

Transformational Ministry: Helping the Vulnerable

by HC and EM

Editor: *Several workers in North Africa face difficult issues as they try to minister to women who are on the fringes of their society. EM, from a sister agency, has compiled stories of the women she seeks to help. HC has written an introduction to a selection of these incidents in order to stimulate both our thoughts and our actions. Our Saviour set us an example of how to minister to such women through the accounts of his meeting with the woman at the well (John 4) and with the woman caught in adultery (John 8).*

Introduction

What should be the driving force in Transformational Ministry? Our compassion for those who are vulnerable, or a need to see justice done? A desire to be needed and to make a difference?

These may all be elements of our motivation to become involved in Transformational Ministry, but the stories below illustrate the conviction that it is God who compels us, and it is only by His power that any change, any development, any transformation can take place in individuals and communities. The stories may raise more questions than they answer – about responsibility, culturally appropriate responses, biblical responses...and yet these questions lead us to deeply examine our reactions and motivations, and so are a good thing.

The process of transformation can be lengthy, frustrating and sometimes non-existent, much to our surprise and despair. Why do people not want to break free from their situations? What is holding them back? Why are the obstacles so huge? Is our faith lacking? Are we too naïve, to believe things can change?

These questions are valid and necessary, but as EM points out, we know that God can and does transform the most chaotic lives. So we go on in hope, learning from the God of hope, and taking up the challenge presented to us in the places where we live and minister.

Three stories from EM *

**names have been changed*

Home is not a happy place

I recently took a sick child from an orphanage and her carer to the doctor. I had met the carer a few times and was slightly apprehensive! At a first meeting, Fatima comes across as an angry, sullen woman – she has a permanent scowl on her face and a defensive attitude! Although our interaction was initially awkward, we soon both relaxed and started to chat about life. Despite my prior assessment of her character, she blossomed into a lovely, caring woman with a great sense of humour.

After collecting some medicine from a pharmacy, Fatima asked if we could go for a drive. Feeling rather curious I agreed! And after a couple of minutes Fatima started to talk:

My husband is not a nice man, he's mean to me. He drinks, he hits me. He won't even put rubbish in the bin. I have to do everything for him; If I don't bring him a drink quickly at his command, he gets very angry. He doesn't work but I work every day from 7am until 7pm, and I have two children – a baby and an older child. I don't like to go home at the end of the day; I love my children but I hate going back into the house with him – it's not easy.

So what do you say? What is the culturally appropriate response? I would usually advise counselling, legal help, hostels or other options, but I felt very unsure in this cultural context! She wasn't looking for a solution, she just wanted someone to listen to her, but she was hurting and I felt helpless. Is being a pair of ears enough in these situations?

Unfortunately there are many situations like this one and I find myself on a constant learning curve. I don't know if you have come across the slogan found on badges and bracelets 'WWJD – What Would Jesus Do?' I find myself asking that question on a regular basis! Please pray that there will be a constructive way to help and support the myriad of women here who, for the most part, appear to suffer in secret.

Finding hope in the midst of chaos

I remember the first time I met Shayma and her three-year old daughter, Mabrouka. They were living in terrible conditions along with Shayma's mother and her younger brothers and sisters. The house was stinking, damp, and full of rubbish. There were skinny kittens wandering about and the floor was thick with mud and filth.

Shayma is a single mother. She drinks, smokes, and goes in and out of jail for theft and other crimes. She is not only a self-confessed prostitute, but also prostitutes her younger sisters – one of whom is only nine-years old. She lies, cheats and neglects her little daughter terribly. She rents out a room in the house for other prostitutes to bring customers to and is notorious in her community as a huge disgrace and problem. She has had multiple abortions and is well known to the Social Services, Police, and Child Protection Unit.

Shayma has a ‘dead face’; it is like someone has stepped inside and switched the light off behind her eyes. I asked her why she was going through life in this way and she said, *‘No one has ever asked me before why I am living like this.’* She went on to explain that she knew no other way of life. Her mother had prostituted her as a child. Her grandmother had prostituted her mother as a child. And so the cycle of abuse and neglect had continued.

I asked Shayma to think about what she was doing to her child and her sisters, and whether she wanted this cycle to continue for her daughter and future granddaughters. Shayma broke down and said she felt her life was totally out of control: ‘I am no good. I am rubbish. I don’t know what to do or how to stop. People hate me but I don’t care. I have stopped caring about anything!’

