



Women as Co-Bearers of the *Imago Dei*: Theological Implications for Gender Equality in Indonesia

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		Abstract
Received:	07 July 2025	<p><i>This study explores the theological implications of Imago Dei for gender equality in the Indonesian context, emphasizing the equal status of women as co-bearers of the divine image. Drawing on a qualitative method with a critical literature review approach, this research analyzes biblical texts, theological interpretations, and socio-cultural realities related to gender discrimination. The study revisits the Hebrew terms tselem and demuth (Genesis 1:26–27), underscoring that both men and women reflect God’s likeness through intellect, morality, and relational capacity. However, patriarchal interpretations—especially within Old Testament narratives—have historically marginalized women by framing them as subordinate to men. In the Indonesian cultural context, these theological biases are compounded by social and linguistic constructs that reinforce gender hierarchy. The findings reveal that feminist theological frameworks provide a constructive reinterpretation of women’s roles in Scripture, portraying figures like Deborah, Hannah, and Rahab as agents of faith and leadership. This study concludes that recognizing women as co-image bearers of God is essential for theological reform and gender justice, and it urges the church to dismantle patriarchal structures, promote inclusive leadership, and collaborate with broader human rights efforts in Indonesia.</i></p>
Revised:	16 July 2025	
Accepted:	23 July 2025	
Keywords:		<i>Imago Dei; women; gender equality; literature review</i>
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How to Cite:		Gyantinus, F., Luma, S., & Tuela, A. (2025). Women as Co Bearers of the Imago Dei. <i>International Journal of Education, Information Technology, and Others</i> , 8(3.B), 241-251. Retrieved from https://jurnal.peneliti.net/index.php/IJEIT/article/view/12745

INTRODUCTION

In the biblical creation narrative, God created humankind in His own image. Both male (Adam) and female (Eve) were formed by God and placed in the Garden of Eden. As recorded in Genesis 2:18 (ITB II version), “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” This divine statement affirms the equal and complementary relationship between man and woman, each created to support and accompany the other. However, over time, the term "helper" (Hebrew: *ezer*) has been increasingly misinterpreted, often implying that women were created to serve men in a subordinate position, rather than as equal partners.

This misinterpretation has contributed significantly to the development of a deeply rooted patriarchal culture, particularly when interpreting Old Testament texts. Many such texts appear to marginalize the status and role of women, reinforcing gender-based discrimination and promoting the idea of male superiority. In Genesis 3:1–24, the narrative of humanity's fall further amplifies

this view. Specifically, verse 12—where Adam blames Eve for giving him the forbidden fruit—has often been used to justify the perception that women are the cause of sin and downfall, further diminishing their role and value in biblical history.

In the Indonesian context, gender inequality and the oppression of women remain unresolved issues. Despite the legacy of Raden Ajeng Kartini and the continued advocacy for gender equality, patriarchal mindsets persist across modern Indonesian society. Cultural perceptions about women's inferiority are influenced by several factors. First, the views of classical thinkers such as Aristotle, who claimed that men are naturally superior and meant to rule, while women are subordinate and meant to be ruled. Second, the terminology used for "woman" in Indonesia reflects historical biases—terms like *perempuan* (from *empu* and *puan*) and *wanita* (from Sanskrit, meaning "beautiful" or "graceful") reinforce gender roles based on appearance and social expectations rather than equality.

This linguistic and cultural framing has reshaped perceptions of female identity, reducing the once-honored title *empu* to a designation rooted in male-defined beauty standards. Within theological discourse, however, movements such as liberation theology and feminist theology have sought to restore women's dignity. Liberation theology focuses on the empowerment of the oppressed, while feminist theology centers on addressing systemic injustice faced by women, emphasizing that women too are bearers of the *Imago Dei*—the image of God.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a **qualitative theological approach** using **literature-based analysis** (library research) as its primary method. The research focuses on the exegetical interpretation of biblical texts, particularly Genesis 1:26–27, as well as various Old Testament passages related to the identity and role of women. The theological framework is shaped by feminist and liberation theology perspectives that emphasize the equal divine image-bearing nature of women and men.

