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Underground Church Movements: The Surprising Role of Women's Networks

by *Rebecca Lewis*

Introduction

I have become increasingly convinced that a key to winning the Muslim world to Christ will be through strategically reaching Muslim women. As I've studied how God has used women in societies quite similar to the Muslim world, I've observed three characteristics of such societies:

1. the seclusion of women, especially from men;
2. an oppressive, hierarchical social structure that minimizes female leadership; and
3. persecution of believers and opposition to Christianity by the government.

One might expect that it would be counter-productive in such settings for large numbers of women to come to faith first, independently of the men. However, my studies so far suggest otherwise. If anything, God seems to use women to help create movements to Christ in *precisely* such societies. Still, working through women, as a specific strategy, has been largely overlooked in Muslim outreach. I hope this paper will encourage further discussion of this possibility.

To the Male First?

When my husband and I first went to Morocco at the beginning of the 1980's, the literature on Muslim evangelism was clear: Seek to win male heads of households. While that works well when it can be accomplished, I began to notice some patterns during our seven years in North Africa. First, many who were being won to Christ were not male heads of households at all, but unmarried young men. Quite frequently, these men would revert to Islam when they got married. A few key men did continue in their faith, and went on to become leaders among the few believers in the country. Curiously, these men often had believing mothers who had been won to Christ by women missionaries years earlier.

Later, as I studied the rise of the early church in the first few centuries, I noticed the same thing. Several key men, such as Constantine and Augustine, had believing, praying mothers who had tried to guide them into the faith. I became intrigued by the often unseen role of women in the spread of the gospel and the establishment of the church.

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In this preliminary study, I will first look at how women impacted the rapid spread of Christianity in the Greco-Roman world. Next, I will show how women's movements have thrived under similarly trying circumstances (especially in Korea and China), contributing to spectacular church growth. Finally, I will discuss why I believe similar patterns could lead to movements to Christ in the Muslim world.

Women and the Rise of Christianity

In his book *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, sociologist Rodney Stark sheds light on the role of women in the early spread of the Church. In the Greco-Roman world of Christ's day and for the first two centuries, men greatly outnumbered women. Citing population statistics done by J.C. Russell, Stark shows that there were 40% more men than women in Italy, Asia Minor (Turkey) and North Africa. This imbalance reflects regular recourse to the legal and culturally acceptable practice of female infanticide. In a letter written in the first year BC, a husband gives his pregnant wife these ominous instructions: "If it is a boy, keep it; if a girl, discard it."

Women in Greco-Roman culture enjoyed low status. They were considered property, and virtuous women were kept secluded from men other than their husbands. In part because women were scarce, girls were usually married before the onset of puberty. Plutarch tells us that the Romans "[gave] their girls in marriage when they were twelve years old or even younger." Shockingly, these marriages were immediately consummated. The famous biographer deplored this practice, lamenting "the hatred and fear of girls forced contrary to nature."

Seclusion and poor treatment in society do not seem to have kept Greco-Roman women from becoming believers. Indeed, the early Christian church became significantly more female than the general population,

One of the ways early believing women spread the church was through marrying non-Christian men.

reflecting the great attraction of the gospel message for women. Ancient historical sources "simply swarm" with stories of women becoming believers. Among the upper classes especially, women were much more likely than men to follow Christ.

Luke 8:1-3 reflects this. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many other upper-class women not only supported Jesus and the twelve out of their own personal resources, but they also traveled with them. In Acts 17:4, 12, a number of "prominent women" are among the new believers in Thessalonica and Berea. Historians Henry Chadwick and Peter Brown have both noted that Christianity seemed to penetrate the upper classes through wives and concubines. These "prominent women" first became believers, then influenced their husbands and sons.

Why did more women become believers than men?

The status and treatment of women was substantially better in the Christian community than in society at large. Christian teaching prohibited infanticide, forbade incest, and condemned bisexuality, homosexuality and divorce. Moreover, girls were married at a higher age. According to one study, 48% were over 18 years of age. And as Chadwick notes, marital fidelity—which was normally required only of wives—was expected of husbands as well (a fact that did not escape the attention of Galen, the famous Greek physician).

The church also looked after widows. Indeed, a letter written in 251 to Bishop Fabius of Antioch by Cornelius, bishop of Rome, reports that more than 1,500 widows and distressed persons were being cared for out of a church membership of around 30,000.

Not only were women a significant majority in the early church, they filled important leadership roles as

well. In his epistle to the Romans (chapter 16), Paul greets 33 individuals by name, of whom 15 are women. Considering that Paul had never visited these believers, his knowledge of what so many of these women were doing is noteworthy.

