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limited by law? What if you cannot find Christians to staff development projects?
Can non-Christians of goodwill contribute to the Christian mission?

The Rev. Alan Nichols is an executive with World Vision Australia. [p. 152](#)

The Tribe of Martha and Priscilla

Beulah Wood

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As a mother of four daughters and with wide experience in ministry to women and men in Asia, the author writes with feeling on the suffering of the disadvantaged half of humanity. The clarity of her case, enhanced by telling stories and statistics needs little introduction. Her plea that women be given a greater role in friendship evangelism, discipling and in shared church leadership cannot be ignored by our readers (who are mostly men!).

Editor

I speak to you today, a product of my own western background, with the additional advantage of years living in Asia, of studying the word of God, and of travel and reading through working for an international aid organization. I cannot escape my cultural bias. None of us can or needs to. Your perspective enriches me, as I hope my perspective enriches you.

Ever since I first reached the shores of this great country of India as a newly-wed 25 years ago, I've been on a journey of discovery on how life is for women, here or anywhere else in the world, and looking at whether the actuality is what our loving God intended.

I. THE DISADVANTAGED HALF OF HUMANITY

The first time I saw women planting rice I reacted as a tourist. 'Oh, isn't that pretty with all the brightly coloured sarees of the line of women in the paddy field! Where's my camera?' Later I understood the mud, the heat, the back-ache, the perspiration, the repetitive drudgery. I pitied the women in the fields.

Then, years later, one July in Nepal, I watched young women [p. 153](#) pass my door with back-loads of rice seedlings to plant that day. Martha who worked in my house chatted to them. 'Isn't she lucky to have such easy work with me?' I thought. 'Or, no, perhaps I'll ask her. "Which would you rather do, Martha?" ' 'Work in the fields,' she smiled. And my respect for the women of Asia grew. They can work excessively hard and be proud of it.

When my husband Brian and I went walking in Nepal, one conversation was repeated over and over. It was our best opener as a chance to talk about our God. 'Is this your family? Daughters. Ek, dui, tin, char,' the people would count. 'No son?' 'No son,' Brian would reply. 'We love girls as much as boys and we have a God who loves girls as much as boys.' And the questioner would look blank, thinking we had our Nepali words muddled. That was two incomprehensible statements—a God who loved, and a God who loved girls as much as boys. Not possible.

A year later, back in New Zealand without Brian, who lost his life in Nepal, I had cause to think further. 'Does God really love girls as much as boys?' It doesn't look like it in our churches. When few women move beyond the servant, or less responsible, or behind scenes roles, how can women know that God loves them as much? We need both serving Martha, and scholar Mary. We need social worker Dorcas, and also Bible teacher Priscilla.

Where women fit is a consideration for societies and churches everywhere in the world, and I choose this topic because it so closely concerns the whole thrust of this consultation on evangelization of the poor.

If we discuss poverty, women are the poorest. If we discuss social or economic or political oppression, women are more oppressed in every society. If we discuss responding to the gospel, women are 51% of the target group and often over 50% of the human resource to carry out the task. If we discuss servant models of Christian leadership, women have thousands of generations of expertise in serving.

Yet if we ask whose voice is heard in the strategizing for evangelism, the voice of women is least often heard. At a conference on evangelism in New Zealand in January 1993 I counted 27 women and then counted the total participants—270. Is it any different here?

Yet when one half of humanity, the women, is poorer than the other half, while living in the very same houses and communities, then we who claim to care about the oppressed and the poor must be aware, and target our assistance to the most needy.

And if in some societies half of humanity, the women's half, faces enormous barriers to hearing or responding to the gospel of God, we as strategists need to know.

And if the growth of the kingdom of God is curtailed by limitations on half its potential work force, we who desire the growth of the gospel need to change our strategy.

And if our practical understanding tells us something needs to change but our theology restricts us, have we got our theology right?

Oppression of women by societies, and discrimination against women by [p. 154](#) churches, are issues we must consider in nearly every deliberation and recommendation on our agenda this week.

II. WHERE ARE WOMEN AMONG THE POOR?

Among the Poor of this World, Women are the Poorest, Because of the Oppression of Women, Whether by Individuals or by Social Structures

Poverty comes in many shapes. Anything that deprives a person of resources and decisions basic to life's functions is poverty. Men and women can be deprived of education, health, nutrition, income, social status, political power, the opportunity to make decisions, religious equality, and even personal safety, and these are deeply interconnected.

I plan to show that on all these counts women are poorer. These may appear merely an accident of society until the reader analyzes the consistency with which one group is the oppressor and the other the oppressed. Such oppression may be unconscious, but it is not unavoidable. I believe it's time for retraining.

