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# Gender Diversity in Mission Work and Leadership: Moving towards Kingdom Transformation

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THE MESSAGE OF THE gospel is a message of transformation. Biblical and theological studies often focus on the transforming power of the gospel in individual lives, and this transformative power is indeed tremendous. Yet full transformation also reaches into relationships, families, communities and organisations. The apostle Paul states in his letter to the Roman believers that the whole creation groans in its present state of bondage to decay, and few doubt that the world needs transformation on a large scale. Social justice issues and human rights issues often arise precisely because the society lacks the transformation brought by the gospel. Yet even in areas where the gospel has permeated to some extent, unjust social practices and lack of transformation can continue to plague

nations, communities and neighbourhoods. The purpose of this article is to help missions organisations to seek the kind of transformation that does good for women, for men, for society, and for the spread of the gospel.

In 1871, Maria Brown and Mary Porter sailed for China as Methodist missionaries. On the way, they struggled to find a Christian perspective on the Chinese custom of foot binding, which had been going on for a millennium. Eventually these women concluded they must oppose the practice. It was clearly harmful to women since it was painful and left them unable to move about freely without assistance. Brown and Porter also realized that physically impaired women were limited in their ability to contribute to society, thus raising the country's poverty level. For them, foot binding was clearly detrimental to the whole society, not just the women themselves. They also saw the implications for evangelism. They reasoned that a woman with bound feet

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could not become an itinerant preacher or Bible woman after her conversion, if she could not walk unaided. So the two women decided that an admission requirement to their gospel training schools would be unbound feet.

Six years later at an inter-mission conference in Shanghai their ideas were presented to all the missionaries. Some of the men at the conference recognized that they had never considered all the implications of foot binding, and joined the women in using moral persuasion to stop it when they could. Gradually more and more missionaries and Chinese people became convinced that foot binding was a harmful practice. The result was that in 1907 the Chinese government itself outlawed the practice. In just one generation, Brown and Porter were catalysts for transformational change in the whole country of China.<sup>1</sup>

### I Women Lost as Leaders

Brown and Porter went to China to start schools for girls. They were not sent in any official agency leadership role, yet their insight brought widespread influence. What about women today? Are women being included in leadership roles in mission organisations? Is their insight and influence being widely felt in the work of mission organisations?

A look at one contemporary organisation, which is considered one of the best at gender integration, illustrates that women are indeed lost as leaders. With approximately 350 workers, over

half of whom are women, this organisation has only six women in leadership positions. There are three women and nine men on the top leadership team. Two of these women share job responsibilities and titles with a male colleague, and one of the two is a short-term worker. The third woman is an at-large member of the team, with no direct responsibilities. The organisation works in over twenty countries; only one country leader is female.<sup>2</sup> The leader of the women's ministry is a woman, as is the leader of family services. Every woman who does hold a leadership role is married, although about seven per cent of the organisation's members are single women staff.

One indicator of the level of female leadership in an organisation is the number of women who return from the field to the home office and then take on a leadership role there. At present in this organisation, there is one woman who fits this profile, though she is leaving within a month. On the other hand, there are at least five men who have returned to the US and taken a position of leadership. In a doctoral thesis written in 2008, titled 'The Trailing Spouse in Mission Leadership',<sup>3</sup> the author relates that she was unable to locate even one 'trailing husband' for her study of couples who returned from the field to the home office in order for one spouse to take a role in mission leadership. What message does that

<sup>1</sup> Dana Robert, *American Women in Mission* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 174-176.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Caes, 'Gender and the Christian Workplace' (La Habra, CA, 2009), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Julie Tiessen, 'The Trailing Spouse in Mission Leadership: Stewarded Commodity or Lost Resource?' (Dissertation, South Hamilton, MA: Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, 2008), 3.

communicate to women, to men and to the wider community about the value of women missionaries' expertise and their leadership contributions to the sending organisation?

