



Into That Heaven of Freedom May Women Too Awake



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Editorial - Jerin Jacob



As the country gears up to commemorate yet another Independence Day, albeit this time amid the global COVID-19 pandemic at play, we find ourselves grappling with newer versions of questions regarding freedom, rights and advocacy that we have been long struggling to answer. While this novel shift in social patterns and frameworks around how, how much and whom the pandemic affects pushes us to seek newer alternatives for long existing problems, this is also a chance for us all to relook at the world around us with fresher, and more critical eyes. Freedom for all, brings with it freedom for each - a concept that India as a free democratic, is yet to wholly translate into practice. When we look particularly at the status of freedom of women in India, rooted in traditional and religious teachings and limitations, it is mandatory to draft and incorporate newer solutions and perspectives, outcomes that stem from lived experiences and those that take the victimised voices into account.

This issue tries to address, document and challenge many such problems, rooted in patriarchy, casteist hegemony and crude gender inequality. This issue has formulated varied perspectives, informed opinions and alternatives while also recording grassroots level work undertaken by the Indian Christian Women's Movement across India. The team hopes that issue reflects itself as representative, enlightening and informative to its readers.

WHAT IS FREEDOM?

Shefalle Karanjikar

Shefalle Karanjikar is always at the forefront of social issues in word and action. She has contributed to many social awareness posters and is a part of the National Social Media Team.



Freedom is the opportunity for right development, for development in accordance with the Progressive ideal of life that we have in conscience.

We celebrate today the feast of our nation's Independence - a day earmarked as one where our ancestors fought with mind and soul to obtain for its citizens - then and future - a land free of oppression - as in Tagore's words 'where the mind is without fear and the head is held high'. The battle of Indian freedom fighters is all encompassing - for it considers all the stalwarts - the revolutionaries who used force to state their point, the satyagrahis who believed in non-violent ways, the reformers who redeemed the nation of the vices of child marriage, sati, untouchability, female infanticide and filled minds with the virtues of education and widow remarriage. Indeed it is a matter of pride to read the stories that seem so distant to us now. Freedom was a collective effort not forgetting that freedom also ushered in the partition that still leaves a scar on many generations. And yet people moved on.

Today we are 73 years from that event-filled day and while we are glad we are not enslaved by foreigners, we wonder if we are free. Today, we are enslaved by a virus and maybe the many vices of old. We stand today on a threshold of many a stark antithesis - India is balancing itself on a rickety plank between abundance and poverty, townships and slums, ethics and selfishness, luck and fate, life and death. With COVID-19 ushering us into the year 2020, we are all urged to be under a lockdown - socializing is banned and you can't move out without an impending risk to life. Yet with COVID -19, in the lockdown of humans, nature was unlocked - we saw both flora and fauna breathing freely and claiming their spaces with glee. Today however, 5 months down the line, we fear our one-time-use masks, PPE equipment and other preferred plastic will once again choke the life out of the earth.

While many cribbed over an opportunity to work from home and funny memes made the rounds, thousands lost basic rights to food, clothing, shelter overnight and started walking home aimlessly. As fields and storerooms overflowed with stock, the rich got the bulk of it. Suddenly businesses emerged reaching daily essentials literally to the doorsteps. The daily work of the poor was now the business of the affluent.

As hospitals became the need of the hour, the opportunity to earn money out of the helpless gained bad press. Many private hospitals generated heavy bills as government hospitals seemed to overflow. Suddenly even the right of an infant to be born seems to be at stake. Palliative homes closed and pain suffered a worse death. Essential medicines instead of going to hospitals were black marketed to people. Today, Right to Life corresponds with the money to buy it.



WHAT IS FREEDOM?

In a country where education was given high importance, suddenly the Right to Education ceased to exist. Education became the privilege of the haves, while the have-nots went vast lengths to seek it to the point of death.

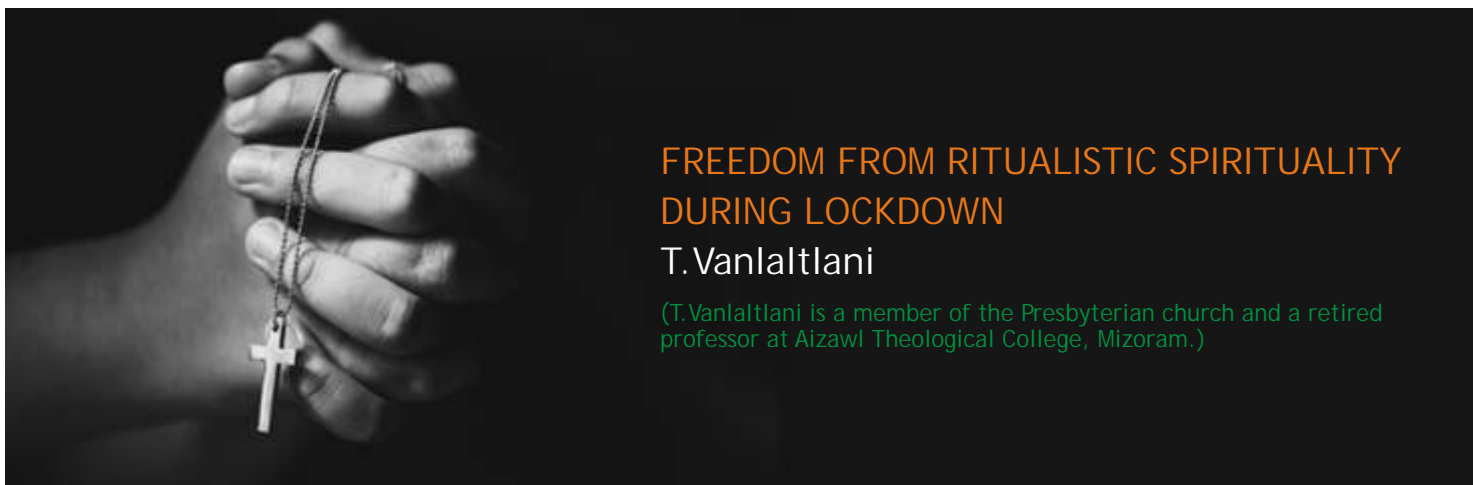
Domestic violence and child abuse increased triple-fold in that the victims were locked with their abusers. To worsen the situation, in the name of revenue, the sale of alcohol saw a boost and further increased the pain of brutality in the abuse. While we thought rapists would fear the virus transmission in rape, it was a short-lived hope. Rape returns, to raise its evil head even in quarantine facilities.

