

Globalisation, Women and Mission

Rose Dowsett

Some glimpses from around the world

Altaa busied herself inside the family ger preparing the meal. In almost every respect, she could have been her mother, or her grandmother, or a distant forebear. The movements of her hands, the rituals she performed, the dish she prepared, were an echo of the centuries. Yet, as she worked, the thoughts passing through her mind found little resonance with the past.

Altaa had never heard the word 'globalisation' and wouldn't have known what to make of it if she had. All she knew was that the traditional way of life, unassailed by many centuries or by natural disaster, all of a sudden was melting like snow in early summer. She doubted whether her children would adopt this way of life. By the time they grew up, the call of the city would be overwhelming, and they would desert their nomadic heritage. They would not observe the customs of marriage she had been bound by, nor bear their children in remote places as she had. And, if she herself lived to be old, would she be forced to leave the land and go to the strangeness of the city? Perhaps one day she and her husband would simply die of weakness and starvation and cold, alone in their ger, unable any longer to care for themselves.

She thought enviously of her mother, who had never known that there were other ways of life, that other people in other countries lived differently, that there was a world of possessions and sounds and ideas that was no longer invisible, and that called into question the old familiar ways. For Altaa, inescapably, confusingly, they battered at the very door of her ger.

She came to the opening in the heavy felt, and gazed at her husband's proud purchase from when he trekked to town to trade last year. It was a satellite dish. Truly, the world was on Altaa's doorstep.

Femi scratched helplessly at the sun-baked earth. Where there should be fat cobs of maize, ready to feed her hungry grandchildren, there was only a handful of dried leaves, not even enough to feed her last remaining scrawny chicken. The rains had failed again, and after four years of drought the land that once had been fertile had become dust, the streams dried beds. Femi no longer had the strength to carry water from the pump, an hour's exhausting walk away, for any but the most essential use, and it was a long time since she had been able to carry water for her field.

Femi wasn't alone in her predicament. The little community was a community of the old, the very young, and the very sick, and the shambas were all reduced to unyielding barrenness. Those who should have been the strong ones to work the fields and carry the water had already died, or were too weak to move. Femi remembered the excitement years before when the young men had started going to the city or to the mines to earn money with which to improve their way of life. They talked of 'markets' for the goods they would make, or the minerals they would dig, markets in countries far beyond the seas, which would make it possible for Africans like themselves to grow prosperous, too.

At first it had seemed it might be as they said. But all too soon, when they returned home with their city clothes and shoes, clutching their purchases and speaking of a great world to be explored, they had brought another hidden and terrifying gift: the disease they called 'the wasting disease'. And now only the elderly, and some of the children, were free of it. Once when he had visited, cycling from his village several miles away, the pastor had told Femi that this disease had caused havoc in many countries. It had spread so rapidly, he said, just because so many men moved away from home to find work and money, and then had sexual relations with other women. When they visited their homes, they brought the disease with them, and their wives became sick as well. Now, he said, all over the world, but especially in poor countries, there were people ill of the same sickness.

Femi wondered whether the pastor would visit again. He, too, had become sick of the wasting disease. She didn't think she would be strong enough again ever to walk to the little church where he taught. She didn't know when last she had seen an able-bodied man. Nobody cared very much about the tragedy of a dying village in an impoverished country. She tried to teach the little ones about God and about Jesus, as best she could. But some days, like today, she wondered whether God either knew or cared about the sickness, the hunger, the hopelessness. Perhaps the world was too big for him to

manage properly, or perhaps he preferred to help white people. Perhaps he was punishing her family because they were not good enough. Perhaps the old ways of her people were right after all. Why should some distant land's hunger for copper or cheap cloth have led to this tragic conclusion? It was all very confusing.

When you're starving, it's hard to believe.

Rani and her husband walked together into the lake. They were going to be baptised as Christians, along with ten others from their country. Even on this warm summer's day, the Scottish water was cold. But Rani scarcely noticed. Boldly she declared her faith in Jesus Christ, and entrusted herself to the gentle arms of the pastor to be plunged into the water. They held her safely, and she stood again, praying quietly as she dedicated her life to the One she had come to know and follow. The crowd watching from the shore responded with a song of praise to God.

