

Women's Ways of Knowing and Doing

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Introduction

A lot of women, if not all, down through the ages have been ignored and misinterpreted. But as ministers of the gospel, we have the responsibility of listening to women's voices, identifying their ways of thinking and doing—and thereby, discovering ways for effective ministry with them.

Think about fact number one: Shirin Ebadi, 2003. Shirin Ebadi won the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize for her work promoting the rights of women and children in her home country of Iran. Ebadi graduated with a law degree from Tehran University. After years of being denied a law license by the Iranian government, Ebadi set up her own legal practice in 1992 and quickly developed a special interest the rights of women, journalists, and others who lacked power under the Iranian regime. The Nobel Committee praised Ebadi for her efforts in “the struggle for human rights and especially the rights of women and children.”¹ Fun Fact: Ebadi was named Iran's first-ever female judge in 1975. However, she and other female judges were forced to resign when Iran became an Islamic Republic after the revolution of 1979.

Women have invented very useful and practical things like: Alphabet blocks, Apgar tests, which evaluate a baby's health upon birth, Chocolate-chip cookies, Circular saw, Dishwasher, Disposable diaper, Electric hot water heater, Elevated railway, Engine muffler, Fire escape, Globes, Ironing board, Kevlar, a steel-like fiber used in radial tires, crash helmets, and bulletproof vests, Life raft, Liquid Paper®, Locomotive chimney, Medical syringe, Paper-bag-making machine, Rolling pin, Rotary engine, Scotchgard™ fabric protector, Snuggli® baby carrier, Street-cleaning machine, Submarine lamp and telescope, and Windshield wiper.

But let's look at fact number two: Mystery Inventors. We'll probably never know how many women inventors there were. That's because in the early years of the US, a woman could not get a patent in her own name. A patent is considered a kind of property, and until the late 1800s laws forbade women in most states from owning property or entering into legal agreements in their own names. Instead, a woman's property would be in the name of her father or husband. For example, many people believe that Sybilla Masters was the first American woman inventor. In 1712 she developed a new corn mill, but was denied a patent because she was a woman. Three years later the patent was filed successfully in her husband's name. In

¹ “The First Female Peace Prize Laureate from the Islamic world,” available at http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2003/ebadi-facts.html (accessed 13 December 2013).

addition, in her 1978 book *Silences*, Tillie Olsen documents the history of women writers and points out the relative silence of women as literary voices.² She wrote that in the 20th century, only one out of 12 published and acclaimed writers is a woman.

Gender-Related Cognitive Difference

Women have very unique ways of thinking and this uniqueness is directly related to how we do things. Some people say that men's minds are like waffles, that is, they think about one thing at a time. Psychologists say that men think *compartmentally* and women think *globally*. Men and women store information and file away data in their cognitive memory banks *very differently*. Men tend to separate details and store them in different "compartments," much like a file-cabinet-drawer system, such as (in random order): work, hobbies, wife, etc.

Cognitively speaking, men tend to open and close "drawers" needed for the immediate moment, staying exclusively in that one compartment, and nothing else even exists except for what is in that compartment. Women, on the other hand, tend to do the complete opposite and connect things up, seeing life more globally. Women see how details and data have underlying and interrelated connections. If men's minds are like waffles, they say women's minds are like spaghetti. Everything is intertwined. That's why we have a joke in Mindanao that while a pious woman says the Hail Mary, "*Ave Maria, napuno ka sa grasya*,"³ she notices that the cat is eating the *paksiw* (fish cooked in vinegar) in the kitchen and continues to recite, "*Ang Ginoong Dios maanaa kanimo, hoy unsa man ng kaldirin diha? Gikaon na sa iring ang paksiw!*"⁴ Isn't that true? Also, a woman in an office is fully capable of typing something on the computer, picking up the phone and talking to a client, greeting people in front of them and still knowing that the coffee in the pantry is ready for her boss. Women are unbelievable creatures.