Primary sources include biblical texts in their original Hebrew context, supported by secondary literature such as theological commentaries, journal articles, and critical writings on gender, patriarchy, and *Imago Dei*. The data were analyzed through **content analysis**, seeking to identify patterns of patriarchal interpretation and theological arguments for gender justice.

By critically re-examining how women have been represented in biblical narratives and theological traditions, the study aims to deconstruct androcentric interpretations and offer a contextual theological reading that affirms women's dignity and agency in both ecclesial and societal spaces.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Imago Dei

The term *Imago Dei* originates from Latin, where *Imago* means "image" or "likeness," and *Dei* translates to "God" (Supriadi, 2022: 21–22). In Hebrew,

Imago Dei is expressed through the words צֶלֶם (*tselem*) and דְמוּת (*demuth*). According to Boshoff and Buitendag (2021), citing Strong (2005), the term *tselem* is derived from *tsele*, meaning image, statue (cf. Num. 33:52), appearance (Ps. 73:20), or shadow (Ps. 39:7) (Achenbach, 2021: 285). It can also mean representation or resemblance—an image that reflects the original but does not possess the essence of that which it represents. In this sense, humanity is described as a shadow or reflection of God, bearing certain characteristics that mirror the divine.

The Hebrew word דְמוּת (*demuth*) conveys the idea of form or likeness, referring to something that resembles or approximates another (cf. 2 Kings 16:10; Isa. 13:4). Derived from *damah*, it implies behavioral or visual resemblance, pointing to a relational abstraction that distinguishes yet connects the subject and the original (cf. Ps. 58:4; Ezek. 23:15). Despite nuanced lexical differences, most theologians agree that *tselem* and *demuth* in Genesis 1:26–27; 5:1–3; and 9:6 are functionally synonymous. The consensus is that *Imago Dei* refers fundamentally to the concept of likeness or resemblance to God.

Moltmann (1985) affirms that humans are the only creatures made in God's image, possessing a unique likeness expressed through intellect, relationality, and spiritual awareness—attributes bestowed by God. Similarly, Situmorang (2020), drawing from R. Soedarmo, breaks down *Imago Dei* into three central dimensions:

1. **Personal Image** – Humanity reflects God's personhood through intellect, will, emotion, and consciousness. Just as God engages relationally (Gen. 1:28–31; Isa. 1:18), humans are granted authority and capacity for personal agency and moral reasoning.
2. **Moral Image** – This refers to the innate ability to distinguish right from wrong, a gift from God implanted in the human conscience through the Spirit. It is the Spirit who enables humans to communicate with God and live according to divine morality.
3. **Social Image** – This highlights humanity's relational nature. God created humans for community (Gen. 1:26), and human existence reflects divine relationality, especially as seen in the Trinitarian fellowship. God, who is love, intends for human beings to live in love and interdependence.

From these theological perspectives, *Imago Dei* can be understood as the essence of humanity created in God's image—not in absolute sameness but in functional resemblance. Humans bear divine likeness through their capacity for reason, morality, relationship, and holiness. Thus, to be made in God's image is to be called to live in holiness, reflecting the character of the Creator in daily life, vocation, and relationship with others.

Women in Old Testament Tradition

Qiao Shiyan outlines the status and role of women within the Old Testament and ancient Israelite tradition. First, women were created as companions and helpers to men. As narrated in the book of Genesis, God's intention in creating woman was to provide a helper suitable for Adam (cf. Gen.

2:18). This helper was not inferior but intended to be a counterpart and partner. However, cultural interpretations over time often distorted this theological foundation.

