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Chapter 15

Women's Leadership in Asia and Their Influence on Global Christianity (Julie Ma)

Abbreviations

APTS	Asia Pacific Theological Seminary
ISACC	Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture
OCMS	Oxford Centre for Mission Studies
SAIACS	South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies

Introduction

God has placed both men and women in his Kingdom to carry out God-given purposes, spanning all spheres of social life. Thus, God calls women to contribute to his Kingdom globally and locally by exercising their leadership.

Traditionally, women have suffered victimisation due to gender inequality and inequity in education, employment, and leadership opportunities in the church and wider society. The situation worsens in Asia because of its current cultural views on women. Many socio-cultural circumstances frequently impede the roles God ordained for women.¹ However, as time passes, society and churches allow women to take advantage of possibilities to pursue higher education, careers in teaching, etc.

This chapter discusses the role of women in the context of the Asian Church and how they influence Christianity worldwide. After addressing the challenges alluded to above, I discuss select Asian women who have made an impact on both their local church and the global Church. I also reflect on personal experiences throughout my academic journey in the hope that

¹ Julie Ma, "The Role of Christian Women in the Global South", *Transformation* 31(3), (2014): 194.

our examples serve as a valuable window through which other women may come to understand their unique and yet significant role in shaping global Christianity.

This discussion considers two assumptions: more than two-thirds (67 percent in 2020) of the world's Christians today reside in the Global South, making global Christianity a "Southern" religion.² Additionally, the discussion assumes that most Christians are women, since the *World Christian Encyclopedia* describes a typical Christian today as "a non-White woman living the Global South."³ Based on these presumptive facts, Asian Christian women have a significant role in influencing global Christianity in various ways and helping women in the Global South overcome the many challenges they face, described in the following section.

Challenges of the Women in the Global South

Women play a unique role in every level of social life, encompassing personal, familial, and societal arenas. However, women in the Global South face many difficulties such as living with "lower-than-average levels of societal safety and proper health care."⁴ Many cultures and communities restrict women's access to resources, opportunities, and leadership positions in the public sphere.

Creating Identity in the Face of Cultural Social Perceptions

The biggest obstacle women face involves overcoming restrictions they may face in creating their identity in a particular social context. How women are perceived and treated in many regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America remains problematic due to many cultural

² Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo (eds), *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020): 917.

³ Johnson and Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3.

⁴ Johnson and Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3.

practices needing eradication. For instance, a woman's identity often stems from her husband or children in many regions of Asia; she is frequently referred to as so-and-so's wife or mother. Her name is, therefore, less used and, thus, less well-known. When I became a Christian, I was surprised to hear women addressed by name in the church, an utterly countercultural norm in Korea.⁵

Many of these perceptions find their basis in the religious observances present in various Asian cultures. For example, the notion that men are the "sky" and women are the "earth" is another Confucianism-influenced Asian worldview. This can become the basis for injustice and discrimination instead of promoting a harmonious relationship of complementarity. For instance, even today, in some households, mothers and children do not join the table when the father and his guests are eating. They hold off until the men are finished eating. The mother and her children receive any leftovers. This gender inequality also results in favouritism toward males. Some families express disappointment that their daughters are not males by dressing them in boy's clothing or giving them a boy's name. This also creates confusion in gender roles even after they have grown up. In many societies, this practice has reinforced the idea that men are superior to women.

When practicing religions like Islam, women must publicly cover their faces and bodies. Due to the long history of these intense religious constraints, women have also rarely questioned such restrictions. Even if regarded as cultural norms, however, such restrictions placed on women's access to school, employment, and other opportunities are in truth a matter of injustice rather than culture:

⁵ Ma, "Role of Christian Women", 196.

In some nations, female rape victims are imprisoned for adultery while their attackers go free. “Honour killings” of women and young girls are also on the rise. A woman doesn’t have to be guilty of doing something immoral to be killed. Her father, husband, brothers, and uncles may kill her simply because she is the subject of gossip. No one knows the exact number of honour killings, but in just one region of one of these nations, 350 young women – some as young as twelve – were murdered in one year. The preferred method of killing women to restore honour to the family is to burn them alive or throw acid on them.⁶

Although cultural practices are changing in modern societies, in certain countries in Asia or Africa, the notion of women remains the same or only gradually changes.