Where at the start we saw the government show a deep concern when there were less cases of COVID-19, we see more concern today in winning elections, building monuments, slaying voices that speak, imprisoning human rights activists and ritualizing religious festivals, as lakhs suffer.

The church in India too saw another awakening. On one side you have the defiance of Mulakkal, in Jalandhar which is still being probed and on the other side former priest and rapist 56 year old Robin now wants to marry the 20-year old rape survivor, to escape his jail sentence. The silence of the church is equivalent to that of politicians who are silent or change the subject to escape their lack of responsibility.

We see the good and bad effects of our freedom today. We are ever thankful for the righteous who work for a just cause to the point of being jailed, for the many simple citizens who continue to reach out with their mite to save the helpless. We are obliged to those who helped fill supplies in other homes besides theirs. We appreciate all those across the world who fought for George Floyd and many others who fought for Jayaraj and Bennicks. We are indebted to those who still care for nature and the many who have gone out of the way to demand justice for nature. We are filled with gratitude for the many who without a call reach out to provide relief aid in areas destroyed by the fury of nature. We owe it to the many who signed petitions so humanity can flourish.

Freedom is a feeling and you won't enjoy it till you see more people reaping the benefits of it



FREEDOM FROM RITUALISTIC SPIRITUALITY DURING LOCKDOWN

T. Vanlaltlani

(T. Vanlaltlani is a member of the Presbyterian church and a retired professor at Aizawl Theological College, Mizoram.)

Starting from the Janata Curfew on 22nd March, life has been so different from the pre-Covid normal. Here are some of my new experiences of freedom, during this lockdown.

a. Freedom to lead the Family Worship

With the churches experiencing a lockdown, no church service has been performed and family worship can be conducted without any problem. Many Christians seem to be oppressed by the regular ritualistic routine of worship inside the church building under the chairmanship of ordained male priests. But the family worship gives equal chance to both men and women, both adults and children. All can lead through Bible reading, recitation, solo singing, conducting the worship service, etc. without any barrier.

b. Freedom to share and participate, to have a deeper sense of oneness and unity in the family

Gathering in the church for public worship is well and good, but there is a strong belief that church public service is possible only under the leadership of few permanent official leaders of the local churches. Consequently, most of women and children become mere observers and participants but have never become leaders and facilitators of the worship program.

In individual and family devotional time each and every member can enjoy equal chance for sharing and participating in their respective houses and sitting places. They can communicate in their respective places by wearing their normal dress without any fashionable attire. They feel free to interact with other members of their family, they can share out their sad and painful feeling caused by the problem of interpersonal relationship in their own family. Hence there is possibility to create closer relationship among the members of the family.

c. Freedom from ritualistic routine-based worship

Church services usually have the program prepared by either the local church committee or worship committee. But the worship outside the church building does not differentiate lay people or ordained ministers; rather even children and differently abled persons can take up the responsibility of leading the worship and praying fellowship. The lockdown has freed several believing Christians from the oppression of ordained people's leadership and nominal ritualistic performance. Hence, they worship living God in their own way and every family is free to enjoy spiritual freedom in order to have practical.

d. Freedom from sacramental rituals

Almost all Christian church denominations are maintaining ritual sacramental performance. Except in a few churches the celebrants of sacraments are men who are licensed to do by their ordination. But lockdown has blocked the regular church services since March 22, 2020 (in India) till date and the sacramental rituals are not performed in individual houses. Today's Christianity in lockdown area of India is alive and active without sacramental rituals. Hence individuals and families maintain their spirituality without sacramental rituals.

e. Freedom for meaningful fellowship with God and family members

Women and children can exercise their loving relationship at their respective family devotion in a relaxed mood. They (who had never been given any chance of sharing, to do Bible reading and prayer in the church service) can enjoy freedom of speech in sharing their joyful spiritual experiences, problems, joys and sorrows. With the lockdown, people can now to set sufficient time for devotional prayer and fellowship with God. Having fellowship with God and other members of the family is little bit difficult for children and many women while attending service inside the church or any church organized program. Therefore, the lockdown can be a blessing for many women and children who have been always marginalized by ritualistic spirituality under the control of regular church routine. Hence freedom from ritually controlled program nourishes another kind of spirituality to the life of many Christians in their respective places, either inside the house or their kitchen garden or anywhere else.