Looking back over the past two years since she and her husband had first fled their country, Rani could scarcely believe the events that had led to today. In their home country, they had been deeply committed to another religion, a religion moreover that was deeply hostile to Christianity. In fact, neither Rani nor her husband had ever met a Christian, and had only heard bad things about them. It was not on religious grounds that they had left, but because her husband had offended the authorities by some mild protest against an injustice. Such criticism wasn't tolerated, and, distraught, they'd fled for their lives. They had taken nearly a year to reach Britain, where they had claimed asylum.

They had been sent to a Scottish city, along with many other asylum seekers, including a number from their own country. It had been very hard to adjust to the strange culture and the cold wet climate, and to the extraordinary racial mix among which they found themselves. For the first time they rubbed shoulders with Africans and Asians and Eastern Europeans, all seeking the right to make their home there permanently. As was the custom back home, Rani did not go out much, but her husband explored freely. Almost at once, he met up with fellow-countrymen who told him of the kindness of a local church who offered food and clothing and English lessons to the asylum seekers. Curious, he went to investigate. He asked many questions, and discovered that Christians were different from the way they had been portrayed back home. He began to attend a Bible study along with some compatriots. They watched the Jesus film, in their own language. Soon, several believed, and within a year nearly ninety from that country had become Christians.

At first Rani was furious. She decided to go along to stick up for their own religion and to prevent such awful apostasy. But before long she, too, was gripped by the gospel and by the person of Jesus Christ. Eagerly she talked to other women who had never heard the gospel before, and soon was leading others to faith.

And so, on this day beside the lake, she thanked God for his love in bringing them thousands of miles, and through heartbreak and danger and suffering, in order that they should meet with him. She did not understand all the forces at work in the world that were leading to such mass migrations of peoples back and forth across the globe. But she knew with deep assurance that the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ was using the refugee movement to enable many like herself to hear the gospel. She and her husband had craved freedom and safety. They had found it in a profound dimension.

Globalisation in Biblical Perspective

A true understanding of the nature of 'real' globalisation begins in the character of God. Without any apology, the Bible declares him to be not some tribal god, concerned with the welfare of a small people group at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, but the Lord and King and Creator of the whole earth, the one to whom every knee in the whole universe shall bow, the one who is Judge of all humankind whether or not they know and recognise him. The Old Testament as well as the New rings with the world-wide claims of the God of the globe. The Lord Jesus Christ is the only Saviour throughout the universe. The Church is to be a global community of disciples and worshippers. The gospel transcends barriers of race and colour and language, and is as central to the eternal wellbeing of people in Peru as in Portugal, in China as in Chile, in Alaska as in Australia. North to south, east to west, the gospel is global because the God whom it celebrates is global.

Our problem with globalisation is that we have created a human construct which is as outrageous as the Tower of Babel. It challenges the divine reality of globalisation – that which takes its starting point in God - and functions instead on the basis of human control, power and ambition.

And yet, because as human beings we are inescapably made in the image of our Creator, alongside the subversion of globalisation that comes from our fallenness there is still redemptive possibility. There is great potential for good and to serve the cause of mission. There is great potential to make visible the world-wide-ness of the Church as the true global humanity, the global worshipping community committed to the one true God of the whole earth. In so far as globalisation reflects human fallenness, it will magnify on a huge canvas sin and corruption and domination of the weak by the powerful. That is the tragic impact of sin.

It is critical that we discern both of these possibilities, and reinforce that which displays the character and purposes of God while vigorously seeking to challenge and counteract that which entrenches sin. In this women as well as men have a strategic responsibility. We are called in this global setting to ensure that on the micro level and on the macro level we demonstrate what the universal kingship of God looks like, putting off sin, putting on righteousness.

Men, Women and God

Much of what happens under globalisation today is driven by men, and benefits men more than women. Of course, some women, especially some Western women, fully share some of the positive benefits of globalisation: for instance, ease of travel, horizons expanded through communications, incredible consumer choice (if that really is a benefit!). Nonetheless, globally, women are more likely to experience the negatives of globalisation and less likely to experience the positives.

But the biblical truth is that God cares passionately about women as well as men. They are equally created by him. They are equally redeemed by him. They are equally the recipients and dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. They are equally the Church on earth. They are equally destined for eternity in his presence. All God's grace-designs for humankind are equally for women as well as for men.