Human Trafficking

Another serious issue for women and girls especially in the Global South is human trafficking. Approximately 800,000 persons are trafficked internationally each year: 50 percent are minors, and 80 percent are women or girls. Although the extent of human trafficking varies between nations and continents, it has clearly emerged as a serious issue on a global scale.

Although sex trafficking victims might be of any age and either sex, as the above percentage clearly shows, women and adolescent girls as the majority face the greatest threat. Even though many countries have made female trafficking illegal, it remains a problem on a global scale.⁷

The most typical motives for human trafficking include exploitation for forced labour and sex. Victims of sex trafficking are forced into engaging in one or more types of sexual exploitation. It is critical to understand that prostitution is merely one type of work that sex trafficking victims are forced into, and human trafficking and prostitution are different.⁸

⁶ Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts’ Advice to Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1978): 31.

⁷ Tiffany Dovydaitis, “Human Trafficking: The Role of the Health Care Provider”, *J Midwifery Women’s Health* 55(5), (Sep-Oct 2010): 462-67, [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmwh.2009.12.017>], [Last accessed: 14th April 2024]. See also Amy Novotney, “7 in 10 Human Trafficking Victims are Women and Girls. What are the Psychological Effects?” *American Psychological Association*, 24th April 2023 [Available at: <https://www.apa.org/topics/women-girls/trafficking-women-girls>], [Last accessed: 14th April 2024].

⁸ There is a similarity between human trafficking and prostitution but the fundamental difference is that, in human trafficking, some people are physically locked behind closed doors, threatened with their family’s safety, and paying

However, commercial sex activities like prostitution, pornography, exotic dance, stripping, live sex shows, mail-order brides, military prostitution, and sexual tourism are closely related to sex trafficking.⁹

Most frequently, victims are presented with bogus marriage proposals that evolve into bonds of servitude or promises of a good career, education, or citizenship in a foreign nation. Parents, husbands, and other family members sell their family members, especially young girls, into the sex trade; sometimes traffickers kidnap victims against their will. Debt bondage is the coercive method utilised the most by perpetrators. In this complex criminal world, victims must provide personal services to repay their debt, such as travel or living expenses. Human traffickers frequently approach low-income families to buy girls or young women with the promise of a better life in a more affluent country.¹⁰

Women's Ordination

Women's ordination has been a contentious and complex issue in the Global South and even in more developed countries. For instance, although Pentecostals generally have more readily embraced women's ordination than more traditional churches, the Church of God in Christ, the biggest African American Pentecostal denomination, still does not ordain women. As Elizabeth Dabney notes, women can only serve as replacements for male pastors:

off debts by servicing men in brothels or working without pay. In prostitution, many women, particularly those living in impoverished areas, turn to sex work because few economic opportunities exist elsewhere. An uneducated woman can make fast money, she is under pressure to provide for her family, and she lives within widespread cultural acceptance of the sex industry. Sex work quickly becomes a viable option – sometimes seemingly the only one. For more information, see Au'Vonnie Alexander, "Prostitution & Human Trafficking: What's the Difference?" *United Against Human Trafficking*, [Available at: <https://uaht.org/prostitution-and-human-trafficking/>], [Last accessed: 14th April 2024].

⁹ Dovydaitis, "Human Trafficking", 462-67.

¹⁰ Neha A. Deshpande and Nawal M. Nour, "Sex Trafficking of Women and Girls", *Rev Obstet Gynecol* 6(1), (2013): e22-7, *National Library of Medicine*, [Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23687554/>], [Last accessed: 14th April 2024].

In the absence of a pastor and with official approval, a woman can “act” in the role of pastor. Official support may come from the pastor who designates which woman will serve while he is absent from his church. In the event of a vacancy of the pastorate, a district superintendent or jurisdictional bishop may authorize a woman to act in the role of pastor until a permanent appointment can be made. But, she cannot assume the title of “pastor.” She may be called by other titles, such as, “missionary,” “mother,” or “shepherdess.” If the woman acts as pastor, she must use the “covering” of a man – a husband, father, brother, uncle, son or nephew – in order to carry out pastoral and other chief leadership roles.¹¹

Female pastors shouldn’t merely be a substitute or replacement to a male pastor but a full understanding of equality would allow them to pastor in their own right.

