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A Shirt-tail Experience? The Role and Significance of Women in Majority World Churches

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Abstract

“What would the study of Christianity look like if scholars put women in the centre of their research?” Dana Robert posed this question in her recent article entitled “World Christianity as a Women’s Movement”¹. In this article she argues that we have known for years that the centre of gravity of Christianity has moved to the Majority World. Scholars such as Andrew Walls have long implored the academy to put the concerns of Christians in Asia, Africa, and Latin America at the centre of scholarship not only because those are the places where the church is growing but also to see what creative impulses and ideas may arise to enlighten and challenge the church universal. What might we learn if we afforded women more than a shirt-tail experience?

This article considers these questions by looking at the challenges and opportunities facing women: the invisibility of women, women’s work and the role and place of women in leadership. It considers the realms

1. D Robert, “World Christianity as a Women’s Movement”, *IBMR*, Vol 30, No 4, October, 2006; 180.

of public and private space and how women have often been marginalised into the private sphere. It reviews and challenges the bias against women's work. It concludes by offering some examples of women in leadership in Majority World churches as good role models.

Keywords: women, mission, invisibility, women's work, leadership, patriarchy, empower, injustice

Introduction

"What would the study of Christianity look like if scholars put women in the centre of their research?" Dana Robert posed this question in her recent article entitled "World Christianity as a Women's Movement"². In this article she argues that we have known for years that the centre of gravity of Christianity has moved to the Majority World. Scholars such as Andrew Walls have long implored the academy to put the concerns of Christians in Asia, Africa, and Latin America at the centre of scholarship not only because those are the places where the church is growing but also to see what creative impulses and ideas may arise to enlighten and challenge the church universal. What might we learn if we afforded women more than a shirt-tail experience? What exactly do I mean by a shirt-tail experience? The word "shirt-tail" refers to the part of a man's shirt which extends below his waist at the back. As an adjective it can also mean, young, immature or of little value. So I

2. D Robert, "World Christianity as a Women's Movement", *IBMR*, Vol 30, No 4, October, 2006; 180.

am using it as a metaphor here to express something of women's experience in the church – both as women are perceived by men and also as women see themselves and their own roles within the church. Women often feel they are clutching onto the shirt-tails of men – therefore they are behind them, following them, left in their shadows.

In 1999 Dana Robert claimed that “the typical late twentieth-century Christian [is] a Latin American or African woman.” In 2002 Philip Jenkins wrote, “If we want to visualise a ‘typical’ contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian favela.”³ While it is notoriously difficult to obtain any hard data to back up this assertion Robert is adamant that there is a female majority in world Christianity. She surveys Pentecostalism and Roman Catholicism as two of the world's largest ecclesiastical groupings and finds that women form a majority in both.⁴ Pentecostalism is the fastest growing block of Christians in the world, three quarters of them live in the Majority World and of these the majority are women. She quotes two Roman Catholic scholars who conclude, after extensive research into popular Catholicism, that around the world most participants are women. So if women really are the majority in most of our churches, why is this phenomenon not more readily acknowledged and studied and what opportunities and challenges does this present to the global church?

A few years ago Rose Dowsett, a colleague from Scotland, and I

3. P Jenkins, *The Next Christendom, The Coming of Global Christianity*, (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 2.

4. See Robert, “World Christianity”, 181.

conducted some primary research among Christian women all over the world. We interviewed women from at least 20 different countries and asked them a range of questions relating to their experience of Christianity and the church in their country. I will draw on some of that material for the rest of this presentation.

Let me begin with a story from the Solomon Islands.

I recall my mother, telling us as children how the gospel came to her area through one of our pioneering men, Peter Ambuofa. The women and children were his first converts. This was a cultural intention so that if Peter Ambuofa's God killed the women and children, the men would survive. It was when their superstitious beliefs were proved wrong, that they too became followers.⁵

In this short episode we see many of the themes that recur again and again when we think about women's involvement in the church and in mission. It was the mother who kept the gospel heritage alive by telling it to her children. So often it is the mothers and grandmothers who keep the faith alive, who tell it and model it to their children, who keep the memories vivid by recounting the old stories to their families. It is the women who are the hub of the family and community, passing on vital information, keeping the valued traditions alive.

