



The 50% Solution

Religion's Global Impact
on Entrepreneurial Women
and How to Fix it

Bettina Langerfeldt

What if it were possible to flip a switch and unleash twenty-five to fifty percent more productivity in your town or country? What impact would that have on the world's economy and on a country's economy in particular?

The truth is, that is entirely possible. Currently, half of the available potential and creativity in many countries is being stifled by a surprising oppressor: Religion, and more specifically a misreading of the very scriptures that underpin Christian belief and dogma.

This misreading has created an environment that, in many cases, causes women to never use their gifts and talents to their fullest, or at best makes it much more difficult than it should be. With a careful reading of scripture it is hard to justify this misguided teaching. Yet, it has persisted for thousands of years and been accepted by the masses who feel it's wrong to challenge church doctrine and teaching.

The result is predictable: less women in leadership and entrepreneurial ventures. Although it has certainly become more common to see women launch their own companies, statistics clearly show that the creativity and entrepreneurial potential of women is a largely underexploited source of economic growth worldwide. This tendency for women to shrink from business and leadership opportunities is even more evident in Christian circles. In my opinion, this stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of scripture and what it teaches about women and how scripture says God sees them.

It's well past time to set the record straight.

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The Impact of a Thousand Years

I live in Chile, a country that is primarily Catholic and I can tell you that, in my country there are still countless barriers holding women entrepreneurs back from fulfilling their promise as feminine leaders. These barriers create drag, and make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to contribute fresh and creative business ideas, and thereby create new sources of prosperity for themselves and their communities. Some of these barriers are very evident and are a direct consequence of the historical discrimination women have been the victims of worldwide: less formal education, chauvinistic stereotypes, difficulties accessing financing, and little access to networking. Yes, there has been undeniable progress over the past century or so. But, we and many other countries like us who are steeped in deep tradition, have a long way to go.

The main source of these barriers is a deeply engrained misconception, oftentimes fostered by the church about what true womanhood and entrepreneurship are really about. These misconceptions (as societal misconceptions and stereotypes often do) create unresolvable tension. For example, it's perfectly OK for an educated woman to open her own company, but at the same time, it's considered to be extremely unspiritual somehow, and even greedy, for her to pursue wealth and money.

The result is that the woman who aspires to business and entrepreneurship constantly struggles to reconcile her inner drive to create wealth for herself and her family with the counter-productive shame, disdain, and unworthiness she gets from herself and her environment. I know this struggle intimately because I have wrestled with it myself and with the women I coach.

Not surprisingly, these conflicts show up in how a woman runs her business. They directly affect her level of leadership, the choice of her market niche, the amount she charges for her services, her marketing decisions, a diminished ability to set healthy boundaries that protect her time and finances, etc.

It also shows up in how women get paid for the work they do. Again, there has been significant progress, but the gender pay gap still exists. Countries like Iceland, Finland, and Norway have the lowest gender differences. Out of 142 countries, the USA is in 20th place after Germany, Switzerland, and Canada. The Gender Gap is even more accentuated in Spanish-speaking countries: Spain ranks in 29th place, Mexico in 38th place and Chile in 66th place. Iran, Syria and Yemen present the biggest Gender Breach. (Source: World Economic Forum, 2014.)

The ripple effects of all of this in the global economy are huge: Less jobs and prosperity, less economic growth and a lower level of family wellbeing overall. It's interesting, isn't it, that the church will build an infrastructure to do charitable deeds in their communities to deal with the shortfalls that their own teaching at least partially caused in the first place.

What Exactly Happens When Only Half a Country's Labor Force Are Allowed to Develop Their Entrepreneurial Spirit?

According to findings of the European Commission's Small Business Act of Europe, women account for only 34.4% of Europe's self-employed and suggests they need more encouragement in order to become entrepreneurs. The report says this:

"This leaves considerable untapped human potential that is sorely needed to boost economic growth and create the new jobs required in today's difficult economic climate. If more women can be motivated to start up and lead companies, this could generate growth and jobs across the EU."

