LOCAL HEROES

By Carolyn Makinson

In recent years, Muslim men have received rather unfavourable "press". Yet, in my travels, I have met many Muslim men who loved dearly their wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters and who strove to demonstrate their love where there were few opportunities for the public expression of tenderness. These are stories of my encounters with several such men, and of another "local hero" who lives in Rwanda. As I write these stories, earth-shattering events have broken out across the Middle East. I hope that the people of the Middle East — especially the women — will soon know greater freedom, and that we shall come to know them with greater nuance and empathy.

THE FAMILY PLANNING CORNER

My first encounter with Afghans was in Peshawar in 2000 in a camp for Afghan refugees. Several years earlier, a dear friend, Mary Anne Schwalbe, had introduced me to the world of refugees and to the appalling conditions in which many of them lived for years at a time. She told me that refugee women around the world had little help with childbirth and lacked access to family planning and other services necessary to safeguard their health. Mary Anne conducted the first field research documenting this tremendous neglect of refugee women's health. In 1995, one of the sites she visited was the Peshawar camp. Five years later, we returned together to see what, if anything, had changed. Imagine our surprise and delight when the first program we saw was the "Family Planning Corner". We were greeted by Dr. Tila, who ran the health clinic, by a nurse midwife, and by smiling Afghan women clients.

As we emerged from the clinic to visit another women's program, a group of men in traditional Afghan pakools rushed down stone steps from a nearby building. They waved their arms and called out, trying to catch our attention. But we were swept off to see a women's handicraft project. Somewhat dejectedly, they remounted the steps and went back

inside their building. Twenty minutes later, as we left handicrafts, we were again accosted by the men who seemed very eager indeed to speak with us. To their chagrin (and somewhat to our relief), we were swept off to see a women's health education program. This was to be the final stop in our whirlwind tour. As we emerged, our van drew up ready to take us out of the camp. The men made one last valiant attempt. It occurred to me that maybe they were not in favour of family planning — that maybe they thought Mary Anne and I (grey-haired, 5' 2" and 120lbs apiece) were a Trojan horse intent on destroying the harmony of Afghan family life. However, it seemed rather cowardly of us to climb into our van and disappear. Somewhat apprehensively, we followed them up the steps and into their building.

We sat on cushions on the floor and waited for the men to speak. It turned out that they were a men's health group. All they wanted was the chance to tell us how much they cared about the health of their wives, sisters and daughters, and how important they knew the new health services were for women. They understood the dangers of childbirth, of having too many children, and of having them too young or too closely together. They wanted to thank us for our role in bringing these services to their camp. We said our goodbyes and headed back to our van happy, tearful and a little sheepish about our own preconceptions.

The Wife Indoors

From the camp for Afghan refugees in Peshawar, we travelled to Afghanistan itself. This was during the days of Taliban rule when life was especially oppressive for women. In Kabul, the few women we saw wore the all-enveloping burqua. In the countryside, away from the capital, life seemed a little more relaxed. But women covered their faces and turned away as our group approached.

The International Rescue Committee worked in Afghanistan throughout this period, bringing small-scale livelihood projects to villagers in rural areas. We visited schools and agricultural projects. The Afghans we met were warm and engaging but women were all but invisible in public life.

One morning, I was taken to meet an Afghan man who was influential in his community. The driver and I arrived at his home — a shabby walled compound in a desolate landscape, like most homes in the area we visited. We knocked at a large wooden door and waited for a few minutes until the householder arrived. He showed us into a farmyard, chickens scurrying away as we approached. We chatted about the IRC's projects in his community, the driver acting as interpreter. As we rose to take our leave, the man spoke animatedly to the driver. He wanted me to meet his wife who was indoors — she could not venture into the courtyard while a male stranger was present. It would mean so much to her to meet a woman like me from America.

The husband and the driver continued to talk back and forth. Eventually, the driver explained the problem. How were the wife and I to speak to each other since she spoke no English and I spoke no Pashto? The driver was the only person who spoke both languages. Yet, as a man and a stranger to the family, it was impossible for him to meet the wife indoors and act as interpreter. The driver left to see if something could be done — maybe he could find a woman who might act as interpreter. I stayed in the courtyard with the husband and the chickens and, before long, the driver returned — inevitably — with no solution to the problem. We again prepared to take our leave from the husband. But he could not let us go. He could not tell his wife that I had visited and gone away without seeing her.

Eventually, we thought of the obvious: I would go inside and simply sit with his wife. I was taken into a bare mud-brick room, with a small window onto the farmyard high up in one wall, and cushions and rugs on the floor. The husband beamed as he introduced me to his wife who was in her thirties — shy, beautiful and excited. The husband left us and we sat on the cushions together, holding hands and speaking, each in our own language. It seemed so simple and so obvious — of course we could communicate the essential.

Years later, I still remember holding hands with the wife and her shy pleasure in meeting me. But, most vividly, I remember the persistence of the husband who loved his wife and could not bear to disappoint her.

