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# CREATING CULTURES OF BELONGING

CULTIVATING  
ORGANIZATIONS  
WHERE WOMEN  
AND MEN THRIVE



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## CHAPTER ONE

# THE MISSIONAL ORGANIZATION HAS A PROBLEM WITH WOMEN

The executive team sat in a conference room answering the question, “Who are our next generation of leaders?” This leadership-pipeline conversation was the right one, the responsible one, even with transitions several years away. The name of a female midlevel leader flashed on the screen.

“Not her,” said her supervisor, a male senior vice president, known for routinely pulling sixty-plus-hour workweeks despite having school-age kids at home. “She’s made it known that with kids and her husband’s demanding job, she doesn’t have the bandwidth to lead right now.”

A female executive there knew exactly why this woman would have said that: she didn’t want to lead like her boss. So she hesitantly interjected, “Maybe she just doesn’t know what being a leader could mean for *her*.”

In an average organization, this next-generation female leader would statistically have few leadership role models. In the movement to elevate more women into leadership, this phenomenon is described as, “You can’t be what you can’t see.” Left to consider whether she could lead like her male boss—maintaining his schedule, mirroring his temperament, carrying on his relentless dedication to work despite obligations at home or in other areas of interest—she is forced to answer with an unequivocal “no.” Without better and more inclusive examples of what being a leader could look like, many women don’t see a pathway to leadership for themselves.

The bottom line is, there aren't enough women in leadership roles to demonstrate what it looks like when women lead, let alone a critical mass of women who could truly make an impact and create a new leadership culture altogether.

In some contexts, women have carved out an occasional role among majority male or men-only leadership teams. For years we have observed that women succeed and are celebrated in leadership when they demonstrate a male-like leadership style—straight-shooting, confident, always on. We've also seen women who are admonished for these same qualities, told they are too aggressive and too confident, so they resort to making sure they are perceived as nice and easy to get along with. By midcareer, aspiring female leaders know that to succeed, they must leave their personalities and personal lives at the door and navigate a labyrinth of conflicting expectations.

Putting pressure on women to show up like men is a lose-lose outcome. Women lose a seat and their genuine voice at the table where important decisions are made. Men and women together lose the opportunity to learn from a shared, more balanced leadership model and the healthy culture it would mean for our organizations, communities, and homes.

### **EEVA'S STORY**

Like most women, I (Eeva) have learned the hard way what it means to speak with my genuine voice. Growing up in a fundamentalist church, as the oldest of four sisters, I intentionally ignored the muted roles women played in that world. It wasn't until I began to toggle between motherhood, career, and leadership that I was forced to face how my patriarchal church community offered me no examples of women in leadership. Neither did it present opportunities for mentorship on how I could manage my many responsibilities. Despite my egalitarian marriage, the realities that faced me as a woman ended up changing how I experienced my Christian faith. Leaving my church after thirty years broke my heart, but I knew that to express the gift of leadership God had given me, I could not call "home" a community that was most comfortable if I kept silent.

I also should have known better, because I grew up in one of the most gender-equal countries in the world: Finland. As a young woman I had seen

a number of close relatives and friends pursue motherhood and careers, leaning on the unparalleled support systems of yearlong maternity leave, daycare, long holidays, and respect for a division between work and the rest of life. When I entered working life in the United States I realized how flawed the system truly was, and my experience was exacerbated by the often-misogynistic attitudes of my church community. While my peers at home had support and affirmation as they entered motherhood, I was focused solely on not causing financial loss to my employer when I did the same. The contrast between the lives of my peers in Finland and my own reality was shocking.

I came to care about healthy leadership because of this contrast.

My yearbook picture, had I had one, wouldn't have described me as "most ambitious" but rather as "most friendly" or "most diplomatic." Creating spaces of cohesion and collaboration is my natural way of being. Because I had been silenced as a woman, it took me many years to realize that my "female" style is exactly what many teams need, and I began lean into it. It is my unique contribution to teams often composed of world-class technical experts, whether in the nonprofit sector or academia. Instead of shrinking this part of me, I have learned to use it as my superpower.

