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Women, Faith, and Culture: Empowering Through Inculturation Theology *Ženske, vera in kultura: krepitev moči skozi inkulturacijsko teologijo*

Abstract: This article explores the critical role of inculturation theology in advancing women's empowerment within various cultural and religious frameworks, with a focus on achieving gender equality and breaking down the barriers erected by patriarchal and misogynistic norms. A thorough review of the literature traces the development of inculturation theology within Christianity, highlighting its flexibility and applicability across different cultures, as demonstrated by case studies in Zambia and the Philippines. It addresses the persistent challenges women encounter due to deep-rooted social conventions, and shows how the fusion of Christian principles with cultural traditions serves as a powerful means for confronting these challenges. This article underscores the theology's potential to drive societal transformation, champion gender equality, and amplify women's presence in both religious and wider societal spheres. It stresses the importance of the continued application of inculturation theology to create fairer and more inclusive spaces for women worldwide, calling for further research and application in this field.

Keywords: Inculturation Theology, Christian, women's empowerment, culture, marginalization

Povzetek: Prispevek raziskuje ključno vlogo inkulturacijske teologije pri spodbujanju krepitve vloge žensk v različnih kulturnih in verskih okvirih, s poudarkom na doseganju enakopravnosti spolov in odpravljanju ovir, ki jih postavljajo patriarhalne in mizoginistične norme. Podroben pregled literature sledi razvoju inkulturacijske teologije v krščanstvu in poudarja njeno prožnost ter uporabnost v različnih kulturah, kakor kažejo študije primerov v Zambiji in na Filipinih. Prispevek obravnava pereče izzive, s katerimi se ženske soočajo zaradi globoko zakoreninjenih družbenih norm, in prikazuje, kako združevanje krščanskih načel s kulturnimi tradicijami lahko služi kot močno sredstvo za soočanje s temi izzivi. Prispevek poudarja potencial teologije za spodbujanje družbene preo-

brazbe, zagovarjanje enakopravnosti spolov in povečanje prisotnosti žensk v verskih in širših družbenih krogih. Poudarja tudi pomen nadaljnje uporabe teologije inkulturacije za ustvarjanje pravičnejših in vključujočih prostorov za ženske po vsem svetu ter poziva k nadaljnjim raziskavam in njihovi uporabi na tem področju.

Ključne besede: teologija inkulturacije, krščanstvo, krepitev vloge žensk, kultura, marginalizacija

1. Introduction

Gender equality and women's empowerment are central to global discourse due to the widespread marginalization and discrimination that women face (Odera and Mulusa 2020; Melo 2019). Studies show that women encounter multiple and intersecting barriers to accessing resources, rights, and opportunities, which are often disproportionately affected by environmental and economic crises (Bradshaw, Chant, and Linneker 2019; Udo and Naidu 2023). These barriers are compounded by women's underrepresentation in decision-making roles, with less than 25 percent of parliamentary seats globally, which restricts their legislative influence and their capacity to shape gender-responsive policies (Awusi, Addae, and Kwapong 2023). Furthermore, gender-based violence affects roughly one-third of women worldwide, underscoring the urgency of developing robust strategies to protect women's rights and safety at structural, institutional, and interpersonal levels (Oo 2024).

Women's experiences of marginalization vary across countries and contexts, shaped by intersecting ethnic, cultural, and religious dynamics (Iqbal et al. 2022; Onah et al. 2023; Bozzano 2017; Pinem 2022). Traditional and religious norms often impose restrictive standards that hinder women's access to education and economic opportunities, reinforcing gender roles that limit public and political engagement. These cultural constraints are further intensified by economic precarity, which confines women to low-paying and low-mobility sectors of the labour market. As a result, inequality is sustained not only through structural exclusion but also through symbolic and normative orders that regulate women's everyday lives.

