

## **GOD'S PRESENCE AMID WOMEN'S MARGINALIZATION AND SUFFERING: A CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON GENDER AND GOD'S JUSTICE**

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### **Abstract**

This study highlights God's presence amidst the marginalization and suffering of women, particularly in the context of Batak culture, which remains steeped in patriarchal values. Using a qualitative approach and a contextual theology paradigm, this study reinterprets women's experiences as a locus theologicus to understand God's justice and provision. Women's marginalization is evident in various social, customary, and ecclesiastical aspects, where women are often positioned as "controlled" and denied full space in decision-making. Yet, Scripture demonstrates that God sides with the oppressed and upholds justice for marginalized groups. The story of Hagar, Jesus' ministry to the Samaritan woman, and the testimony of the resurrection entrusted to women affirm God's liberating presence and the restoration of human dignity. In light of the Holy Spirit's work, the church is called to transform gender relations equitably, transcending the boundaries of cultural patriarchy. Contextual theology serves as a critical tool for rereading Batak customs, particularly dalihan na tolu, so that their values are lived out in the spirit of equality and justice in the Gospel. Thus, God's presence is not merely a theological discourse, but is evident in the solidarity, struggle, and liberation of women from oppressive social structures. The church is expected to be a prophetic community that presents signs of God's justice in an inclusive and transformative way in society.

**Keywords:** *Church, Presence of God, Marginalized, Women, Social*

### **I. Introduction**

The issue of women's marginalization is a social and theological problem that remains relevant today. Various forms of gender inequality, from discrimination in access to education, marginalization in the political and economic spheres, to gender-based violence, demonstrate that women are often positioned at the bottom of the social structure.<sup>1</sup> This marginalization is not only a universal phenomenon but also occurs specifically in local cultural contexts, including in Batak society, which is steeped in patriarchal traditions. In this situation, God's presence is both questioned and sought as a source of comfort, liberation, and social transformation. In Christian theology, God is believed to be on the side of the oppressed. Scripture consistently depicts a God who listens to the cries of His people, who "hears the cry of the oppressed" (Psalm 10:17-18), and who frees Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3:7-8). Jesus Christ, in His ministry, also showed his support for those marginalized, including women. He dialogued with a Samaritan woman (John 4:7-26), defended a woman about to be stoned (John 8:1-11), and made women the first witnesses to the resurrection (Matthew 28:1-10). All of this underscores that God's presence continually overturns oppressive social orders and opens up space for equality from a faith perspective.<sup>2</sup> However, social reality often reveals a gap between the ideals of Christian faith and the practices of congregational life in specific cultural contexts. In Batak society, for example, social structures and customs still place women in a subordinate position. The dalihan na tolu system, as the core of Batak social structure, embodies noble values of balance and respect between relationships. However, in practice, women are often positioned as "controlled" rather than as full subjects. Batak women, within the customary context, are often viewed primarily as kinship bridges through marriage and as

<sup>1</sup>Yuditia Nurimaniar, "Policy on Empowering Marginalized Women (Domestic Workers) in Fulfilling Economic Rights During the Covid-19 Pandemic" in Yustitia Journal Vol. 16 No. 2 (December: 2022), 181-195.

<sup>2</sup>Marie Claire Barth F., *The Heart of God is Like a Mother's Heart* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2005), 86.

guarantors of the clan's continuity through the birth of sons. Although women are honored as "boru" within the customary structure, this respect is often symbolic and does not always translate into real equality.<sup>3</sup> This reality impacts the acceptance of women in social and religious spaces. For example, in customary decision-making, women's voices tend to be disregarded. In some church practices, although Batak women play an active role in ministry, there is still resistance to female leadership, both as full-time pastors and as strategic decision-makers in the church. This phenomenon demonstrates a clash between the theological principle of equality in Christ (Galatians 3:28) and a patriarchal cultural legacy that is difficult to shake off. From a contextual theology perspective, this situation demands critical reflection. Contextual theology not only understands faith within a universal framework but also interprets how that faith is present and meaningful within specific social, cultural, and political contexts. Issues of gender and the marginalization of women are inextricably linked to the reality of Batak culture. The question is not simply whether Batak women are marginalized, but how God is present in this suffering and how the church is called to proclaim His justice amidst patriarchal customary and cultural structures. Within the framework of God's justice, the suffering of Batak women is not a meaningless space. God's presence is evident in his solidarity with those who are oppressed. God is not silent, but rather moves through women's experiences, struggles, and even resistance against injustice.<sup>4</sup> God's presence can be seen in Batak women's efforts to fight for education, economic rights, and involvement in church and traditional leadership. Furthermore, this presence is also evident in the transformation of Batak cultural values, which are increasingly open to women's equal roles, although the process is slow and fraught with tension.