Economic Oppression

In a coffee plantation in Papua New Guinea a woman does the work and her husband takes the coffee beans to market, and buys treats like radio, bicycle, and alcohol. The woman receives no reward for her work.

In Senegal good land, on which women used to grow the family food, now grows crops of peanuts for sale. A woman works the peanut gardens and must still grow the family food on the less fertile uplands. Her workload is doubled. Her menfolk sell the peanuts.

In Bangladesh a 10 year old girl does not go to school because the family wants the economic asset of her work at home. Her brother has attended school since he was five, and she will forever live with exploitative labour rate of 1 maund of rice for every 40 maund she husks for a rich farmer. And even that is unequal work since an illiterate man can still earn more than an illiterate woman.

In the high school system of many western countries the majority of teachers are women but the heads of departments and principals are men.

These examples are repeated thousands of times over in the countries of our world. They constitute oppression of women.

Sociological Oppression

A family can oppress its women and girls without ever realizing it. Father's don't think, 'I will oppress my daughter and make her work harder than my sons.' They merely expect daughters to work while sons fill in free time playing marbles.

Or a peasant man does not think, 'I shall take life easy while my wife slaves,' when he lounges in the tea shop, or the arrack shop. Yet the average peasant man in India works 8-10 hours a day while his wife works 17 hours. And when a young woman gets no say on when she will marry, or whom, she and her family may think that's just the way things are.

A teacher in Nepal finds the girls [p. 155](#) all think they are useless at school work and the boys agree. But the teacher found boys write their homework lessons while girls carry water, bring firewood, sweep, care for animals, and grind curry.

Developed nations have their own sociological oppressions of female. Boys and men think themselves better than girls and women, annoy, tease, and put them down. Television channels are dominated by male sport.

Around the world, with the exception of Australia and USA, women work longer hours than men because they carry the burden of nearly all family and household chores, and often the double burden of paid work as well, while paid work is a survival necessity for many. The International Labour organization says the inequity is almost the same in rich industrialized nations as in the poorest countries. In Cuba, where a law requires men to help with housework, 82% of women still do all the domestic chores, while Japanese men spend only 15 minutes a day on tasks around the house. In Scandinavian countries, where men's workload has been reduced, they use their spare time for leisure instead of helping around the home.

	<i>Weekly Average working hours of men</i>	<i>Weekly Average working hours of women</i>
Africa	53	67
Asia	48	62
Western Europe	43	48
Japan	54	56

There is equal inequality in wages. Even in the country with the smallest gap, Australia, the average wage of a woman is 88% that of a man. In every country of the world men earn more pay for less work. The estimate is that women do 62% of the world's work hours yet own 1% of the world's property. Women form 75% of all sick people, 70% of all the poor, 66% of all illiterates and 80% of all refugees.

And then there are the double standards. I talked to Erica last year in Tanzania. It was acceptable to her society that her husband consorted with a prostitute. It was not acceptable for her as a wife. Yet Erica was dying of AIDS because of her husband's freedom.

Educational and Health Discrimination

Here's a conversation from Guatemala, though it could be found all over the developing world. Martha (13) runs the house and hardly ever goes to school. Neither does Aluvia (8), though school is near, free, and only 7 to 11.30am. Martha is in Grade 1.

'Jose, education is so important for your daughters. Why don't you send them to school?'

'Martha has to look after the younger kids so her Mum can earn money. Anyway, Martha will only be a mother. She doesn't need to read. She needs to make tortillas, weave and sell at the market.'

Yet educational deprivation leads on to many of the other oppressions of women. It's a proven fact that literate women care better for their children, have fewer children, can take part in their own health and economic development and that of their community, and are less prone to fall into the traps of those who [p. 156](#) prey on simple people, such as money lenders or brothers-in-law who deprive a widow of her husband's assets.

Western countries have their own ways of favouring males in education. In UK parents pay for more than five times as many boys as girls to attend fee-paying highly regarded boarding schools, and in New Zealand boys' grammar schools are often better endowed than the sister schools for girls.

Not enough data is kept on women's health, but the very high levels of anaemia among women, indicating poor diet, worse than that of men, are an indicator of neglect. So is high maternal mortality when families take too little care of women in labour.

In fact neglect may be one of the highest factors oppressing women, starting with neglect of baby girls at feed time and when they are unwell, so that in India the estimate now is that every sixth female death is due to gender discrimination. The problem is so marked across east and south Asia with female foeticide, female infanticide, neglect, poorer diet, health neglect, overwork, destitution and bride burnings that experts consider that in 1993 there are 76 million women not alive who should be alive.

In Africa and Latin America the contrasts similarly mark the neglect of women.

