

Mrs. H. G. Underwood, "Woman's Work for Women in Korea," *Missionary Review of the World* (July 1905): pp. 491-500.

In order to appreciate the work that Christian women are doing or may do for their sisters in Korea we need to know: (1) The condition of the women in this land without Christ; (2) The changes wrought by the inflow of Gospel light; (3) the lines along which foreign women can be of most service; and (4) what the Christian Korean women can do and are doing for each other.

1. The life of the ordinary Korean woman is one long, unvaried story of weary toil, sickness, anxiety, and sorrow. Their daily duties often compel them to carry great vessels of water on their heads. In addition to the burden, the spilling and splashing of the water over their shoulders in freezing weather brings on much disease and suffering. After washing their garments, they pound them as their method of smoothing in place of ironing, and toil far into the small hours of the night. They also work in the fields, sowing, weeding, and <491/492> reaping; they weave the cloth from the cotton they have raised, thus making their own clothing from the raw product. This clothing is insufficient for severe weather, and inconvenient. The women marry early, and must often carry a little one on their backs, other children tugging at their skirts, while the mothers support a heavy load on the head in doing their work.

The country women seem much freer, and therefore less unfortunate, than those in the city, tho most of them have to toil in the fields, and have, probably, heavier manual labor. But life in the smaller villages, or on farms where some comparatively "rich" farmer and his servants' families all meet on terms of familiarity, is much easier for women, and they are not constantly confined to the *anpangs*, like the city women.

With pitifully few exceptions the people live in extremely small, low, dark rooms, which aptly correspond to their low, dark, narrow mental and moral environment—no education, no books, no music, no entertainment, practically no amusement, no change, with no thought, desire or hope beyond the necessities of the flesh for the present hour.

Some may say that this is the case with the very poor in London or New York, but I deny that it is true to the same extent, and they are a comparatively small class; in Korea it is the general condition of the women of the nation.

No doubt every young Korean girl hopes some day to rule a household, a wife hopes to give birth to a son, and a mother expects to marry her son or daughter advantageously. Sometimes a woman covets and obtains a heavy silver ring, a silk coat, or a set of girdle ornaments, but, after all, they have few joys or hopes beyond those they share with the animals, and no happy outlook or expectation beyond the <492/493> grave. Only their unceasing labor saves them from madness or idiocy, nor are we surprised to find many of them dull or foolish.

The young marriageable girls from ten or eleven to twenty, and high-caste women of all ages, are very closely confined. Even among the poorest and lowest, except on the farms, the young girls are guarded with extreme care, after marriage as much as before. Then they become the slaves of the mother-in-law and maids of all work in a family to whom they usually go as perfect strangers. All depends on the mother-in-law. She may

happen to be kind and gracious, or ugly and cruel, but she exercises absolute authority over the young wife. These shut-in women are never seen on the street or anywhere else, except in the inner quarters of some near relative's house, to which they are carried in a closed chair. If very poor they may flit thither at night, in the care of some older woman, well enveloped in the capacious folds of a big apron. Charwomen and all very low-class women enjoy comparative freedom from all these restrictions after they have passed their teens. Slaves, sorceresses, and dancing-girls are absolutely untrammelled, going and coming as freely as the men. Dancing-girls are often sold and trained to their dreadful life in childhood, and the same is true of the sorceresses and Buddhist priestesses.

There are no schools for girls outside of those established by the missionaries, no homes for blind, deaf, orphan, or friendless children, who drift into the Buddhist temples or the hands of the sorcerers or, trainers of dancers, or become slaves in some alien family.

Marriage customs add much to the bitterness of women's lives. The fact that a woman never sees her husband till the hour of her marriage is pregnant with legions of miseries, which any woman can easily imagine without further comment. The shyness, ignorance of the world, of herself, and all things, which have been diligently fostered <493/494> in her, makes this sudden cruel plunge from the seclusion of her own home into the ice-cold waters of life, with a family of utter strangers (not to mention her strange husband), an ordeal of exquisite agony to the ordinary shrinking young creature.

