

## NINE

# WOMEN AND MEN AS STRANGERS: GENDER CONFLICT ACROSS CULTURES

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**W**omen who visit or live in other cultures, whether within their own country or abroad, face particular problems of crosscultural ethics. In all cultures there are assumptions about what is proper and good in the relations between the sexes. Sexual role divisions are universal. Differences in cultural perception easily lead to stereotypes and hostility toward those who are different.

In practically all cultures, power and prestige are ascribed more often to the activities of men than to those of women. But the actual conventions for the behavior of men and women differ widely. This creates a dilemma for a stranger in a new context who may not know what is acceptable behavior. Moreover, even when different conventions are understood, they may be ethically and emotionally unacceptable. This

chapter examines some of the commonly faced moral problems of women and men who experience gender-role conflict in a strange culture.

### **The Power of Images in Sexual Relations**

Any attempt to understand another person or another culture begins with categories.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge begins with categorization and discrimination. We say that a person is “this” and not “that.” She is white and not black, rich and not poor, Christian and not Muslim, woman and not man, foreigner and not fellow citizen, young and not old, enemy and not family, “out-group” and not “in-group.”

*Categorization and stereotypes.* Categories, or names of classes of people, enable us to know how we should act toward them. When we classify a person as police officer rather than thief, we have some conception of what is expected of us and what is safe. “Women” and “men” are universally recognized categories. In every culture or subculture, people assume a range of appropriate behaviors based on the sex of another person. Unfortunately for crosscultural contact, the behaviors and characteristics assumed differ dramatically from culture to culture.

When we meet strangers, we assume that we know something about them based on the category we use to name them. Our categories are deeply influenced by personal experience, especially experience that is dramatic or emotionally charged.<sup>2</sup> If one white kid beats up a black kid, the black kid may fear all whites for a long time to come. Everyone characterizes a stranger based on their own limited experience.

Anyone who enters another culture encounters stereotypes. An Indonesian may admire a white American as rich, educated, self-reliant and free. The same person may also assume all Americans are arrogant,

sexually immoral, racist, neocolonialist and anti-Islam. Stereotypes are generalizations about large classes of people based on limited information. When walking through villages in Indonesia, I am often referred to as “Belanda” (Dutch). For some Indonesians the distinction between Dutch and Americans is less significant than the difference between Javanese and Balinese Indonesians.<sup>3</sup> Most Asians know far more about America than most Americans know about Asia. But their knowledge of Westerners in general is understandably laden with stereotypes. This is especially true when it comes to perceptions of white Western women.

*Stereotypes of white women.* Many people of color have a stereotype of white women that includes a sexual element. Most of the world derives powerful images of Western women from a highly sexualized global media. Western movies image women as available sex objects. Multinational advertisements and American television are beamed all over the world via satellite. Even sexual behavior that is mild by Western standards is shocking to many foreign eyes.<sup>4</sup>

The behavior of white tourists seems to confirm the common assumption that many white women are promiscuous. In response to tropical temperatures, and because they are on vacation, many women tourists wear very few clothes. They seem unaware that even a sleeveless blouse is considered immodest in many Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern and southern European cultures.<sup>5</sup>

Before arriving in Pakistan, an experienced traveler advised our family to wear Pakistani dress. If we did so, we would be less conspicuous and would be treated with greater respect. Accordingly, the first thing we did on arrival in Islamabad was visit a tailor and order full Pakistani outfits for all five of us. The extremely baggy clothes cover all flesh from neck to toe and conceal every bodily contour. They were topped with head scarves for the women and rolled-up

hats for my son and me.

Having already experienced various forms of sexual harassment in several countries we had visited, my wife, Frances, and our daughters, Jen Marion and Rina, were happy to have the relatively easy change in dress as a means of escaping unwanted attention. We had heard horror stories of how Western-dressed single women are sometimes subjected to intense sexual harassment in this strongly Muslim society.

Pakistani men and women treated my wife and daughters with great respect throughout our stay. Both our dress and our family togetherness positively influenced our Pakistani hosts. We fit into their category of “respectable” people rather than imaging their stereotype of immoral Westerners.

*Stereotypes and sexual harassment.* Unfortunately, a change of clothes does not always protect a woman from harassment. White women receive a great deal of sexually motivated attention in many cultures. Every country in the world includes many males who would love to make the “conquest” of a sexually available female.

Women have many culturally specific behaviors both to attract and to discourage male attention. These include clothing, posture, ways of moving, use of the eyes (or nonuse), scent, bodily distance, tone of voice, group behavior, age and status signals, times and places where it is acceptable for a woman to be alone, makeup or body paint, and a host of other symbolic behaviors. Women visitors to another culture often don't know how to give the right signals. A foreign visitor lacks social location and may not even have the language to complain effectively. As one rural development worker commented, “It's amazing how much better I'm treated when they discover I speak 'human.' ”

When we first arrived in Indonesia, village people often greeted us with the few English words they knew. They followed us with cries of “Hey, mister!” and “Good morning, miss!” at all times of day. Frances,

Jen Marion and Rina were also regaled with phrases like “I love you!” “I want to kiss you!” “You are so beautiful!” Crowds of high-school boys were the worst offenders. They assumed we could not understand their unprintable comments.

The problem of sexual harassment is worldwide and knows no cultural boundaries. With catcalls in the United States, pinches in Italy, staring in China and whispered propositions in almost every country of the world, women are objectified as targets of masculine conquest. Some women shrug off or even enjoy such attention. But for most it is a mild irritant and sometimes a source of fear and rage.

Harassment has few age limitations. Both my wife and our twenty-one-year-old daughter may be pursued, wooed and insulted by males ranging in age from ten to eighty. Once in Jerusalem, after a day of mild flirtations, our elderly taxi driver tried to convince my wife to give him a kiss. I was upset and frustrated by his brazenness, but the man was so old that my wife was merely amused. It takes too much emotional energy to react to *every* sexual come-on.

For a woman in a foreign culture, sexual harassment can increase insecurity and alienation. She may lack the nuanced understanding and the cultural skills necessary to defuse or escape the situation. This can lead to loss of self-confidence and feelings of helplessness. In her own culture, sexual harassment is also disturbing and may be more dangerous. Violent crimes against women have reached alarming proportions in the United States. But at least most Americans can recognize the complex meanings of sexual communication in their own context and know how to avoid situations that are unpleasant or dangerous.

In some countries where verbal and indirect harassment is notorious, the probabilities of assault or rape may be very low. Nevertheless, the stress may be greater in a foreign context than in a more dangerous

setting that is better understood. When my daughter lived in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, she could go almost anywhere, day or night, without fear of assault. But the unsolicited attention of young men often made her prefer to remain a prisoner in her own room. Going out alone just wasn't worth the hassle.

