

# **The Stained-Glass Ceiling: A Literature Review of Women's Roles in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints**

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There is an interesting paradox that exists for religious women. Despite religion's historical association with gender inequality, women demonstrate higher religious participation than men (Roberts & Yamane). However, women are still underrepresented in positions of religious authority—a phenomenon known as the “stained-glass ceiling” (Roberts & Yamane).<sup>1</sup> The “feminization of religion” refers to the process by which feminine traits, such as tenderness, love, and self-sacrifice, are given more religious value. This process does not necessarily mean that women themselves have become more valued in religions. John Hawley's quote in *Religion in Sociological Perspective* describes the essence of this phenomenon: “Theological appreciation of the feminine does not necessarily lead to a positive evaluation of real women” (Roberts & Yamane, 277). In other words, while feminine qualities are appreciated in religion, religious institutions appear to favor men over women in prominent positions.

The question is then: why do so many women remain devout, even when they face such inequalities? It may be that they are content with the teachings of the doctrine they subscribe to. Many women find that religion serves as a place where their feminine traits are expressly valued (Hoyt). They may stay because they find fulfillment through obedience to the teachings of their faith, or that traditional female roles themselves offer a source of empowerment. In her article on the victim/empowerment paradigm, Hoyt argues that women in traditionalist faiths do not see

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<sup>1</sup> According to Roberts and Yamane, Mormon women make up 56 percent of total members. Overall, women make up 52 percent of all religious groups, yet are still excluded from leadership positions in many religions. For more on gender in religion, see *Religion in Sociological Perspective* Chapter 11, “Religion, Gender, and Sexuality.”

themselves as victims of the patriarchy, but as subjects of empowerment within their own gendered theological worldviews.<sup>2</sup> Some may experience cognitive dissonance from practicing a religion that does not align with their own views on women's roles. To combat this issue, women often engage in a process known as *cognitive restructuring* through which they reinterpret their religious environment to maintain a sense of self-worth without forsaking their beliefs (Beaman). In other words, they reframe their behaviors to be consistent with their beliefs, and vice versa.

This paper will focus on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, referred to throughout as the LDS or Mormon church. The Mormon church is a recent Christian sect known for having traditional values and taking conservative positions on issues of sexuality and family matters.<sup>3</sup> Mormons preach that men and women are given divine and separate gendered purposes by God. Therefore, women's roles as mothers are equally essential to salvation as men's roles as providers and priesthood holders (Sumerau & Cragun). Women are taught to be kind, pure, and subservient; they are told to support their husbands "in every needful thing," and to obey him as he obeys the Lord (Sumerau & Cragun).<sup>4</sup> However, the Latter-Day Saints are also one of few religions to believe in a male God as well as a Heavenly Mother.<sup>5</sup> It would be reductive to say that the Latter-Day Saints are anti-woman, just as it would be to say they are completely

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<sup>2</sup> Hoyt offers the following examples of doctrinal sources of empowerment for LDS women: the existence of a Mother in Heaven, the divine role of mothers in the church, and the doctrine of exaltation (the belief that all people on Earth will become like unto God in the afterlife).

<sup>3</sup> Formed in 1830 (Cornwall), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints began as a Christian new religious movement which now considers itself to be its own denomination. However, due to a general consensus by other Christian groups, the Mormons remain an entrenched sect that has branched too far off in its teachings to be considered a Christian denomination (Roberts and Yamane).

<sup>4</sup> For more on LDS doctrine on gender expectations see Sumerau & Cragun "The Hallmarks of Righteous Women: Gendered Background Expectations in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints."

<sup>5</sup> While Mormons believe in the existence of a Heavenly Mother, they do not worship her or pray to her. Many scholars have theorized that her symbolic role serves to reinforce the divinity of heterosexual marriage, while others view her as a role model for LDS women, evidence of their valuation within church doctrine (Heeran).

gender-inclusive. As with some other traditionalist religions, there are aspects of the Mormon church that are empowering for women just as there are elements which subordinate them. This paper will present a brief overview of the Church's history to explore its complex relationship with gender and women's roles.

## **Early Mormon Women**

Perhaps one of the more controversial aspects of early Mormonism was the practice of polygyny, or the marriage of one husband to multiple wives.<sup>6</sup> Joseph Smith taught that plural marriage was a divine commandment that would ensure one's salvation in the afterlife.

Polygynous families maintained a Victorian-style household, with the husband at the center providing for his wives and children (Embry, *Effects of Polygamy*).<sup>7</sup> Despite being a fundamentally patriarchal structure, polygyny offered some women freedom to run their own households independent of their husbands who were often gone for long periods of time (Iverson). While many lived in poverty due to the inherent strain on the husbands' resources, some were able to start at-home businesses, manage their own farmland, or even form joint households with other wives to support one another (Iverson, *Feminist Implications*). The first wife was also given the authority to allow her husband to marry again and in some cases select his next wife for him (Embry, *Effects of Polygamy*). This exercise of power allowed women a sense of control over the emotional toll of plural marriages, and to be active participants in the enactment of religious principle (Embry, *Effects of Polygamy*). As the Church expanded in the West, it was forced to reckon with the United States government, which prohibited polygamy.

