

Gender Equality and the Role of Women Leaders in the Philippine (Local) Church

Donna Castillo-Tan

**“I do not wish them [women] to have power
over men, but over themselves.”**

— Mary Wollstonecraft,

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)

Gender equality is an enduring issue that spans generations. It’s crucial to recognize the equal worth of women and treat them with respect and dignity. Various forms of gender inequality exist, some more overt than others. Addressing all these forms is essential. We must build a society and culture where women are valued and provided equal opportunities as men. Remember, women and girls comprise nearly half of the world’s population¹ and hold significant potential.

The United Nations (UN) affirms that gender equality is a fundamental human right and is essential to achieving peaceful societies that promote full human potential and sustainable development.² Moreover, it has been presented and often stated that empowering women spurs productivity and economic growth.³ Yet despite how important women’s role is for the betterment of society and what empowering them can do to the world, nothing much is being done to give her the opportunities to participate. Women worldwide are generally not given equal opportunities and are subject to violence and abuse to this day. When there is improvement, it is extremely and painfully slow. According to the Global Gender Gap Report (or GGGR) 2023, it will take 131 years to close the gap and reach full parity.⁴

THE ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

“The indignities inflicted on women
around the globe, intentionally or otherwise,
is a moral burden we all must bear.”⁵

The issue of gender equality, specifically women’s rights, can be traced back to 1792 with its first

advocate, Mary Wollstonecraft⁶. Since then, there has been notable progress in improving gender equality, but not at the pace we would like it to go. In the 2021 GGGR report, where the number of years to close was 135.6, it stated that “closing the global gender gap [in 2021] has increased by a generation from 99.5 years to 135.6 years.”⁷ This implies that “[A]nother generation of women will have to wait for gender parity.”⁸ This is if gender parity continues at the current rate. But what if it drastically slows down again due to another global pandemic, famine or war?

We simply cannot ignore the issues of gender inequality. It is embedded in almost every global issue the world faces.⁹ This shows just how widespread the global issue of unequal treatment and/or mistreatment of women is.

We still have countries like Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq, South Sudan, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Chad, and DR Congo that are listed as “Worst Countries to be a Woman in 2021”¹⁰. The women in these countries, including South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, suffer abuse and violence in and outside their homes.¹¹ In sub-Saharan Africa, “the lifetime risk of dying in childbirth is 1 in 22 (compared to 1 in 4,800 in the United States); in China 39,000 baby girls die every year because they do not receive the same medical care that boys receive; ... a new bride is ritually burned to death in India approximately every two hours.”¹² While poverty is an independent, and significant global issue, it does affect women and children more than it affects men. “Women living in poverty are at an increased risk of experiencing gender-based violence, lack access to sexual and reproductive health care, and millions of girls are currently out of school.”¹³

6. University of Exeter, “A brief history on gender (in)equality,” Future Learn, <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/understanding-gender-inequality/0/steps/66837>, accessed April 14, 2022.

7. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021>.

8. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021>.

9. Gender equality and women’s rights are embedded in the global issues of poverty, hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable energy, decent work, and economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, sustainable consumption and production including climate action, and peace, justice, and strong institutions. In “What does gender equality look like today?” *UN Women*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/10/feature-what-does-gender-equality-look-like-today>

10. Leah Rodriguez, “The 10 Best and Worst Countries to be a Woman in 2021,” *Global Citizen*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/best-worst-countries-for-women-gender-equality/>

11. Rodriguez, “The 10 Best and Worst.”

12. Mahone. “Half the Sky.”

13. Rodriguez, “The 10 Best and Worst.”

1. As of October 4, 2023, World population live reported 4.98 billion males in the world (50.5% of the world population) and 4.02 females (49.5%). <https://countrymeters.info/en/World>, October 4, 2023. This would be an estimated gender ratio of 101 males per 100 females.

2. “Gender Equality,” *United Nations*, <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/gender-equality>, accessed April 14, 2022.

3. “Gender Equality,” *United Nations*.

4. The Global Gender Gap Report 2023, June 2023, *World Economic Forum*, p. 5, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf.

5. Regina Mahone, “Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunities for Women Worldwide,” review of *Half the Sky*, by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. *Philanthropy News Digest*, April 15, 2016, <https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/features/book-reviews/half-the-sky>.

Even in a developed country like the United States, where there is vocal advocacy for gender and racial equality, gender inequality remains a persistent issue in the headlines. The challenge becomes more complex when considering the inclusion of non-binary and LGBTQ+ identities to the gender equality and women's rights table. What's even more puzzling is the irony that, while the U.S. supports women in their pursuit of equal rights, it allows a trans woman (formerly male) to compete in women's national swimming competitions and win, creating a controversial situation!¹⁴

The news got worse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women faced disproportionately high job losses, disruptions in education, and increased unpaid care responsibilities. Women's health services, already underfunded, suffered significant disruptions, affecting their sexual and reproductive health. Despite playing a central role in responding to COVID-19, including frontline healthcare work, women continue to be overlooked for the leadership positions they rightfully deserve.¹⁵

More than equal rights, women worldwide simply desire equal access to the opportunities that men get. "Women see hard work and equal opportunities as the most important aspects (88 percent and 85 percent respectively) to getting ahead in life"¹⁶.