## II. Research Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with a contextual theology paradigm.<sup>5</sup> Contextual theology serves as the primary analytical framework to examine how God's presence is interpreted in the struggles of women experiencing gender discrimination in both traditional and church life. The research data was obtained through a literature review of theology, gender, and Batak culture, as well as relevant church documents. Furthermore, an analysis of biblical texts that demonstrate God's partiality toward marginalized groups was conducted. The analytical method used is theological-contextual analysis, which involves reading social realities in light of the Gospel and interpreting biblical texts in interaction with the local context. This research is not only descriptive but also normative-critical, uncovering gender injustice while offering transformative theological reflections for the Batak church and society.

## III. Theoretical Basis

### 3.1. Gender and Gender IssuesPresent time

Etymologically, the term gender comes from the Latin genus, meaning "kind" or "type." However, in the development of social sciences and humanities, gender is understood not merely as a biological difference between men and women, but as a social and cultural construct inherent in a person's identity.<sup>6</sup> Gender refers to how society assigns meaning to men and women, including in terms of roles, status, and social expectations. Biological differences (sex) are real, but gender differences arise from cultural interpretations that often create hierarchies between men and women. From this understanding, it is clear that gender is dynamic and contextual. It can change according to the times, values, and ideologies prevailing in a society.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, in many cases, gender construction actually creates injustice that disadvantages one party, especially women. This gives rise to so-called gender issues, namely conditions where the relationship between men and women is unequal in terms of access, opportunity, and social recognition. In the current context, there are several key issues related to gender. First, unequal access to education, employment, and leadership. In many places, women still face structural barriers to obtaining higher education or strategic positions. Yet, women's progress in these areas has been proven to make significant contributions to societal development. Second, gender-based violence remains a serious problem. The phenomena of sexual harassment in public and digital spaces, domestic violence, and economic exploitation demonstrate that women's bodies and dignity are vulnerable to unfair treatment. In fact, in some societies, gender-based violence is considered normal because it

<sup>3</sup>Agus Parasian Sinaga, Anak Ni Raja & Boru Ni Raja: Efforts to Build Gender Equality from the Perspective of Toba Batak Culture (Indramayu: Adab Publisher, 2025), 3.

<sup>4</sup>Wanda Kennedy Sanseri, God's Most Precious Woman (Jakarta: PBMR, 2021), 46-47.

<sup>5</sup>Conny R. Semiawan, Qualitative Research Methods (Jakarta: Grasindo, 2010), 1-2.

<sup>6</sup>Sharyn Graham Davies, Gender Diversity in Indonesia (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2018), 25.

<sup>7</sup>Naila Kabeer, Gender, Labor, and Rights: Global Perspectives (London: Routledge, 2016), 78.

is disguised with cultural or religious legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> Third, gender stereotypes persist in everyday life. Men are often positioned as leaders and decision-makers, while women are confined to the domestic sphere. This mindset not only harms women but also causes significant harm and trauma, becoming a serious social problem.

### 3.2. Definition of Marginal

The term marginal comes from the Latin word *margo*, meaning "edge" or "fringe." In the development of social science, marginality is understood as the position of an individual or group outside the mainstream of society. People or groups considered marginalized typically have limited access to resources, power, and social recognition. In other words, marginality refers to a situation where an individual or group does not obtain a proper place in the social, economic, political, or cultural structure. Sociologically, marginality can be viewed from several aspects. First, economic, when an individual or group is unable to meet the needs of a decent life due to structural poverty. Second, political, when the voting rights or participation of certain groups are restricted. Third, socio-cultural, when a group's identity, language, customs, or beliefs are marginalized from the dominant stream. Fourth, gender, when women or sexual minorities are placed in a subordinate position by patriarchal cultural constructs.<sup>9</sup> The phenomenon of marginalization is also often linked to power relations. Dominant groups typically establish norms, rules, and systems that benefit them, while marginalized groups lack the space to voice their interests. As a result, marginalized groups are often labeled unimportant, powerless, and even considered a burden. This view reinforces the cycle of social exclusion and makes it increasingly difficult for them to escape injustice. Being marginalized means living with limited access, an unheard voice, and an existence that is often ignored. However, marginality does not always mean a lack of role. In fact, marginalized groups often possess strength in the form of solidarity, local wisdom, and resilience born of experiences of suffering.<sup>10</sup> In many societies, including in the Indonesian context, marginalization is evident among indigenous communities, migrant workers, the urban poor, people with disabilities, and women living in patriarchal systems. Their presence reminds us that development and progress have not fully reached all levels of society.

