No Woman or Girl Left Behind: Restoring Girls in China and Cambodia

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Former Prime Minister Wen Jiabao of China said, “The speed of a fleet is judged not by the fastest ones in the front, but by the slowest ones trailing at the end.” This imagery, unintended though it was for the women’s movement, provides a vivid depiction of women and girls who are left behind. Though gender equality has seemingly made significant strides inside and outside the church in the past few decades, there remain many overwhelmingly horrific stories of women and girls whose lives are severely broken by extreme abuse and exploitation. In the biblical framework of creation-fall-redemption, and against the cultural backdrops of China and Cambodia, we look into God’s intention in restoring lives of these violated girls.

Many women today are enjoying unprecedented rights and opportunities. Leading in the front of the fleet, we see women as presidents, prime ministers, secretaries of state, chief executives, scientists, astronauts, and more. However, trailing behind in alarming numbers are girls and women who continue to be intimidated, deprived, discriminated against, violated, abused, raped, exploited, brutalized, and even murdered simply because they are female. For example, Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai was shot in 2012 simply because she proclaimed that every girl has a right to an education.¹ The female university student known as Nirbhaya was brutally gang-raped to death on a New Delhi bus.² These horrific stories, not unlike countless others, have made the world’s conscience uneasy and sparked soul-searching about the place of women and girls in the world.

The global plight of women and girls

The above are examples of violations, not just on females’ bodies, but also on their dignities and spirits. Gender brutality in our generation is extensive:

- In the last half-century alone, the number of women and girls who have died as a result of gender discrimination exceeds that of all men killed in all the battles of the twentieth century combined.³
- For each decade in the past century, more girls were killed than the sum total of all those who died in genocides of the entire century.⁴
- More than ten times as many girls are being trafficked each year than African slaves transported during the height of the transatlantic slave trade.⁵

Gender injustice harms women and girls at two general levels: Discrimination and inequality: Gender discrimination results in a global gender gap in literacy. The United Nations has found that 35 million girls are not enrolled even in primary school.⁶ According to World Demographic Profile 2013, of all the world’s illiterate adults over age 15, two-thirds of them are female.⁷ In this information age, education and knowledge directly translate into power and wealth. Hence, unequal opportunities for education create and maintain serious gender inequality in areas such as health and medical care, ownership of property, and work. The startling statistic from the United Nations dating back to 1980—that women work two-thirds of the world’s working hours, produce half of the world’s food, and yet earn only 10 percent of the world’s income and own less than 1 percent of the world’s property—remains almost unchanged forty years later.⁸ Preferring boys over girls harms women and girls not just in the older generations, but also in this generation and age.

Abuse and violence: There has been violence against women and girls since the fall of humanity. But is it ceasing as civilization progresses? The answer is an emphatic no. Take, for example, rape and mutilation as weapons of war. These have been happening since Old Testament times (2 Kgs 15:16; Hos 13:16; Amos 1:13), but seem to be escalating in severity and frequency in our age. Brutal gang rapes and sometimes mutilation have been used as war weapons in recent conflicts in Bosnia, Rwanda, Congo, the Darfur region of Sudan, Syria, and more. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United Nations estimates at least 200,000 women and girls have been raped by soldiers, including girls as young as six.⁹

Shocking statistics from the International Center for Research on Women tell us that, every three seconds, a girl under age 18 is forced into child marriage, often against her will and usually to a much older man. There are more than 50 million child brides worldwide, a number that is expected to grow to 100 million over the next decade.¹⁰ The ripple effects of child marriage are devastating. It not only steals the innocence of millions of girls, but also perpetuates a cycle of poverty and ignorance. In China, the thousand-year-long inhumane practice of foot-binding was outlawed less than a century ago. The bound feet, or “three-inch golden lotuses,” considered a status symbol—or, more accurately, a status symbol of subjugation—was a cruel cultural ritual of breaking the girls’ toes, beginning with the age of four to seven, and binding them tight underneath the sole with bandages. Under cultural pressure, confronted with an “only marriageable” option, and for the selfish pleasure of men, the girls were sentenced to lifelong suffering and excruciating pain.

