

Reflections on ATESEA 2024 Conference on Women “Empowerment”

Under the theme “Empowerment,” the ATESEA 2024 Conference on Women was organized on 24-25 September, 2024, at Bangkok Christian Guest House, Thailand. It was a hybrid conference, with 27 participants in person and 52 participants online. Two feminist theologians – Dr. Lalnghak Thuamai, Dean of Research, Aizawl Theological College, Mizoram and Dr. Lovely Awoni, Dean of Women’s Studies, Eastern Theological College, Assam were invited to the Conference. The conference started with a note that “there is an imbalance between men and women in terms of power sharing. This imbalance is seen in the churches and theological seminaries, and we must address it collectively”, says Dr. Limuel Equina. This reflection comes from two participants from the Senate of Serampore affiliated colleges in India.



Participants of ATESEA 2024 Conference on Women “Empowerment”

Dr. LalnghakThuami



Dr. LovelyAwomi



Lalnghak Thuamai: It is a great privilege for me to attend 2024 conference organized by ATESEA. For the first time, where I will be listening to the voices of Asian women theologians. I appreciate the organizing team of ATESEA with the Executive Director for

their concern on the issue of Asian women's problems and their attempt to strengthen and empower women from a diverse perspective.

The 8 papers shared at the conference were thought-provoking since they came from their experiences as women in their patriarchal context. "Women Leadership in Orality within Theological Education" inspired me to rethink the role of women in oral tradition. It is women who sustained oral tradition, especially in a tribal context, often ignored, but it is a testament for us to resurrect the oral tradition in doing feminist theology in our context. Recovery of oral tradition can give a new paradigm of doing theology in Asia. Another paper, "Bible, Women and Politics," was insightful. There is a paradigm shift of biblical authority from restraint to one of liberation through the hermeneutics of experience, which allows women to raise their voices and play a greater role in politics in the context of Myanmar's Spring Revolution. Her approach to integrating the Bible, Women, and Politics significantly contributes to further reflection for women doing theology in the Asian context. "Leading and Learning: A Sharing on Women Leadership in the Context of SATS" gives another impetus to reflect on women's potentiality and abled leadership if the opportunity is given to them. It is encouraging for me to see a woman sharing her leadership experiences in the church, indicating the ability and competency of women in leadership positions in the church. The rest of the papers, each offering a unique perspective, are also quite enlightening for further reflection on feminist theology in the Asian context.

"There is no women's liberation without changing men's attitude. Gender justice is not women's problem alone but an issue to be addressed by both men and women", says Dr. Wati Longchar. The two main papers are from male theologians Dr. Robert Setio and Dr. Wati Longchar, who shared very insightful papers with us. Re-reading of Prov. 31:10-31 helps me better understand how the text serves patriarchal interests if uncritically applied. Yet, the text can be reclaimed as a model of divine wisdom and love, offering a powerful vision for women. It reminded me of the importance of rereading biblical texts from a woman's perspective. I was happy when Dr. Setio said, "the *eshet chyail* stands not just as an idealized figure of domesticity but as a symbol of resistance in pursuing justice and equality." The last presentation on "Gender Justice in Theological Education" by Dr. Longchar was another thought-provoking one that summarized all the paper presentations. I appreciate the skill and the expertise of the presenter. I especially like how he addressed the imbalance of power relationship between male and female, the need to come out from Western hegemonic theology, the necessity of addressing the transformative aspect of theology, and women's exclusive methodological claim. I get new insights from him that commitment to gender inclusivity, gender justice, and empowerment of women is a must to make a dynamic theological education.

I benefited a lot from the conference, not only from the theme of Empowerment but also from the crucial role of diverse perspectives in doing women's theology in the Asian context. I learnt from other women about the strategy of handling women's problem in their reflection and the powerful vision they pursue in their academic exercise. I also learnt about how to integrate and relate women's problems with other sisters in Asia in order to strengthen and empower with each other.

Lovely Awomi James: I am very happy to participate in the 2024 ATESEA women's conference on "Empowerment". I express my heartfelt gratitude to ATESEA and its Executive Director Dr Limuel R. Equina, for the invite extended to the Senate of Serampore College (University) and its research wing SATHRI. I also express my gratitude to the

FTEAP, for the grant to attend this great program. In a few lines, I would like to share my thoughts about my experience at the conference.

1. Attending the conference truly deepened my knowledge about gender issues in theology and helped me understand the challenging urgency and mandate of integrating gender concerns into our church's ministry and theological education.

2. It helped me connect with other Southeast Asian women and men, theologians, and activists working for women's empowerment. It made me realize the importance of connecting and networking with other fellow women and men so that we could empower one another through our shared experiences, knowledge, and resources in our theological journey, which is aimed at reconstruction, healing, and transforming praxis for our people and our world.

3. Listening to the stories (from Myanmar in particular), of war, conflicts, destruction, dehumanizing powers of the government and people's defence force, and of the resilient power and spirits of the people, especially of the women and their role in fighting and protesting for the sake of life, families and community's safety, for survival and for transforming peace, all contributed to my theological and ministerial understanding of women's empowerment.

4. Overall, ATESEA's work is truly remarkable and commendable. Its tireless and incessant involvement and organization of varied programs bear testimony to itself—that ATESEA represents a dynamic theological body or an agency committed to making Christian faith and theology practical and actualized—engaging itself in establishing the reign of God in the world today.

The interaction in the seminar hall and outside was very enriching and sharpened our thinking. I wish that such interregional academic exchanges between Serampore and ATESEA for faculty and research scholars would be promoted regularly. It is a great blessing for Asian theological institutions that the FTEAP has brought them closer to envisioning new theological thinking and ministerial practices. Thanks to FTEAP, ATESEA, and Serampore, for your support.

Reported by
Lalnglak Thuami, ATC.
Lovely Awomi