Efforts to promote gender equality have long focused on policy reforms, legal protection, increased political participation, combating violence, and reducing bias (Guthridge et al. 2022; Cornwall 2016; Roberts and Kwon 2021). Initiatives such as education, skills training, and programs to enhance financial independence have achieved important progress. Yet these efforts often fall short in transforming the cultural and religious foundations through which gender relations are sustained. Religion remains a powerful force shaping identity, community life, and moral expectations. Neglecting this dimension risks leaving intact the deeper structures of inequality.

In this context, incorporating an inculturation theological perspective offers a distinctive framework for women's empowerment by critically examining the interaction between religion and culture (Kanyoro 2001). Rather than treating cultural traditions as fixed, this approach seeks to reinterpret them through transformative religious teachings and feminist theological reflection (Pui-Lan 2005; Fiorenza 1992). It challenges patriarchal readings of cultural and religious narratives while affirming women's dignity and agency. It also positions women as epistemic agents and theologians in their own right, whose embodied and communal experiences actively shape theological knowledge. This article explores the empowering potential of inculturation theology, highlighting women's marginalization in cultural practices, examining liberative theological possibilities, and outlining practical applications across different contexts. It concludes by emphasizing the significance and transformative potential of inculturation theology in advancing gender justice.

2. Understanding Inculturation Theology

Inculturation theology highlights Christianity's dynamic nature, demonstrating its ability to adapt to and stay relevant across various cultural settings throughout its history. Established at the beginning of the faith, this theological approach gained prominence in the latter half of the 20th century (Stanley 2007). Apostle Paul was at the forefront of tailoring the gospel to diverse cultural audiences, as evidenced by his sermons in Athens (Martasudjita 2021). Moreover, the integration of Greek philosophical concepts into Christian theology by early church fathers broadened the appeal of religion. A significant milestone in this journey was the Second Vatican Council, which underscored the Roman Catholic Church's commitment to global cultural diversity and the integration of local traditions into Christian practices (Phan 2016). This council was a pivotal moment in affirming the church's dedication to inculturating theology principles, further emphasizing Christianity's ability to engage deeply with cultures around the world.

Inculturation theology goes beyond translating Christian beliefs into different languages; it involves a deep contextualization of the gospel to address specific cultural needs without altering its core tenets (Stanley 2007; Garrard 2021). It aims to make Christianity relevant across various cultural contexts, enriching both the faith and practices of those cultures. This approach has been particularly advanced in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where the Church has worked to make the gospel contextually relevant (Kane 2022).

Moreover, inculturation theology serves as a tool for social change and challenging cultural practices that perpetuate inequality and oppression (Nguyen 2017; Ilo 2015). By examining cultural norms through the lens of the Christian values of equality, justice, and love, this theology addresses issues such as gender inequality, racial discrimination, and social exclusion. It positions the Church as a transformative force, ensuring that Christianity continues to be vibrant and rele-

vant in diverse cultural environments. This approach not only nurtures a more inclusive church community but also encourages Christians to actively embody the teachings of Christ in their wider societies.

Feminist theological critique has, however, consistently challenged the assumption that inculturation theology is inherently liberative. When undertaken without a critical feminist lens, inculturation risks reproducing the very power structures it seeks to transform. This dynamic, rooted in kyriarchy—the interlocking system of domination—is described by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as epistemological colonization, where male-dominated ecclesial and cultural authorities determine which experiences are considered theologically credible (Fiorenza 1992; 2013). Mercy Amba Oduyoye likewise cautions that cultural hermeneutics alone are insufficient. Inculturation must involve careful and critical discernment of local traditions, recognising that these traditions may themselves carry misogyny, sexual hierarchies, and the subordination of women (Oduyoye 1986; 2001). In this light, inculturation must be understood not simply as a theological method but as a contested space that requires the active participation of women and other marginalised voices as theologians and meaning-makers, rather than positioning them as passive objects of adaptation.

Thus, inculturation theology moves beyond simply translating the Christian faith into culture. It becomes a transformative praxis in which faith and culture enter into critical dialogue, allowing cultural identity to be both honoured and interrogated, and enabling women to emerge as co-creators of theological meaning. This transformation is not only conceptual but also methodological, requiring interpretive strategies and communal processes that place women's epistemic agency at the centre. In doing so, inculturation theology strengthens its role as both a theological and socio-cultural critique, opening space for alternative narratives and practices that challenge patriarchal structures.