In this study, I am not as concerned with the "official status" of women in the church as I am with the roles they played in its rapid expansion. Again we turn to Scripture first. In the New Testament we find women ministering in important and varied ways. For example, women *extended hospitality* by opening their homes. Luke 10:38 tells us that Mary and Martha hosted Jesus and his disciples in their home. In Acts 12 (the story of Peter's miraculous release from prison), many people have gathered to pray in the home of a woman—Mary, the mother of John Mark. Later, in Acts 16, Lydia persuades Paul and his traveling companions to stay in her home. In addition to hospitality, women *led prayer meetings* (a women's group met with Lydia); *prophesied* (Phillip the evangelist had four daughters with prophetic gifts); and *did evangelism* (the woman at the well). Scripture also lists women as apostles (Junias) and as traveling missionaries (Priscilla).

Women win people to Christ through marrying non-Christians

While not a "church planting strategy" *per se* (nor a necessarily recommended practice), clearly one of the ways early believing women spread the church was by marrying non-Christian men. In I Pet 3:1-2, Peter gives explicit instructions to Christian women whose husbands are not believers, and in I Cor 7:13-14, Paul declares that "an unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife."

In the church, where women far outnumbered men, many Christian women had to marry non-believers, if they were to marry at all. Records

abound of Christian women marrying upper-class men who were not (yet) Christians. The results are striking. Most historical sources not only indicate that it was common for unbelieving spouses eventually to be converted, but reversion to paganism was rare.

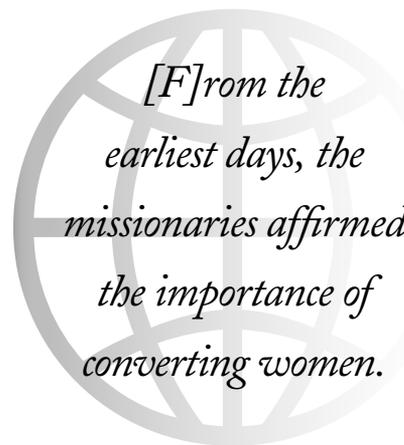
Historian Peter Brown calls Christian women a “gateway” into unbelieving families. These women, “the wives, servants and nurses of unbelievers” (quoted in Stark, p. 114), kept the gospel moving into new circles of non-believers through personal interaction and private witness. Notice that marriage to non-Christian men was only one avenue of influence; servants, nurses and others also contributed to the expansion of the kingdom. As we’ve seen, Greco-Roman culture generally oppressed women. Yet their low status only increased their interest in the gospel; and it certainly did not keep them from effectively spreading it throughout society. But is the same true of other, similar settings? We now turn to South Korea.

Case Study: Korea

Over the last century, the South Korean church has experienced explosive growth. From a tiny minority in 1900, the church has surged to over 30% of the population today, of whom 70% are women. This, despite the fact that Korean culture shared many features characteristic of the Greco-Roman world, features that also make it seem so difficult to reach the Muslim world today.

As Christianity was entering Korea in the late 19th century, strong Confucian values of hierarchy and obedience made life extremely difficult for women. In the first years of marriage, for example, women were scarcely allowed even to speak to their husbands. Women (especially upper-class women) were strictly secluded and, from the age of seven, were kept from associating with the opposite sex. Except for the elite who were indoctrinated into their Confucian role, women were neither educated nor allowed to own property or possess money.

Sons, because of their role in ancestor worship, were greatly desired. Female children, by contrast, were poorly treated. As one Korean woman lamented: “There are two times of regret in a woman’s life: when she is born and when she is married.” In Korean culture, husbands were not supposed to show (or even have) affection for their wives. In fact, women often were never called by a name, but merely referred to as “so-and-so’s daughter” or “so-and-so’s wife.” As a result, when women were baptized and



given names for the first time, many of them would cry for joy.

Early Missionaries Recognized the Strategic Role of Women

Despite the narrowly circumscribed role of women in Korean society, from the earliest days we find that the missionaries affirmed the importance of converting women.

At the first meeting of the Council of Missions in 1893, they adopted policies for their missionary work. One of these was that “the conversion of women and training of Christian girls should be a special aim, since mothers exercise so important an influence over future generations” (*Women in the Korean Church*, Mija Sa, 1995, pg. 6).

These early pioneers acknowledged not only the mother’s unique role in influencing the foundational worldview and faith of her children, but also the long-term impact of that influence on the establishment of the church.

