



The Hidden Face of Persecution:

The Targeted Abuse of
Christian Women Worldwide

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Summary

Religious persecution is not gender neutral. Instead, persecution is tailored to target people at their most vulnerable. This has a disproportionate impact on women and girls.

Over a number of years, Open Doors has conducted research which shows that Christian women and girls are doubly vulnerable to persecution. Women are targeted because of their gender and because of their faith. Gender-specific persecution is widely used to repress the Christian community because:

- it blends in
- it is low risk to perpetrators
- it is highly effective.

The persecution targeted at men is more easily recorded and monitored. Persecution against women and girls is hidden, complex and violent.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) noted in his August 2013 report: “Discrimination based on stereotypical roles of men and women is one of the most widespread human rights violations worldwide. It can assume cruel forms and deprives many women and girls of their rights to life, freedom and respect for human dignity.”

Across countries hostile to Christianity in Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, sexual violence is often a crime of ‘opportunity’ that takes advantage of the overall marginalisation of the community.

In Asia, Christian women are trafficked as ‘brides’ because of the existing socio-economic vulnerabilities of communities; in the Arabian Peninsula, households quietly exploit Christian maids; in sub-Saharan Africa, raiding militias regularly attack women in Christian villages or abduct them for a life of sexual slavery.

Without an awareness of gender-specific forms of religious persecution, these methods of undermining the church are often overlooked. If house arrest or sexual violence is not understood as a common means of targeting Christian women and girls because of their faith, then it is unlikely to be recognised as persecution. This lack of awareness is directly related to inaction and ineffective solutions. When not recognised as persecution, these incidents are processed as ‘normal’ within their relevant cultural context – leaving the church vulnerable.

Hidden, complex and violent

Targeting women is low risk for persecutors, while also having a devastating impact on the whole church. Preventing women from freely raising their children as Christians is an effective means of controlling the Christian population. Attacking women creates a ripple-effect of shame, intimidating the whole family and spreading fear in the community. The nature of persecution against women is hidden, complex and violent.

HIDDEN

Within society. Women are not always safe in public. In some societies, women may be restricted from the public sphere or find that those who attack them get impunity. In societies where women from higher classes are expected to stay at home, it can be more dangerous for women to walk on the streets. Women can be expected to operate invisibly in the public sphere because their presence can be regarded as a provocation. Girls may be attacked when walking to school or fetching water, working in fields or even using toilets outside the home. Christian women are more vulnerable as a result of being both a part of a minority religious community and female. Eighty-four per cent of persecution against Christian women involves sexual violence, and 64 per cent is physical violence in the top 50 countries of the 2020 World Watch List.

Within homes. Persecution against Christian women often takes place quietly within a family, conducted by the very people a woman would turn to for love

and trust. Forced marriage and sexual violence can take place under the cover of respectability. Societal conventions and the concept of honour can prevent women from speaking out about their suffering, because of the potential impact on their family and community. While 84 per cent of the top 50 World Watch List countries cite forced marriage as a characteristic means of persecuting Christian women and girls, only 40 per cent of those same countries could trace verifiable incidents in 2020.

Within the data. Persecution targeted at men is more easily recorded and monitored. Robust research into the persecution experienced by women is often inhibited by strong beliefs that it is men's responsibility to provide for the physical safety of women. When women are attacked, men may be reluctant to give corroborative evidence, because they believe it implies they have failed to protect their family. Women may hide the details of their attack so as not to shame their family. If a woman

CASE STUDY

In India, 15-year-old Tara* lived in the same house as her family, completely rejected by them because of her faith in Jesus. She wasn't even allowed to use the kitchen, in case she polluted the food and water with her 'unclean faith'. Rejection is a common experience for new Christians when they choose to follow Jesus; if a family has come to faith together, they may be rejected by their community. For lone believers like Tara, the pressure is even greater. "Nobody speaks to me. I am estranged in my own home," she said. Thankfully she now lives safely elsewhere.