Women's ways of thinking are related to their ways of doing things. For example, my sister went on a trip and she felt pain in her chest and had the feeling that something bad is going to happen to her son. She immediately called her husband back in Mindanao and warned her son not to go out anywhere because she is sure something would happen. But men have different ways of thinking and doing, Jezreel, my nephew went out with his friends despite the warnings of her mother. Tragically, he had an accident which cost them a lot of money. The popular belief in "women's intuition" often proves true.

² Quoted in Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Cinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (10th anniversary ed.; New York: Basic Books, 1997).

³ "Hail, Mary, full of grace." This and all subsequent translations from Cebuano are from the author [Editor].

⁴ "The Lord is with thee, hey what's going on with the pot? The cat is eating the fish!"

The feelings, thought processes and the gut feeling of my sister led her to call her family to warn them. Many of our behaviour as women come from the way we look at things in our minds. Belenky et al. have done a very important study regarding women's ways of knowing. The project began in the late 1970s. And another book has been written in response to the 10th edition of this book.⁵ Belenky et al. are psychologists who studied the intellectual, ethical, and psychological development of adolescents and adults in educational and clinical settings. They interviewed rural and urban American women of different ages, class, and ethnic backgrounds, and educational histories. One of the things they have found out was the truth that our basic assumptions of about the nature of truth and reality and the origins of knowledge shape the way we see the world and ourselves as participants in it. They say that these assumptions affect our definition of ourselves, the way we interact with others, our public and private personae, our sense of control over life events, our views of teaching and learning, and our conceptions of morality.⁶ Can you relate to that?

Five Major Categories of Women's Ways of Knowing

Let us try to look at women's ways of knowing and describe five perspectives from which women view reality and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge, and authority. It is sobering to think about the traditional Filipino concept of a "woman." For many Filipinos, femininity is portrayed in the famous "Maria Clara"⁷ image: soft-spoken, demure, shy, and slightly covering her face with her fan every time she laughs. Belenky et al. documented that all women grow up having to deal with historically and culturally engrained definitions of femininity, and women, like children, should be seen and not heard.⁸ Many men gravitate to women who are conservative, silent, submissive, "helpless," and pretty. Most men, though not all, especially in the Philippine context, don't really want to court women who are liberated, self-sufficient, opinionated, loud, and strong willed. I am glad this has changed nowadays, or else I would not have gotten married. But there are still people around the world who think that women's voices should not be heard, that women should go back to the house and take care of the children while the men go out and change the world.

According to Sampson, "The commonly accepted stereotype of women's thinking as emotional, intuitive, and personalized has contributed to the devaluation of women's minds and contributions, particularly in Western technologically oriented cultures, which value rationalism and objectivity."⁹ Sampson said that it is generally assumed that intuitive knowledge is more

⁵ Nancy Goldberger, Jill Tarule, Blythe Clinchy, and Mary Belenky, eds., *Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing* (NY: Basic Books, 1996).

⁶ Belenky et al. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, 3.

⁷ The reference here is to the principal female character from the novel *Noli Me Tangere* (ET: *Touch Me Not* or *The Social Cancer*) written by Filipino nationalist José Rizal (d. 1896) [Editor].

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ The author did not include the source of this citation, other than the year of 1978 [Editor].

primitive, therefore less valuable, than so-called objective modes of knowing. Feminists are beginning to articulate the values of the female world and to reshape the disciplines to include the woman's voice, while continuing to press for the right of women to participate as equals in the male world.

Then there's the absence of women in psychology. The authors of the major theories of human development have been men. As Carol Gilligan has pointed out, women have been missing even as research subjects at the formative stages of our psychological theories. Her book *In A Different Voice* builds upon the findings that women are different from men in terms of thinking and psychological makeup.¹⁰ This omission of women from scientific studies is almost universally ignored when scientists draw conclusions from their findings and generalize what they have learned from the study of men to the lives of women. Thus, we have learned a great deal about the development of autonomy and independence, and abstract critical thought. And we have learned less about the development of interdependence, intimacy, nurturance, and contextual thought.¹¹

