

Gender inequality: Religious women in Vietnamese patriarchal church

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Abstract

Gender inequality is a pervasive issue in Vietnamese society, both historically and currently. It affects individuals across the country, even within religious communities. In particular, there exists a significant disparity between clergy and religious women. This results in the unfair burdens and causing pains and wounds that erodes the divine image present in all human beings, both men and women. Unfortunately, this is an unspoken reality in which the devoted and selfless contributions of the female religious are not often acknowledged and appreciated much. They are often deprived of opportunities to participate in church life and given limited roles, effectively rendering them marginalized and unable to contribute meaningfully to the church's mission simply because they are women! This paper will employ the theological pastoral method of "See, Judge, Act" to explore the issue of gender inequality between clergy and religious women in the Vietnamese context. First, the paper will examine the current reality of this inequality and identify the various forms in which religious women have been treated unfairly (See). Next, the paper will analyze the issue of gender inequality from biblical, feminist, and cultural perspectives (Judge). Finally, drawing on pastoral and religious viewpoints, the paper will propose some recommendations in the effort to build up an egalitarian Church where everyone, particularly women, is respected and treated equally (Act).

Keywords: gender inequality, religious women, patriarchal church, egalitarian church, Vietnamese society

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1. Introduction

Confucianism's influence on Vietnamese society, particularly the lives of women, is significant due to over a millennium of rule under China. Gender inequality is one of the most profound impacts of this philosophy. In Confucian society, men hold superiority over women, who are viewed as the property of men. According to Gao (2003), obeying and depending on men are considered virtues that women must practice. This viewpoint has gradually become the social norm for commenting or evaluating others, particularly women. Moreover, conditioning by this mindset for such an extended period has resulted in a culture of submission and passive obedience becoming a typical trait in Vietnamese culture. As a result, many Vietnamese women have grown content with this lifestyle and have no desire for anything else.

Since 1975, Vietnam has been officially free and independent from the foreign forces, and has become a communist country. However, under the rule of the communist party, the situation of Vietnam seems not different, even worse. Indeed, in this new society, the culture of submission is not only maintained, but it is also promoted radically and severely. For the communist government, there is no place for questioning or complaining about authority. So, submitting to the government and obeying unconditionally for any command or order of the ones in power are the obligations for all Vietnamese people who are under their control and rule. Living under this kind of ruling for a long time, people gradually lose the capacity of questioning or critical thinking regarding anything that comes from the government. They have chosen the safe way to live: just obey and submit to authority in order to have an untroubled life. So, in a society that is ruled by the communist, the culture of submission is not only maintained, but also enforced. And as an indispensable result, the mentality of passive obedience has been gradually formed in the mind of Vietnamese people, including the Vietnamese religious sisters.

In addition, in the religious field, Vietnamese Church is now still a patriarchal and hierarchical Church with the triangle structure: the top is the ordained minister, then religious men and women, and lay people. Accordingly, following the command and obedience without any question is highly valued in the religious communities and the parishes as well. So, opening for dialogue between the ones in authority and the subordinate is limited and discouraged. In fact, most of the religious sisters who are serving in the parishes often just do whatever the parish priests want or command. They serve as the helpers in all sorts of services. And there seems no chance for them to make their voice heard, especially in decision-making. Besides, being controlled by the Communist Party with the atheistic policy, the Vietnamese Church has been limited in connection with the universal Church. As a consequence, our Church is quite slow in updating with the changes in the Universal Church, particularly with the renewal spirit of the Second Vatican Council. So, the Vietnamese Church is still a traditional and conservative Church. Accordingly, submissive and passive obedience to authority is valued and promoted among Christian communities. Sadly, this has also happened in the religious Congregations.

