Across the globe, it's far too easy to find cases of women who are exploited, mistreated, harmed, and even killed as they bear children.

Premila, 30, gave birth to her third child, a son, in a hospital in western India. She saw him briefly before she died.[1] The little boy did not go home to be with Premila’s husband and two children, but with Helen,[2] a woman from the United States who had paid Premila to carry her baby.

Just a few weeks earlier, over a thousand miles away in southeast India, another woman died just because she was carrying a baby nobody wanted. Munni was beaten to make her abort her child for the third time.[3] A local religious leader predicted she would not have a male child until her seventh pregnancy, and this was only her sixth. She was carrying a girl. Both she and her daughter were killed.

In Rwanda, women like Beatrice are permanently injured by prolonged labor without medical attention. She suffered an obstetric fistula that left her incontinent, smelly, ashamed and ostracized.[4]
The discrimination against women and girls in healthcare extends beyond the high-profile issues such as abortion, gendercide, and sex trafficking. It isn’t limited to poor countries or certain procedures, but extends broadly across a health care system that too often reduces women to their reproductive capabilities, objectifies their bodies, disdains their dignity, and doesn’t get them the care they need and deserve.

Right here in the U.S., female veterans face traumatic experiences in VA hospitals and the callous treatment of sexual trauma in the military.[5] And, in the UK, a ?dearth of gender-biased clinical research? fails to evaluate drug risks or to adequately recognize conditions that disproportionately affect women, such as coronary artery disease.[6] Adolescent girls in India get subjected to medical testing without their consent. Seven died.[7]

Commodification treats the body as a commodity, a medical resource for meeting someone else’s personal need. In the most literal sense, body parts can be sold, such as a kidney for an organ transplant or eggs to create an embryo via in vitro fertilization. As our sensibilities become numbed to the many ways women and girls have been commodified??their bodies exploited and viewed in market terms??Scott Altman, in ?(Com)Modifying Experience,? suggests that we, too, have been commodified.[8]

Objectification begins at home, where tabloids evaluate and critique our appearances (just ask puffy-faced Ashley Judd).[9] and the ?beauty culture? blasphemes our bodies.[10] Exploitation takes harmful views of the female body much further, allowing others to profit from the sale of body parts or services. Premila, who sold the use of her womb for nine months, was exploited because of her extreme poverty. Guna Ponraj, who sold a kidney on the black market in India, was swindled out of payment, maimed by the removal, and subsequently left unable to work.[11]

Acquiescence to commodification leads to tolerance of sex-based discrimination, with often horrific consequences. Look no further than China, where sons are prized. Results of an ultrasound??It’s a girl!? can be a death sentence.[12] Discrimination begins in the womb and persists throughout a woman’s lifetime. Girls may be last in line for food when there are too many hungry mouths to feed; last in line for healthcare when there is no money for the doctor’s fee. In too many places across the globe, pregnant women lack prenatal care, adequate nutrition, and access to a birthing center or trained midwife. After the earthquake in Haiti, the Guardian reported that women and girls faced gaps in access to healthcare services necessary to stop preventable maternal and infant deaths.?[13] As she ages, a woman may be more vulnerable to disparities in healthcare. Older Hispanic women, for example, have a higher risk of HIV and poorer survival rates, often unable to disclose their HIV status even to family and friends,? researchers say.[14]

These consequences are not someone else’s problem. They are our problem. Christians, and Christian women, of all people should be at the forefront of caring about this. We know that each girl is a person with dignity, made in God’s image, loved by God. Her worth does not depend on international declarations about human rights or noble statements about social justice, as important as these are.

At The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity (CBHD), we have wrestled with how issues arising from advances in medicine and technology intersect with discrimination against women and girls
around the world. Our initiative in global women’s health has a clear vision: we want the world to see women and girls regarded as full moral persons, human beings with dignity, a world where health and life outcomes are not worse just because she is female.

We don’t need more laws, more rights, or more autonomy. We don’t need more access to abortion in the guise of reproductive health or reducing maternal mortality. We need compassionate respect for all girls and women. Dignity-based care goes a long way to increasing our credibility in protecting the unborn, resisting sex-selective abortion, and improving the lives of women and girls around the world.

We have decided this is our problem. On March 8, 2013, in honor of International Women’s Day, The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity launched Her Dignity Network to connect resources, individuals, and organizations around specific health concerns faced by women and girls worldwide. Campaigns on specific issues will mobilize support for on-the-ground care, highlight organizations that share the love of Christ, disseminate best practices, identify areas where more research is needed, and give individuals concrete ways to get involved.

We invite you to join us.

Caring for marginalized women and girls reflects the compassionate heart of God for his daughters. Improving the lives of women and girls can transform families and entire communities.

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*Editor’s note:* This essay is adapted from an article originally published by *Christianity Today* in March 2013 at [http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2013/march/shes-person-not-uterus.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2013/march/shes-person-not-uterus.html).

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**References**


[12] This has been brought to worldwide attention in the documentary, It?s a Girl! http://www.itsagirlmovie.com/.


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