



# Hidden, Violent, Complex:

The Double Vulnerability  
of Faith and Gender

# Introduction

The right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is foundational to all other human rights. The Open Doors World Watch List 2021 report reveals the alarming rate by which FoRB abuses are increasing in more than 50 countries worldwide, with at least 340 million Christians persecuted for their faith.<sup>1</sup>

But religious persecution is not gender-blind. Gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP) occurs when religious vulnerability compounds existing gender vulnerability. This double vulnerability increases both the risk and impact of a violation of the right to FoRB for Christian women. Consequently, it often represents a bridge of the UK government convention commitments to both FoRB and gender equality.

Whereas Christian men experience persecution that is typically focused, severe and visible, Christian women experience persecution that is hidden, violent and complex.<sup>2</sup> Due to the double vulnerability of Christian women and the hiddenness of their persecution, millions of women and girls suffer in silence. Without an awareness of gender-specific forms of religious persecution, these methods of undermining the Christian community are often overlooked and lead to ineffective solutions.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated these existing overlapping vulnerabilities. GSRP rose to the highest level this annual study has ever recorded, with women often experiencing higher potential for risk than men.<sup>3</sup>

Women in Top 50 World Watch List countries			
Rank	Pressure Point	2021	2020
1	Forced marriage	90%	84%
2	Violence – sexual	86%	84%
3	Violence – physical	84%	64%
4	Violence – psychological	74%	40%
5	Forced divorce	70%	64%
<b>5% increase in pressure points since 2020</b>			
<b>Average number of pressure points per country: 9.5</b>			

Results from the 2021 Gender-specific religious persecution report by Open Doors International.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Open Doors World Watch List Report 2021", Open Doors UK, 2021

<sup>2</sup> Fisher, H., Miller, E., "Gendered Persecution: World Watch List 2018 Analysis and Implications," World Watch Research, March 2018 Available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/gender-specific-persecution> (Password: freedom)

<sup>3</sup> Brown, E., Fisher, H., Miller, E., Morley, R., "Same Faith, Different Persecution: WWR GSRP 2021," World Watch Research, March 2021 Available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/gender-specific-persecution> (Password: freedom) A full methodology and findings can be found in the report cited.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



**COVER PHOTO** Amina has suffered ongoing persecution at the hand of Islamic militants in Nigeria. In 2012, Boko Haram killed her husband. Then, in 2017, Boko Haram kidnapped her and she was held hostage for eight months. Since her release, Open Doors partners are supporting Amina's family and provided essential food items during Covid-19.

# Hidden

## WITHIN SOCIETY

Women are not always safe in public. Girls may be attacked when walking to school, fetching water 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.

In honour-shame cultures, such as India, many of the methods used to persecute women result in stigma.<sup>5</sup> For example, rape victims are often viewed by society as sexually impure. Their future prospects are severely limited and they may even face rejection from their community. The shame and stigma component is one of the reasons that rape is used as a tactic of religious persecution.

## WITHIN THE HOME

Persecution against Christian women often occurs quietly and unseen within a family, conducted by the very people a woman would turn to for love. Forced marriage, house arrest and sexual violence can take place under the cover of respectability and socially normalised behaviours. It is therefore an effective tool for persecutors as it blends into societal practice and is low risk.<sup>6</sup>

Ninety per cent of the top 50 World Watch List countries cite forced marriage as a characteristic means of persecuting Christian women and girls, usually to pressurise converts to return to the family religion.

## WITHIN DATA

Persecution targeted at men is more easily recorded. The persecution of women is often enabled by strong beliefs that it is men's responsibility to protect women.<sup>7</sup> 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 to not shame their family. If she did share her experience, her family may advise her to keep quiet for fear of bringing more difficulties on the family, such as discrimination at work or being prevented from sharing the community resources. Staying silent prevents damage to a family's reputation.

Furthermore, most government data collection methods do not show female-specific freedom of religion or belief violations; instead, they aggregate incidents against both genders.<sup>8</sup>



## CASE STUDY

In India, 15-year-old Tara\* was imprisoned in her own home by 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

<sup>5</sup> "Behind Closed Doors," Open Doors International, 2021

<sup>6</sup> Fisher, H., Miller, E.L., Mayer, E., "Gender-specific Religious Persecution: Analysis and Implications," World Watch Research, March 2020

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "Behind Closed Doors," Open Doors International, 2021

# Violent

## HIGHER POTENTIAL FOR RISK

GSRP 2021 research shows that violence has increased by 31 per cent for Christian women,<sup>9</sup> typically sexual and psychological violence. This means Christian women face a higher potential risk of certain forms of violence than men.



## SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Christian women continue to face sexual violence at alarming rates. In 2020, 70 per cent of the countries that reported sexual violence indicated that it was 'moderately widespread'.<sup>10</sup> Countries facing persecution in the form of 'Islamic oppression' are more likely to report sexual violence. Sexual violence can be overt, for example Christian women being abducted and used as sex slaves by Boko Haram, or

under the guise of forced marriage.

Sexual violence can be closely linked to a society's concept of honour 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 to recover from their trauma, but instead be stigmatised and alienated from their community. The damage is not only experienced by the woman, but by her family and community who also suffer from the broken relationships with her.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

Psychological violence has increased by 85 per cent for Christian women and by 18 per cent for Christian men.<sup>11</sup> Psychological violence includes the pressure to renounce one's faith or the trauma that Christians experience after an assault.

Due to a lack of protective legal frameworks and social stigma, many women and girls struggle to find and receive legal or therapeutic support after an assault. An atmosphere of impunity enables persecutors to target women with both physical violence, and the immediate and ongoing psychological violence. The rise in psychological violence may, in part, be linked to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has shed a new light on religious persecution.

## CASE STUDY

Jihan, from Egypt, was dragged through the street and beaten up by a group of neighbours. The attack was initiated by her Muslim neighbour who hates Christians and wanted Jihan and her son, who were the only Christians in the street, to move away. The neighbour had been shouting insults and threatening to rape Jihan for a long time. Jihan went to the police many times and they advised her to set up CCTV cameras to verify her accusations. But installing the CCTV seemed to be the motive for an attack. Jihan was badly bruised and had several swellings in her body because of the attack. The perpetrators were arrested but shortly after released again.



<sup>9</sup> Brown, E., Fisher, H., Miller, E., Morley, R., "Same Faith, Different Persecution: WWR GSRP 2021," World Watch Research, March 2021

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

# Complex

## COMPOUNDING VULNERABILITIES

Persecution targeting Christian women is complex, because it abuses their compounding vulnerabilities. For example, a woman who has not received an education may not be aware of her rights when she faces persecution. Lack of economic and social agency mean that, if her husband dies, then she becomes incredibly vulnerable as a widow.

The data indicates that across the World Watch List countries, Christian females experience a greater breadth of pressure points than men<sup>12</sup> (with the exception of Latin America). With such a multiplicity of potential pressure points for women, the religious persecution dynamic is complex: an event in one area of vulnerability can produce a knock-on effect in other areas.

## A MEANS TO DESTABILISE THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

Women can be targeted and used as pawns by persecutors to bring down the whole community. By abducting Christian women and forcing them to convert, the future generation of the unwelcome Christian community is put in jeopardy. Forced marriage, for example, undermines both the development of Christian families and the raising of children as Christian. Daughters of pastors are often targeted in order to weaken the core of the church community. Targeting women as the reproducers of an 'enemy' community is a classic tactic to target a whole community.

It is widely known that rape can be used as a weapon

of war.<sup>13</sup> Women's bodies become the second battlefield; if the enemy 'captures' the women of a community, it demonstrates to the men that they were unable to 'protect' them and so exerts dominance. In the midst of using these women as pawns, of course, real women are violently abused.

## TRAFFICKING IS ON THE RISE

Trafficking as a form of religious persecution continues to pose a threat, particularly in Africa and Asia.<sup>14</sup> The recurring geopolitical phenomenon to exploit minority communities in conflict situations is well documented.<sup>15</sup> Traffickers commonly target forced migrant populations, making Christian refugees particularly vulnerable.

For females, trafficking is not a stand-alone pressure point, but rather one affiliated with the other pressure points, with each one relying on the value of a woman's sexuality. Traffickers often attempt to cloak the associated sexual violence behind a claim that the girl is now married, which is often a forced marriage or a marriage resulting from targeted seduction.



While the form and prevalence of trafficking varies considerably by region, the data consistently indicates that both trafficking and its affiliated pressure points effectively weaponise women's bodies to restrict the growth of the Christian population.<sup>16</sup>

## CASE STUDY

**Peninah (PICTURED ON P.6) was only 24 when her husband, Paul, was murdered by al-Shabaab in Kenya. The men were lined up, and the attackers demanded they recite the Islamic creed. As a Christian, Paul didn't know it and so they shot him. Peninah was deep in grief, and yet her in-laws refused to support her. She was left as a single mother to a two-year-old, with no means of getting income: "Life became hard. I struggled because I was alone; I became dependent with no one to help me. Even food was a challenge to get." In Kenya, as with much of sub-Saharan Africa, widows are at the bottom of the hierarchy.**

<sup>12</sup> Brown, E., Fisher, H., Miller, E., Morley, R., "Same Faith, Different Persecution: WWR GSRP 2021," World Watch Research, March 2021

<sup>13</sup> UN Security Council 1820 (2008)

<sup>14</sup> Brown, E., Fisher, H., Miller, E., Morley, R., "Same Faith, Different Persecution: WWR GSRP 2021," World Watch Research, March 2021

<sup>15</sup> OCHCR Report, 2014

<sup>16</sup> Brown, E., Fisher, H., Miller, E., Morley, R., "Same Faith, Different Persecution: WWR GSRP 2021," World Watch Research, March 2021

# Covid-19

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## HAS EXACERBATED VULNERABILITIES

Covid-19 has been another weapon in the hands of the persecutors and has exacerbated existing structural vulnerabilities for Christian men and women alike. For Christian women, their double vulnerability has only increased.

