CHAPTER SIX
THE SOCIAL ROLE OF MAYA WOMEN

_Dalila C. Nayap-Pot_

"Maya women have remained close to their men in their struggles, yet not in a passive and subordinate way. And when their men have been silenced or wiped out, they have taken up the struggle themselves, but without losing their social and cultural location". Ms Nayap-Pot, a native Belizian of Maya-Nahuatl descent, lives in San José, Costa Rica, where she coordinates Base Research in Indigenous Development, Gender, and Evangelical Spirituality (BRIDGES) and is a volunteer worker with the Coordinadora de Pastoral Aborigen (COOPA). She worships in a small Pentecostal congregation.¹

Introduction

Historically, the perception of the role of women in Latin American society has been limited to _reproduction_ and _production_. Their main function is defined in terms of work, family, and domestic labor. In marital relations (which the Catholic tradition upholds as a divine sacrament), sex is not defined so much in terms of personhood as of division of labor (an obligation). This limiting perception has framed the social context of women until today—their social position, access to resources, homemaking responsibilities, division of labor, work-space, working hours, individual rights, political participation, government and civil services—the list is long. Women became the cultural metaphors of social property rights.

Because of the key role that women fulfil in our society, we can say that social oppression is somehow related to the oppression of women.²

¹ Ms Nayap-Pot has a Licenciate from the Seminario Nazareno de las Américas (SENDAS) of Costa Rica, an M.Th. from New College, Edinburgh and is currently researching her dissertation for the Doctor of Ministry degree (Womens' Studies) at San Francisco Presbyterian Seminary. This chapter is extracted, with permission, from the author's Masters' thesis: _The Spirituality of Maya Women and Grassroots Protestantism: Sources for Dialogue and Development_ (1992).

² A U.N. study finds that 'Women are the largest "excluded group in the world, lagging behind men in earning power, political influence, literacy and recognition as contributors to the global economy. No country treats its women as well as it treats men...". The report called women "the nonparticipating majority. They make up more than half the world's population and work longer hours than men, but hold
Throughout history, the reality of women has been framed by the way we have been perceived. Latin America and the Caribbean are no exception to the rule.³

**Women's Liberation and Development**

Admittedly, this situation has been changing in a number of places and situations. Many women, such as the "First World" feminist elite, have acquired a certain freedom and even a degree of social authority. This has given them the right to speak of liberation, as well as to work toward the freedom of their fellow oppressed women. Many such women have an understanding of "womens' liberation" which reflects their own experiences in an elitist environment. This can lead even to an elitist interpretation of Scripture passages that have to do with women which may be different than that of grassroots women.⁴

After sharing with a number of women and then reading material on womens' liberation, I find that two basic areas of oppression stand out in the thinking of "First World" women liberationists: male paternalism and authoritarian society. Tereza Cavalcanti, a Latin American theologian, is an example. Dealing with methodological issues, she argues:

---

just 10% of parliamentary positions and fewer than 4 percent of cabinet level government posts. The report went on to say that, "in the developing world there are... gender discriminations in nutrition, education and health care... Maternal mortality rates... are more than 15 times higher than in the industrial countries". But most forms of sex discrimination exist in most countries, rich and poor... "Women are often invisible in statistics... If women's unpaid housework were counted as productive output in national income accounts, global output would increase by 20 to 30 %" (Baltimore Evening Sun, May 24, 1993).

³ Despite the growing awareness of their role in society, the full participation of women has been greatly hindered, even worsened in recent years, mainly because of the impact of economic factors in our countries. Women are suffering the combined weight of many forces: the external debts of our nations, the population explosion, the massive migration from country to city (and thus the accelerated growth of the cities), the increase in the number of women as heads of households, and the decrease in public services for all, both in the cities and the countryside.

⁴ In the Bible, women have also paid special attention to the oppression and liberation of their context. Yet, like the Maya women, they have taken several steps that at first sight seem as that of "silence" and "perpetuating male dominance". Both women in the Bible and Maya women pay particular attention to their context and social relations. This has determined their method of action.