

# Women And Oral Based Communication

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An African proverb says: “*A woman has no religion*”. This means that a woman will automatically follow her husband’s religion in regard to her convictions and actions. Whether consciously or not this paradigm has deluded missionaries and church leaders alike to concentrate their efforts almost exclusively on men as the head of the homes and on leaders of communities; and in so doing they developed a “gender-blind missiology”.

The above proverb surely does not apply to Muslim women, for even if they are illiterate or “uneducated” they will not automatically follow their husbands, if they should become Christians.

Unfortunately there are still a great number of Muslim women and girls, who had no chance of a formal education. UNICEF’s latest statistic reveals that over 40 million children in West-Africa do not go to school – at least not regularly - and most of them are girls.

## 1. Assessing the Situation of oral communication among Muslim women

In oral communication women depend on what people tell them; they have limited access to wider information. Therefore oral communities appoint authoritative and well-respected people to pass on important information and to teach the appropriate customs and traditions, along with tribal taboos. Illiterate women cannot take a book, magazine or newspaper to check for themselves whether the freshly taught information is right or wrong. They rather follow the advice of trustworthy people in the hope to stay out of trouble or get help. Since men often do not value the opinion of women they do not like to teach them or have them taught, and women hardly dare to ask them for advice.

**Why teach illiterate women?** Are they not intellectually limited and unable to learn?

On the contrary most illiterate women are quite intelligent, teachable and eager to learn, only that as oral communicators they have different learning preferences, which we have to be aware of, when sharing new information, and especially if we want to share the Gospel with them. Unfortunately, being illiterate often includes a low “literacy rate” in religious knowledge too. They usually live by “hear-say”, and blindly believe what their sheikhs, imams or religious leaders teach them. To learn new things makes them insecure, suspicious and afraid of the consequences.

On the other hand illiterate women can have a well respected place in society, in guiding and holding up the rules of the community, because wisdom does not depend on formal schooling.

**Remember: The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.**

Where I work most of the orally communicating women are not fanatical Muslims. Does that mean, that religion is not important to them? Not at all! Religion is for many women a way of protection, a sense of belonging, a form of security and a firm place in society. It’s like having a roof over your house. They pray more or less regularly, but preferably in the “designated” environment at home.

The influence of animism is very strong and women are brought under its spell in large numbers. Elderly women of the society, called “holy women”, go around and often enforce their traditions on girls or young mothers in harsh ways, demanding their allegiance and obedience to it, without questioning it.

Many of these traditions are rather cruel: starting with birth rituals, initiation rites, marriage customs. Female genital mutilation, merciless treatment of various sicknesses or diseases. Stories of how to keep their husbands faithful or get out of trouble are swallowed with the “mother’s milk” (Examples: ‘holy’ ink water, ‘powerful urine’, repetitious recitation of Allah’s names).

Religion, traditions and strong family ties affect the married woman. There is no “leave and cleave” in Muslim families. Therefore a woman usually keeps one foot in her own family, always ready to bring in the other foot as well, if the married life gets too hard.

These three aspects, **Religion, Animism (or Traditions) and Family ties** must be taken into consideration, if the gospel is to take hold and become rooted.

## **2. Understanding the deepest needs and desires of a Muslim Woman**

**2.1 The first need** is of course **her husband's love**, which she wants to have for herself and for herself alone. Therefore it is so important, that she presents her husband with the children he wants (esp. boys). The Muslim wife tries to give her all to see her husband satisfied with her, and yet it happens so seldom. The husband – who is granted enormous freedom in Islam – is often encouraged to think wider than monogamy... to be satisfied with only one wife is laughed at by many of his so-called friends. The wife's concern to win her husband's love at any price can often have the opposite effect. ('Don't let it get into your head that you'll be the only one!')

**2.2 The second deep need** is the desire for **social recognition**. Her external appearances play an important role: dress/outfit, jewellery, hair-style etc. These are signs which indicate to everyone around her, how well her husband "loves" her and cares for her. She is even willing to go into debts in order to maintain this image. When the husband marries another woman, the wife feels deeply wounded and her self-esteem is shaken.

Her greatest fear is that of being divorced. If that should happen she will lose her children, her home and her social status. *Obedience to her husband promises her entry into paradise.* (Barriers for the Gospel)  
The happiness of any Muslim wife (educated or illiterate) depends on the fulfilment of these needs; and they go to any length to achieve these.

