

Gender in Mission

The Gender in Mission Study Group began first as ‘Women in Mission’ under the direction of Jocelyn Murray in 1993 for the purposes of exploring women’s role in mission theory and praxis. The group has undergone varying levels of response and interest from members, being able though to convene study groups at the following assemblies: Hammanskraal 2000, Port Dickson 2004 under the leadership of Katjia Heidmanns, Balaton 2008, moderated by Martha Fredericks and Toronto 2012 under the leadership of Rose Uchem. A name change to Gender in Mission had been suggested to the Executive Committee in 2008 and after consideration was recommended and confirmed over the course of 2010 via Executive Committee teleconference.

Initially, ‘Women in Mission’ retrieved and brought to the fore the enormous contribution of women to mission both overseas and in their home churches all over the Christian world which mainline missiology and church history had ignored.¹ While this perspective remains important and relevant, the Executive Committee desired to broaden the base and encourage men and women missiologists and mission practitioners to engage this all important interface of gender and mission in their research.

Purpose

Gender in Mission exists to bring to the fore the necessity of and work of producing strong and valid missiological research and reflection on issues related to gender, a social fabric wherein Christian witness does and needs to take place. This work is necessitated by (although not limited to) the following reasons:

1. Gender issues are often a matter of life and death for many women in many contexts, including migration.
2. Power sharing across genders and mutuality in ministry are crucial to the quality of our witness to Jesus, the Christ, who relinquished power that others might live.
3. Current contexts of globalization, urbanization, migration, and simultaneous secularization and de-secularization have brought to the surface changing dynamics of gendered experience, expectation, and trajectories for men and women. These inevitably shape family structures, children’s care and wellbeing, patterns of gospel transfer, ecclesiastical authority, etc. Thus gender in mission is literally global, multi and inter-generational in scope of effect.
4. Gender equality provides the basis for coherent social witness to the gospel.
5. Males are increasingly at risk of possible social dislocation, and have been de-prioritized from “women’s studies” programs. While the intent of such programs is right, the effect is that it sets men aside. Gender in Mission tries to recover the care and



flourishing of both male and female in harmony within and among the sexes in conversation with Genesis 1 - 3 narratives.

Content

By genderⁱⁱ here is meant: the socially constructed roles, behaviors, feelings and attitudes expected of girls and boys, women and men, in a given society. It also connotes the rights, power and privileges accorded or not accorded each sex; as well as the restrictions and taboos imposed on them. In contradistinction to sex (the condition of being male or female) which is biological, natural and fairly constant, gender is social, cultural, human-made, learned and therefore changeable. This distinction is the basis for gender equality; a situation where men and women have equal opportunities for participation and enjoyment of rights, responsibilities and privileges in their society without any legal, cultural, political, economic, religious, or social hindrance on the basis of their sex. Thus, the observable (morphological, physiological and psychological) differences between men and women do not confer priority on the male nor provide justification for discrimination against the female. Difference is rather seen as a source of enrichment for the human community, a reason to work together as a team, each making up the strengths and weaknesses of the other. Difference is taken to be the hallmark of genuine complementarity and respect for the other who brings into the human partnership a unique contribution. This consideration is also the rationale for gender balance which is the proportion of women to men's representation and participation at the highest echelons of decision- and policy-making, as different from a massive presence at the level of the work force, within an organization.

Update from Toronto 2012

Over the course of IAMS Toronto 2012, the Gender in Mission study group convened and 8 paper presentations were moderated by Rose Uchem. Three papers came from the Americas, four from Africa, and one from New Zealand. 6 presenters were female; 2 were male. Topics included but were not limited to the following: women's migration and dislocation within mission itself (Frances Adeney); the socialization of Jamaican men and women living and worshipping in New York City, and the shift of women into new roles such as that of breadwinner, and the male need to have positions of influence in the local church since they are dislocated in social and familial structures (Janice McClean); women's marginalization in the church perpetuates the condition of scarcity of laborers in the midst of plentiful harvest (Dorothy Oluwagbemi-Jacob); identity formation among North African women in France and how their experiences shape priorities for Christian mission (Jennifer L. Aycock); expansion of HIV/AIDS prevention beyond the limits of sickness aetiologies (Gordon Stewart); gender as primary driver of who and how HIV/AIDS is contracted, such that women are more susceptible because relations are defined in churches by Genesis 3 as prescriptive, based on power rather than mutuality (Nkechinyere Onah); and the missiological significance of the commonalities in the experiences of women, migrants and missionaries (Rose Uchem).

Suggestions were made within the group for further development of each topic, pragmatic and ministerial uses of research (such as curriculum development), as well as how to expand the study group and generate interest in the *broadly* relevant topic of “Gender in Mission.” For example, BISAM reports that 14 of 16 papers were prepared by men, and a number of women who had prepared papers from the southern hemisphere were unable to attend due to finances. Such phenomenon is necessarily a question and concern of “Gender in Mission,” as male and female equity in presence or absence necessarily shapes missiological priorities. This occurrence demonstrates the basic and internal level at which theological reflection, economic resourcing, and diversified voices at the table are interlocked and inter-affecting female and male.

Themes and Topics for Further Study from Toronto 2012:

1. Necessity of studying male experience and socialization alongside recovering female voice and experience.
2. Canopy of shared experiences between missionaries, migrants, and women through migration and dislocation.
3. Creative liminal space in the church created through migration and dislocation which allow for new roles for both men and women in church as social fabric is re-negotiated.
4. How do peoples move as gendered beings? How does gender socialization shape experiences of migration/dislocation accordingly?
5. HIV/AIDS known as “women’s sickness/poison” in some contexts: How do churches’ positions on the place of women inform prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS?
6. Is discipleship gendered? What does it mean to be first and naturally conditioned by culture, then re-oriented to be conditioned by Christ?
7. How does theology of mission inform our male/female relationships in the church and in society?

Convener

If you are interested in learning more about the Gender in Mission Study Group, how to participate, how to acquire papers, etc., please contact Convener, Rose Uchem at nkeonyereu4@hotmail.com.

ⁱ http://www.missionstudies.org/db/newsletter/iams_matters_01.html#_ftnref5.

ⁱⁱ http://www.missionstudies.org/db/newsletter/iams_matters_01.html#_ftn6