The experience of consistently being treated as an object of sexual attention easily gives rise to sexual stereotypes regarding foreign men. In the United States there is a common stereotype of Latin, Middle Eastern and Indian men as sexual predators. The aggressive few are taken as representative of their whole cultures. These men are easy to meet because they are looking for opportunities to get to know white women.

One tall, handsome Middle Eastern man found that his stereotype of "loose American women" was confirmed during the first part of his stay in America.<sup>6</sup> After a number of relatively easy sexual conquests, however, he realized that his experience applied only to a certain type of women. He called them "foreign student groupies." They were insecure, socially marginal women who apparently could not form satisfactory relationships with American men. The American women he wanted to know were not nearly as sexually available. In the process of learning that his own stereotypes were invalid, he contributed to the negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern men.

In Indonesia many Western women have a negative stereotype of young Indonesian men. Some men congregate in tourist areas and try to make serious sexual contact. Others have no serious sexual intent but are curious about white people. For a man, this curiosity can become annoying. Tourists are asked the same few questions dozens of times in a single day. Superficial conversations with strangers are emotionally exhausting.

For women the constant attention afforded to strangers is more

disturbing, especially since the line between sexual attention and curiosity is rather vague. When we were traveling by ship between some Indonesian islands, groups of Indonesian men gathered to stare at any white woman who ventured alone on deck. In the West staring for long periods of time at someone of the opposite sex is impolite and even threatening. In highly communal cultures there are no such inhibitions to curiosity. Personal privacy is not a particularly important value. People may come and look through your window to see what you're doing or enter your room without knocking.<sup>7</sup>

Staring doesn't always indicate curiosity or sexual interest. Sometimes it is intended as a threat. A white person in an all-black or all-Latino neighborhood in Los Angeles would be naive to interpret prolonged staring as a neutral gesture. Where staring is known to be rude, prolonged staring is seldom friendly. But in many cultures the personal privacy Americans assume as their natural right does not exist. In China almost everyone stares at strange white people!

Sexual harassment is a fact of life everywhere, though it is more extreme in some places than others. Still, many adventurous women travel alone and live with great pleasure in almost every country of the world. Others find it more enjoyable to travel with a friend or group. Whether alone or together, many women find that the value of experiencing the richness of another culture far outweighs the occasional discomfort brought on by crude men. You cannot escape harassment just by staying at home!

Recently one of my Indonesian students had the opportunity to attend a conference in Oxford, England. She asked me if it was safe for a woman to travel alone in England or if she should go directly to and from the conference. (America is also widely perceived as a wild and dangerous place.) I advised her to go for as long as she could and travel as much as possible. The educational and cultural treasures

to be gained from travel in another country far outweigh the dangers of sexual harassment. That doesn't mean it is safe, but neither is crossing the street. In either case you have to be careful.

*Combating sexual stereotypes.* Women are not just passive victims of the corrupt practices of evil men. They are active agents who can resist sexual harassment in a number of ways.

First of all, it is important to recognize the reality of the problem. Naiveté can lead to unpleasant results, not least of which is the confused perception that the victim of harassment is somehow to blame or that harassment is just a local custom. Sometimes ignorance of local conventions encourages sexual harassment. But even if that is true, it does not justify the harassment.

The critical factors in sexual harassment are lack of respect, an aggressive, insistent manner and/or an element of threat. Sexual harassment is wrong, no matter what cultural mistakes were made by the visitor. Many decent men in all cultures will not harass a visiting woman even if they are sexually tempted by her "strange" behavior. A few men in all cultures will harass *any* woman if they think they can get away with it.

Sexually motivated attention is not necessarily harassment. Communication between men and women often includes a sexual element. People from different cultures differ on the acceptability of mild flirtation in social situations. Signals of sexual interest are given in many ways. Such signals, even if inappropriate or immoral, may not qualify as harassment if they are polite and noncoercive.

Women should not accept sexual harassment in the name of cultural sensitivity, either as their fault or as something that can't be helped. Sometimes ignoring the insult is the best or only defense. But sometimes men (or boys) need to know their actions are offensive. A polite greeting in good Indonesian often brings order to an unruly

group of students who don't quite realize you are a real person. At other times more direct action seems necessary. One Western woman confronted some crude Javanese boys with the question "Belum orang Jawa, kok?" (What? Are you not yet Javanese?), which is tantamount to suggesting that they are not yet fully human.

Sometimes nonverbal signs of displeasure are effective. While I would not recommend this as a normal strategy, I can understand the feelings of an American woman who had reached her frustration limit after being stared at through a car window from less than a foot away. To the consternation of her admirers, she suddenly turned to face them and stuck out her tongue!

The most effective nonverbal communication is to conform to local conventions of modesty. A visitor is a guest on another's turf, whether it is across town or across the ocean. Consideration for the values and sensibilities of the host is not only polite but also safe. The easiest (though often ignored) way to follow local conventions of politeness and modesty is in clothing.<sup>8</sup> Travelers who aspire to know people and not just sights should wear clothes that are appropriate in the eyes of their hosts.

This does not usually require buying a whole new outfit, as we did in Pakistan (though it might provide a good excuse). Western styles are now common in most countries. But attention to what local women of one's own age and status wear in different social situations can provide a rough guide to standards of modesty.<sup>9</sup> My daughter, who enjoys sleeveless shirts, wide necklines and short skirts, found that in Indonesia she was not comfortable wearing most of her American clothes. In spite of the heat, she soon learned that sleeves, high necklines and long skirts brought more respect and less unwanted attention.

Nonverbal signals may be given in other ways as well. In many cultures certain times, places and types of behavior are considered

inappropriate for women but not for men. Women who do the wrong thing in the wrong place at the wrong time of day are likely to be misunderstood. This is tricky, because sometimes it's a good idea to flout practices that are oppressive to women. At other times it's not worth it.

One night soon after our arrival in Indonesia in 1989, my wife heard the sounds of an outdoor dramatic performance in our village. Since everyone else was busy, she went by herself to see what was happening. I was surprised when she returned after less than half an hour. There were other women at the performance, but she didn't like the kind of attention she received. We soon learned that Indonesian women don't usually go out alone at night. To be without friends or family in a social setting at night invites all kinds of speculations. It sends the wrong signals, especially if you happen to be blond!

Nevertheless, women and men who sojourn in another culture have the important ethical task of resisting and breaking common sexual stereotypes. Stereotypes are based on oversimplified images of whole classes of people. Truth destroys false stereotypes. Women of integrity undermine images that trivialize, objectify and degrade them. Patterns of masculine behavior that assume male superiority are undermined by men who relate to women with respect and justice.