Second, women were primarily regarded as instruments of reproduction. Within patriarchal Israelite society, a woman's principal role—especially as a wife—was to bear children in order to increase the family lineage (cf. Gen. 24:60). Fertility was directly tied to a woman's worth, and childlessness often led to social shame or rejection.

Third, women were treated as the personal property of men. In Old Testament culture, women generally lacked autonomy and were often under the authority of male guardians. An unmarried woman belonged to her father, while married women were considered the possession of their husbands. Women had limited or no say in choosing their spouse, and arranged marriages were the norm. Fourth, women were frequently scapegoated and subjected to violence. The phrase "used and discarded" captures how many women were treated: valued only when needed and abandoned when no longer deemed useful. Women's rights to life and dignity were largely dictated by male authority. This is exemplified in the story of Lot, who offered his two daughters to the men of Sodom to protect his guests—demonstrating the extreme marginalization and objectification of women (Gen. 19:8).

Despite these injustices, women still held significant roles within the family and religious life of Israel. As mothers and wives, women were central to household structure and the continuation of lineage. Furthermore, some women participated in sacred rituals and had indirect yet vital influence within religious traditions. These dual realities highlight the tension between patriarchal norms and the invaluable, though often overlooked, presence of women in Israel's covenantal community.

The Problem of Women in the Old Testament

The marginalization of women in the Old Testament is deeply rooted in patriarchal structures that framed women primarily in terms of their relationship to men—as daughters, wives, or mothers. Feminist theologians have long critiqued the androcentric nature of many Old Testament texts, which often reinforce male dominance and position women as secondary or subordinate figures. At the core of many of these issues is the concept of reproduction, which largely defines the value and identity of women in ancient Israelite society.

a. Barrenness

The Hebrew term for barrenness, **עֲקָרָה** (*'āqār*), appears only eleven times in the Old Testament. Yet, it represents one of the most feared conditions for women both in biblical times and, to some extent, in modern cultures. In biblical narratives, barrenness is portrayed as a personal, social, and even theological crisis. It could be perceived as a divine test (Gen. 16:2; 30:2; 1 Sam. 1:5), a form of punishment (Gen. 20:18), or a profound shame that undermines a woman's dignity and value within the family and community.

For women such as Hannah, barrenness brought deep humiliation and psychological distress, often exacerbated by social pressure from husbands, in-laws, or the broader community. Within a patriarchal worldview, barrenness was typically blamed solely on the woman, despite modern knowledge that infertility can affect both men and women. Such beliefs created enormous emotional burdens for women and reduced their sense of self-worth, even though theologically, children are a gift from God—not a product of human control or merit.

b. Old Testament Strategies for Addressing Barrenness

Yohanes Sutanta (2020) identifies several traditional responses to barrenness in ancient Israel:

1. **Prayer and Vow:** The most prominent response was earnest prayer, often accompanied by vows. Hannah's plea for a son in 1 Samuel 1:1–10 is a notable example. She not only prayed but also vowed to dedicate the child to God's service if her request was granted.
2. **Polygamy:** In a patriarchal society where lineage and inheritance were paramount, men often resorted to polygamy to secure offspring. Polygamy was culturally accepted and is exemplified by King Solomon, who had 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3).
3. **Surrogacy:** Another common practice was the use of surrogate mothers—typically female slaves—who would bear children on behalf of a barren wife. Once born, the child was legally claimed by the wife. Examples include Sarah, Rachel, and Leah, all of whom gave their servants to their husbands to produce children.

c. The Gender of the Child

Genesis 1:28 records God's command to "be fruitful and multiply," a directive that shaped ancient Israelite expectations regarding reproduction. Within this framework, the gender of the child had significant social implications. Patriarchal values privileged male offspring over female. As Yongky Karman points out, purification rites after childbirth, as prescribed in Leviticus 12:1–8, differed based on the child's gender:

Gender	Initial Purification	Extended Purification
Male	7 days + circumcision on day 8	33 days
Female	14 days	66 days

These longer purification periods for female children were based on the belief that females, through menstruation and childbirth, produced blood—associated with ritual impurity. Moreover, only male children were circumcised, which symbolized the covenant between God and His people. Female children were excluded from this rite, reinforcing their marginal status.