It was the women and children who became the first Christians. Did they know the tremendous risk they were taking on behalf of their men? Did they realize that they were endangering their lives – and not

5. Interview with Lois Kusulifu, June 2002.

just their own lives but the lives of their children also – in converting to this new faith? Whether they knew or not, they were willing to accept this previously unknown faith and they were courageous enough to commit themselves to this new God for the sake of their communities. It was the women who bravely shouldered this responsibility and so it was the women and children who, after surviving commitment to this new faith, brought their men to Christ.

It is a similar story in other parts of the world. Robert cites the example of the first missionaries to Hawaii who were greeted by messengers from a female chief. She became an early convert and sponsor of the new faith. In Africa the first converts were often women also. Adrian Hastings has analysed this and concluded that these first women converts saw the “relative equality in Christianity as providing an escape from patriarchal customs that oppressed women”⁶ even though over time the church followed the societal pattern of male domination and women lost that initial freedom.

As Rose and I discovered after communicating with women from all over the world, this largely untold story is still the same story today. In many instances it is the women who come to Christ more readily than their men, it is the women who struggle to keep the faith alive and vibrant, it is the women who model the faith to their families and communities, it is the women who easily outnumber men in the churches. It is women, who as one Ugandan woman expressed it, “are the backbone of the church.” And yet a poignant remark from a woman from the Philippines highlights our contemporary dilemma, “women are

6. Quoted in Robert, “World Christianity”, 184.

still regarded as a second minority and less capable than men." The same lament emerges from Myanmar where a Christian woman asks why, despite the gospel having liberated the community from many harmful cultural practices, gender discrimination still exists in the Christian community.

This was a cry that we heard over and over again from different parts of the world. It does not seem to matter whether it is China, Uganda, Peru, Pakistan, Philippines, Britain, Korea or New Zealand, women in the church often feel undervalued, unrecognised and discouraged. At times, they bewail their seeming invisibility, and express strong feelings about this injustice and the struggle to make their voices heard. Despite this, women still continue in the church, generally in greater numbers than men, faithfully carrying out their tasks and ministries to the glory of God. As a Ugandan woman priest expressed it, "the church cannot be the church without women." So for the emerging churches, here is an exciting opportunity to listen and learn from what has gone before and not to repeat the same mistakes and injustices of the older churches.

The First Challenge and Opportunity - The Invisibility of Women

We are the ones who first ploughed the earth when Modise (God) made it. We were the ones who made the food. We are the ones who look after the men when they are little boys, when they are young men, and when they are old and about to die. We are always there. But we are just

women, and nobody sees us.⁷

This has always been a problem for women – that although women have always been there, they have been invisible. A sharp distinction was made between the public world of men and the private domain of women. Women were seen as incapable of causing events to happen so their experience was either ignored or marginalised. A quotation from a New Zealand historian neatly sums up this dilemma:

As the story of the European settlement of Aotearoa [New Zealand] has been told, gold-diggers, missionaries, pastoralists, soldiers, adventurers and agricultural labourers have been brought into view. It is the men who settle the country and break in the land. Women are viewed only in terms of their relationship to men: ‘The pioneers and their wives.’ They are mute appendages, unnamed and therefore unidentified.⁸

The private space is still considered to be the sphere of women while the more public arena belongs to the men. As a woman living in Egypt observed, “women are more dominant in the home, in private family space; but public space belongs more to men still.” She affirmed that women can share the public space “but are subject to physical harassment.” This is a particular problem in Muslim societies. A

7. An old Setswana poem from Botswana, quoted in Alexander McCall Smith, *The No 1 Ladies Detective Agency*, (London: Abacus, 2003), 32-33.

8. Bronwyn Labrum, *A Short Guide to Researching and Writing Women’s History in New Zealand*, (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1993), 9-10.

woman in Pakistan drew our attention to the legal recognition of a woman's status in Pakistan where a woman's voice is worth only half that of a man's.⁹

For women who want to enter the public space of the world outside the home and hearth, it is not easy. The woman living in Egypt said, "We live with the threat of incurring physical harassment, simply by being in the street, etc., in a way that men are not subject to." This is worse in a Muslim context but a woman from Albania also talked about the harassment she experienced. A woman living in Peru explained "that many women are forced into submission by the dominant attitudes and behaviour of men; be they husbands, brothers, fathers or male colleagues." And our Indian sister told us that many women do not even have their own identity as they are identified by the names of their husbands or fathers. In situations such as these, what is the response of the church towards such injustices? Is the church willing to model a different approach which witnesses to the fact that together, men and women reflect the image of God in both the private and public space?

