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The Double Headache of Women in the Norwegian Mission Society 1842-2004

Introduction

Last year I spent a year undertaking anthropological fieldwork at the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS) in Stavanger, Norway. NMS is a Christian (Lutheran) mission organisation, established in 1842, that is still active today in both church and development work in several countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. One of the things that struck me during my fieldwork was the ambivalent image of women that is alive in the organisation. This paper is about this ambivalent image: how it is understood, how it is not understood, and what a veritable headache it is either way.

There could potentially be two different reasons for looking at this topic. On the one hand, one might wish to look at the history of women in NMS to see what this says *about the women*: to highlight, perhaps, the fact that women have contributed more to the organisation's work and shape and thinking than is usually portrayed in official histories. This is an important task too. However, that is not my reason in this paper. Here, I will take a second approach to women history: I wish to look at the history of women in NMS to see what exactly this says *about the mission society*.

My paper has three parts. First I will explore the question of the ambivalent image of women through four everyday episodes that occurred during my stay in Stavanger. It is worth noting that although these are specific episodes, they did not in any way strike me as unusual at the time. In the second part of the paper I will say something

about double symbols and double binds. And then, in conclusion, I will try to indicate what all this might suggest about NMS.

Episode 1: NMS has invested in women

August 22nd, 2004. I was in the NMS Archives, which are housed in NMS' School of Mission and Theology, in Stavanger. I was reading through a stack of old, dusty mission magazines from around 1890– the magazines especially devoted to women, *Missionslæsning for Kvindeforeninger* ("Mission reading for women's groups"). In a few of the issues– November 1888, July 1890, November 1892– I came across several articles about two young Malagasy women, Ester and Sigrid. I could picture Ester and Sigrid: two pretty young women, with white dresses and neatly braided black hair. The Norwegian missionaries in Madagascar wanted these two young women to become teachers, and, with the help of countless contributions from "mission friends" in Norway, they were able to send Ester and Sigrid to Norway for education and training from 1888-1890. After I had read about this, I was sufficiently impressed to mention it to the next person I met in the corridor. She nodded, equally impressed. "That was progressive thinking," she said. "NMS has invested in women."

NMS has invested in women. She is right. And in many ways, this is how the organisation likes to imagine its role during both the colonial and the development eras: the image of these two young Malagasy girls, Ester and Sigrid, can stand for all the determination of missionaries throughout the organisation's history to promote gender equality. There has always been a wish to improve the conditions under which women live, and a willingness to bear women in mind as people who are equally worthy of mission, help and commitment. The organisation aims, and has always aimed, *to lift women up*.

That was the first episode: Ester and Sigrid. NMS has always invested in women. NMS wishes to lift women up.

Let me move swiftly on to the second episode.

Episode 2: The mission women are incredible witnesses—often quietly

June 13th, 2004. I was at one of the so-called “mission meetings” of NMS: gatherings for the mission people. There was a good turn-out that night; mainly pensioners, both men and women, were milling about in the meeting room. You can picture the scene: a sea of people with grey hair and white hair and no hair, friendly faces, smiles. The theme of the meeting that night was the history of women in NMS. Women- “mission women”, as they are called- have meant a great deal for the organisation right from its foundation in 1842. They have always come together in small groups to collect money for the mission, to share mission information, and to pray for the mission work. They have always contributed a substantial amount to the organisation’s budget. One often imagines them as I have just described them: white hair, friendly faces, smiles, praying, or donating money, or knitting. One of the men at the mission meeting that night, inspired by the evening’s theme, contemplated this image in his mind: the long, long, long row of mission women who have contributed to the mission society from 1842 and until today. “They are incredible witnesses!” he remarked. And then, a little later, he added: “Often quietly.”

They are incredible witnesses. Often quietly. This is usually remarked upon as one of the saving graces of the mission women: they serve in silence. They do not clamber and row. They do not make much of themselves; on the contrary, they are often seen as modesty itself: the very personification of quiet, humble, faithful servitude.

That was the second episode: The Norwegian mission women. Symbols of witness. Quietly.

