

# Global South Feminist Theology in the Public Sphere: An Alternative Space to Strive For Women's Full Humanity

*Teologia feminista do sul global na esfera pública: um espaço alternativo no esforço para a plena humanidade das mulheres*

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to explore the subject of global South feminist theology in the public sphere. It attempts to engage the questions of what feminist theology in the global South looks like in the public realm and how it addresses public issues, particularly those that affect women. This will be achieved through a discussion of feminist theology in Latin America and Asia. As will be argued in this paper, feminist theology in the global South is, like all theology, contextual. It is also inherently public and intersectional. As women experience oppression, discrimination, and injustice in various forms in the global South and around the world, they are denied their full humanity. Given the contextual, intersectional, and public nature of feminist theology in the global South, its engagement in the public sphere creates an alternative space for dialogue and action as women strive toward full humanity in the local and global contexts.

**Resumo:** Este artigo procura explorar o tema da teologia feminista global do Sul na esfera pública. Ele tenta engajar as questões de como é a teologia feminista no Sul global na esfera pública e como aborda questões públicas, particularmente aquelas que afetam as mulheres. Isso será alcançado através de uma discussão sobre a

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teologia feminista na América Latina e na Ásia. Como será discutido neste artigo, a teologia feminista no Sul global é, como toda a teologia, contextual. Também é inerentemente público e interseccional. Como as mulheres experimentam opressão, discriminação e injustiça em várias formas no Sul global e em todo o mundo, lhes é negada sua plena humanidade. Dada a natureza contextual, interseccional e pública da teologia feminista no Sul global, o seu envolvimento na esfera pública cria um espaço alternativo para o diálogo e a ação, à medida que as mulheres se empenham na plena humanidade nos contextos local e global.

### **Terms and Limitations: “Global South” and “Feminist Theology”**

Before beginning this discussion, it is necessary to briefly explain some of the terminology that will be used, specifically the terms “global South” and “feminist theology.” There are pros and cons for both terms as well as other viable alternatives. Such choices have been made, with acknowledgement of their shortcomings, in order to facilitate the discussion in this paper. Unfortunately, a deeper analysis of the issues associated with this terminology is beyond the scope of this paper.

While scholars point out important limitations when it comes to defining what is meant by the “global South,” this paper will use the term “global South” unless directly quoting an author who uses another term such as “Third World.”<sup>2</sup> Clarification is also necessary when it comes to the concept of “feminist theology.” As can be seen in the emergence of womanist theology and *mujerista* theology in the United States, the term “feminist theology” is not without limitations. When the term is synonymous with the concerns of upper-class, white, American women, it severely lacks diverse perspectives and does a disservice to all women, particularly women of color. For the purposes of this paper, when “feminist theology” appears, it will be used in the broadest sense to incorporate the work of the various theologians being discussed. This is not to assume that there is no diversity within such a broad framework. Indeed, this paper will seek to highlight the particularity and contextual nature of all theology, including the theology done by women theologians in the global South. It is also important to note that not all women theologians would self-identify as feminist theologians “in order to avoid the negative, militant, separatist

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<sup>2</sup> KWOK, 2010.

connotation of the term ‘feminist’—which is a term often also referred to as Western”<sup>3</sup>. This is especially true for women theologians in Asia and so in most cases in reference to theology from women in Asia, “women’s theology” will be used instead of “feminist theology.” In light of all this, it must be said that the use of “feminist theology” is not intended to lump all theology done by women together as a single theology that all would agree to. It is instead an attempt to consider the particularity of theology done by women in their contexts making use of the broadest understanding of the term which is that it is “a pluralist, global and open theological project over which it is difficult to pronounce any definite claims.”<sup>4</sup>

## **Global South Feminist Theology as Contextual**

Like liberation theology or queer theology, feminist theology is described as “contextual.” Such a label is not inherently dismissive, but when compared to what is thought of as “classical” or “traditional” theology (i.e., John Calvin, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth), “contextual” theology can be sidelined while “traditional” theology is held up as the norm. This kind of description marginalizes certain theologies, like feminist theology, such that they are not considered as valid as others. Another way of achieving this same marginalization is by considering feminist theology a “fad.” In this view “some theologies are classic and have enduring power, while others will last only for a short while.”<sup>5</sup> Such an idea presumes that some perspectives are more relevant and universal than others. As several scholars have shown, however, all theology is contextual because all theology emerges from a specific context. Elina Vuola states that “there are no neutral perspectives, since all perspectives are bound to certain interests.”<sup>6</sup> Feminist theology is concerned with the interests of women which, will be shown below, intersect with issues of race, sexuality, and class. Its context is determined by a number of interconnected perspectives.

