

THE GLASS CEILING: DISCRIMINATION IN FRONTIER MISSIONS?

■ The vital role of both single and married women in missions is well documented and chronicled. But what is their role in the actual leadership of specifically frontier missions? Are we receiving the full benefit of their unique gifts?

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Single women comprise a significant percentage of today's frontier missions force (perhaps more than 20%). However, very few are represented in frontier mission leadership positions in today's mission organizations. Does discrimination exist and if so, how does it impact world evangelization efforts? Also, what are some of the unique contributions a single woman can make in frontier missions situations? Are there drawbacks?

The term "glass ceiling" is an expression commonly used in business circles to describe the barrier women encounter on their way up the corporate ladder. It describes a situation where a woman is disqualified for executive level positions simply because of her gender. Women progress to mid-level management before hitting the "ceiling" which often prevents them from reaching their full potential.

Do single women in frontier missions encounter similar discrimination when carrying out ministry objectives? To date, this is a topic which has not been addressed in much depth, but needs to be explored given the number of single women in frontier missions. The following is not meant to be the final word on the subject, but is meant to stimulate constructive debate

that will result in more cooperation between men and women in carrying out the Great Commission.

The perspective offered here reflects the authors' experience as, at present, the only nonresidential missionaries (NRMs) who are single women. This is important to keep in mind since NRMs spend much of their time networking with the leadership of a wide range of Christian organizations. Their goals include persuading decisionmakers of missions organizations to channel evangelism resources to the NRMs' unreached people groups. NRMs, while taking a servant position both towards their unreached people group and towards the organizations they work with, interact with many leaders. An NRM's job requires assuming leadership roles that involve initiating and implementing strategies for evangelizing a people group.

Does Discrimination Against Women Exist In Mission Circles?

The fact that percentage-wise there are fewer single women than men, married or single, in leadership positions indicates that a problem exists. Because women are not represented at leadership levels in sufficient numbers, they have little input regarding policies and strategies that affect their work.

Historically, single women have been a significant force in missions. Since the time of Christ, substantial numbers of single women have obeyed the Great Commission. However, until the publication of *Guardians of the Great Commission* by Ruth Tucker, their contributions to the missions effort have been largely ignored. Names of mission "greats" such as William

Carey, Hudson Taylor, and Adoniram Judson immediately spring to mind and numerous volumes have been written about them. Names of outstanding female missionaries, with the exception of a few such as Lottie Moon or Amy Carmichael, remain obscure and few lines pay tribute to their accomplishments.

While name recognition and books published do not make a case for discrimination in and of themselves, it does reflect certain values. Fortunately, God's ways are not our ways, and the esteem he holds for faithful servants is contingent on obedience and not gender. Would that all Christian missions operated with this way.

The "Good Old Boys" Network

The term "good old boys" is a commonly used phrase in business. It refers to an informal network of power, authority and influence, exercised usually by a group of men in a corporation. The network cuts across organizational charts and is often where the real decisionmaking in a corporation occurs. A person may have an impressive title, but not be part of this informal network of information sharing and decisionmaking.

Women have historically been excluded from this network and it has been with great difficulty that many have begun to breach the walls that keep them from decisionmaking and information in a corporation.

To the extent that the "good old boys" network exists in missions circles it harms evangelism efforts. Talented women with resources, ideas, strategies, and information may be shut out of circles where they can share their

expertise. These women are often unable to obtain the information they need to do their job well, and are unable to contribute resources that could help men do their job better.

Reports from numerous women in frontier missions confirm that the "good old boys" network does indeed exist in Christian circles. Many have expressed their frustration at being excluded from informal gatherings of men where major missions strategies and policies affecting their ministry are discussed. They have been unable to make contributions to this process, or where they have voiced their ideas to male colleagues, they've been ignored.

One woman's experience at the headquarters of a major missions organization illustrates the problem. First of all, the men she encountered at a meeting all assumed she was a secretary and addressed her as "dear" and "honey." When she asked a question, one man patted her on the back in a patronizing manner and answered her as one would answer a child. She didn't command their attention or respect even when it was announced that she was their new colleague. In the following months as she pursued her frontier missions assignment she continued to be ignored by her male colleagues.