When the women of this organisation were asked about their concerns, first on their list was the perception of women. They expressed concerns about being viewed as second-class citizens and frustrations with limitations in the kinds of ministries in which they can participate. They believe they have to be like a man to be heard and that they need to achieve more than a man to be valued. The inability to gain leadership positions or have women leaders as role models was a significant source of frustration for them. Most women with leadership gifts found little or no support within the organisation for the use of those gifts, and turned to other ministries or organisations in order to put their gifts to use. For their own sending organisation, these women are lost leaders. It is as though their feet are bound and their footprint limited. A similar study done among theologically trained women leaders in the US found being disrespected and being rejected as second and fourth on their list of challenges, as well.<sup>4</sup> The problem is not geography but gender.

What is it that causes women to perceive that their leadership is neither wanted nor valued within the organisation that sent them overseas, yet at the same time causes male leaders to exclaim, 'Where are the good women?'<sup>5</sup>

4 Natalie Eastman, 'Christian Women Making Biblical and Theological Decisions' (Dissertation, South Hamilton, MA: Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, 2005), 180.

Part of the answer may lie in gender stereotypes and expectations that continue to persist, and may even be promoted as biblical in Christian organisations. In the business world, Dr Alice Eagly of Northwestern University has written extensively on the subject. She asserts that 'Gender stereotypes are one of the culprits behind the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions'.<sup>6</sup> She and Professor Madeline Heilman of New York University add, 'Gender stereotypes create "double binds" for professional women that perpetuate biased evaluations of their competency and leadership abilities and hinder their professional trajectories.'<sup>7</sup> They go on to explain that men are expected to be 'agentic', that is, able to get things done, while women are expected to be 'communal', that is, focused on nurturing and caring for the needs of others.

If leadership is a visionary, achievement-oriented position, women are not expected to be able to fill the role. If a woman does prove herself to be agentic, then she has violated the expectations of communality that underlie gender stereotypes. They explain, 'Gender stereotypes can simultaneously lead to expectations that women

5 Nicola H. Creegan and Christine D. Pohl, *Living on the Boundaries* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 9.

6 Hannah R. Bowles, 'Gender stereotypes and the double binds for women in leadership'. *Women and Public Policy Program*, (2009:2). <<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/wappp/news-events/news/e-newsletter/spring-2009-%7C-issue-no.-2/gender-stereotypes-and-the-double-binds-for-women-in-leadership>> accessed 1 February 2012.

7 Bowles, 'Gender stereotypes'.

are ill-equipped to handle jobs and roles traditionally held by men, and induce disapproval and social penalties for women who are successful in these male gender-typed positions.’<sup>8</sup> Successful women leaders have violated the gender-stereotype expectations placed on them, while women who fulfil the stereotype cannot lead successfully.

These professors represent the business world. What happens when such ideas are translated into the Christian realm? The phrases ‘Biblical manhood’ and ‘Biblical womanhood’ have been widely popularized by a variety of writers over the last twenty-five years.<sup>9</sup> The basic philosophy underlying these phrases is precisely that the gender stereotypes are correct; the difference is that the basis for these stereotypes is said to be God’s design for men and women, rather than social beliefs and pressures.

In this system of thought, men are leaders and women are followers. Not only are Christian women not expected to be leaders, if they do exhibit leadership qualities they are thought to go against a God-ordained ‘role’ for women. They are told they do not really have the gift of leadership, or that they are rebelling against their God-ordained place. They are limited to working with other women or children and told their gifts are not intended for the whole body of Christ.

Women, and Christian organisations as well, find themselves enmeshed in a web of demands and expectations that have little to do with the reality of how

the Holy Spirit creates, calls, redeems and gifts each person. Instead, the emphasis is on culturally stereotypical expectations for men and women. In this view, there is little room for women who exhibit leadership gifts, are drawn to intellectual pursuits, are good at strategic or analytical thinking or have visionary leadership styles. A good Christian woman must fit the gender stereotypes, which make her unsuited for leadership. If she is suited for leadership, she is not a ‘good’ Christian woman, and finds herself excluded on that basis. Either way her gifts are shunned and she encounters disapproval in the Christian organisation.

The double bind that Eagly and Heilman describe often functions quite strongly within the Christian organisation, with the added pressure of being promoted as God’s plan. Fearful of causing discord or of being called rebellious, a Christian woman with leadership gifts and abilities may go elsewhere to exercise those gifts that God has given her. The organisation does not benefit from her abilities, and the male leaders wonder what has become of all the good women.