The post-Vatican II era further illustrates this shift, marked by the Church's growing openness to integrate Christian doctrines with indigenous spiritual practices, emphasizing dialogue and mutual respect (Phan 2016). This development has led to new liturgical forms and theological expressions that reflect the cultural diversity of the global Christian community (Tovey 2019). Inculturation theology thus facilitates a deeper understanding of cultural symbols and rituals, encouraging the Church to reassess and reform traditional practices for greater inclusivity.

In essence, inculturation theology aims to weave cultural diversity into the fabric of Christian beliefs, enriching religion by incorporating a wide range of human experiences and expressions. It promotes empowerment within communities by fostering interaction between faith and local traditions, demonstrating Christianity's continued relevance and adaptability. Through this approach, Christianity actively engages with societal and cultural dynamics, advocating empowerment and meaningful engagement across different cultural landscapes.

3. The Marginalization of Women in Culture

This section delves into the systemic marginalization of women, highlighting the roles that patriarchal and misogynistic ideologies play across various cultures in restricting women's roles in society. Patriarchal structures allocate power and influence predominantly to men, sidelining women into less authoritative positions, while misogyny fosters deep-seated biases against women, further embedding their marginal status (Walby 1989; Srivastava et al. 2017). These ingrained societal norms diminish women's contributions, enforce damaging stereotypes, and justify exclusion and poor treatment across the social, political, and economic spheres.

The impact of these cultural and societal norms is evident in the obstacles to women's education and professional engagement, particularly in settings where tradition and policy severely limit access to these opportunities (Choudhury and Kumar 2022; Bako and Syed 2018; Samtleben 2019). Societal expectations often relegate women to domestic roles, thereby narrowing their prospects for educational attainment and professional advancement (Kolpashnikova and Koike 2021; Pritchett and Sandefur 2020). This restriction not only perpetuates a developmental gap between genders but also limits women's participation in the workforce, where they encounter wage gaps, career advancement barriers, and a scarcity of leadership roles (Matteazzi and Scherer 2021; Kabir 2020).

Additionally, cultural dictates significantly undermine women's autonomy, particularly regarding personal decisions regarding marriage, reproduction, and sexuality (Dessalegn et al. 2020; Sarfo, Yendork, and Naidoo 2022). These societal expectations are often enforced through legal, social, and sometimes violent means, eroding the freedom and agency of women.

Violence against women is another important outcome of their marginalization, encompassing a spectrum of normalized abuses to preserve their subordinate role (Arnosso et al. 2022; Alesina et al. 2021). Practices such as domestic violence, honor killings, female genital mutilation (FGM), and forced marriages not only inflict harm, but also reinforce oppressive norms (Mshweshwe 2020; Dayan 2021; Awolola and Ilupeju 2019; Idriss 2022). These violent acts, often couched in cultural or traditional justifications, sustain the marginalization of women and underscore the urgency of addressing these issues.

Confronting women's marginalization demands comprehensive strategies, including legal and policy reforms, along with cultural and attitudinal changes. Despite these challenges and potential backlash, adopting culturally sensitive methods is crucial in efforts to enhance gender equality and ensure women's rights and safety.

4. Inculturation Theology as a Means of Women's Empowerment

Following the explanation of inculturation theology and the outline of the extensive oppression and marginalization experienced by women in cultural contexts,

this section explores how inculturation theology can be an empowerment tool for marginalized women. By focusing on integrating the Christian faith into various cultural realities, it presents a unique strategy to confront and alleviate the systemic inequalities faced by women.

First, this approach is crucial for acknowledging and questioning the structures that contribute to women's marginalization. It involves a detailed reassessment of religious texts and customs through the lens of diverse cultural encounters, especially those of marginalized women, challenging patriarchal and misogynistic interpretations to promote equality, dignity, and justice (Pietersen 2021; Peppiatt 2019; Bøsterud 2021; Barr 2021).