Often, when attending various mission organizations' staff conferences, one can see the "good old boys" network in operation. During one leadership strategy conference for frontier missions, four women and thirty men were in attendance. The conference was held to discuss significant issues impacting the future of frontier missions in their organization. Yet, none of the men were actual field workers, but were in leadership roles ranging from supervisors to missions strategists. Of the four women, two were actual frontier mission field workers, the ones most qualified to discuss policies affecting their work on the field, and the other two were preparing for frontier missions work. The women's views from the field were virtually ignored as strategies were developed for the future.

Another woman reported difficulties in communicating with a man who was a colleague involved in a project to reach the same people group she was working with. Their projects were

different, but it was critical they work together in order to represent their mission organization as a united front to the churches they were partnering with.

Meetings between the two were always initiated by the woman. However, the man insisted on doing most of the talking, broke eye contact whenever the woman spoke about her projects, and then mentioned to mutual friends that the woman wasn't a team player. On one occasion these same two were sharing about their people group with a man from another missions organization. The man from the other organization constantly addressed the woman's male colleague even on projects under her jurisdiction and never acknowledged her input, even though the woman was the one who initiated the meeting and brought her colleague along to enhance his relationship with this organization. She remarked, "I could have been a piece of furniture for all they were concerned."

Women are often discriminated against as speakers for missions conferences, church services and training classes. It is perceived that to have a man speak carries more weight. One man, knowing a female associate was trained in a specific area, asked her if she'd approach her male colleague (who had less experience) to do a seminar on this same topic.

There are exceptions to such discriminatory and "good old boys" treatment. They mainly come from women who don't belong to major missions organizations or to denominational missions, but have struck out on their own with a vision from God and have "succeeded." They are the ones, like their corporate sisters, that leave the rigid authoritarian structure of big organizations and start their own ministries where they are better able to utilize their leadership gifts.

To borrow another phrase from the corporate world, they are the "entrepreneurial missionaries" and their experiences parallel in surprising degree the women who have left major corporations to start their own enterprises. There they have the autonomy to carry out the ministry they feel God's called them to. They are the Jackie Pullingers and Mother Therasas of the world.

Female missionaries are generally

given far more responsibility for evangelism, teaching and leadership than their female counterparts in the church at home. This greater latitude for using their ministry gifts was one reason that single women in the 19th and early 20th century left for the mission field in droves. However there is much room for improvement.

Do Single Women Have Distinct Contributions To Make To The World Evangelization Effort?

Both women and men, created in the image of God, have unique contributions to make, many of them gender-specific. However, if women's contributions are hindered by discrimination or misunderstandings about the potential of women missionaries, the work of evangelism suffers.

The church has been slower to recognize the potential of women than the business world. It has been said many times in evangelical circles that God will use single women if He has to since there are no men to do the job. Since there aren't enough men on the mission field to do the job, single women are second choice and by implication, second best.

Many books have been written about the Biblical basis for women to be involved in ministry. Some books assert the Bible unequivocally teaches that women are not to be preachers, teachers or church leaders. On the other extreme are those who state that God is really a "she" and all the personal pronouns in Scripture that refer to God should be changed to "she".

The intent of this article is not to explore the theology of women in ministry. Both authors, from their own careful exegesis of scripture have concluded that women are to be an integral part of the Great Commission using the gifts God has given them. There are accounts of key women such as Deborah, Esther, and Hannah in the Old Testament. Nowhere did the writers intimate these women were God's second choice.

Since the time of Christ, single women have had remarkable ministries, characterized by numerous conversions and lasting fruit. Lottie Moon is a case in point.

Lottie Moon was a well known Southern Baptist missionary to China in the 1800s. She fought her mission

organization to allow her to use her church planting and evangelism gifts in China. Instead, her leaders ignored her plea and required her to teach children.

About the situation she commented, "Can we wonder at the mortal weariness and disgust, the sense of wasted powers and the conviction that her life is a failure, that comes over a woman when, instead of the ever broadening activities she had planned, she finds herself tied down to the petty work of teaching a few girls." (Tucker, p. 40).