### 3.3. Biblical Foundation about God's Preference for the Marginalized

The Bible consistently presents God as one who sides with those who are marginalized. This siding is not simply an act of mercy, but part of God's identity as just and loving. The biblical foundation of God's siding with the marginalized can be traced from the Old Testament to the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God is portrayed as a defender of the oppressed. The Book of Exodus confirms that God heard the cries of the Israelites in Egypt: "I have clearly seen the affliction of my people in the land of Egypt... I have come down to deliver them" (Exodus 3:7-8). This exodus narrative provides a fundamental paradigm of a God who is not silent in the face of suffering but rather a liberating presence.<sup>11</sup> The Law books emphasize the protection of vulnerable groups. For example, in Deuteronomy 10:18, God is said to "defend the orphan and the widow and show mercy to the alien." The identity of marginalized orphans, widows, and aliens is of particular concern because they are vulnerable to being neglected within the social structure. The prophets also spoke out. Isaiah condemned a nation that did not defend the rights of the weak (Isaiah 1:17), while Amos highlighted the injustice that oppressed the poor (Amos 5:11-12). God's justice is realized when the marginalized are elevated. In the New Testament, God's partiality is increasingly evident through the ministry of Jesus Christ. The Gospels depict Jesus as present among the poor, sick, and sinners. He dialogued with the Samaritan woman, who was not only a woman but also came from a group considered unclean by the Jews (John 4:7-26). He defended the woman who was about to be stoned (John 8:1-11), healed the blind and lame (Mark 2:1-12; John 9:1-12), and forgave the tax collector who was hated by the people (Luke 19:1-10). All these actions confirm that Jesus' mission is to bring about an inclusive Kingdom of God, where the marginalized have a special place.<sup>12</sup> Jesus' compassion did not stop at personal compassion, but also challenged oppressive social structures. In the Sermon on the Mount, He said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20). This statement affirms that God reverses the logic of the world, allowing the weak to receive the promise of the kingdom. The Apostle Paul continues this vision by affirming equality in Christ: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither

<sup>8</sup>Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 6-7.

<sup>9</sup>Satria Unggul Wicaksana et al., *Dynamics of Human Rights Protection for Marginalized Communities in the Era of Society 5.0* (Surabaya: UM Surabaya Publishing, 2021), 179.

<sup>10</sup>Catur Wahyudi, *Marginalization and Civilization of Society* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2015), vii.

<sup>11</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 293.

<sup>12</sup>NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 279.

slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). This verse provides the theological foundation that social marginality cannot hinder a relationship with God or participation in the community of faith.

#### IV. Discussion

##### 4.1. The Reality of Women's Marginalization in a Socio-Cultural Context

The marginalization of women is a fundamental issue in today's socio-cultural dynamics. Generally speaking, marginalization can be defined as the process of excluding or placing certain groups in disadvantaged positions, whether in terms of access to resources, opportunities, or social recognition. In a gender context, the marginalization of women arises through unequal relationships, where men are positioned as the center of authority while women are positioned as secondary. In Indonesian society, particularly the Batak community, the marginalization of women is evident in the patrilineal social system. The kinship structure positions men as the heirs to the clan and the successors to the lineage, while women are often viewed merely as "continuing someone else's generation" upon marriage. This limits women's freedom of movement, both in the realm of custom, social leadership, and family decision-making. Women are often confined to domestic roles of household management, childbirth, and child-rearing, while their participation in the public sphere is underrecognized.<sup>13</sup> The impact of this marginalization is not only social, but also psychological and spiritual. Socially, women experience limited access to education and economic opportunities, making it difficult to break out of the cycle of powerlessness. Psychologically, this condition fosters feelings of inferiority because women's voices are rarely heard or considered unimportant. Even within the church, gender-biased biblical interpretations often reinforce the stereotype that women should be completely subservient to men, thus hindering equal roles in ministry.<sup>14</sup> Yet, theologically, the Bible clearly affirms that men and women are both created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). Human dignity is not determined by gender, but by one's identity as the *imago Dei*. The marginalization of women is fundamentally the result of a distorted relationship caused by sin, not God's true design.<sup>15</sup> Cultural practices and theological interpretations that oppress women must be criticized and reformed in the light of the Gospel. Within the framework of contextual theology, the marginalization of women demands a prophetic response from the church. The church's presence in society should not only preserve culture but also test and transform it to align with God's justice. The church is called to be an inclusive space, giving women a place as full subjects in social, cultural, and ministry life. In this way, marginalization is no longer seen as women's "fate," but as an injustice that must be resisted in order to bring God's shalom to the world.<sup>16</sup>