Even though Asian women encounter many such difficulties related to their identity and equality issues, they still can be exposed to theological education and can make an impact globally. The following sections, followed by reflections from my own experience in theological education, illustrate the various fields in which women can contribute significantly while they also demonstrate the difficulties and barriers they all too often confront in their particular social contexts.

Reflections on My Involvement in Theological Education

I first worked as a theological educator at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary (APTS), a Pentecostal graduate school in Baguio, Philippines (1996–2006), immediately following the completion of my doctorate. This school’s student body consisted of more than twenty other nations, including non-Asians. Its faculty was equally diverse, representing seven different countries, both Western and Asian. The mission of the school was to prepare regional and global leaders by complementing national schools which trained local and national leaders. An urgent need had emerged for this international leadership development due to the expansion of

¹¹ Elizabeth Juanita Dabney, *What It Means to Pray Through: A True Mystical Journey of Spiritual Awakening to Find Divinity in the Heart of Self* (Memphis, TN: iUniverse, 2012): 45.

Christianity in the Global South. Training Pentecostal leaders for the Global South served as an explicit goal of the school's establishment, since being Spirit-filled and empowered stands as a key tenet of Pentecostal-Charismatic leadership training and development in an educational setting.

I taught mission courses at the seminary. Some students were preparing for missionary work, while others had already had field experience in cross-cultural settings. Given the student body's multicultural makeup, this diversity frequently gave students a unique chance to learn from one another by exchanging their real-world experiences. A more comprehensive global image or glocal interactions began to take shape as different local perspectives were shared. The need for Spirit empowerment in theological education applied not only to training leaders but training students for mission because Spirit-filled leaders affect people and change their lives, as Amos Yong and Dale Coulter note:

Being centred on the formation of the person, education concerns the cultivation and a *habitus* that shapes and orients the individual toward the proper ends for human flourishing. In Christian terms, education is about being Christ-shaped and Spirit-infused. Christ is the pattern, while the Spirit is the transforming presence driving the educational process.¹²

For an Asian woman, teaching was never easy. Eiko Takamizawa, a Japanese scholar who has taught missiology at Torch Trinity Graduate University, Seoul, South Korea, for fourteen years – and who also regularly visits Londrina Biblical Seminary in Londrina, Brazil to teach mission courses – has had a similar challenging experience: cultural diversity and a different education system.

¹² Amos Yong and Dale M. Coulter, *The Holy Spirit and Higher Education: Renewing the Christian University* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2023): 1.

After leaving the Philippines, I transitioned to the United Kingdom to teach at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS) from 2006-2016. The move was more than geographical: from graduate to postgraduate programmes, from relational to global, from Pentecostal to radical evangelical, and more. It felt both enriching and challenging to serve at this global institution. The school's primary focus was training high-level church and mission practitioner leaders from the Global South. Its numbers of PhD students increased from 80 to 120 during my time. Their research topics were broad with subjects ranging from HIV/AIDS to biblical studies. Regnum Books, its publishing arm, grew to more than twenty academic titles per year. The school's quarterly journal, *Transformation*, also increased in subscription and influence.

The school aligned with the realities of global Christianity since theological education must take the realities of life seriously for theological thought to impact mission practices and how mission is understood. The ideal theologian or theological educator will, therefore, be a reflective practitioner who frequently lives in and participates in a specific social and local environment. One can only contribute to the creation of global theology if one is truly local. This proves especially true if theological education in the future reflects the realities of the regions where Christianity is developing and spreading, i.e., the Global South:

As children of the Enlightenment, we distinguished between theory and practice. An encounter with theologies from the Global South will help us to understand that theology cannot and must not be separated from the concrete world. Truth cannot be separated from practice, and orthopraxis is as crucial as orthodoxy. Theology must, therefore, be based on missional/missionary experience; that was how the theology of the Early Church came into being as a theoretical framework of conceptual thinking based on concrete mission experience. Theological reflection must be missiological thinking to hold together practice and theory.¹³

¹³ K. Jorgensen, "Mission in the Post-Modern Society", (Unpublished Paper, 2009): 7.