Being in this kind of society, more or less, the religious women and men, especially the clergy are also influenced by this socio-cultural and religious condition. In fact, this condition is the major source of gender inequality in Vietnam in the past and even today. Growing up in this kind of environment and especially, personally experiencing this reality of gender inequality as a female religious, the researcher would like to choose and study deeper about this issue: '*Gender Inequality: Religious Women in Vietnamese Patriarchal Church*' as the first step in the effort to build up an egalitarian Church in which everyone is respected and treated equally, no matter the differences in age, sex or gender.

2. Methodology

In this paper, the researcher would like to use primarily the theological pastoral method, “See, Judge, Act.” The “See” part of this research will look at the present reality of gender inequality among religious men and women, particularly between clergy and religious women in order to understand this context and more importantly, identify in which forms the religious women have been treated unequally. The “Judge” part of this paper will discern the current situation of religious women in Vietnamese patriarchal church from the biblical, feminist, and cultural perspectives. Finally, based on the correlation between the “See” and “Judge” part of the research is to “Act.” Hence, in this part, the researcher would like to humbly propose the suggestions in the effort to build up an egalitarian Church in which everyone is respected and treated equally, regardless age, sex or gender (Act).

To realize this work, the frameworks of the method “See, Judge, Act” will serve as structured guidelines step by step. Accordingly, this paper includes: understanding the present reality of gender inequality among religious men and women, particularly between clergy and religious women in Vietnamese context, and identifying in which forms the religious women have been treated unequally (See); discerning this issue of gender inequality from the biblical, feminist, and cultural perspectives (Judge); and from the pastoral and religious viewpoint, proposing some suggestions in the effort to build up an egalitarian Church in which everyone is respected and treated equally (Act).

3. Discussion

3.1 Present Context of the Religious Women in Vietnamese Patriarchal Church

Relationship between the Religious Women and the Hierarchy

Consecrated Sisters, who belong to religious Congregations and live in communities dedicated to prayer, service, and evangelization, are an integral part of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. Although being limited in the particular fields of activity given by the communist government, the female religious have played a vital role in the Vietnamese Catholic Church's mission of evangelization and service to the Vietnamese society, particularly in the areas of education, healthcare, and social services, especially for the poor and marginalized. While consecrated sisters are subject to the authority of the local bishop and the Catholic hierarchy in Vietnam, they also enjoy a degree of autonomy in their ministries and daily lives. Religious orders have their own structures and governance, and they are responsible for managing their own communities, finances, and personnel. However, they are accountable to the bishop and the church hierarchy and must adhere to the teachings and norms of the Catholic Church. This association, itself, sometimes created some tensions and challenges in the relationship between consecrated sisters and the Catholic hierarchy in Vietnam, particularly in the areas of governance and decision-making.

In recent years, there have been reports of disagreements between some religious orders and the bishops over issues such as land ownership, financial management, and the appointment of leadership positions. Especially, there have been instances where the relationship has been unequal, with some female religious orders feeling marginalized or undervalued by the hierarchy. One source of inequality is the fact that the Catholic hierarchy in Vietnam is dominated by men, while the majority of consecrated people are women. This can create a power imbalance, with women religious feeling that their voices and perspectives are not given equal weight or consideration in decision-making processes. Another source of inequality is the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church itself. Consecrated sisters are subject to the authority of the bishop and the church hierarchy, which can limit their autonomy and agency in certain areas. For example, bishops have the authority to appoint or remove leadership positions within religious orders, which can lead to tensions and conflicts if the sisters feel that their input or preferences are not being taken into account. Furthermore, there have been reports of religious orders feeling pressured by the hierarchy to conform to certain norms or expectations, such as limiting their

engagement with social justice issues or refraining from criticism of government policies. Some religious orders have also reported difficulties in obtaining necessary permits or approvals for their work, which they attribute to the church hierarchy's reluctance to support their activities.

In short, while the relationship between consecrated sisters and the Catholic hierarchy in Vietnam is generally collaborative and respectful, there are instances in which the relationship can be characterized by inequality or power imbalances. These can arise due to factors such as gender dynamics, hierarchical structures within the church, and differences in priorities or perspectives between different groups.