## II Results for the Women

A woman with leadership gifts in an environment which tells her not to exercise leadership suffers the type of stress known as cognitive dissonance. This is the anxiety experienced by an individual when their experiences are inconsistent with their beliefs or ideals.<sup>10</sup> Cognitive dissonance theory

<sup>8</sup> Bowles, ‘Gender stereotypes’.

<sup>9</sup> CBMW <[www.cbmw.org](http://www.cbmw.org)> accessed 1 February 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Cognitive dissonance <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cognitive+dissonance>> accessed 1 February 2012

states that people will seek to bring consistency to their behaviours and attitudes in order to reduce the distress they experience.<sup>11</sup>

Women in Christian organisations typically follow one of three paths to reduce their distress. Some choose to isolate themselves from the organisation promoting the teaching. They may become passive, disconnected, or uninterested, choosing to pursue other interests. Some may go so far as to reject the organisation or even their faith. Mission agencies certainly have some women who would fit this category. Disconnected from the broader work of the organisation, they find a productive place to invest their time and energy, one that typically has little or nothing to do with the agency that sent them.

A second coping strategy is for a woman to attach herself to a male, perhaps her husband, and seek to become the 'power behind the throne'. With clear gifts, yet lacking the freedom to exercise those gifts openly, these women may become persuaders, or in negative terms, manipulators, seeking to employ their gifts through the position of another person. At its best, this can function as a working partnership between two people with complementary gifts. However, since the environment is hostile to the woman's free exercise of her own abilities, the likelihood is strong that eventually problems will arise. Often the husband will be promoted to a higher position of leadership or responsibility within the organisation, one in which the woman

is unable to participate.<sup>12</sup> In this case the danger is real that she may also slip into the disconnected category mentioned above.

A third possibility occurs when the organisation is inconsistent in its view on women and allows a select few to be leaders as a sort of exception to the general rule. A woman who accepts a leadership position in this organisation must look for reasons to justify her own job while simultaneously affirming the teaching that women do not belong in leadership. To reduce the dissonance this brings, a woman may slide into self-deception.

This coping strategy carries a number of hidden dangers. One is hypocrisy: the woman is using her leadership gifts while denying that she is doing so. She may lead, while continuing to insist that she is 'just' a wife and mother, for example.<sup>13</sup> Another risk is that the woman may begin thinking that she is somehow superior to other women. The seduction of power and the desire to be accepted into the top circles can conspire to make her think that she really is different from other women and not subject to the same limitations as the rest. She may rejoice in having broken through the stained-glass ceiling, and simultaneously work hard to pull the ladder up behind her to prevent other women from competing for limited space or making similar achievements. Or she may simply assume that the barriers are not real,

<sup>11</sup> Cognitive dissonance <[http://changing-minds.org/explanations/theories/cognitive\\_dissonance.htm](http://changing-minds.org/explanations/theories/cognitive_dissonance.htm)> accessed 1 February 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Tiessen, 'The Trailing Spouse in Mission Leadership', xv.

<sup>13</sup> 'About Dorothy Patterson', <<http://www.dorothypatterson.info/about.cfm>> accessed 1 February 2012.

and that any woman who wishes to can succeed as she did.<sup>14</sup>

If a woman does achieve a position of significant leadership in an organisation, she still faces obstacles to leading well. Two of the most common were named by the women in the organisational study referenced above: they feel pressure to become 'fake men' in order to acculturate to their new setting,<sup>15</sup> and they feel pressure to prove themselves by achieving more and working harder than their male counterparts. Missionary women, skilled as they are at working very hard<sup>16</sup> and adjusting to new cultures, may be particularly prone to these pitfalls.

Furthermore, there is evidence that both of these pressures have some basis in fact.<sup>17</sup> In general terms, women continue to work harder and longer for the same amount of recognition, and men continue to discount certain kinds of interactions. For example, a person speaking with great emotional energy on a topic may be called 'emotional' if they are female but 'passionate' if they are male. All these inconsistencies strengthen a woman's belief that she must change who she is in order to be

accepted into the boys' club.<sup>18</sup>

The bottom line for mission work and mission organisations is that the woman's leadership footprint is restricted, bound by social preconceptions masked as biblical principles.