It is so true that theology and practice go hand in hand; they are not separated at all. Our theological understandings of God, our Saviour Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and mission must be applied to practical settings as Jorgensen clearly notes.

OCMS faced the realities of global theological education. Institutional resources were minimal with less than a dozen academic staff, half a dozen administrative staff, and a modest annual budget. As an independent institution, donations provided the most significant income, much of which was used to assist the students. My most striking encounter while there had to do with the creativity of the academic system. Taking full advantage of the UK higher education system, the school contracted more than 300 scholars from the United Kingdom and worldwide to serve as dissertation supervisors.

However, I was the only female resident research tutor and most external supervisors were male. Although the number of female students improved over the years, more than two-thirds of the student body was male. However, many studies were on issues related to women and children, such as health, education, human trafficking, and cultures reinforcing gender inequality. Even topics that did not appear gender-related had profound implications for women. Several dissertations on microfinance, for example, had an overwhelming influence regarding the role of women.

When I transferred to Oral Roberts University (ORU) in 2016 (where I have served until the present time), my teaching career continued. Contextual Theology Ph.D. coursework at ORU began in 2018. The worldwide Spirit-empowered movement has experienced extraordinary growth, and this degree examines the contextual theologies of world Christianity with a primary focus on that movement's development. I have experience mentoring, supervising, and instructing.

As discussed in the section on the challenges of women in the Global South, living with lower-than-average levels of societal safety and proper health care are only some of the numerous challenges women in the Global South endure. Many cultures and groups restrict women's access to resources, opportunities, and leadership roles in public life. The issues of human trafficking and women's ordination are issues churches are facing and agendas they are having to deal with. My involvement in education through teaching, mentoring, and supervising in several academic institutions was a scarce opportunity; as well, publication and paper presentation were also great privileges. These hands-on mission experiences while teaching in the classroom at APTS served as valuable ministry, making theology *living* theology.

The Impact of Asian Women on Global Christianity

Asian Christian female leaders have made an international impact on the Christian Church through their involvement in various ways, despite the challenges they have had to surmount and their having fewer opportunities to participate in local and global activities. This section discusses some of those key areas: academic leadership, influence in publishing, important contributions at academic conferences, involvement in missions, and the creation of new knowledge by their scholarly work. Even with those contributions, however, the challenge of the glass ceiling remains – serving as top-level denominational decisionmakers who can participate equitably with their male partners in making significant Kingdom impacts on Global Christianity.

Academic Leadership

Asian women have made their most notable advancements within general and Christian education, including church-based education, with many female scholars teaching at colleges, universities, and seminaries all around the world. However, Asian women's leadership in higher

education still needs to catch up with that of their male counterparts. This is particularly true within Asian contexts. According to my experience, for instance, the participation of women at international gatherings is substantially less than that of men. Furthermore, men's voices are more frequently heard than women's. Therefore, I encourage female academics to participate and assert their voices more proactively. Female academic leaders sometimes organise such gatherings when the opportunity presents itself. Nevertheless, Asian women's leadership is increasing in educational settings, as the following examples demonstrate.

Jung-sook Lee in Korea has exercised significant leadership in Christian higher education. Educated at Princeton Theological Seminary with a PhD in church history, she served as the first female president of Torch Trinity Theological University, Seoul; the Korean Association of Accredited Theological Schools; and the Church History Society in Korea. She also served as a vice president of the Asia Theological Association; a member of the executive board for the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Oxford, United Kingdom; and a presidium for the International Congress for Calvin Research. She formerly worked as a co-moderator for the Doctoral Initiatives Steering Committee for the International Council of Evangelical Theological Education. She was actively involved in the Asia Forum for Theological Educators and the Global Forum for Theological Educators.¹⁴

Havilah Dharamraj is another example of an Asian woman making a significant impact in educational settings. She serves as Academic Dean and Professor of Old Testament at the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS) in Bangalore, India. After studying Biochemistry and Theology, she earned a Theology PhD from the University of Durham, UK.

¹⁴ Dr Jung-sook Lee, email message with author, 17th July 2023.

