

A Historical Survey of Women in Christian Missions: Contributions and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

History reveals that women have demonstrated passion and commitment as partners with God in the ministry of reconciliation. Thus, the paper surveyed the contributions and challenges of Women in Christian missions. The article submits that the contribution of women could be further maximised if the challenges that confront them in missions are known and addressed. This paper relied on literature that provides insight into the involvement of the female gender in the task of Christian missions. This paper revealed that women involved in missions in terms of caring for children of missionaries, providing support as spouses, ministering to females on the field, and establishing mission societies; their involvement as missionaries, educators and scholars are also worthy of note. However, this research revealed some challenges women encountered as they were involved in missions, such as perpetual singlehood, limited scope of service, health hazards, discrimination, and being overburdened on the mission field. The study recommends continuous emphasis that the task of missions is not limited to any gender, as revealed in the paper. Also, the male gender should endeavour to give necessary support to their spouses who perceive the call to serve as missionaries. Similarly, mission agencies and boards must avoid any form of discrimination that may limit or inhibit the involvement of women in missions.

Key Words: History, Women in Christian Missions,

INTRODUCTION

Missions refer to activities of the church and Christian organisations towards presenting the gospel to the unsaved.¹ It is the responsibility of all believers irrespective of gender because God's choice of people for specific assignments both in the Old and New Testaments includes male and female. Suffice to say that the task of reaching the unreached and saving the unsaved regardless of geographical and cultural differences is enormous and has often required the involvement of men and women.

Indeed, from the era of the early church, women have sacrificially and wholeheartedly participated in missions. Some sacrificed the hope of a marital union; much-experienced pain and discouragement due to overwhelming responsibilities, sicknesses, discrimination in missions, and high child mortality. Considering that women are relevant and germane to the task of missions, this paper argues that the contribution of women could be further maximised if the challenges that confront them in missions are known and addressed.

A SURVEY OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN IN CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

Historically, women have demonstrated zeal and commitment as partners with God in the ministry of reconciliation. The New Testament records the contributions of several women in the life and ministry of Jesus, the perfect model of a missionary. Of note is the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who did not mind the probable reaction of her family, community and especially Joseph, her fiancé. At the same time, she joyfully embraced the task of bringing forth a child conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:27-38). Similarly, the ministry of Jesus was supported by women who cared for the needs of His team

¹ A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), 17.

personally as He embarked on the task of ministering to people. Indeed, such women followed and partnered with Jesus as He travelled to several places proclaiming the Goodnews of the kingdom (Luke 8:1-3).

Furthermore, the role of women in the early church is apparent in the Scriptures. Women were part of the followers who courageously stayed and prayed together with the apostles after the ascension of Jesus. These women were not neglected or side-lined in the meeting chaired by Peter, who addressed the group of believers concerning the need to replace Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:1-16). Women played significant roles in the ministry of apostles, as evident in the ministry of Paul as recorded in Romans 16. Apostle Paul identified women such as Phoebe for her help; Pricilla as a co-worker; Mary, Tryphena and Tryphosa for their labour. These and many more examples show the extent to which women contributed to missions in the early church.

Ruth Tucker opines that some women thrived in missions within the Roman Catholic denomination, among which is Ann Marie Javouhey is considered foremost.² She hails from France, and "...she was actively engaged in the religious education of young children. In 1807...she and a small group of women ...founded the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny...she was ultimately invited to send sisters to Bourbon Island...French West Indies, French Guiana, and the West Coast of Africa."³ In Medieval Catholicism, the appeal of Boniface for the need to engage women in the task of missions provided ministry opportunity in Germany for his relative Lioba and some nuns in A.D 748. Lioba being the leader, occupied the dual position

² Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 287.

³Mary Motte, "Javouhey, Anne-Marie" In Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (New York, Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1998), 330.

of a “missionary-abbess.”⁴ Also, Marguerite Kraft describing the progression of women’s role in the Catholic setting notes that the vision of being a missionary forced them to be members of an order. She adds that “Not until the mid-twentieth century could lay women freely participate in official foreign missions with full sanction of the Church.”⁵

Among Protestants, the Moravians were identified by Catherine R. Ross as the group that involved married and single females in their missions’ activities in the mid-1700s. At the beginning of the modern mission era, dated 1793, the nature of women participation in missions did not change. Women were still not commissioned as missionaries, thus, being married to a missionary was the only guarantee of their participation. Their roles were relegated to the confines of the home and training roles to impact women of the host community.⁶ Marguerite Kraft buttresses that when Protestants began to engage in missions, female involvement was often limited to the spouses of the men commissioned for the task.