Moving into the public space usually requires some education and a certain degree of self-confidence. Girls generally receive less education than their brothers so this is another barrier to overcome. Most of the women interviewed noted this as a major problem as boys are given preference when it comes to education. In India, "there is

9. A Christian's testimony is worth only half that of a Muslim's testimony so a Christian woman finds herself in a dangerous position indeed.

discrimination in food, dress and education. If a male child is born, villagers make a joyful noise but not for a female child." Many of the respondents commented that lack of education is a serious problem for girls. In most societies it is boys who are favoured when it comes to education especially if finances are tight. There was a Kenyan University male professor who had 2 girls and their 3rd child was a son. When he was born he started an investment fund for the boy's education – but not for his daughters. After the birth, his eldest daughter said to him, "Now you have a son, you have started your investment fund." A woman from Samoa explained that "the thought here is that women will have children so that education is not necessary."

The women we interviewed named several issues that disempowered women and kept them from being fully present and engaged in church. These are lack of respect for women, power and patriarchy, women's opinions not being taken seriously and cultural values being followed rather than Christian ones. This may include women's internalising certain cultural values so that the shirt-tail experience, believing themselves to be of lesser significance, takes on a Christian meaning. This is especially dangerous for women where Christian attitudes of service and self-sacrifice can be taken too far and therefore result in unhealthy oppression of women. Moreover, we can become blinded by this and fail to see and name this oppression as sin. And then, as feminist theologian Serene Jones writes, "we must strain hard to see, given the powerfully destructive ways in which oppression structures our thinking and makes even the most profound forms of

brokenness seem normal.”¹⁰ Oppression works like a blinder preventing us from seeing that we are caught in sin. So relations of domination being to abound, women become disempowered and invisible. Sometimes it is difficult not to become overwhelmed by attitudes and structures that work against women’s flourishing.

So here is the first opportunity and challenge – encourage the visibility of women. Acknowledge their presence and what they can offer the church.

Allow women into the public sphere and allow them their own space as well as shared space. Encourage them to speak with their own voice. Enable women to flourish because God wills the flourishing of all persons, including women.

The Second Challenge and Opportunity – Women’s Work

A Ugandan woman expressed it this way, “Women are taken as social objects. They are called on to give service in the home and family and to nurse the sick. But a woman’s work is not valued.” It seems that women do much of the work in a community – growing the food, looking after the children and the home, sometimes educating the children and of course many women work in paid employment outside the home as well. Statistics show that there is not a single country in the world where men are more involved in domestic work and childcare

10. S Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology, Cartographies of Grace*, (Augsburg: Fortress, 2000), 109.

than women. Comments from the Ethiopian situation illustrate this, "There is an unfair household division of labour with women carrying the burden for water and fuel (wood or cow dung), food production and preparation, housekeeping and child-rearing." In many parts of Africa there is still the strong belief that only women should work in the kitchen. Male visitors do not want to pass through the kitchen and many husbands will not even know what to do in a kitchen. In Kenya there is still the cultural expectation that a woman's place is in the kitchen and this cultural norm still exerts a powerful influence, even in the church. In Samoa, little girls are taught that "their role is to learn how to cook, keep the house clean, bear children and care for them."

Women feel this injustice that they carry the burden of the household chores. Abigail, a counsellor from Uganda sums up the situation for many married women, "Women do most of the work in the home. Husbands just come home to eat and sleep." And this is not just the situation of the rural, uneducated woman. A woman church leader from the Philippines told us that "women are still expected to carry out all the domestic functions regardless if they are earning or have high positions in their workplace." These women work what is known as "a double shift." When they come home they still perform the major part of the domestic tasks in the home as well as carry out the child-rearing responsibilities. A Malaysian woman observed the real struggle it is for women to hold down a fulltime job when there is so little support with parenting and household responsibilities.

Statistics also show that women perform 62% of all work hours. So women work harder than men, both within the home and without, but often their work is neither valued nor appreciated. Unfortunately

this seems to be generally the case within the church also. All the women we interviewed were adamant that women work harder than men, especially at home and in performing domestic tasks, and that this work is not appreciated. Moreover, there seemed to be little expectation on the part of men that this could change. As one Ugandan woman firmly stated, "Boys need to be in the kitchen also – all roles need to be shared." As our Roman Catholic sister from India put it, "Women have no respect or voice and have to work at home and outside. Women don't have individual identity, their husband's or father's names will identify them."

