

Why We Must Confront the Global Abuse of Women

The church cannot be silent while the world addresses the worst social injustice of our times.

Several months ago a street vendor named Rosa Elvira Cely placed a desperate call to Colombia's national emergency number on her cellphone. "I'm in the national park," she said. "They are raping me! They are raping me!"

Police in Bogotá couldn't respond fast enough. When they found Rosa she was unconscious and barely breathing. She had stab wounds in her back, she had been raped and beaten, and a jagged piece of wood had been shoved into her vagina. Official reports said the 35-year-old single mother, who had been studying to finish high school, had been impaled.

She died on May 28, and 1,000 Colombians gathered in the park where she was attacked to decry the horrific violence against women that has become a national trend. They carried signs that said, "NI UNA MAS!" ("Not one more!").

I traveled to Colombia this week to add my voice to this chorus, and to remind the Colombian people—especially its women—that Christians from other parts of the world are praying with them for an end to this bloodshed. I told women in the city of Santa Marta yesterday that the gospel of Jesus Christ offers the best answer to the degradation of women that occurs worldwide.

Last year alone, 51,000 women in Colombia were victims of rape or sexual assault, and similar rates can be found in Mexico, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia. But the problem of *machismo*, the harsh male superiority that characterizes much of Latin America, is not just a Latin American problem. The oppression of women is a global phenomenon. Consider these facts:

- Between one quarter and one half of all women in the world have been abused by their intimate partners. From 40 to 70 percent of all female murder victims worldwide are killed by an intimate partner. (In the United States, where domestic cruelty is illegal and police protection is available, one fourth of women have suffered some form of domestic violence.)
- Cruelty to women is rampant in the Middle East, where women are forced to veil themselves, forbidden to drive and banned from walking alone. In Pakistan, angry husbands are known to throw acid in their wives' faces—causing permanent disfigurement. In Syria, Jordan and Iran, women who dare to disagree with their husbands become victims of “honor killings.”
- In many parts of the world girls are denied education because they are viewed as inferior. There were 185 documented attacks on schools and hospitals last year in Afghanistan, all attributed to Taliban extremists who oppose the education of girls.
- Mistreatment of women is widespread in Africa, where widows are legally displaced by their families and left with no protection. Hundreds of thousands of girls in Uganda, Kenya, Somalia, Malawi and other nations are butchered sexually in a barbaric practice known as female genital mutilation. And in South Africa, girls as young as 12 are sold as “wives” to older men who have the AIDS virus. (The men believe that having sex with a virgin will cure them of the disease.)
- Injustice against women is horribly cruel in Asia, where millions of girls are aborted or abandoned at birth because of their gender. If they are fortunate enough to survive their earliest years, they can become child brides at the age of 9 or 10. Millions of girls in Asian countries, some as young as 6, are illegally trafficked all over the world. The price for their sexual favors can be as low as 50 cents.

I recently met *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, who is the co-author of the best-selling book *Half the Sky*. He investigated the largely unreported phenomenon of gender injustice and concluded that it is the most crucial social issue of our day.

Kristoff believes that just as slavery was the key social justice issue of the 1800s, and freedom from tyrannical government was the overarching issue of the 1900s, justice for women and girls will become a primary focus in this century. I agree, but I wonder: Will the church sit back and watch secular activists address this cause, or will we enter the fray?

We have a Savior who cares about the pain of women. Jesus ministered in a male-dominant culture in which women were marginalized, demoralized, abused, denied rights, and judged as guilty before they could be proven innocent. Yet He defended women from their accusers, healed them, empowered them, invited them to become His disciples, and allowed them to be the first to announce the good news of His resurrection.

Jesus was the ultimate champion for women's rights. We cannot truly reflect His heart or carry His message unless we follow His example.

J. Lee Grady is the former editor of *Charisma* and the director of *The Mordecai Project* (). You can follow him on Twitter at *leegrady*. He is the author of *10 Lies the Church Tells Women*, *25 Tough Questions About Women and the Church*, and *Fearless Daughters of the Bible*.