**name changed for security reasons*





shared her experience with a patriarch, he may be likely to advise her to keep quiet about attacks for fear of bringing more difficulties on the family, such as discrimination at work or being prevented from sharing the community resources. This was shown in Open Doors' 2020 report on gender-specific religious persecution, in which most countries' respondents mentioned that women and girls were particularly subject to sexual violence as a form of persecution, and yet known incidents were not officially recorded with the same frequency as sources indicated.

COMPLEX

Persecution targeted against women and girls is complex, partly because it abuses the existing vulnerabilities of Christian women. For example, a woman who has not received education as a child may not be aware of her rights when she faces persecution. Lack of economic agency means that if her husband dies, then a woman becomes incredibly vulnerable as a widow. For example, Rikiya, from

“When I came back, it was not easy for me. I was a widow with three children. I was so traumatised: my husband had gone, and Boko Haram had captured our village. We had nothing except the clothes on our body.”

RIKIYA, NIGERIA

PICTURED ABOVE RIGHT, WITH HER CHILDREN

Nigeria, lost everything when Boko Haram burnt her village to the ground. She escaped with her children, but faced alienation when she returned as a widow. Without the economic support of her husband, she had no means of providing for her family.

VIOLENT

Violence can be used as a weapon of war against women and girls, it can be legitimised within a forced marriage and it can corrode relationships by bringing shame on an entire community.

Sexual violence can be closely linked to a society's concept of dishonour and therefore used intentionally to dishonour the woman, her family and her community. Women who have suffered sexual violence may not receive the compassion and help they need for to recover from their trauma, but instead be stigmatised and alienated from their community.

Forced marriage can give the appearance of respectability and status, but can in reality act as a contract for ongoing sexual violence from which the woman cannot escape. It can also be a way of punishing a Christian community, by not allowing a Christian woman to raise her family in the religion of her choosing. For example, Christian women in Myanmar do not have any legal protection and are pressured into following their husband's religion. According to the Buddhist Women Special Marriage Law introduced in 2015, a non-Buddhist husband must respect his wife's practice of Buddhism. No such protection applies for Christians, however.

Sexual violence in Asia is often a crime of 'opportunity' that takes advantage of the overall marginalisation of the community.



Persecution across the regions:

ASIA

Sexual violence in Asia takes place in various country-specific contexts, yet a connecting theme is abduction and the exploitation of 'opportunity'. In Afghanistan, for example, sexual violence commonly occurs within the context of war. In North Korea, instances of rape are reported to occur daily within concentration camps. In China, prison officers have allegedly raped women. The country that had the greatest number of references to sexual violence was India, reflecting a rise in the persecution of Christians observed in a recent report.

In countries neighbouring China, Christians are caught in webs of human trafficking. China's one-child policy is notorious for leaving a gender imbalance. This is making it difficult to find a bride to provide a family for the next generation to continue the family name. The ramification of this policy now interacts with the vulnerability of Christian communities in places such as Myanmar. There, vulnerable Christian communities are preyed upon by honourable-sounding offers of marriage for their young women. These women are being trafficked as 'brides' into China. In a country in Asia, which cannot be named for security reasons, experts reported that a major prostitution ring smuggling Christian girls to China for fake marriages has been busted. Illegal matchmaking centres have lured poor Asian girls, especially Christian girls, to marry Chinese men visiting or working in Asia.



CASE STUDY

Nima*, a tribal Christian girl, was sold into slavery when her family were displaced due to regional violence. Already vulnerable due to her faith, persecutors took the opportunity to target her and 60 other girls because of her gender. She was beaten, drugged and raped multiple times. After she was rescued, the police initially refused to register her case. **name changed for security reasons*

AFRICA

Pressure points that are particularly high for women in Africa include being denied access to social community networks, being physically harmed, being forced out of the home, and being denied custody of children. Within African society, which places strong value on community and the family unit, these represent a very public form of persecution and a visible cutting off from all key social and familial relationships. Combined, these forms of persecution are very effective at destabilising communities and claiming the identity of the next generation.

