

The Persecution of Christian Women and Girls

OPEN DOORS PARLIAMENTARY REPORT



COVER IMAGE Ruth was abducted by Boko Haram and forcibly converted. You can read more about her story on page 9.

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Introduction

The right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) continues to be under attack around the world. Christians are one religious minority among others who suffer violations of this right. Open Doors' World Watch List 2022¹ reported that 360 million Christians face high to extreme levels of persecution, the heaviest levels on record.

An effective strategy behind this alarming statistic is gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP). Persecutors strategically target men and women from religious minorities in different ways, in a bid to destabilise the whole community. As such, GSRP occurs when religious vulnerability is compounded by existing gender vulnerabilities. Christian women, for example, suffer a greater breadth of persecution than Christian men, as they are particularly vulnerable to attack both for their faith and gender.

While Christian men experience persecution that is typically visible, severe and focused, Christian women experience persecution that is hidden, violent and complex. This can be seen in the strategic targeting of Christian women and girls by persecutors, and in the use of tactics that camouflage persecution in wider society, which often leads to the compounded vulnerability of faith and gender being overlooked by those seeking to offer assistance.

Global crises such as Covid-19 and the conflict in Afghanistan have exacerbated GSRP tactics as they exploit existing faith and gender vulnerabilities. It is therefore vital that gender-specific forms of religious persecution are adequately recognised, otherwise millions of Christian women and girls will continue to be forgotten and suffer in silence.

Statistics

In this research, GSRP is quantified by measuring exposure to persecution in various areas of life (or pressure points). These pressure points cover economic status, political and legal rights, and

social or cultural pressure, as well as basic physical security. The average number of pressure points for each gender per region featured in the top 76 countries in the World Watch List 2022 is listed below:

	Male	Female
Sub-Saharan Africa	5.7	10.8
Middle East and North Africa	5.5	10.6
Asia	6.3	6.9
Latin America	10.1	5.1

Pressure points for women in top 50 World Watch List countries		
2022 rank	Pressure point	Percentage of World Watch List 2022 countries that reported occurrences of this pressure point
1	Violence – sexual	90%
2	Forced marriage	88%
3	Violence – physical	78%
4	Violence – psychological	78%
5	Incarceration by family (house arrest)	66%

¹ Open Doors World Watch List 2022: [Serving Persecuted Christians Worldwide - World Watch List 2021 - Open Doors UK & Ireland](#)

Targeted: A strategic means of destabilising the whole community

The first aspect that must be understood about GSRP is that it is not accidental. Instead, persecutors strategically target Christian women and girls to strike at the roots of an entire religious community. Persecutors see Christian women and girls as sexual objects and vehicles of shame.

In many societies, Christian women are widely viewed to be of lesser value, both as members of a Christian minority and as women. Persecution against women can be used as an attack on their religious community. As they are more vulnerable, they can be targeted specifically, as well as with more general forms of persecution.

Specific attacks on Christian women can directly jeopardise the future of the community itself, because women are often targeted as those who bring up the next generation, with the explicit purpose of stemming the growth of the Christian population while increasing the growth of others. For example, in countries affected by conflict in Central and West Africa (e.g., Nigeria, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Christian women and girls are at high risk of abduction. Once taken, they are then forced to marry militants and bear children, who are used to boost the ranks of militant groups. Such forced marriage – and forced conversion – prevents the formation of Christian families, and children being raised as Christians.

Tragically, rape is used as a weapon of war, with women's bodies becoming almost a second battlefield in conflict zones. In addition, the capture of women is often used to demonstrate the dominance of persecuting groups because it suggests that men are unable to 'protect' them. However, in wider contexts of persecution, women's bodies are also used as vehicles for imparting shame on the Christian community – particularly where the sexual purity of women is bound up with ideas of family honour and of holiness. For example, in some areas, pastors' daughters are especially targeted to intimidate the wider Christian community.

In such situations where honour and shame are part of the culture, survivors' families and communities may struggle to overcome the stigma attached to the abuse of women and girls. Women and girls who have endured sexual abuse may return traumatised, but also be stigmatised, seen as a symbolic reminder of the power of perpetrators – especially if they return home pregnant or with young children.

