

Molly Cappeller

Mr. Crow

REL 1300

5 November 2015

Females in Religion

Historically, women have not been given equal opportunities as men have. This is not only seen in the social structure of society, but also in religion. In recent years, women have been emerging as leaders in religious communities. There are many benefits to having females in leadership positions in religious organizations. These benefits include the following: Females serve as positive role models, they offer insight and opinion about female church members that male leaders may not understand, and female members may feel more comfortable seeking counsel from female church leaders. All these benefits have a great impact on religious communities all around the world.

Women were physically included in history, but often times they were excluded emotionally and intellectually. In older world religions, there is a clear dominance of males in the social structure. Discrimination in religious communities is very common. Violent countries as well as economically unstable countries, often lead to poor treatment for women. When countries try to repress women's rights, especially in religious organizations, it leads to instability. Gender equality in society and religion is still an issue in many countries today.

Women have historically not always been given equal opportunities, and this can be seen in religious organizations around the world. Consider Buddhism where women were seen differently than most other religions. Women were never seen as "property" of men, but there

was still much confusion over the status of women in Buddhism. Female orders were vulnerable because they had fewer connections to political power. Even women who were not ordained still pursued a religious life. Some women took vows of poverty or service, which is similar to vows that Catholic nuns take. In the Hindu scriptures, many statements about women were positive. They honored and respected women, but also scorned them. Similar to other religions, women were expected to be wives and work in the house. Even though they were told to be wives and mothers, they were still well respected as women.

In early times in Christianity, women were usually found in the household and that is where they were said to belong. In the Bible, we see Jesus accepting women as followers and talking about equality before God. However, when the three orders of the ministry were established, women were not a part of them. Women were not able to be ordained into the Church until the nineteenth century. Women have been “under the radar,” but overall, women have been emerging as leaders in religious organizations.

In some churches around the world, women are being elected as bishops. Because women are being seen and respected as leaders in religious life, they are also developing new attitudes. They believe they can lead and preach and be heard just as well as men can. Gender equality in religion is starting to become the accepted norm, and women are reaching new heights in religious communities. The goal of all this is to have a balance of men and women leading in religious organizations. Complete equality is not the goal because if that were the case, women would be doing jobs better suited to men and vice versa. Although history attempted to show women as inferior to men or unnecessary in religious orders, there are many benefits to having females in leadership positions in religious organizations.

Females serve as positive role models in more ways than one. In my personal experience, religious women have done so much for me. I went to Catholic school for fourteen years and women always played an important role. The elementary and middle school I attended was run by a nun, and had many religious women as teachers and educators. They were not only teachers, but they were role models and mentors. At the time, I did not realize how much they influenced me spiritually, but it is apparent now. Because of my years in a Catholic school, I now realize how important it is to have women, as well as men, as leaders in religious organizations. From Baptism and First Communion, to our annual Christmas Pageant, these leading ladies were always making these events memorable and meaningful. They organized, worked behind the scenes, and showed us what it was like to lead a group of children in a religious organization. Just those women alone influenced so many children and parents. Seeing these women leading a church ministry or community leads me to feel that women are being seen as more important than they used to once be. Historically, women were not seen as leaders especially in religious organizations, but women like these are becoming more abundant. As role models, these women taught me much more than religion; they taught me how to be a strong, smart leader. Even in subtle day-to-day things, they are changing the way people see our church community, and this is making a huge difference.

Women are not always represented to be strong leaders, especially in the church, but this is now changing as well. One example of a female role model in a religious community is Bishop Vashti McKenzie of the African Methodist Episcopal Church who women look to for inspiration and motivation to become a leader and a role model. Leaders like Bishop Vashti McKenzie are setting off a chain reaction in religious communities around the world. Being a role model is not

the only way women are making a difference in religion. They are also writers, activists, and scholars. These reasons among many others are why females serve as positive role models as leaders in religious organizations.

Not only can these women be role models, but they can also offer insight and opinion about female church members in a comfortable setting. Women face challenges that men might not understand in regards to balancing family and work or other challenges that women face. Traditional family roles make it difficult for women to achieve that desired balance. Offering this kind of advice and support is not something that would be relatable to most men, therefore a woman would be better suited to this kind of leadership position. This may not be a very prestigious position, but offering this kind of help and advice is something that not everyone can do. It takes a certain kind of woman to devote her life to helping other women in this situation. This is an opportunity for these religious female leaders to give their advice and opinion in order to help the women in need. Many churches offer programs led by women to help women. Without these women, female church members might not be able to fully express themselves in a comfortable setting. This is a great way to get more women involved in the church or any religious community.

Women not only offer advice and insight, but they also offer a unique perspective. Because history has led many to believe that women cannot or should not be leaders, they have had to break through many barriers to be able to offer a unique message. Women can also bring different perspectives and experiences, which makes them unique leaders in religion. They offer diversity in their insight and opinions. The presence of women in religious organizations is increasing, and they are bringing a new perspective and understanding to their religious

communities. Unlike most other aspects of society, the religious community gives women many opportunities and chances to become a part of a greater good. People were so used to the status quo that they did not realize that women played a relatively small role in religious life. Some religious practices value tradition greatly and would not want to see any change in the religious orders. Women can reach a wider group of people than only men can. Not only can women give a different perspective or opinion, but they can also send their message to a larger audience.

Actual life experience can also play a role in a women's advice. Women lead different lives than men, which is clearly seen in their message. From the day they are born, women are treated and heard differently. In dealing with some problems, only a women's real life experience can be the best advice. For example, only a woman who was denied something because of her gender can help a girl who faces the same issue.

Females might be more sensitive and have a heightened awareness of others struggles. Most women, especially those who spend their lives helping others, have some sort of motherly instinct. This is what makes women so willing and able to help struggling women and offer advice. Women most often have different leadership styles, and this is what makes them so suitable to respond to the needs of the religious community as a whole. Sometimes this different leadership style drifts away from tradition, but this can be seen as a positive thing. As they lean away from tradition, they are going towards a shared involvement throughout the religious community. Their leadership style is being modeled to acknowledge the difficulties women face in becoming leaders and the double standards that the world has for leading women. Women often have a heightened awareness for what it is like to be "shut out" because they have been

excluded from orders and leadership roles for a long time. Women can use their own struggles to help and enable people to value themselves and their beliefs.

To conclude, these are all great examples of the benefits of women serving as leaders in religion. Any position, big or small, can make a difference in any religious community. We can all benefit from having more dedicated women serving and leading in religious organizations.

Works Cited

Trofin, Tomescu, Madalina, and Liliana. "Religion and Discrimination against Women." (n.d.): n. pag. Web

Sharma, Arvind. *Women in World Religions*. Albany: State U of New York, 1987. Print.

King, Ursula. *Women in the World's Religions, past and Present*. New York: Paragon House, 1987. Print

Sachedina, Abdulaziz, Dr. "The Impact of Religion on Women in the Development Process." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26.2, SPECIAL ISSUE WITH THE SOCIETY FOR PHENOMENOLOGY AND EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY (2012): 291-98. Web

Marshall, Katherine, and Susan Hayward. "Women in Religious Peacebuilding." *Peace Works* (n.d.): n. pag. Web.