### III Cultural Issues

North American and European culture and North American and European Christian sub-culture are in good company to the extent that they assign a subordinate place to women in relation to men. (This is not a comment on the legal status of women, but rather on lingering stereotypes.) Many Eastern religions as well as much of Islam also promote this view.

Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wu-Dunn, Pulitzer-Prize winning journalists, published a book in 2009 entitled *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. From the Middle East, through Africa and across Asia, they document some of the most blatantly oppressive practices directed at women, in every case because female life is deemed less valuable than male life in a particular society, tribe, or country. North American, European and Christian cultural values find themselves at present in a kind of midway position, having elevated the value of women to a certain extent while still maintaining them in a subordinate position in relation to males.

What implications does this have for the work of the mission organisation? Issues of culture, acculturation

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**14** Caes, 'Gender and the Christian Workplace', 4.

**15** Caryn Rivadeneira, 'What We're Asked to Change', *Gifted for Leadership* <[http://blog.kyria.com/giftedforleadership/2009/12/what\\_were\\_asked\\_to\\_change.html](http://blog.kyria.com/giftedforleadership/2009/12/what_were_asked_to_change.html)> accessed 1 February 2012.

**16** Dzubinski, 'Work Practices of Missionary Women', (Dissertation, South Hamilton, MA: Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, 2007), 95.

**17** Tiessen, 'The Trailing Spouse in Mission Leadership', 38.

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**18** Nancy Beach, *Gifted to Lead: The Art of Leading as a Woman in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 32.



and cultural adjustment figure largely in most agencies' training plans and strategies for overseas service. In fact, the organisation studied has used culture as a reason for not promoting many women to significant levels of leadership. Both the host cultures' values and the sending culture's values are cited as standards to which the organisation must submit.<sup>19</sup> Yet it is not clear whether the host or sending cultures' views on this topic have ever been examined.

Even more significant are the questions about the transforming nature of the gospel message. Is the desire to acculturate taking precedence over the true message of the gospel? When missionaries unquestioningly submit themselves to cultural values that are clearly contrary to scriptural ones, they miss an opportunity to bring holistic transformation to the society. Missionaries are thoroughly trained to observe and adapt to their host culture. They also need skills in determining when to fit in and when to resist.

Gender practices are one area in which the easy path is to accept the host culture, especially if their own culture has similar tendencies. There are certainly times when God works despite the sinful practices of a society.<sup>20</sup> In their eagerness to fit in, however, missionaries can forget this aspect of transformation: that being different can serve to reflect different values, Kingdom values, which make people

thirsty for the good news the gospel brings.

The two Methodist missionary women who opposed foot binding understood this principle clearly. Kingdom values are different from culture's values. Jesus and the gospel affirmed the value of women, so to them, even what appeared to be an entrenched cultural practice was not acceptable since it was damaging to women. Interestingly, their firm stance had such a far-reaching effect that the secular writers of *Half the Sky* make the following comment about China:

We sometimes hear people voice doubts about opposition to sex trafficking, genital cutting, or honor killings because of their supposed inevitability. What can our good intentions achieve against thousands of years of tradition?

One response is China. A century ago, China was arguable the worst place in the world to be born female. Foot-binding, child marriage, concubinage, and female infanticide were embedded in traditional Chinese culture.... So was it cultural imperialism for Westerners to criticize foot-binding and female infanticide? Perhaps. But it was also the right thing to do. If we believe firmly in certain values, such as the equality of all human beings regardless of color or gender, then we should not be afraid to stand up for them; it would be feckless to defer to slavery, torture, foot-binding, honor killings, or genital cutting just because we believe in respecting other people's faiths or cultures. One lesson of China is that we need not accept that discrimination is an intractable

19 Caes, 'Gender and the Christian Workplace', 5; 17.

20 Kate Sauter, 'Culture Shock! Successfully Navigating the Transition Phase of Ministry', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (46:2, 2010, 142-145), 148.



element of any society. If culture were immutable, China would still be impoverished and Sheryl would be stumbling along on three-inch feet.<sup>21</sup>

For Kristof and WuDunn, there is no question at all about standing up for what is right. History may have largely forgotten that it was two missionary women who initiated this change, but these two women serve as an example for all who seek to carry the gospel that real transformation is holistic transformation, reaching to all members, levels, and structures of society. The transformation of individual hearts leads directly to a ripple effect outward through society, leading to the destruction of prejudice and the breaking down of unjust social structures, no matter how deeply embedded in the culture they may appear.