Belenky et al. documented that models of intellectual development: the mental processes that are involved in considering the abstract and the impersonal have been labelled "thinking" and are attributed primarily to men, while those that deal with the personal and interpersonal fall under the rubric of "emotions" and are largely relegated to women. Although it seems ludicrous to us now, just a century ago the belief that women who engaged in intellectual pursuits would find their reproductive organs atrophying (meaning, decrease in size or be paralysed) was widely held and used to justify the continued exclusion of women from the academic community.¹² Down through the ages, women have been generally thought of as objects of male gratification. In "The Seducer's Diary," written by Søren Kierkegaard, is according to Jane Duran one of the most obvious problematic works.¹³ Duran commented that, for Kierkegaard, the feminine is not only the object of male seduction, but somehow in and of itself represents the sphere of the immediate, the aesthetic, and the realm of gratification. Duran explained, "In each case, the concept is developed through the uses of categories employing females in ways that tend to trivialize or diminish the concept of woman apart from her objectification at the hands of male categorization."¹⁴ But the good news is that research studies and critical essays have focused on the demonstration of women's intellectual competence, minimizing any differences that the authors found between the sexes.¹⁵ This gives light to the fact that women have intellectual powers capable of running their own lives and not having to be treated as mere sexual objects of their male counterparts.

¹⁰ Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Quoted from Bakan 1966; Gilligan 1977 (The author did not further identify these sources [Editor].)

¹² Quoted from Rosenberg, 1982. (The author did not further identify this source [Editor].)

¹³ Jane Duran in "The Kierkegaardian Feminist," *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Celine Leon and Sylvia Walsh (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 249.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Quoted from Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974.

We shall now turn to the five major categories of women's perspectives on knowing, as discussed in *Women's Ways of Knowing*. The first category of women's thought is silence. In the authors' study, silent women were among the youngest and the most socially, economically, and educationally deprived. They felt "deaf" because they assumed they could not learn from the words of others and "dumb" because they felt so voiceless. The silent women worried that they would be punished just for using words—any words. Example: "I don't like talking to my husband. If I were to say no, he might hit me." I hope that won't happen to anyone of us here. One of the questions that the researchers asked was, "How would you describe yourself to yourself?" The silent women would answer, "I don't know... No one has told me yet what they thought of me." They believe that the source of self-knowledge is lodged in others—not in the self. These women were seen but never heard, like children who do not have much play nor dialogue. According to Vygotsky, "Without playing, conversing, listening to others, and drawing out their own voice, people fail to develop a sense that they can talk and think things through."¹⁶ So for those of us who are in the ministry with children, let us think about this and apply it to our ministries. Let us teach in such a way that we imbue confidence amongst the children.

The second category is received knowledge or listening to the voices of others. For these women, listening is a way of knowing. While received knowers can be very open to take in what others have to offer, they have little confidence in their own ability to speak. This type of knowledge consists primarily in listening to authorities, with the assumption that all authorities are infinitely capable of receiving and retaining "the right answer" with impeccable precision. Being recipients but not sources of knowledge, these women as students feel confused and incapable when the teacher requires that they do original work. Entering into the moral community, women at the position of received knowledge are capable of hearing, understanding, and remembering. In this position, women could have faith if they listen carefully enough and they will be able to do the "right thing" and will get along with others. In the book *Women's Faith Development*, Nicola Slee traces the patterns and processes whereby women develop their faith. From her research, she found out that there is the dominance of concrete, visual, narrative and embodied forms of thinking over propositional, abstract or analytical thought in the women's faith accounts.¹⁷

The third category is subjective knowledge: the inner voice. According to Belenky et al., subjective knowledge is generated when women become more aware of the existence of inner resources for knowing and valuing, as she begins to listen to the "still small voice" within her, she finds an inner source of strength (1 Kings 19:11-12) denoting the voice of God. An important step on the route to subjective knowing is the affirmation nurturant authorities can provide for

¹⁶ Quoted in Belenky et al., op cit., 33.