## **3. Finding stepping stones or bridges to reach Muslim women**

Muslim women are not so engrossed in following the "right beliefs" or the "right religion". They are interested in how to survive the struggles of their daily lives.

- They long to be loved, recognized and accepted.
- They wish to have faithful husbands, obedient and successful children.
- They fear being divorced, or having to endure a co-wife.
- They fear losing their status, respect or honour.
- They fear the power of "jealousy curses" or the "evil eye" put on them by neighbours or even relatives.
- They fear the gossip in society and the shame that brings to the family.
- They fear sickness, death or disability of a child or relative.
- They long for God to be close and to be forgiven.
- They desire to understand their own book, the Qur'an.
- They would like to listen to the Word of God, the Bible and its true life stories.

Where Muslims and Christians live side by side, Christian women have many opportunities of sharing their lives with Muslim women. In building relationships they will start asking questions such as:

What magic does the Christian wife use, to keep her husband faithful to her?

Why is the Christian woman not fearful of the "jealousy curse" or "evil eye" of her neighbour?

How can she be sure to be forgiven and where she will go when she dies?

### **3.1 Use of stories as a "gentle way to the hearts" of women**

Illiterate Muslim women listen all day to stories spread by their religious women and men. They look out and long for stories of hope. Equip yourself with stories, which could be applicable to the life of your Muslim neighbours and friends.

As Muslims earnestly desire explanations to understand the Qur'an, and are also allowed to listen to previously revealed Scriptures, we can boldly share God's Story with them... Therefore:

### **3.2 Communicate the Stories of the Bible - show the real life struggles, successes and failures.**

- Struggles and strife in a polygamous household with two wives:
- Lea and Rahel, Hannah and Penninah
- Problems of not being able to have children - Rebecca, Hannah (Medina needing a son)
- Problems of being a refugee woman, being abused - Hagar...
- Mothers losing children through violence - Cain and Abel
- Problems of favouritism in the family, between husband and wife;
- Esau and Jacob, Jacob and Joseph
- Problems of disabled or handicapped children - Mephiboseth

All these problems are not foreign to Muslim women. But they often know no other way, than to visit shrines, get help from witchdoctors, shamans or other “dark sources”.

A very appropriate story is “Hamid and Kinza” by Elizabeth St. John set in rural Marocco. It is the touching account of an unfortunate girl born blind, and how God cared and provided for her, rescuing her from merciless traditions.

### **3.3 Make traditions or religious zeal working for the good of the Gospel**

**Turn their practice** of memorization and recitation of the Qur’an in Arabic –“the eternal language of the eternal book” - into a steppingstone of sharing the Gospel.

As the recitation of the Qur’an has to be in Arabic, illiterate people are also learning to memorize the Qur’an in the Madrassa classes (Surah 1 – Al Fatiha is a minimum for most). But as this is in Arabic it’s not something they can understand or converse in. Even if one is memorizing the whole of the Qur’an, it is not a matter of understanding, rather a matter of getting the blessing from learning and reciting it aloud.

**Capture the desire** of learning scripture and teach them the “Living Word”.

**Use the common “rote learning pattern”** (prevailing even in formal education) to teach scripture verses to women. Memorizing scripture helps women to understand the truths of the Word of God.

*There is great power in learning scripture by heart.*

## **4. Strategies for reaching illiterate Muslim women**

**4.1 Build personal relationships** with Muslim women for the sake for the Gospel. They need to trust you, before they truly listen or accept what you are sharing with them.

**4.2 Keep an open home.** Let Muslim women be part of your life. Share your struggles in life, how you learned to cope with them and where you get the strength and wisdom from.

### **4.2 Pray that God will enable you**

- to engage in deep conversations and meaningful stories of the Bible.

- to avoid too many lengthy conversations that do not lead to a discussion of God’s word.

- to rather seek focusing on some of the following topics and meaningful ways of sharing:

**Personal subjects** like suffering, abortion, ritual and spiritual purity, impurity and its consequences (not being able to say the prayers) Ex. Nigeria, blind ladies group...!