#### IV Theological Issues

Christians, and more specifically, missionaries and mission agencies that are wholly committed to the spread of the gospel, need to rethink the demands of the Kingdom of God versus the practice of culture in relation to their views and practices regarding women. A good place to start is by looking at the life of Jesus as a model for today.

The Bible describes life in a patriarchal culture. Men are the primary actors, with some accounts of noteworthy women who accomplish significant things sprinkled throughout. Yet Jesus,

in his interactions with both men and women, never allowed himself to be limited by cultural definitions of gender roles. None of the cultural valuations of human beings held weight for Jesus. He healed, called and related to all: gentiles, sinners, women, children, Samaritans. He had women among his disciples, women who followed him and women who supported him. He healed women, raised a girl from death, accepted the support of women and used women's life stories to illustrate the Kingdom of God. He loved Martha, her sister Mary, and Lazarus.

He revealed his full deity to the woman from Samaria with the statement, 'I am'. Women were the first witnesses to the resurrection. Not once did Jesus encourage women to pursue certain kinds of activities but not others. He never told them they should remain at home or stick to domestic tasks. He never reinforced in any way the religious or cultural demands on women of his day.

The impact of Jesus' life and practice toward women is probably best summed up in Dorothy Sayers' statement:

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there has never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half The Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity For Women Worldwide* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 206-207.

mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about woman's nature.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus' treatment of women during his time on earth shows that he never felt himself or women to be bound by cultural definitions of what women could or should do. Rather than encouraging women to stick to a carefully defined sphere, fulfil domestic duties and obey the males in their lives, he treated them as full, complete, competent and independent persons, capable of making their own choices and decisions. Christian mission organisations and workers can certainly look to Jesus' interactions as a model for how to treat all people.

Any consideration of the New Testament value of women must also take into account the writings of the apostle Paul. Though a thorough examination of the so-called 'problem passages' is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to notice some aspects of Paul's writings.

Paul encourages women to do the following: pray aloud in the worship service, prophesy aloud in the wor-

ship service, learn, be taught the faith, teach others, and form an integral part of the body of Christ. In his long lists of commandments, he never suggests that some commands are for women and some for men. There are no sins listed that are sins if done by women but not by men. The passages on spiritual gifts do not even suggest that some gifts are for men and others for women. The 'one another' commands about how believers are to treat each other in the body of Christ are for all believers.

1 Timothy 2:12, the passage most often cited today by those who wish to limit women's participation in certain ministries, starts with a third-person imperative verb form which is impossible to translate exactly into English: 'a woman [is to] learn.' Emphasis is frequently placed on 'quiet'; rarely is the imperative form of the verb that commands her to learn the focus of attention. Paul wanted believing women to be trained, taught, and prepared and he commended them numerous times in his letters for their diligence in ministry.

Church history illustrates what Jesus and Paul taught. Women have always played a vital role in the growth of the church and the spread of the gospel. In the early church, orders of widows, virgins and deaconesses quickly developed as a 'distinctly pastoral ministry'<sup>23</sup> that was remarkably effective for 500 years. The monastic movements of the Middle Ages always included women. Pachomius and his sister Mary founded the first monastic

22 Dorothy Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 68.

23 Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 67.

orders for men and women in the late third century.<sup>24</sup> Benedict and his twin sister Scholastica were the founders of the Benedictine order, also for men and women.<sup>25</sup> Many monasteries throughout England and Western Europe were 'double' or co-ed monasteries, often led by women who became quite influential in their towns or villages.<sup>26</sup>

Later, the modern missionary movement became a place for women, both married and single, to exercise their gifts in ministry. From the 1860s to 1900, women founded over forty sending agencies.<sup>27</sup> More than three million North American women<sup>28</sup> worked to raise money and send women to the mission field to preach, teach, evangelize, heal and in general minister holistically to men, women and children around the world. By 1890 women made up 60 per cent of the missionary force,<sup>29</sup> a number that remains constant today.

