

**Religion and Gender,
Changing Identities of Women in Religion in India**
A Study on the Catholic Community of Udupi and Dakshina Kannada Districts
UGC Minor Research Project [MRP(H)-376/08-09/KAMA008/UGC-SWRO]
(A brief summary of the Report)

The proposed research work, 'Religion and Gender – Changing Identities of Women in Religion in India, a Study on the Catholic Community of Udupi and Dakshina Kannada Districts' concentrated on the Catholic community that is located in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts. The districts chosen for study though distinct politically as far as Catholic community is concerned are homogeneous in many respects.

In its scope the study tries to understand the status of Catholic women in the religious context. In its limit it does not explore into every individual or family units of Catholic community, rather it selects the representative sample from different parishes demarking areas as urban and rural. The techniques of interview and questionnaire both were employed to gather the primary data.

The study makes certain observations with regard to Catholic women in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts. Women have emancipated themselves from the age-old structures and proved their abilities in various fields. Hence there is a shift from the traditionally assigned identity of women to a modern educated woman. Secondly, there is a greater degree of social inclusion among Catholic women when compared to women in other religions in the area, in many respects.

The findings of the study are discussed under the following major heads :

Gender discrimination

People are quite aware of the discrimination in the society. However, the trend of gender exclusion reported is rather low. There are other factors also that influence gender discrimination as education, employment, etc. However, there is no consensus with regard to one particular factor becoming prominent.

Religion and Gender discrimination

Gender exclusion in religion (Catholic community) is moderate. The study explores into certain important positions at the church / parish level and inquires whether equal opportunity is given to both the sexes to occupy those positions. Eight distinct

positions were selected to study. The participation rate of women in different positions depends on the responsibility and the religious status involved in the position. The data does not report any case among women occupying the position of a vice-president in the parishes. But their involvement in other positions is significant.

Women empowerment

The parish unit of Catholic community has taken up certain steps to train and motivate women to take up responsibility, leadership opportunities and thereby empower themselves. In this regard there are associations or organizations systematically functioning at the parish as well as diocesan level. The families give equal chances to both boys and girls in family matters. Women generally enjoy equal status with men in a Catholic family (61%). Women are included in the process of decision making in the family. There is willingness to share the property equally among children without gender discrimination. In fact it is evident that women do take up responsibilities and also dominate in certain family matters.

Employment

As a general trend Catholics encourage children to take up employment without gender discrimination. The trend that Catholic women are becoming economically independent is quite dominant. The trend of women being employed outside the family is increasing. Employment also helps women in empowerment.

Political Participation

The general assessment of the political participation of Catholic women is rather low. There is some improvement with regard to this aspect in recent years due to panchayat elections. Similarly the assessment on leadership chances for Catholic women in politics again is very low.

Education

The Catholic community of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts has a favourable attitude towards educational attainment. By and large equal chances are given to both boys and girls in educational attainment. This trend has helped especially girls in finding employment in India as well as abroad. The factor of educational attainment has helped women in empowerment to a great extent.

Changes in identity

The identity of women in Catholic community has changed to a great extent. Educational attainment, employment opportunities and the support of various activities at the church level have helped in changing the identity of Catholic women in the past 10 to 15 years.

Catholic women and other women

Although Catholic women in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi Districts are less in number when compared to their counterparts in other religious groups sociologically they are significant in many respects, such as employment and education. Catholic women are situationally different from women in other communities. Generally it is felt that Catholic women freely mix with women belonging to other communities.

Important conclusions in the study are :

1. The community is generally aware of the gender discrimination in society; and also identifies the trend of gender exclusion.
2. Religion is one of the factors in gender discrimination / exclusion; and reports gender discrimination in religious matters.
3. Church gives equal opportunity to all in all respects. However, in reality the distribution of the responsibilities generally men take the upper hand.
4. The study identifies certain organizations and associations functioning at the church level that influence women participation in different activities.
5. Women in Catholic family generally enjoy equal freedom with men. Woman plays a dominant / decisive role in family.
6. Catholic women are employed to a greater extent at different levels.
7. The assessment of the political participation of Catholic women is rather low.
8. By and large community gives equal chances for boys and girls in educational attainment. Higher education is helping women in empowerment.
9. The inter-community relationship of Catholic women with women in the region is quite cordial.
10. By and large it is assessed that the identity of Catholic women in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts is changed considerably when compared to the past. Similarly the study observes a greater degree of women inclusion in social as well as religious matters.

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