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**“YOU ARE NOT ALONE”:
A REFLECTION ON THE
WOMEN’S PEERLEADER FORUM**
Havilah Dharamraj



**SCHOLARLEADER
INSIGHTS**

Dear Friends of SCHOLARLEADERS,

From our beginnings 36 years ago, we have encouraged women as theological leaders. Today, 30% of *LeaderStudies* recipients are women. However, Christian women faculty and executive leaders remain a small minority in the Majority World. Typically, a woman may be the only senior theologian in her context.

With that in mind, several years ago we began sponsoring a *PeerLeader Forum* for women, a place where these leaders can gather, share experiences, and encourage one another. This lovely reflection imagines a conversation between one participant and her young daughter. It moved me deeply, and I hope it encourages you.

With excitement for our work together,

Larry A. Smith
President



Dr. Havilah Dharamraj

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ON THE *WOMEN’S PEERLEADER FORUM***

Havilah Dharamraj is Academic Dean and Professor of Old Testament at South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies in Bangalore, India (a *Vital SustainAbility Initiative* client). She has a PhD from the University of Durham (UK), and she has recently published a commentary on the book of Ruth. Here, she writes about Seblewengel Daniel, a faculty member at Ethiopia Graduate School of Theology (another *Vital SustainAbility Initiative* client). Seblewengel is EGST’s Head of Academic Affairs. She has a PhD from Akrofi-Christaller Institute and is working on a commentary on James for a series in Amharic.



Photo credit: Anonymous

2019 WPLF participants overlooking Taal Lake in the Philippines.

Seble's little girl Bamlak is happy that her mother is home in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. At age 6, a week is a very, very long time. Bamlak wants to know why Seble has been away, and the photos on her mom's phone help to tell the story. "You see all these ladies here? They are the friends I was with," Seble says.

"Friends?" Bamlak's one-word question is reasonable. Only Emily and Eliane are from Africa. There's Dinorah and Ruth from Central America; Athena, Chee-Chiew, Theresa, and Jung Sook from East Asia; Havilah from South Asia; Rula from the Middle East; and Meritt, who facilitated this *Women's PeerLeader Forum*, from the States. And if there's one thing common to them all, it's the grin of delight at being part of this company.

"Yes, they're friends," Seble explains. "We became friends – very good friends! – by meeting once every year for three days." Boston, Panama City, a resort outside Manila. "All of us work very hard, because our jobs are big..." "Bigger than you?" Bamlak asks.

"Out of the mouths of babes," Seble thinks, and smiles. "Yes, my job is bigger than me! I teach students. I write books. I have to make sure my theological college is coming along nicely – at least that part of my college that I'm in charge of. I have big meetings to attend. I have to travel to speak at some of these meetings. And, of course, I have to help daddy look after you!"

Seble is thinking of the air-miles Ruth covers weekly as she represents displaced people in Central and South America. Of the countries across Asia that Theresa visits each month on accreditation visits for the Asian Theological Association. Of the university leadership responsibilities shouldered by Emily in Nairobi and Eliane in Ivory Coast. Of the fundraising Jung Sook does as a seminary president in Seoul.

Bamlak agrees, "That's a lot of work. Don't you get tired?" "Oh, yes – very tired! But I would feel less tired if I had friends to talk to. Friends who do the same things I do and can teach me how to manage those things better." Seble remembers the group's

meetings over the past three years. She learned a few things about optimizing her work relationships, especially with male colleagues. The women encouraged each other to keep writing to publish – even if they had crossed over to the "dark side" by accepting high-level administrative responsibilities that took them away from teaching and writing. Once, they'd practiced exercises that you could do on the go to help the body keep up with a mind that was often on overdrive.

"You don't have friends in your college?" Bamlak wants to know. Did her mother need to catch a plane to a faraway country to meet friends? "Well, I do, but only sort of. They're nearly all men. I'd like some *girl* friends." "I like my girl friends," Bamlak says as she begins counting off her many besties on her fingers.

Seble recalls the group's conversations. Everyone expressed at least some degree of isolation, simply because they had been the first woman in their context with their academic credentials and in their leadership position. Nearly all had contributed to academia in outstanding ways, but in the process, they had become a minority. "That's why we had to catch a plane to find our besties!" she thinks.

And what a time it was, from exchanging hacks on managing work and family to sharing (horror) stories of gender discrimination and (happy) stories of gender inclusion. These were conversations particular to women in positions of high responsibility: Why would men feel guilty about success or lie awake at nights wondering if they had too much privilege? Just the relief that you are not alone was worth travelling halfway around the world to these meetings.

Meanwhile, Bamlak has been swiping the phone. "What's this you're eating?" she asks, her finger hovering over a picture of a generous box of baklava. Seble's tastebuds quickly relive the food – drool-worthy meals from a local caterer, food that, for once, the women didn't have to cook. And, of course, the baklava reminded her of the treats that each had brought from her own country for her friends to try.

Bamlak is asking another question: "Will you keep going to meet your friends for the rest of your life?"

"Oh no," Seble answers, a little wistfully. At the last meeting, they had talked about what would come next. This forum was too much of a privilege to limit. Maybe they could split regionally so that they could start offering the same menu to others like themselves, starved for support and encouragement and ideas for managing it all better?

And alongside that plan, they talked about mentoring. About fostering bright young women who had it in them to crash through glass ceilings and excel in theological leadership. Athena described how she takes students and faculty on writers' retreats to learn research skills, pick target readers, and read each other's work. Havilah tossed in ideas from her group of high-achieving students – those she mentors each week over the course of a year in sessions on pedagogy, assessment techniques, creative communication tricks, and Christian formation.

"The *WPLF* isn't just about us," Seble reminds herself. These women were meant to discover peer fellowship – the gently encouraging nudges, the heads nodding in agreement, the arm around shoulders heaving with sobs, the permission to be as silly as you please – and to pay it forward.



Photo credit: Dr. Annabel M. Manalo

2019 WPLF participants convened in a retreat center where they could rest from their many top-tier leadership duties – and household chores.