The Ugandan woman priest commented on the feelings of inferiority that women may experience when working with men in the church. She has noticed that sometimes women will try to take a certain initiative but it is the man who takes the credit for it! Iris Marion Young has described this as "gender exploitation." She claims, "Women's oppression consists not merely in an inequality of status, power and wealth resulting from men's excluding them from privileged activities. The freedom, power, status and self-realization of men is possible precisely because women work for them."¹¹

There is a bias against women's work. Teaching, preaching and church planting are seen as 'male' tasks in many denominations. The kind of work often performed by women – hospitality, visiting, counselling, ministries of compassion and children's work is sometimes seen as secondary to the primary tasks performed by men. Moreover,

11. I M Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 50.

church work typically lacks gender analysis. A good example of this is the hidden work of 19th century missionary wives who did not count officially as missionaries and therefore did not figure in the statistics.

Many scholars acknowledge that women have a more holistic approach to life and work and that when women come into a church community they bring their families. Women tend to join churches because they hope to find there female solidarity and support for their families. Robert claims that “women are attracted to new Christian movements because they hold out hope for healing, improved well-being, and reconciliation with others in their communities.”¹² Korean missiologist, Chun Chae Ok, claims that women are vehicles for evangelism for their families and neighbours more than men. She notes that Christian women’s roles in church and mission have not been recorded nor sufficiently recognised.

Women evangelists, women deacons, mothers and daughters are the ones who most of the time, give their total service for the faith community and its neighbours in visiting, in prayers, in counselling and in a variety of aids. ... Women’s witness with the gospel to the world is carried out in weakness and selflessness.¹³

She goes on to talk about women exercising a missiology of

12. Robert, “World Christianity”, 185.

13. Chun Chae Ok “Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel: Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: An Asian Perspective” Unpublished paper, 11th conference of the International Association for Mission Studies, Port Dickson, Malaysia, August, 2004.

emptiness, a missiology of comforting and a missiology of healing – both for humanity as well as for nature. In a fascinating study on 2 women-led African Instituted churches in Nairobi, Kenyan scholar Philomena Mwaura claims that women’s healing roles and holistic approach are an extension of their gendered roles on society.¹⁴ These may well be qualities that women are uniquely placed to offer the church.

As emerging churches you face the great challenge of valuing women’s work. Do not be guilty of either minimising women’s work or of claiming the credit as your own. Value and affirm what women have to offer which may be different from that of men. Allow women the freedom to work out their roles so that they can flourish in their work to the glory of God.

The Third Challenge and Opportunity - Leadership

“Women are like curry leaves. Curry leaves are used in cooking to give a nice flavour and taste. When people eat food they throw the curry leaves away. Like this women are fully used and thrown out.” A Roman Catholic sister from India grieved over the plight of women – women were used for flavouring and were subsequently discarded as they had served their purpose. Young Lee Hertig tells a similar story of Korean Bible women in both the 19th and 20th centuries. In a moving article, entitled “Without a Face” she catalogues the work of 19th century

14. P Mwaura, “Gendered Appropriation of Mass Media in Kenyan Christianities: A Comparison of Two Women-led African Instituted Churches in Kenya” in O Kalu and A Low (eds) *Interpreting Contemporary Christianity, Global Processes and Local Identities*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 294.

Korean Bible women who were effective evangelists and informal leaders. However, she claims that once the church began to become institutionalised, “masculinization of the Korean church took place, and the hard labour of the Bible women remained invisible and faceless. Patriarchal leadership took over and continued to harvest the Bible women’s work with women’s labour credited to male leadership.”¹⁵ The women were discarded – they had served their purpose. The situation had not improved for Korean Bible women by the 20th century. She cites a distressing example from 1922 where 300 Southern Methodist women jeondosa (evangelists) protested about salary inequalities compared with male colleagues, a male-only ordination policy and their low social rank – being referred to as a “rag” – being either single or widowed, these Bible women had a low status in a patriarchal society. According to Hertig, Korean women jeondosa today still struggle with discrimination. A similar situation exists in India, where at the Church of South India’s Golden Jubilee in 1997 the total number of women in fulltime pastoral or evangelistic work had declined dramatically over the previous 50 years. Ironically, “Under devolution, Indian women exchanged leadership and support by foreign (American) women for control and maintenance of traditional cultural assumptions by Indian men.”¹⁶

15. Young Lee Hertig, “Without a Face” in D Robert (ed) *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 186.

16. Deborah Gaitskell and Wendy Urban-Mead, “Transnational Biblewomen: Asian and African Women in Christian Mission” *Women’s History Review*, 17:4, 2008; 490.