Interestingly, single males sought for a spouse to take along before embarking on the task.⁷ Moreover, irrespective of the passion of women in missions, they were “...required to marry before they could fulfil their missionary calling.”⁸ This indicates the limitation that obstructed women involvement in missions in the earliest period of the emergence of Protestant missions. The role of women as spouses of missionaries progressively advanced beyond the frontiers of domestics to ministering to females on the field. Ann Judson is an example of such a

⁴ Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefield, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Books, 1987), 135-136.

⁵ Marguerite Kraft, “Women in Missions” In *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 1021.

⁶ C. Ross, “Women in Missions” In *Dictionary of Mission Theology Evangelical Foundations* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 433.

⁷ Kraft, “Women in Missions”, 1021.

⁸ *Ibid.*

women; “Ann ran a small school for girls, did evangelistic work with the women, was a pioneer Bible translator in two languages, and was the leading female missionary author of the early nineteenth century.”⁹

Likewise, Ruth A. Tucker notes that before the second half of the 19th Century, the Protestants rarely engaged unmarried ladies in the ministerial assignment. Most spouses of missionaries were readily committed to supporting their husbands on the field, while a few felt bitter about such roles. Tucker classified Dorothy Carey and Edith Buxton into the latter category.¹⁰ The plight of Dorothy was that although she declined the offer to work with Carey in India, she reluctantly went since her husband could not be dissuaded. The dilemma of Dorothy increased due to the poor state of her health and the death of her child in 1794; this affected her mind until she died in 1807.¹¹

Conversely, the initial role of unmarried females who were granted the opportunity to work with the missionaries was merely that of assistance and collaboration. Nevertheless, prominent roles were accorded women in Protestant missions in the early 19th Century as seen in the ministry of Cynthia Farrar and Eliza Agnew.¹² Farrar was commissioned by the American Board around 1826 as a missionary to India to anchor the issues of teaching females.¹³ At the same time,

⁹ Kraft, 1021.

¹⁰ Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 287.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 124-127.

¹² Kraft, 1021.

¹³ Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1997), 108. Cynthia Farrar was assigned the responsibility of “superintendent of female schools” in Mahrattas by the American Board. See John O. Choules, A.M. and Thomas Smith, *The Origin and History of Missions: A Record of the Voyages, Travels, Labors, and Successes of the Various Missionaries* (Boston: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln and Crocker and Brewster, 1837), 607.

Agnew was considered “the first single-woman missionary of Sri Lanka” in 1839.¹⁴

Furthermore, Kraft identified several areas that women have thrived in missions in the modern era. Some of such areas include “Education, medical work, and struggles against foot binding, child marriage, female infanticide, and oppressive social, religious, and economic structures...”¹⁵ All the above-discussed shows that women contribution to missions spread across continents. In Africa, notable women in missions identified by Naomi Famunre include Florence Yeboah, Victoria Hassan, Chinwe Francisca, Lovina Obonna, and Lucy Wangari Muguiyi.¹⁶ Despite the terseness of this list, many others are labourers with their spouse or alone in several homes and foreign missions in Africa.

CHALLENGES OF WOMEN IN MISSIONS

The contributions of women to the growth of Christian missions from the early church until now, they have encountered diverse challenges, some of which have been identified and discussed below.

1. Challenge of Perpetual Singlehood

The challenge of perpetual singleness, according to Herbert Kane, confronts unmarried women who embark on missions. This position is based on the premise that since the number of males who engage in missions does not match the females, unmarried ladies may be subjected to perpetual singlehood; he thinks they have a limited chance of marriage while serving on

¹⁴ Maina Chawla Singh, *Gender, Religion, and “Heathen Lands”: American Missionary Women in South Asia (1860s-1940s)* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 354.

¹⁵ Kraft, 1023.

¹⁶ Naomi Famunre, “Women in Ministry: Practical Issues in African Context” In *Missionafric: A Journal of Mission Practice in and from Africa* Vol. 2(1), 2013, 39-40.

the field.¹⁷ Herbert narrated the instance of a female missionary who returned from a field in Africa and considered marriage as the basis of another trip to the continent. She forfeited the mission field since her self-imposed condition was not satisfied.¹⁸

Similarly, Tucker, in the biography of Mabel Francis (missionary to Japan, 1909) notes her desire to be married. Mabel personally expressed that “You see, when I was so discouraged and the job seemed so terribly big, I thought, ‘Well now, if I was married, could follow on with my husband, and there would be something doing, but what can a little person like myself do?’ I just felt hopeless!”¹⁹ This heartfelt passion of Mable shows that she did not desire a life of perpetual singleness, at least for the help and motivation her husband will offer. Also, Tucker narrates that Mary Slessor (Missionary to Calabar) sojourn in Africa as characterised by loneliness. Her courtship with Charles Morrison, which was hinged on collaborating in her current station, did not culminate into marriage because he was not healthy. Of course, her responsibility on the field is a priority.²⁰

Additionally, Kane buttresses the challenges that some unmarried females encounter when he notes that “Celibacy is not for everyone. Some try it and find that they don’t have what it takes.” He cited the instance of one Helen Roseveare who returned from Congo resolved to enter into conjugal union with a male who is a surgical specialist like herself to collaborate on

¹⁷J. Herbert Kane, *Understanding Christian Missions* Fourth Ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book, House, 1986), 60. Herbert remarks that “Women do outnumber men, but the ratio is much more modest, approximately six to four.” See J. Herbert Kane, *Life and Work on the Mission Field* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980), 147.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 276.