No one can overturn entrenched prejudices in a short time. But the cumulative effect of strong examples of integrity in gender relations can both enlighten individual men and give hope to women. At the very least, stereotypes of all Western women as sexually promiscuous cannot survive sustained contact with Western women who show dignity and chastity in sexual relations. Married couples can show an example of healthy married love and friendship between equals. Though far from perfect, our marriage has elicited comments from young Indonesians who see hope for women in an example of equal

partnership, mutual respect and genuine love.

There will always be Western men and women who propagate ugly stereotypes by fulfilling negative expectations. "Sexual tourism" involving extreme forms of sexual exploitation of poor and powerless women and children is a continuing, serious problem in many Asian countries. It is not always ignorance that causes suspicion of white (and Japanese) males. People of color in many countries of the world remember a long history of imperialist arrogance in which male conquerors treated powerless women and children as objects of sexual pleasure. Sexual exploitation of the poor by rich foreigners is still widespread.

Western women also contribute to negative stereotypes. In spite of AIDS, there continue to be white women who initiate or accept casual sexual relations with a variety of local men, thus reinforcing images propagated by third-rate movies. The stereotype of pleasure-seeking, helpless rich women is also unfortunately exemplified by too many tourists.

In China a communist government recruitment agency specifically requested *Christian* teachers from the West. A significant factor in the unusual invitation was the agency's experience of Christians as sexually responsible and dedicated to their work. In contrast, other foreign teachers were described (stereotyped!) as sexually immoral and undisciplined. Christians, by their character and lifestyle, had broken the negative stereotypes that underlie sexual harassment.

### **Structural Patterns in Gender Conflict**

Crosscultural ethical problems faced by women and men include more than stereotypes and prejudices held by individuals. Institutions, practices and structures of whole societies systematically differentiate between the rights of men and those of women.

*The cultural universality of sexism.* Every society recorded in history or present today is structured to give men more recognized prestige and power than women.<sup>10</sup> Almost everything done by men is also done by women. In one culture men weave baskets and women build houses, while in another women weave baskets and men build houses. But whichever work is done by men is considered more important. The culture where men weave baskets may even despise the other group because its men do “women’s work.”<sup>11</sup>

In Russia the majority of physicians are women. But these doctors receive low wages and very little status. Their status and power are analogous to those of nurses in the United States. Until recently physicians in the United States wielded enormous social and economic power. Most of them were men. Today the prestige of the American medical profession is in sharp decline. Perhaps it is only coincidence that finally women are entering medical schools in significant numbers.<sup>12</sup>

The only gender roles that are always differentiated in all cultures are those to do with childbirth and lactation for women and warfare for men.<sup>13</sup> Every other task is performed by some men and some women in some cultures. Why then is women’s work so universally devalued? Women do two-thirds of the world’s work, earn a tenth of its income and own less than a hundredth of its property.<sup>14</sup> Rough statistics like this conceal the true power of women in the world, but they do illustrate a worldwide pattern.

As Mao Zedong stated in 1940,

Women are subjugated by four thick ropes. A man in China is usually subjected to the domination of three systems of authority: political authority, clan authority and religious authority. As for women, in addition to being dominated by these three systems, they are also dominated by men. But women hold up half the sky.<sup>15</sup>

The way men dominate women differs in every culture. There are an infinite variety of structures and rationalizations for oppression. But in every case, ideological or psychological assumptions of male superiority are reinforced by practices and institutions controlled by men. All of this has been extensively documented.

In her profound study of women Simone de Beauvoir wrote,

But it will be asked at once: how did all this begin? It is easy to see that the duality of the sexes, like any duality, gives rise to conflict. And doubtless the winner will assume the status of absolute. But why should man have won from the start? It seems possible that women could have won the victory; or that the outcome of the conflict might never have been decided. How is it that this world has always belonged to the men and that things have begun to change only recently? Is this change a good thing? Will it bring about an equal sharing of the world between men and women?<sup>16</sup>

*Feminism in the United States.* The modern feminist movement was a reaction to the declining importance of the family as a social institution. World War II required the active participation of American women in economic life to support the war effort. After the war women were expected to return to the domestic sphere and achieve all their fulfillment in caring for their husbands and children. As Betty Friedan vividly showed in *The Feminine Mystique*, “the problem that has no name” involved the trivialization of women through their limitation to a sphere of activity no longer vital to the nation.<sup>17</sup>

Traditional societies also radically limit women to the sphere of home and family. But in traditional societies the family is vital to educational, economic, social and political life. In the modern West, large institutions (schools, hospitals, corporations, social welfare, old age homes, the entertainment industry, clubs, the media, the military and even the church) have replaced the former functions of the family.

The family is considered a place of emotional security with little connection to public life.<sup>18</sup> A traditional American housewife may be economically secure but have far less power than women in more traditional societies. Women who “have everything” are sometimes intensely unhappy. Feminism did not create this social reality but rather responded to it.

There is no uniform “Western” view of the role of women. Theories abound as to the original causes of the radical inequality of women all over the world. Biological, hormonal and evolutionary theories are highly unconvincing.<sup>19</sup> Since all the social, economic and political roles of men are duplicated by women in various cultures, it is likely that culture and socialization are the primary cause of the differences.

Christians differ greatly on what is implied by biblical teaching. In America there are wide differences of interpretation between white, black and Hispanic women, between “traditionalists” and “feminists,” and even between different kinds of feminists. Different cultural, social and economic contexts produce different perceptions of gender and different readings of the Bible. Our convictions of what is right for a woman or man spring from different patterns of family, ethnic and class structure.

Nevertheless, women and men in the West experience the status and role of women within a broadly common culture. Using categories borrowed from John Condon and Fathi Yousef, we can broadly describe North American culture as *individualistic* in its relational orientation, *democratic* in its view of authority, *open* in its approach to role behavior and *highly mobile* in its sense of openness to movement and change.<sup>20</sup> Commonly held assumptions about the foundations of our social relationships may cause Western women to appear all alike in a foreign context. An Iranian might see very little difference in the overt gender behaviors of a radical lesbian feminist from New York

and a fundamentalist housewife from Iowa.

Ever since the Fall and the subsequent “curse” in Genesis 3, there have been conflict, domination and subservience in the relations between men and women. Some women and men have always transcended the structural inequalities of their cultures. Some cultures have come close to structural gender equality. But even the most conservative “traditionalists” would concede the term *oppression* to describe some cultural practices of men toward women. The rapidly growing literature of women’s studies vividly documents the suffering of women at the hands of men in virtually every historical period and culture.