When the Methodists arrived in Korea in the 1880’s, one of the first

things they did was to establish schools for girls. They taught women and men to read, and translated the Bible into Korean. All this brought dramatic changes to the lives of women, who now became involved in evangelism and education outside the home.

Korean women—excluded as they were from the all-important rituals of ancestor worship—were surprised and grateful when they were encouraged to attend Christian worship gatherings. Initially, women met in separate prayer and Bible study groups. These groups fostered a level of supportive fellowship previously unknown among women. The women then began to teach their neighbors and evangelize them. Later, when they started meeting with the men, a heavy curtain separated the sexes, so men and women still could not see each other. Nevertheless, by participating in worship together, women gained a sense of unity and community with men never before possible.

The “Bible Women” of Korea

Early in the history of the nascent Korean church, when Christians were a tiny minority, a significant movement was launched. “The Bible Women of Korea” movement, as it was called, systematized the training efforts of Korean women. What is a “Bible woman”? The Presbyterian bylaws of 1896 define her as “a Christian woman employed in the distribution of Christian literature and biblical instruction.”

Women missionaries—Methodist and Presbyterian alike—specifically trained Korean women in their forties and fifties to be “Bible women,” preferring widows who could travel as itinerant teachers. One such Bible woman was Dorcas Kim Kang. Appointed in 1900 at age 52, Dorcas was assigned a 195-mile circuit of 17 churches. In a single year, she walked 1,450 miles as she visited the churches under her care! Family responsibilities prevented Sam-Tok Chun, a married Bible woman, from assuming a Methodist-style itinerant ministry. Still, she faithfully taught

Single women missionaries were often sent to the most difficult, anti-Christian . . . areas, because they were less likely to be persecuted

the Bible to her daughters-in-law and neighbors, Sam-Tok, working with other Bible women, is credited with winning over 600 women to Christ. Although Bible women functioned as evangelists and as pastors of female congregations, not once in 100 years were they ever officially ordained as “elders” or “pastors.”

As in many oppressive contexts, life was difficult for these early women believers. Indeed, many were martyred before 1900, especially those who had taken a vow of celibacy as part of their Christian commitment. The church in Korea owes a great debt to these women.

Finally, I will mention the National Organization of Korean Presbyterian Women, founded in 1928 by the Presbyterian Church of Korea, which had a huge impact on society. Similarly, the YWCA also helped to lead women in active social change. Today, whereas ordained men remain the official leaders of the Korean church, one can scarcely exaggerate the importance of women in the rapid expansion of early Korean Christianity, especially at a time when women and men lived in completely separate worlds.

Case Study: China

In China, as in Korea, women were quite secluded, especially in the more populous or upper class areas. Female foot binding, a widespread practice in China, made walking extremely painful for women, and kept them from venturing far from home. How could these women be reached? Even if the few Chinese male converts been much more numerous, men in China were not used to having personal relationships with their wives, much less with other women. If Chinese women were to be won, it would depend on the arrival of women missionaries from the outside.

And arrive they did. Outreach to women significantly increased after 1870, as growing numbers of single

women missionaries went to China. Two main factors contributed to this influx. First, the hugely destructive Civil War in America deprived many women of their husbands (or potential husbands), creating a much larger available female missionary force. Second, the structures needed to harness this force—women's missionary training schools and women's mission boards—were created in the aftermath of the war.

Once in China, these missionaries established girls' schools, visited women in their homes, taught them to read, and trained them in practical handicrafts. They also rendered medical services. Because seclusion practices made it extremely difficult for male doctors to treat women, medically-trained female missionaries became the primary health care providers for Chinese women.

As we have seen, women in China lived life beyond the reach of male missionaries. And yet they generally found Christianity much more attractive than did the men. Their receptivity caused one early missionary to fear that winning so many women and children to Christ would “feminize Christianity” in China. That women have turned to Christ in much larger numbers than men is undeniable. Over the last 50 years, China's Christian population, which has exploded to nearly 90 million (nearly 10% of the population), is over 70% female. Yet in terms of perceptions, Christianity is far from being a “woman's religion.” Indeed, men are actively involved in highest levels of official leadership.

The separation of the sexes, which resulted in foreign women working among Chinese women and children, created a situation whose impact would be more far-reaching than these missionaries could ever have imagined. Because they were less threatening to the population at large (which was very suspicious of male foreigners), female foreign

missionaries were able carry on their work “beneath the radar screen.” And because they were less likely to be persecuted and more likely to be allowed to settle, single women missionaries were often sent to the most difficult, anti-Christian or anti-foreigner areas. As a result, women were reached in these locales as well.