The role of sons was deemed more critical: they carried on the family name, contributed to the household economy, inherited family property, and were expected to care for aging parents. Daughters, by contrast, were expected to marry and leave the family home, contributing economically only until marriage. This

view placed male children in a privileged position and further reinforced the gender hierarchy within family and society.

Women as Co-Bearers of the Imago Dei

Based on the theological explanation of *Imago Dei* and the depiction of women in the Old Testament, it is evident that women are equally created in the image of God. However, this understanding has often been obscured by patriarchal traditions that dominate both ancient Israelite society and the interpretation of biblical texts. These traditions have historically marginalized women, obscuring the full implications of their shared divine image-bearing status.

From the beginning, both man and woman were created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27). The creation account affirms that male and female were intended to reflect God's nature equally, not hierarchically. Differences between men and women, therefore, should be understood as complementary rather than hierarchical. There is no divine intent to establish superiority or inferiority based on gender.

1. Equal, Yet Different

The biological and functional distinctions between male and female are not grounds for ranking one above the other. The idea that men are inherently superior—stronger, more rational, or more suited for leadership—is not grounded in the creation narrative but rather in cultural and historical constructs, particularly those shaped by patriarchal systems. When God created woman, He endowed her with a womb—a profound, life-generating gift that men cannot possess. This capacity symbolizes strength, not weakness.

Theological debates have also questioned the gender of God. While God transcends human categories, the Bible's predominantly patriarchal context often presents God in masculine terms. However, the Hebrew word for the Spirit of God (*Ruakh*) is grammatically feminine, and God is likened to a nurturing mother in Isaiah 49:15, demonstrating divine compassion in maternal terms. This imagery challenges patriarchal assumptions and offers hope for feminist theology, affirming that God's nature includes both traditionally "masculine" and "feminine" attributes.

2. A Suitable Helper

In Genesis 2:18, the Hebrew term *ezer kenegdo* is used to describe the woman as a "suitable helper" for the man. This phrase has often been misinterpreted to suggest subordination. However, the term *ezer* is frequently used in the Old Testament to describe God's own role as a helper to Israel (e.g., Exod. 18:4; Deut. 33:7, 26; Ps. 33:20; 146:5). Clearly, this form of "help" does not imply inferiority, but strength and partnership.

Therefore, the term *ezer kenegdo* should be reinterpreted to mean that the woman stands as an equal counterpart to the man—a co-bearer of the divine image, not a subordinate assistant. This interpretation not only reclaims the dignity of women in theological discourse but also reinforces the mutuality and interdependence intended in human relationships. Rather than being "weaker," the

woman, as helper, represents divine strength and support, a reflection of God's own aid to humanity.

Feminist Figures in the Old Testament

Several women in the Old Testament can be seen as concrete manifestations of female agency and dignity, affirming that women too bear the *Imago Dei*. Through their roles as helpers, leaders, and preservers of life and faith, these women challenged patriarchal norms and redefined the perception of femininity in a male-dominated context. Below are key examples:

a. Eve

Eve, the first woman in the biblical narrative, was created from Adam's rib, symbolizing equality and companionship (Gen. 2:18–22). This creation account emphasizes that Eve was made to be a *suitable helper (ezer kenegdo)*, not a subordinate. The use of Adam's rib rather than another body part signifies relational closeness and equal dignity—both man and woman are co-bearers of the *Imago Dei*.

b. Rahab

Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho and a member of the marginalized Amorite group, demonstrated extraordinary faith and courage by hiding Israelite spies (Josh. 2:1–24). Despite her social status, Rahab's actions saved her household and positioned her as a protector. Her inclusion in Jesus' genealogy (Matt. 1:5) testifies to her redemptive role as a feminist figure whose faith transcended social stigma.