In its Human Development Report of 1990, UNDP quantified human development on a scale 0.11 to 0.99, using three basic variables—life expectancy, literacy, and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita—to provide a Human Development Index (HDI). This gave a tool by which to rank the countries of the world with an approximate quality of life.

Then they compared the Human Development Indices of males and females. Where there is greater equality women survive longer than men. The extent of the oppression of women comes into sharper focus when, even in spite of this natural advantage in life

expectancy, the HDI of women is lower than that of men in most countries of the world. That is, women are worse off.

Violations and Violence Against Women

In former Yugoslavia rape is an instrument of war. In Thailand girls are sold and tricked into prostitution. Male tourists from the West and elsewhere create the demand. Pakistan won't allow a rape case in law without four male witnesses. Could a case even come to court?

Battered wives troop to women's refuges all over the world—shamed, disillusioned, broken. Many more remain in abusive situations. Little girls get sexually abused in their own homes. Australia and New Zealand have the highest levels of recorded rape anywhere in the world. In Asia battery acid gets thrown by men on women. Brides get burnt.

Some Christian men physically and emotionally abuse their wives and daughters. Some tell you it's God's will that they should keep their women under control by such means.

These are matters for us as Christians to face and fight. How can we otherwise even begin to talk of justice? [p. 157](#)

III. WHERE ARE WOMEN IN EVANGELISM?

The Oppression of Women Decreases Their Ability to Respond to the Gospel

Hours

If women are required to work longer hours than men in nearly all countries, and some work excessively long hours, my question is, 'How can these find the energy or the time to look at an alternative world view such as the gospel presents?' Many are forced by the very hours they work to have no time or energy left to looking at new ideas like a different God to worship.

Education

Some illiterate women become Christians, but many are prevented by the under-development of their mental power from weighing up the welcome of a loving God, when they've had never a day in school. If they do wish to choose Christ as Saviour, they often lack the self worth and confidence to defend their choice.

Personal Freedom

For a woman whose husband does not want her to consider a new religion, there is often no freedom to attend Christian meetings or even visit a Christian woman to learn. The ramifications of this stretch from the slum woman of Madras who reads and prays in the toilet in order to get some privacy, to the western woman who hides her Bible because if her husband finds it he'll beat her when he's drunk. Thousands of women in the world today won't take the risk of displeasing their husband or father.

With the above facts in front of us, we may wonder that young woman living at home or married woman attends church without the wish of father or husband. Yet, although we may know of women whose Hindu or Muslim or atheist husbands won't let them attend, we still find some doing so.

A friend observes that in Pakistan most women converts are single, widowed or divorced, indicating that these are more likely to be free to make such a choice. And in the

West too I note women who have been hurt by their marriage and left it, who choose to follow Christ. The reverse also is true—women who once followed Christ but were hurt by dominating men turned their back on Christ.

Isolation

This factor results from both the cultural context and the decisions of the men of a household and occurs both in the East and in the West. Women may be kept at home, isolated, either by their workload because no-one else shares the responsibility of keeping the family together, fed and clothed, or by a too possessive husband or father. Where there is verbal or physical abuse a woman becomes ashamed, loses self-esteem and social skills. Or a jealous husband may believe that if a wife is not at home doing domestic chores, she is not doing what she should. Such a woman is frightened of upsetting her husband, and, because he holds the economic power, dares not cross him. How can such a woman seek the gospel? Isolated women lack support for even the idea of change. *p. 158*

One of the first recorded women to stand alone against a husband who wished to exploit her beauty before other men, was thrown out of home by a husband and his friends who feared that other women would follow her example. Her name was Vashti.

Christian Culture

In some cultures which have repressed women, Christianity releases women to a freedom they never had before. Asian women speak of the liberating effect of the gospel.

Yet Christianity has often been used to support male privilege, a belief that wives and children are there to make a man's life more comfortable. As a result, for some women the experience of living in a Christian family, with a husband who believes he must exercise a patriarchal role, or a church that allows only a restricted role to women, is a narrowing of function and diminishing of worth. Many women in the West now will have nothing to do with Christianity because they believe it puts women down.

Yet Women are Often the Back-bone of a Church

Given the above discrimination against women, there should be fewer in church. But the opposite is true in many countries of the world. Why?

The gospel affirms the value of the individual. Every person has worth and Christ died for all, men and women. More than in secular society, more than in animism, more than in Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, each person has enormous value, each person is loved by God and by Jesus Christ. Small wonder that women, so often counted as nobodies in other contexts, love to follow Jesus.