So now we have young Ester and Sigrid on one side of the globe, and the quiet Norwegian mission women on the other side. The two images on opposite sides of the globe are linked together: young women moving from Madagascar to Norway and back again, women in Norway praying for women in Madagascar; there is movement and connection. There have been innumerable such connections throughout the organisation's history- women praying for women, women praying for men, men praying for women. There are interesting implications of all of these- which I won't go into here.

What I will note instead is that in the next two episodes, surprisingly, all connections seem to be lost.

Episode 3: Where would the women come from?

December 10th, 2003. I went down to the canteen in the head office of NMS to have lunch. I sat down at a table with some of the staff. In a friendly attempt to relate to me, one of them asked me how my studies were going. I said that I had just been going through archive material on the so-called "mission feminists": the women who argued for gender equality in NMS in the early twentieth century. We began talking about Christian feminists around the table, and then about women theologians. One of the men next to me remarked on the fact that there was only one woman theologian employed at the NMS head office. When I was there, there were around 70 people working in the head office building, and they were just about equally divided between men and women- although the lower ranks of the organogram were overly populated

by women while the higher ranks were overly populated by men. Leaving this aside; of these 70 there were around 20 theologians while I was there, but of these theologians– as this man pointed out– only one was female. NMS has been educating female theologians since the 1970s, so logically it should be possible to have a more or less equal male/female theological ratio, 30 years on.

I asked, therefore, how there could be only one female theologian. The man sitting opposite me shook his head: “That’s not so strange,” he explained, “because where would they come from?” Everyone around the table laughed a little at that: Where, indeed, would the women come from? It seemed very hard for any of us to be able to think of a single eligible woman. “It takes a while,” he explained; “it takes a while for the women to become missionaries and then afterwards they come back and get positions at the head office.”

None of us picked up on the fact that since there have been female theologians within the orbit of the organisation since the 1970s, it is, strictly speaking, not a matter of *time* any longer; several of the female theologians have been missionaries already, and they have come back, and yet they are nowhere to be seen near the head office.

So where are the women? The question would seem almost bizarre were it not experienced as so *real*– for me as well, sitting at the table in the canteen; I wondered, along with the others: Where would they come from? And this despite the fact that I came straight from the archive, where I had been reading about the history of feminism in the mission movement. After more than 150 years of “lifting women up” in the mission tradition, women leaders should, logically, be springing up all around. Yet they seem very hard to find. And what is most surprising is that nobody finds this surprising. There is no bewilderment at the question: after 150 years of pioneering women’s groups, women’s education, the importance of gender equality, women’s

right to vote and, lastly, the acknowledgement of female theologians— the question still seems very real: Where, indeed, would any women come from?

The conversation around the table continued. I remarked that I had been told that Anne Karin— who was one of the two women in the nine-person leadership team of NMS while I was there— had been told when she was young and on her way to the mission field as a missionary wife, that it was all the same to NMS what she studied, and that indeed it was all the same to the organisation whether she had a degree in theology or simply a certificate from Sunday school. I remarked that I found it incredible that someone could have told her that. One of the men next to me thought about this for a few seconds. “It was probably said in a well-meaning way,” he commented; “what the person was trying to say to her was probably that the mission society wanted to send her out as a missionary wife just the way she was. They didn’t want to burden her by demanding a theological education.”

They didn’t want to burden her. And that is where we end the third episode: Around lunch in the canteen of NMS, wondering: Where would the women come from? And noting, in passing, that women should not be overly burdened.

Let me move on now to the fourth and final episode.

Episode 4: We would like to recruit women leaders—but there is hardly ever a chance

November 19th, 2003. I was speaking with one of the nine high-level staff in NMS; we were talking about the lack of women leaders at the head office. “We would like to change that,” he said. He emphasised that the gender inequality was not there because of a lack of awareness from their side. On the contrary, they were apparently very

aware of it. But, he added, by way of explanation to me: "It's just that top-level staff remain in their positions for so long. There's hardly ever a chance to recruit new people."

