

DO Muslim women REALLY NEED SAVING?



In an article with this provocative title¹, scholar Lila Abu-Lughod points to the dangers of covering over difficult historical and political situations with neat cultural icons like ‘the Muslim woman’.

She is calling attention to the notion of rescuing Muslim women that has been used as the justification for the war on terror, the assertion that Muslim women are better off because of military intervention: ‘The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women’². In the highly politicised world we inhabit today, when words of evangelism are used to justify war, how do we tackle the task of taking the good news to women who are followers of Islam? Do Muslim women need saving? Our

commitment to the task will be fired if we have answered questions about why, and from what, women who follow Islam need saving. And this will help us work out how we tackle the task, so that many of these women can have an encounter with Jesus.

Do Muslim women need saving from the veil and the subjugation of women that Islam appears to condone and even mandate? In the West we often see the veil as symbolic of the domination of women, a way of removing them from the public sphere and controlling their movement. And yet there are Muslim women who assert they are able to enter into public life, work, and maintain their dignity because they wear the veil.

Do Muslim women need saving from the violence that seems to be allowed under Islam? After all, the Qur'an says that an uncontrolled woman can be beaten, lightly, by her husband. Mukhtar Mai is a Pakistani woman from a village in the south Punjab. She was gang-raped on the orders of the village *panchayat* (council) because her brother had been accused of an illicit relationship with a woman from another tribe, dishonouring the larger and more powerful Mastoi tribe. This extreme violence was the result of the parallel justice systems that operate in Pakistan and of cultural notions of honour and shame.

Do Muslim women need saving from the poverty, lack of education and poor health services that affect their lives? Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Sudan, Red Sea – so

many of the countries where the majority of the population are Muslims marginalise women in development. These are countries that struggle with unstable governments, dictatorships and huge debts. In the globalised world they are often hostage to decisions made by external economic forces setting the agenda for change and debt servicing.

Do Muslim women need saving from Islam? Many Muslims argue that Islam has given women many benefits. It sets a standard for women to inherit, honours them by protecting them and does not burden them as the ones who brought in sin. Others argue it legislates their abuse, because it is about following the example of the prophet Muhammad, who married a nine-year-old child, and had multiple wives, justifying polygamy.

So, do Muslim women need saving? I am drawn back to the many stories of Jesus and His encounters with women: women who were ostracised by their community because of their behaviour; women who were condemned by the religious elite but who found forgiveness and life through their encounter with Him; women who were healed, provided for, restored; women who found hope and life because they met Jesus. Jesus often broke cultural and religiously sanctioned taboos in his meetings with women, reaching across artificial barriers, man-made barriers, to change their lives. In each of these personal encounters we

find Him more interested in the needs of the woman than attacking the symbols of the culture and religion. He was committed to changing her life as He met her needs and drew her into the place where she could find a living and vibrant relationship with Him.

Women who live under Islam need these encounters with Jesus. A woman who has

Jesus often broke cultural and religiously sanctioned taboos in his meetings with women, reaching across artificial barriers, man-made barriers, to change their lives.

not been able to have a child, or maybe has only had daughters, is often ostracised by her family. A woman who has been caught in adultery suffers severe punishment, even death, while the man will usually escape punishment. Without good medical help women suffer with untreated physical ailments. Many of them know the pain of the death of a child. There are victims of violence, women robbed of their inheritance, married to the Qur'an to protect the family wealth. There are women marginalised because of the veil and concepts of



If we only tackle the cultural, religious and political symbols of their lives we fail them.

seclusion. For all of them their greatest need is an encounter with Jesus Christ, to know a place of love and acceptance in the arms of God, who loves them and gave Himself for them. This is what women living under Islam need.

In Interserve we are committed to this task, to reaching out to women so they can have a life-changing encounter with Jesus. There is the community midwifery project that is assisting women in a rural area of the Red Sea, raising the standards of care to help alleviate high infant and maternal mortality rates. There is rural development work giving small loans to women so they can start a small business that will allow them to care for their families. There is literacy and other educational work that enables women to enter the workforce and so make decisions about their lives. There is work with victims of abuse, providing them with an opportunity to process their suffering and find a sense of dignity and worth. These are ministries that care for the whole person, proclaiming Jesus in word and deed, creative opportunities for encounter with Him.

I recently listened to Syrian American psychiatrist, Dr Wafa'a Sultana. An avowed secularist, Sultana rejected Islam after she saw her medical professor murdered by members of the Muslim brotherhood in front of the class at Aleppo University. She recounted with tears the story of her niece, who was married at age 10 to her cousin who was in his forties. Repeatedly this young

woman begged her father not to send her back to her husband, but he always did, telling her that God would reward her for obeying her husband. At the age of 25 this young woman committed suicide by setting herself on fire. Did this young woman need saving? Without hope, without the possibility for change, she sought a way out in suicide. How could an encounter with Jesus have changed her life? Sultana is on a crusade to save Muslims, but her only message of hope is one of political freedom.

Do Muslim women need saving? If we only tackle the cultural, religious and political symbols of their lives we fail them. True freedom will come when, through encounter with Jesus Christ, their lives are changed. The transformed lives of individual women and families will impact the community and build capacity for change where cultural, religious and political oppression marks the lives of women. ❧

The author has worked in South Asia and the Middle East since 1986 in ministry among women. She is presently involved in leadership in Interserve in the Middle East.

¹Abu-Lughod, Lila Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others, American Anthropologist, 104(3), 2002

²US Government 2002