This targeting of Christian women may also be concealed and exacerbated by wider socio-cultural beliefs about the status of women. Persecutors may use commonly held beliefs about men and women as opportunities to fracture communities through strategic attacks. For example, as noted above, women can be specifically targeted for sexual assault and abuse because of beliefs about purity and shame. Likewise, where men are seen as economic providers, men from religious minorities can face attacks on their businesses or ability to work (see section on men and boys: page 14).

Such strategic targeting of men and women has long-term traumatic effects, on the individuals persecuted as well as on their families and communities. Social and psychological fragmentation may in turn be made worse by the community's response.



Agnes was kidnapped and held captive by Boko Haram for two years. After her escape she thought she'd be welcomed home by her family, but instead faced rejection and shame because she was regarded as a 'Boko Haram wife'.

Hidden

The persecution Christian women and girls face is often hidden and camouflaged by societal norms. This contrasts with the persecution Christian men often face, which is visible, such as imprisonment and murder. Persecutors exploit vulnerabilities that women already face by using opportunities to persecute them in hidden and often domestic spaces, and against a cultural backdrop where the tactics used to persecute blend into a culture in which women are not valued and persecution is left unreported and unchallenged.

Often honour-shame cultures perpetuate hidden methods of persecution. Persecutors exploit pre-existing cultural inequalities to take opportunities to attack Christian women and girls, exploiting the prevailing stigma that keeps such acts concealed. Conflicts such as that in Afghanistan, as well as the pandemic, have been key factors in worsening hidden persecution against women. Against these backdrops, both Covid-19 and conflict further create opportunities to persecute Christian women and girls in hidden ways.

Forced marriage

Open Doors research shows that one of the most regularly reported means of putting pressure on Christian women is one which remains largely invisible: forced marriage.² Of the top 50 countries featured in the World Watch List 2022 that provided reports on gender-specific persecution of women, 88% cited this form of persecution. None reported its use against men.

Forced marriage often occurs without any opportunity for legal redress. As with other forms of persecution perpetrated against women, the practice is often hidden within wider inequalities. Christian women may, for example, live within a different value system (e.g., under some forms of religious law). In such a system, customs and traditions which are far from gender-neutral can be used against women for persecution and remain invisible.

The sexual exploitation of women and girls serves to stem the growth of Christian populations, while increasing that of other populations. In 2020, during the peak of Covid-19 around the world, the number one pressure point for women was forced marriage. The effects of forced marriage are devastating – especially in cultures where sexual purity is tied to family honour. Sexual violence, trafficking and forced marriage are regularly weaponised against Christian women and girls to inflict the wider Christian community. It is therefore important to highlight how in certain societies this form of persecution is a common phenomenon, yet completely unseen and invisible.

Research from this year found that forced marriage is often used as a threat, but in the rural areas of some countries it is a stark reality for some. In Central Asia, where 'bride-knapping' still receives general societal acceptance, converts can be forced into marriage with a Muslim man. The abduction and sexual violence of religious minorities is also endemic within local communities, such as in Pakistan where men seek out underage Christian girls for marriage and forced conversion. Consequently, it is common that victims of abduction are trapped with their abductor who, by producing a certificate of conversion, can easily win the favour of the local court.

House arrest

The house arrests reported in Open Doors research are largely family enforced and, as such, are another mainly invisible constraint on Christian women and girls. House arrest 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 yet remains a low-risk method.

the widespread use of house arrest; it was reported as an issue for Christian women from Muslim backgrounds in all MENA countries. Other means of isolation, such as denying female converts access to churches or even their mobile phones, are also frequently carried out by male family members.

In the Middle East and North Africa, family members exert control over Christian women and girls through

Samida*, from Central Asia, was thrown out of her family home and instead told to live in the family's shed with the animals because of her Christian faith.

² Although widely used in policy discourse, the term 'forced marriage' remains problematic because marriage is a consensual union and the relational model is delegitimised by coercion.

At the age of 26, her family perceived her to bring shame and embarrassment on them for not being married or having children. She was physically abused in her home and even dragged into the central market by her mother to be beaten as a public sign of

their disapproval. Her family said there was no more room in the house, and it was better for her to live in the shed with the goats and cows, being treated like a slave. As a woman, Samida had no means and no freedom to go anywhere else.

CASE STUDY: **Lucina***



Lucina* is a 19-year-old woman from South Asia who dreamed of becoming a doctor one day. But that all changed in 2020, when extremists threatened Lucina's father, Boutros*, because of his Christian faith. At first, the extremists threatened Boutros directly. When direct attacks on him didn't stop Boutros, the extremists targeted his daughter.