THE NEW WASHING MACHINE

During the mid 1980s, I rented a room from an Egyptian widow in Cairo and eventually became a member of her family for over a year. It was the most interesting year of my life — like suddenly being reborn as someone completely different. A few months after I moved in, my Egyptian "mother", Kuka, announced that her son was returning from Paris to live in Cairo, together with his new wife and his two young sons from his first marriage. Life was about to become very interesting indeed.

Hitherto, Kuka and I had accomplished the weekly laundry in the bathtub, hanging the wet washing to dry on a balcony overlooking the Pyramids. We were now to be propelled into the 20th century. One Saturday morning, while I was studying, Kuka came into my room to announce that a washing machine would be delivered later that day and installed in the family bathroom, which adjoined my bedroom. A very large cardboard box soon arrived and Mohammed, the 'mohandis' who lived in the flat below, was summoned. Mohandis is the Arabic word for engineer. In our world, Mohammed's talent with machinery was legendary.

Mohammed laboured in the bathroom for quite some time. Eventually, the entire family was summoned to watch the machine's maiden voyage. A large quantity of clothing was stuffed into its opening, the 'on' button was pressed, and the family disappeared to the sitting room for tea and pastries — the usual way of recognising events of significance.

All seemed well from my next-door bedroom. There were the familiar sounds of water sloshing around and the machine's drum stopping every so often to reverse direction. I thought happily how much easier laundry day was going to be now that Kuka and I would no longer have to spend a couple of hours bent over the bathtub. Until the spin cycle. Suddenly, I heard an appalling banging and crashing noise coming from the bathroom. I dashed in to find the washing machine running around the room, vibrating so strongly that I thought it might explode. I tried to physically hang onto the machine but received an

electric shock, so thought better of that approach. After a couple of minutes, I simply flipped the electric switch in the wall and went to the sitting room to report.

For the next week, we reverted to the usual bathtub routine for the laundry. At the week-end, Mohammed the mohandis reappeared. The washing machine was placed on a special wooden plinth to prevent it from running around the bathroom, the electricity supply was earthed, clothes were loaded, and everyone disappeared again for tea and pastries. This time, I was on high alert waiting for the spin cycle. The most dreadful noises again emanated from the bathroom. Admittedly, the machine remained stationary on its plinth and I could touch it without being shocked. But it was clear that not all was well. I turned it off at the wall socket and again went to interrupt the tea and cakes.

That evening, I decided to read the washing machine manual. It was the first time in my life I had ever contemplated reading such a thing. At school, I had been removed from science classes long before we got to anything practical like electricity or machinery. The one thing I had going for me was that the manual was written in English — and helpfully translated into Japanese, German, French and Spanish — but not into Arabic. After a couple of pages, I came across the ominous phrase “transit bolts”. It was essential to remove these bolts when the machine was installed. Should they not be removed, the machine would destroy itself when it reached the spin cycle.

I thought it would be a relatively simple matter for me to explain the transit bolts to Mohamed the mohandis, who was one of the most gentle and amenable men I had ever met. This plan, however, was scotched by Kuka who felt the mohandis’s self esteem was more important than the washing machine. It was out of the question for a woman to tell the mohandis how to do his job. The machine could just be trashed and Mona, the daughter-in-law, could help do the laundry in the bathtub. It occurred to me that Kuka had mixed feelings about the new machine. If the bathtub had been good enough for her for all these years, why wasn’t it good enough for Mona, the new daughter-in-law? At this point, however, I myself had a strong vested interest in making sure the washing machine was up and running. I was also

unsure of the impact on my bedroom of a washing machine explosion, not to mention the impact on family harmony.

It was clear that I needed a man who read English and spoke Arabic. One such relative existed — Assaam, a wealthy and worldly businessman married to Kuka's daughter. I called Assaam on the telephone, explained the problem in English and assumed that neither Kuka nor the mohandis would be any the wiser. Sure enough, Assaam soon came to visit and to advise on the washing machine. Initially, the family were somewhat mystified by this turn of events, since Assam's practical skills had never before been much in evidence — even the changing of a light bulb in his home required a visit from the local handyman. Still, a washing machine was different from a light bulb, requiring sophisticated knowledge of computers and electronics — no wonder Assaam would be able to help.

Assaam and the mohandis pored over the manual and disappeared into the bathroom. Later, I drifted past the bathroom — trying not to look too interested — and saw them huddled together on the floor with nuts, bolts and washing machine parts arrayed around the room. After about 20 minutes, they emerged to say that, between them, they had figured out the problem. The washing machine was set to go. The women of the family gathered in the bathroom, laughing and celebrating the success of the project with the traditional Egyptian zagreet. They then disappeared for more tea and cakes.

Later that afternoon, with the laundry happily rotating in the washing machine, I went to sit with Mohamed the mohandis as he smoked his favorite shisha and celebrated the success of the washing machine project. He took a few puffs then smiled at me mischievously. "So, mohandissa Carolyn, what do you think?" And this was how he addressed me for the rest of my stay in Cairo.

THE FOURTH SUITOR

Eventually, I left behind the world of washing machines and went to live in a rural village in the Delta for a few months. There I was 'adopted' by Fatima and her family. I visited them every day and learnt

about rural Egyptian life — caring for the cattle and the water buffalo, tending the vegetable garden, sharing the house with the family goat who one day scoffed all the bamiyya intended for the evening's supper, and participating in the rituals surrounding births, deaths, engagements and marriages.