IMPLICATIONS TO SOCIETY

Gender Bias with Women in the Workplace

While the global issue of gender equality and women's rights affects all sectors of society,¹⁷ one area to highlight is how the better and equal treatment of women has an ongoing effect on the economic development of the country. Kristof and WuDunn, in their book *Half the Sky* report that both the UN and the World Bank openly recognized the "potential resource that women and girls represent,"¹⁸ with the World Bank particularly stating that "Investment in girls' education may well be the highest-return investment available in the developing world."¹⁹ Furthermore, the World Bank's 2001 study, *Engendering Development Through Gender*

14. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/college/2022/03/18/lia-thomas-trans-woman-win-ncaa-swimming-championship/7088548001/>

15. "What does gender equality look like today?" *UN Women*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/10/feature-what-does-gender-equality-look-like-today>

16. Limos, "Remote Work."

17. The GGGR measures gender equality in four areas: *political empowerment, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and health and survival*, with the gender gap on political empowerment as still the largest of the four gaps tracked, with only 22.1% closed to date and health and survival being the closest to parity at 96%. Of the 146 countries covered by the 2023 index, the Health and Survival gender gap has closed by 96%, Educational Attainment by 95.2%, Economic Participation and Opportunity by 60.1% and Political Empowerment by 22.1%. In https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf, p. 9-12

18. Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryll WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunities for Women Worldwide* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), p. xx.

19. Lawrence Summers in Kristof and WuDunn, p. xx.

Equality in Rights, Resources, and Voice, stated "that promoting gender equality is crucial to combat global poverty"²⁰ with UNICEF concurring this in its major report arguing that "gender equality yields a 'double dividend' by elevating not only women but also their children and communities."²¹

Clearly, women empowerment is believed to accelerate the economic development of a country and, in effect, globally. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) further summed up all research in this way: "Women's empowerment helps raise economic productivity and reduce infant mortality. It contributes to improved health and nutrition. It increases the chances of education for the next generation."²²

Yet sadly, these reports still need to have an impact in society. E. Bayeh in a study on the correlation of gender equality to the economic development of Ethiopia, shares that,

*...the role of women across different dimensions of sustainable development is less reflected in the country. The use of a women's labour force in the economic development of the country is minimal. The political sphere of the country is, by and large, reserved for men alone. The place of women in society is also relegated to contributing minimally to the social development of the country. In addition, women's rights are not properly being protected in order for women to participate in various the issues of their country but are subjected to abysmal violations.*²³

In South Asia, fewer than one in four women hold a paying job, which is less than half of the global average.²⁴ In the United States, it is reported, "Overall, women who were full-time, year-round employees made 83 cents for every dollar men made in 2020, based on median earning data from the Census Current Population Survey. That means women are paid about 17% less than men."²⁵ We also need to factor in how culture may dictate that certain jobs are better suited for men and certain jobs better suited for women. For example, nurses and babysitters are expected to be women, and firemen and construction workers are expected to be men.

In the past two years of the Global Pandemic alone, women suffered steeper job losses than men, with the number of women in the workforce down by 54 million in 2020 and a total of 45 million women who left

20. Kristof and WuDunn, p. xx.

21. Kristof and WuDunn, p. xx.

22. Kristof and WuDunn, p. xx.

23. Endalcachew Bayeh, "The role of empowering women and achieving gender equality to the sustainable development of Ethiopia," *Pacific Science Review B: Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2016, Pages 37-42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psr.2016.09.013>.

24. Rodriguez, "The 10 Best and Worst."

25. Sonam Sheth, Madison Hoff, Marguerite Ward and Taylor Tyson. "These 8 charts show the glaring gap between men's and women's salaries in the US," *Insider*, March 15, 2022. <https://www.businessinsider.com/gender-wage-pay-gap-charts-2017-3>.

the labor market altogether²⁶. A survey done in the Philippines showed that “22 percent of female professionals agree that they have fewer career advancement opportunities, and 14 percent claim they are paid less than men in their profession...[while] half of working women in the Philippines have experienced that their being a woman played a role in missing out on opportunities, promotion, and pay.”²⁷ Furthermore, due to the global lockdown, “88 percent of Filipinos have started working from home”²⁸ and among them are many working women, but they face more barriers than usual. Most of the respondents named the lack of time as the top barrier for women in achieving opportunities, and this is likely due to having to juggle remote work and family responsibilities.²⁹ “Close to half of the working mother respondents (47 percent) said they are struggling to balance their work and household responsibilities, with 42 percent saying their duties at home are getting in the way of their career development.”³⁰ Thus, the reality is women are still at a disadvantage in the workforce. One reason is that opportunities are still limited and, in some cases, even scarce; another reason is the need to be full-time on the domestic front and the challenge to balance both. “Women are still disadvantaged by their greater domestic labor commitments and impaired access to well-paid jobs; and, in extreme cases, denied the right to live.”³¹

Gender Bias with Women and the Justice System

Gender inequality is a significant predictor of poverty and injustice in our world today.³² Justice involves fair, equal treatment in all aspects of life, regardless of one’s background. Women often experience marginalization and are frequently victims of discrimination, persecution, abuse, and violence.