¹⁷ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 61-80. Taking into consideration the work of James Fowler, Slee found out that women have unique strategies of faithing, and not necessarily in sequence or in a particular order. For Slee, these strategies did not appear to represent distinctive developmental ways of structuring faith. For the faithing strategies of women, consult *ibid.*, 62-80.

women in transition. This is a challenge for us Christian education workers. We need to affirm some women in the church that they can in fact make a difference in their own spheres of influence. The subjective knower takes a huge step: she sees truth as subjectified and personal. Concepts of the self-now derive a sense of “who I am.” New connections: the role of inward watching and listening—increased experience of strength, optimism and self-value.

The fourth category is procedural knowledge, also known as the voice of reason. Though women with procedural knowledge process both received and subjective knowledge, these women think before they speak, and because their ideas must measure up to certain objective and standards. In other words, they speak in measured tones. Objectivity is a need for these women, that is, taking time to attend truly to the object. They wait for meanings to emerge from something. This is discovering that the inner voice sometimes lies. It tells you something is right for you that turns out to be disastrously wrong for you. For example: it tells you that you have met Mr. Right; however, nine months later you find yourself alone, raising his child. Procedural knowers are pragmatic problem solvers. They take control of their lives in planned deliberate fashion. Recognizing the limits of procedural knowledge, subsequently, requires integration of feeling and thinking, rather than a reversion to sheer feeling, but. The task is clear, although the solution is not. In the closing lines of Marge Piercy’s poem: She must learn again to speak starting with I, starting with We, Starting as the infant does, with her own true hunger and pleasure and rage,¹⁸ as in, “*Magpakatotoo ka sister!*” (“Get real, sister!”)

The final category of women’s thinking is constructed knowledge: integrating the voices. *Silent* women have little awareness of their intellectual capabilities. At the positions of *received knowledge* and *procedural knowledge*, other voices and external truths prevail and sense of self is embedded either in external definitions and roles or in identification with institutions, disciplines and methods. At the position of *subjective knowledge*, quest for self, or at least protection of a space for growth of self is primary. The position of constructed knowledge – emphasis on a never-ending search for truth, which is coordinate with a never-ending quest for learning. Compared to other positions, there is a capacity at the position of constructed knowledge to attend to another person and to feel related to that person in spite of what may be enormous difference. Attentive caring is important in understanding not only people but also the written word, ideas, even impersonal objects.¹⁹ Women in this category strive to translate their moral commitments into action, both out of a conviction that “one must act” and out of a feeling of responsibility to the larger community in which they live. They aspire to work that contributes to the empowerment and improvement in the quality of life of others.

Now that we have identified the categories, let me share with you the alternatives that Belenky et al. have identified to develop women’s thinking. They suggest that there should be dialogue instead of violence, families and schools need to explore ways to give confidence to

¹⁸ Quoted in Belenky et al., op. cit., 130.

¹⁹ Ibid., 149.

students, to make them feel successful in some ways. Schools need to support activities that help children cultivate the life of the mind. In relation to education, the authors suggest that there needs to be connected teaching. This entails that the teacher becomes a midwife— the opposite of banker-teachers. While the bankers deposit knowledge in the learner’s head, the midwives draw it out. They assist the student in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit (unspoken) knowledge explicit and elaborating it. And with connected classes—both student and teacher engage in the process of thinking, think and talk together, connected teachers try to discern the truth inside the students.²⁰

In conclusion, there was one time in heaven when God asked the men who were there to form two lines. The first line would be those men who really believe that they are the “man of the house.” The other line would be for those who believe that their wives are actually “the head of the house.” God was surprised to find all the men except one in the line for those who believe that their wives are actually the head of the house. So God said to the only man who believed he was the “head of the house,” “Make me proud, son, tell me how did you manage to be the head of the house.” The man replied with a quaver in his voice, “My wife told me to stand in this line.”

Well, this is not the kind of woman we are aiming to be. We don’t want the men cowering before us in utter fear because we are such “women with constructed knowledge.” We just want to celebrate God’s act of creating us as women and living as God wanted us to be. We just live to become a woman “after God’s own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14).²¹

²⁰ Ibid., 223.

²¹ The citation is not from a recognized Biblical translation. Most translations render this phrase “after his [or His] own heart.” The ethos of the conference in which this paper was originally presented included hesitancy with regard to the traditional Christian way of referring to God with male pronouns [Editor].