²⁰ Ibid., 173. Tucker also narrated the passion of Gladys Aylward who nursed the desire to marry even as a missionary but eventually could not because of the war. See Tucker, *Guardian of the Great Commission*, 182.

the field. Fortunately, this desire was accomplished.²¹ However, some unmarried females sacrifice the prospect of marriage because of their passion for serving as missionaries. This is affirmed by the determination of a lady working in a field in Zambia. She, on two occasions, declined the marital advances of her suitor in her own country because the wooer was not a missionary.²²

2. Challenge of Limited Scope of Service

The limitation of the scope of service has affected both single and married females. Kane remarks that initially, unmarried female missionaries were attached with the family of a missionary. He adds that “The single ladies were limited in their missionary activities. They could not minister to men, so they turned their attention to the women and girls.”²³ This implies that single ladies were probably not considered capable of working independently on the field and could not freely explore diverse areas of ministry. Hence, their focus was to coordinate aspects related to the females. Kraft remarks that initially, these ladies functioned as nannies and team members on the field. Subsequently, they anchored female education among the people. “Quietly they helped reach out to the local women who were secluded from society.”²⁴ This trend points to how women were limited in the scope of their task as missionaries. Likewise, their married counterparts were not commissioned as missionaries; they only supported their spouses. This for some was somewhat a coerced role with the bitter ending as seen in Dorothy Carey.²⁵

3. Challenge of Being Overburdened

²¹ Kane, *Life and Work on the Mission Field*, 148.

²² *Ibid.*, 149.

²³ Kane, *Life and Work on the Mission Field*, 145.

²⁴ Kraft, “Women in Missions”, 1021.

²⁵ Tucker and Liefeld, 293.

One of the challenges women grappled with in Christian missions was that they were saddled with too many responsibilities. In addition to being spouses of missionaries, they were also helpful in ministering to women. Notwithstanding, “They received little recognition for the heavy load they carried, managing the home and children as well as developing programs to reach local women and girls.”²⁶ Such an enormous task could be overwhelming capable of inhibiting maximum productivity. K Rajendran adds that “...many wives struggle to survive in the mission field looking after he needs of their husbands and children and offering hospitality to the cascading crowds.”²⁷ This means that women were rather multitasked on the field with domestic duties and ministry responsibilities that may be numerous and sometimes unpredictable.

5. Challenge of Discrimination

Women in missions have been deterred by “...gender limitations-imposed either by the mission societies that send them, the indigenous churches that they serve, or both.”²⁸ Indeed, certain forms of gender-related discrimination inhibited women’s freedom and enthusiasm of participating maximally in missions in time past. For instance, in early times, the missionary carrier for women among the Catholic denomination was through an abbey with chastity. While among the Protestants, a breakthrough for women in missions started on participation as spouses of commissioned men. The unmarried ones subsequently started on the note of assisting and

²⁶ Marguerite Kraft and Meg Crossman, “Women in Mission” In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* Fourth ed. (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2009), 295.

²⁷ K. Rajendran, “Evangelical Methodology from India” In *Global Missiology for the 21st Century; The Ignuassu Dialogue* ed. William D. Taylor (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000), 324.

²⁸ Dana L. Robert, ed. *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers: Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), xi.

partnering with a family.²⁹ These give a hint of how women have had lesser opportunities due to gender discrimination by denominations or mission agencies.

Tucker remarks that despite the efforts of women in missions beyond the shores of their country, they seldom have similar status accorded men in missions. This is often associated with Scriptural texts and some established ancient practices of the church. She adds that in some context, spouses of missionaries were excluded from remunerations despite their arduous responsibility.³⁰ Since women sacrificed comfort and prospects to serve with their spouses on the field, it may be considered a form of discrimination or degradation if they are side-lined regarding financial incentives as their husbands received.

Additionally, Tucker discussed how Charlotte Lottie Moon, who worked in China around 1873, encountered discrimination. Though her ambition was to explore China as a missionary, she was assigned to educate little ones. This was frustrating to her, and “She viewed herself as part of an oppressed class -single women missionaries...”³¹ Lottie’s advocacy for women’s liberty as missionaries in China was not ratified by her superior and was antagonised by some people, including Mrs Arthur Smith. Nevertheless, when her request was granted, she was very resourceful and effective on the field. Lottie.³² Lottie will be remembered, “For all that she did to promote women’s involvement at home and in China, showing that women indeed could function on an equal level with men...”³³ The passion of Lottie should be advocated and applicable globally in other to

²⁹Kraft, “Women in Missions”, 1021.