Violence has such a strong connection to women that when one thinks of a victim of violence, most would assume it is a woman. Violence against women and girls not only devastates their lives but, even more, undermines the building of strong democracies and just societies.³³

26. “What does gender equality look like today?” *UN Women*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/10/feature-what-does-gender-equality-look-like-today>

27. Mario Alvaro Limos, “Remote Work Is a Heavier Burden on Filipino Women Than Men, According to Study,” *Esquire*, March 3, 2021,

https://www.esquiremag.ph/life/women/filipino-women-work-opportunities-linked-in-a00293-20210303-lfrm?utm_source=Facebook-EsquireMoney&utm_medium=SiteShare&utm_campaign=20220414-fbnp-life-filipino-women-work-opportunities-linked-in-a00293-20210303-lfrm-fbold&fbclid=IwAR1z-rpKrnCksvH-GmSkTeFY63YaZvrVdh0FQG1u2awwk-PjMXw6n079B3sE

28. Limos, “Remote.”

29. Limos, “Remote.”

30. Limos, “Remote.”

31. Dilli, Carmichael, and Rijpma, “Introducing the Historical Gender.”

32. “Women’s Rights and Gender Justice,” Oxfam, <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/issues/womens-rights-and-gender-justice/>, accessed April 22, 2022.

33. “Women’s Rights,” *Oxfam*.

Gender Bias with Women and the Dilution of the Issue

Despite societal progress through various eras and cultural shifts, women still bear the burden of devaluation, albeit in different forms. The fight for women’s equality remains a profound struggle in many countries. However, today, the focus on women’s rights and gender equality seems to be overshadowed by the ideologies of the postmodern and even posthuman generation. Gender bias is no longer solely about women; it now includes trans-women, trans-men, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, queer, and fluid identities. Multiple advocacies have joined the conversation, extending beyond women’s issues.

Real women may never reach the end of their quest for equal rights, fair treatment, and appropriate value due to the additional issues and baggage now being added to their struggle.

THE PHILIPPINE SETTING

The Philippines has a history of strong women warriors and leaders like Urduja, Gabriela Silang, and Melchora Aquino (Tandang Sora). It has also had two women presidents: Corazon Aquino and Gloria Arroyo, and women senators as early as 1947 (Geronima Josefa Tecson)³⁴. The Philippines could indeed be a leader in gender equality. After all, it has been said,

*At the core, Philippine society is a matriarchal society...women directly and indirectly run the family, businesses, and institutions. Women also, most [sic] often than not, by default, become the family’s treasurer... The underlying power and strength of Pinays is rooted in pre-colonial indigenous Philippine society where equal importance was given to women and men. Women were traditionally entitled to property, to engage in trade, and, in the absence of a male heir, hold the position of village chieftain. Women were also powerful and esteemed high priestesses and healers known as babaylans or catalonans. Such was the power of women in pre-colonial Philippine society that they also had the right to divorce their husbands if they chose to do so.*³⁵

It is on a high note that the country can boast of its ranking 16th in the Global Gender Gap Index 2023, with a gender gap score of 0.791 and an improvement of +3 points since 2022.³⁶ The Philippines is the lone Asian country on the top 20 list!

According to research, women’s status in the

34. Nigel Tan, “Filipinas who were first in Philippine History,” *Rappler*, March 21, 2014, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/53470-filipinas-first-ph-history/>

35. Wilfred Gacula, “The Power of Pinays – A Short Essay,” *SOMA Pilipinas*, accessed October 4, 2023 at <https://www.somapilipinas.org/community-1/powerofpinays#:~:text=At%20its%20core%2C%20Philippine%20society,default%2C%20become%20the%20family%27s%20treasurer.>

36. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf, p.11.

Philippines can be seen as highly advanced compared to women in other nations, particularly regarding education, professional opportunities, political representation, and legislative involvement.³⁷ Even within the country, a consensus exists among people regarding this perception, with 51% of Filipinos believing that gender equality has improved in the country and is not as significant an issue as it was during their parents' time.³⁸ This represents a significant achievement, as Ryanne Co of Tatler Asia points out. Co attributes the Philippines' strong position in terms of gender parity or equality to its matriarchal system, which has elevated it above the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia in this regard—an institution rooted in the pre-colonial era.³⁹ Moreover, the Philippine Constitution recognizes the vital role of women in the country's well-being and ensures their equal treatment.⁴⁰