The problem for crosscultural ethics is not whether sexual oppression exists but how to understand and respond to it. When a woman enters another culture, she cannot remain neutral to sexual oppression. It affects her identity in deep and significant ways. The definition of sexual oppression is controversial and complex, even in our own culture.<sup>21</sup> In another culture misunderstandings and misinterpretations are inevitable. Some of the structures of gender behavior in the non-Western world are morally repugnant and almost incomprehensible to most Westerners. The best known and most widespread of these structures is the systematic segregation of women from men.

*The segregation of women from the public realm.* Sexual segregation is most obvious in the Muslim world but is common in many other non-Western countries. The limitation of women, in varying degrees, to the sphere of home and family is common in Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Confucianist cultures. The most extreme structures of female segregation are symbolized by the *purdah*, a full-length veil or curtain used in some Muslim and Hindu societies for screening women from contact with all strange men.

During my family’s travels in Pakistan, despite the gracious behavior

of many Pakistanis we soon experienced a severe sense of cultural dislocation that was related to the treatment of women. The whole country seemed to have banned women from the public sphere. While staying in Islamabad I never saw the wife or daughters of our innkeeper, although we all lived in the same house. Hardly any women appeared on the streets or in public places. The ones we saw often wore veils from head to foot, with only their (heavily made-up) eyes showing. One day I spent an hour counting the men and women in the center of the capital city and arrived at the (unscientific) estimate that 90 percent of all people were male. I christened Pakistan “the land without women.”

At times the segregation was humorous. One day I followed my wife and daughters onto a public bus, only to discover that I was surrounded by giggling, veiled women. Quickly I ascertained that the iron grating from ceiling to floor in the middle of the bus was intended to separate the women in the front of the bus from the men in the rear. I scrambled through a small hole in the partition to arrive with relief in the male section. Of course most buses do not have such a partition. Most vehicles are for males only, and modest women must wait for less frequent all-female or partitioned vehicles.

While the absence of women in public seemed tragic to me, it posed a more serious problem to Frances, Jen Marion and Rina. Relationships with other women were very hard to establish, as women in public did not talk to strangers. Women came out only for absolutely necessary tasks. Even the shopkeepers, market people and street sellers were all men. Unlike the men, women did not sit around in public discussing politics, religion and culture. No doubt there was a private sphere in which women related to other women and to trusted males, but as foreign tourists we had no access to that sphere.

Since Frances and our daughters could not talk to unrelated men,

they were cut off from the normal, everyday interactions that make travel interesting. While I engaged in deep conversations about Islam and Christianity, Pakistani culture, Western imperialism, colonialism and even English literature with literate Pakistanis, my wife and daughters were isolated to their rooms or to silence unless accompanied by me.

While traveling we spent most of our time in public places. The whole structure of public life was tailored to the needs of men. Frances had to express her needs through me, or they went unmet. During a two-day bus trip into the mountains, the simple matter of going to the bathroom became a serious and embarrassing problem. Even though we were on a general public bus, Frances, Jen Marion and Rina were the only women passengers. The bus stopped at least five times a day for the mandatory Muslim prayer times. In addition to prayer, these were times when men wandered off to relieve themselves in the bushes. This was considerably more difficult for women in a semidesert terrain! The frustration reached its peak when one of our party, who had desperately waited for nightfall, tried to wander away from the party in the dark, only to be followed by a solicitous Pakistani man who wanted to make sure that she was "all right"! His concern may have been sincere, since we heard gunfire and the mountainous area included many fierce-looking armed Afghan refugees. But such concern only exacerbated the problem. Our whole family wanted to see the world. Pakistanis seemed to think that women should stay at home.<sup>22</sup>

Men are confronted with crosscultural gender segregation in a different way. Men are affected by abusive or unjust treatment of women who are close to them. They also face pressures to conform to the male gender-role expectations of the culture. Gender expectations for men range from the assumption that they will spend all their waking hours with male colleagues to the common practice of being

served by women who may eat the leftovers only when the men are finished. These moral dilemmas are often the flip side of problems faced by women.

Sexual segregation enhances the freedom of men and curtails women's activities. One woman told me that as a male I would never understand the frustration of being a prisoner in my own home. Though a woman may need solitude—time away from her family or friends—she cannot go out at night. Understanding the cultural forms of discrimination may not lessen the sense of injustice experienced. In many countries, at night the world belongs to men.

A knowledgeable observer from the Middle East estimated that a high percentage of Western families in the Middle East left because of the wife's dissatisfaction.<sup>23</sup> He noted that the women's task of adjustment was much more difficult than that of men. While men found a respected place in the life of the community, their wives were confined to the home. Even women who saw their primary role as supporting their family found it very difficult. Few families lasted more than a year or two. Some returned home with serious emotional trauma.

One American woman apparently adapted well to life in Lebanon by abandoning her career and concentrating her attention on raising a family. Yet small everyday events left bitter memories. One day she walked through an outdoor market, traditionally a male preserve. There she spotted a Lebanese pastor who was a close friend of the family. When she called out to him in greeting, he averted his eyes and hurried past her. Later he apologized in private. He explained that it was not proper for him to greet a woman in public. But for his American friend, understanding the cultural conventions did not remove the sting of rejection.<sup>24</sup>

*Paternalism and patriarchy.* In many countries paternalism is the

underlying rationale for sexual segregation. The restriction of women to the home does not necessarily imply that men consider them less intellectually competent. Women may even earn high educational and professional standing. But their achievements do not end paternalism. One Algerian woman is a respected ophthalmologist (eye specialist), with full freedom in her career. In the office, men obey her. But she lives with her brother-in-law, and in the private sphere she must obey him. She must return home by 7:00 p.m. every day and may not go out at night.

Paternalism assumes that men must protect women from a dangerous world. Women are sometimes considered not only weaker physically but also weaker morally and spiritually. Therefore patriarchy is necessary. Men are the rulers of women. In an ancient Chinese proverb, the common pattern is explicit: "A woman follows her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son after her husband's death."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the Laws of Manu (Hindu scriptures) state:

Her father protects her in childhood; her husband protects her in youth; and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence. . . . Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under control. . . . Through their passion for men, through their mutable temper, through their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal toward their husbands, however carefully they may be guarded.<sup>26</sup>

A woman who lives in a paternalistic culture faces a series of crosscultural ethical problems. As a Western woman, she is offended by conventional behavior. First, she must interpret the meaning and intent of the behavior. A single American woman in Java learned that her boarding house had an 8:00 p.m. curfew. Before hearing this rule she had already moved in and paid a year's rent. In this case what

appeared a major problem evaporated when she discovered all she had to do was ask for a key if she expected to be out late. If she forgot, there was always someone up who would let her in with no questions asked. So the rule was merely a nod to traditional conventions of proper behavior that were no longer followed.

