

The Voices of Women

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“Women in the Church are more important than its bishops and priests”, stated Pope Francis during an engaging press conference on the airplane that was carrying him to Europe from Rio de Janeiro. I was impressed by the simplicity of the Pope and his closeness to the people around him, his humility and humanity, and his response became engraved in my mind, perhaps because it reminded me of a recent experience I had.



Last June 23rd I attended a poetry reading in the garden of the memorable Longfellow House in Cambridge, MA. Jim Kates, an expert translator of Russian contemporary poetry, was reading beautiful poems by Mikhail Aizenberg, which he had translated into English. Nearly at the end of his reading, Kates mentioned that in his most recent encounter with Aizenberg in Moscow—a few months before—the poet had stated, referring to Russian poetry: “Today the most interesting voices are women’s voices”. I took note of that commentary, since I believe the same thing, not just in regards to literature, but also in regards to culture and society in general.



I enjoyed the book *Lean In* by the number two in command at Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, who defends intelligently the need for women to gain access to key positions of influence and decision-making in business, not just as a feminist challenge to a patriarchal world, but also as a way to attain an ethical improvement in the business world and to take advantage of the creativity of the many women who, in an earlier time, would have been left out simply because they were women. I see this effort to promote the involvement of women as an excellent thing. “If women ruled / instead of men / all peoples and nations would live in peace”, run the lyrics of one of the *jotas* of the *zarzuela* “Gigantes y cabezudos”. Sheryl Sandberg doesn’t say this, but rather she holds that women should have access to the “levers of power” that are currently mostly in the hands of men.



My experience—and that of many people—is that we men behave better when there are women around, and that when women and men form teams together they are more effective than male-only teams. How many women have had to experience the cruelty of other females towards them? In contrast, I remember that Hannah Arendt wrote to her friend Hilde Fränkel in February of 1950: “Men are heavy baggage, but even so we women don’t do well without them”. The joyful reality of many families demonstrates clearly the fecund collaboration of men and women in order to attain common objectives.



In a recent article in the *New York Times*, Adam Grant, a professor at the Wharton School, provided abundant data to support his argument that men need women. It is not just the case that daughters—and not sons—make their fathers become better, more generous and affectionate, but also companies that have women in key posts achieve better results than those that only have men at the helm. Grant gives the example, among others, of Bill Gates, who —it appears— was inspired by his mother Mary and his wife Melinda to transform himself into a generous philanthropist. “In the working world”, Grant concludes, “we really need women in positions of leadership”.

I agree with this idea of fostering women’s success in the workplace, so that each one can attain the heights of professional and personal success that she desires and deserves: the problem isn’t that women need to be *bosses*, but rather to transform the working world—nearly always designed by men and only for men—so that it is possible for women to be women while participating actively in the workplace. This affects many areas, and the most obvious is motherhood and everything that that brings with it. Another area, for example, is that of conversations: men tend to talk in turns, while women overlap their contributions. These are different conversational styles, and linguists consider that of women to be more cooperative. At any rate, we men should learn to listen to women with greater attention. It is not only that women—perhaps more than men—need to be (and feel themselves to be) listened to, but also that humankind needs to listen to women more, in order to learn from these experts in humanity.



This, for me, was the ultimate meaning of those luminous words of Pope Francis in the airplane: the importance of women derives from the lessons in humanity they give us with their lives and their words. And as a result, it is not just a matter of admiring them, but to listen to them, to hear the different voices of women.