The 'Forgotten Partner' in the Church

In the introduction of his book, Nguyen Thao (2020) presented one of his aims in the book is “to present a fuller picture of the Catholic Church in Asia whose prominently feminine characteristic has long been largely hidden and unrecognized.” And to illustrate this point, he mentioned a concrete example about a Vietnamese Sister. He told:

Due to the political constraints of Communism in the second half of the twentieth century that banned male clergy and Bishops from ministry, women like Nguyen Thi Men, a Dominican Sister, became involved in the administration of Lang Son Diocese for a couple of decades. She ran the Bishop's house, took care of the Diocesan administration, and helped sustain the life of the Diocese. And yet her tremendous contributions were never mentioned (p. 1).

Indeed, the case of this Dominican Sister, in reality, is just one among many other cases of sisters who silently dedicated themselves in serving people and building the local Churches without being recognized by the Church. So, for the author, they are worthy to have this compliment: “It was women religious who were pivotal in sustaining the faith of the Church” (Nguyen Thao, 2020, p. 1).

Looking closer at the present context of Vietnamese Church, we see that, according to the recent statistics, Vietnamese Church has 3.907 diocesan priests; 1.290 religious priests; 2671 seminarians; 2.631 male religious; and 4.524 female religious belonging to international congregations; 1.703 male diocesan religious; and 14.338 female diocesan religious (Vietnamese Catholic Bishops Conference, 2017). These numbers show the significant presence of female religious in the Church and in the consecrated life in particular. Obviously, they are consistently in a big number beside priests and male religious. However, the active participation of female religious is much lesser than male religious. How come!?

Azevedo (2012) in his book: “*Les Religieux, Vocation et Mission*” [The religious: Vocation and Mission], pointed out four reasons for this reality. First, the process of choosing the candidates for female religious is an easy process, and thus, the quality is affected. Second, in the process of formation, in many ways, the personal capacity and intellect of the individuals are gradually set aside, thus they could not develop their true selves. Third, in many countries, religious leaders, either religious superiors or formators did not invest enough in knowledge in terms of education and culture for women or religious sisters. And finally, in the religious congregations, the formation process does not really concern much about theology, Scripture, or ecclesiology, but it often emphasizes more on ethics, moral, or devotions. In short, there is no adequate and systematic program for religious sisters, so that they can be well prepared for their future mission. On the contrary, the clergy or religious men are given much more attention than women in these areas (Azevedo, 2012).

With the observation and analysis of the author above regarding the active participation of female religious is much lesser than male religious and the reasons for this fact in the context of Vietnamese Church, the researcher sees that those critical comments are very true. In fact, that reality can be seen in the formation program of many female religious congregations, especially local congregations in Vietnam. As a matter of fact, most of the local congregations were founded by bishops or priests. In addition, in the teaching, giving retreat, or spiritual accompaniment, the religious Congregations, even the female religious Congregations often prefer to

invite the priests or male religious to the female religious, no matter the better degree of the religious women are.

Beside the issue of being less involvement in Church activities of the female religious, distributing the apostolate tasks among the priests and the religious women in the Church is also another issue that needs to be considered. About this, it is interesting to hear from a 19-year-old young man, who was an ex-seminarian, about his experiences regarding the roles of religious Sisters in his local church. According to him, most of the religious leaders, or ministers in his parish are men, whereas in the pastoral visitation, religious women are often assigned to go because the parish priests do believe that women can give consolation, sympathy, and empathy better than men. Hence, there are places for women in the Church in terms of participation, however, gender roles are applied obviously here. Religious sisters can be the counselors, comforters or listeners, but to be the leaders or speakers is another story. Then, he concluded: “Anyway, still patriarchal behavior!”

