

## FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS

### **The involvement of women in Bible translation: hope versus reality**

*[A recent United Bible Societies policy statement entitled Gender and Translation Activities looks seriously at the lack of balance between women and men in much of the Bible translation work taking place at present. From the judgment that “many of the church’s women are denied the opportunity to make an important contribution to the work of Bible translation,” the statement goes on to recommend that the UBS “actively recruit and train qualified women as translators, reviewers, and translation officers” and that we “include women in all aspects of the translation process so that the translation reflects the male and female aspects of language use.”*

*In the following notes William Mitchell looks back at his experience of translation projects in Latin America, and in particular at the level of participation of women in those projects.*

– Editor]

Over the period from 1984 to 1996 I worked with some 96 translators in 26 projects in seven different countries in Latin America. Two of the projects were in national languages; the remainder were in minority languages, though some of these had large populations of more than 1 million speakers. Only 13 of the 96 translators were women, or less than 15%, and two projects accounted for almost half of all these women. There were 7 women translators in the remaining 24 projects – a mere 8%.

In looking at what these figures mean, and then what might be done to change the present situation, it is helpful to review in detail one of the projects where women were in the majority. (The names of individuals and organisations involved will not be given, however, for obvious reasons.)

#### **A project in which women were involved as translators**

In 1985 leaders of the churches in this language area asked the Bible Society in their country for help in translating the Old Testament. A study of the society and the language was undertaken, and this led to a recommendation that the Bible Society should initiate and develop a translation project, together with the churches. As a result the churches and a large mission organisation working in the country covenanted together to work with the Bible Society in the project.

A 2-week translation workshop was planned and the churches agreed to send potential translators to it. Fifteen local people, seven women and eight men, took part in the workshop. I led the workshop together with G. (a European missionary and fluent speaker of the language with, at that time, some 20 years experience in the country, most of it spent in Bible translation work), R. (a missionary in the region just beginning studies in the language), and E. (a veteran lady missionary, preparing for her retirement after many years of work in the area).

As the workshop went ahead, it was clear that if we were to choose translators on the basis of ability and the promise they showed, the team would be all-female. It had previously been agreed that G. would serve

as exegete and R. would help to coordinate the project. The superiority of the women in the course was so marked that when we met with the church leaders to discuss with them the possible makeup of the team, we consulted them on the advisability of appointing an all-female team. They were quite clear on the matter: the women who had been asked to attend were there on merit. The leaders were not surprised with our assessment – it confirmed theirs. In the end the project began with a fairly large team, four women and two men translators. The church leaders were fully committed to the role of the women in the project for as long as it took. There was also a secretary, who had been trained in the use of a computer.

From the beginning it was clear that G. was not comfortable with the large number of women on the team; nor was he ever able to accept the different rhythms of work and time that the women brought to the team, due mainly to their home and family responsibilities. He had difficulty even appreciating the sacrifices the women made; the youngest team member, for example, delayed beginning her family until the project was well advanced!

However, the first major crisis arose from a different direction. When I was visiting the project about a year after it began, I was asked to meet with the field director of the mission in the capital city before going to meet with the team where they were working. He explained that R. had been relocated to a teaching position in another place since “he had made no progress in learning the language”. The director was sorry that the mission would no longer be able to give help in coordinating the project. When I met the team I found that one of the women was no longer with the project. I soon learned indirectly that, rather than face the mission leaders with a case of sexual misbehaviour on the part of one of their colleagues, they had asked for him to be removed because he was overbearing and was not learning their language. In the strongly community-based culture of the area, the woman involved could not continue in the team. The project went on with three women and two men.

The departure of R. meant that G. also took over the role of overall coordinator. He abandoned his first reluctance to use computers and an attempt was made to use SIL software to adapt a translation in a related language to this language. The plan was that the team would be stylists working on the computer-produced draft. This plan went nowhere, for two main reasons:

- (1) The printed computer output seemed to the translators to already be “Holy Scripture” and they were therefore afraid to suggest changes to it.
- (2) The process took away from the translators the need to be creative, and somehow gave them what they felt to be a lesser role. They doubted that God could inspire them in the same way that was possible when they themselves did the first draft.

A further unfortunate effect of this failed venture was that a higher level of computer technology was introduced into the project, and that this was installed in G.’s office in the capital city rather than in a community

in the area where the language was spoken. It meant that the secretary left the project.

The women translators worked on for the whole time of the project, and G. continued to complain about them on each of my visits; but he worked on too. The fact that the church leaders were committed to the participation of the women acted as a brake on his desire to bring more men into the team. The appointment of a woman as the general secretary of the Bible Society in the country was an encouragement to the women. She was supportive, if a bit patronising.

The women brought a different dimension to the translation task, particularly in their use of language. The oldest of the three was a community nurse who had worked with missionaries for many years. She had the most difficulty in getting away from a formal approach to translation. It was as if being literal gave her a kind of protection, allowing her to decline all personal responsibility. This was not helped by the way G. sometimes expressed himself.