**4.3 Use the Chronological Storytelling approach** starting with Genesis through to the life of Christ, laying a good foundation of *Who God is, who Man is, what Sin is, and how Man can relate to God.*

Chronological Storytelling is “Telling God’s Story” in full. With it you give the listener time to build relationships and trust, time to process and to think, and slowly experience a change of their worldview as well as their religious view:

*God is near, God sees, God hears and answers, God can be trusted, God is holy* – has to punish sin by death, *God is merciful* and prepared a way out. *God is love*, man is a sinner from birth. **Include**

- **Biographies from the Bible:** Life stories, they can relate to. Muslim women identify with many people in Genesis: Abraham, a friend of God?  
Ruth and Hagar: Unifying problems of refugees, abuse, exploitations, attitudes towards sufferings, God’s intervention, nearness and comfort in time of need. (Mother-in-law).
- **Sharing the life of Christ** with reference to Old Testament prophecies. (Use pictures)
- **Studies of a Gospel:** Luke or Matthew are especially helpful because of the Genealogies, The appearance of angels (or reference to OT-fulfilment – in Matthew)

### **Example of an evangelistic Bible study:**

Numbers 21: 4-9 Bronze Serpent – this is an account, not just a nice story.

The People of Israel were travelling with their Prophet Moses, trouble came...

Instead of fasting and praying, they were protesting and grumbling.

Their relationship was broken through ingratitude.

God sent his punishment – severe and deadly – the poisonous snakes.

God showed *one* healing opportunity only – looking at the lifted bronze serpent

People could be saved by God’s way only – healing through faith – believing in His word.

### **Parallels between OT-stories and John 3, 14-17**

God can choose how He saves -God is great!!!

Noah and the Ark - He saves one family!

Moses and the raised serpent - He saves one nation!

Jesus lifted high unto the cross - God's chosen way to save the world!

**4.4 Using Tapes and Tape Recorders** of Language Recordings Intl., with their visual aids, The "Look, Listen and Live" Flipcharts and booklets, or the laminated CBS-picture series.

**4.5 Show Films of OT stories** Abraham, Josef, 10 Commandments etc. (Life Ministry has many) Show the Jesus Film in their mother tongue. Use C.S. Lewis "Narnia stories"- films (BBC), and other Christian films.

**4.6 Encourage memorization of the Bible** with applicable verses:

John 17: 3, Rev. 3: 20, John 14: 6, John 8: 12, John 11: 25, Matth.11: 27-28.

Challenge those wearing charms with a choice: should one secure the Word of God around the neck or in the heart?

**Our Goal:** to help to "read" or memorize the Bible (or Verses) in their *heart-felt language*. This *understanding* becomes powerful, esp. for people who have never understood their *own holy book*.

God's word is a seed... *One Mediator between God and Man...* 1.Tim.2:5

**4.7 Songs and Poetry** are other ways of learning God's truth by heart. Sister Rebekka teaches the wives of the Nigerian Emirs Christian, biblical songs and poetry she wrote herself. These women keep singing and storing *eternal values in their heart*. They ask many questions on her return visit.

**4.8 Penetrate whole communities** through:

Literacy classes, Sewing classes, Schools and **introduce the "CBS"** to these groups.

In project groups women meet with their "ordinary activities" over a longer period of time, which provides you with the opportunity to teach them right through the Bible.

If it is announced at a Christian project, make it *compulsory to be present during the Bible lesson*. Usually they like the stories, since they are very close to their lives. Stories do touch their hearts.

Women usually remember stories well, because they identify thoroughly with the people and happenings in the story... In a project they can talk, share and help one another to understand the deeper meaning. It becomes a community effect.

**4.9 Train illiterate** Christian women to share the stories with others – let them be co-labourers. Don't despair, even if **teaching oral communities takes a long time and needs lots of repetition**.

**4.10 Use Dramas, Object lessons, Picture books**, (make your own pictures), **Quiz** with rewards.

**4.11 Pray with women:** Pour out your heart before God for their sorrow, problems and pain.

Let them see and experience: God is near, God hears, God answers, God is my personal friend through Jesus Christ and He wants to be their friend too.

In Sura 1 they pray: "*lead me the straight way!*" **Christ is the WAY** - to become a friend of God!

Let us not relapse into the old paradigm of "gender-blind missiology". Remember the powerful influence given to the weaker sex:

**If you reach a man, you reach a man,  
if you reach a woman, you reach a community!**

**Questions to discuss:**

**What do you find the most difficult part as a literate communicator in sharing with an oral communicator? (generally and spiritually)**

**What are some helping forces, stepping stones or bridges, which make it possible or easier to share with oral communicators in your area or people group? (Muslim women or men)?**

**What other strategies are you using in your oral communication outreach? Could you share them with the group?**

**What are you applying in your group already and what was or is new to you?**