This is corroborated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, who devised the Gender, Institutions and Development Database, which measures the economic and political power of women in 162 countries (OECD, 2006). With few exceptions, the greater the power of women, the greater the country's economic success.

The World Bank's 2011 World Development Report suggests that in some economies productivity could increase 25% if the barriers due to discrimination against women were abolished.

A Word About Money

One of the most misquoted bible verses is the one about “money being the root of all evil.” That is not what that oft quoted verse says at all. It actually says that the LOVE of money is the root of all evil. The truth is, if money is the only reason you launch a business or go to work every day, you are most likely destined to fail. People need a mission, and money is a lousy one. It’s elusive, it doesn’t bring satisfaction, and using it as a singular goal and measuring stick for success will cause us to make grave mistakes in the effort to achieve it and fill our coffers.

On the other hand, making money in and of itself is not a sin, nor is it to be looked down on in any way. In fact, the scriptures are full of people who did well, were landowners, bought and sold livestock, and were entrepreneurial and successful.

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The women I coach struggle mightily with the whole notion of money, and it seems the more they make the more they struggle with it. Somehow, the idea that money is religiously considered to be “filthy lucre” has gotten into their DNA, and causes them to tap on the brakes instead of forging ahead with great joy, celebrating their good fortune.

When asked about how much money was enough, the great John Rockefeller supposedly replied, “Just a little bit more.” All of the latest research says that there is a certain amount of money that brings more happiness, but that beyond that number (somewhere around 70,000 U.S. dollars annually) happiness does not increase. No surprise there, really. But money is a direct reflection of the impact you are making in the world with your business. Serving others and doing so with excellence should be a magnet for money. And, the better one gets at their job, the more they should be paid for doing it. The commensurate paycheck usually follows hard work, and work that is done well. Or, at least it should.

So, take joy in making money. God is okay with that. It is a tool to bless yourself, your loved ones, and others through acts of charity.

Evidence of a Different Template for Women

Manmade laws and regulations derived from wrong interpretations of biblical truths have kept women silent for far too long. It's time for us to go back to the quintessence of true womanhood that is masterfully described in The Book of Proverbs, written by King Solomon, more than 2,500 years ago.

The virtuous woman he describes in The Book of Proverbs 31 is assumed by many biblical scholars to refer to his mother, Queen Bathsheba. Solomon describes a woman who has perfectly fulfilled the feminine role of leadership in God's eyes: she was a full-fledged businesswoman and real estate investor who not only cared well for her family, but also made important contributions to society as a whole.

This shows us that women have a distinctive and important role to play in the world and are given full permission to step into the leadership roles they were created for.

I suggest that we go back to this plan and boldly claim our ground as legitimate leaders in contemporary society, not in competition with—or as an opposite to—men, but as gracious, wise and loving co-leaders willing to offer a badly needed feminine complement to a predominantly masculine-ruled world.

That's what Mrs. Virtuous Woman did. Are you ready to meet her? She's amazing, no doubt. But I believe that we all can be like this, with God's help. Let's take a look:

She was a trustworthy queen who diligently conducted the stewardship of the family budget with integrity:

"The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain." (Verse 11)

She was an industrious queen who proactively embraced productivity:

"She seeks wool and flax, and willingly works with her hands.

"She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hand holds the spindle." (Verse 13 and 19)

She was a good steward-queen who applied solid business criteria to all of her money transactions, including providing for her household:

"She is like the merchant ships, she brings her food from afar." (Verse 14)

As a queen, she was a great manager. Although she had lots of servants, she was not self-indulgent or lazy, but loved working and took responsibility by providing abundantly for everybody who lived with her:

“She also rises while it is yet night, and provides food for her household, and a portion for her maidservants.” (Verse 15)

She was a money-savvy queen, a full-fledged real estate investor and a wise businesswoman who knew how to create wealth by creatively multiplying her income:

“She considers a field and buys it; from her profits she plants a vineyard.” (Verse 16)

