

Helping Female Single Teammates Thrive amidst Challenges in Muslim Society: A Case Study

By John Idoko

John Idoko, a CAPRO Nigeria missionary, has been a church planting team leader for two decades in two major contexts. He led a multinational church planting team among a local Arab tribe for 10 years, alongside his wife, Dr. Hayat (her adopted name in the community), in medical missions/church planting. As a writer, he has authored several books on church planting, and is a visiting lecturer at Global Institute for Transformations (GIFT). In 2013, he pioneered CAPRO diaspora church planting and currently leads teams planting migrant churches among northern migrants, who are from unreached tribes in diaspora, living in southern regions of Nigeria. He is also an IIPEC Chaplain..

Our team was diverse in many ways. We had newly married couples, those married with kids, single males and females, indigenous and expatriates, all from different church backgrounds, pursuing the same goal in a different culture. As a multi-cultural, multi-lingual team we faced numerous challenges. But none was greater than those faced by women on our team. While accomplishing lots of wonderful things in church planting, these female workers grappled with many frustrating challenges.

This article is intended to paint a picture of the useful roles single women have in church planting among Muslims, the challenges they face in playing those roles, and how they can be helped to navigate these challenges so that their work is not hindered.

I want to also encourage single women that singlehood is not a disadvantage but a blessing to a church planting team. Equally, I hope that teams with singles will learn more ideas in the art of helping, supporting,

honoring, and building the capacities of single women on their teams, and how to incorporate single women better into the ministry of that team while navigating through those unique challenges.

A Diverse Group with Diverse Assignments

Our church planting team from 1993–2011 was dynamic, heterogenous, and multinational, drawing workers from Arab-speaking, Francophone, and Anglophone regions of Africa, who banded together in a church planting mission in a local Arab community. These local Arabs (Shuwa Arabs) are situated in the extreme northeastern border region of Nigeria, Cameroon, The Republic of Chad, and up to the Darfur region of Sudan. Team members were included married couples, families and singles (men and women), from different countries, professions, tribes, and cultures. Our lingua franca on the team varied; most of the time it was Arabic, other times English. Despite this incredible diversity, we were all heartily committed to church planting in a 100% Muslim Arabs community.

To be articulate and organized in our church planting pursuits among our target tribe, we divided our church planting tasks along three main lines. Our first focus of ministry was to religious clerics. Second, we focused on the Arab women. In this area, we divided our work into two main groups according to natural social divisions. The married women/mothers on our team focused on the Arab women/mothers, while newlywed and single women focused on young wives and the unmarried Arab girls. Finally, the men focused on household heads, including community and political leaders.

Each team member was assigned to and clearly engaged one of the aforementioned groups. Over the years, about ninety-five percent of team members worked in a cottage hospital established by the team to meet the felt needs of the community and to give residency status and employment to our workers. Local Arab women staffed the clinic, and it was this health center that became the hub from which all our church planting activities took their bearings.

Many team members also engaged other parts of the community with different skills, but we made sure to keep our whole team neatly connected. This allowed the influence of our ministry to span across three countries bordering each other as our target people were spread across those countries, and beyond.

The Impact of Female Team Members in Church Planting

In the Muslim world, female team members need extraordinary support to thrive. By giving this strong focus in our team, our team members had great ministry impact among our target group. Female team members learned colloquial Arabic well, as they combined vigorous language learning with other responsibilities. The women on our team built friendships with local women as they became part of robust, existing social networks; so great was their impact the husbands of their friends became friends with the husbands on the team. For example, as the field leader, quite a few of my friendships started through the influence of my wife. I wrote about her impact as a medical doctor in one of my books:

Her practice opened unimaginable doors into diverse people and places, and the title of the practice put on me by the Arabs themselves (some said that the husband of a doctor is also a doctor) gave me the honor and leverage I needed to harness the open doors for the advancement of the kingdom of God. She was the practicing doctor, while I was the known “doctor” at the gate.¹

The women on our team identified with people deeply as they attended culturally important ceremonies: weddings, namings, and burials were platforms where meaningful interactions took place that

1 Yahya, Abdul-Haliq. 2016. *Life Behind the Veil: Ministry to Arab Women*. Jos, Nigeria: Cedar Tree Publishing.

were beneficial for ministry. The clinics at the cottage hospital were always full of Arab women and their children from all walks of local society because of our team nurses and other healthcare providers. Our Wednesday ante-natal clinic was a creative and colorful day for immunizations, consultations, and health talks which were deliberately chosen to educate on physical health and spiritual matters.

The female team members were the living color of hospitality on the team. Among Arabs, hospitality is not only a culture, but also a prized virtue, driven only by the woman or women of a house. To enable our team to be seen as highly hospitable in the community, and so we could explore diverse ministry opportunities embedded in hospitality, the women on our team rose to the occasion; with sparkling cheerfulness and godly decorum, they always welcomed visitors into our homes, attended patients in the clinic with culturally sensitive professional styles, and adapted their way of life, dressing, cooking, and child rearing into Arabic styles. These adaptations endeared them to the local Arab women, their husbands, and the entire community.