THE BIBLE'S LIBERATIVE MESSAGE FOR WOMEN - LaInghakthuami

Dr LaInghakthuami is Professor in Aizawl Theological College, Mizoram and a member of the ICWM National Team.



The Bible is the source of inspiration for Christians throughout the ages. It is regarded as the infallible Word of God for Christian faith and conduct. In fact, the Bible is a collection of books written by human beings over a number of years in the context of patriarchal culture. Therefore, it is necessary that we read the Bible in its own cultural setting and context from the women's perspective.

The Bible has been read and interpreted by male scholars for centuries. No one dares to question the male biases of its authors, texts and interpretations. The biblical texts are misused by the male interpreters to keep women in second place and as tools to deny women leadership roles in the community. Women have started questioning the impact of the biblical interpretations on their life and have started re-reading the Bible from their perspective. The feminist re-reading of the Bible has uncovered many biases of its male interpreters. The re-reading of the bible with a feminist consciousness has led to the liberation of women and the poor.

When rereading the Bible through a woman's eyes we are able:

- (i) to observe the plight of women
- (ii) to identify the biblical texts that are offensive to women
- (iii) to critique traditions and culture that oppress women
- (iv) to reclaim the liberative message from texts

When we read about Jesus' ministry we discover his positive attitudes towards women which carry a liberative message for women's today.

Let us look at **Mk 7: 24 – 30**: As we know women were supposed to be silent and docile in Jewish culture. Unexpectedly Jesus encountered a foreign woman who who confronts him. She asked him to heal her daughter but Jesus refused, explaining that he had been sent to the Israelites. Her courageous efforts encouraged Jesus to change his mind and expand the scope of his ministry to the Gentile world. Finally, Jesus accepted his mission which was for all the people. He not only healed her daughter, he also restored her confidence and accepted her as an equal who could demand and receive what she wanted. It was the unnamed foreign woman who forced Jesus to free the unslaved.

Paul says, "I follow the example of Christ" (I Cor.11:1). The Hebrew writer also says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus" (Heb.12:2). The word and action of Jesus is an inspiration for women to free themselves from the clutches of patriarchal norms and traditions. His affirmation of women's dignity and his recognition of their full humanity suggests that Jesus sought justice for women well before such action was common. He accepted women's dignity and humanity as created in the image of God. In a world where women's talents, potential and creativity are not recognized let us listen to Jesus and help women to use their gifts in God's ministry for the betterment of human society. Women throughout history have heard the voice of God and responded with commitment and humility let us also obey the voice of God and "listen to Jesus" wherever we are so that we can be agents of change in our church and society. Jesus breaks the barriers of socio-religious traditions that held women in captivity. He gives freedom to women and makes them whole. Even today, Jesus is the liberator who gives freedom to captives, women and the poor.

I remember once during the class on Feminist Theology, one of my male students got disturbed and upset when I said that many girls and women in our families have no freedom. They cannot take any decisions even regarding their own life. They are always told what to study, what job to take up and even whom to marry. Even after marriage, they are not consulted when important decisions are made in the family. The student responded to my observations by saying that women are provided with everything. They lack nothing in the family. He could not see any problem in this patriarchal arrangement which appears to be beneficial for women. Husbands provide everything for the wife. Fathers provide everything for their daughters. They should be happy and content with that.

My student's arguments set me reflecting on this situation. I was aware that his observation does not apply to many women who are not provided for, as he claimed. But still the question remains. Why should women be unhappy if they are provided with everything? The image

that came to my mind at that time was that of a bird in a golden cage. The bird is given the best of everything. Tasty food, fruits and nuts, water to drink, a nice cage where it is well protected. Even if the bird is happy in that cage, there is something missing. The bird may not even realize that. The creator had a purpose for creating this bird. That includes the joy of flying, finding food, making a nest, finding a mate, rearing the young ones, etc. The bird in the cage is deprived of following its natural instincts. It is denied of the joy of living as a free bird.

Freedom is the greatest gift God has given to human beings. The first human beings were given freedom to eat or not to eat the fruit from the tree which was in the middle of the garden. They chose to eat the forbidden fruit and had to face the consequence of their action. Theologically speaking at birth each human being is not a readymade product or a complete product. We are like a sketch drawn on a canvas. It is through our free choices in life that we fill up this sketch and become the person God intended us to become. In other words, human freedom is a necessary condition to achieve our salvation or well being or wholeness for which we are created. It is through our free choices/decisions that each of us becomes either a better human being or less of a human being. By denying freedom to women, society is denying them the means to achieve wholeness and wellbeing.