She was a powerful queen conscious of her important role and responsibilities, so she took good care of herself and her body:

“She girds herself with strength, and strengthens her arms.” (Verse 17)

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She was a confident queen who knew what she was worth and was conscious of the huge value of her products. She did not shy away from additional work when it was necessary:

“She perceives that her merchandise is good, and her lamp does not go out by night.” (Verse 18)

She was a very generous queen:

“She extends her hand to the poor, yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy.” (Verse 20)

She was a queen of high standards who provided a secure and high quality lifestyle for her family:

“She is not afraid of snow for all her household is clothed with scarlet.” (Verse 21)

She was an elegant queen who knew how to surround herself with beauty, she was creative with her clothes and had beautiful and expensive dresses:

“She makes tapestry for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple.” (Verse 22)

She was a creative queen, most probably a fashion statement in her time who created and sold clothes of her own design, which people were eager to buy and even to resell:

“She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies sashes for the merchants.” (Verse 24)

She was a dignified and strong queen, who confidently looked forward to the future with boldness:

“Strength and honor are her clothing; she shall rejoice in time to come.” (Verse 25)

She was a wise and kind queen:

“She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness.” (Verse 26)

She was a faithful queen who took full responsibility for her loved ones:

“She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.” (Verse 27)

Verse 30 reveals the source of her unshakable wisdom and strength: God Himself!

The virtuous woman queen had a personal relationship with God, the impersonation of unconditional love and freedom:

“Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing,

But a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.” (Verse 30)

Where Do We Go From Here?

So, if this is the truth about women, then what do we do about it?

Here are some closing thoughts:

Be honest: The Church needs to encourage entrepreneurship, and not only allow women to find their place in this world, but to prosper there. If the fear is that a successful woman will somehow not take good care of her home and children, I would suggest this: Let's teach men and women how to have balanced lives that allow both of them to use all of their gifts and talents and also raise children and take care of their homes. It certainly can be done, and it needs to be encouraged from the pulpits and from Church leaders generally.

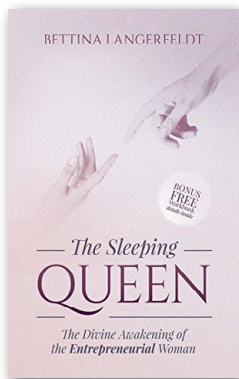
Be brave: If you are a woman living in a culture that discourages you from using all of your God-given talents and gifts, step out and use them anyway. You were created and designed to be you, and it would be a tragedy if you are not able to carry out your life's mission, whatever that is. If you fail, then by all means pick yourself up and start over again. Failure is fixable. Regret is not. Don't grow old wondering if you could have been something, or built something. To coin a famous advertising slogan, just do it!

Be social: Find other women who want to accomplish something and spend time together on purpose. Plan a weekly or monthly get together and encourage one another when you meet. Don't do this alone. There is a Bible verse that says, "In a multitude of counselors, there is safety." That's absolutely true. I can tell you from personal experience that when you step out bravely, you'll find and gravitate toward other women who are doing the same. You need each other.

Be coachable: Find a good coach. Preferably one who has walked this path and understands the ups and downs and the pitfalls that can happen. Schedule time with them and let them help you. The combination of advice and encouragement from fellow travelers and encouragement from a coach who cares about your journey will assuredly produce results.

Remember, you were created to live a purposeful, meaningful and accomplished life, and the world is waiting for you to step out and make the difference you were intended to make. 🌱

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Bettina Langerfeldt is on a mission. She has been awakened to what is possible for women around the world and she wants to help them be what they were intended to be; to use all of their unique and significant talents every day to accomplish their dreams and to feel the joy that comes with all of that. For the past eight years she has been coaching and mentoring women entrepreneurs, and preparing to write her first book, *The Sleeping Queen*. It published this fall on Morgan James Books. Her goal is simple: help women around the world be successful in every way. Bettina lives in Santiago Chile with her husband, Robert.

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