Recognizing and addressing the impact of societal values in the spiritual transformation of new believers' communities: A Central Asian perspective

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Abstract: This paper addresses the challenges faced by Christian women with Muslim background (MB) in Central Asia, which are rooted in their cultural and religious upbringing. There is a need for church leaders to recognize and address the impact of societal traditional values in the spiritual transformation of new believers. The power and tools needed for preparing MB Christian women for a successful Christian life and ministry are discussed.

Introduction: Cape Town Commitment concerning women

The 21st century brings more awareness of the challenges faced by Christian women, especially those who live in continuous persecution and poverty. There is a growing recognition of the important role Christian women play in the church. The desire of many leaders of the global evangelical community to see both men and women raised by God to represent His love and beauty in the hostile environment was clearly expressed in the Cape Town Commitment: “We long for God to raise up more men and women of grace who will make long-term commitments to live, love and serve in tough places dominated by other religions, to bring the smell and taste of the grace of Jesus Christ into cultures where it is unwelcome and dangerous to do so”. There is a need to recognise, encourage and equip both men and women to properly exercise their spiritual gifts and handle the Word of God. In the section “Men and Women in Partnership”, a special focus is made on the equality of men and women in Christ and their need to exercise their God-given gifts and to help all other Christians to do likewise. A special call to the churches: “We encourage churches to acknowledge godly women who teach and model what is good, as Paul commanded, and to open wider doors of opportunity for women in education, service, and leadership, particularly in contexts where the gospel challenges unjust cultural traditions. We long that women should not be hindered from exercising God’s gifts or following God’s call on their lives”.

This inspiring document can serve as a guideline for discipleship and spiritual transformation for every Christian woman. It also makes us think about the challenges that should be overcome and the tools that are needed to help women in reaching this goal.

Christianity in Central Asia

Central Asia is a large region in Asia, including five former Soviet republics - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, which became independent states after the collapse of the USSR. The presence of Islam as a dominant religion for 1300 years has had a significant impact on the formation of Central Asian traditions and culture. During the Soviet period, atheism was the main policy of the state but Islam continued to impact people’s lives through traditions and culture. During the spiritual revival in the 1990 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the region experienced many freedoms, which were soon replaced by numerous restrictions by the state. At present, the main religion is Sunni Islam. Christians are a small minority and face many restrictions and persecution.

The migration of the Russian and other non-Central Asian populations from the region during the last two decades has had its impact on the Christian church. In the past, there were hardly any Central Asian Christians but now their number is growing and there are many MB pastors and
leaders. The number of house and family churches mainly consisting of Central Asian people is growing. Therefore, a new generation of the church has been born in Central Asia with a significant number being MB Christians. Although many were nominal Muslims and hardly familiar with the Quran, their daily life, traditions and thinking were based on Islamic teaching, which still affects their lives as Christians.

Central Asian women

The attitude to women in Central Asia is very similar to that in other Islamic countries and is rooted in the Quran’s teaching about women. Women are considered inferior, having less or no value as compared with men. They are expected to give total submission to their parents before marriage and to their husbands after it. Living in her husband’s family, a woman becomes a domestic slave to all, without any right to make her own choice or decisions. A wife is demanded to give total obedience to her husband and it is acceptable if the husband beats his wife. The Soviet period brought significant liberation to women in terms of education and professional opportunities, so women study at University and have a professional career. However, their position and role in the family remains unchanged. Many experience beatings from their husbands even when pregnant, often in a cruel and humiliating way. A woman cannot say a word of complaint even to her parents as it is shameful and brings disgrace on her family. Often men take so-called “second wives”, while women must remain faithful to their husbands and can be cruelly punished if suspected of any form of adultery.

As a result, many women suffer depression and deep shame and fear the future. The economic hardship and poverty make life even harder. Some women commit suicide. Other women turn to the traditional religion of Islam seeking escape from depression and shame. However, performing religious rituals does not bring peace and deliverance. Hard life, low self-esteem, deep emotional wounds, lack of love, meaningless existence and hopelessness make many Central Asian women open to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Persecution

In Central Asian countries, in addition to the restrictions of religious freedom from the state, practically all MB Christians experience persecution from the family and Muslim community. Persecution from the family comes in different forms: threats, shaming, persuasion, abduction and home imprisonment, beatings, other physical abuse and total rejection. Persecution from the community: threats, beatings, discrimination, rejection, harassment, marginalization, etc.