So it is a great outrage and offence to God when women are exploited or abused or where justice is denied them, or where structures exclude them from encountering the gospel message. That is not to deny that equally God hates those same things done to men. He does. But, as Genesis 3 clearly predicts, the impact of the Fall means that women will be exploited and dominated by men (just as women will be manipulative towards men). Just as in general terms men are likely to have greater physical power than women, so in most cultures men have greater economic and social power than women. At the domestic and community level, that means that in many cultures women suffer more than men and have fewer resources with which to change their circumstances. They will be likely to have less access to financial and economic resources, less education, less access to work beyond the home, less access to medical care, less access to justice. Of course, these are generalisations and we could all cite many exceptions. But where there is superior power in the hands of men, and too little to balance that, women suffer.

We see the same principle at work on a much larger scale when we note how rich nations exercise power through their resources of money and technology. Western nations do not expand their markets out of philanthropy. Many poorer nations angrily but helplessly find themselves unable to operate on the world stage as equal players. They are frequently forced into arrangements that benefit the richer countries at the expense of the poorer ones.

So in thinking about globalisation we need to think about the impact upon those who have historically and almost universally had less voice, less say in determining their lives, and who may find themselves caught up in powerful forces they neither understand nor can control. The traditional Chinese saying describes women as 'holding up half the sky'. That is wiser than the original author could have dreamed. It is because of the way in which God created us that women are indeed destined to 'hold up half the sky'. So what are the specific challenges to women, and what are some of the specific opportunities for mission to and by women, in the context of globalisation?

Pluses and minuses: migration

As the thumb-nail sketches at the beginning of this chapter illustrate, the impact of globalisation on women is both universal and confused.

Take Rani's story. On the one hand, the massive migration movements of the past twenty years or so have undoubtedly been fuelled by global factors. Equally undoubtedly the vast uprootings of people from their familiar environments, whether through war or famine or economic opportunism, have brought both alienation from the gospel and openness to it. In parts of Africa, for example, migration has resulted in forced conversion from Christianity, or voluntary abandoning of it to embrace materialism. At the same time, there are many stories like Rani's, involving people from many different countries. And it is not only in the west that such people are coming to faith. You may find the same glorious evidence of God's sovereign care in China, in Turkey, in Thailand, and many more. For the first time, perhaps, or in the context of all the familiar structures of life being taken away, there has been opportunity to question the old assumptions and perhaps a first encounter with vibrant Christianity. Where compassion and practical help has been offered to refugees, there has often followed opportunity to point to God as our great motivator, the one who teaches us to love the stranger in our midst and to welcome her in the name of the Lord.

While migration is as ancient as the human race, globalisation has intensified, diversified and fed it. Travel, information, awareness of alternative ways of life, and inequity on an international scale of wealth distribution, have all made migration not a last resort but for many the means to a future.

In migration movements from some countries, the men travel first, leaving the women back in the home country. That is especially true of economic migration, or where men have fought on the losing side in a war. This may be an especially vulnerable time for the womenfolk left behind. Not only will they probably be struggling to make a living, and to feed themselves and their children, they will also not know whether or not they will see their menfolk again, or whether their men have taken up with other women. They may have little protection from attack or rape. In other migration movements, women travel with their men, and en route to their destination may be caught up in begging or prostitution to pay the demands of their couriers. When (and if) they arrive, they will face bewildering changes, probably hostility, and the unnerving problem of bearing children in a strange country whose language they do not yet speak.

As Christians, we must not exploit the weak and take advantage of their vulnerability. Instead we may and must find ways of reaching with compassion and gospel vision to these needy women. One of the great untold stories of our time – because it is so sensitive – is the way in which women and men from countries where Christian activity is forbidden are coming to faith in alien countries to which they have fled, for whatever reason. Without a doubt, globalisation has speeded up the migration phenomenon, as people become aware of the possibility of a different kind of life if they can only reach this country or that. Just as God had compassionate purposes in the repeated migrations of his people as recorded for us in Scripture, so today we need to look for the hand of God in this particular global dislocation and relocation. Globalisation has produced doorways for the gospel.