Such examples of pain inflicted on women and girls down through human history, and in all corners of the world, have been too numerous even to mention here. This article will look into three areas that are most shocking in our generation.

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Female infanticide/feticide: 100 million missing

As early as 1992, Amartya Sen, recipient of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics, stated that “more than 100 million women are missing” globally,1180 percent of whom are from China and India. On March 8, 2007, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women formally put forth the statistic of 44 million in China and 37 million in India.12

The official Chinese news agency, Xinhua, put the national sex ratio at birth (SRB) in China at 117:100 in 2012, with certain provinces reaching as high as 133:100 boys to girls.13 The Women’s UN Report Network, referencing Xinhua, reported 119:100 as China’s SRB.14 This is almost 30 percent higher than the normal biological ratio of 103:100, skewing the SRB of the entire world to 107:100.15 China’s one-child policy, launched and enforced in 1980, originally intended as an emergency measure to slow population growth at the start of the Chinese economic reforms, has resulted in more than 37 million girls “missing,” either eliminated or abandoned; more than 336 million forced and coerced abortions; and 222 million forced sterilizations.16 These numbers amount to one baby’s life eliminated every 2.5 seconds, 114 baby girls abandoned every hour, and 500 women per day committing suicide out of despair due to forced abortion or abandonment of their daughters.17 “One child per family” is in reality a brutal policy of female infanticide/feticide, having become the world’s largest genocide ever.

Bringing about this lethal phenomenon is the fatal combination of the one-child policy, contemporary ultrasound technology, and China’s traditional preference of boys over girls. In addition to human rights violations, this policy has brought about other consequences, including the trafficking of women from the Chinese countryside and from neighboring countries (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma) as tens of millions of Chinese men of marrying age cannot find wives.

Author Ma Jian declared in a New York Times op ed, “The atrocities committed in the name of the one-child policy over the last three decades rank among the worst crimes against humanity of the last century.”18 Indeed, female infanticide and sex-selective abortion in unimaginably huge numbers due to the one-child policy is considered one of the greatest evils in human history.

Domestic violence and wife abuse

One in three women experiences violence in her lifetime by beating, rape, or assault.19 The New York City police department announced in 2011 that there are more than 250,000 reported cases of violence against women each year in the city, on the average more than 700 cases every day. Among them, 4,000 are victims of Chinese ethnicity.20 In the United States, an average of five children die per day of abuse at home, 80 percent of them younger than four years old.21 Forty percent of sex abuse victims are younger than eighteen; a female is sexually violated every two minutes.22 In China and Cambodia, domestic violence and wife beating are not only common, but also accepted as normal gender relations.

Human trafficking: modern-day slavery

Of human trafficking, United States President Barack Obama stated, “It ought to concern every person, because it’s a debasement of our common humanity . . . I’m talking about the injustice, the outrage, of human trafficking, which must be called by its true name—modern slavery.”23 Nearly 21 million people are victims of forced labor worldwide at any given time.24 Women account for 55–60 percent of all trafficking victims detected globally; women and girls together account for about 75 percent.25

With a multibillion-dollar industry of an underground nature, with an enormously dark power behind it, obtaining accurate data on the extent of the problem is almost impossible. Whatever we know now is but the head of the monster. No country or region in the world is unaffected; every nation is either a destination country, a transit country, or a sending country. Many countries can be two or even all three.

Ranked as having one of the highest rates of human trafficking in the world, Cambodia is “a source, transit, and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking.”26 Cambodia, originally a beautiful country, was shattered by decades of civil war and unrest. Although this country is apparently moving past the horrors of genocide of the Killing Fields of the Pol Pot regime and toward recovery and reconstruction, commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) continues to scar Cambodia. Victims end up in forced prostitution and sexual exploitation, held in service through psychological manipulation, debt bondage, and/or physical restraint. Humiliation and abuses inflicted on them include being caged, deprived of food, beaten, forced to perform sexual acts against their will, gang-raped until fainting, and more.27 It is sickening just to hear of the evils that one human being is doing to another.