Second, it acknowledges women's unique experiences within the Christian belief system, enhances theological understanding, and ensures Christianity's relevance to the challenges women face in different cultures. This lays a theological foundation for challenging norms and promoting gender equality, emphasizing women's perspectives and experiences within the church (Kaunda and Pokol 2019).

Third, practical implications for women's empowerment include developing focused ministries and programs, addressing gender-based violence and economic empowerment, and advocating for more female leadership in church decision-making (Wood 2019). This active participation fosters an equitable church community and catalyzes broader social shifts toward gender equality, positioning inculturation theology as a transformative force in both the religious and social spheres.

Fourth, it influences public and communal perceptions of women's roles, advocating for inclusive interpretations of Christian texts and traditions, and challenging stereotypes. This approach redefines women as active participants and leaders, breaking down barriers to influential positions and fostering a more equitable social order (Ilesanmi 1995).

Inculturation theology serves as a transformative force for gender equality, reinterpreting Christian teachings to empower marginalized women and fostering a more inclusive church community. Challenging stereotypes and advocating for justice, equality, and inclusivity plays a crucial role in improving women's societal positions and creating compassionate communities within and beyond the church. This theological approach not only promotes an inclusive understanding of gender roles within faith contexts but also encourages women to embrace leadership roles and express faith in ways that reflect their diverse experiences. As it challenges cultural and religious norms about gender, inculturation theology advocates a reinterpretation of religious texts and traditions in favor of empowering women. This catalyses a cultural shift towards gender equality, transforming communities into spaces of justice and equity.

5. Two Case Studies

This section provides illustrative case studies on how inculturation theology can be utilized for women's empowerment. The cases presented here are drawn from Africa and Asia, specifically focusing on the myth of Bemba creation in Zambia and the Babaylan tradition in the Philippines. These examples highlight the interplay between indigenous spiritual traditions and Christian theological reinterpretations of empowering women within their respective cultural and religious contexts.

5.1 Africa: Insights from the Bemba Creation Myth

The study of inculturation theology in the African context delves into the intersection of indigenous cultural elements with Christian theological concepts. This analysis highlights the relationship between sexual desire, gender, and prayer within the Bemba creation story, underscoring their significant role in empowering women (Kaunda and Kaunda 2021; Kaunda and Pokol 2019). Integrating the spiritual and cultural identity of one of Zambia's largest ethnic groups, the Bemba creation myth elucidates the origins of gender and human desires through the journey of two initially genderless beings. This exploration melds the Bemba myth with Christian theological insights, providing a unique perspective on the themes of creation, sin, and redemption.

In contrast to Western dualistic viewpoints, African worldviews do not draw strict lines between spiritual and sexual, physical and spiritual, or between female and male realms (Kaunda and Kaunda 2021). African feminist theology adopts a holistic approach, challenging the patriarchal suppression of female sexuality and advocating for a more equitable understanding of spirituality, prayer, and sexual desires (Bongmba 2012; Moyo 2004). This perspective actively resists patriarchal religious practices that often marginalize and exploit women's sexual desires. Within the framework of the Bemba creation story, this theological viewpoint reinterprets traditional narratives to align with Christian values that advocate for gender equality and a more profound understanding of human sexuality as an integral part of God's divine plan.

The Bemba creation myth begins with two initially androgynous entities, where Lesa (God) bestows gifts symbolizing divine masculine and feminine traits. This narrative mirrors the Bemba people's worldview and perception of destiny, depicting the hasty and one-sided decisions of the being who assumes maleness, thereby distorting the true nature of human sexuality and relationships. Christian theology engages with these themes in the story's inculturation, contextualizing the actions and repercussions within a Christian framework of sin and the imperative for reconciliation with God. Such distortions reflect patriarchal biases common in contemporary societies, where males often override and devalue female sexuality. The Christian interpretation of this myth critiques these biases and advocates a more equitable, God-focused approach to gender relations.