At 9 o'clock one morning, Lucina was walking home after a tutoring session. A girl named Ghadaara* pulled up in a taxi beside Lucina. Ghadaara started a conversation about their studies and offered Lucina a ride home. When Lucina got into the taxi, she saw a few unknown men. But Ghadaara quickly offered Lucina some tea and cakes – a sign that she was an honoured guest. Unfortunately, after Lucina ate the tea and cakes, she fell into a deep sleep. When Lucina woke up, hours later, she was locked in a bedroom. Lucina cried out for help. But Ghadaara

shouted back: "You're never going home! You're married to my brother now."

While the rest of us around the world were in Covid-19 lockdowns, Lucina was also locked down, but as a prisoner in someone else's home, repeatedly raped in a false marriage. Months went by. Lucina's pleas for freedom were ignored. Then, lockdown was lifted in the region and Ghadaara and her brother finally went out for a short while. This gave Lucina the opportunity she had been waiting for. She carefully snuck out of her room and found a phone. Lucina called her sister for help and gave her the address. Her father Boutros rushed to the police station and the police were able to find Lucina. She was in a terrible condition – malnourished, mistreated, abused. She later discovered that she was pregnant – and was devastated. Lucina still dreams of being a doctor, but her future is uncertain.

*name changed for security

Violent

One of the most common ways Christian women and girls are vulnerable to persecution on account of their faith and gender is through violence. Violence can be physical: a force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something. Alternatively, it can be psychological: a strength of emotion or of a destructive natural force.³ Open Doors 2022 GSRP research highlights how the mechanism used to target and persecute Christian women is through using them as sexual objects and vehicles of shame. Violence is used to not only harm marginalised women but also as a means of punishing, destabilising and shaming Christian families and communities.

Although Christian men typically face more severe and even lethal violence, the insidious violence faced by women tends to be invisible and long-lasting. It is deliberately carried out where it will not be seen, and the stigma and psychological impact that follow only worsen the persecution. Sexual violence and forced marriage have consistently ranked as the top two vulnerabilities for Christian women and girls in the last five years of Open Doors research.⁴

Women and girls as sexual objects

Christian women continue to face sexual violence on a large scale. Women are targeted as a sexual 'prize' and as an instrument used to punish or harm the wider Christian community. Incidents of sexual violence against Christian women and girls were reported in 90% of countries that sit in the top 50 of Open Doors' World Watch List 2022. Meanwhile, 62% reported abductions and 24% reported 'targeted seduction' or grooming.

the guise of forced marriage where Christian women are forced to convert. In sub-Saharan Africa, being kidnapped, raped and forcibly married by jihadist groups is a well-founded fear shadowing Christian women and girls.

Sexual violence can be overt, such as Christian women being attacked and/or abducted to become sex slaves or be trafficked, or it can be covert, under

Christian women and girls are vulnerable to being trafficked as brides particularly within Asian countries, or sexually enslaved by extremist groups in sub-Saharan Africa who view them as trophies of war and providers of future fighters.

Women and girls as vehicles of shame

Sexual violence is also linked to a society's concept of honour and therefore used intentionally to undermine and dishonour a Christian woman, her family and her community. In some cases, because women and girls are viewed to be of less value in society, both as Christians and as women, they become easier targets for sexual crimes, such as in Afghanistan.

Christian women and girls also experience psychological violence. Psychological violence includes the pressure to renounce one's faith or the trauma that Christians experience after an assault. Women who have experienced these forms of violence do not have easy access to appropriate support for recovery and reintegration into society, especially where this stigma and shame lead to alienation from their communities. An atmosphere of impunity enables persecutors to target women with both physical violence, and the immediate and ongoing psychological violence, which not only affects her but the wider Christian community.

Conversely, in Latin America, Christian girls are targeted for sexual violence due to their perceived sexual purity. Whether women and girls are viewed as pure or worthless, their bodies become a vehicle for imparting shame on the Christian community, and the social stigma serves to prolong the effect of persecution.

³ Definitions from [Oxford Languages and Google - English | Oxford Languages \(oup.com\)](#)

⁴ [Invisible: The Gender Report 2022, Open Doors International](#)

CASE STUDY: Ruth*



Ruth*, now 22, is not one of the Chibok girls, but she too was kidnapped in 2014 aged just 14 when Boko Haram attacked her village in Adamawa State, north-eastern Nigeria.