So the need of the hour is to make each woman aware of her right to be free. "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore and do not submit again to slavery," says Paul to the Galatians (5:1). As women we have to take this Scriptural calling seriously and help all women to stand firm and stand free. Help oneself and others to reclaim our God given freedom. This freedom does not mean to do what I like but it means that I responsibly decide or choose at each moment what is good for me and for the common good. As a Christian woman I need to choose at each moment what is the most loving thing to do in a particular situation and I need to have freedom to decide and to follow my conscience.

WOMAN YOU ARE FREE

Shalini Mulackal PBVM

Dr Shalini Mulackal is a professor of Systematic Theology at Vidyajyoti College of Theology New Delhi.



CELEBRATING MARY MAGDALENE - ICON OF LIBERATION

Marcia D'Cunha



It was a feast of feasts as Mary Magdalene was celebrated by women from across the country and the globe, thanks to the initiative taken by Virginia Saldanha with her detailed planned and well co-ordinated liturgies. The best thing about the pandemic is that people have realized that coming together is easier than ever before. No travel. No flights. No commute. And so, on 22nd July the IWTF (Indian Women Theologian's Forum) organised LIBERATIVE LEADERSHIP OF MARY MAGDALENE which went house-full! On 24th July the PUNE Diocese Women's Commission, in collaboration with the ICWM and Streevani followed it up with a reflection by Raynah Braganza on THE REAL MARY MAGDALENE Sinner? Disciple-Companion? Apostle to the Apostles? But women just couldn't seem to have enough. On 26th July the IWTF and the Catholic Women's Council organized a Virtual Liturgy on this amazing woman, by women from 5 different continents. Here are a few Reflections, poems, and songs that won hearts and minds, aired during or after the celebrations.

"For Christian women who are emerging out of the gendered moulds in which we have been cast by the social fabric of our religio-cultural contexts, Mary Magdalene is an icon of liberation, whose life has been touched and transformed through her encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. In her we see a prophetic model who calls us constantly to reclaim greater dignity and freedom from the different demons of silence, self-negation, dependency, fear, slavish submission, exclusion and acceptance of gendered violence that continue to afflict us on our life journeys even in the 3rd millennium"

Dr. Kochurani Abraham

"Mary takes the initiative to go to the tomb early morning, when it was dark, and there she received the first light of resurrection. First Easter morning, Peter, the Rock, the Pope, was fearfully hiding at the upper room, and here Jesus commissions Mary of Magdala to be the Light House and the Woman Pope, of the 'Cosmic-Garden-Church'. She calls down everybody from the upper room to the Easter Garden to see the risen Guru!"

Margaret Gonsalves

"Spirit Sophia, as you did with Mary Magdalene help us to be open to newness, to be courageous in our apostolic mission denouncing everything that contradicts God's Kingdom of love. Give us the courage to take charge of the most vulnerable and bear the burden of what reality is demanding from us. Courage to walk by the way of justice and love to overcome evil and sufferings."

Rocio Figueroa (New Zealand/Peru - South America)

"Historically speaking, Mary Magdalene, like Peter, had apostolic authority in some Christian communities even into the third and fourth centuries. Nevertheless, in reality, even though Jesus appointed women to be ministers and preachers of the Word, the leaders of the hierarchical church were reluctant to accept the authority of women in proclamation. Hence, we must reclaim the empty tomb tradition as women-oriented tradition, where Jesus affirmed the fullest potential of women to proclaim a new social, religious and political order."

Sr. Rasika Pieres (Sri Lanka - Asia)



MARY MAGDALENE - OUR MODEL

This inspirational song composed and passionately sung by Sr Santana Pereira at the first two programs, got all voices raised in praise and solidarity.

Vs 1. The passionate Woman at the Tomb once said, "I've seen the Lord, He has spoken to me,"

"Why are you weeping, O Mary? But go and tell my brothers this..."

Chorus: Tell us, O tell, Mary, Mary. Tell us, O tell, what Jesus has said (2)

Vs 2. Jesus, the risen Christ told me to be His Voice to all the World.

He chose me from His closest friends, "Apostle of Apostles" to be to all.

Vs 3. I am the One Whom Jesus loved. He chose me to be the Cornerstone. He said: On this Rock, I will build my Church. Never will I leave you alone.

Vs 4. But silenced is this Voice today. Women in the Church don't have any say

You are a woman, you cannot be ordained. Patriarchy thus has its way.

Vs 5. The male constructs pervade the world. Woman you should be in the home confined.

That's your place, it's enough for you. Thuse'en the space of women defined.

Vs 6. In the image and likeness of our God created. Then why all women are the most subjugated

The future is ours, let us all arise. To the New Dawn of Life that awaits us all!

Santana Pereira FMA is a Salesian sister from the Mumbai Province. She completed her MTh in Spirituality from JDV, Pune with her dissertation on ECO-Spirituality. For the melody of this song, you may contact her at santanafma@gmail.com.

Independence Day 2020

Prayer on Secularism

Astrid Lobo Gajiwala -

15th August 2020

(Inspired by Gitanjali 35, by Nobel laureate, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore)



“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high” ;Where a diverse society is not a divided one but a pluralistic whole;Where all are seekers of Truth free to follow a religion, change their religion or be free from religion...

