

A Perspective on Women's Spirituality – As a Source of Hope

*Virginia Saldanha*¹

Introduction

Despite worldwide claims to economic growth and development the number of people living in absolute poverty has been steadily increasing. The gap between the rich and the poor has increased considerably.

Women, children and the environment have borne the brunt of the opening up of economies. Economic restructuring has cut down on food subsidies, health care and education. The prices of food and basic necessities are out of reach of the poor in the open market. The little that women earn they spend on their children and other dependants and neglect their own health and needs.

We are all aware of the growth of the sex trade and child prostitution in the poor countries, which is a direct result of poverty. Parents sell their children to agents in the sex trade to keep their families from the brink of starvation. Sometimes women opt for this work to keep their families from sinking into absolute poverty. Society looks down on these women, but just as Jesus pointed out the sin of the accusers when he was confronted with such a woman, today I feel that He would point to us, the educated opinion makers in society and ask that we should look into ourselves to find out what is the part we are playing in this great global movement towards a civilisation of greed that is dehumanising people. The values in such a system are leading us to create a “civilisation of greed” whereas our Christian values require that we create a “civilisation of Love”.

Women's Contribution Towards Bringing Hope Is Rooted In The Spirituality Of Their Body

In relation to the theme of the 2005 World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai, “Another World is possible”, Sri Lankan Jesuit Paul Casperz said, “Another world is truly possible - a ‘mother world.’” As a woman/mother, I was struck by this statement. It set in motion a chain of thought.

The WSF theme is in response to a realisation that something is truly wrong with the present state of our world: greed, unbridled competition, corruption, violence, etc. (we know the list well). What struck me about Casperz' statement was the description of ‘another’ world as a ‘mother’ world. Women have been reflecting for sometime on a spirituality that is uniquely “women's” spirituality

¹ **Virginia Saldanha** is the Executive Secretary of the Office of Laity and Family as well as Women's Desk of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

in relation to their bodies which was created by God primarily to be mothers.

Traditionally our dualistic spirituality has socialised women to regard their bodies as dirty, evil, and a source of sin. With the growth of the Women's movement, traditional customs or beliefs which identify women as dependent, deficient or devious have been questioned. Women's bodies which are created to give and nurture life are indeed good and even sacred. Women have begun to discover that their own spirituality is deeply rooted in their life experiences and therefore in their bodies as well.

Most women do not realise that their body experiences of menstruation, breast-feeding, pregnancy, childbirth, and even menopause form part of their spirituality as women. These experiences are closely associated with the giving and nurturing of life, beginning with menstruation which reminds women each month of their capacity to create and nurture life. Pregnancy, despite its problems and discomfort it is a profound experience of woman becoming a co-creator with God. Childbirth even with its pain is an event of joy in bringing forth new life. Breast-feeding is another deep experience of connecting with and nurturing new life. Menopause, which is a period of biological change, signals the end of a women's reproductive life, and the beginning of her productive life (when children are grown and move away from home she has more time to contribute to her own growth as well as the growth and well being of the extended family/society).

The body experiences of woman involve a certain degree of suffering, sacrifice, and a constant thinking of 'the other.' These are values and important elements of her faith. Women's body helps her to give expression to her faith and belief in a loving and life-giving God.

Women's spirituality which is so closely linked to God's work of creating, nurturing, loving and caring for life has the elements of a holistic spirituality which are: *inclusiveness; non-hierarchical, circular relationships; peace loving – with non violent responses to conflict; promoting and nurturing all life – enjoys life and share joys and sorrows; sensitivity; appreciation and gratitude; and most importantly – that woman meets and experiences God through her Body.*

I find Maria Riley's definition of spirituality very apt. "*Spirituality is an energy that nourishes our spirit to act on what we believe. It is the energy, vision and values we bring to all our relationships and all our activities. It gives shape to our particular style and presence in the world. Spirituality flows from our belief systems and enables us to give meaning to the many events and experiences of our lives.*"²

Women's energy comes from her ability to give and nurture life. Her daily experience is very much rooted in life, her work of caring, nurturing, teaching, cooking, healing, etc. which are all life-giving, are closely related to God's work

² Maria Riley OP, *Wisdom Seeks Her Way: Liberating the Power of Women's Spirituality* (Washington, DC: Center of Concern, 1987).

of giving life, and therefore comprise an essential part of women's spirituality. Unfortunately these experiences are devalued and discounted because they do not bring direct economic profit in contrast to the work that men do to 'earn a living'. So women have been socialised to believe that their work for their family or people is not important beyond the home and therefore trivialised.

Most people fondly remember the experience of their mother's love and care which helped them grow in wholeness. Through the love of their mother, they experienced the love of God. Very often, women in neighbourhoods are summoned in time of crisis, or they come to people "in answer to a prayer" and leave behind a person who feels touched by God's love. Women themselves experience God through these experiences.