Context influences how Scripture is read and how theology is done. Elina Vuola says that contextuality “presupposes a creative interaction between the reading of Scripture and the reading of present-day social reality, the mediating authority between these two elements not being an individual theologian but the praxis of a

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<sup>3</sup> WONG, 2010, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> VUOLA, 2002, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> KWOK, 2010, 149.

<sup>6</sup> VUOLA, 2002, p. 88.

community.”<sup>7</sup>Indeed, the community context out of which an individual does theology cannot be separated from their work because their community is part of their experience which is integral to their theology. Furthermore, it can be argued that feminist theology, like liberation theology, “is self-consciously historical and contextual. It does not claim to be *the* universal truth for all times and for all societies.”<sup>8</sup> It is self-aware of its context and its interests. In this way, feminist theology is situated in a position that it is able to engage with other theologies more so than those that do assume their status to be “universal.” Starting from a point of acknowledged context allows for a more fruitful dialogue with other contexts. As will be demonstrated in this paper, contextual awareness can serve as a basis for global conversation and action on public issues.

## **The Intersectionality of Global South Feminist Theology**

Global South feminist theology is inherently intersectional because of how feminist theology emerged in the global South and how it functions in communities and conversations today. Kwok Pui-lan asserts that “feminists in the Third World do not have the luxury of attending to gender oppression alone, without simultaneously taking into consideration class, racial, colonial, and religious oppression.”<sup>9</sup> Unlike in the United States where the feminist movement has been fairly criticized for its emphasis on white women at the exclusion of women of color while ignoring the overlapping issues of race and socioeconomic status, feminist theology in the global South cannot be separated from these intersecting issues.

Kwok Pui-lan also states that “the emergence of feminist consciousness in the Third World took place in the wider political climate of national struggles, the fight against economic exploitation, and the quest for cultural self-definition”<sup>10</sup>. Again this shows that global South feminist theology emerged intertwined with other movements and issues from which it cannot be separated as feminist theologians continue to address these and other problems. This intersectionality is part of what situates feminist theology in the global South to have a profound impact on local and global issues. It

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<sup>7</sup> VUOLA, 2002, p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> VUOLA, 2002, p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> KWOK, 2010, p. 166.

<sup>10</sup> KWOK, 2010, p. 151.

sees the interconnectedness of all things, including injustice and oppression, and speaks to the intersecting experience of injustice for women in the global South.

## **Global South Feminist Theology's Publicness**

Global South feminist theology also has a public nature to it that is born out of the simple fact that it engages with public issues. It does not exist only in the academy or the church, but in the world such that it is involved in the lives of people. It is public in that it “addresses concrete social and political concerns” and “relates the Christian tradition to the lived experiences of the people”<sup>11</sup>. As will be discussed below, Latin American feminist theology is intertwined with the problem of poverty, a public issue which disproportionately affects women and children. This emphasis means that in a way, feminist theology in Latin America emerged already involved in a public conversation about a public issue. In another example, for Korean feminist theologians today, feminist theology in Korea grew as part of a larger movement of democratization within that country which again shows its engagement in the public realm as an aspect of a public and political process.<sup>12</sup>

Feminist theology in the global South has also created a kind of alternative public space “to articulate the theological vision of hope and aspiration of women”<sup>13</sup>. It is in this alternative public space, rather than in the existing structures dominated by what is known as “classical” theology, that dialogue and positive change can happen to improve the lives of women and those in their communities. Given the inherent publicness of feminist theology and the fact that feminist theologians in the global South are most often working from the margins of society, feminist theology is able to engage with the concrete issues that individuals and communities face. The public aspect of global South feminist theology has implications for how feminist theology can continue to address public issues at the local and international levels as it starts new conversations and is included as part of existing ones. It is these characteristics that create a space in which women strive for full humanity.

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<sup>11</sup> KWOK, 2010, p. 150.

<sup>12</sup> CHO, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> KWOK, 2010, p. 151.

## **Approaches: Hermeneutical, Theological, and Practical**

This paper seeks to explore Latin American and Asian feminist theologies by considering three aspects from both contexts including hermeneutical approach, the theology itself, and the practical implications. In other words, it will explore how Latin American and Asian feminist theologians are reading and interpreting the Bible, how this is related to the theology being presented by feminist theologians, and what this looks like.