As reported by CNN, the village Svay Pak in Cambodia appears to have a disturbing reputation as a place where little girls are openly sold for sex to foreign tourists. One of the girls—not named to protect her identity—says she was forced to work in a brothel before she could read. “I was about five or six years old,” the girl said.28 Worse still, when these girls try to reintegrate with society, they often feel unwelcome and are marginalized even (or especially) in evangelical churches.

CSE is to be condemned because, first of all, the image of God in these women and girls is horribly violated and damaged. Secondly, the damage inflicted is not limited to the physical (including HIV and AIDS), but is also psychological and spiritual, being violently hurtful to the core of their souls, and even causing death. Third, these women are doubly victimized: although they have been sinned against, they are blamed for being the sinners, cast out, and ostracized.

With the passage of new human trafficking control policies in 2011 by the Cambodian government, some nongovernmental organizations are claiming that the number of human trafficking victims is decreasing. However, according to Ros Yeng, the country director of Chab Dai Coalition in Cambodia, the number is actually on the rise. The reason for an apparent decrease is that, after governmental policies/strategies changed in 2011, CSE networks changed their ways of doing business. The pimps use more deceptive schemes; for example, some develop cover-up facilities in place of regular brothels or use “loans” to the girls and families instead of directly paying for trafficking as before.29 As the old Chinese saying goes, “While ‘Tao’ is one foot high, evil-
ness is ten feet tall.” What is actually decreasing is the number of arrests, not the rate of CSE. Also, victims are now mostly disguised as labor trafficking and pushed into sex trafficking later. According to Ros Yeng, 5,000 Cambodians are trafficked across the Thai borders each day under “labor trafficking” and later sex trafficking.30 Driving Cambodia toward the number-one rank in human trafficking in the world, Ros maintains, are factors such as corruption, ineffectiveness in enforcing laws, poverty, and a lack of education and job opportunities overall in the country.31

**Cultural worldviews that create and maintain abuses**

Clearly, the magnitude and severity of discrimination, brutalization, and elimination of women and girls are beyond human comprehension. What, then, are the root causes of gender abuse?

*The grand biblical narrative of creation–fall–redemption*

One Hebrew word sums up the beginning of human history: *shalom*. As given in Genesis 1:26–28 and 2:18–25, God’s original intention for men and women was that they be created equal in God’s image, equal in blessing, equal in missions, equal in relation, mutual in partnership, and one-flesh in unity. Men and women had equal value and equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Why, then, is the reality of women’s plight today such a total negation of the original fullness intended in creation? As we can see in Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve rebelled against God, patriarchy developed in both Eastern and Western cultures: men ruling and women submitting. Women were now seen as the property of men. They were considered innately inferior, less worthy of freedom and equality. These erroneous ontological gender biases not only encouraged discrimination and abuses, but also provided the perpetrators justification for their abusive actions. Hence, God’s original plan for harmonious gender relations was ruined by sin, and the original fullness and glory in women was lost.

The stories of millions and millions of women, precious daughters of our heavenly Father, outside of Eden and under the “rule, authority, power, and dominion of the world” (Eph 1:20–23) throughout human history, have been marred by the evils of footbinding, femicide, wife abuse, and sex trafficking, not to mention female genital mutilation and suttee (wife sacrifice), which are not addressed in this article. Unlike other human pains and sufferings, oppression and violation against women are pains inflicted categorically by one gender, which is half of the human race, upon another gender, the other half of the human race. Down through history, men selfishly misinterpreted God’s description of the sinful gender culture that developed outside Eden, “your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen 3:15b), claiming that the description was prescription, ordained by God. Thus, as we know it, the world outside Eden has become the battleground where “enmity between the serpent and the woman” (Gen 3:15a) is played out. Another drama deep beneath the surface is taking place: a drama that is much more brutal and deadly.

Yet, God’s eternal plan is that the drama move toward a hopeful redemption and restoration in Christ, as described in Genesis 3:15: through the offspring of the woman, God will crush the serpent’s head, destroy the dominion of sin, and tear down the wall that divides God from human beings and male from female, restoring the fullness that was lost, especially in regard to the value of women. However, that is a long and difficult path, a long and fierce battle between females and the serpent. Because of the vicious attacks by Satan on generation after generation, this battle continues to be brutal, cruel, extensive, pervasive, and prolonged.