Unspoken Prophet in Mission

According to Manansala (2015), exercising the prophetic character in Asian context for the religious has something to do with the patriarchal culture. Indeed, in the patriarchal Church, the power and authority are often in favor of men. And as an indispensable consequence, in many Asian Churches, women and religious sisters are treated not as the partners in mission but as the assistants or servers, who are just silent and wait for the order of the priests. So, Mananzan, in the Bishop's Synod on Amazonia, had encouraged the religious women to speak out because, for her, “we were silent long enough in the Church and our voice must be heard” (Mananzan, 2019). This message, indeed, has challenged the Church to be faithful to the Gospel values through involving everyone, particularly women in leadership roles in the Church.

Looking closely at the situation of the religious sisters in the Vietnamese patriarchal Church, it seems no difference. In fact, in most of the parishes, the religious sisters often silently serve, without payment, the multi-task of the parishes under the leadership of parish priests. So, in the eyes of the parishioners, the religious sisters are really the unspoken prophets in the apostolic mission. In order to illustrate more this point, the sharing of a Vietnamese brother, Michael Tãm, a 27-year-old-seminarian, somehow could help to uncover the image of the religious sisters in the context of Vietnamese parishes. He shared:

Gender prejudice and looking down on women still happen. In the parish, the priests are often favored by the parishioners because they are presiders at Masses or Eucharistic celebrations. As such, everyone can see them easily since they are at the altar. Meanwhile, the sisters decorate the flowers or prepare the altar before the Mass quietly behind ‘the scene,’ and more often, few people can see them.

He also observed that “when priests are getting old, they are visited by the parishioners while the sisters are seldom visited at their convents except a few people.” For him, the sisters need to be loved and cared for more. Indeed, this experienced sharing partly brought a glimpse of religious sisters’ lives and their silent and unnamed services in the church. These make them unspoken prophets. Besides, at the end of the interview, this brother shared his reflection that those who are priests, they are blessed! However, God knows everything and God will repay the sisters for their sacrifices. Then, he pointed out that what we can do now is to make people aware that both priests and sisters, both are capable of services in the Church. While priests serve at the altar as presiders, the sisters do their services behind the scene. Yet, both are worthy of being appreciated equally!

3.2 Gender Equality from Different Perspectives

Biblical Perspective

“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” (Gen 1:26, 1989, NRSV)

Interpreting this biblical passage, Soskice (2015) supposes that everyone is the image of God. *Imago Dei* is not applied for men alone but for both women and men. And sexual difference is just one of the aspects of

human becoming that shows us about God, the invisible divine image. Then, she asserted that sexual difference does not mean that “women were made for men any more (or any less) than men were made for women” (p. 17). Or in other words, women and men are equal in dignity.

Furthermore, she also reasoned that male and female in Genesis 1 “is not just about sexual difference, but about God in whose image they are made” (p. 16); and they “become themselves through being with others” (p. 18). Besides, reflecting on this biblical passage of creation, Soskice also emphasized that male and female are created in the image and likeness of God with the “fullness of divine life and creativity” (p. 17). So, in the very beginning of the Scripture, woman as Eve is taken into account, without “establishing relative rank or worth of the genders, the spinner of this creation tale indicates that humankind is found in two varieties, the male and the female, and this humanity in its complementarity is a reflection of the deity” (Newsom & Ringe, 1992, p. 12). This ‘creaturehood before God’ was also mentioned by Coakly (2002). She brought out the Christian feminist theology about ‘female figures of Godhead’ (p. 57) which will be the foundation to develop the image of women in the divine image.

Feminist Perspective

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1993) in her book “Discipleship of Equals” brings forward questions surrounding women in the ministry of the Church, in which the concern of education for women is highlighted. For her, education will “prepare girls not just for marriage or religious life, but also for professional life” (p. 16). This is really a good strategy and advocacy to empower women’s participation actively and effectively. In agreement with Fiorenza, Nguyen Thi Oanh (2011) also supposes that the education plays an essential role in the development of a country. She said:

Education is the inner strength of development, especially for those underdeveloped or developing countries... Most of all, education is the best factor to increase one’s self-confidence and thus, will take part in improving the quality of life. From this awareness and consciousness, the society will be affected in its economic and social welfare (p. 30).

