

Promoting women's reproductive and sexual health

A biblical reflection by Moumita Biswas, Executive Secretary of the All India Council of Christian Women.

The story of a mother who wanted to have Life in its Fullness; Mark 5.25-34

We must have read and heard the story of the haemorrhaging woman in Mark's Gospel many times. But let us re-read and analyse this story once again. Let us understand the story from the perspective of a mother's sexual and reproductive health justice issue and well-being promoted by Jesus.

Mark 5.25 reveals to us that there was this mother or a woman whose sexual or reproductive health was not well. This mother was suffering and haemorrhaging for 12 years. She went to many doctors but could not be healed. Imagine what will be the health condition of this mother who is suffering for 12 years, bleeding all the time. How uncomfortable and unbearable this disease must have been for her. She must have been very fatigued, suffering from anaemia because of losing so much of blood; she might have been suffering from infection and there is possibility that she was very weak and frail.

According to Jewish law (Leviticus 12.1-8; 15.19-30), because of her bleeding the woman was unclean which prohibited her from regular fellowship with others and worship of God. We have to agree that prolonged disease not only created physical discomfort and pain but the taboo and discrimination attached to this disease sanctioned by Jewish law must have created psychological trauma for her also.



Moumita Biswas (Church of North India) and Jeanne Samuel (Church of Ceylon) at the International Anglican Women's Network regional consultation for South Asia, October 2015

Let us imagine the sufferings this mother might have faced. Definitely her conjugal life with her husband under such circumstances might not have been happy and satisfying. Who knows, maybe she was ridiculed, or faced violence because of her inability to satisfy her spouse. Maybe her spouse was fed up of her and took another wife. Her own children might have also looked down on her and felt ashamed of her. Maybe she was considered as a burden and nagging mother every time she requested for money to go to local doctors. Since she was considered polluted, maybe she was not allowed to stay in the same house with other family members but given a space near the stable or backyard of her home. Since she was considered polluted maybe she was not even allowed to continue household chores and hence she was considered not productive.

Maybe her family members even deprived her share of food as she was a burden and useless to the family. Maybe this mother and woman suffered in pain silently and cried. Maybe she hated her body. Maybe she cursed herself being born as woman. There are many possibilities if we want to identify and feel her pain. All these things are not written in the Bible. But to understand the pain of this woman we need to put ourselves in her shoes.

The courageous mother disobeying the unjust law to be healed

Despite her sickness and vulnerability, this bleeding mother was a remarkable woman. She was desperate to get healed. She was bold and a daring mother who did not want to just suffer and accept her situation as her fate. Maybe she did not want to indulge in self pity cursing her own fate or seeking healing in heaven after death. She took a risk, and a very great risk. Her own unique spirituality prompted her to break the law. Her faith in God of love allowed her to touch the Rabbi and take risk to be healed. In other words she asserted her rights to come to the Rabbi (Jesus) to touch him, to seek healing, even though Jewish law forbade her to do so. According to the Jewish laws of ritual on purity she should not have even ventured out into the crowd. In that sense with her physical condition of impurity in Jewish society her action was a crime.

Who touched me? Jesus breaking the silence and promoting women's sexual and reproductive health rights

When the woman touched Jesus, he knew someone had touched his clothes and power went away from him. Jesus wanted to know who touched him. In fact when Jesus insisted he wanted to know, his disciples answered, "You see the people crowding against you and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?' But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it". We need to interrogate our own conscience and mind and raise certain pertinent questions. Many people in the crowd might have touched Jesus to seek healing, so why did Jesus insist on his disciples to find out who touched him? Why was it so important to him? Why Jesus kept on searching for the person who touched him? Jesus was Son of God performing so many miracles. It might not have been impossible for him to understand who touched him and why. He could have kept quiet, his purpose was served, power went away from him, and the woman was healed immediately. The story could have ended here. But it did not. This story reveals that Jesus wanted to break the silence. He defied the unjust Jewish law, as mentioned in book of Leviticus that oppressed women because of their sexuality or issue concerning sexual and reproductive health.

- He wanted to let the suffering mother or woman know he understands her pain, even being a man.
- He removed the taboo of purity and pollution that society attaches to women's sexual and reproductive health.
- Through the act of healing Jesus publicly proclaimed that women and mothers have the right to life in its fullness.
- Jesus through his action of healing and his question to his disciples "Who touched me?" reminds us that it is the duty of our society to acknowledge that women do suffer due to diseases concerning their sexual or reproductive health. It is the duty of society to acknowledge that such diseases need immediate attention and healing, and not neglect, violence, or discrimination.
- Jesus acknowledged the courage and faith of this mother even in her brokenness and sickness when he said, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering".

The story also narrates that the woman revealed her own identity to Jesus. This mother or woman could have run away. Being a Jewish woman she was well aware of the consequences of breaking Jewish laws as written in Torah (Jewish scripture). Maybe she would have been stoned to death or ridiculed further in public. But the woman did not choose to run away. She also participated with her courage and faith to facilitate Jesus to promote women's sexual and reproductive health rights and promote a mother's right to life in its fullness. So this mother and Jesus were partners in Jesus' ministry. Men and women's partnership is essential to overcome violence against women.

Contextualising the story

Even today in Indian society women suffer silently with issues regarding their sexual or reproductive health. In both urban and rural scenarios women are still considered impure because of their body and monthly cycle. In many homes, women during her monthly cycle are not allowed to enter the kitchen, sit and eat with the rest of the family or worship.

Scripture is used to legitimise such discrimination. There are idioms in our society which are very common which are conditioned in our mind from childhood to discriminate against women because of her monthly cycle. For example, "If a woman or girl touches a pickle or jam bottle during her monthly flow, the pickle or the jam gets spoiled and rotten".

This reveals there is a nexus between culture, norms and religion that perpetuates violence on woman. Our complex socio-cultural web conditions women to suffer silently and internalise their pain. Millions of mothers in our country have no access to proper maternal health care facilities. Millions of mothers are deprived of food since their childhood and so suffer from anaemia resulting in high mortality rate during childbirth. Women living below poverty level suffer due to unhygienic conditions, lack of sanitary facilities and lack of access to proper health care facilities. Even urban women suffer as they are conditioned to be care givers and neglect their own health. The philosophy of self-denial, sacrifice, self-effacement and service by mothers is regarded as virtue in Indian society. The rigid societal hierarchies have conditioned them to sublimate themselves. In our Indian society, priority is not given to create

awareness and share information about women's sexual and reproductive health issues and rights.

It is time to break the silence regarding the neglect of Indian women's reproductive and sexual health issues. It is time to proclaim that our sexuality is gift of God and mothers do have the right to life in its fullness. It is the sacred duty of the church to engage in mission to promote health, healing and wholeness of mothers as Jesus did.



*First appeared in Samachar, newsletter of the All India Council of Christian Women, 2015.
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