

Modern-Day Martyrs: Women Endure Torture, Rape and Losing Family to Follow Christ

What happens when a woman decides to follow Christ? In the United States, it can mean peace, joy and freedom. In other countries, it can mean arrest, torture, rape—even death.

As a journalist, I've had wonderful opportunities to travel around the world and write about the amazing things the Lord is doing. What stands out to me most are the women I've had the honor of meeting—women who have counted the cost to follow Christ and are willingly paying it.

“You're so brave to go to these countries,” people often tell me. I'm not brave at all; I always have a return ticket to freedom. Women such as Anna*, Hui Liang* and Lily*, whom you'll meet in a moment, are the brave ones. They live under cruel, vicious governments that are doing everything possible to stamp out Christianity.

You won't read their stories in *People* or, frankly, in most Christian women's magazines. But their stories deserve to be told.

Will you allow me to introduce you to some of them? I warn you that their stories are not pretty. They'll challenge you. They'll make you feel uncomfortable. You may even feel guilty the next time you're in the grocery store.

But then, you don't read *SpiritLed Woman* because you're hunting for feel-good, goose-bump articles. You want to find the heart of God—and these women are definitely in His heart.

Take Anna Kima, for example. I met Anna in Nairobi, Kenya. I flew on a nice comfortable plane to Kenya ("Oh, you're so brave!"), but Anna walked there from war-torn Sudan—with her four children and all their earthly possessions.

"I carried one child on my neck, another on my back and our luggage on my head," Anna told me. "We walked for three months. All of us were sick with malaria and diarrhea."

Sudan, Anna's homeland, is torn apart by famine and a long-standing civil war that purposely targets Christians, among others. For years, the Muslim government of northern Sudan has waged all-out war against Christians and tribal people in the southern part of the country, trying to force them to become Muslims.

The North bombs their villages, schools and hospitals (during the day when they can kill as many as possible). Christian women and girls are often kidnapped and enslaved by Muslims in the North and forced to work in intolerable conditions where they are beaten, burned and raped repeatedly. Millions of southern Sudanese have already died from the war and famine, and thousands of Christian women and girls are still held as slaves.

Anna was one of the ones who made it out of Sudan rather than being brutally murdered. Today, as a refugee in Kenya, she works with the New Sudan Council of Churches, a ministry that helps people in southern Sudan.

Anna helped organize the 1999 Women's Peace Workshop, which brought together for the first time women from tribes that had fought one another for generations. Some of the attendees were widows whose husbands had been killed by husbands of other women at the workshop. Through gentleness, grace and a great deal of prayer, Anna and the other organizers showed the women their need to forgive one another and be united.

"We thought God turned from us," she says, "but we turned from

Him because of hatred. Where there is hatred, there are no blessings. That's why we have famine. We want to use peace as an instrument for development."

Every Christian woman in southern Sudan has lost a loved one to the war. Like Anna, they are paying the price to follow Jesus.

Where He Leads, I'll Follow

Sometimes I meet remarkable women such as Anna on their own turf; other times they come to mine. Hui Liang ("hwee lee-AHNG") and her husband, who are both from mainland China, stayed at my home for a few weeks when I was writing a book (*China: The Hidden Miracle, Sovereign World*) about what they've endured simply to remain true to their faith.

Hui Liang was engaged to a young pastor in China before the cultural revolution. He was eventually jailed for his outspoken Christian witness, but he was not the only one who suffered. Hui Liang was also persecuted because she refused to renounce her fiancé, who was considered a traitor to communism and China. She lost her job and was sent to a labor camp on the other side of China.

At first, she was devastated to be so far from her family and fiancé, but she soon saw God's wisdom in the move. There were other Christian women at the camp, and in between hours of hard labor in the fields surrounding the prison, they told other prisoners and also some of the villagers about Jesus and led many to Him. The Lord, she realized, was using the women to spread the gospel to areas of China where the Good News had never before been preached.

In China, prison sentences rarely come with a term, and Hui Liang had no idea when her fiancé would be released—if ever. Year after year she waited for him, not knowing at times if he was even alive. After she was released from the labor camp,

her friends, family and government exerted tremendous pressure on her to renounce her relationship with him, but she refused, knowing that God was telling her to wait—and giving her the extraordinary grace to do so.

Finally, after two decades, her fiancé was released from prison. The couple was married—and continued to carry on the same activities that got them into trouble in the first place, including preaching, evangelizing and distributing Bibles smuggled into China by foreigners. Eventually they received a tip that they were about to be arrested again. They told the Lord they were willing to go back to prison if that's what He wanted, but He told them the time had come to leave. With a mere 24 hours' notice, they secretly left China for the West, where they live today far from family, friends and homeland.

