



global news

CANADA: A new poll finds the number of Canadians describing themselves as evangelical has risen to 19 percent. Meanwhile, the Islamic Institute of Civil Justice will soon begin arbitrating civil disputes through Muslim *sharia* law, first in Ontario and later across Canada. *Sharia* rulings can be enforced by Canadian courts. The plan involves inheritance, divorce and family matters, but not criminal offenses. Islamic leaders say all parties must agree to the arbitration for decisions to be binding. Others, however, say *sharia* places women at a disadvantage because they could be pressured to take part in these courts. For example, *sharia* maintains that sons inherit twice as much as daughters. One newspaper editorial said, "*Sharia* law is known in the West mainly by its more extreme clauses, which recommend brutal punishments and authorize the unequal treatment of women. Perhaps this is an unfair image. But no country can have two competing codes of law."

CHILE: Although Chile has largely avoided Latin America's overall economic plight, its child prostitution problem looms. A prominent businessman is at the center of a scandal alleging that he heads a prostitution ring that recruits street kids. Police and other top businessmen have been arrested, while two senators are being investigated. A government child protection department spokesperson says that this is helping children by bringing to light a previously unrecognized problem. One child prostitute, an orphan who fled a rough orphanage at age seven, says that prostitution was the only way he could feed himself. Estimates of the numbers of children in Chile's sex trade range from 4,000 to 15,000. Some start as young as five years old.

Sisters in Service

Western Esthers Catch Vision of Overseas Women

Deann Alford, copy editor

Eighty percent of the world's unreached people—and 80 percent of all refugees—are women and children. As many as 4 million of them are trafficked each year. Women and girls suffer disproportionately as the least valued, least fed and least educated, the most often abandoned, abused, abducted and aborted.

Still, as the nurturers and spiritual hearts of the home, they are in positions of power to influence the next generation. In some countries, there's only a 12-year span between the birth of a boy and his conscription into a military training camp.

Yet there are no global outreach ministries that focus exclusively on women listed in the EMIS 2004-2006 *Mission Handbook* (www.emisdirect.com).

Pooling Resources

Michele Rickett wants not only to relieve the suffering of women and children but also to bring them the gospel. In 1996 the former missionary to Africa founded Sisters In Service (www.sistersinservice.org), a trans-American grassroots network of women's advocacy groups now based in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. These groups learn of needs for projects to benefit women and children across the globe. They pray for the needs, select overseas projects and raise funds to help make them reality. Rickett is SIS president and CEO.

Rickett, author of *Daughters of Hope: Stories of Witness and Courage* (InterVarsity Press 2003), holds that often the

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Sisters in Service

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best person to help an indigenous woman is another indigenous woman. "Yet they are operating under poverty, oppression and persecution," she said. "We [women in the West] have freedom, mobility, access to wealth and opportunity. Let's join forces together and extend the gospel."

Here's How It Works

Rickett and her husband, Daniel, have created a global network of ministry connections over 25 years, and missionaries in this network recommend worthy indigenous women's projects that need funding. That's how she learned about Christians in southern India with a vision to build a center for Dalits—"untouchables" in India's caste system—but lacked the money to make it happen. A SIS chapter from San Francisco, Calif., learned of the need, and a chapter representative traveled with Rickett to assess whether its members would support the project.

They did. So the San Francisco chapter held a walk-a-thon that raised \$14,000 in one morning. It funded the center, which has raised Dalits' status in that southern Indian community as the women learn to read, write and learn skills with which to build small businesses. The center launched a savings and loan program to help women pay for their dreams—for instance, a daughter's dowry or an outhouse for the home. The center, as all SIS-funded projects, offers woman-to-woman evangelism and discipleship, all by national women to their peers.

Following Their Footsteps

Rickett's vision was influenced by powerful role models who came alive to her in the pages of books she read while serving in Africa in the 1980s. One book was about missionary Eliza George, who suffered much in her service in Liberia. *Daughters of the Great Commission*, by Ruth Tucker, noted that two-thirds of all missionaries throughout history have been women. Another book told the stories of women's missionary societies and early women missionaries who begged for the chance to live out their global outreach callings.