Second, Western women abroad must sometimes adjust to conventional patterns of behavior. The woman in the above case soon discovered that her real dilemma was not the curfew but the fact that hardly any of her housemates ever *wanted* to be out later than 8:00 p.m.! She was forced to adjust to this reality. Going out alone at night was too emotionally draining. Another woman living in North Africa also chose to follow local conventions. When Algerian men asked her out for a date, she refused, even though she missed the experience of dating. She knew that in that culture “good” women did not go out alone with men, and she did not want to borrow trouble or ruin her reputation.

Third, a woman should know when she cannot conform to expected patterns of behavior and be prepared to pay the consequences. Far more subtle than curfews or veils are the assumptions of what constitutes modest feminine behavior in a paternalistic society. It has been noted that in America if a man is aggressive in his job he is called a “go-getter,” while if a woman acts the same way she is considered pushy. A Thai professor told me that in Asia women are expected to act feminine. They should move slowly, use a soft voice, and be gentle in manner and delicate in dress. He commented that an ethics professor from Yale was not appreciated in Thailand because she was so aggressive. She got a reputation as pushy, argumentative, domineering and insensitive.

The Thai professor told of another American woman who was equally unconventional by Thai standards of femininity. Unlike her

Yale compatriot, however, this woman won the respect and love of the Thais with whom she worked. The difference seemed to be that they could see that she really loved and respected them. Moreover, in spite of a busy schedule she took time to reach out to poor people. Her crass American ways (by Thai standards) may have been beyond her ability (or wish) to change. But it did not matter to those who saw her integrity and love.

Sometimes the very qualities we consider desirable in an educated person are misunderstood in another context. They may not be things a woman is willing to change. A missionary in Ethiopia was informed that her behavior was scandalous for a woman. Her crime was that she looked people in the eye, walked “like a man” with her head up and expressed her opinions clearly. An African commented, “Only a prostitute would act as bold as she did!” Another American woman in Africa soon became known by the name “She Who Works like a Man.”

In order to understand foreign assumptions of “proper” feminine behavior, it is helpful to see how Western behavior appears to others. The following story begins with the statement of an American teacher in Ethiopia who despaired of ever teaching her girls “simple human dignity.”

“For three years, I’ve tried to get those dear little girls to behave like normal human beings, to have some pride, to hold up their heads, look me in the face, and answer a question in a voice I can hear without straining. They’re so bright; they learn as fast as the children back home, but they’re hopeless, absolutely hopeless. . . .”

The school day ended. Kebedetch walked stiffly home. She felt rigid, brave and frightened. Entering the *gojo* (small hut), Kebedetch was greeted warmly. Father asked the usual daily question: “What did you learn today?” Kebedetch threw back her head, looked her father in the eye, and proclaimed in a loud, clear voice, “Ethiopia is

composed of twelve provinces plus the Federated State of Eritrea. . . .”

Momma and Poppa talked late that night. What had happened to Kebedetch? She was no longer behaving as a normal human being. “Did you notice how she threw back her head like a man?” asked Poppa; “what has happened to her shyness as a woman?” “And her voice,” added Momma. “How happy I am that our parents were not present to hear a daughter of ours speak with the voice of a foreigner. She showed no modesty; she seemed to feel no pride.” “If she were normal, she would be ashamed to raise her head like that, being a girl-child, and to speak so loud as that,” Poppa added with a deep sigh. “Kebedetch has learned so much,” said Momma. “She knows more than I, and this has given me great joy. But if her learnings are making of her a strange, ungentle, beast-like person, I do not want her to learn more; she is my only daughter.” Poppa pondered. Finally he shook his head and spoke. . . . “The frightening behavior of hers tonight has convinced me. She has lost her sense of pride, lost her sense of shame, lost her dignity. She must never return to the school.”<sup>27</sup>

The manner of feminine behavior considered proper in many paternalistic cultures stems from complex cultural values. To reduce it all to sexist or patriarchal motivations is too simple and easily becomes ethnocentric. Westerners often consider individualistic, democratic, open and socially mobile patterns of behavior as norms against which all other cultures are measured. But women in some cultures may be more “advanced” than we think.

### **The Power of Women in Cultural Perspective**

Many Westerners believe women in the “Third World” lag far behind their more advanced Western counterparts in the struggle for equality.

But the reality is much more complex. Different cultures measure the meaning of relationships in different ways. In Java the richest young businessman must speak with deference to the old woman who sells fruit in the marketplace, while her counterpart in the West is consigned to powerlessness in a retirement home. In Pakistan women cover their heads, but men are expected to treat them with great respect.

The meaning of power cannot be measured in economic or legal terms. The feminist movement in the West has significantly improved the economic and legal rights of women, but many women still suffer injustice and live on the edge of crisis.<sup>28</sup> The widely documented “feminization of poverty” in America indicates that the percentage of the poor who are women and children is steadily growing. Many are the victims of family breakdown and have no regular means of support.

*Power and the family.* The actual power of women in some overtly patriarchal societies compares favorably with women’s power in Western society. While the existence of matriarchal societies is largely a myth, *matrifocal* societies are quite widespread. In a matrifocal society the mother plays the central role in the family. She is structurally, culturally and affectively central. In matrifocal societies both men and women have economic and ritual power.<sup>29</sup>

In Java, Indonesia, an island of over a hundred million people, there are many indications of a patriarchal society. Javanese women traditionally show deference to men. At a local celebration of Independence Day I attended a ceremonial dinner for the heads of a number of villages and neighborhoods, all of whom were men. The food was all prepared by wives who stayed in the back room except when serving the men. Since we were seated on mats on the floor, the women served us on their hands and knees, keeping their heads well

down to ensure that they were lower than those of the seated men.

Nevertheless, official appearances are deceiving. In many cases the wives were the ones who ran the local affairs, managed all the finances and made all important decisions for the community. Family economics is also controlled by the women. Traditionally a Javanese man turns over all income to his wife to take care of. True to the rule that women's work is considered less important than men's work, traditional Javanese consider real power to be spiritual rather than economic. Managing finances is a worldly affair best left to women.