During her time in the camp, she was severely abused in an attempt to convert her to Islam. It became unbearable for Ruth, and she decided to accept Islam in the hope that things would get better. She was married off and fell pregnant with her first child a year later. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months and months into years, but no one came to rescue Ruth. That does not mean she stopped looking for a way out.

“Every time I washed my clothes at the stream, I tried to figure out a way to escape,” she shares.

Her chance came one sunny Wednesday afternoon when the men had left the camp, possibly to carry out attacks, and left the women and children unguarded.

“That day in 2017, God showed me a way and He gave me the courage to run. I placed Samaila on my back and fled. I didn’t look back.”

Ruth was reunited with her family and began the long road of healing and processing her trauma with assistance from Open Doors.

*name changed for security

Shalom Trauma Centre, Nigeria



The Shalom Trauma Centre is an example of a local faith-based programme that directly responds to the compounding and violent persecution faced by women for both their faith and gender.⁵ Founded as a project in 2014, and officially opened in 2019, Shalom Trauma Centre operates as a hub for a variety of psychosocial services for Christians affected by violence in northern and central Nigeria.

The centre hosts residential retreats for Christian women and girls who have experienced severe trauma after being targeted with violence because of their faith and gender. The women, who are known to staff as ‘survivors’, have all suffered attacks, rape or kidnapping by Boko Haram fighters or Fulani militants.

The trauma centre is open to about 15 guests every week. The guests receive in-depth care through a programme specifically designed to respond to their experiences. The trauma programme offers guests a variety of psychosocial services such as counselling and sessions that teach about grief and how to understand their trauma as minority Christian women. It also offers participation in group activities, as well as a safe haven where the women can simply rest, heal and recover. At the centre, women are relieved from the pressures of daily life in their homes.

The trauma centre is led by female counsellors who are themselves survivors of violence and have since been trained in how to combat trauma as religious minority women. Not only do they have their own first-hand experience of trauma from these vulnerabilities, they also understand the cultural, religious and communal nuances of the situation in Nigeria, and are aware of why such suffering exists and how to deal with it in an appropriate manner.

As Christian women living in Nigeria, the religious element of the violence and extremist attacks are central to their experience. Christian women and girls are also often targeted in Nigeria to impact the wider community and reach local pastors who are seen as central to the spread of Christianity. Tailoring the programme to address these vulnerabilities is vital to seeing transformation in the lives of these women personally and for their neighbourhoods as they go home.

“Most of the women were very sober when they first came,” explains Tirham*, a trauma counsellor at the centre. “They couldn’t relate very well; they were so quiet. But after the trauma programme and healing period, we could see how they were dancing and singing very happily. In the night you could hear them singing. This place is like a refuge. A refuge place where people come with their hurts, and you walk with them for a while. After working with them for five days or one week, you see their faces change – there’s a glow on their face.”

Other services organised by Shalom Trauma Centre are offered through an extensive and growing network of churches and trained church members, referred to as ‘caregivers’, throughout the country. Dozens of pastors and 150 church members offer psychosocial support to people in their communities, identify severe cases for referral, and raise awareness about trauma and mental health needs resulting from violence, and about the subsequent impact on community resilience and economic development. They lead sessions at theological institutions and with healthcare providers, and engage with NGOs and local government to build a dialogue around restoring community resilience in violence-affected communities. Shalom Trauma Centre has national leadership and a strong network of staff, volunteers and promoters.

⁵ As is also recently highlighted in [The Faith Actor, Open Doors International](#).



Survivors receive care at the Shalom Trauma Centre in Nigeria

*name changed for security

Complex

The tactics employed against persecuted Christian women and girls often exploit their complex and multifaceted vulnerabilities, as many are victims of long-standing discrimination and denial of rights. This lower status of women in many countries covered by our research means that they may be

dependent on male family members, and especially vulnerable if separated from them. It also means that women will be affected even more significantly by crises facing the whole community, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Denial of rights

Women and girls are often more vulnerable to persecution because of long-standing discrimination or inequality. Patterns of discrimination, harassment and violence are built into the structures that shape daily life across the world. For example, persecution in the Middle East and North Africa occurs against a backdrop of legal and social discrimination, which in turn enable heightened levels of maltreatment.⁶ In many other countries of concern, women and girls have reduced legal rights to begin with and perpetrators of violence may act with impunity.

have been a persistent threat to minorities. Forced marriage, house arrest and rape are all used as tools for forced (re-)conversion, particularly against women and girls from a Muslim background. Such entrenched inequalities mean that escape is not straightforward.

