

## 2021 Women's Campaign: Gender Specific Religious Persecution

In the recently published 2021 Open Doors World Watch List<sup>1</sup> of facts and trends relating to the persecution of Christians globally, it was noted women and girls are particularly vulnerable because of their faith. Gender-specific religious persecution and discrimination occur when religious vulnerability compounds existing gender vulnerability. This double vulnerability increases both the risk and impact of a violation of the right to religious freedom.

### Issue in action

Christian men and women experience persecution in very different ways. In practice, Christian women, and men both face various pressures for their faith in different social, legal, physical or economic ways. Open Doors research shows that a significant issue is that for Christian women, there are more aspects where this pressure applies and then leads to persecution.

Our research shows that the persecution of Christian women is hidden, violent and complex. Over the last year, we have seen this issue not only continue but worsen as an impact of the Covid19 pandemic.

#### **This double vulnerability is: Hidden.**

Often women are forcibly married, imprisoned in their own home or trafficked for their faith. This form of persecution happens in the private sphere and is very difficult to tackle.

#### **This double vulnerability is: Violent**

Many persecuted Christian women experience sexual violence for their faith, especially in conflict situations. Increasingly, our research shows they have experienced psychological violence for their faith, including the stigma that often follows sexual violence.

#### **This double vulnerability is: Complex**

By having these multiple compounding vulnerabilities, persecuted Christian women often don't have the economic or social agency to be able to support themselves if their husbands have been killed for their faith, for example. Women are also often specifically targeted as a pawn to bring down the whole community, as they are the reproducers of the community.

#### **Covid-19 has only exacerbated this persecution.**

### Previous momentum

Open Doors field research has led us to campaign on this issue.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?\\_ga=2.170273248.1540654841.1612895267-1578016928.1578049733](https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/WorldWatchListreport-2021.pdf?_ga=2.170273248.1540654841.1612895267-1578016928.1578049733)

Initially we called on the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) to recognise faith as a vulnerability for sexual violence in conflict. Over 16,000 supporters signed their names to this campaign, culminating in the sewn fabric display of the handmade petition.<sup>2</sup>

We then published The Hidden Face of Persecution report<sup>3</sup> and asked the then Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Department for International Development (DfID) to recognise the specific vulnerabilities of persecuted Christian women and their often-hidden nature. Beyond this recognition, we addressed the need to offer immediate support through projects which support vulnerable women from religious minority communities, and long-term support through projects which tackle cultural climates that foster discrimination and fear.

It is encouraging to see that the UK Government does appear to show acknowledgement of this vulnerability now, for example, when doc was circulated throughout FCDO...

There is still so much to do in ensuring this double vulnerability is recognised and responded to in both policy and practice.

## What you can do...

- On the 26th of February, Open Doors will launch the 2021 Gender Specific Persecution Report and a policy briefing for UK Government on the findings highlighted above.
- Supporters will send this policy briefing and a video of the issue to ask you and their MPs to sign their name to a joint letter to call on the Minister for Women and Equalities and the Foreign Secretary about the below:

*In the recently published 2021 Open Doors World Watch List of facts and trends relating to the persecution of Christians globally it was noted women and girls are particularly vulnerable because of their faith.*

*This widespread injustice is often hidden, violent and complex. We thank the government for acknowledging this double vulnerability, and we are calling on the government to:*

1. *To demonstrate where religion is recognised as a vulnerability in gender-based violence.*
  2. *To practically support, counsel and re-integrate persecuted Christian 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.*
- In advance of sending this letter, we hope that there will also be a debate in Parliament giving focus to this issue and generating further support amongst Parliamentarians.
  - We will then send the signed letter at end of March.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/act/see-change/stitching-up-a-storm/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/2020-The-Hidden-Face-of-Persecution.pdf?\\_ga=2.118636874.2129794929.1613046936-1578016928.1578049733](https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/2020-The-Hidden-Face-of-Persecution.pdf?_ga=2.118636874.2129794929.1613046936-1578016928.1578049733)