The “Bible Women” of China

As in Korea, women in China were trained and employed as “Bible women.” While the female foreign missionaries themselves never converted large numbers of Chinese women, their example of independent female evangelism, coupled with their training of native Bible women (who were very well received and were effective evangelists), all proved invaluable. Since the Bible women were frequently only semi-literate—Chinese being a very difficult language to read—much of the Bible training was done orally. Amazingly, by 1917, Chinese women made up almost half of the available female harvest force in China. One survey counted 1,819 missionary wives and 1,818 single women missionaries, but 2,579 paid Chinese Bible women!

Challenges and Opportunities

As churches began to develop, an attempt was made to incorporate women into the general worship services. As in Korea, propriety dictated that women be kept separate from the men. In rural areas, where women were generally less secluded, they joined in the male church gatherings more readily. Unfortunately, baptism requirements often made church life difficult for women, as even minimal literacy was harder for them to achieve. Moreover, public confession of faith ran counter to cultural requirements for modesty, as “proper women” did not speak in public.

Nevertheless, from the very beginning, women assumed many different informal leadership roles among the growing number of female believers. As one author writes,

They learned to be teachers, evangelists, leaders of religious ritual, and counselors in local congregations. . . . Other volunteers offered their help in teaching Sunday Schools, organizing prayer meetings, visiting the sick,

and providing comfort for women in need. Women's religious groups, therefore, became training grounds for women to develop their own leadership. (Pui-Lan, 1992, pg. 66)

Not surprisingly, younger single women and older women, having fewer household responsibilities, often took the lead.

One factor proved to be crucial both to the rapid multiplication of lay women leaders, and also to their survival during times of persecution. Because women had never been accepted into the more formalized "ordination" model of training and leadership organized for the men, women's leadership patterns within the church developed independently of Western patterns. As a result, many gifted female leaders, regardless of their age or social status, became evangelists and teachers among the women. The seminary and ordination process not only severely limited the number of male leaders, but the status it conferred made them easy targets when persecution came.

Chinese Women's Societies

Outside normal church structures, Chinese women did copy American models. They formed their own societies both to combat social evils and also to raise their own money for missions. Through these societies, Chinese Christian women exercised an influence disproportionate to their numbers, and helped to expand the gospel into non-Christian Chinese society.

One such association is the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), which established chapters in China in the late 1800's. By 1916, over 40 WCTU chapters could be found in seven provinces. Like their American counterparts, WCTU members wore white ribbons as symbols of purity. They held public lectures and distributed literature to stir up public opinion against such evils as foot binding, polygamy, prostitution, and the selling of daughters into slavery, as well as against the importation of opium, tobacco, and alcohol.

Through other societies, Chinese Christian women promoted education, literacy, children's welfare, and economic independence for women.

And they led Bible distribution efforts around China, both in the early days, and in times of persecution.

How Women's Networks Helped the Chinese Church Survive Persecution

After almost 100 years of Protestant Christianity in China, severe persecution of Chinese Christians broke out, first during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, and later under Communist rule. Chinese women believers had challenged cultural evils in China, but radical students (many of whom had been educated in mission schools) would seek violent solutions to China's deeper systemic problems. Leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, which was founded in 1920, attacked the women's reform movements as Western and middle-class, replacing them with the equally Western revolutionary philosophy of Marx. The focus of the Communist agenda was on improving the lot of the male peasant, not female reform issues. Nevertheless, many female Communist leaders had been influenced by the reform movements of the WCTU and the YWCA.

In the 1940's, Christians in China began to get a burden for taking the gospel "back to Jerusalem." In 1947, the first mission team of five young women and two young men set out for the western border of China, only to be turned back. That same year, the Communists took control. The Western missionaries were expelled and Chinese believers, including the Back to Jerusalem Evangelistic Band, were caught in the Communist push to obliterate the church. Many leaders were tortured; some were imprisoned for decades. While the most violent repression took place during the "Cultural Revolution" of the 1960's, Chinese Christians essentially went underground from 1950 to 1980 to avoid persecution.

The male-dominated official church hierarchy provided an easy target for revolutionaries; however, the separation of women had enabled females to develop leadership skills, form their own networks, hold their own conferences, and exert their own influence—a reality that proved invaluable when

persecution was at its worst. These networks of women believers survived the closure and destruction of church buildings precisely because their interactions mostly took place in homes, and were less structured. And where Bible women were predominately volunteers instead of full-time paid workers, the work fared even better.