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<sup>6</sup> The term "polygamy" is a broad term for having more than one spouse, whereas "polygyny" specifically refers to a marriage with multiple wives. Most scholars use the terms interchangeably when referring to Mormonism.

<sup>7</sup> For more on polygamous households, see Embry, "Effects of Polygamy on Mormon Women" and Iverson, "Feminist Implications of Mormon Polygyny."

As a result, early Mormon women initiated a suffragist movement to defend the practice of plural marriage (Iverson, *The Mormon Question*). Eventually the practice was abandoned; however, it resulted in one of the first feminist movements within the Church and in the restoration of women's suffrage in Utah (Iverson, *The Mormon Question*).

In 1842 Joseph Smith, first prophet and founder of the LDS church, established the first Relief Society as a completely women-run organization (Arrington). Its responsibilities were to attend to the sick and provide for the poor, manufacture silk and other goods, and implement food storage, among other purposes (Arrington). The Relief Societies served an important economic purpose which would lay the foundation for the future pilgrimage and settlement of the Great Basin in the 1860s (Arrington). The organization gave women space for autonomy and an important place of leadership in the Church hierarchy. Some women may have even been ordained to the highest authority offered by the Church: the priesthood. The "priesthood" refers to the power of God bestowed upon worthy men which grants them the ability to heal, to perform blessings, and other religious rites. Upon the formation of the first Relief Society, Joseph Smith is alleged to have ordained a few women with the authority to lead as well as the capability to bless and heal other women (Newell).<sup>8</sup> However, the historical record is not settled on this topic, and this account is disputed by church historians to this day. After Smith's death, this power was rescinded by his successor, Brigham Young, who declared that only men could hold the priesthood (Newell). Once women's ordination was withdrawn, the Relief Society itself became

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<sup>8</sup> Emma Smith, Sarah M. Cleveland, and Elizabeth Whitney made up the first presidency of the Relief Society in 1842, and may have been ordained by the prophet Joseph Smith with the authority to preside over the organization and the spiritual power to heal the sick (Newell).

a subjugated auxiliary within the Church, as it was now being overseen by priesthood leaders rather than operating as its own organization (Cornwall).

As a result of the growth and institutionalization of the Church, women's positions were increasingly devalued. The Church was focused on professional bureaucratization, creating new administrations to manage ever-growing wards and stakes.<sup>9</sup> Greater emphasis was placed on the role of the patriarchal priesthood, and, because women were no longer being ordained, they had no institutional role other than to support their priesthood-holding leaders (Cornwall).

Mormonism underwent a period of feminization during which there were more active female members than males, making the priesthood a scarcer commodity and increasing Mormon women's dependence on their male counterparts (Cornwall). This dilemma of administrative order contributed to the inflated prioritization of men's roles, leaving women with little institutional influence in church matters.<sup>10</sup> Relief Societies have remained the central sphere for women's religious participation, even in modern-day LDS congregations.

### **Latter-Day Saint Women**

The LDS church is just as vocal about its expectations for men and women now as it was in the beginning. In 1995, then-prophet Gordon B. Hinckley read a statement to the General Relief Society entitled "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," which details the Church's beliefs in the ordinance of marriage between man and woman, as well as the responsibilities of

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<sup>9</sup> For Latter-Day Saints, "wards" refer to local congregations, while "stakes" are conglomerates of several wards in a particular region.

<sup>10</sup> O'Dea's dilemma of administrative order suggests that as an organization grows and bureaucratizes, its rigid structure may alienate individuals who are impeded by the hierarchy (Roberts & Yamane). Policy can create a sort of red tape, preventing religious individuals from seeking the guidance they desire from those higher up in church authority.

mothers and fathers over their offspring. In it, the prophet emphasized traditional gender roles; fathers were to be providers and protectors; mothers were to care for and nurture their children. In 2004, Hinckley reiterated this official separation of spheres in his talk titled “The Women in Our Lives,” which praises the different-but-equal spiritual characteristics of men and women. Amid modern-day discussions about gender and equal rights, the Church has adopted a culture of benevolent sexism, or the idealization of women as spiritually superior beings in need of protection (Toscano). Women are seen as being naturally pure and Christlike, necessary for men’s salvation but lacking the moral agency to be independent actors on their own.

However, LDS women have made some strides in recent years. In October of 2012, the official age requirement for women missionaries was lowered to 19 years old from 21, while men’s age was lowered to 18 instead of 19. Unlike men, women are not required to serve missions and are instead encouraged to prioritize marriage and starting a family (Embry, *Oral History*). While modern-day Mormon women enjoy more of the same privileges as Mormon men, including serving missions,<sup>11</sup> wearing pants to church, and giving talks at General Conference,<sup>12</sup> the Church has remained firm in its teachings on traditional roles for women. Women are expected to prioritize childcare and domestic work over a career. Their primary role is to be a mother and a wife, and work and education are secondary. However, many families cannot afford to have one parent stay home, so some women will work; others may enjoy having a work life and pursue a career out of enjoyment. Certain traditions within Mormonism have adapted to changing social trends, which some LDS women deal with through a process of

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<sup>11</sup> See Embry, “Oral History and Mormon Women Missionaries” for more on women’s missionary experiences.