When finally released to do church planting, she succeeded to the point that her work in P'ing-tu was described as the "greatest evangelistic center" among the Southern Baptists in all of China. (Tucker, p. 41). Still, *The Foreign Missions journal*, while paying high tribute to her achievement, stated with latent chauvinism, "she was the best man among our missionaries." (Tucker, p. 42)

What if there had been no Lottie Moon, Gladys Aylward, Elizabeth Elliott, Helen Roseveare or Amy Carmichael?

Jackie Pullinger, a missionary serving in Hong Kong for over 20 years, was given the highest medal of honor by the Hong Kong government for her service in the Walled City among drug addicts. God created men and women for a purpose. They are different and have different gifts to contribute towards building God's kingdom. To say they are God's second choice for service is to demean God's creation. Jesus himself had numerous female followers and chose to first reveal himself after his resurrection to a woman. Without women in missions, many tasks would be left undone and many left unreached.

Women, by the virtue of being women, have unique gifts to contribute to world evangelism. There is a danger in saying certain attributes are gender specific. One can always find an exception of a member of one sex displaying attributes normally ascribed to a member of the opposite sex. However, generalities can be made about the personality, decisionmaking styles, and management styles of women versus men, that are useful in analyzing contributions women have to

make.

Why Women?

Single women have much to offer frontier missions in terms of leadership. Often their decisionmaking, leadership and management styles differ from men enabling them, at times, to accomplish things that men, in the same situation

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A friend related her experience with the head of a major missions organization in India. While other Western men had come and visited with this leader and discussed their goals and plans with him, he didn't feel comfortable working with them. He clearly sensed they were pushing their own agenda and were only interested in him to the extent that he would further their agenda.

The woman, who had the same goals as the men before her, was able to communicate her heart for the Indian people first. Relationships, not agendas, were more important to her. Because of that, the leader was free to share some of his personal struggles in his ministry and he asked her to pray for him. At the end of the meeting the Indian man had formed a bond with this woman that has greatly enhanced their future work together.

This illustration also points out another leadership style women more commonly have than men, a focus on relationships rather than needing to build their own kingdoms. Men typically base their identity on what they do, whereas women derive their identity from relationships. Women tend to be more interested in working together toward a common goal.

Because NRMs need to cooperate

with a wide variety of groups to accomplish evangelization strategies, and their only real authority to accomplish goals is based on the strength of the relationship they build with these groups, this characteristic is crucial. However, the desirability of this characteristic is not limited to NRMs. No one mission agency is able to finish the task of evangelizing all the world's peoples by the year 2000. It's only as organizations cooperate, pool resources, and work towards common and not mutually exclusive goals, that the task will be accomplished.

Studies done by David Barrett and Todd Johnson in *Our globe and how to reach it* (New Hope, 1990) show that there are enough evangelism resources in the world today to finish the task. Women can play a critical role in helping breach walls of mistrust and territoriality that separate organizations so they can reach this common goal.

Also, a key area, often overlooked involves dealings in many Third World countries which operate more on the basis of relationships than in the West. Aggressive pursuit of objectives, without much attention to developing relationships, as is more typically the Western way of doing business, is not acceptable in these countries.

Before one can even discuss business in Third World settings, one must drink many cups of tea and eat bowls of rice. Business deals take more time as relationships of trust need to be built before anything can take place. Whereas Western businessmen desire to have contracts in writing, Third World businessmen, once trust is established, consider the verbal commitment as binding.

Women are more patient about getting to the bottom line and signing on the dotted line. The most eloquent sermons are lives lived out according to the Gospel, not brilliant exegesis of the scriptures. This is especially true in developing countries where talk is cheap, but actions speak volumes. Only in the context of relationships can actions and character be truly evaluated. Therefore, individuals with a relational orientation are needed.

Jokes are frequently made about a "woman's intuition." However, it is true that while women sometimes can't

rationally explain the basis for a certain decision or assessment of an individual, they are often right. In fact, a better name for this trait is discernment. This discernment plays a significant role in their decision-making style. While this intuition or discernment isn't limited to women, women tend to act more on their intuitions and are less apologetic about it. Men, on the other hand, tend to base decisions more on hard facts. Both qualities are needed.

Discernment is invaluable when it comes to evaluating whether or not an individual should participate with a particular group. For example, while a certain ministry looked solid from all appearances, one woman, without having any inside knowledge of what was going on in the ministry, predicted the leader's fall. Based on this discernment she exercised caution when dealing with this ministry. When it fell, her work wasn't damaged.