From the start of the church, women with a vocation have always had a place to love and serve God through ministry. History clearly confirms that women have continually played a vital part in the founding, spread and health of the church worldwide.

Despite the clear record of participation and accomplishments by wom-

en, on a philosophical level theologians throughout the ages show a certain ambivalence towards them. Praise for their accomplishments or piety are countered with comments on the apparent sinfulness of female nature. Within evangelical circles today, there remains a push to maintain women in a subordinate position in relation to men. 'Equal in being but different (subordinate) in role' is the key phrase.

Race relations in the US have already amply demonstrated that 'equal but separate' is, in its very essence, a declaration of inequality. When 'separate' is maintained and enforced, based on a deterministic factor such as race or gender, the effect is of essential, and not merely functional, inequality. It is time to recognize this fact and move forward into practices that truly value women as men's partners.

As agencies continue to ask what Jesus would do, they should recognize that he would not be inconsistent and confusing in his message to women. Neither Jesus nor Paul would adopt the form of culture that devalues women. The historical record of women's contributions to the spread of the gospel throughout the history of the church clearly demonstrates the gifts, leading and transforming power of the Holy Spirit. God faithfully demonstrates his blessing on women who love him, serve him and diligently use the gifts the Holy Spirit has given them. If missions organisations embraced the behaviour of Paul and Jesus in leadership appointments, then a deeper and more powerful transformation would occur in those organisations and their ministries.

24 Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2001), 145.

25 Gonzalez, 239; Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 134.

26 Tucker and Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church*, 135.

27 Robert, *American Women in Mission*, 129.

28 Robert, *American Women in Mission*, 129.

29 Robert, *American Women in Mission*, 130.

## V Missiological Issues

The central missiological issue that arises alongside questions of diversity in mission today, whether it is age, gender, race or any other type of diversity is the question, 'What kind of gospel message are western missionaries taking to the world?' The gospel is a holistic message of total transformation, stated clearly by the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:26-28.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

In Christ, racial, social, economic, class, gender, educational, and any other barriers that society uses to divide and classify people ought to be broken down. This is the message that transforms: You are all one in Christ Jesus.

A list of twenty-five common oppressive practices towards women (see the appendix) shows that the nine most egregious are those criticized by Kristof and WuDunn, and are mainly practised in the majority world. The remaining fourteen are or have been staple practices of the Christianised West during the last 150 to 200 years. The vast majority have to do with prohibiting women from exercising certain rights or privileges freely granted to males in the same society.

The best known struggle was certainly for women's enfranchisement, but women have also had to fight to gain university entrance, to be able to divorce unfaithful or abusive spouses,

to be able to raise their own children in the case of a divorce or death of their husband, to own property or to spend the family income. Women still are not paid the same for the same work, are restricted in certain professions, are limited in some educational institutions, and face prohibitions and limitations in churches. Whether women are not allowed to speak in front of men at all, or merely not allowed to speak on certain topics in front of men, the underlying rationale is the same.

All of these limitations, regardless of the religious or sociological reasons given to support them, in the end stem fundamentally from the belief that women must remain subordinate to men.

In an article called 'A Disturbing Question', Pastor Ken Fong explains his response to *Half the Sky*:

When some Christian groups interpret the Bible as teaching that God created women to live in a male-ruled hierarchy, that they must obediently submit to male 'heads' or risk violating a divine mandate, aren't they also contributing to the oppression of girls and women?.... Even if the point is made that the Bible teaches that women are of equal value before God, if a person's being a female automatically and always means that she is overtly or subtly denied equal opportunities to learn, to lead, to teach, etc., that is oppressing her in the name of God.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ken Fong, 'A Disturbing Question and a Determined Conviction on the Treatment of Women'. *Sojourners: God's Politics Blog*. <<http://blog.sojo.net/blogs/2010/03/08/disturbing-question-and-determined-conviction-treatment-women>> accessed 1 February 2012.

This is indeed a crucial observation. Christian missions do a great deal of work in developing nations, and some of these nations are often the very ones that practise the devaluing of women in overt ways: sex-selected abortion, exposure of infant girls, limited access to education, health care, or even food, slavery, prostitution, honour killings, and more. If sending agencies also subscribe, no matter how subtly, to practices that devalue women, then they will be limited in the kind of transformation they can offer when they bring the gospel to those societies.