Regarding hermeneutics, Yong Ting Jin explains Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's model of "A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics of Liberation," by saying that "this methodological model starts with who is interpreting the bible, and in what context. The Subject of the text is the one interpreting the text. It is imperative and essential that the reader realizes that she/he is the Subject of any text"<sup>14</sup>. Realization of one's role as Subject empowers one to read and interpret the text from their own perspective in their own voice. Along the same line of thought, Musa Dube states that "different readers act out the biblical story in different ways at different times in history"<sup>15</sup>. With this assumption in mind she says that "without overlooking the differences of race, sexuality, religion, and class, I am proposing that our critical practice should be multicultural in a post-colonial open-space of women of the world as equal subjects"<sup>16</sup>. Not only does this proposal recognize context and diversity, it also speaks to the reality of the multicultural global context and the importance of dialogue across cultures. Furthermore, with women as equal subjects, the space opens up for readings and interpretations of the Bible by women that are liberating for women.

In terms of the theological approach, it has been mentioned that feminist theology encompasses a wide spectrum of work from different geographic, social, political, biblical, and theological contexts. There is no single way to adequately define what feminist theology is because it is unique to each of the contexts from which it develops. With that in mind, however, it is possible to look for connections and speak about common approaches and aims in feminist theology when we consider it "as a heterogeneous and multifaceted phenomenon"<sup>17</sup>. In her discussion about written work, Kwok Pui-lan explains that "the act of writing back implies an

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<sup>14</sup> YONG, 2014, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> DUBE, 2010, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> DUBE, 2010, p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> VUOLA, 2002, p. 88.

oppositional stance, of claiming the power to narrate, to contest and reconstruct meanings, and to play with language and imagination”<sup>18</sup>. This process of “writing back” does not need to be limited to written theology. Such a process can be expanded to oral traditions where one is still “claiming the power to narrate.” The most important facet is that the one “writing” (or “talking”) back is expressing their own theology in their own voice. Similar to the hermeneutical lens discussed above, feminist theology promotes women as the subject of theology. Another commonality that can be seen across contexts is the intersectionality and publicness of global South feminist theology as it engages with interconnecting public issues, as was discussed above. These aspects characterize feminist theology in the global South and allow a consideration of feminist theology that incorporates contextual difference while looking at feminist theology from a global perspective to see what is shared between contexts.

The practical implications speak to the nature of global South feminist theology as it is contextual, intersectional, and public. They are in answer to the question of what it looks like for global South feminist theology to engage in the public realm. As a theology that exists in the world beyond the church and the academy, what does global South feminist theology *do* in the world? How does it have an impact on the world and those who have experienced injustice and oppression? These are the questions that will be looked at by considering feminist theology in Latin America and Asia and how feminist theology in these places has sought to address public issues that affect women and their communities.

## **A Dialogue: Latin American and Asian Feminist Theology**

The choice to consider feminist theology in the contexts of Latin America and Asia does not assume that these geographic regions are homogenous and contain no diversity. Rather it is an attempt to consider feminist theology from a number of theologians from these places in order to begin to grasp the kind of theology that is emerging from Latin America and Asia. Over the course of the discussion, the particularity of these contexts will be apparent as will hopefully the commonalities.

In looking at Asian feminist theology, or women’s theology in Asia, this paper will consider hermeneutics that allow women to find

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<sup>18</sup> KWOK, 2010, p. 126.

liberation and humanity in the Bible, a theology that has emerged out of a national struggle for democracy in South Korea and the daily suffering of women across the continent, and the practical ways in which feminist theology is done in the ecumenical movement in Asia. The inclusion of these specific voices from South Korea and China offer a glimpse at feminist theology in two geographic contexts and does not assume to be representative of Asian feminist theology in all its distinct presentations.

When it comes to hermeneutics, Asian feminist theology seeks a way of women reading the Bible where they are the Subjects, empowered to read and interpret Scripture in light of their own experiences and in their own voices. Chung Hyun Kyung says that “in their search for full humanity, Asian women receive strength through biblical teachings. However, for Asian women good news from the Bible is not a free gift to accept without suspicion since the Bible carries so many oppressive messages for women”<sup>19</sup>. Such a statement speaks to the need for a hermeneutical lens that allows Asian women to be the Subject of their reading of the Bible. Then it is possible for the Bible to be a source of liberation instead of oppression for women.