To this is added the horrors of the concubine system. Is the wife ill looking, or childless, or in any way distasteful to her husband? He forthwith takes to himself a concubine. Has she grown old in his love and service? He resorts to a concubine, who, tho of low family and coarse nature, frequently rules over and ill-treats the rightful wife, shoving her quite to the wall. As for the concubine herself, her position is insecure, she may any day be put aside; she is snubbed by ladies of good standing, treated with unseemly familiarity by men, her children can not inherit without special intervention, and are not counted legitimate; she has no sure hold upon her lord's affections except in youth, good looks, and her children; her life is precarious and full of sorrow, doubt, and fear.

The dancing-girls are the toys of evil men so long as youth lasts; they are then cast aside to scorn, sickness, abuse, and death, unless, as rarely happens, they have managed to save a little money or have married. The sorceresses are given over to the service of the devil, to frenzy drunkenness, and life-long hypocrisy and imposition, often dying early, as the result of their excesses. .

Korean husbands vary, like those of other nationalities, and, except when intoxicated—as they frequently are, alas!—do not seem inclined to ill-treat their wives, according to their idea of ill-treatment. When drunk they beat them cruelly, and in fits of jealousy sometimes cut off the wife's nose. A fairly kind husband of good family and more than moderate means considers it nothing out of the way to allow his wife to carry water and other heavy loads, to beat the rice with a terribly heavy mortar, and perform other equally laborious tasks while he sits in the *sarang*, smoking and chatting with his friends. To gamble away her earnings, or spend them on other women or in drink, to leave her to support herself and his little ones, is not uncommon, but is, alas! nothing different from what is done by some Europeans and Americans.

To us who find home ties and family life the sweetest thing on earth, it is inexpressibly sad to behold how little of this there is in the Korean woman's life. The *sarang* and *anpang* divide the family. Men and women live practically apart. The pleasures and business of the men are carried on in the outside world, in and beyond the *sarang*. It is almost an unheard-of thing, except among Christians, for men and their wives, daughters, or sisters to go anywhere together. How can they, when it is thought improper for women to go out at all?

It would be unthinkable for a Korean family to sit together in the evening round a table reading or playing games—impossible; for the <494/495> women play no games, and there is no light by which one can see well enough to enjoy work or play in the ordinary Korean household.

But the saddest thing in the life of Korean, as of all heathen women, is the fact that there is no outlook, no hope, and no vision above the earth or beyond the grave. The skies are brass above their heads, not a slight canopy thinly veiling a heaven, of which it hath not entered the heart of man to imagine the glories. The grave closes over them in absolute blackness, with no hint of the light beyond and the life eternal. "Where no vision is, the people die." A poor woman dying in the hospital said to the missionary doctor: "Oh, where am I going? Oh, it is so dark, so dark! Is there no light?"

What the Missionaries are Doing

Let us notice a few ways in which the condition of these women is changed for the better by the coming of the Gospel.

Nothing else is worth mentioning in comparison with the fact that immortal souls are saved, for, after all, tho things that are seen are only for a time, and a mortal's condition during a few score years on earth will count for little in the eons of eternity. But even looking no further than this life, and to answer the sneers of those who do not believe in missions, let us see how the present temporal state is modified by the entrance of a better hope.

First of all, the husbands change. Christianity works a miraculous change in the men, noted and talked of by communities far and near. Gambling, drinking, and other vices are completely stopped, and money flows into the household coffers for necessities; quarreling and wife-beating are known no more; and, further, the man, in the light of the missionary's teaching, gets a better lamp for his wife to sew by, puts a pane of glass in the window of the *anpang*, digs a well close at the door, helps her with the heaviest burdens, when able hires a servant, and, in a word, begins to treat her with considerate, unselfish love. This in itself makes all the difference between daylight and darkness in the home, and a little unheard-of heaven on earth for the poor, down-trodden creatures, who never dreamed of a possible improvement of their condition.

Second, the marriage customs are changed. No more concubines; no more jealousy, heartbreak, and quarreling; no more women of uncertain and precarious standing, despised, looked down upon; no more dishonored children.