Rank	Country	Score		Score change	Rank change
		0-1	2022	2022	2022
1	Iceland	0.912		+0.004	-
2	Norway	0.879		+0.034	+1
3	Finland	0.863		+0.003	-1
4	New Zealand	0.856		+0.014	-
5	Sweden	0.815		-0.007	-
6	Germany	0.815		+0.014	+4
7	Nicaragua	0.811		+0.001	-
8	Namibia	0.802		-0.005	-
9	Lithuania	0.800		+0.001	+2
10	Belgium	0.796		+0.003	+4
11	Ireland	0.795		-0.010	-2
12	Rwanda	0.794		-0.017	-6
13	Latvia	0.794		+0.023	+13
14	Costa Rica	0.793		-0.003	-2
15	United Kingdom	0.792		+0.012	+7
16	Philippines	0.791		+0.009	+3
17	Albania	0.791		+0.004	+1
18	Spain	0.791		+0.002	-1
19	Moldova, Republic of	0.788		-0.001	-3
20	South Africa	0.787		+0.005	-
21	Switzerland	0.783		-0.012	-8

Figure 1: Screenshot of TABLE 1. The Global Gender Gap Index 2023 rankings, page 11 of the Global Gender Gap Report 2023. Source: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf

However, some sectors have concerns about the current state of gender equality and women's rights in the Philippines.⁴¹ There are disparities on the

37. Gender Profile of the Philippines https://www.jica.go.jp/activities/issues/gender/reports/ku57pq00002hdv3w-att/phi_2008_summary_en.pdf

38. Limos, "Remote Work."

39. Ryanne Co, "Gender Parity In the Philippines: Is the Country Truly As Progressive As It Seems?" Tatler Asia, August 7, 2021, <https://www.tatlerasia.com/power-purpose/ideas-education/gender-parity-in-the-philippines>.

40. The 1987 Constitution states two prominent provisions. The first is in the Declaration of Principles Article II Section 14 which asserts that, "The State recognizes the role of women in nation-building and shall ensure the fundamental equality before the law of women and men." Additionally, according to the Article XIII-Labor: Section 14, "The state shall protect working women by providing safe and healthful working conditions taking into account their maternal functions, and such facilities and opportunities that will enhance their welfare and enable them to realize their full potential in the service of the nation" from Carlos Antonio Anonuevo, "An Overview of the Gender Situation in the Philippines," *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Philippine Office*, September 2020, accessed October 4, 2023 from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/philippinen/50069.pdf>.

41. Co, 2021.

ground, with women experiencing domestic violence, sexual abuse, economic disadvantages, workplace discrimination, exploitation as migrant workers, prostitution, and displacement due to conflict.⁴² A 2022 report states that "One in four Filipino women experienced gender-based violence, and 41% of victims did not seek help."⁴³ One would think that such would be unheard of in these postmodern times!

In the early months of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, a local birthing center reported an alarming spike in pregnancies and the shocking reality that four of ten women who came to the clinic for prenatal checkups were between thirteen and eighteen years old.⁴⁴ This would be the reality that barely verifies the studies. There is a strong disparity between what is reported and what is real.

Meanwhile, the survey respondents who acknowledged improvement in gender equality also recognize the persistence of gender bias in the workplace, with about 31% who believe gender equality is challenging to achieve.⁴⁵ Despite the country's high rank in gender equality, the road to full parity seems to be long from seeing fulfillment. However, research indicates that this perspective may arise from broader societal views on gender. According to the same survey, 74% consider gender equality an important value for a fair society; however, more than half of the respondents believe that it has already made satisfactory progress.⁴⁶ This mindset may lead to complacency, even though the Philippines is leading in this area, in Asia and globally. Such a prevailing mindset could significantly delay women's quest for equal opportunities and fair treatment, rendering them voiceless and helpless.

I recall the 2019 incident involving Gretchen Custodio Diez, a transgender woman denied access to the women's restroom by a janitress.⁴⁷ Her experience gained significant attention on social media, and unfortunately, the janitress faced much criticism while people rallied to defend Diez. I wondered where the defenders for the janitress were. It seemed like no one, including women's rights groups, stood up for her. Everyone seemed to prioritize Gretchen's "rights" over the rights of the janitress who was simply doing her job. It was political correctness that overshadowed the injustice, with society seemingly more willing to criticize a woman just doing her job than a man insisting on using the ladies restroom.

42. Gender Profile of the Philippines https://www.jica.go.jp/activities/issues/gender/reports/ku57pq00002hdv3w-att/phi_2008_summary_en.pdf

43. Isabel Kristine M. Valdez, et al. "Violence against women in the Philippines: barriers to seeking support." *The Lancet regional health. Western Pacific* vol. 23 100471. 3 May. 2022, doi:10.1016/j.lanwpc.2022.100471

44. From a Messenger Chat conversation with Dr. Ces Estera, Medical Director of Shalom Paanakan Birthing Center in Antipolo.

45. Limos, "Remote Work."

46. Limos, "Remote Work."

47. Rambo Talabong, "Trans Woman Arrested after Being Blocked from Using Women's Restroom in Cubao," *Rappler*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/237698-transgender-woman-arrested-after-blocked-using-women-restroom-cubao/>

Meanwhile, signs of inequality continue to persist in the form of devaluation, racy jokes, stereotypical portrayals in movies, and the way women present themselves to others. These factors continue to show that women and men are not treated and valued equally.