For a MB Christian woman, persecution is even harder than for a man. Salvation and faith in Christ bring a sense of God’s love, forgiveness, joy, peace, spiritual freedom, deliverance from shame and depression. There are many amazing stories of supernatural conversions, each truly unique and inspiring. But in most cases after her conversion her situation gets worse as she becomes a target of persecution because of her Christian faith. She needs supernatural power to stand strong in her new faith under the fiery arrows of persecution.

Dealing with the old self

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: The old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). This does not happen immediately. The impact of old values is one of the biggest challenges for the spiritual transformation of new Christian believers in Central Asia. When coming to Christ, Central Asian women bring heavy baggage of old ideas, concepts and beliefs. From childhood a woman is learning to see herself through the eyes of Islam. She also has emotional and
psychological wounds from her past. There is a need for spiritual transformation by the renewing of her mind so that she can determine what God’s will is – what is proper, pleasing and perfect (Romans 12:2). Without proper discipleship and inner healing, a Christian woman remains an immature untransformed woman unable to stand strong under persecution and live a victorious Christian life.

**Power and tools for transformation**

In her journey to spiritual transformation, a MB Christian woman needs support from church leaders who would recognize and address the impact of societal traditional values in her life and help her to receive both power and tools for her spiritual growth.

The *power for transformation* comes from God. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses…” (Acts 1:8). God gives His Holy Spirit to all His sons and daughters. The power of the Holy Spirit enabled many generations of Christians to endure times of most severe persecution. Christian women need to learn how to overcome fear and be God’s witnesses in the hostile society by the power of the Holy Spirit.

God gives two powerful *tools for spiritual transformation*:

1. **The Word of God** – the Bible, which provides spiritual food for all believers, from babies in Christ to mature believers. It is vitally important for all believers to read, understand and apply God’s Word in their life. It is their protection from false doctrines and heresies. It is important to properly interpret and explain the Word of God to other people. For a MB Christian woman it is important to have her mind cleansed from old thinking and beliefs based on Islam and be filled with new knowledge from the Word of God.

2. **The Church of God** - His people. A new Christian cannot grow spiritually and reach maturity without help from other Christians. A Christian woman needs to be guided in the process of transformation by pastoral care, counselling, prayer support and the good example and counsel of mature Christian women.

**Women in the churches in Central Asia**

There are two extremes: One extreme is when the churches, especially in older traditional denominations, are unable to help MB Christian women. Christian women have to accept the inferior position to men in the church. Often there is a lack of trust for women to do God’s work, they are not properly discipled or trained, no counselling is provided and their spiritual gifts are not recognized. They are not allowed to minister to other women. In some churches, men are in charge of women’s ministry. The instructions given to women focus on their outward appearance and behaviour but their needs are not discussed. The other extreme is when an immature and untrained woman becomes quickly involved in teaching ministry. Her mistakes due to her ignorance may be multiplied in other people’s lives.

Although attempts are made by Christian women in Central Asia to teach and train other women, help them in the process of transformation and prepare them for the ministry, the need for further development of women’s ministry is enormous as there is an obvious deficiency of training resources for women and very limited opportunities for women’s conferences and similar events. The number of trained women counsellors is inadequate.

Therefore, there is an obvious gap in the proper discipleship of Christian women in Central Asia.

**Overcoming the gap**
Discipling Christian women is an important task. Women often represent the majority of believers in local churches. In Central Asia God uses them as evangelists, social workers, teachers and leaders. It is important to raise the issues of women’s spiritual needs, discipleship and transformation, equipping them for ministry as church leaders in Central Asia.

Special training resources are required for MB Christian women. There is a need for printed, audio and video resources because many CA people are oral learners. These resources should be in local languages written for the Central Asian context or contextualized in the case of translation.

It is important to train the trainers – to find godly mature Christian women dedicated to discipling other women and helping them to be equipped and trained for this ministry.

Seminars, conferences and workshops for Christian women provide good opportunities for discipleship and transformation. Many women say that they experienced inner healing and were strengthened spiritually at women’s conferences.

Conclusion

Every Christian woman needs transformation after her conversion. For CA Christian women, their whole mindset needs transformation because many women continue to live in the slavery of old traditions and beliefs. The process of transformation can take years but it can never happen if nothing is done. The number of CA Christians is growing. Both men and women who are former Muslims are called to active Christian ministry. Helping MB Christian women to experience spiritual transformation is helping the future generation of the church. This paper is a humble attempt to analyse this important topic, which requires further research and practical application helping the MB Christian women in CA to get free from the old self and become new persons in Christ.