Pluses and minuses: collision of worlds

Altaa's experience could be repeated millions of times, with minor variations. How do you put the old world and the new world together? How do you make sense of what you see and hear through media whose origin is another world from your own? You can sidle up the favelas of Brazil, or pick your way through the shanties of some Asian or African city, and find yourself bombarded with the current Top Ten pop songs from London, or join a crowd clustered round a television screen showing some Bollywood or Hollywood blockbuster. It is almost surreal. Certainly it produces some kind of fragmentation of the personality, a cracking apart of coherence however ill-founded.

For immediate life is lived within the boundaries of grinding poverty, of no running water and no sanitation, of life that is precarious and hard and full of suffering. And then, on the screen, a world of obscene wealth and unreal escapes, of fast cars and beautiful clothes, and things and things and things..... And always the hero wins through, the virtuous heroine is carried off to a life of luxury and ease. What does the woman in a Calcutta slum make of all that? Does she aspire to wealth for herself or her daughters? Does she hope there might be justice for her as a woman if she's virtuous? How does she put it together with her Hindu faith? Can she make any connection at all between what she sees and what she knows? But, when a Christian woman is stirred into that context, what a marvellous

opportunity to explain the limitations of the old world and the limitations of the seductive plastic new, and to deal with the realities of living differently within the world as it is. Here, too, is a doorway for the gospel. For the gospel is not escapism, but it is deliverance.

Pluses and minuses: the tyranny of world markets

Femi's life, too, is bound up with global forces. Her world may be limited to a tiny specific geographical location, from which she will never move, and to the most basic activities of human survival. But the factors which have shaped her life's circumstances have their roots far away quite as much as close at hand. Has industrialisation and global warming, driven by Western consumption, exacerbated the drought? If there had not been a global market, perhaps her sons would not have left for the city. And then perhaps they would not have encountered HIV and AIDS, and left Femi, as so many an African grandmother, struggling to care for orphaned grandchildren. Ironically, the lure of cash and access to goods drastically impoverished rather than enriching this community.

One of the tragedies of Western domination, through Western wealth, of the mass media and of technology is that there is often greater export of Western values and materialism to the poorer parts of the world, than there is genuine reciprocal export to the West of understanding of life in those poor countries. So, despite some documentaries and heartbreaking images of AIDS or famine wracked little children, we can quickly put those images aside, their place taken by other things and local concerns. It is arguable that Femi's life is far more manipulated by the forces of globalisation than is mine, despite the fact that I am much more surrounded by the artefacts of globalisation. Certainly, Femi has far less power than I do to protest, or to choose alternatives. She is much more a victim than am I. It is hard to see how any of the advantages of globalisation as that is commonly understood enrich her life. At the same time, if we go back to the definition of globalisation in its biblical sense of coming under the world-wide rule of God, then Femi is already a beneficiary. Sadly, the negative impact of economic globalisation has undermined her ability to live in the good of the spiritual reality.

Issues of identity

In many cultures, women have been the guardians and primary transmitters of religion, even where they have had no public role in religious leadership, and where they may be excluded from public ritual and worship. This is because they are primary nurturers of children, and are more likely to be the ones who instil in children from earliest consciousness the worldview associated with a particular faith. They may be the ones who in the home and in the community of childhood, most likely lived out among women and children, train the next generation in home-based religious ritual and observance. Many of the rituals associated with birth, sickness and death, are performed by women; and these may shape a child quite as powerfully as any public male-dominated ritual. If women are to be reached with the gospel, and in turn their children reached, then we need to understand and interact with these deep, often unarticulated mental maps.

One of the significant results of globalisation is that people the world over are being exposed to other ways of life, other cultures, other belief systems, whether formal religious systems or the implicit values that betray fundamental actual beliefs. We need to be extremely sensitive to what may be going on in women's minds and worldview as a result of this exposure. There may (or may not!) be subtle (or quite major!) changes from what cultural anthropologists have noted in the past, or an earlier generation of missionaries has observed and passed down as 'the way they think'. Past observation may no longer be quite as accurate as we assume. There is an enormous amount of transition. But in women it may be harder to spot, because many of the traditional ritual observances continue. In this context, too, there is an exciting potential for effective ministry where a Christian woman can engage with women at the level of daily life and in the areas of birth and marriage and sickness. As traditional patterns are challenged, and other possibilities brought into focus, there is another doorway for the gospel.