I've made my greatest impact on teams I've worked on and led by resourcing people to do their best work. I focus on the well-being of people because I believe it drives them to perform at their highest level and leads to the best results for the team as a whole. I believe good, healthy leadership that emphasizes every team member's well-being and personal strengths is not only possible but attainable. I also believe that this emphasis is the secret to unlocking gender equality in our organizations.

### **BETH'S STORY**

I (Beth) was raised in a home where my parents held traditional roles. My dad was the breadwinner, while my mother, who contributed to the family income through Tupperware parties, was the caregiver and also the primary decision maker on finances and family matters. As a young girl I saw women teach at my Episcopal church and never gave a thought to gender roles growing up. When I was in my twenties I joined a church with superior egalitarian Bible teaching, and soon after I joined a Christian university's

leadership center, which was led by three diverse individuals who modeled what they taught. Two were men; one was a woman. This was my introduction to a culture of belonging. The healthy leadership and organizational behaviors I espouse today can be attributed to the lessons I learned from them.

When I joined this university, it was filled with egalitarian theologians and led by a female president—the first woman to head a Protestant college in the United States. While some called her “hell on heels” for her masculine leadership style, I remember thinking I could see the flecks of glass in her hair from crashing her way through the glass ceiling. Undoubtedly her experience in a man’s world such as academia formed some of her leadership style. Today we’ve learned to identify and call out the harsh critiques leveled against women who show up with leadership traits usually associated with men.

I was encircled by men and women who encouraged me to use my gifts for significant purposes. In my leadership role in the university’s small leadership center that evolved into the school of leadership and development, I encountered the stark realities women and girls face in less egalitarian countries. When I traveled, too many meeting rooms I entered were filled with all men. Too many times I held a dear African sister as she wrestled with her family calling her selfish for using money to further her own education rather than paying for the education of relatives. Too many qualified female graduates from my program were never considered for top posts, despite their skills and qualifications.

I learned what cultural and systemic inequality looks like.

In 2015, the university where I served decided to refocus its programs nationally. I knew my calling to equip leaders in the most difficult places had not changed, so after twenty-two years of service, I surprised many when I left my tenured faculty position. It was in the international world of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that I confronted a second stark reality, but this time not on foreign soil. I came to realize that the systemic treatment of women as “second-class” is prevalent in faith-based organizations, particularly in their Western headquarters.

These experiences, the good and the less good, are what fueled our passion to write this book. Because we have known what a culture of

belonging feels like, and what a difference it makes for staff success and everyday experience, we want women *and* men in the missional sector to feel it too.

## THE MISSIONAL ORGANIZATION

In this book we talk about missional organizations.

We use this term as a catch-all to describe organizations united by faith-based or religious roots, including nonprofits, parachurch ministries, mission organizations, churches, conferences, educational institutions, and even some for-profits. The term *missional* is a bit of a buzzword with no real dictionary definition; we use it here to assume an organizational motivation that is centered on Christian faith. Missional organizations follow the example of Jesus, who sent out his disciples into “all the world.” Throughout their histories, missional organizations have felt a strong prompting by faith to be sent out, whether in fighting poverty, serving refugees and displaced people, educating, advocating, creating microbusiness opportunities, or in the many capacities they serve people in our neighborhoods or around the world.

The missional sector uses the terms such as *integral mission* or *transformational development* to describe the coming together of “word and deed.” René Padilla was among the first to challenge the patriarchal and Western-focused way of thinking about mission and development. He spoke of integral mission as the church, wherever it is located, being committed to communicating the gospel through everything it is, says, and does. Gil Odendaal, a leading teacher and expert on integral mission, often says, “Mixing word and deed is like mixing tea and milk: the two become inseparable. You can no longer tell them apart.” In the missional organization, word and deed have become integrated, an inseparable part of our organizational DNA.

This approach gives missional organizations a special flavor; it is the unique handprint by which we do our work. But it does not come without challenges.

The global context of the missional organization forces us to continuously reevaluate this integral view of our work. Government funds cannot

support explicitly religious programming. Many millennial staff don't feel comfortable being labeled as "faith-based" and are even less so being called "evangelical," not least because of the unwelcoming stigma these terms carry. Organizations work in geographic contexts that do not welcome a faith-based approach, which can even endanger the staff. Many organizations that were established on Christian or religious foundations no longer self-identify as faith-based, claim any religious affiliation, ask their staff to sign statements of faith, or require participation in weekly practices of devotion or prayer.