In Bemba mythology, addressing injustices and imbalances resulting from distorted perceptions of divine desire entails a return to Lesa through prayers. This

act of 'return' symbolizes a gender-aware prayer, crucial for attaining gender equity and liberating desires. The myth posits that female desire, though frequently suppressed, holds significant potential and can be actualized through divine grace and prayerful commitment. Integrating this myth into Christian theology underscores the role of prayer not just as a ceremonial act but as a transformative process that aligns human desires with the divine will, fostering a culture of respect and equality consistent with Christian teachings.

An examination of the Bemba creation story through the lens of inculturation theology indicates that, while desire is inherently divine, its interpretation and manifestation are profoundly influenced by cultural norms that often benefit dominant groups. This necessitates an ongoing commitment to prayers and proactive efforts to nurture equitable relationships and justice. Therefore, this narrative serves as a valuable framework for understanding how sexual desire, gender roles, and prayerful practices can enhance women's empowerment in the African Christian context. The Christian reinterpretation of this myth highlights the transformative power of reimagining cultural narratives in light of Christian values, thus paving the way for a more just and inclusive society. This reinterpretation also foregrounds women's bodies and lived experiences as sacred sites of spiritual and theological meaning, challenging dualistic traditions that marginalize female embodiment.

5.2 Asia: the Transformative Role of the Babaylan

The Babaylan tradition in the Philippines showcases the amalgamation of inculturation Christian theology and promotion of women's emancipation (Sanchez 2022; Mendoza 2017). It is a crucial element of Filipino folk spirituality and offers a unique perspective for understanding the changing position of women in historical and contemporary circumstances.

Babaylan occupies a prominent position in the religious beliefs and practices of Filipino people. It is distinguished by the cohesive amalgamation of native beliefs and Catholicism. Babaylans, typically women or effeminate individuals, are regarded as spiritual authorities, healers, and mentors within their communities. The Shamans served as crucial intermediaries between the spiritual realm and the community. They provided essential directions, healing, and rituals that were crucial to the social and spiritual welfare of their communities. Their impact encompasses diverse domains of existence, including agriculture, medicine, and resolution of communal conflicts.

The Babaylan tradition has consistently exerted a profound influence on the spiritual beliefs and values of Filipinos, even amid the substantial changes brought about by Spanish colonization and the introduction of Christianity (Tapia 2024). Spanish colonizers aimed to repress Babaylan, perceiving it as an obstacle to the propagation of Christianity. Nevertheless, Babaylan assimilated Christian doctrines while preserving its fundamental function as a spiritual and community guide.

Contemporary Filipino theologians with feminist perspectives have recently re-examined the Babaylan tradition to empower women and question the patri-

archal standards prevalent in both the Church and society (Nono 2021). Babaylan symbolizes power, endurance, and ability to lead, acting as a valuable source and fundamental symbol for various gender identities. This reinterpretation is in accordance with Christian principles that highlight the dignity and capacities of women while also questioning and redefining conventional patriarchal systems. This practice cultivates a heightened feeling of unity among women, the LGBTIQ+ community, and other groups that have historically been excluded because of their gender.

The incorporation of the Babaylan tradition into Christian theology in the Philippines exemplifies the impact of cultural heritage on advancing women's emancipation. This tradition exemplifies the conservation of cultural customs, while simultaneously promoting justice and equality. The fusion of cultural heritage and Christian beliefs can foster an all-encompassing Church and society that honors and appreciates the varied perspectives and valuable contributions of women and oppressed cultures. The Babaylan tradition emphasizes the transformational power of inculturation theology in promoting a society that is fair and equal.

6. Challenges and Considerations

Successful implementation of inculturation theology for women's empowerment involves navigating through several challenges and considerations. This strategy aims to empower women authentically by resonating theology with their diverse cultural and religious experiences. Yet this empowerment cannot be fully realized without confronting the patriarchal structures embedded within church institutions themselves, which often limit women's leadership, participation, and theological authority.

