act with justice.

Love without condition.

You are the light this world is waiting for.

Go and shine,

not for applause, but for impact.

Not for perfection, but for purpose.

Go, and make a difference.

Amen.



CELEBRATING AND PROTECTING OUR DIVERSITIES

Report on ICWM National Webinar held on 29.08.2025



Rapporteur by
Celin Thomas

Lawyer & National Secretary- ICWM 2025-27

In the backdrop of our great nation's independence day, ICWM celebrated this occasion by paying homage to the diversity that coexisted within our democracy. As our country stands at the cusp of changing legal and political landscape, we asked whether it was our differences in opinions, in our individual choices, religious affiliation and culture that were driving us apart? Whether freedom of choice should or could be constrained in our personal biases, political ideologies and laws?

We assessed the happenings and incidents across India that demonstrated the systemic apathy that reeked of subjugation by robbing people from practicing their way of life without the fear of judgment and reprimand. We looked for ways to influence the secular and constitutional way of life in India and going forward, how to protect our ability to freely express ourselves without losing the freedom of choice.

Webinar report:

Number of participants: 51

The Webinar was conducted on Zoom between 8-9PM IST.

Susan Thomas- National Convenor introduced ICWM and the concept behind the webinar. She handed over to Hannah Dhanaraj the moderator who introduced the speaker.

Lara Jessani- spoke about how ICWM was close to her heart as she had been associated with our movement over the years and was honoured to be a part of this webinar.

Lara spoke about celebrating Independence Day from constitutional articles that provide basic and fundamental rights and how they are compromised.

She spoke about the challenges: increase in hate speech especially in Maharashtra, misuse of social media, mainstream media channels have picked up the divisive narratives, spread of propaganda and hate speeches happening.

Hate speeches are generally linked to mob

lynching and crimes, communal clashes in Nagpur, Satara and Mira Road- Thane district. Concern for minorities and every other citizen is an issue since mobs take over and the police and State government remain inactive.

Communal hate is fostered via social media. Many of those who are indulging in hate and abuse are creating fake accounts/ profiles and perpetrating such malice. People who stood up for a community by voicing their dissent as hate is not acceptable to them face a backlash.

The impunity with which communal hatred and hate speeches are perpetrated is concerning. Police reports are necessary so that communal hatred will be nipped in the bud.

Incidents showing solidarity from different communities is a good initiative. She asserted that we need to be involved and initiate talks that forge communal harmony.

It is important to look beyond religion, look towards humanity, preserving essential human values. Secularism is a spirit with which we live.

Mohalla committees encourage dialogue between communities from different faiths. It is important to show a counter narrative that shows solidarity, across generations. LOVE should be louder than hate.

Mumbai for Peace Initiative - many activists, citizens came together, did cultural programs, movies were shown and rallies were conducted to spread the message of love.

Article 51 (a)- duty to protect constitutional values. Inter-faith solidarity is extremely important in preserving the social and secular fabric. We need to get together and reach out to more people to spread the message of solidarity and love at

constituent level, cities, etc.

We need to become tolerant too. Following our faith should not make us intolerant. We need to shun dogmas and biases. As a pluralistic society we should respect despite cultural differences and enjoy equal citizenship rights.

Anti conversion laws are taking choices away.

Dalits, adivasis are the easiest targets of these laws.

Creating a pluralistic society and protecting it takes effort, especially when there are windmills of hate which are driven by money and power. If we want to counter it we must do so with an **epidemic of love.**

EVENTS ORGANISED BY ICWM NATIONAL TEAM

1. On 29.08.2025 - ' Celebrating and Protecting our Diversities ', Speaker- Lara Jesani and moderated by Susan Thomas - National Convenor- ICWM
2. On 04.01.2026- 16 days of Activism organised in collaboration with CRI-Women
3. On 06.03.2026 Panel discussion: Understand your voting rights: Special Intensive Revision (SIR); Speakers - Mr. Clifton D'Rosario, Ms. Madhuri Badwani and Ms. Manisha Banerjee moderated by Anita Cheria- JCoR/ ICWM. Co-organised with Together for Tranquility (TfT) and Justice Coalition of the Religious (JCoR)
4. On 28.05.2026- Women's Reservation Bill webinar, Speaker- Shabnam Hashmi and moderated by Brinda Adige.
5. ICWM spearheaded a Prayer for Peace initiative along with several Christian groups belonging to different denominations. The worship was lead by several members representing a total of 15 organisations over a Zoom meeting on 10.04.2026. The Prayer for Peace initiative is now known as Peace with Justice and teh Collective aims to collaborate and organise several such initiatives aimed towards justice, equity and peace.
6. 'Observing Nakba' was organised by ICWM National team along with 'Peace with Justice' initiative on 12.06.2026 at 7PM over Zoom. The meeting was hosted by ICWM with guest speaker Ms. Amal who spoke about the Nakba- a day of observance where an estimated 750,000 to 800,000 Palestinians were forcibly expelled or fled from their homes and became refugees. Palestinians observe Nakba Day annually on May 15, the day following the declaration of Israeli independence.

INTRODUCING ICWM NATIONAL TEAM FOR THE PERIOD 2025-2027

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Celin Thomas - National Secretary
Joycia Thorat - National Treasurer

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Hannah Dhanraj
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