The difference between withholding learning from poor girls in a remote tribal village and withholding seminary training to them in North America is only one of degree. Women are maintained in a subordinate position in relation to the men and Paul's explicit command for a woman to learn in 1 Timothy 2:12 is ignored. The holistic transformation of the gospel message fails to penetrate the society.

Fong points out that if women are 'overtly or subtly denied equal opportunities to...lead' then women are being oppressed, though in a softer way than much of what is described in *Half the Sky*. He sees that oppression is oppression, and the difference is simply one of degree. Yet the true gospel message is not one of oppression, but of liberation, as Jesus read from Isaiah in the synagogue:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Lk 4:16-21).

Freedom for the oppressed, says Jesus, is a central part of his message. For the mission agency as well as the mission worker, the transformation brought by the gospel must be holistic, encompassing this present life as well as the one to come. A message of future redemption only, that fails to address the injustices in this current life, is like that condemned in James 2:16, 'If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed", but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?'

The demands of the gospel include the needs of the present life, as well as transformation in the life to come. For mission agencies, incorporating women as full partners in the work and leadership of the mission is an essential step toward bringing that holistic transformation and freedom from oppression that the gospel requires of Christ-followers.

## VI Implications for Mission Agencies

The potential gains in efficiency and effectiveness for mission agencies that fully value their women and intentionally integrate them into positions of leadership responsibility are tremendous. Perhaps the most obvious is maximizing the available resources for the work at hand. Women typically comprise at least 60 per cent of any given mission agency; therefore, maximizing the contributions of the women is an obvious way to expand the work of the organisation.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore,

<sup>31</sup> Leanne Dzubinski, 'Innovation in Mission: Women Workers in the Harvest Force', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (46, no. 2, 2010: 150-156), 151-152.

supporting 60 per cent of the organisation can have a significant impact on staff retention.<sup>32</sup>

Women who know that their agency will support them and truly value their contributions will work harder and stay longer with that agency. Additionally, healthy practices regarding women staff can be of significance in attracting new workers to the agency. Today's adults who have grown up in an increasingly egalitarian society are often not interested in participating in something that looks and sounds very male-dominated in its attitude and practice.

In regards to leadership in particular, agencies could benefit greatly from including women at all levels of strategy, policy-making and planning. Those women who represent 'communal' female strengths of relationship, networking, and empowering offer a kind of leadership that Christian organisations usually value highly. Women who represent 'agentic' strength also bring a different life experience and a different viewpoint, therefore offering a broader perspective on questions of planning, strategy, decision-making, influence and leading. Like the men, women workers bring a vast quantity of experience and wisdom, and astute agencies will seek to benefit from this wisdom.

Studies in the workforce continue to demonstrate that companies with higher numbers of women in top leadership positions consistently perform better

than more hierarchical, male-run companies.<sup>33</sup> This is likely to be equally true of mission organisations. The apostle Paul did repeat his description of the interdependence of the physical body several times to illustrate how things work for the Body of Christ on earth.

For the mission agency to benefit fully from the expertise of its women, it may need to ask some hard questions regarding women staff.<sup>34</sup>

- Are married women classified as staff or volunteers? Are they included in the pay and reporting structures?
- To what extent are married women functionally trailing spouses, sent to the field along with their husbands and then left to find their own way?
- Are there significant numbers of women in leadership positions in the organisation? When leadership positions become available, to what degree are women considered or deliberately sought out to fill those positions?
- Do women receive the same kinds and levels of support, whether it is financial, educational or structural, as the men?
- To what degree are women's different life-patterns supported as they contribute to the agency, or to what degree are they expected

32 Rob Hay, 'The toxic mission organisation: Fiction or Fact?' *Encounters Mission Ezine* (October 2004), 2 <[http://www.redcliffe.org/uploads/documents/toxic\\_mission5\\_02.pdf](http://www.redcliffe.org/uploads/documents/toxic_mission5_02.pdf)> accessed 1 February 2012.

33 Sylvia Ann Hewlett, 'Are Your Best Female Employees a Flight Risk?' *Harvard Business Review* <[http://blogs.hbr.org/hbr/hewlett/2009/10/smart\\_women\\_stronger\\_companies.html](http://blogs.hbr.org/hbr/hewlett/2009/10/smart_women_stronger_companies.html)> accessed 1 February 2012.