But Africa's Christian women themselves served among Rickett's greatest role models. "My experience in women's ministries in the US was that there was a strong emphasis on Bible study, but almost no outreach in the community," she said. In contrast, "My African sisters' ideas of women's ministry was to emphasize ministry—making Christ known, particularly

among the poor in the garbage dump [and in] squatter communities."

These African women, however, were themselves operating under poverty and oppression, which hindered them from making even greater impact. Bringing resources to support their projects, Rickett realized, would dramatically further the gospel.

Global Multiplication

Women's centers like the one the San Francisco chapter sponsored in India are in the works in Muslim villages in Senegal, Rickett says. Also in India, SIS is helping fund a center for women with AIDS. In response to six praying women in Iraq, SIS is partnering with an indigenous ministry to build women's centers there. One has been funded and more are planned.

In China, SIS funds the training of leaders in underground house churches where 75 percent of new believers are women. In Sudan, SIS programs include job training and work-for-food programs for displaced women. Other SIS projects are in North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and Indonesia. SIS chapters have funded women's ministry training courses in 17 Arab countries.

Western women typically are willing to pray for needs they become aware of. A formidable obstacle, however, is tapping their huge, untapped power to impact the world with their resources. While prayer advocacy is a big part of SIS, "The Book of James is very clear," Rickett said. "You cannot say to your brother who's suffering, 'You just be warm and filled. We're praying for you.'"

Rickett carries a heavy speaking schedule to civic clubs, churches and church women's groups. Her audiences often respond by setting up a SIS advocacy chapter to pray for and fund these indigenous projects. "An important part of what we do is keep the information flowing," Rickett said. To that end, SIS publishes monthly updates and leads advocacy trips. Through them SIS advocates become aware of short-term ministry needs and some of these advocates step up to fill them.

Pray, Give and Even Go

That's how Peggy Wharton, a 62-year-old grandma, ended up teaching English for three months in Iraq. Rickett spoke at Wharton's church, Midland Evangelical Free in Midland, Mich., for a women's conference in 1998. Women at the church formed a SIS advocacy group with other Christians in the community. The group embraced the outreach of Wati*, a middle-aged Indonesian who, despite death threats, has planted

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churches, founded a seminary and preaches on the radio. She leads a network of Christian workers who meet the physical needs of the poor and Christian refugees on northern Sumatra, among the world's most dangerous places. The Midland women fund Wati's ongoing work.

When Rickett spoke at the Midland church about a need for English teachers

in Kurdish northern Iraq, Wharton's husband said the job sounded like something his wife could do. SIS linked Wharton with a Kurdish Christian school where she spent late 2003 teaching English.

Wharton said that SIS awakened a vision among women in her church and community. While women in her group aren't wealthy by Western standards, their

few dollars pooled together have ministered to thousands in Indonesia. "It's the small, consistent things that people do that make the difference," Wharton said.

Following a 16-hour trip to the heart of the nation's separatist movement, a trip punctuated by 30 military stops in which Wati's group had to get out of their car for searches, she e-mailed Rickett: "All of that bad and exhausting journey vanished. I realize this ministry can do many things because of Sisters In Service women prayers and help. Please keep on praying for us."

Equipped with prayer and tools such as women's centers and training programs, indigenous women like Wati have tremendous success reaching their communities for Christ. They can spread the gospel even in the hardest parts of the world closed to foreign missionaries.

Western Esthers

Rickett describes women of the West as Esthers of the faith. "It appeared to me that generally women were under-utilized, un-inspired in our churches for global service," she said. "I longed to create solutions to that...as an example to my own daughters, an inspiration and avenue for other young mothers.