Fatima was by far the most beautiful girl in the village. She was dark-haired, dark-eyed, with a dazzling smile and a lively personality. Her father treasured her, valued her opinion, and entrusted her with the household's most important papers. But Fatima was 19 years old — it was time to get married. Fatima herself looked forward to marriage. She was already laying away the clothes and household goods that would constitute her trousseau. She was happy for her parents to find a groom for her. But she also hoped that he would be a modern husband — young, handsome, someone returning from work in the Gulf.

One morning, I arrived at the house to find the family in a state of excitement. That evening, a relative of Fatima's father was coming to visit, accompanied by her son who was a potential bridegroom for Fatima. Fatima and I discussed what clothes she should wear, and she explained that she would serve tea and be allowed to spend a few minutes with the suitor to gain a first impression. I was still at the house when the visitors arrived. I must admit that I thought the suitor somewhat overweight and unprepossessing for the gorgeous Fatima. But I kept my counsel and left for home.

The following morning, a rather gloomy mood prevailed. Fatima confessed that she had found the suitor "not modern". He had announced that any wife of his would not be allowed to work outside the home — a decision that Fatima felt should be hers to make. Mohammed, her father, would be left with the awkward job of halting the proceedings in as tactful a way as possible.

Shortly thereafter, I left for Europe to attend a conference and visit my family. I was gone for several weeks. I returned to find a subdued Fatima confined to the house. Fatima sat in the parlour with the shutters drawn and a semi-permanent headache. Her father kept to his tailor's shop, which adjoined the house. I wondered whether there had been a death in the family. Soon, Fatima explained. While I was absent,

she had turned down two additional suitors. They simply were not modern enough — they were not what she hoped for — she wanted a friend with whom she could talk and share her future life. Surely her parents must be able to find someone like this for her.

Initially, her father, Mohammed, had feared that I might be a bad influence, encouraging Fatima to seek the kind of independence and autonomy that Western women had. Gradually, he saw that, much as I wanted Fatima to be happy, I understood that she had no desire to be a trailblazer or a rebel. She very much wanted the approval and support of her family and community in her married life. He confided with some exasperation that he was at his wit's end. Carolyn — to turn down one suitor is understandable — but to turn down three! And these are my relatives — what am I to do?

When I left the village, and Egypt, I had no contact with Fatima and her family. I managed to have a friend deliver photos from my time with them. But Fatima did not read and write easily, and I had no idea how to send them letters, or whether my rather bad Arabic handwriting would be comprehensible. A year later, a letter from Fatima suddenly reached me, one written by a scribe. She wanted me to know that her parents had found a fourth suitor — a young man, handsome and modern, just as she had hoped. They had moved together to Cairo and she was expecting her first child. Fatima's father's love for his daughter had won the day.

FORGIVING GENOCIDE

My final hero is Damien. He and I worked together many years ago in the 1980s to implement Burundi's first national demographic and health survey. He was a wonderful colleague and friend. At that time, he was a Rwandan refugee in Burundi — a Tutsi who had fled Hutu-governed Rwanda and sought refuge in Burundi, which was governed by the minority Tutsis.

When the genocide took place in Rwanda, I feared that similar events would take place in Burundi. I had not seen Damien for several years but I contacted him, hoping to help him find a job outside the region.

I failed in that attempt, and Damien soon wrote to tell me that he and his family had moved back to Rwanda where he felt they would be safe. He quickly acquired a senior position in the ministry responsible for repatriating the Rwandan refugees living in camps in Tanzania and Zaire. By coincidence, I took on a short-term assignment with the International Rescue Committee to look at communications between these camps and the government ministries and humanitarian organizations that were getting life moving again inside Rwanda. In my first few days in Rwanda, I startled Damien by turning up at his office — we had not seen each other for years — and informing him that we would be working together again. Both our jobs, in different ways, were geared towards ensuring the peaceful return to Rwanda of the refugees in the camps.

I came to know Damien's wife, Annonciata, and to learn their story. When they returned to Rwanda after the genocide, they found that every single one of their relatives had been killed — with one exception — a young man of 15 years who had, by some miracle, survived and found them. Damien and Annonciata raised this young man with their own five children.

One evening, over dinner, I asked Damien how he could work every day to ensure the return of the refugees, among them the killers of all of his family and of Annonciata's family too. While I waited for his reply, I tried to imagine what it would be like to return home to find that all your relatives had been killed — hacked to death by the people it was now your job to bring back to your country. These were the same people who had forced him to live in exile for many years of his life. How easy it would be to feel that their current situation was more than justified.

Damien thought for a moment before responding. Then he held my attention and said: I have been a refugee — I know all too well what it is like to live without rights and security, and to know that your children will grow up without rights and citizenship. Nobody should have to live as a refugee, no matter what they have done. We all need to think of our children — what kind of future do we want for them and what kind of country do we want them to live in? These people must

come home and we must rebuild Rwanda together. Truly, Damien is one of my heroes.

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