As was mentioned above, for Korean feminist theologians today, feminist theology in Korea is intertwined with South Korea’s democratization movement.<sup>20</sup> Min-Ah Cho explains further by saying “the Korean Christian feminist movement grew alongside the nationwide protest of the masses. By joining in the movement toward democracy, Christian women’s political consciousness was awakened, and they applied it to the anti-democratic church systems and the distortions of Christian patriarchy”<sup>21</sup>. Through participation in a larger political movement, women saw how oppression and injustice were manifested in various ways and how they were connected. This is echoed in a broader sense by Chung Hyun Kyung who states that “Asian women’s theology has been created out of the historical context of Asia’s struggle for full humanity. The women of Asia awakened from their long silence and began to speak out in their own language about their experience of the divine.”<sup>22</sup>. Framing Asian feminist theology in a larger historical and political context speaks to its emergence as part of a movement that incorporated a struggle for democracy and a struggle for humanity in the public

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<sup>19</sup> CHUNG, 1990, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> CHO, 2014, p. 233.

<sup>21</sup> CHO, 2014, p. 235.

<sup>22</sup> CHUNG, 1990, p. 11.

sphere reflecting the fact that it is contextual, intersectional, and public.

Speaking more broadly about the emergence of feminist theology in Asia, Chung Hyun Kyung says that “Asian women’s theology was born out of Asian women’s tears and sighs and from their burning desire for liberation and wholeness”<sup>23</sup>. This highlights how feminist theology in Asia is born out of the daily lives of women and how it is inseparable from their suffering. It is this suffering that feminist theology seeks to alleviate and the causes of which it seeks to eliminate through engagement in the public sphere. In being concerned with the daily suffering of women, women’s theology in Asia is concerned with the public lives of women in society and the issues they experience as they are “politically and economically victimized, culturally oppressed, colonially exploited, and theologically undermined”<sup>24</sup>. Because of this, “theology must be embodied”<sup>25</sup>. Asian women’s theology must take on the suffering of Asian women. It must reflect their experiences, speak to solutions, and address issues in a concrete manner. Women’s engagement in the Asian ecumenical movement provides one example of what this can look like in practical terms.

The Asian ecumenical movement has been a platform for productive theological reflection on public issues. It is in this context that Asian women theologians have been able to “relate to each other, cultivate mutual exchange and support, and build networks and alliances on common issues”<sup>26</sup>. This kind of mutual, cooperative work is crucial to addressing the issues that women face in Asia and around the world. It is in this exchange of ideas and support that progress can be made. The exchange is most effective when it embraces the “ethical-political commitment to the people who are ‘disprivileged’ and marginalized”<sup>27</sup>. In this way, a common commitment is shared and can be addressed from various perspectives and contexts. Min-Ah Cho speaks of the need for feminist theologians “to work harder” on issues related to the LGBTQ community, reproductive rights, and interfaith dialogue among others.<sup>28</sup> Such efforts are reflected in the Asian ecumenical movement in the form of publications, conferences, workshops, movements, and partnerships. It is in the continuation of these

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<sup>23</sup> CHUNG, 1990, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> WONG, 2010, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> WONG, 2010, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> WONG, 2010, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> WONG, 2010, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> CHO, 2014, p. 244.

efforts that feminist theology in Asia will continue to be a presence in the public realm, seeking to address the issues facing women and their communities.

From a Latin American perspective, this paper will consider a reading of Mary through a feminist lens in Latin America, how Marian theology addresses the issue of poverty in particular, and how Mary has become a symbol for women striving for justice and humanity. Ivone Gebara highlights an important point regarding feminist hermeneutics. Referencing Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Gebara asks the question, “How can a feminist biblical hermeneutics situate its readings of the Bible in such a way that they do not reinscribe the patriarchal discourse of subordination and obedience?”<sup>29</sup> In asking this question, Gebara illuminates the notion that the Bible emerged out of a patriarchal context and expresses concern that “the weapons used for oppression cannot always be transformed into paths of liberation”<sup>30</sup>. She goes on to say, however, that “it is imperative somehow to lead the Bible back to the common reality of human life..., to let it become anew a human word on matters related to life and death, a word concerning the meaning of life, an ethical word, situated and dated, in dialogue with our words of today”<sup>31</sup>. Such a reading of the Bible highlights the importance of Scripture’s connection to life, humanity, and human experience. This way of reading and interpreting Scripture is reflected in Latin American feminist theology.

