

How God Can Use the Women of Iran to Change the World

Read Time: 4 Minutes 47 Seconds

In 2022, TIME Magazine named the women of Iran as the “Heroes of the Year,” specifically honoring their fight for freedom from oppression. While their plight has been ongoing, protests were sparked after the death of Mahsa Amini while in the morality police’s custody after being arrested for not properly wearing her hijab.

This situation has shined a light on the many stories of Iranian women who have felt unseen and unheard of for far too long.

To put the protests into perspective, this is about far more than just hijabs. Women in Iran are tired of the cultural ‘norms’ that have been set. For example, the Islamic regime lowered the age of marriage for women from 18 to 13 in 1979, and to age nine in 1982, adding the need for a male guardian’s consent to marry. A married woman cannot leave the country without her husband’s permission. Men can marry up to four women at one time, while women can only marry one husband.

Change isn’t here yet, but I know there is hope for the women of Iran to change the world. I know this because I am an Iranian woman. I also was abused and persecuted by a patriarchal culture in which women are mainly dominated by men.

I was born and raised in a nominally Muslim family in Tehran, Iran. When I was 16, my parents emigrated to Germany to escape their bankrupt business; we later migrated to the U.S. to reunite as a family. When I was 18, my father encouraged me to get to know his Iranian business partner who was 14 years older than me—essentially, it was decided for me to marry this

man.

Because the primary motivational driver in my own life was my father's stamp of approval, I trusted that this arrangement would be favorable. Furthermore, it is extremely normalized in societies of the Middle East to adopt this practice; families setting young girls up with older men is very much engrained in the culture and even encouraged—especially in cases where men are relatively established.

Life became bitter the moment I met him in person.

In our marriage, each day felt more demoralizing than the days before, navigating his increasingly magnified jealousy, insecurity and verbal, emotional and physical abuse. I felt utterly hopeless, presuming I'd be trapped in this prison of marriage for the rest of my life. Living in darkened oppression without hope or joy, I found myself extremely depressed, trudging through life like a walking dead person.

I cried out to God in desperation, asking Him for a do-over in life, pleading with Him to let me start fresh again.

One day, my mom contacted me and asked me to go visit some family friends that were in town from Oklahoma. The moment I stepped into their home, I felt an indescribable sense of love and joy that I had never experienced before. They were watching a film about Jesus' life, and I was immediately intrigued.

Now, I didn't know anything about Jesus at that time—only what I had seen that night and what I was taught in Iran about Jesus being one of the greatest prophets who had performed many miracles.

While we were watching the movie, one of the girls turned and said to me, "Lily, did you know that when you believe in Jesus, all things will become new? Everything from your past will be wiped off, and you will become a new creation."

As I heard these words, I felt stricken; I knew that this was exactly what I wanted and had prayed for. While I held no knowledge of His deity, the trinity or any theology, I undoubtedly knew that He was going to be what I was looking for, the one that would pull me out of the dungeon that I was trapped in. I was filled with a supernatural faith that He would bring me hope and a future. This bold statement was the seed sown within my heart. I decided then and there that Jesus would be my Savior.

And my life was forever changed. The Lord set me free from my abusive marriage. Today, I work at Iran Alive Ministries—the very ministry that helped me grow in the first steps of my faith following my conversion to Christianity. Through this ministry, I found hope and purpose in Christ and am able to speak about how cultural dispositions such as arranged marriages are destructive to young girls and about the strong grip of abusive male domination in the culture.

But the process hasn't been without challenges and pain.

Because of the rejection and hurt I felt from Iranians after I had initially come to faith, I found it difficult to feel compassion in order to really minister to my own people. I recognized my sympathy for Iranian women that are hurt when I was reminded of my own pain in my past. In that space, I realized that there are so many women that feel trapped, abused and struck down just like I was. I remembered the darkness in which I also once dwelled. It was as if my eyes were opened to see the true pain that Iranian women are suffering from.

 My story is but a glimpse into the oppression the women of Iran have been subjected to their entire lives. I can only imagine the brokenness, loneliness and darkness the vast majority of them feel on a day-to-day basis, just as I once did.

In ministering to the very culture from which I came, I pray each of these women will come to know Jesus as I have, that they might experience true freedom, joy and life in abundance. I long to share the hope I have found with others; likewise, these women have the potential to lead multitudes of freed women following in their wake, finding Jesus through their own testimonies.

What Iran needs is not a political revolution, but a spiritual awakening and internal revolution to change the Islamic culture that has been ingrained in that country for so long.
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