In writing about the project, Alice Mitchell points out the effect of the women on the translation, especially with regard to the relational and intimate aspects of human activity and the area of emotional expression. The language has a remarkable facility for expressing emotions and feeling to the finest degree and, in contrast to the men, the women used these resources to the full:

“... the women’s language is almost inevitably more gentle, and hence female team members add a degree of intimacy and gentleness to the finished Scripture. In this particular language this meant that women used particles which soften or make the construction more polite. The effects of this softening of the language are far-reaching. The resulting Bible text shows a gentler God, a warmer gospel, and perhaps a less abstract and more human story altogether.”

At the dedication of the Bible in 1994, the women, their male colleagues, G. and his wife, were duly honoured by their grateful sisters and brothers.

### **Learning from this project**

Of course this particular project was unique, as every project is. Yet it provides a number of clues to help understand what was achieved. It also sheds light on the lack of balance between women and men in translation teams elsewhere. Some factors that seem to be significant are:

***Absent husbands.*** The men of this community have traditionally been, and still are, travelling salesmen, selling weavings, sweaters, and musical instruments throughout Latin America. Their frequent absences have allowed women to have more opportunity to do things in the community. This means that the women have a more prominent role in society than many of their sisters in other parts of the Andes. In addition to this, some of the more gifted men have become more fluent and comfortable in the “other tongue” than in their mother tongue.

***Leadership support.*** The role of the church leaders in empowering the women was a key factor in the process. This “sponsorship” not only

gave value to their presence and their work, but it also provided a protection against the exegete's interest in replacing them with men.

**Culture.** There were factors in the local culture supporting the women's inclusion in the team. In Andean society it is a very important characteristic of all relationships that they are two-way, and that all human endeavour is shared activity. Linked to this is the recognition that male and female roles are complementary in character. The women are the keepers of the story. They are the guardians and transmitters of the language, and in some cases the singers of the songs.

[We should note, however, that these factors on their own were not sufficient in other Andean projects to produce a similar balance of men and women on translation teams. In those other cases there were influences, either from the dominant culture or from a doctrinal view of the role of men as guardians of the Bible, that acted against the inclusion of women as translators – though not against them as “support” persons.]

**Models.** The fall of man, and a missionary man at that, was empowering for the women. But in this case it also created a situation which gave more power to the male exegete. On the other hand, there was another “missionary model” in the situation. E. retired while the project was in progress, but her presence in the region over a long period of time and her role in the birth of a number of churches provided a strong “mother in Israel” figure which balanced the influence of the male leadership model.

**The call of God.** The women believed strongly in the importance of the Old Testament for their people, and had a real sense of call and commitment to the work they were doing.

Thus there were many factors – culture, power, patronage, providence, the call of God, committed people, role models, and even sin! – that played a part in the unfolding of this project.

### **The situation in other projects**

The majority of the other projects referred to above were local language projects in highland or lowland South America. In understanding the general lack of women translators in these projects, the following factors seem to be significant:

**Education.** Levels of education amongst indigenous people in South America are low, and most do well if they complete primary school. Within that framework girls tend to have fewer years of schooling than boys. Correspondingly the level of literacy is lower amongst women.

**The influence of Spanish.** Either through greater opportunity for education or through more extensive contact with the dominant culture, men are generally more fluent in Spanish than women. The following assessment of the situation in Ecuador could be applied to many other countries in the region:

“Linguistic competence in Spanish varies according to the degree of bilingualism. For the majority of indigenous women the use of Spanish is very restricted, and is limited to vocabulary and stock phrases which serve well in inter-ethnic relations. Those who have had more schooling, or have travelled more, or have a wider contact with other groups, use a larger vocabulary and have a better grasp of Spanish grammatical features” (José Sánchez Parga, *Educación y Bilingüismo en la sierra Ecuatoriana*, page 352).

**Doctrinal views.** Leadership in the churches of the language groups concerned is almost exclusively male. Their understanding of the Bible confirms them in this position, and tends to lead to women not being considered as potential translators.

**Minority cultures.** In spite of situations where the local culture has a more balanced view of the roles of men and women than the dominant culture in the country, the pattern of the dominant culture often prevails and women are not considered for translation teams.

**Failure to call for the involvement of women.** Over the years I am looking back to, both the national Bible Society and the Translation Consultant failed to make the effort to identify and promote the need for women translators.

### **Can hope become reality?**

There are a number of requirements and qualifications for Bible translators which are demanded by the nature and processes of a translation project. This is one of the factors which works against the involvement of women in Bible translation teams. Other factors which have the same effect, and which we have referred to above, are patterns of male dominance in the church and the dominance of Spanish over local culture and language.

Perhaps it is the reverse of the negative factors that we have identified that will change the situation for the better. For example:

- Education of key people: translation officers, Bible Society leaders and staff, church leaders.
- Raising the issue in public of the role of women in translation, as a matter of policy.
- Research into stereotypes of male and female roles in society, and into the nature of language as spoken and used by women and men.
- Taking practical steps to involve women in the translation process, at all levels.