"For no good reason of our own, we've been placed in positions of privilege," she said. Those blessings are for furthering the kingdom at such a time as this. ■

*Pseudonym

INTERVIEW with Michele Rickett on page 4➔

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How Women Here Can Help Women There

In 1996 Sisters In Service began empowering indigenous Christian women to light their worlds for Christ. Today, SIS consists of 20 chapters across the United States, hundreds of advocates at large, and other advocacy groups formed in women's Bible studies or women's departments of churches. They network abroad with indigenous projects, bringing resources to make real the ministry dreams of oppressed Christian women around the world. Here's a conversation *World Pulse* copy editor Deann Alford had with SIS President and CEO Michele Rickett.



Michele Rickett

Q: Why do women and girls suffer more in a society?

The powerless always suffer more. The psalmist said poverty is the ruin of the poor. Whether it's the power of money, decision-making power, or power of opportunity or friends, [women are] the most vulnerable. Ever since the fall of man and woman, the enemy has targeted women and children. That war has been going on ever since, and it's meant disproportionate suffering for women and girls.

Q: What happens when the gospel is introduced?

Wherever the gospel takes root in a culture, the lives of women and girls improve because Jesus valued women as well as men, little boys as well as little girls. If I have a boy and a girl, they're both going to school. I'm going to educate and feed them the same.

Q: How does inequality manifest in cultures without the gospel?

The girls of India are not eating protein. If there's an egg or a little bit of chicken, it goes to the boys. So girls fall behind physically, emotionally and educationally. They don't have a hint that God created them, loves and treasures them. God is equally incensed when there's no one to stand in the gap. That's what Sisters In Service exists to do: raise up voices that will be as incensed as the Lord is at this kind of injustice.

Q: Do SIS advocates themselves go abroad?

If God gives liberty to go and is calling them, they need to go. But the vast majority of SIS women in the US will not go. They're moms and working women. But they will send a representative from their group to see the project whenever possible and then to keep the women informed in prayer. Prayer advocacy is a big part of what we do.

Q: How have your years as a missionary in Africa impacted SIS?

Upon completing our assignment we returned to the US. I had a much clearer idea of the two kinds of poverty God was calling me to address: actual poverty of resources for his servants and poverty of vision and inspiration for North American women. I continued to learn about the disproportionate suffering of women and girls, about the history of women's involvement in global outreach, and about exciting initiatives of indigenous women to extend God's love.

Q: Do any American men support the work? How has your husband, Daniel, responded?

A number of our major supporters and board members are men. Many men have been strong advocates to their areas of influence—elders of churches, missions pastors, businessmen. One talked to his boss,

a Christian, who has given corporate funds to Sisters In Service. My husband is my biggest cheerleader and encourager. He has willingly released me to spend my efforts on this calling, in part, because I strongly supported his calling for 25 years while our children were still young, and I still do.

Q: How does women's ministry differ in the US from Africa and Asia?

This is a gross generalization, but I know when I ask the director of a US church's women's ministry [to describe its activities], they're going to say, "We have a Bible study every week, we do a Christmas outreach, and we do a women's retreat." When I ask the same question of a Christian woman in Africa, Iraq or Egypt, or if I had asked it of a Christian woman in 1900, they would have described to me their ministry: orphanages, working in prisons, taking food to refugees.

Q: Has it been a struggle to change attitudes?

For example, when I spoke with the director of a large church's women's ministry, she told me to talk to the missions pastors because "The missions department doesn't mess with women's ministry, and I don't mess with missions."

I said, "You and I really have a common goal—to bring these women to completion in Christ. They can't be mature in Christ when, as they lean on the Savior's breast daily in Bible study, they don't hear his heart beating for the unreached, for the nations."

Her eyes filled with tears. "You've got to help me," she said. "I can't lead these women where I'm not going. Start with me."

She went with me to India. In three months she came up with the other half of what was needed for the Dalit women's center. Every woman of her church feels like they have a share of reaching the unreached in south India. If they're not hearing Jesus' heart, something's got to change. She will never think of her women's ministry the same again. Her borders have been expanded to reach the whole world.

Q: Why aren't Western women more involved?

They're afraid that it's going to be too much to ask, be too hard, that it will take over their lives. What I try to bring them is the message that you can't do everything, but you must do something. ■