The Worldwide Suffering of Women

By Shari M. Kelly

It reads like a tragic novel: Nearly two-thirds of the world’s 876 million illiterate adults are women. Approximately 6,000 girls are subjected to female genital mutilation each day, and 30 percent of girls subjected to its most radical form die from the effects. Four million women are sold each year as slaves. In sub-Saharan Africa, 55 percent of HIV-infected adults are women, and teenage girls are five times more likely to be infected than boys. These numbers, gathered from a variety of sources and published by Global Women, an organization that supports the global ministry of women, are only the tip of an iceberg adrift in developing countries across the world.

The reality is grim. Women around the globe face problems like poverty, lack of education, lack of medical care, female genital mutilation, sex slavery and trafficking, female infanticide, the AIDS crisis in Africa, honor killings, dowry killings, a low value in Hindu and fundamental Muslim societies, abuse and displacement in war and, where employment is even available, poor working conditions.

Underlining these problems is the fact that of the world’s 1.3 billion “absolute poor,” an almost unbelievable 70 percent are women, according to the Development Institute for Women. Poverty still wears a woman’s face.

“Women suffer worldwide because of poverty,” confirms Commissioner Kay Rader, former World President of Women’s Organizations in The Salvation Army. “Most of the issues women face worldwide can be included under the umbrella of poverty.” She relates a statement made by an Indian colleague: “In India we say a woman born into poverty is twice oppressed. Her first oppression is that she is born woman. But to be born poor as a woman adds another oppression all its own.”

While all people in poor countries may face similar issues, women are less valued, and often end up with the worst of the problem, says Jane Overstreet, President/CEO for Development Associates International, an organization that develops Christian leaders worldwide. “For instance, in some countries women serve men the meal and wait to see if there is anything left. If there is, then they get to eat. [And,] in medical care, the unique needs of women often are not addressed,” she says. Or, women are simply denied access to doctors altogether.

As early as five years old, girls in many countries are called upon to care for younger siblings, haul water for family members and livestock, gather wood for cooking, perform household duties and carry a host of other burdens, says Rader. “Being born a woman carries in many countries its own built-in disadvantages,” she says. “In many cultures, she will be excluded from educational opportunities, her options for the future limited to early marriage where her life will continue as before — the ‘inside person’ — behind walls, inside the gates, suffering in silence.”

Literacy rates for women are always the lowest across the Third World. Because of ignorance and prejudice, girls often are not allowed to receive education, Overstreet observes, or else they receive less. “Usually there are school fees and when there is not enough money in poor families, the boys are given the opportunity first,” she explains.

Third World women are often further marginalized by their inability to participate in the decision-making that impacts their lives and therefore struggle with feelings of worthlessness, says Overstreet.

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The Role of Culture and Religion

So what does biblical equality have to do with the global plight of women? “Everything,” wrote Catherine Clark Kroeger in a 1995 article (“CBE and the Spread of HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa”) published in *Priscilla Papers*. She wrote: “As men and women come to understand the spiritual worth of women, they must also value their integrity as human beings with the right to maintain their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit.”

The global implications of a belief in equality reach to the hearts of women in every country, women who often believe that their dire circumstances are the unassailable status quo of a society or religion that does not value them. “Often [these women] have been told for so long that they are worthless that they believe it too, and therefore can’t even take advantage of opportunities that come, because they can’t believe they deserve better,” explains Overstreet. “It’s a bit like the battered women syndrome.”

While poverty alone contributes to women’s suffering, many cultural and religious values compound or directly cause the neglect of women. “Culture is such a determining factor in gender equality,” says Lorry Lutz, author and former AD2000 Women’s Track Executive Director. The cultural stigma against women is a strong force across West Africa, where tribal traditions and animistic beliefs place women far beneath men.

Rural African women work 16 to 18 hours each day, Lutz reports in the AD2000 booklet “Women of the 10/40 Window,” performing labor-intensive tasks such as hauling water for miles, tending crops, gathering fuel for fires, caring for their families and preparing meals from scratch. Their culture demands such work from women of all ages, including pregnant women and those who have just given birth. In addition, some tribes forbid women to eat protein-rich foods such as eggs, chicken and milk.

Many Muslim women also lack social rights. “In extreme fundamentalist societies such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, women have almost no rights,” says Lutz. Women in Muslim countries such as Iran are required to remain completely veiled in public. They are forbidden to drive cars or travel unless accompanied by a male relative. They also must endure polygamy.

“In Islam or Hinduism, women have no guaranteed salvation,” says Overstreet. “They are not necessarily considered completely ‘human’ and therefore they are viewed as servants, slaves, the property of their fathers or husbands and having little value.”

Hindu society places a low value on women, who are worth less than a cow. It is believed that bad deeds in a former life will cause a person to be reincarnated as a woman, says Lutz. Girls are serious financial burdens to their families, as parents must pay a dowry to their daughters’ husbands. “Dowry deaths” — the murder of new wives by their husbands or in-laws — allow men to marry again for another, or better, dowry. In 1995, the Indian Government reported 7,300 dowry deaths. It is no wonder those steeped in Hindu culture dread giving birth to girls.