34 Dzubinski, 'Innovation in Mission', 154-155.



to navigate what may be male-biased agency structures on their own?

- What subtle or unintentional messages do women receive that their contributions are less significant than those made by men?

If women are not classified as staff, function as trailing spouses, are not present in leadership in a significant way and do not receive sufficient support from the organisation, then the sum total of these messages is one of the diminished value of women workers. If the sending agency itself does not highly value its women, its attempts to bring a complete message of life and value to women in the target audiences around the world will be less effective.

## VII Practical Steps toward Change

Sending agencies that want to move towards greater inclusion of women in organisational leadership may benefit from taking proactive steps to empower and support their female leaders. While both male and female leaders can benefit from positive organisational practices, gifted women may also need some help aimed specifically at their needs. This is simply an acknowledgement that the playing field has not been level in the past and that women are often starting from a position of disadvantage relative to that of their male colleagues. These are some potential first steps:

- Ask the hard questions, and listen carefully and non-defensively to the answers. Find out what kinds of support the women

themselves need. Then follow through on the information.

- Make clear decisions and statements about women's contributions. If the organisation chooses to limit women's activities, state this clearly from the recruiting phase. If women candidates show strong leadership gifts, counsel them to consider other organisations that might be a better fit for them.
- Learn to recognize women's non-traditional paths towards leadership.<sup>35</sup> Many married women prefer to spend the early years concentrating on their children, and then later are ready to enter whole-heartedly into leadership using the store of experience and knowledge they have accumulated. They will not look anything like the twenty- or thirty-something males who are beginning their leadership journey.
- Learn to support leaders' families. If women leaders have children at home, the agency should give husbands the right to participate as equal partners in home and childcare responsibilities while their wives are involved in ministry, rather than tacitly expecting a traditional gender-based division of labour.
- Actively seek women with leadership gifts and train them. Leadership development in the organisation should include both

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35 Gascho, 'The Needs of Women in Organizational Leadership,' 5, <<http://www.impactleader.org/articles/?cat=16>> accessed 1 February 2012.



men and women. Coaching, mentoring, seminars and classes are all ways that leaders can grow in skills and character. Make sure women are included in all kinds of training offered by the organisation.

- Put some women leaders in place in the home office. Women with years of field experience and leadership gifts can make a significant contribution to the organisation when they return from

the field.

The history of women in God's kingdom shows that despite their often-limited footprint women have been incredibly effective in evangelizing, teaching, training and spreading the gospel. They have established faith communities and brought transformation to whole societies. It is time to cease hampering them through the binding of their feet, and time to partner fully as redeemed humans, male and female, in the cause of the gospel of Christ.

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## Appendix:

### Twenty-five Common Oppressive Practices Towards Women

Sex-selective abortion	Not allowed to leave/divorce a husband
Exposure of infant girls	Not allowed to travel without husband/father's permission
Genital cutting	Not allowed to study certain subjects
Restrictions of food, medical care, and/or education	Not allowed to control the family finances/spend the family income/her own income
Rape (especially to force a marriage without a dowry)	Not paid the same wages as a man for the same work
Selling into slavery/prostitution	Not allowed to speak in the presence of men
Acid attacks	Not allowed to speak on certain topics in the presence of men
Honour killings	Not allowed to enter certain professions
Polygamy	Not allowed to educate males
Lack of maternal care/high maternal mortality or infant mortality	Not allowed to exercise certain spiritual gifts
Not allowed to go in public unaccompanied by a male	Not allowed to fulfil certain positions in the church
Not allowed to own property	Not allowed to be in a leadership position in home, church, or society
Not allowed to vote	
Not allowed to drive	
Not allowed to keep children if divorced/sent away by husband	

While the first nine practices on this list are the primary focus of the book *Half the Sky*, and mainly occur at present in developing nations, the remaining eighteen have all been a regular practice of Western, Christianised society in the last two hundred years. The last six on the list continue to be advocated in certain circles today as 'appropriate' limitations on the personhood of women, who are deemed unsuited by their female nature to carry out these tasks.