In sub-Saharan Africa, this tactic of destabilising communities through gender-based violence is used intentionally by jihadist groups. This is because the violence in sub-Saharan Africa is often linked to a myriad of jihadist groups aiming to create instability. This is also made possible by the many 'weak' or failed states in sub-Saharan Africa. These same raiding militant bands regularly attack or abduct the women in Christian villages for a life of sexual slavery. Whether perpetrators rape and leave a woman to the fate of the community, or return her after several years, Christian communities often feel that she, and any resulting children, are now identified with the enemy. In Central African Republic, the social ostracism has historically extended to calling her a 'Seleka woman'; in Nigeria, babies born of rape might be called 'Boko babies' by the remaining community.



CASE STUDY

Esther (PICTURED) was abducted by Boko Haram when she was 17. She was forcibly married and says that so many men raped her when she was held captive, that she lost count. When she returned to her community, she was pregnant with her daughter Rebecca. But instead of receiving a welcome after her ordeal, Esther was shunned by her friends and family. "They called my baby 'Boko'," she says.

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Sexual violence and incarceration by family members were mentioned by 84 per cent of countries in this region. Within a society defined by an honour/shame culture, persecution happens behind closed doors. Women are vulnerable in the United Arab Emirates as domestic violence and marital rape are permitted without legal consequence. As 'inferior' members of society in need of male guardianship, tribal society also affects the level of persecution experienced by female converts from Islam to Christianity. A female convert to Christianity will face immense pressure from her family who will try to force her to convert back to Islam. If she does not, an imam may be called in to convince her of her 'sin', or she could be placed under house arrest, or sent to a psychiatric hospital. Even if a Christian man were willing to marry her, a woman from a Muslim background would be legally prevented from marrying a non-Muslim. In Egypt, Coptic Christian girls are being targeted by kidnapers and forcibly married to Muslim men. Often their documents are forged and they are sentenced to a life of persecution in a domestic disguise. The abductors are seldom arrested or prosecuted. Sometimes the police even help the kidnapers, bringing fear and vulnerability to the whole church community.



CASE STUDY

Jamila grew up in a Muslim family, but became interested in Christianity through a friend. She wanted to become a Christian herself, but could not because of the threat to her life from her family. "If I believe that Jesus is God, they will kill me," she wrote.



Recommendations

Open Doors' vision is that every woman persecuted for her faith and gender is seen, valued and empowered. Open Doors partners deliver projects around the world that meet the specific need of persecuted Christian women. Whether that means humanitarian relief for Iraqi refugees, trauma care in Nigeria or political advocacy in India, each project aims to restore the hope, dignity and identity of vulnerable Christian women.

However, in order to ensure that this issue is adequately responded to, **we must all play our part.**

There is an urgent need for the plight of vulnerable Christian women to be recognised and supported.

To Parliamentarians:

Open Doors believes that the UK Government can play an important role in addressing the specific vulnerabilities experienced by women from religious minority communities around the world. Open Doors urges the UK Government to:

1. Recognise their hidden vulnerabilities in policy
2. Support short-term projects that empower and meet their specific needs
3. Influence long-term change to cultures of discrimination and fear.

Please write to the Secretary of State for International Development, asking DfID to:

- Include targeted programming and aid for women who face double vulnerabilities as members of minority faith communities
- Include religion as a factor of vulnerability in any assessment made in planning and programming
- Ensure that sensitivity relating to the international right to FoRB is integrated into gender-related and anti-discrimination programmes.

Please write to the Foreign Secretary highlighting what you have read in this report and asking the FCO to:

- Fund social media projects which produce and promote content that challenges the notion that women from religious minority backgrounds are second-class citizens whose rights are not equal to other citizens
- Strengthen existing and develop new training programmes to help women from religious minority communities understand their rights in countries where the prevailing culture fails to recognise and uphold these rights
- Explore opportunities to support security forces to better protect women from religious minority communities in societies where they are persecuted.

To church leaders:

- Openly address the extent and severity of violence against persecuted Christian women in your church community
- Galvanise your church to pray and advocate on this issue.

To members of the public:

- To influencers: Use your platform to publicise this complex yet crucial issue to your audiences
- To Open Doors supporters: Pray for Christian women who are doubly vulnerable to persecution, and take part in campaigns that advocate on their behalf.

> For more ways to take part in Open Doors' campaign to See. Change. for persecuted women, go to www.opendoorsuk.org/seechange



PERSECUTED WOMEN SEE. CHANGE.

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