Despite these barriers, the faith-based actors in international and US-based programming continue to grow their footprint among nonprofits.

According to the United Nations Economic and Social Council estimate, faith-based organizations make up approximately 14 percent of NGOs globally. Christian organizations make up nearly 60 percent of that number. In the United States, of the more than 1.5 million registered nonprofits, religion-related organizations make up nearly 7 percent. According to GuideStar, there are 143,350 religious nonprofits in the United States, with over half of this number made up of Christian churches. Since some nonprofits register as churches, and many churches do the work of nonprofits, the waters of an accurate count are muddied even further.

According to Katherine Marshall, who calls these organizations "faith-inspired," their footprint has steadily increased in the United Nations registry:

Through the 1980s, the secular world, whether US or other foreign governments or UN agencies, took very little explicit notice of religious organizations. September 11 put a spotlight on religion and the culture wars at large, sadly generally in negative ways. Overall, however, today religion and religiously inspired work are much more on different agendas, but the priority of these organizations or their centrality to the development agendas varies from one administration or global leader to the next. Success in securing mainstream funding is often contingent on a capacity to cut across very different worldviews from their own.



Despite the enlarged footprint of faith-based nonprofits, their ability to secure continued support depends on their ability to communicate their mission not only to faith-aligned audiences but beyond. To reach across ideologies and to qualify for governmental and global funding, organizations are forced to continually reexamine what role faith, and especially the expression of faith, plays in their programmatic activities and interventions.

Some missional organizations are doing the hard work of shedding harmful ideologies and practices in their programming. Challenged by books such as *The White Man's Burden* and *When Helping Hurts*, as well as documentaries such as *Poverty, Inc.*, they are applying a different critical lens to their own sector. The historical “White savior” mentality is being challenged to give way to locally driven planning and leadership, where outside resources are welcomed only after the local community establishes priorities and needs and draws first on its own skills and resources. This approach requires the missional organization to enter as a guest and function as a servant. This is not a posture that comes easily when organizational goals, donor expectations, and money are driving the agenda.

The way organizations have “done development” in past decades is certainly open to examination and criticism. Part of this examination involves a rejection of terms such as *international development* and certainly *undeveloped world*, as well as dismantling the distorted image of donors and aid workers as heroic saviors, something the sector has held on to for far too long. Change is difficult, but a brave few organizations are forging the right path.

## MISSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THE PROBLEM WITH WOMEN

Change is also desperately needed in how missional organizations engage with women.

It might be easy to assume that missional organizations should hold the welcoming and belonging of everyone as central to the organizational culture. After all, if Jesus is at the center, shouldn't we, by his example, also welcome all?

The reality is that many organizations still carry the baggage of decades past. Their viewpoints have been formulated by their history and traditional theology, resulting in an organizational culture that is unwelcoming to women.

Over the decades the sector has not only struggled to create cultures that welcome all but has held on to unique historical and theological barriers. The theological views that still dominate in organizations have been gleaned from unchallenged denominational interpretations and practices. Histories are often intertwined with military, church, and missionary cultures, in which many household-name missional organizations have their roots. Unexamined, obsolete, and harmful cultures that center one-size-fits-all leadership still permeate many organizations, whether secular or missional. All these factors create a perfect storm in missional organizations, one that has long prevented the conversation around women's equality from even getting started.

Despite individual organizations' undertaking efforts to reexamine and reevaluate other harmful practices, the issue of women's unequal role lingers. Women's participation in leadership and decision making, along with their ability to shape the future of organizations, remains stunted. Organizations make decisions about forward motion in a complex world while still holding on to legacy policies, practices, and leadership styles that do not favor and even completely disregard women.