Women give so much of themselves, their time and their talent to raise a family. Their spirituality is very close to the spirituality that Jesus gave to us – women have a communitarian spirituality. Caring for others even at the cost of personal neglect. Parishes have a majority of women serving as volunteers in community projects.

The qualities of women that flow from her biological experiences are essentially qualities that enhance life. They are 'mothering' qualities which our hurt and broken world needs so much. Generally women who are professionals like politicians, lawyers, doctors, managers, etc. bring to these professions the uniqueness of their feminine nature which gives us the term "feminist" since it is rooted in WOMEN'S life.

A recent story of Mary Ann Ollaging-Tresmanio, a dentist by profession, but now serving as a warden in Benguet District Jail, in a town in Northern Philippines seems to give credence to the point I want to make. Mary Ann, a 34-year-old mother, reflected on the challenges she has faced since she assumed the post December 2005, and attributed her success in addressing them to qualities she developed in her roles as a woman. One quality a warden needs is patience, she affirmed. Mary Ann said she was also driven by her "natural instinct as a woman and mother" to nurture prisoners and staff members under her care, and to provide ways to supplement "meager" resources available in the jail. She said she feels called to care for the prisoners even if they are criminals whom many regard as deserving suffering for their crimes. She also said she "understands" why some inmates are prone to get into trouble. (Story published in *Asia Focus* – August 11, 2006)

The life-enhancing qualities of woman should not be confined to the home, but should be brought into social spaces so that they can help to enhance life in every field of human activity. The domination of the male experience/perspective in public life has brought about a great deal of imbalance. This is evidenced in environmental degradation, escalation of conflicts, violence, exploitation, oppression and marginalisation of the weak.

The spirituality of some well known Indian women like Medha Patkar (who

has pitched her tent with the indigenous people displaced by a mega dam construction project), Kiran Bedi (a police official brought reforms to the jail system that were humane and reformatory, replacing conditions that created more criminals.), Sr. Rani Maria (who was killed for empowering the poor), and many other unnamed women of their ilk, have helped to bring justice, social change and wholeness to large sections of marginalised people. The spirituality of Mother Teresa brought to the fore certain aspects of women's spirituality which are also very important.

It is important for women to operate from their life-giving spirituality of women to bring about a transformation that is life-giving.

Women's Spirituality has to be promoted

Presently, because of our patriarchal society, women have grown into a male perspective and spirituality. They think that their body experiences are not valid because they are so often trivialised. Right now the thinking is unbalanced with a dominance of the male perspective - to achieve a balance, women need to bring in their share of experience and thinking at all levels - the government, religious and social institutions.

It is necessary to propagate the spirituality of women as it will help greatly in enhancing women's self worth as well as creating a culture of life. It is a spirituality that men can learn as well. There are already men who have developed the values of caring, nurturing, valuing and protecting life. This spirituality that is rooted in life is life-giving and can contribute positively to bringing hope to people.

Women should be invited to begin looking at their bodies, their work and their experiences as sacred to life and close to God, and helped to develop their life-giving spirituality. This life-giving spirituality can build and strengthen relationships, and help to restore life and hope to a broken world.

We would want women who come into government to take decisions or to influence decisions taken in government from a woman's perspective and experience of dealing with these problems at the micro level viz. the home. We would want women to influence economic policies and laws that are people-oriented rather than anti-people. These are all presently oriented towards the goal of reposing power and riches in the hands of a few who do not care about the people of the country.

It is hoped that women will bring to government their sense of equity, justice, and caring. To make women effective in government, they need to be trained to operate from their women's spirituality and perspective. Too often, women who come into government think that they have to operate like men. It is only when women bring to the fore their experience and thinking and act upon them for the good of all that we can hope to have change for the better.

Including Men is Necessary

Men have a part in women's spirituality. Our best example of a man who lived the spirituality of women is Jesus. His teachings of love, compassion, justice and peace show us the way to make a 'mother' world possible. There are a number of men who share women's spirituality! These are men whose nurturing side has been developed. They are sensitive, caring, and compassionate. For these men, being manly is not synonymous with being macho, but instead it is being fully human and fully alive. These men join hands with women in creating a better world.

I often see Genesis 2: 26 and 27 in the symbol of yin/yang, because it brings to mind the wholeness of God represented by the circle formed by the yin and yang which symbolize man and woman. Therefore we can say that God is present and there is wholeness when man and woman work in harmony.

There will truly be hope for our world when men and women leaders like "mothers and fathers", place the life and needs of their human family as their highest priority. Where God's creation is not commoditised for profit but cared for and used with respect for human need, not greed. Leaders who will not have need for armies to kill and be killed to bring peace! Instead they would seek to solve conflict by dialogue and or mediation between headstrong parties. Leaders who would not use the budget of their countries for amassing weapons to destroy life but like mothers would use the money wisely, first to see that all have food, shelter, clothes, healthcare and education. A 'mother' world has to be inclusive, celebrating diversity, nurturing and caring for all aspects of life. A paradigm shift in our spirituality can make a 'mother' world possible, so that like Jesus we can bring fullness of life to all peoples.