In her study of the family in a Central Javanese town, Hildred Geertz concluded that both the family and the kindred system are matrifocal. She writes,

For the nuclear family to be matrifocal means that the woman has more authority, influence and responsibility than her husband, and at the same time receives more affection and loyalty. The concentration of both of these features on the female role leaves the male role relatively functionless in regard to the internal affairs of the nuclear family. In such circumstances it is unimportant whether or not the male role in the family is actually filled, or whether or not it is always occupied by the same man. For the kindred to be matrifocal means that the persons of greatest influence are women, and that the relationships of greatest solidarity are those between women or between persons related through women. Correspondingly, the relationships with the least amount of influence and solidarity are those between men or persons related through men.<sup>30</sup>

Although Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world, it is unlike Pakistan and many Middle Eastern countries, where women are segregated from the public sphere. In Indonesia most occupations are open to women. Most Indonesians are rural agricultural workers, and women not only work in the fields with men but also dominate the

small-scale agricultural trade in indigenous markets. At least in traditional sectors of the society, men have the titles of authority, but it is questionable whether they have more power.

*Women and modernization.* Modernization does not necessarily bring increased power to women. An ideology of equality is not the same as actual equality. For example, the Indonesian government makes strong statements in support of gender equality and the participation of women in all areas of national development. But Indonesian integration in a global, capitalist economy may not be accompanied by improvements in the relative power of women.

During the process of modernization, a growth of materialism seems to accompany the rise in prosperity. Prestige is increasingly identified with wealth rather than other kinds of power. Formal political power, dominated by men, is wedded to economic interests, and large institutions take over more and more of the functions traditionally served by the family. A traditional ideology of female subservience is replaced by modern notions of equality, but the family as an institutional vehicle for influencing all areas of life becomes relatively weak. As a result, the relative position of women in public life becomes progressively more marginal.

Alongside its official message of the equality of the sexes, the government emphasizes the primary, natural function of women as mothers and wives. But modernization brings about a decline in the social and economic function of the family. Women are encouraged to participate in all areas of public life. But those who do are at a distinct disadvantage. In addition to the demands of a paid profession, they must also do all their traditional homemaking functions. Both the family and the profession are shortchanged, and women become very over-worked.

This pattern is emerging in Indonesia but is visible all over the

world.<sup>31</sup> It is particularly vivid in China. After two thousand years of patriarchal subjugation, the communist revolution brought guarantees of equal rights for women in the workplace. This included the requirement that they do an equal share of the work assigned to them. But equality in the workplace was not accompanied by equality in the home or family. Women are still expected to do all the housework. In a Chinese government survey taken in 1986 of fifteen hundred women scientists and technicians, 75 percent said that they were obliged to work a “double day.”<sup>32</sup> Modern ideology may increase a women’s options in the workplace while actually decreasing her power in society.

The ideology and appearance of patriarchy are not *necessarily* signs that women are powerless, and its removal does not necessarily lead to an increase in women’s power. Even in societies where the public realm is reserved for men, women may be central figures who hold the community together. Nancy Tanner argues that this is the case in the American black family. “There is a clear conception of what a woman should be: a strong, resourceful mother with a structurally central position. Girls are socialized for such roles.”<sup>33</sup> Black males may be “macho,” but everyone depends on the mother.

*Indirect channels of power.* One of my students in Berkeley expressed anxiety about her role as a woman in the “macho” culture of Mexico. She was going to spend several months working with a church near Mexico City. When she returned she was not only relieved at the freedom she had experienced but overjoyed at the strength and leadership of the Mexican women with whom she worked—even though men occupied all the formal positions of leadership in the church. The women were not only “permitted” to work behind the scenes; the church depended on them to run things. They exercised power and responsibility. Women did the real ministry of the church.

Western women who have lived in most parts of the world report

similar experiences. A North American woman confided that she had a much harder time coping with the condescending attitude of some male American evangelical leaders than she did with Muslim men and women in North Africa! North African women defer to the overt rule of men, but men depend on women in many areas of life, and the women know it.

After several years in Kenya, one woman found adjustment to life in the States much harder than her life in Kenya. She acknowledged that Kenyan sexism was infuriating. Kenyan women often dropped their own plans to wait on the needs of men. Sometimes men ignored her wishes simply because she was “only a woman.” Kenyan women always served the men first and expected to eat what was left.

Nevertheless, she saw African women not as weak but as strong. African women had ways of adjusting to male demands. By the time the men had been served their food, the women were often too full to eat anyway, because they had tasted everything on the way! To her, the trivialization of American women living in the suburbs was much more demoralizing than the obvious patriarchy in Kenya.

*Cultures that honor women.* Some paternalistic cultures that segregate women to the spheres of home and family honor women more deeply than liberal societies that conceal misogynous practices behind a veneer of equality. I will never forget the shock I felt when a Pakistani man took me to task for the oppression of women in America. It seemed self-evident to me that Pakistan was a barbarous country that kept half its population in virtual prison. But he didn't see it that way.

He said that according to the Qur'an, women are the most precious treasure on earth. They are far more noble than men and should be guarded from oppression and defilement. He pointed out that many women hold high positions in Pakistan, including that of prime minister. Pakistani women excel as scientists, executives, doctors,

professors and so on. Women are equal in ability to men and should pursue their educational and professional opportunities to as high a level as possible. But women are vulnerable to the crude and vulgar lust of men. "Therefore," he continued, "the veil that shields a woman from violating eyes is a mark of the honor we hold for women."

This gentle Muslim could not understand why we in the West permit such gross exploitation and degradation of women in our societies. The treatment of women as trivial sex objects in advertisements, movies and television, not to mention their dehumanization in pornography and prostitution, is criminal. His only daughter is attending university in the United States, and his greatest fear is for her safety in our lawless society!

This analysis of sexual oppression was a revelation to me. I realized there was some truth to his perspective and that I had made the characteristic American error of confusing freedom with equality and justice. Since women in America are relatively free to do and be whatever they like, while women in Pakistan are restricted and confined by veils and taboos, I thought it followed that America was the land of equality and justice while Pakistan was not only patriarchal but indeed feudal.

My knowledge of Pakistan is impressionistic and superficial. Certainly I am in no position to judge the position of women there relative to that of women in the United States. In Pakistan there are forms of restriction and oppression that I find appalling. But I must confess that the same applies to America. Muslim polemics against the West are sometimes extreme caricatures. Decadent Western society is portrayed as depriving women of family solidarity, marital faithfulness and economic security.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, Muslim women are portrayed as fully equal, protected by law and honored in the community. But women who excel in Pakistan do so against the odds. Illiteracy is high in

Pakistan, and if you are a boy you are more than twice as likely to be sent to school than if you are a girl.<sup>35</sup> Women may be honored, but they are also chained. They may be a treasure, but they are a treasure owned by men.