Jane, a participant in a focus group we conducted, states,

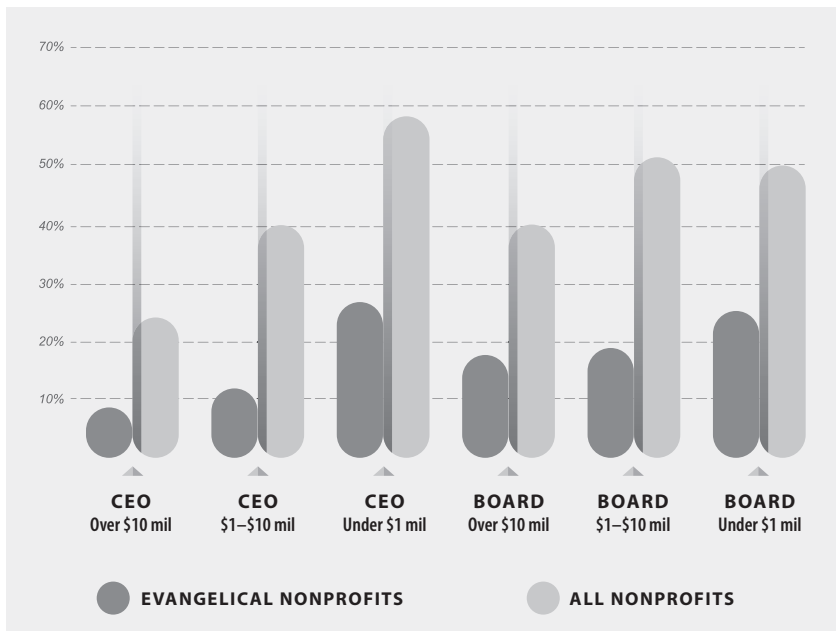
During my tenure with my organization I've seen ten women enter and exit our executive team. They'll come in and make progress for six to eighteen months, and then suddenly something happens and they're out. Maybe it's that they can't do the job, sure, but the men don't have the same track record. Men serve in their roles for a decade at a time. Why is it that women are so unsuitable for these roles? What is holding women back? It's almost like some invisible qualifier cuts women out before they even get started.

The data confirms the same. Women make up more than 70 percent of the nonprofit workforce, including the secular sector, but just over 20 percent of the larger agencies have women as CEOs. A Gordon College

study led by professors Amy Reynolds and Janel Curry assessed evangelical nonprofits' female leadership status in 2016 and found this segment dramatically lagging behind the general sector statistics. In the faith-based space, women lead just 2 percent of nonprofits larger than \$10 million, and whereas larger secular nonprofit boards are led by 40 percent women, for faith-based organizations that statistic is well under 20 percent (see fig. 1). Consider these additional findings:

- Between 50 and 80 percent of the clients of services or programs of missional organization work are women and girls.
- More than 70 percent of the staff who serve in missional organizations are women.
- More than 50 percent of the people making donor decisions are women, even if their name isn't on the credit card or check.
- Women represent just over 2 percent of large missional organization CEOs and just over 20 percent of small to midsize organizations.

Why are women not making progress in the missional sector?



**Figure 1.** Comparison of female leadership in evangelical nonprofits and all nonprofits

Despite numerous examples of excellent female leaders, people tend to prioritize and gravitate toward male leadership, almost as a reflex. A recent analysis found that women are devalued in leadership positions when they occupy male-dominated roles and when they are evaluated by men. Men still struggle to see women as leaders, and the most conservative worldview downright believes that women are not created or wired for leadership.

There is a false belief that men are simply better at leadership and have more natural disposition for it. And who can blame most of us for believing this? We learn this from a very early age from the cultural context and familial practices we are raised in, and as people of faith we also learn it from the examples and teaching we receive at church. No matter how strongly we think “women in leadership” is a great idea on paper, in practice most of our daily lives and behaviors are riddled with bias against it.

So we continue to believe that leaders are chosen because they are most qualified, not identifying messages we receive all around us that disqualify women.

A former executive director of a major NGO comments, “There is this prime assumption that the men who are leading these organizations are really good. They’re not. . . . Some are pretty mediocre. At the moment women are having to be very, very good to get to the top.” When leadership qualities like depth of voice, commanding presence, and color of skin are what inch a candidate from “good” to “most qualified,” despite their superior qualifications, it’s nearly impossible for someone with a softer speaking voice, a smaller stature, or a different skin color to be seen in such a role. Women who reach top posts have almost impossible obstacles to overcome, including the rest of us overcoming our collective bias that men are naturally more qualified and suitable leaders.