Dharamraj's research areas are Old Testament, biblical and theological studies, and innovation in theological education and ministry training. One of her publications is "We Reap What We Sow: Engaging Curriculum and Context in Theological Education."¹⁵

Another example among the many Asian female academics is Jayachitra Lalitha in India. In addition to serving as an ordained minister in the Church of South India, she has academic positions at the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in Tamil Nadu, India. One of her works, *Re-Reading Household Relationships Christologically: Ephesians, Empire and Egalitarianism*,¹⁶ is highly acclaimed and has had an important effect on other women.

Yet another example is Protestant systematic theologian Elizabeth (Lisa) Sung, a visiting theology professor at Mundelein Seminary and the University of Saint Mary of the Lake. She also previously served as an Associate Professor in Trinity Evangelical Divinity School's Department of Biblical and Systematic Theology. She belongs to the Evangelical Theological Society and the American Academy of Religion. Additionally, Sung teaches in the "Global Theologies" course by seminaries affiliated with the evangelical, mainstream, and Roman Catholic traditions. Theological hermeneutics, theological anthropology, the relationships between theology and science and culture, and theologies of sanctification and spiritual formation are the main topics of her literature. Her publications include *"Race" and Ethnicity Discourse and the Christian Doctrine of Humanity: A Systematic Sociological and Theological Approach* (2011) and *"Race" and Ethnicity Discourse and the Christian Doctrine of Humanity: A Systematic Sociological and Theological Appraisal*.¹⁷

¹⁵ Havilah Dharamraj, "We Reap What We Sow: Engaging Curriculum and Context in Theological Education," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 38(4), (2014): 2-14.

¹⁶ Jayachitra Lalitha, *Re-Reading Household Relationships Christologically: Ephesians, Empire and Egalitarianism* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2017).

¹⁷ Graham Joseph Hill, "18 Asian Female Theologians You Should Know About (Plus Others for You to Explore)", *Global Church Project*, 16th December 2023, [Available at: <https://theglobalchurchproject.com/18-asian-female->

Publishing

Several ways exist to share newly created knowledge, with publication being the first and most obvious path. Both print and online publications are available for monographs and scholarly papers. It is encouraging to see a rise in the quantity and quality of doctoral dissertations written by thoughtful individuals in the Global South. This used to happen only in theological schools in the West, but now more research-based postgraduate programmes exist in Africa, Asia, and Latin America than ever before. However, since so few of these researchers are published, fresh studies from the new churches face an even greater uphill battle.

Fortunately, progress has taken place on several fronts. First, the rise of contemporary communication technology has radically expanded spaces to share knowledge. Publishing media now includes institutional and personal websites that regularly publish studies. Such publishing media have added functions such as audio and video material to augment the texts and allow conversation between authors and readers. Search capability also adds convenience to traditional books. Shareability is another revolutionary function of electronic publishing, evidenced by the increasing number of portals offering complementary material. Online libraries have also become more widely available, holding numerous studies not easily shared otherwise. Both in traditional and new publishing spaces, both established Western publishers and an ever-growing number of non-Western authors are now publishing their works. A select number of publishers even give non-Western authors priority. At the same time, more publishers in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe are producing high-quality studies for global consumption.¹⁸

[theologians/](#)], [Last accessed: 20th April 2024]. See also “10 Asian Christian Women to Start Following during #WomensHistoryMonth,” 7th March 2020, *Grace Ji-Sun Kim ~ Loving Life Website*, [Available at: <https://gracejisunkim.wordpress.com/2020/03/14/10-asian-christian-women-to-start-following-during-womenshistorymonth/>], [Last accessed: 20th April 2024].

¹⁸ For example, “The Globethics Library is the world’s largest free, open online library aimed at providing quality resources in the field of ethics, higher education, policy engagement, and ethical leadership, with a specific focus on

For this reason, editorial work can serve as a unique gift of empowering new minds from the Global South to stand with established Western scholars in the same co-edited book. The editor creates a new space where scholars from various parts of the world are brought together for collaboration. In the process, contributors experience empowerment from the Lord and one another, expanding their understanding and discovering new implications of their studies in new contexts, such as South-to-North and South-to-South exchanges. I am familiar with several academic journal editors promoting such exchanges by recruiting young scholarly voices from the Global South.¹⁹