No Longer a Matriarchal or Patriarchal Society, but a Gender Equal Society

Addressing this disparity might involve acknowledging and discussing both “matriarchal” and “patriarchal” perspectives in our conversations. These discussions often perpetuate the divide. As mentioned earlier, many historians and sociologists believe that “The Philippines has indigenous roots in matriarchal systems”⁴⁸ dating back to the pre-colonial period. The shift from equality between men and women to a patriarchal culture occurred with the arrival of colonizers. The long history of colonialism subjected women, teaching them to be subordinate to men and limiting their roles to homemaking.⁴⁹ However, remnants of our heritage of gender equality still surface in the current society. Consequently, there continue ongoing debates and arguments about gender equality, with representatives from both sides asserting and defending their due positions in society. Further, there may be no need to use “matriarchal” and “patriarchal” terms because that has to do with kinship lineage, which is another topic.

After all, numbers don’t lie. The Philippines ranks 16th on the Global Gender Gap Parity report, surpassing countries like Switzerland (21st) and the United States (43rd), highlighting the country’s treatment of both men and women. Despite personal observations suggesting otherwise, Filipino women face few or no restrictions in pursuing their ambitions or careers. The police force, for instance, has seen an increase in the number of women applicants, and there is a noticeable increase in women CEOs, CFOs, and business owners. Women have taken on prominent roles in government, including the Senate, Congress, and positions such as governors, mayors, and even the presidency. Women holding leadership positions is not uncommon in the Philippines.⁵⁰

MISSIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND CHURCH APPLICATION

The Lord announces the word, and the women who proclaim it are a mighty throng. Psalm 68:11

In Genesis 1:27, God created both man and woman in His own image, emphasizing equality from the

48. Clarissa Delgado, in Co, 2021.

49. Carlos Antonio Anonuevo, “An Overview of the Gender Situation in the Philippines,” *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Philippine Office*, September 2020, accessed October 4, 2023 from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/philippinen/50069.pdf>.

50. “Filipino Women in Leadership: Government and Industry,” *Investing in Women*, accessed October 5, 2023 from <https://investinginwomen.asia/knowledge/filipino-women-leadership-government-industry/>

beginning. They were intentionally made equal in God’s eyes, possessing equal value (“And God saw all [including man and woman] He had made, and behold, it was very good.” Genesis 1:31 NASB), equal tasks (“God blessed them, and said to them...” Gen 1:28), and equal benefits (both had the same freedom and restrictions in the garden of Eden, Gen 1:29-30). Neither was created as having more (or less) value than the other.

The creation of Adam before Eve does not imply positional status before God. It is evident that even if Adam was created first and Eve second, she was not a second thought. Eve was created as an intentional act. God saw that Adam would not be able to do the work alone, and therefore he needed a “suitable helper,” a *Kenegdo Ezer*. The word *kenegdo* implies someone who completes the other half; thus, creating Eve was meant to complement Adam.⁵¹ It also implies someone who stands in front, to protect Adam, and not just alongside as an assistant nor at the back as a subordinate.

Conversely, the term “*Ezer*,” which means “help,” takes on a different connotation when considering its other usages outside of the two instances in Genesis 2:18 and 20 that specifically refer to the woman God created. In these other references, “*Ezer*” is a reliable warrior or dependable defender. These instances include God acting as Israel’s ally in war and other nations coming to Israel’s aid.⁵²

When God created man and woman, He established distinct roles for them, but their intrinsic value remained equal in His eyes. The subordination of women in other Bible stories stems from cultural influences of the people, not from God’s intentions. This is why God often made deliberate efforts to emphasize the importance of women, such as when He revealed Himself as “*El Roi*” to Hagar, a woman and a slave. (Genesis 16). God highlighted women like Rahab in the Hall of the Faithful (Hebrews 11:31), enabled Deborah to serve as a Judge in Israel despite societal norms (Judges 4), revealed His identity as the Messiah to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:5-30), and first appeared as the risen Lord to Mary Magdalene (John 20:14-16).

We also encounter significant examples of influential women in the early church, such as Junia, acknowledged as an outstanding apostle (Romans 16:7). Additionally, we see the husband-wife duo of Pricilla and Aquila (Romans 16:3), with Pricilla being mentioned ahead of her husband, suggesting a more prominent leadership role. Dorcas was also noted as a disciple of Jesus in Acts. These women’s names underscore their importance and leadership positions in early church history. In his letters, Paul demonstrates respect for women, recognizing their roles as ministry partners and their contributions to the church. He honors notable women like Lydia,

51. Carolyn Custis James, *When Life and Belief Collide: How Knowing God Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 182.

52. James, p. 181.

Phoebe, Junia, Priscilla, Euodia, and Syntyche. It is essential to understand that the passages where Paul seems to address women's roles "are not general statements about women in the church. Paul actually loved and valued women, and they were among his ministry partners."⁵³

As women hold half the sky, so also do they make up half the church. In her book, *Half the Church: Recapturing God's Global Vision for Women*, Carolyn Custis James shows us how as a church, we are guilty of discriminating women. We delegate to her the menial jobs like kitchen work, and back-office work; while the "more important" matters of the church, like evangelism, outreach and leadership are tasks often given to the men.⁵⁴ The men go out to the streets to evangelize while the women should only be tasked to meal preparation for the men when they return. And yet, women compose half of the church! And so, if this is the case, then the church is wasting away more than half of its important resources (women) by not releasing them to exercise their gifts and capacities!