Today, as in the past, the designated church leaders are men. This is true in both the government-controlled Three-Self Churches and in the house church movements (although it is not unusual for local house churches to be primarily women, led by unofficial women leaders). In the underground seminaries, however, half or more of the students are female.

By now it is not surprising to learn that many male and female leaders have had believing mothers, or other older believing female relatives, who led them toward Christ. One spectacular case is Lu Xiaomin, one of the most amazing women to influence Chinese Christianity. Won to Christ by an aunt, "Sister Ruth" (as Lu is widely known) has now written over 900 Chinese hymns. Her songs have taken the underground house church movements and the official government-controlled churches by storm. Clearly, leading contributors to the rapid growth of the Chinese church continue to be women.

Greater Spiritual Interest among Women

Many estimate that almost 80% of Christians in China, whether in official or house churches, are women. Some attribute this imbalance to the greater interest of men in careers, and of women in spiritual issues. To be sure, in China as in the Greco-Roman world, the gospel has brought women freedom and dignity. But there are other important factors. In Korea and China, as well as in the Muslim world, women have traditionally practiced a much more animistic or folk version of the official religion. Women are the ones who deal with spiritual forces. Using amulets, appeasement or other means, they seek to gain control in a world in which they feel powerless

over everything from sickness and pregnancy, to their husband's fidelity.

Is it because women have such deep needs for hope and spiritual power that they are drawn to the God of Hope, who alone has genuine spiritual power to help them? Perhaps their felt needs make women more receptive to the gospel and more grateful for God's personal involvement in their lives.

Modern Case Study: Nepal?

It's worth mentioning in passing that in the last few decades, a phenomenon similar to what happened in Korea and China has been developing in Nepal. In an unpublished manuscript, John Wilson writes:

From the outset, women have played a significant role in the church in Nepal. This is interesting in view of the poor status of women in the traditional Hindu culture of Nepal.

Two of the oldest churches in Nepal were established by women and to this day, husband and wife serve the churches together (though the husband is designated as the official pastor).

David McMillan is quoted as saying,

Today the church in Nepal seems to me to have at least as many men as women ... but when it comes to its origins, clearly women played the critical role. What I find striking is that this is completely counter to the culture of the country in which the role of women is to breed, farm, feed their families and literally bow down to their husbands. Why was it women to whom God gave the vision and call to establish the gospel in Nepal?... Why have women played such a key role in the growth of the church in Nepal even though in church life all leadership is male and men and women sit on different sides of the building?... In family life, commerce, politics and every other walk of life the gender distinction and the balance of power is completely different from our western culture—men have it all, women don't get "a look in sideways."

However, women found themselves in the same position in the Greco-Roman, Korean and Chinese cultures, that is, until the gospel was established.

What about the Muslim world?

This last generation has seen more mission outreach to Muslims than

any before it. Yet working through networks of women as a strategy often has either been discouraged, or simply overlooked. True, Muslim women *are* secluded and apparently *are* powerless and oppressed, both at home and in society. But did women in Korean and Chinese societies at the time the seeds of the gospel were first planted enjoy any more status or control than in the most oppressive of Muslim societies today? Were Korea and China initially any less hostile to Christianity? It is tempting to regard the Islamic world as a "special case," where opposition to the gospel by authorities and families is exceptionally severe—until one reads the stories of what believers have suffered in these other places.

One thing is different, to be sure. Unlike the pattern in the Muslim world, missionaries in both China and Korea were determined from the beginning to win women and train them to win others. Many single women missionaries poured into these fields, willing to dedicate their lives to raising up women leaders.

My research, preliminary as it is, leads me to believe that if we sent women by the scores into the Muslim world to win Muslim women to the Lord, we would see results similar to those in China and Korea. As in these other societies, foreign women in Muslim countries are seen as less threatening. Similarly, what women do or don't believe is considered of little consequence; their opinions are either belittled or overlooked.

I believe it is time for us, like the missionaries to Korea and China in former generations, to specifically strategize to create movements of women followers of Christ in the Muslim world. Women in the Islamic world are searching for spiritual power. They are more animistic in their beliefs. And they control the emerging worldview of their children. Because sons serve as a mother's "social security," Muslim women try to maintain close lifelong relationships with them. As a result, mothers exercise much power over their sons' lives and beliefs.

God has been giving Muslim women dreams and other revelations of

Himself, just like He has Muslim men. Persecution will no doubt come, but it has rarely stamped out the growth of the gospel in a culture. If God so mightily used networks of despised women to spread His kingdom throughout Rome, Korea and China, surely He can do it in the Muslim world. **IJFM**

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