A Muslim critique of Western oppression of women is important. Many Americans have a stereotyped, simplistic perception of the status of Muslim women. A Muslim magazine chose a kind of superwoman as its model woman. She has nine successful, highly educated children, teaches in the university, holds office in several Islamic institutions, lectures on Muslim teaching, is a board member of several schools, hospitals and orphanages, is fluent in Arabic and practices her religion with great devotion.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps this idealized picture of overwork explains why women's life expectancy in Muslim countries is so low!<sup>37</sup>

The fact that women exercise power and are respected in patriarchal countries should neither surprise us nor lead to the conclusion that patriarchy is morally acceptable. A Chinese woman from Hong Kong commented that Asian women have more power than is apparent. Older women are especially powerful. Women cloak their power behind a gentle and meek exterior in order to protect male egos. But even in the male bastions of Korea and Japan, women have great influence.

But that does not excuse the injustice of more work for less pay, less prestige and less recognition. It does not excuse the lies of male superiority that conceal the many ways in which "women hold up half the sky."

### **The Crosscultural Task of Gender Justice**

*Biblical perspectives on power and evil.* According to the biblical story of human relations, gender conflict began in the Garden of Eden. Man and woman were both created in the image of God and together given dominion over the earth. The primal sin that separated humanity from

God also separated man and woman. The temptation was not to sex but rather to power. Both woman and man wanted to be like God.

The results of the curse in Genesis 3 led to male tendencies to exchange dominion over nature for domination over women. The flip side of male domination is a female tendency to exchange dominion over nature for dependence on men. As Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen puts it, the characteristic male sin is domination while women are tempted to sacrifice responsibility for sociability.<sup>38</sup> Both sexes are sinners who seek their own power in ways that are destructive of true human community.

The reconciliation brought about by the life, death and resurrection of Christ not only bridges the gap between human beings and God but also breaks down the power barriers between ethnic groups, between rich and poor, and between men and women. "There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). This ideal is worth struggling for today. It is the characteristic pattern of relationships in the coming kingdom of God.

From this brief sketch a number of biblical assumptions may be drawn about men and women in different cultures. First, men and women are equal in value, responsibility and overall ability in all human cultures. Their roles may differ for cultural, biological and contextual reasons. But every culture should honor a woman's equal dignity and provide her with opportunities to exercise her gifts and responsibilities.

The essential equality of men and women explains why even in cultures that systematically discriminate against women there is ample evidence that women still "hold up half the sky." That is, they are never mere adjuncts of men but are just as vital for the health (*shalom*) of society. Thus it is not surprising that women often exercise

substantial power even in societies that conceal their importance behind an ideology of male superiority.

Second, men and women are equally sinners. Women are not morally superior to men, nor men to women. The characteristic patterns taken by the sins of men and women may be different, but they are mutually reinforcing. Male domination is enabled by female dependency. Both men and women seek power, although they often seek it in different ways.

The characteristic patterns of male sin have led to the creation of patriarchal structures in most societies. Even though neither sex is morally superior to the other, it is safe to say that women are more often victims of male oppression than vice versa. Of course in individual cases the converse may be true. Since women often exercise power in more hidden ways, individual men may be oppressed by individual women. But structurally men have greater power to oppress women than vice versa. And according to the values of the kingdom of God, oppression is not only bad for the oppressed, it is bad for the oppressor and for the entire community.

Third, male domination and female overdependency are evils to be opposed in anticipation of the kingdom of God. The curse in Genesis 3 describes a characteristic pattern of sinful gender relations in all cultures. It should not be taken as normative. Patriarchy ("your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you," Gen 3:16) is a curse rather than a pattern of creation. The curse included evils like pain in childbearing, toil and sweat in work, thorns and thistles in agriculture, and death itself. Patriarchal gender relations fall into the same class of evils to be combated.

This implies that gender justice is not an area of cultural relativity. Sinful domination and dependency are evident in all cultures, and in all cultures they are wrong. Just as racism, oppression of the poor and

wanton destruction of creation are wrong in all cultures, so sexism is evil in all cultures.

An Indonesian once commented to me that feminism was unnecessary in Indonesia because men and women have equal rights and there is harmony between the sexes. I thought to myself, “Not likely.” If it were true (and it’s not), Indonesia would be the first such Eden since the original Garden.

*Learning from women and men in a strange context.* It is hard to distinguish sexism from other forms of power relations, even in one’s own culture. Feminism is a powerful interpretive tool for understanding sexual discrimination. But its overuse is dangerous. If all complex situations in which women experience suffering in their relations with men are interpreted through the lens of sexism, men and women are polarized and other factors are obscured.

The first task of a stranger in a foreign culture is to listen and learn. Women and men who live within a culture know far more than a stranger about the ways in which they sin against each other. A white middle-class American feminist interpretation may radically misconstrue the situation of women in another culture. Black womanist critiques of white feminism in America demonstrate how different women interpret and prioritize their experience differently.

Categories and terms (including *feminism*, *sexism* and *patriarchy*) illuminate reality in one context but may obscure it in another. For example, one intelligent Chinese career woman rejected the idea that women in Asia are ruled by men and need more power. She said, “We women in Asia already have a great deal of power. What we need is for that power to be recognized and acknowledged.”

Some Asian feminists disagree with this perspective and welcome the interpretive tools forged by feminists in the West. They argue that “sexism,” “oppression,” “patriarchy” and other Western interpretive

concepts are very helpful in casting light on their experience. Feminist ideas have spread throughout the world. An intercultural dialogue on gender relations is very valuable. Within this conversation, the stranger is a partner in dialogue who may freshly see what is hidden to an insider.

*Transforming unequal structures of power.* A woman from the West cannot change social structures that have been formed over centuries. Inequality is not just a matter of individual patriarchal attitudes. Social, political and economic structures systematically control what classes of people have access to power. Change is usually gradual and painful. As we have seen, ideological and even legal improvements in the status of women do not necessarily improve the lot of women. Real equality requires both changed attitudes and new structures that provide women with access to recognized power.

Sometimes Western women create subtle changes in structural assumptions simply because their whole manner of life contradicts “the way it has always been done.” Such women do not internalize the inferiority promoted by conventional practices. Thus the practices and the structures underlying them are called into question. A foreign woman can be a catalyst for change in part because the particular patterns of patriarchy in a strange culture are not a part of her already-formed identity.

An American who lived in Algeria related that a foreign context made it much easier to deal with sexism than at home. Since the culture was so foreign, it took a long time for her to internalize any feelings of inferiority that might otherwise be prompted by belittling male behavior. She was so different from the Algerian conception of a woman that the patriarchal behavior she experienced seemed amusing, quaint or at least unrelated to who she really was.

Cultural distancing from conventional gender behavior may be

practiced by both sides. Western women are occasionally treated as a separate category from local women. Sometimes this can be hurtful. A missionary in Africa was asked to join a board of elders that was all male. She pointed out that the board did not usually elect women. The male elders replied, "Oh, but we do not think of you as a woman!" The woman was deeply hurt, as she felt they did not recognize her essential humanness as a woman. Nevertheless, she is a woman. Her nonconformity to stereotypes broke open a traditionally all-male structure.