<sup>12</sup> More on Wear Pants to Church Day and the Let Women Pray campaign in Finnigan & Ross, “I’m a Mormon Feminist.”

*gender negotiation*, where women perform acts of agency and accommodation to manage gender inequality in their religious group (Leamaster & Einwohner). They draw on gender schemas from their religion as well as the more progressive broader society to form a gendered identity that is most fulfilling to them (Leamaster & Einwohner). This negotiation is similar to cognitive restructuring in that both processes allow religious women to adapt their beliefs in order to occupy a more empowered position in society.

Mormon feminist movements have also been on the rise, though they are not new to the Church's history. Since the days of the early Mormon suffragists, Mormon feminism has taken on new forms as challenges arise. Many of these movements have been met with strong pushback from church leaders, who referred to Mormon feminists as "one of the three greatest dangers to the Church" (Finnigan & Ross).<sup>13</sup> One characteristic of religious sects is a resistance to "compromises" of doctrine, particularly in response to secular society, which is especially true for the Mormon church's response to social norms about gender and sexuality (Roberts & Yamane). The Church maintains a fundamentalistic theology, believing in a literal reading of the Bible and Book of Mormon and the notion that prophets are conduits for the word of God.<sup>14</sup> Thus, they often cite the eternity of God's word to explain this resistance to change.

## **Implications**

Globalization, along with the current wave of feminism, has presented new challenges for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The Church's struggle to adapt with the times

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<sup>13</sup> In some cases, church leaders went so far as excommunicating women like Sonia Johnson, who spoke out against the church's opposition to the 1970 Equal Rights Amendment (Finnigan & Ross).

<sup>14</sup> Sects often reject "compromises" to doctrine, believing in the original revelation as the only "authentic expression of the faith" (Roberts & Yamane, 171). For more on the church-sect typology, see *Religion in Sociological Perspective* Chapter 7, "Organized Religion."

has put women in a position where they must actively negotiate their roles in order to maintain consistency between their religious and worldly selves. More recently, Mormon feminists have led movements in direct opposition to the Church's doctrine; they've advocated for women to be allowed to perform temple baptisms while menstruating, for a gender-equal reading of the Book of Mormon, and for women's priesthood ordination (Finnigan & Ross). The Church has resisted many of these changes; however, their recent policy change allowing children of LGBT parents to be baptized suggests that church leaders may become more open to adjusting doctrine based on the pressures of church members and broader society.<sup>15</sup>

What does this mean for the future of Mormonism? One might predict two different paths. The Church could maintain its stance on gender traditionalism, causing them to fall behind the progress of society and eventually fade into oblivion. In this case one might see a decline in membership as more members leave the Church, fewer conversions, and a steady shrinking of the Church into an even smaller institution. Alternatively, in coming years the Church may become more comfortable with changing policy and experience new growth as a result. Appealing to the mainstream could lead to the establishment of a Mormon denomination with empowered female leaders carrying it into a new progressive era. It is likely that the Church will struggle to accommodate changing social norms, caught between remaining consistent in their teachings while facing pressure to be more progressive. While the voices of members seeking change are difficult to ignore, they still fall into the minority—most LDS women are content in

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<sup>15</sup> When announcing the policy change that would allow the blessing and baptism of children of LGBT parents, President Dallin H. Oaks stated, “[The changes] do not represent a shift in Church doctrine related to marriage or the commandments of God in regard to chastity or morality... We want to reduce the hate and contention so common today” (LDS.org). This policy also changes the way the church treats same-sex marriage, which will no longer be considered apostasy.

their roles in the Church, and relatively few actually seek ordination to the priesthood (Newell). Those who are dissatisfied with their religion may be more likely to defect than attempt to revolutionize from within the institution.<sup>16</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Through its history, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has held strong traditionalist beliefs about gender and women's divine roles as wives and mothers. Despite being structurally undervalued, Mormon women have always found avenues for self-empowerment, be it within Relief Societies or in modern feminist movements. Many cope with conflicting messages about femininity through cognitive restructuring, a process of gender negotiation in which women in traditionalist faiths reshape their worldview to accommodate broader social ideals without sacrificing their faith. Time will tell if the Church's stance on women's roles will result in its detriment, or if it will remain an entrenched Christian sect. Being such a new religion, it is necessary to consider how they will evolve with the 21<sup>st</sup> century, specifically how LDS traditionalism will navigate an ever-progressing society, and how LDS women find new ways to negotiate their roles amid such contradictory messages.

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<sup>16</sup> For more on apostasy, see *Religion in Sociological Perspective* Chapter 6, "Conversion and Switching."

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