Looking closely at the reality of the Asian Churches, particularly the Vietnamese Church, it seems that the concern about education for women including religious women, presented by Fiorenza and Nguyen Thi Oanh above, is not so much highlighted. Indeed, according to Nguyen Thao (2020), “historical records concur that women’s formal theological education was, for many centuries, not a part of the Church’s agenda. This was one of the major reasons that prevented women from advancing and asserting themselves as leaders” (p. 39). And indirectly, this is one of the reasons that has maintained the issue of gender inequality in the Vietnamese Church today. Indeed, Nguyen Thao made known to us in his recent book that there are huge inequities in the practice of gender equality in the Church between religious women and seminarians or male clergy: men study theology, whereas religious women just serve in the kitchen. He said,

In Vietnam, at many seminaries, religious women work full time in the kitchen, preparing daily meals for young seminaries and clergy professors. This practice implies that the main job of male clergy is to study theology, serve at the Eucharist table, and do ministries to people of God in public, whereas the main job of women is to serve in the kitchen and offer services to men (p. 47).

For Nguyen Thao, “although working in the kitchen is not in itself demeaning in any way, serving meals for young seminarians by religious women will continue to enforce gender inequality between men and women in the church” (p. 47). Besides, he also supposes, the training environment for the seminarians, the future priests, really contributes in strengthening the hierarchical structure of the Church in which gender inequality is enhanced. He said,

In some seminaries, often young seminarians’ only regular contact with women is with the few women religious who provide services to the seminary such as cleaning, cooking, and serving

meals. Therefore, the seminarians' perception of women in the Church very much stems from the way they have encountered women while at seminary. After these young priests become leaders of a parish, their relationship with lay men and women, including religious women, understandably continues to be hierarchical and patriarchal (p. 46).

In addition to the points above, he continues to demonstrate more on the reality of gender inequality in Vietnamese context from another angle, he said, "While the number of female professors at the State Universities in Vietnam was 342,000, in the year 2,000, only a couple of Vietnamese women were invited to teach at the seminary" (p. 47). Indeed, as a matter of fact, in some Vietnamese Dioceses, the theological centers for female religious often invites male the professors. Women religious professors are often only optional!

Approaching the issue of gender inequality from a different direction, Rosemary Chinnici (1992), through a process called "re-imagining," separated the reality of the feminine experience from the centuries-old and sometimes stilted beliefs that have been handed down to us. She uses the principles of psychology that include women's voices and sets them in dialogue with feminist theology. In fact, for Chinnici, every woman has authority and right to use her own experience as the basis for re-imagining. It is a dynamic and ongoing revelation that offers a positive gift to the community. This is also a process that uses women's experiences as a method to reconstruct the theological language which is exclusive to women, and from women's experiences, it develops new words for them to talk about their innermost self. It will bring new life in the church where women are given a place to raise their voice and exercise their power in their perspective. Therefore, this process is really a bold and provocative exploration for women within the Church who feel alienated by traditional patriarchal theology.

With Karen Enrique (2012), in a critical reflection and reaction on John Paul II's anthropology regarding gender equality between men and women, she said:

While John Paul II's statement 'equal yet complementary' as well as his notion of the 'special genius' of women as 'being for the other' can lead to affirming the great dignity and role of women within society, this special 'genius' and 'dignity' of women can, on the other hand, become a huge burden on women's shoulders, and at the worst, leaving women in shameful situations of oppression and exploitation (p. 52).

Indeed, the idea of Enrique above is worth for us to think about, especially for the ones who really want to engage in the fight for the issue of gender inequality.