A common expression of Latin American theology in general, but feminist theology in particular, is Mary. For feminist theologians in Latin America, Mary is explicitly connected to the experience of poverty which has become “feminized” as labor has been divided by sex with women’s labor being undervalued and women continuing to earn less income than men.<sup>32</sup> Ana María Bidegain explains that “the figure of Mary—Mary poor, Mary committed and engaged—so central to our Latin American piety, is for us the power and model of liberation as the process of the feminization of poverty waxes apace”<sup>33</sup>. Mary as a model of strength and liberation flips on its head the model of Mary which has been used to symbolize “self-denial, passivity, and submission as the essential (or worse still, the only) attributes of woman”<sup>34</sup>. Understanding Mary instead as a woman

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<sup>29</sup> GEBARA, 2010, p. 59.

<sup>30</sup> GEBARA, 2010, p. 59.

<sup>31</sup> GEBARA, 2010, p. 60.

<sup>32</sup> BIDEGAIN, 1989, p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> BIDEGAIN, 1989, p. 31.

<sup>34</sup> BIDEGAIN, 1989, p. 34.

who actively responds to God's invitation in Luke 1:38 means that, for Latin American women, "Mary, the prophet of the Magnificat, gives us the strength to fight, in solidarity and in community, for the right to life"<sup>35</sup>. It is this "right to life," found in Mary, that is connected to the search for full humanity which is central to feminist theology.

Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer highlight the significance of Mary when it comes to addressing the issue of poverty. They say that "in Latin America one cannot speak about the church of the poor or of pastoral work among the popular classes without dealing with the figure of this woman who carried the Liberator of the poor in her womb and gave birth to him"<sup>36</sup>. Such a statement explains the title of their book, that Mary is the mother of God and the mother of the poor. They go on to say that when it comes to the Latin American struggle for liberation, one must look "toward Mary [to see] what message her person and her mystery provide today in the communities and groups who are striving for and living out this organizing and this struggle"<sup>37</sup>. Mary informs the way that women and communities organize for liberation. Gebara and Bingemer cite base Christian communities in Latin America, where "Mary is not only their traveling companion but also the voice of their yearning and hope"<sup>38</sup>. Although Gebara and Bingemer wrote of this situation nearly thirty years ago, the idea is still relevant in today's context as Latin American feminist theology today demonstrates that liberation for women in poverty comes from the message of the Gospel. In a discussion of contemporary Latin American theology in general, Ruth Padilla DeBorst speaks of "a socially committed spirituality that...engages in the deeply complex and painful realities of its context with the hopeful proclamation of a different reality"<sup>39</sup>. For women in poverty in Latin America, the "hopeful proclamation of a different reality" is in their striving for full humanity.

In looking at feminist theology in Latin America and Asia, one sees different contexts, but one also sees the common suffering of women and the efforts by women to relieve that suffering through theology and biblical interpretation from their contexts. In both cases, there is concern for the daily lives and experiences of women and an attempt to address the complex and intersecting issues that

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<sup>35</sup> BIDEGAIN, 1989, p. 35

<sup>36</sup> GEBARA & BINGEMER, 1989, p. 159.

<sup>37</sup> GEBARA & BINGEMER, 1989, p. 159.

<sup>38</sup> GEBARA & BINGEMER, 1989, p. 164.

<sup>39</sup> DeBORST, 2014, p. 101.

affect women and their communities. It is this awareness of context, the intersection of different manifestations of oppression, and public engagement that bring Latin American and Asian feminist theologies into dialogue on a global scale.

## Conclusion

Kwok Pui-lan states that feminist interpretation of the Bible “has become a global movement, as women with different histories and cultures challenge patriarchal readings and articulate their faith and understanding of God”<sup>40</sup>. This idea extends to feminist theology as women around the world, particularly in the global South, do theology from their local contexts and experiences. Kwok Pui-lan goes on to say that there is a need to create “places of mutual learning, and places for trying out new ideas and strategies for the emancipation of all”<sup>41</sup>. As feminist theology in the global South continues to engage in the public realm, it will continue to create just such a place where humanity and emancipation may become a reality for all. Latin American and Asian feminist theologies both demonstrate theology that departs from a point of human suffering so as to address the intersecting causes of that suffering. They both involve women giving voice to their own experiences and these are the voices that need to be heard. These are the voices that reflect the layers of injustice and oppression in the church and society. These are the voices that speak to the need for dialogue and action on the issues affecting women and their communities. Theologians from other contexts can gain insight from feminist theologians in the global South who recognize their own context and address the intersection of issues in the public sphere in an effort to ensure the full humanity of those to whom that humanity has been denied.

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<sup>40</sup> KWOK, 2010, p. 99.

<sup>41</sup> KWOK, 2010, p. 99.

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