Professional Academic Seminars and Conferences

Professional conferences provide another venue for the exchange of newly produced knowledge. Sharing many essential components with publishing, these events offer an opportunity to develop new relationships, have lively discussions, and empower younger scholars. After receiving my PhD in June 1996 at Fuller Theological Seminary, I was first invited to present a paper at the conference on “Pentecostalism in Globalization” in Costa Rica. This opportunity came my way as a greenhorn scholar from the Global South, thanks to a good friend who encouraged me to participate, along with my husband. I recognised many well-known conference speakers when I first viewed the conference flyer. Standing with them required much

the thematic priorities defined in the Globethics Strategy 2023-2027. The library currently holds more than 3.8 million documents, including Globethics publications, books, reference works, research papers, dissertations, conference proceedings, case studies, reports, textbooks, and educational resources, carefully selected and curated in over 75 collections and more than 170 journals, accessible free of charge, and via a multilingual portal.” “About Globethics Library,” *Globethics Library*, [Available at: <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/about>], [Last accessed: 20th April 2024].

¹⁹ Julie Ma and Allan Anderson, “Pentecostalism”, in Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross (eds), *Atlas of Global Christianity* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2010): 100-101.

courage, primarily due to my lack of experience. Since that nerve-racking but warmly empowering experience, I have attended many events, frequently on invitation.²⁰

Naturally, more exposure leads to better recognition, thanks to the empowering hospitality of established scholars and organisers. Over time, I have contributed to the broader process of knowledge creation regularly. This experience has also helped me handle critical responses to my study gracefully, with a learning attitude and increased clarity of my views. As people naturally tend to get fearful and demoralised by criticism, handling it takes continued exposure and experience. Later, I learned that academics should trust each other for their unique viewpoints and contexts, strengthening the greater Christian community.

I also learned to respect and accept different views and methodologies as a result of these conferences. At the same time, affirmations motivate us. Indeed, such is the environment where academic engagements and progress are made. I soon discovered that networking with thoughtful and creative colleagues proved incredibly beneficial for me and the organisations which I serve. The most helpful conference experiences for me have been those where I have gotten to know many groups with vibrant national and religious perspectives. For example, I met Eiko Takamizawa, a Japanese mission scholar who presented at the International Symposium on Asian Mission in Manila in January 2002. Another scholar was a Filipino female social anthropologist, Melba P. Maggay, who contributed a study to the same conference.²¹ I have grown even more appreciative of others, as many come from different experiences and academic

²⁰ Jungja (Julie) Ma, "Pentecostal Challenges in East and South-East Asia", in Murray Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (eds), *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* (Carlisle, UK: Regnum, 1999): 183-202.

²¹ Melba P. Maggay, director of the Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture (ISACC), Manila, Philippines, presented on "Early Protestant Missionary Efforts in the Philippines: Some Intercultural Issues", International Symposium on Asian Mission, Manila, January 2002.

disciplines. Knowing that my own specialty may be unfamiliar to others, I could confidently share my understanding and findings.

Another conference I attended was the 2005 Conference for World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches in Athens, Greece, with about 800 attendees, including delegates, guests, and staff from diverse churches and mission agencies. Like many others, this conference exposed me to fresh and new experiences. Six to eight people came daily for *lexio divina* devotion and reflection. Reading a passage slowly and several times deepened my understanding and my relationship with God and others. The range of worship services offered by various church traditions proved equally valuable. For instance, Orthodox worship was ritualistic, whereas Pentecostal worship was spontaneous. I could welcome diversity rather than fear it because of such dynamic experiences.

Yet another conference I attended was the 52nd annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (SPS) held at Oral Roberts University 16th–18th March 2023. The theme was “In Our Own Tongues”, emphasising amplifying Pentecostalism’s minoritised voices. Around 250 people, local and international Pentecostal scholars, church leaders, and lay leaders attended. The ethnically diverse keynote speakers presented on quite challenging subjects. The parallel sessions went well with beneficial topics and meaningful discussions among the members who attended. I found it an enriching experience academically and enjoyed seeing Pentecostal scholars who have become friends of mine and having fellowship over coffee or tea with them and new friends during the breaks.

Missionary Reflection and Involvement

At the start of the twentieth century, women ran forty evangelical missionary organisations, with many female missionaries founding hospitals, schools, and orphanages.