³⁰ Tucker, *Guardians of the Great Commission*, 37, 39.

³¹ Tucker, *Guardians of the Great Commission*, 40-41.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 42.

eradicate every form of discrimination experienced by the female gender in missions.

6. Health-Related Challenge

Some women who engaged in missions with their husbands had painful experiences because of ill-health. For instance, Dorothy Carey, who reluctantly went to India with her husband, faced critical health issues. The first was because of their residence, which was "...surrounded by malaria swamps, the Careys lived in dire circumstances. Dorothy and the two oldest boys became critically ill..."³⁴ The second was a condition of mental disorder, which was the aftermath of the death of her child in 1794.³⁵ Tucker describes her condition as "mental illness" and a "delusional disorder" that affected her husband and made him depressed. Unfortunately, she lived with this condition until she died in 1807.³⁶

Similarly, Mary Livingstone, who worked with her husband in South Africa in 1845, struggled with paralysis after the delivery of a child while in the continent.³⁷ Although she and the children returned to England in 1852 to guarantee their physical wellbeing since his mission work involved lots of travelling, a decade later, she returned but "The fever-ridden Zambezi delta, combined with emotional stress, soon claimed her life."³⁸ This shows that the ministry of Livingstone in South Africa had an adverse effect on the wellbeing of Mary and her children, which may give a cue to the likely experience of women whose stories have not been documented.

³⁴ Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 125.

³⁵ Tucker, *Guardians of the Great Commission*, 17.

³⁶ Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 125, 127.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁸ Tucker, *Guardians of the Great Commission*, 18-19.

7. Challenge of Parenting

Tucker notes that as women teamed with their spouses, "...the rearing of children on the mission field. Determining where little ones should be educated was a difficult issue that faced many women, including Evelyn Brand...and Dorie Van Stone..."³⁹ This infers that some women who were active in missions could not adequately care for their children either because they lived apart and enormity of house chores coupled with ministry responsibilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

The following recommendations are considered essential for contemporary missions. First, the contemporary church must continually emphasise that males and females as heirs of salvation are God's ambassadors in the ministry of reconciliation and reaching the unreached worldwide. This is evident in history, and the same is replicated in contemporary times. Second, men ought to be encouraged to partner and support their spouses who sense the call to become a missionary. This implies that husbands and the finance of such women would give all necessary help needed just as women are expected to support their husbands in the pursuance of God-given vision.

Third, churches, mission boards and agencies should avoid any iota of discrimination against women regarding the opportunity for service, the scope of service, remuneration, and ordination. Policies and ideologies that deters women from participating maximally in missions both in theory and practice should be jettisoned. Women should have similar opportunities of service as their male counterparts in as much as they have the passion and training needed for such a task. Fourth, the well-being of missionaries and their family members should be of utmost concern to the sending agencies and churches. Hence, frequent

³⁹ Ibid., 172.

medical provisions and attention should be provided for them. Pregnant and lactating mothers should be excused from the field to have access to proper antenatal and postnatal care. Male missionaries should not jeopardise the lives of their wives and infants, who may become instruments for the service of God in the nearest future.

Fifth, women who serve alongside their spouses on the field should not be saddled with tedious and enormous responsibilities that wear them out and prevents their usefulness to the course of missions on the field. Wives who equally serve as missionaries should not be deprived of the opportunity of service. Their husbands ought to provide the necessary support to lessen their stress and create room for effective involvement in the field. Where possible, a third party should be employed to serve with the family of the missionary to assist with house chores. Lastly, missionaries should create time for their children amid busy schedules of missionary assignments. Children who do not reside on the field should be visited frequently to be shown love and affection. Parents who are missionaries must thrive not to neglect the holistic nurturing of their children as they serve on the field. It may be an anomaly to care for souls of others on the field while one's children are abandoned to fate.

CONCLUSION

The paper reveals that women have involved immensely in Christian missions right from the emergence of the church and even in contemporary times. Among others, the study looked at their involvement in the ministry of Christ, the apostles and the early church. Also, women involved in missions in terms of caring for children of missionaries, providing support as spouses, ministering to females on the field, and establishing mission societies; their involvement as missionaries, educators and scholars was also considered in this survey. Despite such contributions, women have encountered challenges related to perpetual singlehood, limited-service scope, excessive burden,

culture, discrimination, health, parenting, and child mortality. These challenges have adversely affected female missionaries emotionally, psychologically and physically. Nevertheless, various churches, denominations, and mission agencies are encouraged to consider a review of women involvement in their missions endeavours to make the necessary adjustment that will further enhance the participation and performance of women as missionaries or wives missionaries.

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