Where hands are joined in prayer to a God beyond religion, and the Divinity within all creation;Where the universal holy book is our republican constitution;Where the fight over places of worship is replaced by a fight for better hospitals, schools, infrastructure and environment;

Where caste is cast into the funeral pyre and the last shall be first;Where cultural freedoms of food and dress, and sexual preferences are not curbed by a self-anointed moral police;Where religious stereotypes and fundamentalism are not used to fan the hatred of communalism, or question the patriotism of any citizen;

Where true patriotism isn't just about standing up for the national anthem but standing up for what is right and just;Where people of all religions or none, can live together in kinship, unity, respect and peace;

Into that heaven of freedom, O God,

Let my country awake!

SILENCE OF THE LAMBS

Adv. Flavia Agnes

Adv. Flavia Agnes is a lawyer and founder of a Mumbai based NGO Majlis which provides socio-legal support to victims of sexual and domestic violence. She can be contacted at flaviaagnes@gmail.com.



An application filed by a convicted former Catholic priest of Syro-Malabar tradition before the Kerala high court seeking two months' parole to marry his victim has brought into the public glare, the rampant sexual exploitation of vulnerable women and girls by the clergy, in the Church. As a priest the crime is twofold 1) it violates the oath of celibacy which binds a Roman Catholic priest; 2) The power equation between the abuser and the abused is so skewed that it often silences victims, conceals the pregnancy and the child fathered by the priest is placed in homes specially created for this purpose. Compounding the situation, church authorities even after being made aware, do not act on complaints. They prefer to side with the accused rather than the victim adhering to the premise, 'innocent till proved guilty'. Often a sum of money is offered to buy her silence. But if she rejects the offer the church authorities ostracize the victim and her supporters as we have seen in the Franco Mulakkal case. Despite being charge sheeted, he continues to be the Bishop of Jalandhar and enjoys the status and privileges of his position, while all institutional support is withdrawn from the

victim and the sisters who have stood by her. Efforts have been made to break their solidarity and they are left to fend for themselves. But they have stood firm in their resolve to expose the criminal misdeeds of the Bishop.

Yet, the Robin Vadakkumchery's case ended in a conviction. The 16 year old victim and her family was unable to withstand the pressure from the man who was their Parish Priest and also the manager of the school in which the victim was studying without any support from activists and well-wishers. But, I see the hand of God and the Holy Spirit at work.

The 52 year old former priest was convicted by the district and sessions court at Telassery on February 16, 2019, for raping and impregnating the 16-year-old. His power and influence prevented three members of the District Child Welfare Committee (a priest and two religious sisters) who were aware of the crime, to report it to the police even though they were bound to under the stringent Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act of 2012. On the contrary, they 'managed the pregnancy and delivery' in a missionary hospital and on the very next day, shifted the infant to St. Agnelo's Foundling Home, without preparing the necessary documents and without obtaining the required permissions, so that no paper trail is left behind. He would have escaped to Canada where it is believed he owns a lot of property, to avoid criminal prosecution. But information about him trying to abscond was 'leaked' to the police and he was nabbed before he left for the airport, on February 28, 2017, just weeks after the teenager had given birth to the child.

During the trial his lawyers used every conceivable legal ploy known to criminal lawyers. First the girl's own father was bribed to falsely testify to the crime of incest and undergo stringent punishment the crime invokes, because such was the loyalty of the parishioner. DNA reports uncovered this lie. He offered Rs. 10 lakhs to the parents to falsely testify that the girl is not a minor and the sex was consensual.

Each of these strategies reveal the power he wields not just over the girl and her parents but also over various church functionaries. Without their support he would not have been able to carry on the sexual abuse that must have gone on for years, and victims silenced. Now the former priest has used yet another well worn out legal ploy to marry his 20 year old victim claiming that she has consented to marry him. This falls perfectly within the patriarchal scheme of things where if an accused marries his victim, the crime is erased.

During the trial the victim/survivor did not have a support person. One does not know whether she received any compensation due from the state authorities. Hence she continues to be in the clutches of the accused. He has used all the right arguments to impress upon the judiciary that he wants to take care of the victim and raise his child in a domestic atmosphere of love rather than in an institution. His marriage to the victim will surely be a factor which the judges will consider while hearing his appeal. But what will be the message to society in general and to Catholic women in particular? Is it a message that there is no way out for a young girl or a vulnerable adult once she is sexually assaulted, but to suffer in silence as she will not be able to confront the mighty power of a patriarchal church?

GRANDMOTHER CARRIED YOU IN HER WOMB! Amelia Andrews

(Amelia Andrews is an ICWM member from Delhi and a communication specialist working with a children's charity. She believes in asking pertinent questions and is currently praying the prayer of Jabez, waiting to be surprised by God when He blesses and enlarges her territory. She can be reached on amiandrews@gmail.com)



When I learnt this fact, it gave me goosebumps. Simply put, in the last stages of your grandmother's pregnancy, she carried the baby that grew up to be your mother. And that baby's ovaries developed all the eggs she was born with. And one of them grew up to be you! Fascinating isn't it? This close connection between two generations is a privilege only women have. This set me thinking, how choices and struggles of one generation of women affect future generations. And why it is important for us now to be those women who will, figuratively speaking, give future generations of women an opportunity to discover their potential.