First, a key internal challenge is balancing the preservation of cultural traditions with the integration of Christian teaching. This requires a delicate equilibrium between honoring cultural customs and upholding Christianity's core values. Resistance may arise in settings where cultural and religious identities are closely knit, with the fear of losing cultural authenticity or altering long-standing traditions.

Second, inculturation efforts are sometimes met with skepticism, seen as potentially diluting the essence of Christian teachings or leading to syncretism (Munonwe 2014). It is vital to clearly communicate the aims of inculturation theology, particularly its dedication to gender equality and women's rights. Educating both religious communities and society about the value of weaving cultural diversity into religious practices can create a more inclusive faith environment.

Third, from a theological perspective, it is crucial to find a balance between traditions and innovation. Inculturation theology aims to adapt Christian beliefs to diverse cultural settings, without compromising them (Doyle 2012). This necessitates openness from theologians and religious leaders to new interpretations of scriptures and theology that align with the local cultural practices. Reevaluating

traditional teaching through the lens of diverse cultural experiences, especially from women's viewpoints, is essential.

Beyond these theological and institutional challenges, inculturation must also confront the power relations that are deeply embedded within local cultures themselves. Local traditions are not always liberating. They often contain elements of misogyny, sexual hierarchy, and violence against women. If inculturation merely integrates culture into theology without critical feminist discernment, it may end up legitimizing these oppressive elements. Feminist theologians have underscored the importance of interrogating local cultures and their entanglements with patriarchal and colonial structures, stressing that any inculturation process must carefully distinguish between practices that are liberating and those that perpetuate oppression (Oduyoye 1995; Dube 2000; Chung 1990)

In addition, inculturation theology benefits from an intersectional and post-colonial lens that accounts for the complexity of women's lived experiences. These experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by race, class, ethnicity, colonial legacies, and economic structures. Kim and Shaw (2018) show how intersectional theology exposes overlapping systems of power, while Kwok Pui-lan (2005; 2021) draws attention to postcolonial dynamics that shape theological engagement in diverse contexts. Together, these perspectives help ensure that inculturation theology does not reproduce dominant cultural norms but instead amplifies and centres the voices of those who have historically been marginalised.

Moreover, inculturation theology carries a moral obligation to emphasize empowerment and justice. This must ensure that the process of inculturation does not unintentionally uphold existing power imbalances or patriarchal norms within both the Church and broader society. The goal is to dismantle these structures, enabling women and other marginalized groups to gain voice and agency. This commitment requires continuous effort and a proactive approach to align inculturation theology with the overarching objectives of social justice, equality, and empowerment of all community members. By carefully addressing these cultural, sociological, theological, and ethical dimensions, inculturation theology can significantly contribute to religious practices enriched with cultural diversity, furthering gender equality and the empowerment of women.

7. Conclusion

Inculturation theology offers a critical theological framework for advancing women's empowerment in culturally and religiously diverse settings. As this article has shown, gender inequality is deeply embedded not only in structural and economic systems but also in cultural and religious norms that restrict women's roles and agency. By engaging faith and culture in a dynamic dialogue, inculturation theology recognizes cultural identity while challenging patriarchal interpretations

that sustain marginalization. Through feminist perspectives, it moves beyond mere adaptation toward critical discernment, interrogating power relations within both church and culture. The Bemba creation myth and the Babaylan tradition illustrate how local spiritualities can be reimagined to affirm dignity, equality, and agency, transforming religious narratives into resources for justice and empowerment.

Looking ahead, inculturation theology holds transformative potential to nurture inclusive faith communities and wider social change. It calls for continuous critical engagement, theological creativity, and the active participation of women as theologians and meaning-makers. This requires building concrete feminist practices within faith communities, including inclusive liturgies, shared leadership models, and embodied spiritual expressions that centre women's experiences. When practiced intentionally, this approach can help reshape gender relations, strengthen communal solidarity, and advance a theological vision that resonates with local contexts while upholding justice and equality for all.

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