**Unacknowledged Heroes: The Gospels and Obstetric Fistula**

**By Sean Goan**

In this reflection two different worlds are put briefly side by side. On the face of it they have little in common, but the hope is to allow them to meet and for both to benefit from the encounter. One is the first century world of the **Gospels**, and the other is the world of **obstetric fistula** in the 21st century.

**First Century – 3 unnamed women in the Gospels**

Let’s begin in the first century and the stories of three unnamed women who find themselves excluded. We, quite rightly, read the Gospels to find out about the person of Jesus but the stories aren’t just about Jesus they are about the people who impacted on him!  
In Mark 5:24-34 we are told the crowds are following Jesus, milling around and pressing in on him. In that crowd there is a woman, anonymous, unnoticed who carries with her a story of exclusion that has lasted twelve long years. She has impoverished herself in the effort to be cured of her condition which, in the story, is called a flow of blood. Nothing more is said and scholars discuss what her condition might be but what is clear is that it has rendered her marginalised. Yet in the midst of the mayhem, she is the one who will stand out. She does not come forward seeking pity from Jesus, she doesn’t even want to meet him. She simply wants to assert her right to be there, and to be healed. And it is for this that she becomes the hero of the story. She is the hero because she insists on reaching out when Jesus doesn’t even know she’s there! Jesus for his part wants to know who has touched him and on finding out he simply says to her “your faith has made you well, go in peace…” She is commended for her faith, her faith not simply in Jesus’ power to heal but her faith in her own dignity as a human being who may not be just cast aside due to cultural or religions norms that would deprive her of her place in society. The good news that Jesus proclaims is that everybody matters and her faith in that truth makes her the hero in this encounter.

Just a little further on in Mark we come to another remarkable encounter where once again an unnamed woman emerges as the hero. This time she is a foreigner (Mk 7:24-30) and does not share Jesus’ religion. Yet, like her companion in the earlier story she knows her need and will stop at nothing to be heard. The shock here is that her appeal is rejected by Jesus, apparently on religious grounds – you are not Jewish! Yet she will not be put off, she will not accept being defined by religion and she once again asserts her dignity and worth and the value of her little daughter’s life. Her faith in who she is and the rightness of what she seeks brings about a healing outcome. Jesus is as much impacted by her as she is by him!

In one further story this time from Luke yet another unnamed woman refuses to be simply labelled and marginalised (Lk 7:36-50). There is high drama in this report of a woman “who is a sinner” breaking into the male preserve of the dining room and showing deep affection for Jesus by washing his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. The story does not tell us what her sin is and for the purpose of the story it does not matter. The men are horrified at this breakdown of social and religious convention but Jesus quite simply affirms the woman as the hero by saying once again, “your faith has made you well, go in peace”. Her stance towards him is in stark contrast to the men who had invited him in the first place. It is her faith in her God given human dignity that gives her the courage to make this breakthrough and assert her right to be there.

Three women, three heroes, all of them asserting their right to be heard and to take their place in a world that would refuse them.

Now, to the 21st century and three more women.

**21st Century The stories of Pembar, Sojina and Jamila**

***Pemba*** was called “ndoki,” or “witch,” by her community, including her father and siblings. ***Sojina*** felt like a prisoner in the room she was banished to, forbidden to step outside even to worship. ***Jamila***’s career as an early childhood development teacher came to an end.   
All three women had undergone prolonged, obstructed and agonizing labour. All three lost their babies. And all three developed [obstetric fistula](https://www.unfpa.org/obstetric-fistula), the childbirth injury that left them leaking urine and faeces and rendered them pariahs in the only homes they knew.  
Each year between 50,000 to 100,000 women worldwide are affected by obstetric fistula, an abnormal opening between a woman’s genital tract and her urinary tract or rectum. The development of obstetric fistula is directly linked to one of the major causes of maternal mortality: obstructed labour. Women who experience obstetric fistula suffer constant incontinence, shame, social segregation and health problems. Most fistulae occur among women living in poverty in cultures where a woman’s status and self-esteem may depend almost entirely on her marriage and ability to bear children. It is estimated that more than 2 million young women live with untreated obstetric fistula in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

**Where the Gospels and the realities in the 21st Century merge**

Can the world of the Gospels speak to these women and their plight and also to those who support them – Most definitely yes! The Gospel affirms their right to take their place in society and to benefit from whatever treatment that will resolve their medical condition. It speaks to the importance of faith and courage in the face of exclusion and rejection. This faith is not simply in a higher power “out there” that can work miracles but also and perhaps more importantly faith in themselves and in a God who validates their struggle to thrive as human beings whose lives may not be diminished by societal, cultural or religious norms that enslave and belittle them. The Gospels urge them to have the courage to step forward and claim their right to be seen, heard and cherished as children of God and those same Gospels demand of the faith community that we do all in our power to assist them.

( for more see: <https://www.unfpa.org/news/three-women-three-stories-picking-pieces-lives-broken-obstetric-fistula>; <https://www.who.int/news-room/facts-in-pictures/detail/10-facts-on-obstetric-fistula>)

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