Cultural Perspective

During the length of Vietnamese history, particularly the oppressed period by foreign forces, many women figures arose as the national heroes. And they were also acknowledged, honored, and even worshiped in Vietnamese culture and literature. First, in the year of 40 of the first century, Trung Trắc and Trung Nhi, together with 36 other women were the vanguards of the movement against Chinese invaders to protect the country. Leading the rebellion against Chinese domination had not only brought back freedom for the country but also portrayed a powerful image of Vietnamese women as 'heroic and unyielding.' After that, another great woman, called Bà Triệu [Lady Trieu], a female General who was successful in the battle with Ngô's Dynasty in the year of 248. Her famous and powerful saying broke down the culture of polygamy: "I want to ride the strong wind, tread fierce waves, kill sharks in the East Sea, clean up the frontier, drive out greedy and cruel aggressors to save people from drowning; I will not imitate the ordinary others-bowing and kneeling, serving as a concubine to anyone" (National Cultural Committee, 2015, p. 226).

So, from some remarkable historical references above, the researcher realizes that, from the beginning of Vietnamese history, Vietnamese women were precisely active, not just inside their household but showed responsibility for their nation through involvement in politics, economy, or culture. Together with men, they are

partners in human development and in all aspects of life: in family, they took care the elders and educated their children; in the society, they conserved local cultural values and passed them to the next generations; moreover, for the common good, they shared their power to build up a better life wherever they are, and in whatever region they belong.

Later on, in the Vietnamese civil wars, the role of Vietnamese women and their contributions were also noteworthy. They had participated in these wars as warriors. Truly, during the wars, many of them were very brave even though they were only around 16, 17, or 18 years old. Many “were not in the military, they did not wear a uniform, they did not have the benefits of military retirement after the war. This was an extremely difficult and painful part of the women’s experience from the North Vietnamese side” (Nguyen Hanh, 2017, p. 12). However, they volunteered their services such as filling in the bomb craters on Ho Chi Minh Trail, digging the canal and channels, supporting ammunition, and building strongholds, taking care of wounded men soldiers, etc. After the wars, they have joined the reconstruction and healing process of the country (p. 12).

Recalling and highlighting the extraordinary women in Vietnamese history, we could not forget to mention here the significant female figures in the Vietnamese Catholic Church. Indeed, an outstanding figure of the 17th-Century-Church in the South of Vietnam was Princess Minh Duc, the most important noble woman. She, herself, supported effectively Alexander de Rhodes, a French missionary, in building up the Church in the early time of Christianity in Vietnam. She was known as a great minister, who nurtured the faith of believers in times of trials and persecution. Her house became a refuge for Christians hiding from persecution (Nguyen Thao, 2020). Another significant Vietnamese Christian woman was Princess Ngoc Lien, the eldest daughter of local lord Nguyen Phuoc Nguyen. She was also full of enthusiasm for the mission of the Church in the beginning of Christianity. Like Princess Minh Duc, she also supported Alexander de Rhodes in preaching the Gospels, teaching Catechism to the people, building hospitals for the poor, and taking care of those who had no family. These charitable services helped to strengthen the faith of people and encouraged them to keep their faith, even to the point of martyrdom in years later (Nguyen Thao, 2020).

Therefore, from those extraordinary accomplishments of the outstanding Vietnamese women in history, their images clearly changed. Indeed, this crossed the boundaries of gender stereotypes and gender boxes. Their active presence in varied areas of life helped women see themselves as a subject and bring out the right and human dignity fully into the lives of women today. Especially, by acknowledging the powerful images and significant accomplishments of Vietnamese women in history also will allow women, including female religious to reconstruct the mindset of submission into self-reliance, thus enabling them to exercise their capacities and become confident to represent Christ in all aspects of life.

3.3 Toward an Egalitarian Church

Gender Equity: Win-Win Negotiation

In a hierarchical Church like Vietnam in which social structure is highlighted and paid attention much, ‘win-lose negotiation’ is often practiced and ‘win-win negotiation’ has no place to exist are understandable. Thus, to prompt gender equity toward an egalitarian Church, for me, it is essential to promote ‘win-win negotiation’ among men and women, particularly between the clergy and the female religious. Roger Fisher and William Ury (1991) devised this “win-win negotiation” with five following principles:

Firstly, separate people from the problem. The problem here is gender inequity, caused by social and cultural systems. So, it needs to be listened to by both sexes and gender in order to clearly understand the problem rather than silently or quickly make a judgment.