## HAS CAUSED A 'SHADOW PANDEMIC'

During Covid-19, there has been a significant rise in domestic and sexual violence, which is tied to pre-existing gender-based vulnerabilities. The UN has labelled this rise in domestic violence a 'shadow pandemic' and recognises that gender vulnerability is amplified by forms of fragility, such as discrimination on the basis of faith.<sup>17</sup> Since Christian women face persecution that is typically hidden, the impact of the pandemic is particularly worrying.

## HAS MADE THE VULNERABLE EVEN MORE VULNERABLE

In the Gulf region, lockdowns have reduced the number of people on the streets, making it both easier to target Christian women and girls, and harder to recover them. In Mozambique, the economic impact of Covid-19 on already poor families and day labourers pushed underage girls into forced marriages to 'guarantee food for the family'.

## Men and boys

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Forms of persecution and discrimination targeting men and boys often include physical violence, economic harassment at work and imprisonment by the state. Indeed, men are more likely to die for their faith than women. The persecution is more likely to be visible because incidents commonly occur in the public sphere. They are targeted according to perceived gender roles such as community and family leaders, financial providers, and protectors. Men in church leadership roles are also particularly vulnerable.

<sup>17</sup> "The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19." UN Women, 2020. [www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19](http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19) [Accessed January 26th, 2021]; "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women". United Nations, April 9th, 2020. [www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy\\_brief\\_on\\_covid\\_impact\\_on\\_women\\_9\\_april\\_2020.pdf](http://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_april_2020.pdf) [Accessed January 26th, 2021]

## CASE STUDY

In early 2020, 19-year-old Lucina\*, was drugged, whilst walking home. She was abducted, forcibly married, and repeatedly raped and abused. The persecutors attacked her to target her father and stop him from carrying on with his ministry as a Christian evangelist. He was an even greater target as he had converted from the majority state religion.

Lucina was lured in by a young girl who pretended to be her friend and study partner. Lucina caught a ride with her and her brothers who ended up being Lucina's captors. They locked her indoors, and one of the brothers forcibly married her. While she was still under lock and key, he raped and abused her, threatening her daily. She tried to escape once but was caught, only worsening her persecution.

Meanwhile, Lucina's family were looking for her, but, as Covid-19 lockdown hit, they were suddenly prevented from going anywhere and had to stay home. One day, Lucina managed to call her family as her captors left for a moment following the lockdown. A police rescue operation meant that Lucina was rescued, and her captors were arrested and charged for rape. Later and once safe, Lucina found out she was pregnant. For her, it meant her experiences were ongoing and she suddenly had to face stigma as well as perceived permanency of her persecutor. Lucina and her family continue to face persecution from the local community as well. They have been mocked, threatened and attacked for continuing to be Christian.

\*name changed for security reasons



**As we consider International Women's Day on 8 March 2021, please remember the millions of Christian women suffering in silence today for both their faith and gender.**

Sign the parliamentary joint letter to Dominic Raab MP, Foreign Secretary, and Elizabeth Truss MP, Minister for Women and Equalities. This letter calls on the UK Government:

- 1. To publicly and explicitly acknowledge that religion is a vulnerability in gender-based violence.**
- 2. To practically support, counsel and re-integrate persecuted women who are stigmatised by sexual violence, abduction or forced marriage.**
- 3. To support and resource the Prime Minister's Special Envoys for: Freedom of Religion or Belief, Fiona Bruce MP; and Girl's Education, Helen Grant MP, to work together to address the persecution of women and girls for their faith.**

Open Doors will deliver this letter to the Ministers on 31 March 2021. Please email [advocacy@opendoorsuk.org](mailto:advocacy@opendoorsuk.org) to sign the letter or for more details.

**PICTURED** Peninah was practically and spiritually supported by Open Doors partners after al-Shabaab killed her husband.



**OpenDoors**

**SERVING PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS WORLDWIDE**

**[opendoorsuk.org](http://opendoorsuk.org) | [advocacy@opendoorsuk.org](mailto:advocacy@opendoorsuk.org)**

Open Doors UK & I, PO Box 6, Witney, OX29 6WG

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