c. Deborah

Deborah, a prophetess and judge (Judg. 4:4–5), stands as a remarkable example of female leadership in a patriarchal context. She commanded Barak to lead Israel into battle, and her authority was recognized and respected. Deborah's military and spiritual leadership culminated in victory over Sisera, with the honor of defeating the enemy ultimately attributed to a woman—affirming the pivotal role of women in divine missions.

d. Jael

Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, killed Sisera by driving a tent peg through his head (Judg. 4:17–21). Her bold and violent act was driven by political and communal survival instincts. Though often described as ruthless, Jael's action was a strategic choice that protected her people and ensured Israel's victory, making her a complex feminist hero who defied expectations of passive femininity.

e. Ruth

Ruth, a Moabite widow, showed radical loyalty to her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi (Ruth 1:16–17). Her willingness to leave her homeland and adopt Naomi's faith and people marked her as a model of covenantal love and faithfulness. Through her marriage to Boaz, she entered the lineage of King David and Jesus Christ. Ruth's story elevates the status of foreign women and reveals that dignity and divine purpose are not bound by ethnicity or gender.

f. Hannah

Hannah, the beloved yet barren wife of Elkanah, experienced emotional abuse and marginalization from her rival Peninnah (1 Sam. 1:1–20). In her sorrow, Hannah prayed fervently and vowed to dedicate her son to God if her prayer was answered. God honored her prayer, and she gave birth to Samuel, who became a great prophet. Hannah's story highlights spiritual resilience and portrays her as a woman of faith and agency who shaped Israel's prophetic tradition.

Contextual Issues

1. Gender Equality in Indonesia

Gender equality remains a persistent challenge in Indonesia. Although significant progress has been made, issues related to unequal treatment, discrimination, and limited access to resources for women continue to surface in various spheres of life, including family, education, employment, politics, and religion. Gender equality is conceptually understood as the equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of individuals regardless of gender, shaped by evolving social and cultural structures. However, in Indonesia—where traditional values still dominate, especially in Javanese culture—gender roles often reflect entrenched patriarchal beliefs.

A popular cultural metaphor, “the five fingers of a woman's hand,” illustrates expected female behavior: (a) the thumb symbolizes obedience to the husband's will, (b) the index finger signifies respect for his guidance, (c) the middle finger represents safeguarding his honor, (d) the ring finger implies serving his desires, and (e) the pinky symbolizes gentle submission. Women who fail to bear children are often deemed unworthy, and ideals such as loyalty, submissiveness, domestic skills, and physical beauty continue to define their social value.

Such notions reflect persistent gender bias. In the 4.0/5.0 industrial revolution era, women still face systemic discrimination, driven by patriarchal ideologies that elevate men's roles and marginalize women's contributions. This not only undermines human dignity but also contradicts Indonesia's constitutional mandate to uphold social justice for all citizens.

2. Efforts Toward Gender Equality

The struggle for gender equality in Indonesia has historical roots. R.A. Kartini, an early 20th-century national heroine, pioneered the women's emancipation movement, advocating for women's rights in education and professional development. Her work laid the foundation for later legal and institutional reforms.

Various national laws and policies have been enacted to address gender-based discrimination, including:

- Law No. 39 of 1999 on Human Rights
- Law No. 23 of 2004 on the Elimination of Domestic Violence
- Law No. 12 of 2006 on Citizenship
- Law No. 21 of 2007 on Human Trafficking
- Laws on political representation (Law No. 2/2008 and No. 42/2008)
- Presidential Instruction No. 9/2000 on Gender Mainstreaming

- Presidential Decree No. 181/1998 on the National Commission on Violence Against Women (updated by Presidential Regulation No. 65/2005)

These regulations aim to reduce gender inequality and provide legal protection for women. Nonetheless, the practical implementation often lags behind policy, necessitating greater collaboration between state, civil society, and religious institutions.

