Columns
Social Justice



The author wonders how today's young girls will cope with the gender inequality and discrimination they are likely to face in their career and other parts of life. (Courtesy of Tessy Jacob)



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The city where I live has government-operated bus service, which is very convenient and affordable, but the buses do not run frequently. After each bus leaves, you may wait 30 to 40 minutes for another. In the morning, the majority of the commuters are students or day laborers who live a hard life. They do not have the luxury of going to their workplace in a relaxed and comfortable style. The rush and the long hours of hanging onto the rails of the bus make their journey tiresome. However, how much do people who are better off think about being kind to them?

On one journey like that, when the bus was jampacked, two women — who looked worn out from hard labor — got a seat. A few minutes later, an elderly man with his wife made his way to that seat, which was reserved for senior citizens. He gestured for the women to get up. One of the women, maybe out of fear or respect, got up instantly and let him sit. Then he ordered the other woman to get up also, indicating that it was a senior citizen's seat. And he beckoned for his wife to sit beside him.

At that instant the woman who had vacated the seat pointed at the woman still sitting and roared at the man: "She is also a senior citizen — if you want it, you get up and make a place for your senior citizen wife!" Given the caste-class system of Indian society, that was a bold action by a woman of less significance.

This event made me wonder: What is women's empowerment, and who really needs it? It's a cliché, yet we often classify rural women as "under-empowered" creatures. I believe not everyone needs "empowerment" if we would allow people to exercise their innate power.



Sister Anita visits one of the women in the village as part of her empowerment mission. (Courtesy of Tessy Jacob)

I know of an ordinary woman who challenged authorities who reprimanded her for no fault of her own. She had to undergo constant passive harassment, but withstood it boldly. When the hands that ought to care become the dragons of destruction — be it in family, workplace, society, religious circles — a woman can be reduced to powerlessness. I wonder if the only way one can beat down a woman is through emotional manipulation.

Women's empowerment often focuses on rural folks, many of whom do not have the basic knowledge or legal information about how society functions. Their naivete forces them to learn by doing. There is a saying that if a woman is determined, she can even bring down the heavens.

In another example, one of our housemaids — a thin, fragile widow who could not read — fought like a lioness to rescue her minor daughter, who eloped with a man. She made sure that the man compensated her daughter and that he was held accountable legally. When talking with such women, we feel how powerful a woman

can be.

Looking at the pace with which the current generation is growing up, especially among the better educated sectors, I wonder: Do they ever know there are movements called women's empowerment and gender equality? In their adolescence they experience the liberty of being a human, rather than a man or woman. How will they cope with the gender inequality and discrimination they likely will face in their career and other parts of life?

Many women who face discrimination in their professional lives choose silence as a mode of protection, rather than protest. Messing with the patriarchal system is not an easy choice for everyone.

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It's common for authoritative voices to silence women in male-dominated sectors. In such cases, women may try to ignore suppressive factors and focus their energy on being self-assertive. Such women may not need "empowerment," but a space where someone respectfully listens to them.

Every individual, whatever caste, creed, culture, economic background or political stand, seeks respect. It is an irony that suppressive systems exist in church circles, that hands that ought to be caring become the means of harassment. Some authority figures in institutions managed by priests and nuns become mini-demons without realizing that servant leadership is the way of Catholic life.

As the waves of feminism evolve, let the changes to which we aspire not be equivalent to male dominance; rather let it focus on the innate power and strength of woman herself. In Hindu mythology, the powerful gods are female gods. Let the world learn the fact that messing with a woman is not easy — so respect her!