Shayma is 24 years old, uneducated, and has no obvious employment skills. She has no life experiences, except the chaos of prostitution and drinking. How would you respond to Shayma; how would you seek to protect the children, help her improve her life and the life of her whole family?

Humans are capable of performing the most atrocious acts e.g. people like Shayma. Many people feel naturally outraged and shocked by stories like these; this is normal. But at what point does the anger, shock and horror become something proactive?

As Christians we are called to follow Jesus’ example of reaching out to the lost and broken. I believe that God enables us to see beyond the chaos to the people themselves. We do not condone or make excuses for people’s behaviour. We feel the disbelief and deep sadness. We believe in consequence and legal justice. We do not accept that it is okay for a person to abuse, neglect or damage others. People need to take responsibility and accept the consequences of their behaviour.

But we also believe in mercy and compassion. We believe that God **can** transform even the roughest of situations, the most chaotic of lives (the Gospels are full of such examples). We **can** love even the most unlovely, messed-up people and have hearts filled with compassion

for the ‘lowest of the low’. We **can** be proactive in encouraging people to transform their lives. We **can** challenge people in authority to think differently because we **can** model *transformational* development work. Not just investing in projects and structures, but in people themselves. We live out the belief that all people **can** experience a transformation of the heart and that they have the right to feel dignity and value. We **can** empower the weak, advocate on behalf of the forgotten and be a positive presence in the blackest of situations.

Who will take my son?

A young girl is made pregnant by her older, married brother. She is banished from her family home and has nowhere to go except to the house of her brother. She is very depressed, won’t hold the baby or care for him. Her brother is aggressive and doesn’t want her or the baby in the house. He is frightened of what she will say to people, but there is nowhere else for her to go. They are trying to arrange for the baby to be taken by the authorities and officially ‘abandoned’ but all the baby homes are overflowing with unwanted children so they have no option but to keep the baby with them. He is a tiny two-month old baby, skinny, dirty, and rejected by every adult in his little world. What will become of him?

A girl comes in to see the hospital social worker. She is only twenty but

looks twice her age with broken teeth, pocked skin and calloused hands. She is weeping uncontrollably and continually wails, ‘Give me an abortion. I beg you, give me an abortion!’ She comes from a place further up the country but ran away from her abusive father. She ended up in a notorious part of town where a ‘kindly older lady’ takes in stray girls and helps them by paying them to run errands for her. She then locks them up in her house – which is actually a brothel – and the girl is trapped into prostitution. This girl managed to escape and made her way to the public hospital. She already has a fifteen-week old baby and has just discovered that she is eleven weeks pregnant with her next. Legally, the hospital will not carry out a termination as she is beyond nine weeks. Her only option is to go to a private clinic, or ‘back-street butchers’ as they are known. Where does she go now? What will become of her and her now two children?

A tiny baby is discovered in the local river – a baby boy. The authorities don’t seem overly concerned, as apparently it is quite common here. The first mother is visited and she still has her baby with her. The second mother is eventually tracked down. She is still distraught but has her baby with her and the one she is carrying. So where did this baby come

from? It is tragic and in reality very few people seem to care. A couple of weeks later, a social worker speaks up saying a young girl had contacted her and told her she 'was about to give birth and her family was threatening to kill her if she came home with the baby'. The girl was completely alone when she gave birth and initially had nowhere to go. But then her family arrived and took her and the baby home from the hospital. Some days later, she secretly phoned the social worker, begging for someone to come and take the baby. The social worker had tried to take action but for some reason was unable to book transport to the girl's house. She heard nothing more from the girl and then the baby was found.

This is a terrible but true story, very recent in fact. I include it because it is necessary that people

hear that such things go on and are not just exaggerated accounts. Many of the situations I encounter are in many ways hopeless as there is no way to address every issue or confront every gap in the process. This is a fact and the reality of this work at this time. I do believe that God can transform any situation, but history shows us that it can be a fast and dramatic process or a painfully slow one! I would encourage you to sit down with pen and paper and go over this sequence of events and express your feelings. Please then use this as a springboard for prayer. While we are praying, these tragedies will still occur, but prayer is the key. Pray for God's intervention, protection, grace, the injustices, the social workers, key people, the process, the authorities, the families, the hospitals, the communities, the girls, the babies.