Today the Chinese government continues to persecute Christians, and women are often arrested, tortured, burned with cattle prods, hung from their feet in prison cells and left to die. They and Hui Liang have paid the price to follow Jesus.

Light in the Darkness

Lily and Sara* also live in repressive situations. They pastor a church in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world—and one that has been torn apart by war and violence. More than 2,500 people have been killed in Indonesia since early 1999. Most of the dead were Christians.

“[The war has] resulted in murder, rape, persecution and destruction,” Lily says. “There have been many martyrs, including kids. Hundreds of church buildings have been burned to the ground.”

Lily and Sara's church went on a 40-day fast and at the same time distributed food to the local poor, regardless of their religious affiliation. When fanatical Islamic mobs went on a rampage against churches, local Muslims remembered how Lily

and Sara's church had distributed free food to the poor, so they barricaded the church building, preventing the mob from destroying it. Because of the free food distribution program, "they knew our church," Sara says, "and they protected us in a time of danger."

The women echo a plea that resounds wherever Christians are severely persecuted. "Don't pray that the situation would stop," Sara warns, "but that the churches [in Indonesia] would be strong and able to face this situation. There are many souls coming in right now, and it's very easy to evangelize and win people to the Lord. But many churches are not ready to face this situation [and are not prepared] for the harvest."

Sara and Lily have paid the price to follow Jesus.

Of Martyrs and Millionaires

There are other women I have met who stand out in my mind. There's Donna Sauñe, an American who became a missionary to Peru and married a local man well-known for his outspoken Christian witness. I met Donna at a memorial service for her husband, who had been brutally murdered by the Shining Path guerillas. It was the first funeral I ever attended for a martyr, but sadly not the last one.

I'm constantly challenged and inspired by persecuted Christian women such as these—and also by the ones I've never actually met but feel as if I have. There's Zhou Shiu Yon, a Christian woman I interviewed by phone who told me how she had fled China to avoid the abortion that the communist government was trying to force her to have.

There's the unnamed woman from Chiapas, Mexico, where Christians are regularly threatened and killed, a woman whose hands wove the delicate blue bookmark I keep in my daily devotional.

There's Hannan, a young woman from Cairo, Egypt, whose picture

hung on my refrigerator for years. Her family arranged for the local police to put her under house arrest so she could not marry the man of her dreams—simply because she converted from Islam to Christianity to do so.

There's Debbie, an enormously brave young woman from the Middle East whose father took out a contract on her life when she converted from Islam to Christianity while studying in London. The British government recently refused her request for political asylum, and today she is on her way back to her homeland, knowing she might be killed, but praying she first has the chance to share her Lord with others.

Portraits of Persecution

Each of these special women represents millions of persecuted Christian women all over the world. Anna represents the hundreds of millions of refugees on all continents, women uprooted from their homes and families because of their Christian faith.

Hui Liang represents the wives of persecuted and imprisoned pastors. These are women who suffer—often in silence—for the bold witness of their husbands, women who must be bold and clever themselves in order to care for their families against tremendous odds while their husbands are imprisoned for their faith.

Lily and Sara represent women in ministry, women who suffer from the devastating effects of repressive governments and false religions.

Donna represents the elite circle of women who have paid the ultimate price as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters of martyrs—and in some cases as martyrs themselves.

And the woman from Chiapas, Mexico, who wove my delicate blue bookmark, represents the millions and millions of Christian

women all over the world whom we will never know by name, but who are our sisters in Christ—women from Bangladesh and Belarus, Sierra Leone and Sudan, Mauritania and Myanmar, women who daily count the cost and pay the price to follow the same Savior we follow in freedom.

Each of these women is real. It's hard for us to imagine the constant terror some of them live with, never knowing if the police, their parents, or their own husbands or children will turn them in or even kill them, simply for practicing their faith.

Someday we'll meet these women in heaven. I don't know about you, but I want to be able to run up to them confident that I did everything on Earth I could to strengthen them. I want to be able to say, "I prayed for you," or "I wrote you while you were in prison," or "I gave you a cup of cold water in His name," or "I read about you and didn't turn the page."

In our comfortable society, it's so easy to turn the page or flip the channel. It's much more comfortable to watch reality TV than it is to read the Voice of the Martyrs newsletter or *Jesus Freaks*, the compelling book about persecuted Christians.

But what would Jesus do? Is that a nice little saying on a refrigerator magnet, or does it represent our lives? These women have counted the cost and paid the price to follow Him. We must all ask what we can do to support them—no matter what it costs us.

** Not their real names*

Read a companion devotional.

Elisabeth Farrell *writes frequently about persecuted Christians.*