Ralph Winter refers to this as a “burst of female energy” into missions. One of the top medical schools in Vellore, India was founded and is managed predominantly by women. They have accomplished this in the most inhospitable locations, but as one writer observes, “The more difficult and dangerous the work, the higher the ratio of women to men.”²² Female missionaries really do shine.

God has raised up and empowered numerous Asian women. For instance, Susan Tang has founded and led churches in Sabah, Malaysia, for over twenty years. Her dedication to God’s cause has produced innumerable Christ followers, pastors, and evangelists who have received training. Teo Kwee Keng has led a thriving church in Batu Pahat, Malaysia, for fourteen years while founding at least four other congregations in the area.

Many Asian women also serve as intercultural missionaries. To mention a few, Erlynda Reyes has collaborated on worldwide training projects with missionary workers from different nations. Nora Catipon, a single Filipino woman missionary, travelled to Cambodia to plant churches and teach in the Bible school which she and her fellow missionaries established.

Another example is Maria Gomez, whose story Bill Snider recounts:

In the 1960s, Maria Gomez in East Timor was called to service at a particular island where a prison stands and various criminals were confined. She and her husband spent many years planting the seeds of the gospel through the means of building churches and training young people. One night when they had an evening service, the Holy Spirit fell upon the congregation, people confessed their sins, and great healings took place. Now the whole Island is called an “Assemblies of God island.” Gomez is the current General Superintendent in East Timor.²³

²² J. Herbert Kane, *Life and Work on the Mission Field* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1980): 143.

²³ Bill Snider (Assemblies of God World Mission Area Director for Southeast Asia), speaking at the Missions Emphasis Week at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, 10th October 2001.

Mission history contains endless examples of how women have used their gifts for God's Kingdom. Female missionaries are often more receptive to the holistic expression of God's mission because of their inherent sensitivity. They frequently demonstrate extraordinary dedication, a more profound understanding of human pain, and incredible tenacity. Additionally, they tend to have easier access to local people because they can approach and interact with other women.

Equally encouraging is the growing number of female missionaries from the Southern Church, some of whom I have already mentioned above. The areas of their missionary engagement are vast. Some started Bible schools, while others translated the Bible into hundreds of different languages worldwide.

Along with my husband, Wonsuk Ma, I spent three decades serving as a missionary. We were intensely active in holistic ministries among the mountain tribal communities in Northern Luzon, the Philippines, in addition to our theological education ministry. Women actively led many mountain churches in those areas. Through my research on the transmission of the gospel and the impact of Christianity on Kankana-ey life and culture, I could carefully construct their Christian history, spiritual journey, and conciliate it with conventional culture and religion. Although this research may seem exotic, it has proven helpful when applied to other contexts. One local Oxford congregation proved useful for my study, which mixed church planting techniques with theological and anthropological considerations. A parish pastor who had read about my research sought my advice on improving his plan to grow churches in foreign countries.

New Christian Knowledge Being Created

“Theology in the Global South will dominate the next Christianity,” predicts Knud Jorgensen, “even though it may take some strange forms. It is from this part of the world that renewal of theology and church life may come.”²⁴ He continues, saying:

Bediako sees African Christianity as a rediscovery of Biblical Christianity in an African context, particularly the experience of the transcendent in the midst of the immanent is one of the characteristics: God lives and acts and weeps and dances amid the world. Further, what is true about the African experience may also be witnessed by the liberated faith of Latin America – liberated in both a socio-political sense and a deep existential and religious sense. Alternatively, if we visit some of the open and house churches in the provinces of China and we will meet the same living, invigorating, shouting, praying, and infectious faith.²⁵

Without writing and publication, no opportunity will exist for people to learn about the remarkable encounters and reflections happening within vibrant Christian communities in the Global South. Literature lasts much longer than us and travels much farther. As an Asian woman, I faced significant barriers with respect to writing and publication. First, my early education in Asia could have better prepared me for critical and thoughtful thought. We were simply taught to reproduce or regurgitate existing knowledge. While working in multinational institutional settings, I have received training and encouragement to create my own expertise. However, I have tried to express such storylines in an Asian manner because I appreciate my Asian thinking and writing styles as well.