##### 4.2. God is Present in the History of Women's Suffering

The biblical record affirms that God is not a distant figure unconcerned with human suffering, but rather a God who is truly present in history, especially in the suffering of the oppressed. God's presence in women's suffering is evidence that their experiences are not empty spaces, but rather places where God reveals solidarity, love, and the work of liberation. One of the most powerful stories about God's presence in women's suffering is the story of Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21. Hagar, a female slave who was treated unfairly by her master, experienced exclusion and was abandoned in the desert. However, it is precisely in that outcast situation that God appears. Hagar even named Allah "El-Roi" the God who sees because she experienced for herself that God pays attention to the screams of the oppressed. This encounter shows that Allah is on the side of women who are treated as objects, and gives them new dignity through direct recognition of their existence.<sup>17</sup> God's presence is also evident in the ministry of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Jesus consistently rejected the gender discrimination that prevailed in first-century Jewish society. He openly dialogued with a Samaritan woman (John 4:7-30), made Mary Magdalene a witness to the resurrection (Matthew 28:1-10; John 20:11-18), and restored the dignity of a woman suffering from a hemorrhage (Mark 5:25-34). All of these actions affirm that God's presence in Jesus Christ is a liberating presence, revealing the face of God, full of mercy and justice. From a theological perspective, women's suffering is not something God ignores, but rather the context in which His saving work is revealed. God is present not only to comfort but also to liberate. This means that women's suffering must be read not as divine destiny, but as the result of social, cultural, and even religious structures that are inconsistent with God's will. Christian faith calls people to imitate God's active

<sup>13</sup>Taufik Abdullah, *Women and Social Transformation in Indonesia* (Jakarta: Pustaka LP3ES, 2019), 15.

<sup>14</sup>Barth, *God's Heart is Like a Mother's Heart*, 95.

<sup>15</sup>Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 24.

<sup>16</sup>Jhonnedy Kolang Nauli Simatupang, "Women in Theology: New Perspectives for Church Leaders," *LOGIA: Pentecostal Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (June 2025), 16-31.

<sup>17</sup>Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 26.

presence in suffering and to reject all forms of marginalization that oppress women's dignity.<sup>18</sup> God's presence in women's suffering also confirms their identity as *imago Dei*. In Genesis 1:27 it is emphasized that men and women are equally created in the image of God. Therefore, any form of exclusion that degrades women is contrary to God's creative design. Furthermore, women's suffering becomes a space for spiritual encounter, where they find God who walks with them, accompanies them, and enables them to survive and struggle in the face of injustice.<sup>19</sup> Within the framework of contextual theology, God's presence in women's suffering is not an abstract concept, but a reality that must be understood through concrete experience. The stories of women who struggle against discrimination in traditional, political, economic, and church settings are evidence that God continues to work through them. The church, as the body of Christ, is called to imitate God's presence in this suffering by expressing concrete solidarity, transforming oppressive structures, and presenting signs of God's justice in society.

#### 4.3. The Holy Spirit and the Transformation of Gender Relations in the Church

The Holy Spirit is a divine person who works to renew creation and guide the church to a life in accordance with God's will. In the context of gender relations, the Holy Spirit brings a transformative power that frees women from marginalization and affirms their equality as full members of the body of Christ. The account of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-18) affirms that the Holy Spirit is poured out without discrimination: "Your sons and your daughters will prophesy." This statement marks a spiritual revolution, in which women's roles are no longer limited by patriarchal social structures but are recognized as active subjects in the proclamation of the Gospel. With the descent of the Holy Spirit, the church is called to become a new community that transcends the boundaries of gender discrimination.<sup>20</sup> Throughout church history, the role of women has often been suppressed for theologically biased reasons. However, biblical testimony shows that the Holy Spirit continues to work through women, both as prophets, servants, and witnesses of the faith (for example, Deborah in Judges 4-5 or Priscilla in Acts 18:26). This indicates that the Holy Spirit reveals a new reality, where women and men are called equally to serve. The transformation of gender relations by the Holy Spirit is also evident in Paul's theology, which affirms: "In Christ there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in him" (Gal. 3:28). This equality is not merely an abstract ideal, but a practical calling that transforms the pattern of church relationships. This means that the marginalization of women is not God's will, but rather the result of culture and sin that needs to be renewed by the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup> For the church today, the work of the Holy Spirit demands the courage to open up leadership and ministry spaces for women on an equal footing. The church is called to be a prophetic community that advocates for gender justice, not perpetuates patriarchal structures.