Looking into the core of this evil, Kristyn Komarnicki says it well: “Eve was singled out for special attack because Lucifer, so radiant and beautiful before pride led to his fall, loathes her as the representation of all that he lost and all that he desires to be. Satan hates Eve . . . for her beauty and her ability to produce life—the two things in which she most clearly reflects God’s image. For me, that goes a long way in explaining the variety and depth of oppression to which women have always been subjected.”32 Combing the abuses of women and girls is indeed a huge spiritual battle against the forces of evil that have been dominating the world since the fall.

In this overarching theological structure of creation–fall–restoration, men and women are seen as equal in the original order of creation, and domination of one gender over the other is sinful and a curse. Instead, women should be called into full equality in the redeemed family, church, and society.

Hence, the teaching of the Bible urges us to

> be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:10–12 NRSV)

**Yin-yang philosophies presupposing women as the origin of evil**

In China, the suppression of women for four thousand years was initiated and maintained by folk religion, the syncretism of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. This combination made the lives of women in China miserable and unbearable.

The presupposition of Buddhism is that women are the origin of sin, being tempters and the personification of evil. The yin-yang dichotomy of Taoism developed into a gender paradigm/worldview of “Yang as noble and good, hence to be exalted; and the Yin as lowly and evil, hence to be suppressed.”33 The Confucian gender paradigm of men leading and women following completed the deeply gender-biased Chinese worldview of males being preferred over females, and, if this heavenly order be upset, this would be disastrous for society. Women were required to follow their fathers when young, husbands when married, and sons when old. Among the neo-Confucian sayings most oppressive to women are:

- “A woman’s duty is not to control nor take charge.”
- “Woman’s greatest duty is to produce a son.”
- “A woman ruler is like a hen crowing.”
- “For a woman to starve to death is a small matter, but for her to lose her chastity is a great calamity.”
- “Disorder is not sent down by Heaven, it is produced by women.”34
The use of violence by a husband is justified as a norm of society beyond questioning. Cambodia, whose culture is deeply rooted in Buddhism, has a similar discriminatory gender worldview, voiced by the Khmer proverb, “Men are as pure gold, women are but white cloth.”

Since 1949, Maoism, with its socialist strategy and ideology of productivity and class struggle, brought drastic changes to women’s roles for the first time in thousands of years. Apparent changes since Mao’s era include economic independence for women and gender equality in the workplace and public sphere. Women’s liberation is heralded as “women holding up half the sky.”

However, the Marxist-feminist approach has focused on the economic value and productivity of women rather than their intrinsic value. So, when the one-child policy was implemented in 1980, the world quickly witnessed the resurgence of women’s devaluation, and emerging with it was an even scarier monster of sex-selective abortion and female infanticide—the most shocking obstetric atrocities ever committed against the human race.

**Not left behind, but restored**

In the face of all these evils of gender injustice, as Christians following the footsteps of Jesus Christ, how should we respond? First, let us look into one of the many stories of how Jesus treated women in a discriminatory culture.

**Jesus’s example**

In ancient Israel’s society, where religion, culture, and politics were all integrated, Jairus, a synagogue leader, hence also a community celebrity, came to Jesus and pleaded with him for the healing of his dying twelve-year-old daughter (Luke 8:40–56). While Jesus was hurrying to Jairus’s home, being followed by a crowd made up of almost the whole town, he deliberately stopped for a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years (the twelve years might not be just a coincidence). She was considered ceremonially unclean, and, hence, untouchable, nor could anyone be touched by her, so she was marginalized, stigmatized, to be avoided, an outcast of society (Lev 15). Jesus’s stopping for her was intended to convey a message to the whole town that God cares for the neglected over the popular. Jesus then exemplified for us a holistic ministry model of (1) challenging gender injustice of the time—letting the crowd know that it is acceptable to be touched by a bleeding woman; (2) restoring her self-image (psychological healing)—encouraging her to testify before the crowd; (3) meeting her physical needs (physical healing)—healing her bleeding ailment and making her whole; (4) bringing her the gospel of salvation (spiritual healing) by proclaiming, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”

More than once, Jesus put aside what the world deemed important and popular, what it gave priority and even favoritism, for the hurting women who were forgotten, abused, oppressed, and downtrodden. He is indeed the Messiah who “will bring justice to the nations. . . . A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” (Isa 42:2).