“The killing of baby girls in India is continuing — both inside and outside of the womb — despite new legislation that bans the use of ultrasound tests in determining the sex of unborn children,” says Lutz. “But recent reports suggest the law is being widely violated around the country. It is estimated that up to 5 million baby girls are aborted every year in India.”

India and China hold the highest numbers of abandonment and murder of female infants and of aborting female fetuses. Gendercide Watch, an organization that raises awareness of gender-related killings worldwide, has published several case studies on their Web site, www.gendercide.org. Included is a case study on “missing women” in China, where women are still often valued far beneath men. According to the report, female infanticide in China is a very old tradition, one discouraged by The People’s Republic upon its formation in 1949. The practice then abated, but the 1979 “one-child policy,” designed to control population growth, unintentionally rekindled the practice. During the 1980s, the ratio of male to female live births spiked as high as 118 boys per 100 girls.
In 2000, a report observed that surprise “spot checks” by government census takers uncovered another scenario: As many as 40 percent of baby girls born in rural China were simply unregistered. This may seem better than outright murder, but Gendercide Watch notes the ramifications: As these girls have no official existence, they suffer a complete lack of legal rights and are unable to receive education, medical care and other services. They may exist only as slaves of their families, and possible “currency” to be traded or sold.

A Biblical Response

The issues from which women suffer are legion, says Rader. But it doesn’t stop there. “It is now well known that the deprivation of women adversely affects the human development of families and of society,” she says. Women’s afflictions are human afflictions.

Biblical equality speaks to these issues. “Start with how Jesus treated women,” says Lutz. When we realize how male-dominated and authoritarian the culture was in which Jesus lived, we realize that his relationships with women were, and are, revolutionary, she says. “It may not be possible to teach biblical equality initially, but certainly women need to know they are created in the image of God and [are] just as valuable as men,” says Lutz.

Women need to be educated about how God views them, in addition to physical relief and development, literacy training, medical care, job training, nutrition and child care training, preventive care medicine, etc., agrees Overstreet. “These can bring some immediate relief, which is desperately needed, while meanwhile trying to change the worldview to value women and see them as equal humans with dignity.”

American Christians have the opportunity to set a positive example. They need to realize how crucial their own attitudes toward women are, adds Rader, particularly within the church. “The church’s treatment of women sets the example before the world. Their observations of how American Christian churchmen treat women may have a negative effect on the development of women worldwide,” she says. The American church’s treatment of women as second-class citizens sends a strong message worldwide that this is admirable behavior, and those ideas carried to extremes may cause further suffering to women of other cultures, warns Rader.

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In the United States, secular culture leads the way (sometimes destructively) in equality — in areas like business, education, medicine and legal rights, says Lutz, while the church drags its feet. In other countries, it’s often the opposite. “[Where] women have almost no rights, the church often gives women more rights than society in general, [and] walks a fine line,” she says. “Just as Paul was careful not to overturn too much of a society’s rules too fast, sometimes we have to respect culture.” Not because we respect harmful traditions, Lutz clarifies, but because we realize that too rapid or extensive a change could be more destructive than helpful. “I’m finding, however, that many thinking, educated and godly women in the developing world are asking questions, studying the Bible and realizing by themselves that God intended them to be more than the men in their culture [allow],” she says.

“I am passionately convinced that there are many ways to try and help, but the most valuable revolve around changing [the] worldview and values of the culture,” says Overstreet. While Christianity offers hope, it must be communicated in a way that changes the society’s devaluation of women instead of accepting that aspect of the culture. Overstreet believes that the most effective way to shift cultural perceptions of women is to strengthen local churches and leaders. By discipling local leaders, communities can grow in their ability to solve their own issues instead of importing solutions that may not fit.

There are many opportunities for participation in the global ministry to women. “Giving, praying and going are all powerful options,” says Overstreet. “There are many really good programs that need financial support. Praying is incredibly effective. Going just to see and understand, at least, is important. Then you can’t stop giving and praying!”

Traveling overseas to meet women in various situations, especially those who are in ministry, can make a huge difference in understanding, agrees Lutz. “Stay in their homes. Walk in their shoes,” she says. “Don’t go to bring all the answers, but go to learn and love. Let your heart be touched and moved by God to show you what you can do.” And, if you aren’t able to travel or directly participate in overseas ministries, find other ways to get involved with organizations that focus on educating and encouraging women internationally, she urges.

Most critically, we can pray. Even those who have or choose no other way of participation can make a huge difference in the lives of global women through prayer. “We ought to be praying intentionally, fervently and wisely about the needs of women around the world,” says Lutz.

All change begins in an individual’s heart. Each of us should humble ourselves enough to examine our former attitudes and be willing to change where necessary, says Rader. “Establish patterns of behavior that reflect your newly discovered areas of truth. Commit yourself to work on behalf of gender issues. These changes, not monetary gifts, will effect the greatest change.”

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