On Women in Church Leadership Roles in the Philippines

The pressing question that demands an answer is: why does the treatment of women as equals change in the church setting? If, based on the evidence presented earlier, the Filipino woman is not only capable but often exceeds expectations in various areas of society, why are women confined to very specific roles, responsibilities, and tasks when it comes to church ministry?

One colleague shared that she is a trained military officer in the Armed Forces of her country, possessing leadership experience, but when it came to her church situation, she was not allowed leadership roles. Instead she was suggested only to certain roles that women are expected to fill.

Tira and Wan, in their paper on a Filipino case study of diaspora, say, "Filipino women have a vital role in fulfilling the Great Commission [with particular reference to]...the thousands of household maids deployed in high places in the Buddhist, Jewish, and Islamic world."⁵⁵ These women are strategically placed inside homes of people of influence in these cultures, with great opportunities to influence the lives of their employers and their children with the gospel, something for which "Western conventional missionaries do not have the privilege."⁵⁶ While at first we might not think too highly of these women since

53. Marg Mowczko, "Partnering Together: Paul's Female Coworkers," *Marg Mowczko: Exploring the Biblical Theology of Christian Egalitarianism*, May 1, 2019, <https://margmowczko.com/paul-romans-16-women-coworkers/>

54. Carolyn Custis James, *Half The Church: Recapturing God's Global Vision for Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

55. Sadiri Joy Tira and Enoch Wan, "The Filipino Experience in Diaspora Missions: A Case Study of Christian Communities in Contemporary Contexts," *Commission VII: Christian Communities in Contemporary Contexts Edinburgh Commission*, June 12-13, 2009, p.9.

56. Tira and Wan, p. 9.

they are, after all, "just maids," in God's kingdom building what they do for God is of utmost honor! Tira and Wan even liken the influence and position these Filipino women are in to the likes of Jochebed, who raised Moses, though her own child biologically, but officially belonging to the Pharaoh's daughter, to become an important figure in both Egypt and Israel.⁵⁷

It would be detrimental for the church to underestimate women and restrict their contributions to advancing God's Kingdom. For example, in preaching and teaching, the church often receives only wisdom from male educators and preachers, resulting in a one-sided perspective. The church is at a disadvantage when it fails to recognize and utilize the gifts and capabilities of all individuals, including women, in spreading the gospel. God Himself confirms the significant potential of women as bearers of the Good News when the Psalmist declared, "The Lord gives the command; The women who proclaim the good news are a great army" (Psalm 68:11 NASB).

God created women with a purpose, and when the church restricts their participation and voices, it falls short of fulfilling God's intended purpose. Even more concerning, it could be interpreted as questioning God's design of women. When we doubt a woman's capabilities, skills, and worth, we doubt God's plan in creating her. Are we implying that God made an error when He created women? Are we suggesting that they do not play a vital role in advancing the gospel or building up the church? However, it is evident that God did not create Eve, whom He declared to be made in His image, as an inferior being.

Gender equality and women's rights are deeply ingrained issues not only in society but sadly, also within the church, where it should not be an issue. However, the responsibility for advocating for the equal treatment of not just women but of all people falls heavily on the church itself, which proclaims believers to be "one in Christ" and to be free in Christ. Accordingly, we must act on what we proclaim when we say "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. For you all are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28, NLT).

Further, it is even ironic that Philippine missions recognize the "trend in Philippine feminization in

57. Tira and Wan, p. 9.

missions continues,"⁵⁸ meaning that most Filipino missionaries, whether as full time career missionaries or tentmaking missionaries or OFW kingdom workers, are women. There is no problem with women being missionaries. In fact, there is excitement. But the tide shifts for her in the church setting. It simply does not make sense.

If Filipinos readily acknowledge women in leadership positions in areas outside of the church, such as government, business, and companies, then the same recognition should extend to their leadership roles within the church. When a woman serves as the CEO of a business or a lady mayor, her stature and leadership abilities grant her a platform. However, this recognition often does not carry over to the church setting. While such prominent figures may be invited to give special lectures, serve as guest speakers at women's events, and occupy prominent seats in the church, they are rarely granted the privilege to stand on the same platform as the pastor and deliver the Word of God.

My point here is not primarily about granting women grand titles or the highest positions but rather about enabling women to minister in the same capacities as men, giving them the space and freedom to exercise their spiritual gifts within the safe confines of the Body of Christ. Gender should not be a factor when it comes to utilizing spiritual gifts for the benefit of the church. Imagine telling someone they cannot exercise their gift of hospitality, giving, or mercy based on gender. When did spiritual gifting become gender-based? It's not about gender; it's about the appointment of the Holy Spirit.