Yet when I remember this conversation now, it puzzles me. Even during the relatively short time that I was in Stavanger there were recruitment rounds for two of the top nine leadership positions at the head office; one internal round, to cover for maternity leave, and one external round, for a programme director. Both posts were successfully filled- and in both cases the new recruits were men. Highly competent men, I must add- although this is beside the point. The point, rather, is that this makes the explanations I received seem, again, vaguely bizarre- and all the more so because they are experienced as so *genuine*. "We would *like* to recruit women leaders, but there is hardly ever any new recruitment opportunities"- the explanation is experienced as genuine for the top leadership; in fact, when the person who explained this to me said it, he seemed completely oblivious to the fact that the organisation actually recruits for top positions on a fairly regular basis. If I were to hazard a guess I would say that the high-level positions in NMS, taken together, have a turn-around time of about ten years, which by organisational standards is pretty good- and which certainly does not explain the non-recruitment of women. Why then is this forgotten when the matter is presented to me?

Let me assemble together the episodes, images and sentences that I have collected along the way so far: Firstly, Ester and Sigrid: NMS has always invested in women, NMS wishes to lift women up. Secondly, the Norwegian mission women: symbols of witness, quietly. Thirdly, the table in the canteen of the mission society head office and the conversation about women theologians: Where would the women come from? And why shouldn't women be burdened? And, finally, my conversation with the member of staff who explained: We would like to recruit women leaders, but there's hardly ever a chance.

If we bring all this together, what image does it present us with? It presents us with an image of women as an important part of the organisation, yet quiet; they are worth investing in, yet shouldn't be burdened; they are valuable human beings, yet not leaders; they are to be lifted up, if only they could be found. How can we understand this bundle of thoughts and images– and there are many more in similar vein– that surround women in NMS?

I would like to suggest two concepts that may go some way towards explaining these seemingly incongruent ideas about women and how they can coexist in NMS today: *double symbols* and *double binds*.

Double symbols

Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) has argued that women serve as ambivalent symbols in the construction of nationhood: on the one hand, they symbolise– in potent and exalted ways– the nation's unity and honour and the collective *raison d'être*; on the other hand, they are excluded from the collective "we" of the body politic and are inserted into the symbolic category "womenandchildren": to be protected. They are regarded as good icons but not as grown-ups.

It seems that the same ambivalence has marked the image of women in NMS throughout the organisation's history, from 1842 until today. To illustrate this double-edged symbolism, let us reconsider the phrase "to lift women up". What does it mean in NMS today? Does it mean to lift up women in the way that one would lift up a flag or a crucifix, as a rallying cry and symbol of unity and purpose, to treasure and adore– but not to have a proper argument with? Does it mean to lift up women in the way that one would lift up a small child, to care for, to protect, to love, to save, to guide–

but not to enter into theological discussions or budget negotiations with? The images that surround women in NMS come stumblingly close to either angels on the one hand, or children on the other. Both angels and children are important to have around. But, quite understandably, one does not sit down to make serious high-level recruitment plans for either of these two categories.

Let me reiterate that I am speaking here of *images* of women– the ideas and thoughts that surround them, the emotions, visions, what we hope for and invest in– and not necessarily of women themselves. The many committed and capable women in NMS are neither childlike nor, I must say, particularly angelic. But images still play some part in which possibilities are naturally open to them, and which possibilities they have to fight for or are implicitly encouraged to avoid.

Double binds

To add another layer of depth to this picture, let me also introduce the concept of *double bind*. Gregory Bateson (1972) defined double bind as that form of double-edged communication where one thing is said while another thing is signalled. Let me give a brief example. A father says to his young daughter, through gritted teeth: “You know you’re free to do what you want.” The mother adds, with a sad face: “Of course, I don’t mind.” The girl then hesitates. The parents ask why she has suddenly turned so silent and sulky. The girl is then confused. She is so confused, in fact, that she does not know why she suddenly feels deeply shameful– or why she is not able to say so. If she chooses to do what she wants now, she will be wrong, and if she chooses not to do it, then she will also be wrong. She is caught in a double bind.