Again, schools are being established for the girls. A vast new world of interest and delight is opened to these fresh young minds, in which they develop with marvelous rapidity. These women have known nothing of real music, but now they learn to sing, now

they have something to sing for, and it is pathetic to see their eager, passionate desire to learn and sing the hymns, and the endless delight they take <495/496> in their own crude efforts to render the tunes. Many an old woman who cannot read a line has learned all the commonest hymns in the book by heart, and can recite or sing (?) them on any occasion. The light in the formerly dull eyes and the songs of their lips speak for themselves of what God has wrought through woman's work for women in Korea.

The Christian women, moreover, have gained dignity, social importance, and self-respect; for now each has a *name* of her own, read at service before the assembled multitude, sealed with the baptism water on her brow, written in the records of the church among the names of all Christians. She hears the others exhorted to watch over, pray for, and help her, and she is placed in a class whose leader reports each week to the *moxa*,* whether she has attended the meetings, has been sick or away, etc. No; she is no more an insignificant molecule of society who, alive to-day, may disappear to-morrow without injury or concern. She is a sister in the Lord, of immense importance to everybody; her doings are well known; she is a lamb folded, fed, and cared for; no longer a stray sheep lost in the wilderness, torn and weary, and ready to die.

But all this is nothing compared with the fact that they have discovered they possess a *soul* and a *future*! If a poor hack-horse could be suddenly transformed into one of the sons of God, with a partial knowledge of what God has for His sons, and a clear appreciation of what he formerly was, it could not mean more to him than to these women, who have been suddenly lifted from the condition of mere <496/497> beasts of burden to join the innumerable company of angels, the general assembly and church of the first born, who are written in heaven to behold as their father, God, the judge of all, and their brethren, the spirits of just men made perfect, and, crowning glory, Jesus their Savior, the mediator of the new covenant!

In the light, then, of what we have seen the question as to whether women missionaries are needed would never arise, but how best can we economize and most advantageously use the few whom the Church in Christian countries sends.

There are between eight and twelve million souls in Korea; the approximate number of women is easily computed. Of this population, there are in touch with Gospel light about forty thousand Protestant Church adherents, catechumen and baptized Christians. Of these, about one-half are probably women.

The native women, as they pathetically told Miss Chase, get comparatively little from the men missionaries, whom they are too shy to question, whose visits to each little group are necessarily brief, and whose efforts are divided between the millions of heathen who have never heard and the thousands of new believers who are all very ignorant. These women need a woman who can sit down quietly with them in the *anpang* and patiently teach them, and listen patiently to their "unlearned questions." But in all Korea, in twelve centers of work, hundreds of populous miles apart, there are, counting both Methodists and Presbyterians, those on the field and those on furlough, from Canada, Australia, and the United States, only one foreign single woman for every three hundred thousand. It needs no argument to show that these women's unaided efforts are as a drop in the bucket compared

* Missionary.

with the crying need; therefore, it seems evident that they can do most good by teaching and training natives who can go forth to teach others.

The work which we believe will result in greatest fruitfulness in the end is:

First.—To teach young girls in schools.

Second.—To train the intelligent, advanced Christian women who [seem] fit for it for Bible women and evangelistic workers.

Third.—To hold Bible classes, of a week or ten days' duration, in the little Christian villages.

The meeting and teaching of inquirers and heathen women who come in great crowds to the newer stations from curiosity, our ladies are not wholly equal to, because the *kugyunging** countrywoman comprehends, for the first few interviews, very little of the Korean or of foreigners, and pays scant attention, owing to curiosity. Native workers are needed here, and here they accomplish wonders. <497/498>

Without violating all their ideas of propriety, women under thirty-five can not go about from house to house or village to village as Bible women, and, on the other hand, many of the older women can not read and seem unable to learn, while numbers of those who are highly fitted to do this work are overburdened mothers of large families. There are no maiden ladies in Korea, but there are quite a number of widows, and on these we must mainly depend for our assistants, leaders, and Bible women. But altho they can not serve in so public a way and can not give their whole time to the work, there are many faithful Christian women who do what they can, as opportunity offers, in telling their neighbors and relatives, employers or servants and friends, about the blessed Gospel, and it is no doubt that to this is due, in part, the wonderful spread of Christianity from village to village, where missionaries have never gone.