Second, focus on interests, not position. Principled negotiation focuses on how gender equity benefits the family, school, company, the church, and society. It is good for all actually, not just for women alone. So, it is necessary to let people, especially males, know that the option of this search is for the common good rather than

to achieve any position, or power.

Third, invent options for mutual gain. This win-win negotiation on gender equity issue does not intend to put down men but to invent a mutual relationship that brings men and women in the same table of equal rights and opportunities to build a better society according to their capacities.

Fourth, use objective criteria. Gender equity does not mean that women, or men from now on will do what others used to do before. The objective criterion is how to “empower women and men to maximize their strengths and improve their performance” (Pham Kim Thoa, 2018).

Fifth, know your best alternative to a negotiated agreement.

Personally, I found this win-win negotiation is relevant for religious women in dialogue and communication with male authorities in the Church. In fact, it creates a space for discussion among the members of a religious community. It not only brings religious women’s voices into the decision making, but also gains more and deeper understanding about the reality or problems in the community, where every member takes part in the responsibility. This win-win negotiation also helps re-construct the mind of community members from patriarchal hierarchy into a discipleship of equals as what Jesus did with the Samaritan woman at the well (New Revised Standard Version, 1989, John 4:1-42). It is never considered as a fight for the sake of winning, but for joining efforts to build up the community and leave the different sorts of prejudices, oppressions, and discriminations.

Practicing Gender Inclusive Language

Bhasin (2003), an Indian feminist activist, confirmed that language is gendered. And she continues her thought in a very strong and clear statement that language is patriarchal. It carries and reflects gender bias and inequalities. And it is a different expression in each cultural context. In agreement with her, Jandt (2004) supposed:

The language of a particular culture does not serve all its speakers equally, for not all speakers contribute in an equal fashion to its formulation. Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men (p. 495).

In reality, language is a means of communication. It helps people communicate with one another and build up the world. Language in words or verbal language can be easy to define and create reality; it also provides the meaning of reality. More significantly, through language, “we learn to see ourselves” (Chittister, 1983, p. 18). However, language or words can be prejudicial, racist, and sexist in patriarchal culture, where women get treated as inferiors. Their words are discounted in society and their thoughts are devalued.

It is important to realize that the word ‘he’ is a male pronoun, which in many occasions excludes women. Bhasin (2003) is eager to bring an argument about the use of the masculine words as the standard in terminology. She re-examined why the words ‘mankind’, ‘he’ ‘his’ or ‘him’ are used even when the reference is women. It does not make sense to women at all! This critical realization was developed more by Lerner, a pioneering historian and feminist, when she figures out the reality that women in patriarchal culture have to endure using “hidden words” to describe their own body experiences. The vilest insults in every language refer to parts of the female body or to female sexuality (Lerner, 1993). By writing down women’s situations, Lerner also shows that each woman had her-story (history), and she wants them to know about it, so that it will cause a transformation in their consciousness about thought and experiences.

Being social beings, we all want to be included and belong to the group, the community or the society (Morgan, 2015). So, the exclusive and sexist language often causes painful and hurtful feelings in others,

particularly women in daily life and religious life as well. On the contrary, inclusive and effective language can heal the wounds of our brothers and sisters.