In other parts of the world, acts of violence then compound existing inequalities. For example, in nations within and neighbouring the Sahel belt, girls' access to education is restricted due to an inability to provide security. This reduced access to education for girls in turn makes Christian women in the region more vulnerable.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, systemic gender inequalities and a culture of honour and shame

Deprivation of support

Against this background of inequality, women are often more reliant on male family members for support. The persecution and killing of these family members worsen the situation for women. For example, by targeting men who are church leaders, fathers and financial providers, persecutors inflict pain on the whole Christian community. By recruiting men into militias and criminal groups, families and communities are left traumatised and defenceless (see section on men and boys, page 14).

intimidate their male relatives. For example, in Mexico, there are reports that female family members of Christian leaders are targeted by criminal gangs.

In addition, women and girls are affected as men flee situations of persecution. While many women and girls flee Latin American countries, it is primarily young men that depart to seek economic opportunities, including men from Christian families and communities. Left alone in countries such as Venezuela, women and girls are at increased risk of prostitution. State support is not a viable option, given that most government services are only offered to those who belong to the ruling party.⁷

In some regions, such as Latin America, the power of drug cartels and criminal gangs creates opportunities for the persecution of women and girls, sometimes to

Disproportionate impact of crises

Existing discrimination and deprivation of support from male relatives both mean that women are disproportionately vulnerable to crises. Sadly, these crises have not been hard to find over the last year. This can be seen, for example, in the ongoing impact

of Covid-19 and measures to counter it, or in the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. In such crises, women and girls from religious minorities are especially vulnerable.

⁶ *Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/2022: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women*. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2021.

⁷ *El Sistema Patria, una nueva estructura de control social en Venezuela*. *El País*, April 20, 2021.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, opportunities to harm members of Christian minorities (both men and women) have grown. Jobs have been lost, violence has increased and Christians have been used as scapegoats, even being blamed for the virus in some countries. While pandemic restrictions were introduced around the world as protective measures, millions of people became more vulnerable overnight. According to a UN report, women have experienced consistently higher rates of physical, sexual and emotional abuse since the pandemic began.⁸ Meanwhile, Christian converts are often punished

harshly by their families if their newfound faith is discovered – and have been particularly vulnerable in lockdown.

Likewise, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has been catastrophic for women from religious minorities. Under the Taliban's all-male, highly conservative Islamic government, women from religious minorities, such as Christianity, are especially vulnerable.⁹ Christians now fear for what lies ahead.

CASE STUDY: **Zabi***



"I grew up in Afghanistan, my family are secret believers. A few years ago, the Taliban came, and they took my father away because he was a Christian. They tortured and killed him. A few months later my brother also disappeared. We never heard of him ever again.

When the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021, my mother and I managed to escape to another country. Our situation is desperate. We

don't have food or extra clothes. I have money in my bank account, but I can't access it from here. My visa will expire soon. What will happen to me?

I am praying I can leave this country and go somewhere safe. I may have to go into hiding or I will be deported back to Afghanistan where I may be killed. I feel alone and hopeless. I feel depressed. If I'm honest, how are my mother and I going to live?"

*name changed for security and illustrative image used

⁸ [COVID-19 and violence against women: What the data tells us](#). UN Women, November 24, 2021.

⁹ [Transcript of Taliban's first news conference in Kabul](#). Al-Jazeera, August 17, 2021.

Men and boys

While this report focuses on the persecution of Christian women and girls, gender-specific religious persecution is also highly relevant for men and boys across the world. Our research shows that in all regions, Christian men and boys risk being abducted, imprisoned, beaten, falsely accused, or forced into the ranks of militias or criminal gangs.

Christian men face more severe violence and are also more likely to be killed for their faith, with those involved in church leadership being particularly vulnerable. In Latin America, efforts by church leaders to assist those addicted to drugs and involved in gangs can lead to threats and violence against the leaders. "It's a simple principle," shares an expert in India, "kill the leader and win the battle."

In Latin America especially, Christian men and boys are exposed to persecution in far more areas of life (or pressure points) than average, according to Open Doors World Watch Research.