Unconscious assumptions often reveal unequal structures of power. In many cultures (including American evangelicalism) it is assumed that if possible men should always take the public role. If there is a choice between a qualified man and a qualified woman, the invitation to lead will automatically go to the man. The choice may not imply disrespect for the woman. But male leaders are more afraid of offending the man if they choose the woman, especially if the woman is his wife. Networks of male friendship also make male candidates more real to their associates.

Men in a foreign context can challenge this pattern by refusing invitations to lead and suggesting equally qualified women in their place.<sup>39</sup> This may appear costly, but it is necessary if women are to break into all-male circles of influence. A Christian executive suggested to me that worldly leaders step on a rival in the climb to the top. Humanistic leaders help another along. But Christian leaders step down in order to give room to the other.

Women sojourners can also bring change by confronting discrimination in a culturally sensitive manner. Often male colleagues are unaware that their unconscious assumptions of gender roles are hurtful. In the context of a positive relationship, one woman frankly discussed with her director her needs for respect and encouragement.

Her sensitive openness cleared the air and opened the way for a healthier partnership.

In some cultures an unmarried older Western woman, or even a wife without children, may have difficulty finding entrance or acceptance. In many groups a woman's status takes a huge leap at the birth of her first child. A mother from the West may be enfolded into the community because her children form a natural bridge to the other women. An unmarried woman lacks access to the natural structures of power located in family institutions.

In other contexts a single older woman may find it easier to break out of gender stereotypes because she is not in the normal category of wife and mother. She is neither an adjunct to her husband nor "the mother of José." If she has valued skills, she may be regarded as an individual in her own right.

Many cultures have a special category for women who are strong leaders. The recorded history of most cultures includes accounts of strong women who transcended stereotyped gender roles. Sometimes the most rigidly patriarchal cultures made room for outstanding women leaders. From Queen Victoria, who ruled over the largest empire in history, to Cory Aquino, who mobilized a nation against impossible odds, there have been women who inspired the loyalty of even the most sexist and macho males.

Unfortunately, the exceptional woman who transcends all cultural and social barriers does not often pave the way for her more ordinary sisters. The normal patriarchal structures remain in place. Nevertheless, a foreign woman who refuses to follow the expectations of a paternalistic male leadership may be tolerated by those who value her presence. This is all the more true if behind her "unfeminine" manners can be seen a person of humble integrity who truly cares about the people she serves.

Some of the most effective crosscultural women I have known were unconventional personalities of great moral character. One of them, Pauline Hamilton, did not conform to any culture's stereotype of a missionary or a woman. She was short and overweight, smoked a pipe for her asthma, slept during the day, stayed up all night and managed to change the lives (and social structures) of hundreds of gang members throughout Taiwan.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps because she *was* a woman, she dared many things that no man had ever tried.

Most of us are not larger-than-life personalities who can change the world by sheer force of character. Nevertheless, the example of such people is instructive. Virtue and character are more important than conformity to conventional cultural expectations. Someone whose life is a True Story can transform the unequal structures of power.

*Recognizing and empowering women.* Effective crosscultural Christians recognize and empower others. Patriarchal assumptions repress the abilities of half the human family. Women learn they can succeed only within certain narrow boundaries. Someone from outside a culture can often recognize the special gifts of women who play second fiddle to less talented men. These women need the catalyst of an example. Everyone, regardless of sex, needs the support of people who believe in them.

Foreign women who adapt sensitively to a patriarchal context are pioneers who swim against the stream without being defeated. By their example they give hope to gifted women who may play a crucial role in the life of their church and nation. By encouraging women from a different ethnic community to excel, they participate in a worldwide movement for justice.

Men also must recognize and empower women. In some cases Western men can open or close the doors of opportunity for women in the Two-Thirds World. The recognition of women by respected

men, whether in a business, an urban development project, a hospital, a school or a church, may determine the future of a woman, and of the many others who will follow her.

Encouraging women within a strange social structure requires delicacy and tact. An American teacher in a Muslim country explained that she was cautious about radicalizing women beyond what they could handle. She felt it was crucial not to push a person beyond his or her ability to face the consequences of the new ideas or actions. Within a strict Muslim context, Western ideas of liberation could easily lead to rejection, shame, divorce or even death.

This perceptive teacher was also careful about her relation to the men and institutions that trusted her. When the director of her department suggested that she spend regular times with his wife, she was grateful for the opportunity and did not abuse his trust in her. The wife was a strict, conservative Muslim in a very traditional marriage. In honoring the husband's trust, the teacher could not directly talk to his wife about the role of women in a conservative Muslim marriage. If she had done so, the woman might have moved out! Yet the teacher's long visits did provide the wife with a radical example of a different way of being a woman.

On the other hand, when other Muslim women took the initiative to confide in this teacher their frustrations and hopes, she tended to share their anger. She saw the world through their eyes and shared with them her own hopes and dreams. Thus she walked a tightrope between respecting the religious and social world in which she was a visitor and letting in the light of the gospel for those who had eyes to see and ears to hear. Certainly her most effective communication to Muslim women was through her example and empathy for those who became her friends.

*Partnership in a movement for gender justice and peace.* We are all the

products of our culture and time. Therefore we need one another, the community of faith, the Bible and the Holy Spirit if we are to understand ourselves. No one culture can be said to have achieved justice and peace between the sexes. Therefore no one culture can be held up as the model for all others. The cultural oppression of women is well captured by Paulo Freire's definition of oppression in general. He writes,

Any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders [the] pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with [a person's] ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human.<sup>41</sup>

Even a minimal and negative definition of oppression such as this points to the existence of gender injustice wherever men and women live together. The biblical concept of *shalom*, however, reveals a positive ideal for gender relations. Augustine defines *shalom* as "the perfectly ordered, harmonious enjoyment of God and one another in God."<sup>42</sup> This is an ideal for all people in all cultures. Women and men from all cultures need one another in our imperfect search for *shalom*.

The ancient rift between Adam and Eve continues to be played out all over the world. The healing of this rift is one of the great promises of the coming kingdom of God. In the meantime, the work of the kingdom is crosscultural. Each culture has its own perverse methods of encouraging dominance in men and subservience in women. Each culture has also invented creative ways in which women transcend cultural discrimination. In each culture there are men and women who live in relative peace and justice with one another. The task for Christians in a strange culture is not to solve all the problems of that culture. Rather, it is to see what God is already doing. By humble listening we may be honored to participate with local women and

men who are seeking the kingdom.