Some of the same double-edged communication is evident in NMS. If women stick their neck out too far, it is relatively easy, in the mission tradition, to think that they

are “making noise”; they are no longer adhering to the admired image of quiet humbleness. On the other hand, if they remain in quiet servitude, then it is relatively easy to blame the women themselves for the lack of women leaders in NMS. And this is not the only example; there are several such double binds that surround women in NMS, spun out in a closely-knit web of thoughts ranging from professorships in Stavanger through missionary wives in Madagascar to the internal humour among high-level staff at the head office.

The same double binds may also be found, of course, to various degrees, in secular development organisations. However, there is something about the religious motivation of NMS that perhaps makes it more difficult to bring these double binds to light or to object to them. Firstly, because the gender roles can easily be framed in terms of God’s will; it is difficult to object when staff comment on how much they admire the loyal and silent Christian women with their hands folded in prayer. Secondly, because a lack of gender equality can be deflected and covered over by religious rhetoric; it is difficult to object when high-level staff slip into the habit of speaking of the gender equality propagated by St Paul 2,000 years ago, yet don’t manage to bring about gender equality at the head office today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me return to my opening statement: This time I am not looking at the history of women in NMS to see what this says about the women, but instead to see what it says about the mission society. And I think it says a great many things about the mission society. I will highlight two points here.

Firstly, the thoughts and images that surround women in NMS might say something about the amount of external stress that the organisation feels itself to be under. Or- if

we are not to blame it all on the external conditions– perhaps it is more accurate to say: it says something about how insecure the organisation has allowed itself to become under these conditions. Any organisation that advocates universal religious truth or religious mission in contemporary Norway faces a certain amount of scepticism and even hostility, and it is not always easy to know how to respond to this.

Katherine Young (1987) has argued that when a religious organisation perceives itself to be under stress or pressure of one kind or another, then anxiety for women and the perceived need for rigid and stable gender roles within the organisation become greater. It is very demanding to start thinking about changes in gender images and roles while one perceives oneself to be under pressure– because any changes might themselves add to the stress and tension. Stable gender images and roles are far more secure, both for men and for women.

If this is true, however, it does not augur well for gender equality in NMS– in contrast to secular development organisations. Development organisations can rely on far more external goodwill these days– while the external scepticism and critique that NMS notices is not likely to lessen in the near future. In this situation the future of the ambivalent symbolism surrounding women– and the attendant gender roles– will depend on the organisation's ability to maintain a safe enough internal space to be able to let oneself be challenged; a space with boundaries, privacy and comfort; a space where alternatives can be played with and tried out.

Secondly, the sentences about women that I have collected here say something about how communication and power have operated in tandem in NMS' history, and how they continue to operate in this way. It highlights the capacity that the organisation has developed to throw out a net of double binds. Or perhaps it is not just a capacity any longer; perhaps it has become a habitual way of communicating: "You want to

move with your missionary husband to Madagascar? You know that we're so happy about that. We're sure you'll find something to do once you get there. Of course, we don't want to burden you." Or: "You think we should employ more female leaders? Of course, we think so too. But there are incredibly few suitable women who are willing to take it on. You must realise that it is a very frustrating situation for us." And so on, and so on.

Such organisational double binds are trickier to overcome than organisational stress. They need to be exposed for what they are. This entails asking questions about unspoken mechanisms and power: Why exactly are important spaces often occupied by important men? What would have to change, for example, for the General Secretary post and half the leadership team in Stavanger to be staffed by women? Which changes would this in turn bring about? What would happen if there was suddenly only one male theologian at the head office and 19 female theologians? And why is it not experienced as institutionally pressing to find out?

In sum, the historical tradition that NMS is placed in (with every colonial and developmental separation etched into the bargain) has left them- and all of us, I guess- with a heavy and unwieldy legacy of doubles: double symbols and double binds. Even the most favourably inclined member of staff in NMS seems to find it extremely difficult to step out of this tradition for more than a single thought at a time. To be able to connect those thoughts into a coherent whole and to formulate congruent practical steps- to actually start thinking about women and men in a wholly different way today- seems a particularly challenging headache for all concerned.

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