

Violent, hidden and complex: Life as a Christian woman in a hostile area

Understanding the reality of persecution for Christian women around the world is cause for concern—but there is also cause for hope

————— BY ELIZABETH LANE MILLER AND HELENE FISHER —————

The faces of persecuted Christian women tell a deeply personal story. Often there's fear. Pain, too. But, most of all, their eyes tell of their hope, their joy and their peace. When you meet someone like Precious, Aina or Mansuri, it's not immediately obvious what struggles or doubts she harbors in her heart. The joy or, perhaps, the calm in her face could lull you into believing that everything is going reasonably well for her. These emotions, however, flow from God's peace within her soul, and are not a reflection of the persecution she faces as a Christian woman in Southeast Asia. Each of these three women is from a different country, and yet their stories all reflect global trends for Christian women's experiences.

Precious' declaration of Christian faith resulted in death threats from her family as well as from her tribe, including persecution from her own sister. For some time, she was forced to flee from her community, a former place of safety, in order to survive.

Aina, a courageous Malaysian woman who describes herself as "rebellious," chooses to keep her faith a secret from many of her friends and family. In her situation, Muslims who convert to Christianity get into severe trouble with their families and may be forcibly divorced, beaten, locked up or banished from their communities. In a society where the family is considered the center of the social structure, families are often the first to exert pressure on a believer to try to force her return to Islam. Such measures are largely hidden from outside observers. Without explanation, she could suddenly vanish behind the walls of the family home, isolated until she chooses to recant. Women in her situation also fear that their

families will turn them over to the government. The religious authorities have set up "Purification Centers" to "re-educate" them back to the Islamic faith.

And then there's Mansuri. With her darker skin—considered "inferior" in her region—Mansuri would not normally have enjoyed the benefits of one of the few traits given value in her culture: beauty. Thankfully, Mansuri was married to a loving, believing husband from a Muslim background like her own, so she and her husband faced the shaming and disowning together. But without a believing husband, her fate would have been the usual enforced isolation, shunning and domestic violence as a truly powerless member living among her husband's non-Christian extended family. If this had happened, we wouldn't ever have been able to report on her story for one very good reason: We wouldn't know what had happened.

While each woman's story is individual to her religious and cultural background, the persecution experiences of women and girls who have chosen to follow Jesus, despite the dangers in their context, typically have three characteristics in common: It's violent, hidden and complex.

Precious' family's response is shockingly violent; before killing her, the family waits to see if she will respond while her own sister persecutes her. Statistically speaking, this persecution was more than humiliating shaming, or even ongoing verbal abuse; a family that threatens death will first try to persuade by severe physical violence. How can her family get away with abusing her and threatening her in this way?

They can get away with it because much of the persecution experienced by Christian women and girls is hidden. It goes



unnoticed and, therefore, is undocumented. Sometimes it is hidden behind the walls of the family compound. Women put under house arrest by their upset families might be chained to the walls of their homes. Alternatively, they might walk freely within the four walls of their home, but be ignored as if they were dead, the nobody household servant. These degrading forms of persecution facing Christian women are almost completely invisible.

As if that weren't enough, the situations are also complex. Often persecutors require no physical walls. For instance, Christian women who might also have been forced into despicable forms of slavery stay in terrible situations because the options awaiting her outside her community's "protection" are no more than variations of the slavery within. Without an education, or legal rights to property or her own children, the only difference on the streets is that she will also be denied access to her children while she suffers.

There is a more basic reason for why Christian women and girls are persecuted in these violent and hidden ways: their circumstances simply make it the easiest means of religious persecution. Precious' family is simply taking advantage of her vulnerability as a woman in her culture, and her vulnerability as member of a minority faith. No great strategy needed to be devised in order to exploit this overlap of dual vulnerabilities. Taking advantage of Christian women's double vulnerability is the easiest means of religious persecution for three reasons.

This type of gender-specific religious persecution is easy because it blends in. For example, in contexts where women lack social protection in general, the use of pressures such as

sexual touching in the streets by strangers blends in to the general harassment of women. However, this common form of harassment is targeted on a Christian woman especially, because her head is not covered by a hijab.

Secondly, gender-specific religious persecution is low risk to the one carrying out the persecution. The legal and social structure constructing the circumstances of Precious and Aina's lives create impunity for those pressuring her to give up her choice to follow Jesus.

Finally, taking advantage of a Christian woman's double vulnerability is devastatingly efficient at causing extensive damage. Religious persecution exploits all individual vulnerabilities to create the maximum damage to a faith community.

How beautiful, then, when we hear a story which defies these odds. We know what Mansuri's story might have been; we can see how her vulnerability as a woman and as a Christian could have been used to crush her faith. Instead, by God's grace, she has safety within a Christian household. From this secure place, she and her husband have shared about Jesus' love with her family, they are an example to their own children who also brave the bullying and shaming that goes with being a Christian, and Mansura is multiplying the investment made in her through Open Doors' Annana Discipleship Training to help other women living in worse conditions than her own.

And Precious has persevered in the midst of persecution most of us would find unthinkable. She has shared the gospel with her sister—who became a Christian after Jesus revealed Himself in a vision—and continues to speak out for Christ even in a cultural context where she risked attack from ISIS. She has grown into a fiery woman of prayer and living for Christ. "We need you to pray," she says. "Pray for us that we will be like Christ in the field and pray for our provision, financial support for the workers, and livelihood programs for the believers.

"Pray that our faith will grow, and be strengthened. Pray that, for any persecution we encounter, we will face it by faith in Jesus Christ. Pray for all the Muslims that we share the gospel with, that God will open their eyes to see the Messiah. Pray also that many more Muslim come to know Isa [Jesus], and that they will also become workers of Isa al-Masih [Jesus Christ]."

Despite the circumstances, God is at work even in the middle of brutal persecution against our sisters in Christ. He is working through these powerful women of God, to give them hope and to build His Church. And we're invited to be a part of that mission through prayer and encouragement; we're invited to stand with Christians around the world, no matter what. ❖