At least that is the theory of Christianity. What we need to keep examining is whether we carry it out in practice. Do we accord equal value in terms of status, salaries, decision-making, ministry tasks, to women along with men in our homes and churches? Are women visible as spiritual role models, leading worship, preaching and praying? Are they affirmed in more than their Sunday School teaching, feast preparation, singing and service to the sick and elderly?

Even in a New Zealand evangelical church which does include women in leadership, statistics kept this year showed that men dominated the air time of corporate worship and teaching at a rate of 75% to 25%.

If women received the equal standing that Jesus gave them, perhaps even more women would crowd our churches.

So, What is the Good News for Women?

- Jesus said ([Luke 5:18-19](#)) that he came to preach good news to the poor. This means women too. Will the gospel bring them out of poverty and economic oppression?
- Release to the captives: will women be free from physical and emotional oppression in the community of God on earth? Will they be first class citizens, equally free and responsible with their husbands before God?
- Recovery of sight to the blind: will [p. 159](#) women be free from the blindness of narrowed horizons and restricted views of what they may do?
- To set at liberty those who are oppressed: Will women be free from social oppression put on them because they're women?

IV. DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN IN THE CHURCH DECREASES THEIR ABILITY TO PROMOTE THE GOSPEL

Women's lower standing may make their message less authoritative, so people choosing preachers usually select an authoritative sounding man. Women often have less freedom to be out of the house because of child care. And women with less education may have fewer skills with which to evangelize.

But over each of these factors is the reluctance of many churches to train, use or pay women as evangelists or church leaders, or to strategize with women, even when the good Lord has seen fit to give them the talents needed for promoting the kingdom of God.

Most high visibility evangelism is done by men. Most paid church work is done by men.

Yet recent research in UK showed two interesting points about the main factors leading to conversion.

- (i) Men were most influenced by their wife.
- (ii) Women were most influenced by friends.

Put these two facts together and you have the astonishing information that women were, behind the scenes, doing more evangelism than anyone ever realized, perhaps more than men.

That's food for thought. Perhaps we should put more effort into women's methods of friendship evangelism and perhaps less effort into TV and radio and evangelism. The personal factor seems highly significant. That's why I've brought as a case study the story 'Love Link in New Zealand'.

If women, despite all the limitations currently on them, are already such good evangelists, perhaps the kingdom of God would grow faster if the church included more women and women's methods in their evangelism strategies. To do that, we'd have to look hard at our theology of women.

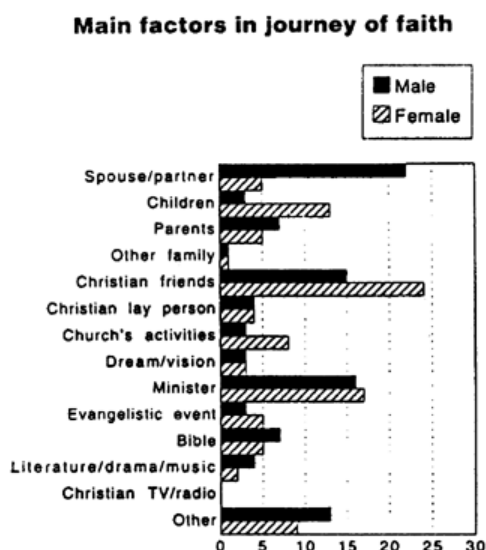
V. HOW THEN SHOULD WE STRATEGIZE FOR WOMEN AND MEN TO ENLARGE THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

I have a few pointers here. You'll have more as you talk and discuss. A mission leader from Pakistan suggests men and women should always work together, equally, to model the value God places on both women and men, and reflect the intrinsic image of God.

Another leader, a worker throughout Latin America, finds the fastest growing churches are *charismatic*, using all the gifts in their congregations. Some evangelical and pentecostal churches, not using the gifts of women, are not growing.

A missionary from Zaire reminds me women work harder and longer and can do two jobs at once.

When women are over half the church's human resource, it makes [p. 160](#) sense to use their creativity, their energy, and their gifts for both leadership and service. And when women are half the church's target group, it makes sense to use their insights to plan the task.



A proverb on a calendar in Kenya:

Educate a man and you educate a person.

Educate a woman and you educate a nation.

Here are some strategies to consider

1. Work for equality and against male domination in our theology and then in our churches.
2. Put a high priority on friendship evangelism to use well both men and women as effective evangelists.
3. Put appropriate resources of time, people and money into helping women from oppressive situations to find freedom in Christ.
4. Offer training bursaries to women. Offer salaried positions.
5. Use the God-given gifts of both women and men for evangelism and discipling.
6. Encourage men and women to model the acceptance Christ gave to women in the gender equality of their evangelistic outreach and pastoral care.

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