Gender equality and women's rights are deeply ingrained issues not only in society but sadly, also within the church, where it should not be an issue. However, the responsibility for advocating for the equal treatment of not just women but of all people falls heavily on the church itself, which proclaims believers to be "one in Christ" and to be free in Christ. Accordingly, we must act on what we proclaim when we say "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. For you all are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28, NLT).

Let the woman be the Image Bearer she was created and designed to be

Amidst the chaos and confusion from discussions on gender equality, many women have found themselves lost, afraid, and uncertain about their identity and potential. Where can women discover a safe space to be themselves and fulfill their God-given purpose? Where can they speak without judgment, act without criticism, laugh without misunderstanding, and love without fear of hurt? The answer lies at the feet of Jesus.

At Jesus' feet, there is always a reserved place for women, as Mary of Bethany confirmed. Even if taking our place at His feet might lead to trouble, where

people may judge, ridicule, criticize, or attempt to confine us to certain roles, at Jesus' feet, women will find safety, acceptance, and the assurance of being His beloved daughters. Therefore, we who also sit at Jesus' feet should welcome her as equal. We, who also sit at Jesus' feet should make sure her place there is safe, affirming, loving and empowering.

And until the day comes when the world fully recognizes women's roles and contributions, those who understand the importance of women's voices in the church and society must serve as their willing advocates. We must be their voice, tirelessly advocating for their worth, visibility, and full acceptance as equally valuable heirs to the kingdom of God. We must fight for them to be heard and listened to as equally valuable spokespersons for Jesus Christ and proclaimers of the Good News (Psalm 68:11).

We must see more and more women confidently stepping into what God has called them and designed them to do in all areas, not just teaching or preaching, but in whatever good work God has created them for (Ephesians 2:10). And let us not forget that for the global church to effectively and significantly move forward, it is increasingly important that Christians, men and women, brothers and sisters, work together.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"A Brief History of Gender (In)equality," Future Learn. University of Exeter. <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/understanding-gender-inequality/0/steps/66837>, accessed April 14, 2022.

Anonuevo, Carlos Antonio. "An Overview of the Gender Situation in the Philippines," *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Philippine Office*, September 2020, accessed October 4, 2023 from <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/philippinen/50069.pdf>.

Banks, James, ed. "Cultural Hybridity." *Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education*, 2022. <https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/diversityineducation/n166.xml>.

Bayeh, Endalcachew. "The role of empowering women and achieving gender equality to the sustainable development of Ethiopia." *Pacific Science Review B: Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2016, Pages 37-42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psr.2016.09.013>. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2405883116300508>)

Co, Rynne. "Gender Parity In the Philippines: Is the Country Truly as Progressive as It Seems?" *Tatler Asia*, August 7, 2021, <https://www.tatlerasia.com/power-purpose/ideas-education/gender-parity-in-the-philippines>.

Cohick, Lynn. "Episode 138: God's Purpose" in *God Hears Her*, presented by Our Daily Bread

⁵⁸. Ibid.