My grandmother was born in pre-independence India. She married early. She lost most of her family in a famine that struck central India. Christian missionaries cared for her and eventually found her a husband. Barely a high school graduate, she would go on to have six surviving children. There were a couple of miscarriages but what was remarkable was her determination to pursue her education. She completed her Bachelors in Arts, with her children. My grandmother and mother both appeared for their undergraduate exams together and both aced them. She made sure that all three of her daughters were post graduates and trained teachers. She was also a teacher in a primary school and a Sunday school teacher. Faith, education, grit and determination she instilled in all six of her children. I did not have the privilege of growing up with my grandmother. She left us too soon. But her daughter, my mother, made sure that her values passed on to us. As a pastor's and then Bishop's wife, a mother and a teacher, my mother's ministry bore fruit in our lives and in the lives of the people and animals she touched. So it continues with my sister and me.

As women our lives are intrinsically linked, even more so as Christian women. We are the yeast in the dough. We have the responsibility to not just pass on the faith but also to do great things for God. We are strong women, united in prayer and serving according to our gifts so that the next generation of young women will know what it means to be a Christian woman and to live like one. Whether we recognise it or not, we are role models in the community and we are called to build each other up. In Christ, as children of God, women are women's best friends, we lift each other up, we uphold each other and we provide support if someone stumbles. Above all, we love each other. In my career, I have received support from strong women, sometimes my boss, at other times senior colleagues, well-wishers, who taught me not just how to do my job well but how to respect myself and my work. I have excelled under women bosses. Through the rough patches in my life, they've offered support and advice. In turn, I have mentored junior colleagues and young people whenever possible. The world tells us a lot of things. It tells us that a woman is a woman's worst enemy. It tells us that a woman is so insecure facing another woman that one will always undermine and demoralise the other. It tells us to think about I, me and myself. It tells us that in order to succeed, we need to put the other down. We are never told what happens when one woman lifts another. When we lift each other up, we are letting God's love, strength and purpose shine through in the world. India and the world needs Indian Christian women to stand together to bring peace and well-being in a world fraught with pain and suffering. Sisters, are we together in this mission? Will the next generation of women have a head start in their lives because of us? Ready or not, here we go, we have been called to serve and to love.

REFLECTION ON WHO GOD IS FOR ME AMIDST THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

Adv Aileen Marques



Who is God?

A question I seldom asked.

In reaching the beaten and the abused, God is who I encountered.

When a 78 year old mother, was filmed naked; shocked to accept it was her son's act, as gifting her property, she refused; ensuring she was protected was my faith response.

Trapped in the house with the abuser, women called to have a listening ear.

To those struggling social workers and counsellors, the pandemic is stressful; the only solace was understanding the law.

Joining hands, building bridges, we do all we can to work towards justice.

Protecting victims of violence,

Nourishing bodies with food,

Reaching safety to corona warriors, God to me has been all this.

I experienced love, seeds of hope we did sow

Pieces to peace, violence to safety, hunger to nourishment,

Fear to fervor, threat to trust, facilitating co-travelers.....God my strength is you.

Across boundaries and borders, beyond religion and profession,

I took the God of Love and Providence.

Accompanying my husband in his work on the field, reaching necessities to my family, collaborating with state agencies and NGOs, God radiated through me and in me. In every phone call I made and received, God spoke to me and through me.

In every meal I cooked and served, God nourished me and through me.

In every situation of despair and illness, God brought healing and health.

The pandemic made global the quarantine experiences of victims of violence.

The lock down unfolded the realities of victims of human trafficking.

The social distancing norms moved our focus from the physical to the emotional.

Community transmission of the virus brought more meaning to facilitate community transmission of God's kingdom.

The struggle to develop a vaccine to cure has only made God dear and near. Whenever there was a call for help and they asked whom do we send to help?

I responded with faith "Here am I. Send me"! (Isaiah 6.8)

I used the gifts I received in personal and professional life to serve others as a faithful steward of God's grace. (1 Pet 4.10)

God is Love. God is Light. God is alive and active through each of us.

God is Human and Humane.