**Pleroma Missions in Cambodia (PMC)**

Cambodia is one of the highest-rated countries for human trafficking in the world, as we have noted. Statistics reveal that poverty and illiteracy are the two major reasons why girls become prey to commercial sexual exploitation; 97 percent of CSE victims are recruited due to poverty-related issues, and more than 32 percent of females in the country are illiterate. In response to God’s calling, and following the example of Jesus, our organization, Fullness in Christ Fellowship, started praying, exploring the establishment of Pleroma Missions in Cambodia to combat the social evil of human trafficking there.

Instead of simply offering charity to women and girls, Pleroma Missions in Cambodia creates a more compassionate and just environment, a God-honoring world in which women and girls can be healed, grow, thrive, and flourish to their full potential and live out the abundant life as promised by Christ. In the New Testament, the term fullness, or plēroma in Greek, is often used to describe the nature of God as manifested in the incarnate Christ, being filled with the glory of grace and truth (John 1:14). By his becoming flesh and dwelling among us, as fully human and obedient unto death, those who believe in him are redeemed and brought to the same glorious fullness of his grace and truth.

To advance the biblical truth about the value of females, two mutually reinforcing holistic ministries have been developed in Cambodia. Pleroma Home for Girls, established in March 2011, is a safe haven for girls under 18 who have been victims or who are at high risk for being victims of sex trafficking and/or sex-abuse victims. They are nurtured holistically to realize their full potential as God’s precious daughters and experience the fullness of God in Christ for them, with the glorious image of God restored to them. Holistic Christian formation programs enable them to grow physically, mentally, socially, intellectually, and spiritually. Vocational training is also provided to empower them toward self-sufficiency and reintegration into the society.

Pleroma Education for Girls (PEG), a preventive approach, aims at raising the general educational level for girls in poor urban or rural areas in order to make a long-term impact in the lives of girls otherwise doomed to repeat the vicious cycle of poverty and illiteracy. PEG provides remedial/catching-up education on one hand and equips future women leaders on the other. Our aim is for girls to grow up to be educated Christian women and mothers, well equipped to raise healthy daughters and sons and to become independent and contributing citizens participating in all levels of the workforce in society. The message of PEG is for girls to have a good education in order to develop their God-given potential, to allow their innate abilities to flourish, and to enable them to work hard and achieve their hopes and goals for their lives. To the community, the message is that girls are precious and important to God, and to us! They are worth all the time, efforts, and resources we are investing.

Due to gender preference in traditional Cambodian families, girls usually do not go to school or stop going at a very early age. They are often placed in grade levels that do not match their chronological age, so catching-up education programs are needed. Due to the lack of public transportation, it would be difficult
for girls to commute to a one-location school, so satellite campuses are needed. Finally, good holistic Christian curriculum is generally lacking in Cambodia, so writing and publishing our own curriculum are greatly needed initiatives.

Conclusion

While the whole world might forget about these women and girls trailing along at the end of the women’s movement, God’s intention is for them to be redeemed and restored in his full salvation, to fully reflect his image, to be empowered fully to achieve their God-given potential and gifts, to live in full dignity and worth. Christ’s salvation should reach not just a person or a church, but also society and culture—this is kingdom vision and kingdom mission. Hence, we should go beyond the four walls of the church and enter and immerse ourselves into communities, to become their salt and light and serve as their conscience, leading societal and cultural renewal and regeneration from brokenness to fullness in Christ. This is the work of reconciliation I and my colleagues are trying to do in Cambodia for the betterment of people and the glory of the God who created each one of us.

Notes

17. All Girls Allowed website.
30. Ros Yeng, interview with the author.
31. NGO Joint Statistics; Ros Yeng, interview with the author.
33. Bao Jialin, Wandering Women, Rice Township Publisher (written in Chinese).