- Ministries, podcast, accessed October 6, 2023, at https://www.godhearsher.org/podcast/gods-purpose?fbclid=IwAR1k6uZHRT_7aa-L e S g Q p z M f o W v 6 l S R 1 p e m M _ V u g r k c 8 e M Q R a K k s 3 c 3 M 6 p 8
- Dilli, Selin, Sarah Carmichael, and Auke Rijpma. "Introducing the Historical Gender Equality Index." *Feminist Economics* 25, no. 1 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2018.1442582>.
- Eugenio, Ara. "On Ricci, Andrea: How Public Proposals Can be Problematic for Women." *Reportr*, April 14, 2022. https://www.reportr.world/news/ricci-rivero-andrew-brillantes-proposal-explainer-a4713-20220414-lfrm?fbclid=IwAR11IMzTJXg_n5o5GRE7xWdCzD4TDFRxt68NUnUEsENko4AR4eyvIWWua6s.
- Galila, Wilfred. "The Power of Pinays - A Short Essay," *SOMA Pilipinas*, accessed October 4, 2023 at <https://www.somafilipinas.org/community-1/powerofpinays#:~:text=At%20its%20core%2C%20Philippine%20society,default%2C%20become%20the%20family%27s%20treasurer>.
- "Gender Profile of the Philippines." https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/activities/issues/gender/reports/ku57pq00002hdv3w-att/phi_2008_summary_en.pdf
- Gilbert, Asha. "Penn Swimmer Lia Thomas Becomes First Trans Woman to Win NCAA Swimming Championship." *USA Today*, May 18, 2022. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/college/2022/03/18/lia-thomas-trans-woman-win-ncaa-swimming-championship/7088548001/>
- Jackson, Jesse. "Two Years Later, Beth Moore Addresses John MacArthur Telling Her to 'Go Home.'" *Church Leaders*, February 4, 2022. <https://churchleaders.com/news/416530-two-years-later-beth-moore-addresses-john-macarthur-telling-her-to-go-home.html>.
- James, Carolyn Custis. *Half The Church: Recapturing God's Global Vision for Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).
- James, Carolyn Custis. *When Life and Belief Collide: How Knowing God Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).
- Kristof, Nicholas D. and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).
- Limos, Mario Alvaro. "Remote Work Is a Heavier Burden on Filipino Women Than Men, According to Study." *Esquire*, March 3, 2021. https://www.esquiremag.ph/life/women/filipino-women-work-opportunities-linked-in-a00293-20210303-lfrm?utm_source=Facebook-EsquireMoney&utm_medium=SiteShare&utm_campaign=20220414-fbnp-life-filipino-women-work-opportunities-linked-in-a00293-20210303-lfrm-fbold&fbclid=IwAR1z-rpKrnCksvhGmSkTeFY63YaZvrVdh0FQG1-u2awwk-PjMXw6n079B3sE
- Mahone, Regina. "Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunities for Women Worldwide." Review of *Half the Sky*, by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. *Philanthropy News Digest*, April 15, 2016. <https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/features/book-reviews/half-the-sky>.
- Mowczko, Marg. "Partnering Together: Paul's Female Coworkers." *Marg Mowczko: Exploring the Biblical Theology of Christian Egalitarianism*, May 1, 2019. <https://margmowczko.com/paul-romans-16-women-coworkers/>.
- Philippine Commission on Women. "Philippines Drops 8 Places in Gender Equality, Remains Top in Asia." December 28, 2019. <https://pcw.gov.ph/philippines-drops-8-places-in-gender-equality-remains-top-in-asia/>
- "Post-modern Feminism." *Tutor2u*, May 26, 2019. <https://www.tutor2u.net/politics/reference/post-modern-feminism>.
- Rodriguez, Leah. "The 10 Best and Worst Countries to be a Woman in 2021," *Global Citizen*, October 22, 2021. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/best-worst-countries-for-women-gender-equality/>
- Sheth, Sonam, Madison Hoff, Marguerite Ward and Taylor Tyson. "These 8 Charts Show the Glaring Gap between Men's and Women's Salaries in the US." *Insider*, March 15, 2022. <https://www.businessinsider.com/gender-wage-pay-gap-charts-2017-3>.
- Statistics Times. "Gender ratio in the world," August 26, 2021. <https://statisticstimes.com/demographics/world-sex-ratio.php>.
- Talabong, Rambo. "Trans Woman Arrested after Being Blocked from Using Women's Restroom in Cubao." *Rappler*, August 13, 2019. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/237698-transgender-woman-arrested-after-blocked-using-women-restroom-cubao/>
- Tan, Nigel. "Filipinas Who Were First in Philippine History," *Rappler*, March 21, 2014, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/53470-filipinas-first-ph-history/>
- The Global Gender Gap Report 2023, June 2023 (p. 5), *World Economic Forum*, <https://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR/00000233/00000233en.pdf>

weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf

Unitarian Universalist Association. Handout3: Position-Muslim Women Are Not Equal. <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/bridges/workshop14/185708.shtml>

United Nations. "Gender Equality." <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/gender-equality>. Accessed April 14, 2022.

Valdez, Isabel Kristine M et al. "Violence against Women in the Philippines: Barriers to Seeking Support." *The Lancet Regional Health. Western Pacific* vol. 23 100471. 3 May. 2022, doi:10.1016/j.lanwpc.2022.100471

"What Does Gender Equality Look Like Today?" *UN Women*. October 6, 2021. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/10/feature-what-does-gender-equality-look-like-today>

World Economic Forum. "Global Gender Gap Report 2021," March 30, 2021. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021>.

World Economic Forum. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf,

"Women's Rights and Gender Justice." Oxfam. <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/issues/womens-rights-and-gender-justice/>.

*This article is being re-published with the author's permission. This paper was included in the book "Beautiful Feet Following Christian Missionary Footstep."



Donna Castillo-Tan
DonnaHopeTan@gmail.com

Donna Castillo Tan is a published author, trained counselor pastoral trainer and resource speaker on topics of marriage, family life and parenting, biblical womanhood and spirituality. She and her husband, Jason are missionaries with Global Grace Fellowship, with mission base in the Philippines.

asian missions advance

Quarterly Bulletin of the Asia Missions Association *published by*
the East-West Center for Missions Research & Development

ASIAN MISSIONS ADVANCE, published from 1978 to 1993 by the East-West Center for Missions Research & Development as the Occasional Bulletin of the Asia Missions Association, has re-started publishing from August 2011 as the Quarterly Bulletin of the Asia Missions Association by the East-West Center for Missions Research & Development

1520 James M Wood Blvd, #303, Los Angeles, CA 90015, USA
www.asiamissions.net | www.ewcmrd.org
voice/fax: +1 626 577 5564 | email: missionsadvance@gmail.com

ISSN 2765-0936

Editor

Steve K. Eom

Managing Editor

Damples Dulcero-Baclagon

Contributing Editors

Chris Sung; Lalano Badoy
K. Y. Cheung Teng; Isaac Soundaraja; Yohanes Nahuway;
Chong Pae Kim; Chansamone Saiyasak ; Hong Yang

Publisher

East-West Center for MRD Publishing