MIZORAM COMBATS COVID-19 CRISIS: COLLECTIVE EFFORTS

Lalneihzovi

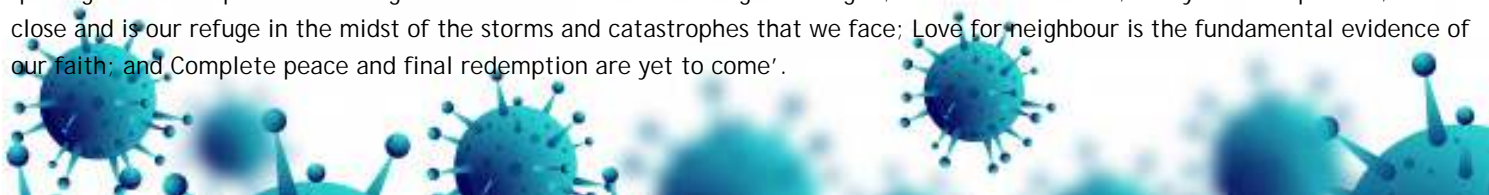
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Mizoram, a Christian state with 1.1 million people is also combating Covid-19 crisis as elsewhere. This crisis termed as the 'New Normal' has changed the way we live and the way we have to carry on. The virus does not discriminate between men and women, rich and poor, old and young by removing barriers of 'we and they', 'here and there'. We now understood well the concept of 'global family' or 'global village', realising that COVID-19 is the problem of 'our community'. In this scenario, we have to think globally and act locally. At this juncture, anybody can be an emissary of hope, reflecting the grace, mercy and love of God in the midst of troubled times. A humongous community effort is underway to prevent the outbreak of the pandemic with the Government of Mizoram, the locals, the churches, and the NGOs putting in their best efforts. Under the broad frame work of the Centre, the Government of Mizoram has issued lockdown guidelines from time to time for the safety of the people. The powerful CBO like Young Mizo Association (YMA) - an organisation formed in 1935 by the missionaries for the development of the Mizo in line with Christian values; the Young Lai Association (YLA); Mara ThyutliaPy (MTP) and others stepped in with their members. Mizoram faced an acute shortage of quarantine facilities as a large number of people returned to the state from various parts of the country. The government and churches have so far set up more than 500 quarantine facilities to accommodate people. Amazingly, more than 168 churches from various denominations like Presbyterian Church, Baptist Church of Mizoram (BCM), Salvation Army (SA), Lairamsua Krista Baptist Kohhran (LIKBK), Evangelical Church of Maraland (ECM), United Pentecostal Church (NEI) and United Pentecostal Church (Mizoram) have offered their halls to be used as quarantine facilities. Even financial supports have been extended to the Government of Mizoram and food supplied to the inmates of the quarantine centres.

The Firstpost News comments- Mizoram locals and NGOs set example for communities in other states to ensure availability of essential items in the midst of a strict lockdown. Not only that, even Kawtkai Library (doorstep library service in Mizoram) catered to residents of the locality as a constructive way of dealing with boredom while being indoors. The volunteers of the NGOs have also stood vigilant at the state's international borders for more than three months now. There are areas where even the Army could not reach, and yet these volunteers were there - guarding the borders. One of the volunteers, 18-year-old girl, H. Lalvenmawii from Sangau village of Lawngtlai District in the southern part of Mizoram, died on June 9 after suffering from a bout of malaria. As Mizoram shares a 510-km border with Myanmar and 318-km border with Bangladesh, illegal migration has to be contained.

Many other individuals also rendered noble services to the society during this crisis. While the businesses have been shut amid the lockdown, tailors have been keeping themselves busy. More than 400 tailors in the state of Mizoram are working tirelessly to make protective gear, as per the directions of nurses and doctors for the front line workers. 95 year old, Nghakliani of Mizoram, a tailor by profession, stitched masks and offered them to the nurses and others in need. She even contributed her monthly pension of Rs. 14,000 to the Chief Minister's Relief Fund of the State.

Food supplies, like vegetables collected from their jhums have been provided by many villages to the residents of Aizawl and towns of various districts of Mizoram without expecting any return. The rich businessmen, officers and interest groups have been extending helping hands to the needy and the poor both in cash and kind. Families share their food items with their neighbours. Landlords exempted tenants from paying rent and many other massive donation drives came along. Professor Margaret Ch Zama, Mizoram University, describes the Mizo as a "communitarian society". "It runs much deeper than voluntarism. It is ingrained, and you feel a sense of duty" Compassion, kindness, sympathy and caring are some of those spiritual values that drive humanity in its basic form. By quoting Octavio Esqueda in his blog: 'Life is short and human beings are fragile; We are all the same; Every life is important; God is close and is our refuge in the midst of the storms and catastrophes that we face; Love for neighbour is the fundamental evidence of our faith; and Complete peace and final redemption are yet to come'.



NEWS FROM THE NORTH

ICWM Delhi: February- March 2020



Orientation: On 29 January 2020, a team of new members were introduced into the ICWM. The program at the auditorium of CNI Bhavan, NICC, Pandit Pant Marg, New Delhi was arranged by Ms Sushma Ramaswami. Older members of ICWM were also present on the occasion. Twenty-three members were present. With Dr Anu Vaghela, current Co-Ordinator, ICWM is a platform for women to express themselves. They stand for equality, solidarity and integrity. Social Awareness via Media: Soon after this Delhi was engulfed in anti-CAA protest and subsequently riots broke out in Northeast Delhi. The ICWM WhatsApp group has played a very important role amid all this. It encouraged the members, shared updates and information on voting rights, understanding bar codes on products, dharana on the violation against women and also kept that personal touch. Solidarity with the oppressed: The group used the 121st anniversary of Ramabai Ambedkar, the mother of millions of oppressed daughters, to learn from her example of uplifting the downtrodden women. In solidarity with the women survivors of violence, a decision was taken to wear black on Thursdays and blue on Fridays.

Awareness Meetings: On 18th February 2020 the Christian Institute of Religion and Society organized a fellowship meeting in which our members also participated. On 14 February 2020, we organized a meeting to discuss the acid attacks on women. Fellowship: The picnic on February 22nd was organized at Nehru Park. It was a day filled with fun and laughter. Twelve members could finally make it for the picnic while many couldn't because of traffic diversions in the city. Though the individual contribution was only Rs 100/-, the food and snacks provided were beyond our expectations. We played many games like pithu, mimicking, and everyone was in very good spirits. The picnic wrapped up by 3:00 pm.