Persecutors exploit socio-cultural norms on the differing value and purpose attributed to men and women. As financial providers and leaders, men in such contexts are often denied work opportunities. In targeting men, the persecutors inflict pain on the wider Christian community. Meanwhile, a boycott of one man's business or a false accusation can leave a whole family destitute.

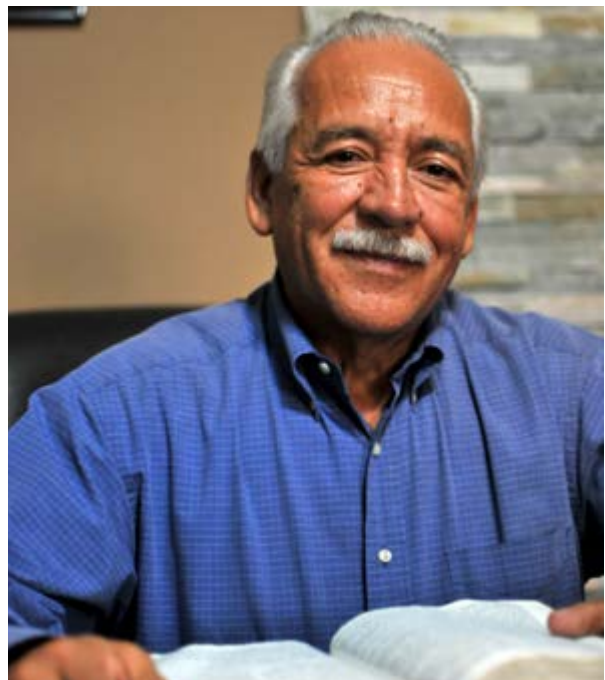
Burdened by economic pressures exacerbated by Covid-19, Christian men may struggle to find work, to be recognised for promotions or to set up businesses without facing additional hurdles. Being unable to provide for his family is a source of shame for men, which drives many to migrate away in search of opportunities, further fragmenting Christian communities.

Male converts to Christianity are often despised in the eyes of their community. As men, they are expected to lead their family in all respects – including in religious belief and practice. By converting to Christianity, a man is seen as betraying his family, culture and community. In the best case, his family may tolerate his faith if he keeps it quiet. In the worst-case scenario, he will be ostracised, beaten or even

killed by extremists, community members or even his own family.

Within a context of ongoing political instability, corruption and criminal activity, it is young men who are most at risk.¹⁰ Persecution may also take the form of recruiting men into militias and criminal groups or abducting and killing them. For example, in Afghanistan under the Taliban, Christians fear what lies ahead. Men and boys are being forcibly recruited into its new army.¹¹

In the most extreme circumstances, even boys may be swept into the hands of militias or killed at the hands of extremists. According to an Afghan church leader, "It's just an obvious thing that they're [the Taliban] going to take all of your kids... and the boys; they have to go to be re-educated in madrasas and definitely they will be trained as [Taliban] soldiers forcefully."¹² Meanwhile, in Mexico, teenage boys are forcibly recruited into criminal gangs who force them to carry out criminal activities, including killings and drug-running.



In Mexico, Pastor Eduardo Garcia was murdered in broad daylight. His son Abraham was also killed by cartel violence nine years previously and his daughter Griselda had been kidnapped and held to ransom.

¹⁰ For more information, see: [Same Faith, Different Persecution](#). Open Doors International, March 1, 2021. pp. 10. [password: freedom].

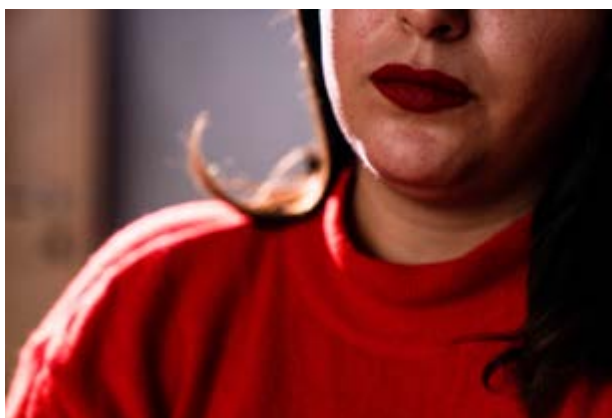
¹¹ [Taliban to build new army in Afghanistan](#). The Portal Centre, October 26, 2021.

¹² [ICC interview with Afghan church leader, referenced in Afghan Christians Face Terrifying Future Under Taliban](#). CBN News, August 16, 2021.

