

Life IN A MUSLIM COUNTRY

I get woken up at 4:30 in the morning... was it too much coffee or a bad dream? No, it is my neighbour's door slamming below my window as he heads out to pray at the mosque nearby. I don't bother to go back to sleep as he will be back again in just fifteen minutes, and will slam the door again.

Everyone is up and about early, getting off to work before 8 am. The school bus picks

up the kids at 7.30 am. We always have a parent on the bus, as we live in a country where there is an ever-present risk of the unexpected.

If I go on the bus, I need to be dressed in very conservative, long clothes, and it is hot. My scarf slips off my head, and I somehow need to keep it readjusted without starting all over again. Thankfully there is no safety belt - that would just cause it to slip off more. But showing a bit of hair is okay, as I want to emphasise I am not a Muslim.

I'm thirsty: the rush of the morning meant I couldn't wait for my hot coffee to cool. I have a muffin in my bag, and water. But because I am a woman, it

would be very shameful for the driver if I was gulping water or nibbling on the muffin as we drive around. So I will wait the half hour or so in the heat until I get to school to drink and eat the rest of my breakfast.

There are many restrictions on women, but after a couple of years you don't notice your invisibility attempts. The men still seem to shout out at any person walking down the street, though. Reminds me of how workmen used to wolf whistle back in New Zealand.

The kids come home at 1:30pm for lunch - the lunch-time prayer was a good hour before this. Their school day has finished. Everything goes quiet as most people rest or sleep during the hottest part of the day.

You know when the siesta has finished, another loud call of the mosque... who needs a watch? We slowly get busy again, time for visiting the neighbours and catching up with the family news. Again, I will dress conservatively with long sleeves, long skirt or trousers. Really I should be in the black covering because then I can wear what I like underneath. My girlfriends are dressed "to the nines" with makeup and jewellery and brightly coloured clothing. Because I walked to their house I couldn't wear make-up... I don't wear the face covering. And my white skin with make-up might give the local guys the idea that I am someone from "Hollywood" (the best and the worst).

My 'alarm clock' goes off again at 6pm-ish... the next mosque call. Told you I don't need



a watch. It is dark now and time to go home. I need to feed the kids so they can go off to bed for the early start tomorrow.

But we might get a visit after the last mosque call of the day from a local “believing” family – their kids are hopeful that they will have some playmates for soccer outside in our courtyard. I have to explain regretfully to them why my kids can’t play... they are asleep!

It is lovely to sit down with the family and chat. I kiss the woman on the cheek and hold her hand, and my husband gives a similar kiss to the man, and then shakes his hand. I must quickly go and make a sweet tea with some type of snack. I don’t ask them what they want... I just put it in front of them.

They will leave about 10pm. We will drive them home in our car as all the public transport has stopped. The area around us is silent. The shops closed at 9pm, although we live in a large village of over 500,000 people, but I think this is the way it has been done for centuries.

Living in a Muslim country affects our lives in many different ways. Each of my day’s activities and the way I go about each activity are guided by the surrounding religion and culture. They are so richly intertwined it is hard to know if anything is not touched by Islam’s reach. ☞

Sue and her family have been serving in the Arab world since 2004.

SHAME & HONOUR

It is not right and wrong, but shame and honour that motivates behaviour in our region. The two are diametrically opposed.

You only have to listen to the parents admonishing children here to realise this. ‘No. Don’t throw that stone! It’s shameful to do that.’ Conversely, a parent in our society might say, ‘No. Don’t throw that stone. It’s wrong to do that.’ Naughty in this culture means shameful. Naughty in our culture means wrong. The implications of this distinction for sharing the Gospel are huge. It makes the notion of ‘sin’ much more than a matter of right and wrong.

Defending honour and avoiding shame dictates all behaviour in this culture and honour is defended to the death. So what sort of behaviour are we talking about? And what sort of things are considered shameful and honourable?

When Laila leaves her house in the morning to go to university, she is wearing her long-sleeved full-length black balto, headscarf and lithma (veil). Anything less would be shameful in the eyes of her family. She sees a minibus approaching in the direction she needs to go but does not dash across the road to catch it because it would be shameful for a woman to run. After waiting impatiently for a couple of minutes, another arrives and there are two seats free. She does not

get in though because it would mean sitting next to a man and that would be shameful. So she waits as more buses go by with no suitable seats until finally, Al hamdulillah!, there is one not only with a free seat, but with two of her friends in it. But she does not greet them enthusiastically and engage in exuberant conversation because it would be shameful for a woman to talk or laugh loudly in public. When they arrive at uni, Laila and her friends buy breakfast but they have to wait until they are seated in an all-girls’ room before they eat it. Sometimes if she is really hungry Laila may grab a bite under her veil for it is shameful for a woman to be seen eating in public and, as a woman, she is the one to carry the honour of her family.

Meanwhile, as the sun sets and the rock cliffs in a remote mountain village reverberate to the evening call to prayer, Laila’s uncle’s family find themselves in the greatest predicament of their lives. Their youngest daughter, Jamila, has denied her Muslim faith and shamed them all by taking up a different religion. They love her deeply but in a case like this they all know the mind-numbing truth: she must be disowned and perhaps killed in order to restore the honour of the family and tribe. She has failed in the most basic of principles – to conform to the accepted system of values. Jamila must be publicly shamed for the family and group to save face and for the honourable values of loyalty, strength and even, in such a case, violence, to be demonstrated. Tearfully, but convinced that their resolve is honourable, they retire to bed. ☞

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