It’s true too that men self-identify as qualified for a new role when they meet only 60 percent of the requirements, while women require full qualification to even apply. But it is also true that women are held to a higher, perhaps impossible, standard when they do serve in roles of leadership.

What came first, we wonder, the devaluing of women and what they have to offer, or the devaluing of women by themselves?

In missional organizations, our history adds another layer of complication: men haven’t just been the de facto leaders based on their biology. Scriptural

interpretations and cultural practices have also justified blocking and disqualifying women from executive roles.

Just as communities and churches over decades have segregated women from leadership to caregiving, workplaces have done the same. How this is manifested in missional organizations came across over and over in our focus group interviews.

Charlene comments,

I'm still shocked that motherhood and womanhood are seen as obstacles for women to be in leadership. Opportunities are held from women because at some point they may have a baby or may need extra consideration due to care for children. Organizations should just accept the fact that many women will require a season to have children. They should accept the cost of supporting women on maternity leave or during lactation time. These things should not stand in the way of her being promoted if she's qualified. By now, organizations should just accept it and make space for it.

The absence of constructs that support women in the workplace is, whether explicitly or subtly, justified by the belief that children are entitled to be raised by mothers who stay at home. In conservative Christian circles we still encounter the concept of a "kept woman." We've had conversations with men and couples who draw their sense of identity from the husband providing and the wife and family being provided for. We have also seen the burden of shame a man carries when, due to illness, unemployment, or some other reason, he cannot provide for his family. We've even encountered husbands who are ashamed of their wife's career because they believe it makes them look weak.

There are individuals who hold this worldview on the leadership teams and boards of missional organizations. How can a woman succeed in such an environment?

Constructs for women to succeed are often missing both in the workplace and at home, and this is especially true in our Christian context. As theological interpretations have preferred women to stay at home, so have economic systems. Between the world wars, new labor laws led to the

establishment of the “family wage,” where a man earned adequate wages to support his family, encouraging the wife not to work.

“There has always been a tension hidden within this ideology,” states author Sarah Jaffe, “whether women were needed at home because their work in the home was indispensable, or whether women should stay at home because they were simply too pure, or too good for the world of wage labor.” Professor Gayle Kauffman comments, “While there have always been women, particularly women of color, poor women and immigrant women in the labor force, the modern workplace developed during a time when our society emphasized separate spheres for women and men.”

It is no wonder so many women are unable to succeed in the workplace; it was originally designed, through systems and constructs such as the family wage and ideologies like the male breadwinner, to keep them at home. And in missional organizations, theology and historical economic constructs are so tightly wound that they can’t be told apart. Was it scriptural interpretation or economic benefit that first said, “A woman’s place is in the home?” Or was this notion created in a dialogue between the two?

All the while women’s employment is still considered an exception to male employment and female leadership to male leadership. This despite the fact women represent 40 percent of most countries’ workforce, 50 percent in the United States. Organizational policies and practices like to pretend that women are at home. But women are not at home, they are working right inside our missional organizations.

### *A Note on Leadership and Women of Color*

It’s important to call out here the disparity between women of color and White women. This is a painful legacy that manifests in a continued pay gap and lack of representation, among other outcomes. While we have included vignettes and interviews with women of all backgrounds, we, as White women, do not presume to speak for women of color. And the sector *must* hear from women of color. We personally continue to learn more about systemic racism in our organizations and the ways it has held women and men back in unjust and criminal ways. We believe that if organizations adapt the approach and principles of a culture of belonging we have laid

out in this book, they can create more welcoming environments for both women and other minority leaders. However, this will not, and should not, happen without dialogue with—and leadership of—women of color.

## WOMEN'S ISSUES

Women of color face unique obstacles. “Why are there not more brown and black women at the CEO level?” writes a CEO of a secular INGO. The organization she leads focuses on improving sexual and reproductive health in the Global South, a key women’s rights issue. In one high-level meeting with peer organizations, she says, she “faced a wall of white men.” She concludes, “Certainly, men are and should be part of that movement, but they are over-represented in leadership positions, including at the very top.”