Snapshots from the picnic

Delhi Unit involvement in anti-CAA protests and subsequent riots: ICWM decided to engage actively rather than remain silent. Individual members contributed either through financial contributions and/or materials. We collected supplies such - medicines, rations, household utensils, toiletries, bedsheets, towels and clothes for the relief. Each member of the ICWM was a mother to many unknown. Everything collected was loaded in a small truck and taken to Mustafabad and distributed to families in need.

Team for relief work at Mustafabad

8th March - International Women's Day: It was celebrated in Churches and important public places. The theme this time was Each for Equal, which was represented by aligning the hands in an '=' formation. In addition, a newsletter- When Women Wake- March 2020 Volume 1 Issue 2 as circulated as part of International Women's Day. In the Newsletter the painting, Equal Discipleship, by Anujath Sindhu Vinayla, who won the most recent prestigious 'Shanker's International Award' for the best works-of-art from children across the world impressed us. Anujath's sharing of his mother as the biggest cheerleader who would also encourage him to make each painting better than the previous one stuck a chord with us as mothers.

Each for Equal

Signature Campaign: In March 2020, a letter was circulated about the dangers of NPR for women. A call was issued to get it endorsed by individual women and women's groups/ organizations before being sent to the Chief Ministers. The aim of the letter was to urge the CMS to issue executive orders to de-link NPR from the census house listing which was set out to roll from April.



ICWM (MUMBAI) ACTIVITY REPORT July 2020

Rachael Alphonso

On 1st April, 2020, the leadership of ICWM Mumbai Chapter was handed over to Virginia Saldanha (Coordinator) and ShamaChaterjee (Asst. Co-ordinator). The coordinator invited young volunteers to form a team and lost no time in connecting with all members, understanding the needs of Christian women, and organizing events to support and train ICWM members. The WhatsApp group and email group was updated with contact details to ease communication. News, information, and requests related to issues faced by women in India are shared on WhatsApp and discussed.

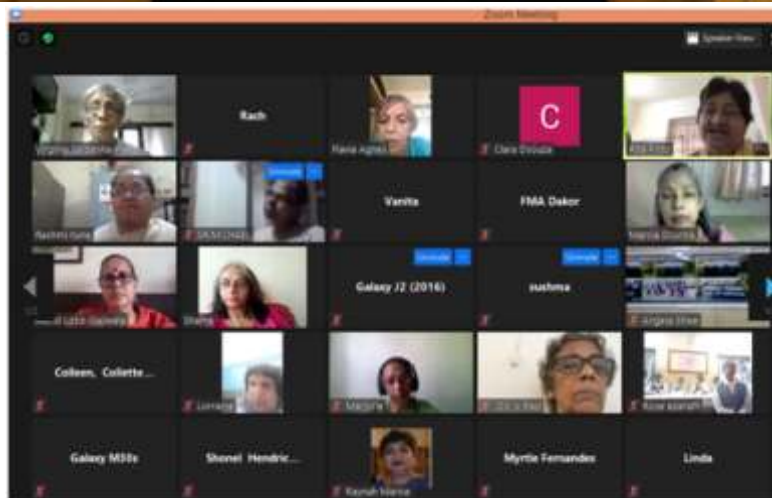
Individual members took the initiative to reach out and help during the lockdown to distribute food, collect funds, and in general offer help to people needing it. The WhatsApp group is used to ask for help, make connections and help people. The Covid lockdown didn't stop the team from using alternative ways to connect.

A group of women was formed to reach out to all members and to others in their neighbourhood during the lockdown and find out how they were faring and if anyone required any help. This group is managed by the Asst. Co-ordinator Shama Chatterjee.

A group of women volunteered to reach out to victims of domestic violence during the lockdown and help them in whatever way possible. In order to improve the efficacy of their actions, an online training on Domestic Violence was organized by a High Court Lawyer from Majlis Legal Centre on 28th April 2020. Empowered by this, women from ICWM Mumbai have been taking up cases independently and consulting lawyers when necessary. The team is also determined to help Christian women develop a feminist perspective on Scripture. Sr Philomena D'Souza FMA was kind enough to oblige us with her time and share her vast knowledge in feminist theology and exegesis. A webinar is organized every alternate Saturday with the help of the media team - Shefalle Karanjikar, Caroline Francis, Jerin Jacob and Rachael Alphonso, led by Virginia. Initially planned to be a 45minute session, the webinars often spillover to 90 minutes as a range of questions, perspectives, and interpretations are shared and responded to by Sr Philomena. She has addressed patriarchy in the writings of the Bible, the feminist in Jesus, the bravery of the women in the Bible in the backdrop of a culture that was oppressive towards them. The themes covered so far in this series of online lectures are Women in the Bible, Jesus and Women Disciples, Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles, Women: You Are Free, Who were present at the Last Supper. The audience so far has between 70 to 120 people including women, men, and religious. New themes for webinars are often suggested by the audience. ICWM Mumbai continues to keep its eyes and ears open to the realities around, and involve itself in creating awareness or participate in relevant action to assuage women's problems in India.

Each for Equal

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This 3rd edition of When Women Wake is led by the North and North-Eastern Regions in India and revolves around Freedom for India and Women in particular.