Despite the fact that most cultures remain male-dominated, there have been and are some high profile women now visible on the world stage. In the 1960s, my generation in Britain knew the name of Mrs Bandaranaike (the Sri Lankan who became the world's first female Prime Minister) but wouldn't have recognised her in the street because we rarely saw a picture of her. But by the 1990s, Diana Princess of Wales, and Mother Teresa, would be recognised by hundreds of millions all around the globe. It was not only British newspapers that were awash with pictures of them. Their images could be seen in Beijing or Bombay or Lagos. They became global icons. An icon is literally a picture that is an aid to worship, but which in the hands of the unknowing can become an object of worship. It is worth

reflecting on the response in many parts of the world to Diana's death. Here globalisation produced a counterfeit of the gospel.

Whilst there will be very few women who achieve the global familiarity of Diana or Mother Teresa, it is observable all round the world that advertising and visual images still largely present women as sex objects and as intellectually inferior. This reinforces the message that sexual exploitation of women is OK. The same technology that can beam wholesome information around the world can also spread pornography as fast as the most virulent physical epidemic, and become the basis of world-wide trade in child prostitution. Men travel the world to engage in the rape of little girls in Bangkok. Trade such as this, sickening and an abomination to God, has been fed by global travel, global information, global money. It is important for Christian mission to challenge this, because it is an outrage to God as Creator and Redeemer.

In some situations, this provides yet one more doorway for the gospel as women discover that they are loved and valued and respected by God.

The challenge of secular feminism

The institutional church, male-dominated as it always has been, does not have a very good track record in relation to women. It is common all round the world for the church leadership's subliminal message to convince women as well as men that they are not as valuable as their husbands, their fathers or their sons. Sadly, under the impact of globalisation, the choice being dangled before most of the non-Christian world does not include a genuinely biblical model. Rather, the choice is between the traditional ways of a people or religion (and fundamentalism is one response in seeking to ensure that that tradition remains in place); women as sex objects; or women making their claim to equality in strident and destructive ways. There are fingerprints of most kinds of Western secular feminist agenda in the most unlikely places. None of these have very much at all to do with God's loving design for men and women living in harmony and complementarity, freely and gladly serving the King of the whole earth.

There are, of course, many forms of feminism. Some come closer to God's truth than others, and feminism has highlighted many areas where the Church badly needs to change, and concerns that we should share. Sadly, however, the most influential feminist movements today are driven by secular humanist values, and too often by anger and self-assertion. This is more dangerous than we often acknowledge, because in many parts of the world, where resistance to the gospel is strongest, the West is still (quite erroneously) equated with the Christian faith. So, just as unbridled capitalism and economic imperialism – largely associated with the West - create enormous barriers to the gospel, so too does the powerful model of social relations exported through the feminist lobby. It is displayed in films, and books, and political policy. It can be observed in the raucous behaviour of tourists, and the offensive immodesty of many Westerners. It is perceived, fairly or unfairly, as undermining family values and social stability, and thus an enemy to be resisted.

If 'all the world's a stage', and if globalisation ensures that all the world can be spectators as well as players, how critical it is that we model a way of life that pulses with God's love and points clearly to the way he has created us to live within the human family. Some feminist movements had their roots in the Church, as people (rightly) protested that the Church did not read the Scriptures closely when it came to treating women as God intended. Often the starting point was right, though often the protest later came to be expressed in ways far removed from the biblical agenda. We need far more carefully, and with much greater discrimination, to address the challenges of feminism, and to display in practice what redeemed manhood and womanhood should look like. While there are of course differences in understanding exactly how that works out from the biblical data, without any doubt at all there is much progress that could be made with full agreement, if only there were the will to do so. Failure to do this may greatly compromise mission and gospel ministry.