From a theological perspective, women have historically been marginalized, particularly due to patriarchal interpretations of scripture and church traditions. In response, the 20th-century Latin American church witnessed the emergence of liberation theology, feminist theology, and eco-theology—prophetic movements that challenge marginalization. Feminist theology, in particular, critiques the patriarchal culture embedded in both society and church and advocates for theological reform.

Feminist theology is rooted in the lived experiences of women who have suffered oppression and exclusion. Its core objectives include: (1) reclaiming the dignity and agency of women as bearers of *Imago Dei*, (2) transforming theological frameworks to promote justice, and (3) building ecumenical solidarity across denominations and cultures.

Ultimately, the pursuit of gender equality will only succeed when the church, in cooperation with society and the state, fully embraces the theological truth that women and men are equal image-bearers of God. Only then can justice, as envisioned by both divine revelation and human rights, be truly realized.

Theological Significance

The concept of *Imago Dei* is not exclusive to patriarchal interpretations. When God created women and entrusted them with the role of being a "helper" (*ezer*) to men, this designation must not be reduced to that of a subordinate or assistant. Rather, the biblical notion of a helper carries connotations of strength and mutual support, implying that both men and women are called to complement one another in their unique capacities.

Recognizing women as equal bearers of *Imago Dei* affirms that their dignity and status are equal to those of men in the eyes of God. While much of the Old Testament reflects an androcentric cultural context, it is crucial to acknowledge that women also held significant roles in biblical narratives. The inclusion of women in the divine image (*Genesis 1:26–27*) should challenge theological traditions that perpetuate gender inequality.

Despite the considerable discrimination women faced in ancient Israelite society, such marginalization should not define the theological understanding of womanhood. Instead, the emphasis should shift toward affirming women's identity as co-image bearers of God. This theological affirmation forms the foundation for advocating gender equality in both ecclesial and societal contexts today.

Efforts to dismantle gender discrimination remain necessary, particularly through theological reflection and public advocacy. The voices of feminist theologians and the legacy of women's empowerment movements serve as vital

instruments in reclaiming the divine image within every woman. Biblical accounts of courageous and faithful women—such as Deborah, Rahab, Ruth, and Hannah—stand as testimony to the inherent dignity and strength of women even within patriarchal systems.

In the Indonesian context, the goals of human rights advocacy align closely with the objectives of feminist theology. Both seek to dismantle longstanding patriarchal norms and advance the full recognition of women's roles and rights. Therefore, the collaboration between legal frameworks (such as national human rights laws) and theological reform (particularly feminist theology) is essential to realize the vision of gender equality rooted in the concept of *Imago Dei*.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that both men and women were created as equal bearers of *Imago Dei*, which affirms their inherent dignity, worth, and divine resemblance. However, patriarchal interpretations rooted in Old Testament traditions have historically undermined the status of women, often portraying them as inferior, subordinate, or secondary to men. Such views have fostered systemic gender inequality, both in theological narratives and in sociocultural realities, particularly in Indonesia where patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded. Nevertheless, through feminist theological frameworks and reinterpretation of key biblical figures—such as Deborah, Rahab, Ruth, Hannah, and others—it becomes clear that women played central roles in Israel's spiritual and historical journey. Theologically, this reinforces the idea that being a helper (*ezer kenegdo*) does not imply inferiority, but rather divine strength and mutual partnership. In light of this, churches are called to recognize, teach, and embody the truth that women share equally in the image of God, and should be given equal opportunities for leadership, education, and service within both church and society. To achieve this, the church must actively engage in dismantling patriarchal structures, collaborate with state efforts to uphold human rights, and encourage biblical literacy that highlights the presence and contributions of women. Furthermore, the concept of women as co-image bearers must become a theological cornerstone for ongoing feminist movements and the broader pursuit of gender justice, ensuring that Christian communities reflect God's original intent of equality, mutuality, and shared dominion.

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