The task of determining the theological future of the Global South will need to be carried out by insiders within the various global communities, i.e., Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and Eastern and Central Europeans, even though Western theological intellectuals can provide a helping hand in the process. Philip Jenkins makes a critical point that needs to be remembered: “I

²⁴ Jorgensen, “Mission in the Post-Modern Society”, 8.

²⁵ Jorgensen, “Mission in the Post-Modern Society,” 8.

somehow doubt that the contribution of the Global South to theological inquiry will be limited to rhythmic dancing or hand-clapping.”²⁶ Ironically, it may turn out that the old adage “Publish or perish!” is true.

Women Decisionmakers: The Challenge That Remains

Even in view of all the contributions Asian women have made to Global Christianity, the question remains regarding the extent of their serving in the national executive bodies of the Pentecostal churches. Such positions include top-level denominational officers, district-level administrators, and national mission committee members. Men typically hold most leadership positions at the national level, and women only sometimes do. Nonetheless, the lack of women in these positions shows a glass ceiling for their advancement in leadership. The majority of women only continue to be active at the level of schooling, missionary work, or local church ministry. Evangelical churches generally follow this tendency as well.

In Corinth, Paul held Priscilla and Aquila in high regard. Priscilla’s function is undoubtedly that of a leader in her local congregation and in leadership development, even if the church organisation had not yet attained its current degree of sophistication. Paul received help from Priscilla and Aquila in establishing churches in Ephesus and Rome. He highly praised their leadership abilities and included them among his most reliable colleagues. Paul valued their opinions and listened to their advice (Acts 18:18-19, 24-26; Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19; and 2 Tim. 4:19).

Women can contribute significantly to church and denominational decision-making

²⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 103.

through their keen attention to detail and relational sensitivity. The position and contributions of women are so important for politics; how much more critical that they have greater agency and impact in the Church.

As I close this section on the impact that Asian women have had, do have, and should have on global Christianity, I pose this challenging question: what would it take for Asian Pentecostal churches and denominations to elect or appoint women as denominational heads or heads of various departments of their denomination? Among Pentecostal churches, it is rare to see a female denominational leader. One recent surprise came from a young Pentecostal church, the Mongolian Assemblies of God, which elected a female general superintendent, but such exceptions actually demonstrate that the highest position in these ecclesial organisations is still reserved for men. Thus, the glass ceiling remains in place.

Conclusion

In discussing the role of women in Asia and their influence on global Christianity, this chapter first discussed the challenges women face in the Global South, highlighted their involvement in theological education, depicted areas of their impact on international Christianity, and then posed the challenge of how to address the glass ceiling that still remains – female executive denominational leadership.

Certainly, the Southern Church, especially the Asian women which make up a large proportion, have played meaningful roles in the global context, yet in the face of culturally unfavourable circumstances, their unique gifts are frequently hidden. Therefore, women must remain conscious of the opportunities and gifts God has given to them. Women in the Global South must not undervalue themselves while pretending to be humble but must strengthen their

conviction of God's calling and enablement so they can cultivate and use their abundant potential for Christian missions and activities worldwide and hide it no longer.

I can encourage Asian women to walk this path in confidence because, in my experience, I needed to see myself as qualified. As an Asian female theologian, my main concern now involves how to effectively manage my own opportunities and education while expanding the knowledge God has given me to advance his Kingdom. As one of the Pentecostals' favourite verses reads, "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23).

Women in the Global South have the chance to play a significant part in creating a new global Christianity. The Church must empower women by recognising their potential and enablement to live out the gospel. I strongly invite select women who have earned higher education degrees while actively participating in academic and missionary endeavours. As our paths have crossed, I could only sample a small portion of their potential, but I hope that all those women, especially in academic circles, will maintain their involvement in academic and mission activities to continue to serve as thoughtful practitioners and develop content that will impact the future of Christianity worldwide.

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Abstract

In various Asian countries, women have suffered from gender inequity regarding access to leadership positions, career prospects, and education.

However, as time passes, society and the church allow women to benefit from opportunities to pursue teaching and higher education jobs.

The place of women in the Asian Church and their global impact on Christianity are apparent.

Some Asian women impacted the scholarly community of local and international churches.

It will be a great help to other women to see their distinct and essential roles in influencing worldwide Christianity through my perspective on my journey through academic environments and sharing with other women researchers.