#### 4.4. Contextual Theological Study of God's Justice for Women

God's justice is not an abstract idea that stands outside of history, but is concretely present in the realities of people's lives, including the experiences of women who experience marginalization. Women's experiences and struggles are a legitimate locus theologicus for reflecting on God's work. The Book of Psalms depicts God as hearing the cry of the oppressed (Ps. 10:17-18), and the prophet Isaiah prophesied of a Messiah who brings good news to the poor and sets the captives free (Isa. 61:1-2). In the light of contextual theology, these promises and works of God must be critically reinterpreted in the context of a still patriarchal culture, including Batak culture, which tends to subordinate women in the realm of custom and decision-making. God's justice for women is not just about formal recognition, but also about structural transformation. The Church, as the body of Christ, is called to challenge social systems that reduce women's dignity to mere symbols or domestic functions.<sup>22</sup> Contextual theology asserts that the Gospel must take the form of an emancipatory practice that allows women to emerge as full subjects in church, social, and cultural life. In this way, God's justice is translated into concrete, liberating action, not merely memorized doctrine. Furthermore, God's justice for women contains a prophetic dimension.<sup>23</sup> The Church must not only be adaptive to culture, but also critical and transformational. Noble cultural values, such as respect in *dalihan na tolu*,

<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> John H. Weston, *Human Sexuality and the Holy Spirit: Spirit-Empowered Transformation* (New York: Fortress Press, 2021), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Tri Hananto et al., *Ontologi Exsequendum Didactic: Practical Theology and Christian Religious Education, Volume 1* (Jakarta: Indonesian Bright House Association, 2023), 253.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Suleeman and Bendalina Souk, *Give Me That Living Water: Source Material for Gender Studies - Results of the Consultation and Workshop for Theologically Educated Women*, Tomohon, Minahasa, 19-28 May 1995 (Jakarta: PERSETIA, 2007), 231.

<sup>23</sup> Barth, *God's Heart is Like a Mother's Heart*, 56.

need to be revived in the light of the Gospel so that they truly affirm equality, not reinforce subordination. Thus, a contextual theological study of God's justice for women affirms that God sides with those who are marginalized, and His justice must be presented through inclusive, transformative, and liberating church practices. A just God is not only spoken of in sermons but lived out in concrete solidarity with women struggling against discrimination. This is where Christian faith finds its relevance and prophetic power amidst today's socio-cultural realities.

## V. CONCLUSION

God is present in the reality of the suffering of marginalized women. In the light of contextual theology, women's experiences, especially in Batak culture, which is still steeped in patriarchal values, become a theologian locus for rereading the face of God who sides with the oppressed. Women's marginalization in Batak culture often emerges through marginalization in traditional, political, economic, and even church services. Although the dalihan na tolu system upholds the noble value of balanced relationships, in practice women are more often positioned as regulated parties, rather than full subjects. As a result, women's voices are less considered in decision-making, both in the customary and church spheres. This situation demonstrates a clash between the principle of equality in Christ (Gal. 3:28) and the legacy of patriarchal culture. However, it is precisely in situations of suffering that God's presence becomes evident. Scripture shows a God who "hears the cry of the oppressed" (Psalm 10:17-18) and Jesus who consistently sides with those marginalized, including women. God's presence is not only comforting but also liberating and transformative. This is evident in the experiences of Batak women who continue to struggle to gain education, economic access, and leadership involvement, both within their traditional communities and within the church.

Contextual theology provides a critical framework for the church to reinterpret the Gospel in local contexts. Batak culture should not be rejected entirely, but rather needs to be critiqued and transformed so that noble values, such as respect in dalihan na tolu, can be interpreted in light of the Gospel toward gender equality. God's presence is realized when cultural values are lived out not as tools of domination, but as a means of building just relationships. God's presence amidst the marginalization of women confirms two key points. First, God is on the side of justice; therefore, all forms of gender discrimination are contrary to His will. Second, the church is called to be an agent of transformation, not merely a universal evangelizer but also a visible witness in the fight for gender equality within a patriarchal cultural context. Women's suffering is not the end, but rather a space in which God works to bring about love, justice, and renewal of life.

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