This good-naturedness brought numerous challenges to the single women because it made them especially interesting to Arab men for wives! They were seen as holy and respected women who follow *Isa Almasih*, and who were compassionate “doctors” in Hayat’s clinic. Because of their honor, every woman in the community, and even those from the neighboring countries wanted to come to the clinic. It became a common saying in the community that if anyone needed to know the exact truth of their health conditions without any tincture of lies, they should go to Hayat’s clinic.

The female workers, beyond being professionals, were excellent missionary evangelists. We developed a strategy for effective evangelism by working out a list of women who mattered in the community, which we called the “high-hanging fruits.” The women set goals to visit these particular women, to build and deepen relationships with them, and preach the gospel to them. As I have written previously, “There was a year we set the goal to reach and evangelize fifty women. The women on

the team rose up to that challenge with a singular and joyful heart. At the end of the year, they had evangelized seventy women!”²

The women of the team kept a good reputation for our team by being good homemakers. This is one of the many areas where they made immeasurable contributions to church planting—on the home front. The home front is where female team members gave countless counsel to local women as they came in daily with a myriad of life struggles and needing help. It is at the home front that they received visitors and discipled female converts; all the while these women loved their husbands and raised their children in full view of Arab society. In every way they demonstrated, by their example, good family life to the local people. My wife once put it this way, women on a church planting team “are the hinges that bear the door of the base.... As a result, the home is also at peace to receive and accommodate enquirers and disciples.”³

Challenges Faced by Female Workers

Significant ministry impact did not come without challenges for the single women on our team. I will only mention a few cases that provide a glimpse of these challenges because of space.

Stigma

Being unmarried as an adult female is a stigma among our focus people; a single woman is looked down upon and regarded as an outcast. One of the single women on the team narrated her challenge this way:

When I joined the team in 2008, I was 47 years old. By their standard, I was already a great-great-grandmother. You can imagine how they looked at me from their own worldview. There were so many questions: “Where is your husband?” “You mean you don’t have a husband?”

2 Ibid., 214.

3 Ibid., 215.

"Where are your children?" "Are you traveling to bring your husband?" The questions were usually directed to me by the women folk and children. And honestly, sometimes these questions got very wearisome.⁴

In a culture where early marriage is the norm, girls are married as early as age twelve; so living as a single adult female worker was a wearisome thing to deal with.

Advances from Men

A daily challenge female workers faced, particularly the singles, were romantic or sexual advances from men. Harassment came in the form of obscene language and gestures, even physical harassment. Because of their dignity and piousness, a lot of Arab men expressed a desire to marry them. This challenge constantly wearied these female workers and the entire team.

One of the single women, a nurse, and midwife told of her experiences of subtle harassment in this way:

A man who was supposed to be a friend of the team had asked me how I was able to stay alone without a man when my colleagues were out of the base. At another time, he asked if I was not feeling lonely, being alone in the house. A man is not supposed to ask a woman such questions unless the woman is a prostitute. So, because I was not married, I was not different from a prostitute.⁵

She recounted the challenges with yet another man in the book, *Life Behind the Veil: Ministry to Arab Women*:

On yet another occasion, still inside the dispensary, in the pretense of showing me the place that was hurting

4 Ibid., 178.

5 Ibid.

him, he touched my arm, almost touching my breast. It was then I realized that the man had been taking advantage of me. I was filled with rage and would have slapped him on the face with the sole of my slippers [the height of insult to a man in their culture], but something held me back. I remembered the relationship the team had built with him and his entire family, and how my action would have destroyed any chance of winning any of them to Christ.⁶

Embarrassing Stares from Men

As I sat in the company of men in our community, I often observed that each time a woman passed by a pocket of men, they would stare at the woman until she was out of sight. This was not aimed at only the local women but also at women on our team. I recall a day I was sitting with men in our neighborhood, and my wife was passing by. As a sign of respect for the men, she stooped down, removed her shoes, and carried them in her hands, walking barefooted. After she had passed by, she dropped them, stepped into them, and moved on. The eyes of the men were fixed on her, and it was apparent they did not know she was my wife. Finally, another man spoke up and said that she was my wife.

To women, such staring from men can be embarrassing. The awareness that you are being stared at can even make one's step clumsy. Unfortunately, this kind of embarrassment caused by Muslim men is quite common in many Muslim communities.

Marriage Proposals

As alluded to before, one other area of challenge that faced single female church planters was Arab men expressing a desire to marry them.

6 Ibid., 179.

Once I was visiting a team leader in the Republic of Chad and we were checking on some of his workers in various locations. He told me how a woman on his team, whom we had visited, was seeking to evangelize a high government official. She visited the official in his office to give him materials, and to discuss the gospel with him. The man mistook her visits to mean she was chasing him for marriage. He proposed to her and became seriously bent on marrying her, so much so that it became very embarrassing! The team leader and another local believer had to wade into the matter to douse the fire before it got out of control.