The irony of this should not be lost on anyone. Why are White men at the very top levels of organizational leadership speaking on behalf of women and on issues that affect women?

One of the five female CEOs among the top fifty Christian nonprofits comments, “Quite simply, the pool of entry level candidates for a Christian nonprofit are majority white and privileged. There is significant work needed to help expose economically poorer and non-white communities to this type of work—which they would naturally be empathetic to and well-suited for—and to provide the mentoring and support needed to help enlarge the pool of diverse candidates within the U.S.”

Missional organizations must work not just to find out what is preventing the progress of women and minoritized people inside our walls; they must also find out what obstacles nonwhite candidates encounter outside our walls that prevent them from joining our organizations—and then break down those obstacles. The answer to the diversity issue for organizations cannot continue to be, “We couldn’t find any qualified applicants.” Instead, organizations have an invitation to come up with brand-new strategies to recruit people of all backgrounds, and that includes taking a critical look at the criteria of what a successful applicant looks like.

The missional sector desperately needs qualified women to lead in the years to come. This is not only a justice issue. Our ability to secure future funding and programmatic relevancy depend on it. For the past decade, the

best development practices tell us that solutions and programs must be locally led and birthed among the people who are most impacted by the problems. This means not only centering women and minoritized people in program funding, design, and implementation, but centering the very populations our programs serve in our neighborhoods and global programs. Refugees must be at the center when resettlement services are designed. Local faith leaders must sit around the table when organizations discuss what religious education programs to roll out in communities. And women must certainly be involved when decisions around policies and programs impacting women's health are being decided on.

### *The Challenges Women Face*

- Women and girls have unique health needs, but they are less likely to have access to high-quality health services, essential medicines and vaccines, maternal and reproductive health care, and insurance coverage for routine and catastrophic health costs, especially in rural and marginalized communities. Restrictive social norms and gender stereotypes can also limit women's ability to access health services.
- The provision of sexual and reproductive health services—including healthy timing of pregnancies, maternal health care, and services related to gender-based violence—is central to the health, rights, and well-being of women and girls.
- The concerted effort of the global community continues to reduce preventable child deaths. Notwithstanding the progress, some 5.3 million children died before reaching five years of age in 2018 alone, and nearly half of those deaths, or 2.5 million, occurred in the first month of life.
- Before the Covid-19 pandemic, girls from the poorest households faced major obstacles to education: 44 percent of girls compared to 34 percent of boys from the neediest families have never gone to school or dropped out before completing primary school.
- Around the world, women earn less, save less, and hold less secure jobs; therefore their capacity to absorb economic shocks is less than that of men. In developing countries, 70 percent of women's employment is in the informal economy, with no protections such as sick leave or time off to care for children or aging parents.



- It is estimated that one in three women will experience violence during their lifetime.
- At least 200 million girls and women in thirty-one countries have experienced female genital mutilation (FGM) in violation of their human rights. In 2020 it was estimated that 34 percent of girls age fifteen to nineteen had undergone FGM.
- Women have a 27 percent higher risk of facing food insecurity than men. Their willingness to sacrifice their own food intake for the sake of feeding their children, as well as their high percentage as single head-of-household status, both contribute to this reality.
- Women are 14 percent more likely to die in natural disasters than men. Human trafficking and sexual and gender-based violence increase in their aftermath.



As we sat through one presentation after another during the 2021 NGO Committee on the Status of Women conference, Zimbabwean gender advocate and policy adviser Nancy Kachingwe made a poignant statement: “Are we really talking to the decision makers when we meet here? Are these the rooms where macroeconomic decisions are made? I think not. Therefore we need constant, relentless sensitization of those making decisions.”

We agree with Kachingwe. The problem is that many of the discussions focused on the role of women are happening without current decision makers in the room.

The missional organization’s “problem with women” is not just a women’s problem to be solved by all-women panels and discussion groups. Current leaders, who statistically are mostly men, desperately need to participate in the conversation and mine for solutions with us.

The rigor with which missional organizations have created innovative development practices and cultivated transformational development principles must also be applied to creating organizations of belonging. Perhaps the last frontier of transformational development needs to be the transformation of the organization from the inside. It’s time. It’s long past time.

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