Women in global mission

It is one of the great ironies of church history that women have been the primary gospel pioneers in country after country, and among people group after people group, and yet mission strategy is normally devised by men. It remains true today that approximately two-thirds of the world formal missionary force (i.e. members of mission agencies) are women, and a similar proportion of church members around the world. Yet, mission history repeatedly shows us that as soon as a believing community emerges, it will be formalised under male leadership. Mission agencies, however heavily populated by

women, are overwhelmingly led by men. Sadly, this frequently leads to the marginalisation of women in mission and church policy and practice, and neither church nor mission agency thinks strategically enough about how God chooses to push back the boundaries of unbelief through the specific contribution of Christian women.

At its heart, the transmission of the gospel is highly relational, and in most cultures of the world women are instinctively (and are socialised into being) more relational than many men. Particularly in those parts of the world where there is a high level of resistance to the gospel – those hard, hard places – it is only through quiet persistent godly living, accompanied by friendship evangelism, that people will be won to Christian faith. These are often the places, too, where traditional forms of church life, focused on buildings and institutional structures, are not possible. What a marvellous opportunity for Christian women all over the world! In almost any culture in the world, women have free access to other women and to children, with daily opportunities to disciple them, either formally or informally. In some of the countries most deeply hostile to the gospel, there is good evidence that there are countless secret believers, many of them women and children quietly reached through the friendship of other women reaching into neighbours' homes and families. There is enormous potential for faith-sharing when it is properly integrated into the whole of our daily lives, wherever these may be played out, in the domestic sphere, in the community, in a workplace distanced from the home, or wherever else. It may be that some women have better captured this than those who equate mission with a more formal and separate activity.

It is not only among women and children that women are highly effective missionaries, though. Many of the world's tribal groups have been reached initially by women. Sometimes that is because they have appeared as less threatening. Women, too, have often been at the forefront of compassion ministries, nursing the sick, tending the poor and the dying. They have frequently been able to reduce deaths through childbirth, and, by teaching women primary healthcare at the level of home and local community have also reduced infant and child mortality. They have taught better nutrition sensitively, introduced small home-based cottage industries to boost income, listened and chatted..... In wealthier settings, especially in the West where loneliness and unhappiness are widespread, compassionate engagement in the lives of others is no less powerful a gospel tool. In a thousand small ways, Christian women, local and expatriate, have incarnated the gospel and made it understandable, bringing word and deed together. And as their contribution has impacted communities helpfully, the men have been more willing in their turn to listen, too.

It may be, too, that many Christian women are more readily content with discipling quietly in small groups or one to one. The pressure of globalisation may be to make us focus on the big scheme and the highly visible, but the spiritual reality is that the most effective mission is accomplished through deep investment in a personally known group. Yes, we need to share the Lord's vision for the whole world, and not be content with a tiny fraction of it! But the paradox is that global vision will be brought into realisation through the multiplication of incarnated ministries in millions of times and places.

Men and women together in global mission

This pattern, because it is biblical, is more likely to be effective in reaching today's unreached (but potentially highly reachable, thanks to globalisation) than all the complex schemes the contemporary Church cares to devise. The world Church has a choice facing it today. It can copy the pattern of the world, and use the tools and goals so amply adopted by global business. This way, it will market itself aggressively, with an emphasis on high profile, size and success, and devise global schemes for conquering the world, all served by efficient structures and resulting in a stress on institutional organisation, and mostly led by men exercising power as the world knows it. Or, it can choose to travel the way of the Cross, not just talk about it. For this, it must be prepared to be misunderstood and rejected, to serve out of human weakness in order that all power should be seen to be the Lord's, emphasising structure less and spiritual life and godliness more, fired by vision rather than schemes, and with great humility. The Church is called to be a global family of disciples, not a human-made empire, and in that family women and men are to stand side by side, equally loved, equally valued, equally fruitful. In this way, the Kingdom of God on earth in the here and now will more truly illustrate that fully realised Kingdom of the future. And, in this way, we shall see more clearly what God truly intended globalisation to be all about.

Some questions to think about

1. How has your life, and that of your neighbours, been affected by globalisation? What do you think might be the gains, and what might be the losses?
2. Who are the migrants from and to your community? Why are they migrants? How could your church play its part in reaching them with the gospel?
3. Imagine yourself going to live alongside Altaa or Femi in the opening stories. How might you try to help them live with the consequences of globalisation?
4. In what ways are Christian women in your community especially effective in reaching others for Christ?