As NRMs, the authors have consistently seen their intuition about a ministry born out by circumstances later on. This discernment, has enhanced their ability to work with a wide variety of organizations. Certain prudence in working with some groups has proven invaluable as they have been able to direct resources to groups with integrity as opposed to ones that have misused funds.

How men and women approach meetings where confrontational or difficult issues are discussed is enlightening. Both approaches are good, but one approach may be better than another in a specific situations. One woman spoke of a particularly difficult meeting. Once the issues were resolved, she remained uncomfortable with the outcome. The men, on the other hand, saw the conclusion to be more like the end of a difficult tennis match for them. They shook hands, congratulated each other on the agreement reached, and moved on.

This is good and bad. In this case, the woman was concerned for the players who suffered casualties from the discussion, herself included. The men were oblivious to the fact that though their objectives had been achieved and compromises reached, that the exchange was wounding. It's important to treat confrontations as less of a personal threat and move on quickly, but also to be concerned for individuals who may have been hurt by the

exchange. One of the main reasons people leave the mission field is because of relational problems. Perhaps if there were more women in leadership some of these "wounded" individuals could be healed and return to the field.

Women are usually perceived by foreign governments as less threatening than men. Male missionaries are often the victims of anti-foreigner sentiment making them the target of violence or the focus of suspicion. Oftentimes where foreign governments have not issued men visas, they haven't hesitated to offer women of the same nationality permission to enter their country. The reason, more often than not is because women are less likely to be viewed as terrorists, political figures or a threat to a foreign government's sovereignty.

The experience of Elisabeth Elliot comes to mind. Whereas her husband and the other four men who flew in to work with the Aucas were killed, Elisabeth was readily accepted into Auca society. The Indians saw the men as potential warriors, whereas they felt a burden to protect a single mother with her young child from harm.

One man who works in Indochina often sends his wife to government officials to gain permission for him to travel to restricted areas. He shared that every time he sent her, they cooperated, whereas he was always denied. Now he always sends his wife to deal with government officials whenever he needs their permission on various matters.

Drawbacks

Every virtue has its accompanying vice. While the above qualities, more generally exhibited by women than men, are good and needed in missions, they can be liabilities as well.

"Women's intuition" can be wrong. Sometimes to persuade someone of a particular course of action a person needs to have worked out a rational step-by-step explanation rather than ask them to trust their intuition. Sometimes women can be so concerned with relationships in the work place or with other missions organizations that work doesn't get done as efficiently or as quickly. Being nonthreatening is often misperceived as not having nothing to offer and can lead to not being respected. Sometimes being a woman is a cultural disadvantage. One only has to think how women are

treated in Muslim countries. The authors weren't allowed to stay in a hotel overnight when they had an layover in one Middle Eastern country: they were "unaccompanied females." Instead, they ended up spending the night in the airport.

In countries like this, men and women are often segregated. Single woman aren't allowed to be in the presence of a male who is not a close relative. This severely hinders her evangelism efforts to half the population.

By and large, even in nonmuslim countries, it is still a man's world. Chauvinism against women teachers, preachers and church planters are not just found among missions organizations, but the countries the women are sent to as well. Many times, a woman is not the most appropriate agent for sharing the Gospel given cultural values, and in these situations, she might be second best. However, the Holy Spirit often chooses the "weak to confound the wise" and works in spite of this seemingly cultural liability through women. Although she may be unable to perform some of the preaching and teaching functions this should not keep her from holding leadership positions.

A woman who works with tribal people in Northern Luzon has often wished a man could come and do her job. She believes a man is a more culturally appropriate agent for preaching the Gospel. More than 10 years have passed and although no man has come to take over her task, she has planted numerous churches throughout the area and has disciplined local men to the point that most of them are now church leaders.

A final consideration regarding drawbacks to women in leadership would be the caution that needs to be taken for women in leadership as they travel with male colleagues. More careful arranging needs to take place regarding accommodations, one-on-one meetings and travel plans. While this requires more detail in planning it should never prohibit women from being a part of leadership and leadership meetings.

Conclusion—Feminism as a Response to Discrimination?

Feminism is not an appropriate response to the discrimination women