Conclusion

This report shows that persecutors specifically target Christian women, both to strike at the roots of a Christian community and to exploit the vulnerabilities that stem from socio-cultural attitudes towards women, whether that means viewing them as of lesser value or as vehicles of shame around sexual purity. Such targeted attacks have existential implications not only for individuals and families, but for entire Christian communities. These communities may also struggle to respond well to the trauma inflicted on Christian women.

The persecution of Christian women around the world also reveals specific and common tactics used against them, to exploit their vulnerability. The persecution of Christian women is hidden, violent and complex, whereas the persecution of Christian men is often visible, severe and focused. We highlight many hidden forms of persecution that have grown against women from religious minorities – such as forced marriage and trafficking.



Sarah*, from North Africa, faced persecution in her home being beaten and then thrown out when her father discovered she was a Christian. She was left incredibly vulnerable without the protection of her family. Sarah's persecution was hidden, violent and complex. Her story is one of many religious minority women and girls across the world who face gender-specific religious persecution.
*name changed for security

We set out the different forms of violence to which women from religious minorities are subjected, including physical, sexual and psychological. At the same time, local faith-based programmes such as the Shalom Trauma Centre in Nigeria show examples of good practice in responding to the persecution of Christian women, taking seriously the distinctive threats against them.

It is also clear from our research that the persecution of Christian women is not simply a series of isolated acts of violence, but part of a wider context that renders response more complex. This wider context may also camouflage specific attacks within a broader situation of discrimination. Persecution often compounds a broader denial of rights, or strikes at the precarious situation of women who are dependent on male relatives. The heightened vulnerability of religious minority women also means that they suffer disproportionately from crises, such as the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan or the global Covid-19 pandemic.

The hiddenness and complexity of the persecution of Christian women that we have identified presents a real risk: that the suffering of these women may simply be overlooked or forgotten by the world, even by those trying to provide assistance. In addition to global advocacy on human rights (e.g., FoRB) and support for gender equality around the world, the UK must directly address cases where women from religious minorities face a compounded vulnerability.

It is our hope that the research in this report will contribute to this response, and will provide a resource for all in the UK who are concerned about gender-specific religious persecution around the world.

Recommendations

2022 will see great opportunities for the UK as it seeks to promote global human rights, including the rights of women from religious minorities. For example, this year the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro on the persecution of Christians and the response of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) will be scrutinised by an independent reviewer, and the UK will be hosting the International Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief in July.

The fifth recommendation of the Truro Review urges the FCDO to 'bolster research into the critical intersection of FoRB [freedom of religion or belief] and minority rights with both broader human rights issues (such as people trafficking, gender equality, gender based violence especially kidnapping, forced conversion and forced marriage) and other critical concerns for FCDO such as security, economic activity, etc. recognising the potential for religious identity to be a key marker of vulnerability'. **We recommend that the Government set out what progress the FCDO has made in responding to this recommendation, and what research the FCDO plans to undertake in the future to address these issues.**

We welcome the commitments that the UK has already made to promote gender equality and address discrimination around the world. In its 2021 Spending Review, the Government announced increased funding to support women and girls, with a particular focus on ensuring access to education. **We recommend:**

- **that this spending include targeted programming and aid for women and girls who face vulnerabilities as members of minority faiths, with faith clearly recognised as a factor of vulnerability;**
- **that the UK ensure meaningful participation by women and girls who have faced vulnerabilities as members of minority faith in design,**

assessment and implementation of these targeted programmes.

We also welcome the announcement by the Foreign Secretary of the Preventing Sexual Violence Against Women Summit, and the proposal to build a new consensus on sexual violence in conflict as a red line. **We recommend that the Government ensure that sensitivity to issues around freedom of religion or belief (and women from religious minorities) is fully integrated into this new consensus.**

We believe that the Government's commitment to defending women and girls from religious minorities should encompass all areas of foreign affairs, including our trade policy and our support for British businesses operating overseas, ensuring that the situation of religious minority women suffering discrimination is not forgotten. **Therefore, we recommend that the Government:**

- **consider any reports of gender-specific religious persecution as it negotiates and signs new trade agreements;**
- **continue to work with British businesses to ensure they do not become complicit in modern slavery or abusive labour practices rooted in gender-specific religious persecution and discrimination.**

For more information, please do contact us at: advocacy@opendoorsuk.org

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