Let me cite a few instances. Mrs. Yi, an old widow woman of between fifty and sixty who could not read, moved with her two sons from the Christian village of Sorai, where she had been converted and instructed, to Chil Pong, a village far off, nestled among the mountains. Tho she could not read, her son could, and, through her, they, their wives, and, later, their children, were all converted, and little by little their neighbors. There are now two little groups of Christians and two neat little churches within ten miles of each other, all practicing and *preaching* the Word, as the result of this ignorant old woman's faith, labor, and prayer.

Again, in an island off the coast of Whang Hai, a number of people who had been partially taught, and had been in a measure intellectually convinced, decided to become Christians, but they were very ignorant, no one had time to visit, instruct, and encourage them, and they fell back into heathenism. Mr. Kim's mother—who after her conversion, tho she had plenty of means, and was of the class who do not go out, went about constantly, from village to village, exhorting unbelievers and teaching the Christians as she best could—undertook the rather perilous trip across currents and to a dangerous coast to help these islanders. She was ill received. A perfect stranger, no one would give her shelter, she was looked upon with suspicion; but she persisted, talked to the women at their gates, the well, the clothes-laundering places, and with such soul-winning power that several of them

* sight-seeing visitors

listened perforce and believed. She was invited into the homes, treated as an honored guest, and one year later, when she visited the island with the missionary, found a group of earnest men and women Christians, and a good commodious little church, set on a hill where all might see it—the fruit of one poor woman's work for women.

Mrs. Pak, a Presbyterian convert, and a widow whose second daughter had just married, went to a distant town to visit her other <498/499> daughter, whom, with her family, she soon led to Christ, and then began reaching out to the neighbors and teaching the children, until the Methodists, in whose field she happened to be, were able to organize a church as the result of her volunteer work of love. In the meantime the Presbyterians, who were not aware of these facts, had urged her to return to Seoul and accept a salary to do continual Bible work in the hospital; but so strongly did she feel the call for her service where she was, that she refused this offer and remained to work unpaid.

Mrs. Yi's daughter-in-law, a young *saxie* not twenty, became converted after her marriage, and was eager to tell her friends; so when at length she was allowed to pay the customary visit to her relatives, she began to *chando hao* (pass on the word). Scorn, mockery, and abuse were the result. But she persisted, and so faithfully that one by one they yielded, and now seven sturdy, earnest farmer households are believing, baptized, and *passing on the word*. These are incidents which could be paralleled many times by every one who has had experience in the work.

Enough can scarcely be said in praise of the efficiency, earnestness, and zeal of the few women who serve as Bible women and helpers, often voluntarily. It must be remembered, too, that their books are few. With the exception of some tracts, they have a simple catechism, and the New Testament, without references, and no commentaries or concordances; so that to teach as they do necessitates great familiarity with the Word, a heart in touch with the source of wisdom, < 499/500> and faithful attention to the instructions received from foreigners. One of the women I know made three long country trips last year, two of them at her own suggestion, when only her bare expenses were paid. She taught at all of these three times a day with great thoroughness, witnessed to by the foreigners who were present, teaching the women to read, as well as giving Bible studies. Two others held a class of little over a week's duration at their own instance, the natives testifying to the benefit received. Another of about eighty who cannot read, but who knows by heart much of her Testament and hymnbook, visited the hospital regularly all winter, talking to the patients in the dispensary and wards, and others whose family duties do not permit them to go to the country, have brought neighbor after neighbor into the Church.

But most of the people are poorly instructed (many of them can not read), so we need trained teachers—trained by foreign women. Native women are begging pathetically for schools and Bible-training classes. But even the foreign women who are here have not always money enough to itinerate with, or to pay the traveling expenses of the voluntary women helpers who go with them. Mrs. Sharrocks and Miss Samuels, of Syen Chun, told me they now had no time to do anything but teach the increasing numbers of believers, while from the south comes the cry of hundreds of inquirers coming to the stations and no one to teach them.

If there are those who seek a work full of opportunity and inspiration, let them come and join us. If any woman doubts whether life is worth living, let her enter the work for women in Korea.