Promoting Liberating Spirituality for Religious Women

“Where will women get their strength? Where will they get their energy? Where will they get the source of life that will make them transcend? From spirituality.” (Mananzan & Park, 1996, p. 14)

Asian women and Vietnamese women in particular, have experienced various sorts of oppression in the domestic, economic, political, and religious fields. These experiences have shaped in women’s attitude a form of spirituality, which brings them inner liberation. This inner liberation, according to Mananzan (1996), is about the sense of wholeness, and the fight for full humanity of women. She said, “There is nothing more empowering than believing that within us lies the source of our power and strength” (p. 15). Unlike in the context of patriarchy, which traditional and oppressed roles have obscured their self-image or even made them invisible (Manansala, 2015), this spirituality is born when women have grown in awareness of their situation. From the inner liberation, their lives are also on the edge to quest for holistic liberation both “from internal and external slaveries that they have struggled to break” (Mananzan, 1996, p.15). It means to say, liberation or freedom is not just for “me”/ “her” but also for “men and children” (p.14) for the free society! Mananzan highlighted the characteristics of this spirituality:

(1) Self-affirming: Women have to give value to themselves, appreciate themselves with all their potentials and limitations. It is self-esteem, self-acknowledgement, and self-acceptance. It is assertive, not aggressive.

(2) Mutual Empowering: There is a fact that not any woman empowers other women! For insecure people, they do not want others to develop. This is how power over takes place. However, the more you empower others, the more your family/congregation/society develops.

(3) Integral: First, women have to connect with themselves as a whole: body-mind-soul. And then, their relationship with others, nature, and of course, with God has to be in interconnectedness.

(4) Liberating:

+ *Free oneself from fear.* In fact, there is real fear and fake fear (what may people think about you? How can I act to be free from fear?)

+ *Free from idols:* There are some people who inspire you, others do not. Whomever they are can bring you into servitude. You are the one to suffer because of what you think they are (but they are not, because no one is perfect)

+ *Free from bitterness:* How long can you forgive, out of bad experiences? How liberated am I?

(5) Prophetic: Being real is the first character of a prophet. Then, it will take courage to stand up, and speak out to what is wrong and for what is right.

(6) Contemplative: Spend time to be alone with God, who is the source of power. When women are in touch with God in the depth of their being, she will develop in the sense of self-acknowledgement, and free themselves from self-deception and delusions.

(7) Healing: Spirituality can heal wounded hearts. There, women can find hope, strengths, and support. It will transform women from victims to survivors and advocates. When one has experienced healing touch, she will become a healer to others.

(8) Celebrating: Women’s spirituality is not about asceticism. It is about women’s experiences of God’s unconditional love. That is why one of the characteristics of this spirituality is celebration. Women are

celebrating and living happily because God saves them to be happy and to live fully.

(9) A Continuing Process: “Women’s spirituality is an ongoing spirituality.” Truly, women can free themselves from one thing that enslaves them, but another thing will come. So, it is not good to have a complacent attitude towards this spirituality, for women cannot be free from any problem. Let the spiritual process continue to find them!

Hopefully, this spirituality will be applied for religious women in Vietnam. Indeed, the church will be much more active when women are involved in the fullness of their being and in their experiences, where the image of Christ can be seen and recognized in the whole Church, the image of both male and female believers. A significant look, by practicing this spirituality, we can create a culture of harmony, justice and peace in the midst of complexity in the world today.

4. Conclusion

In the patriarchal structure of Vietnamese society and the Church, female religious often go unnoticed despite their dedicated contributions, facing obstacles in leadership and ministries. Corruption within the Church can lead to the abuse and oppression of religious sisters. To advance gender equality, religious individuals, inspired by Pope Francis's call in "Fratelli tutti," must challenge societal gender norms. Recognizing God's image in each individual, they can promote equality and draw inspiration from strong women in Vietnamese history. Emulating Blessed Mary's equal discipleship, they can contribute to building an egalitarian Church through practical measures like gender-inclusive language and liberating spirituality for religious women.

Specifically, for Vietnamese teachers and students, this study underscores the importance of challenging gender norms. Teachers can foster discussions on gender equality, encouraging students to question stereotypes and appreciate the historical role of strong women. By embracing a mindset valuing equality and respect, students can actively contribute to creating an inclusive and egalitarian environment, transcending societal expectations.

5. References

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