Another situation involved a female from Kenya on my team who worked in the clinic and a Muslim sheikh who was a good friend of mine. Any time the sheikh came to the clinic for treatment, he would cast a look on her in a way that we knew what he was thinking, then one day, he approached me to say that he would like to marry her. After some thought, I gave him a condition for that to happen. I told him that for marriage to even be discussed, he had to move into the Light. Since the woman he was interested in was in the Light and he was in Darkness, it would not be possible unless he moved into the Light—only then could we discuss this possibility. Since Light and Darkness have no fellowship together, it would not be possible for him and our team member to have any fellowship of that sort. He could not proceed any further because he was not willing to move into the Light. But it gave an opportunity to explain the Light to him.

Another time, something similar happened while I sat with elders in the community. For a church planter like myself to be given a spot in such *majlis* was the height of respect, honor, progress, and acceptance; therefore, I always attended. During this time, one of the men spoke out in front of all the other men that he wanted to marry my sister (this is what the locals called all my female teammates). Having experienced such a thing before, I did not react. I told him plainly in the presence of all the elders that he should go and propose to her, if she agreed, I would allow him to marry her. He paused for a while and said, “I won’t go because she’s educated and I am not.” We all laughed, and I told

them that since he knew she was educated and he wasn't, why was he even trying?

Navigating through the Challenges Together as a Team

Let me be clear, these single women did not go through these challenges alone; it was a team challenge. As a team, we gladly helped these women navigate their way through issues, and we turned the challenge into opportunities to share the gospel. Here are some of the measures we took as a team.

1. At orientation and onboarding of new single women into the team, we would explain these challenges to them and teach them how to respond. We focused on how they could turn the challenges into opportunities, rather than reacting or feeling hurt by them. We told them to expect marriage proposals by the men, even when they appeared to be interested in the gospel or to have even become followers of Christ. In that way, they were not shocked when it did happen.

2. As the team leader, and one who was well respected in the community and beyond, I took responsibility to act as a father to all the single women on the team, whether they were older than me or not. As a team, we all agreed that by me taking on the responsibility and role of guardian/father that this would give the single women respect in the community. As you may already know, in an Arab community, a woman's identity is attached to a male family member. She is either the daughter of somebody, the wife of somebody, the sister of somebody, the mother of somebody, the widow of somebody, or the *ajuz* (old woman) of somebody. So, if the single women on our team were identified in the community as daughters or sisters of Yahya (my name in the community), they would be accorded respect and could go in and out freely; as such, all the men who were desirous of marrying them had to come to me privately to express their desires. No man dared bypass me as the *rais ul bayt* (head of the house) or the *rais-ul-daish* (leader or head of the army [team]).

3. We discussed these issues regularly as they came up. When a man made his intention known to me about a female team member, I would go home to that person and inform her that I have found a husband for her and have permitted him to come to propose to her. We would laugh about it, and discuss it as a team, arming her with what to say, how to say it, and the expression to maintain, should the man come.

4. We ensured that single women were embedded into team stations in such a way that they did not do church planting alone but under the ‘protection’ of married couples. This improved the community’s view of them and provided extra moral and physical protection.

Conclusion

Singleness is not a disadvantage but a blessing to church planting, but it is challenging for women in the Arab world. Growing in the art of helping these women navigate hiccups that come their way is a needed skill in church planting teams among Muslims.

Without any sense of flattery, I can say I admired and valued the commitments, labors, sacrifices, attitudes, and spirits of all the women, single and married alike, that I have worked with in our company. Our team was forced to end due to local violence, but a good number of them are still engaging Arab women in other countries. As a team we sought to motivate them and sought to provide what they needed to do their work with excitement.

Many times I sought to encourage them by buying them useful books such as *Ministry to Muslim Women: Longing to Call them Sisters; Miniskirts, Mothers, and Muslims: A Christian Woman in a Muslim Land, Screams in the Desert: Hope and Humor for Women in Cross-Cultural Ministry, Daughters of Islam: Building Bridges with Muslim Women*. These books and others added value to their lives and enabled them to have fellowship with other women of like passion facing similar challenges in other locations.

Without these dedicated and resolute women, our church planting work would not be as robust. Some years ago, I authored a book (from which sections were quoted in this article) as a garland to decorate and adorn the necks of these gallant, brilliant women who have dedicated their lives and professional skills to serve God's purpose in church planting in Muslim contexts. These precious sisters are numbered among the many women who have risked their lives for the sake of unreached peoples across the world.

Questions for Conversation

- How are the challenges faced by single women in Mr. Idoko's team context similar or dissimilar to challenges faced by single women in your context?
- How can we cultivate a team environment which enables single women to thrive?
- What are the unique obstacles and the unique opportunities faced by workers of different life stages? How can a team effectively address the obstacles and steward the opportunities?

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