



WWL 2019 Gender-specific religious persecution: Analysis and Implications

February 2019

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1. Executive Summary

Analysis of the World Watch List (WWL) 2019¹ Gender profiles of religious persecution confirms that global trends regarding religious persecution are gender-specific, broadly reflecting stereotypical gender roles of social context. Christian men are especially subject to economic harassment via business, work or job access, while Christian women in particular suffer sexually violent attacks.

Researchers found, based upon numerous field interviews in combination with detailed reporting on over 60 countries, that the experiences of religious persecution faced by Christian men globally is characterized as focused, severe and visible. In contrast, religious persecution endured by Christian women globally is characterized by being complex, violent and hidden.

Examination of the WWL 2019 gender-specific research reveals four key findings:

1. Socio-economic ostracism and severe physical violence facing Christian men severely strains Christian communities.
2. Sexual violence is widely used as a means of power and control over Christian women.
3. Female converts to Christianity are *especially* vulnerable to house arrest, forced marriage, rape, forced divorce, and denied custody of children, regardless of their religious background.
4. Forced marriage and military/militia conscription are the top pressure points most directly impacting Christian young adult women and men, respectively.

Further, there was notable repetition of certain contributing legal and social contextual factors, which constitute pre-established vulnerabilities that are then exploited by those working to deny Christian men and women the free expression of religion. As in WWL 2018,² the Gender profiles describe for both men and women dynamics that have the effect of diminishing or destroying the immediate victim's family and/or community through ripples of suffering.

2. Introduction

The study of gender-specific religious persecution focuses on the intersection between a person's vulnerabilities relating to their primary roles and identities according to their gender and their vulnerabilities as a Christian.

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief noted in his August 2013 report that "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."³ Additionally, "Gender stereotypes and stereotypical pictures of believers often exist in tandem, a problem disproportionately affecting women from religious minorities."⁴

¹ World Watch List 2019 is based on research covering the reporting period 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018.

² World Watch List 2018 is based on research covering the reporting period 1 November 2016 – 31 October 2017.

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/A.68.290.pdf>, p.10-11.

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/A.68.290.pdf>, p.5.

Based upon these socio-cultural constructs,⁵ Christian women and men both face various social, legal, physical, or economic pressures for their faith. We refer to these as “pressure points,” and have identified 35 such phenomena in the WWL 2019 Gender profiles of persecution.

WWL 2019 research concurs with the UN Special Rapporteur as specifically regards Christian persecution and discrimination. We observe that these socio-cultural constructs create vulnerabilities that disproportionately affect Christian women in their expression of faith.

3. Effects and tools of persecution common to both men and women

While the top three global trends for women and men contain no overlap, there a number of significant direct or indirect effects common to the persecution of both men and women. As in WWL 2018, two of the common effects remain trauma and economic disempowerment, and two often-shared pressure points are divorce and loss of custody of children. The WWL 2019 data emphasizes two further pressure points common to both men and women, which are shaming or shunning, and incarceration.

a) Shaming or shunning

With nearly the full count of 50 countries to draw on for the WWL 2019 reporting period, the salient pressure point affecting both men and women equally was the use of shaming or shunning as a tool of dissuasion from their chosen faith. Especially noted as a key pressure point for converts, shaming or shunning was mentioned as significant for men and women in 21 countries each, although those 21 countries reporting for women were usually different ones than were reporting this pressure point for men. Not surprisingly, this powerful means of social pressure was most often present in countries with a highly explicit honor-shame system.

b) Incarceration

One of the most fundamental means of restricting free practice of religion is incarceration of the individual for their religious (or non-religious) choice. Thirteen countries mentioned imprisonment by local or national governments of Christian men for their faith. Thirteen also mentioned for women incarceration by family (house arrest). While these are not technically one pressure point, we note the common effect on the believer - immobilization, no ability to take initiative, negative reshaping of their identity and isolation. As will be discussed below, there are strong structural reasons for why men and women are incarcerated by different actors, but in relatively equal measure for their faith.

⁵ We understand the stereotypical roles referred to by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief not as theological concepts but as functional places in society with associated power or limitations.

4. Male-specific religious persecution: Socio-economic ostracism and severe physical violence

With 46 respondent countries for men, economic harassment once again ranked as the primary pressure point used against men in religious persecution, followed by, in order, shaming or shunning, physical violence (including torture), government incarceration, and military/militia service/conscription. The WWL 2019 top pressure points for men are the same as those found in the WWL 2018 reporting period, although not in the same order. Religious persecution of Christian men continues to be channelled through a relatively few - but harsh - pressure points and resoundingly affirms that men are most vulnerable with respect to their roles as primary breadwinners and church leaders. Overall, the persecution of men can be characterized as focused, severe and visible.

a) Pressure points for men

i) Economic

The WWL 2019 data reveals even more clearly than in the WWL 2018 reporting period the extent to which economic harassment is, by a significant margin, the most frequent means of putting pressure on a Christian man because of, or in order that he renounce, his faith. Thirty-four of forty-six (74%) countries found that economic harassment was a characteristic means of putting pressure on Christian men, both converts and ethnic or traditional Christians. In addition, six countries mentioned the specific use of fines in order to further apply economic pressure on Christian men.

This intentional discrimination essentially takes two forms: Either preventing men from obtaining or retaining gainful employment, or discrimination that leads to exploitation and abuse. For some, it hits immediately upon a man's conversion and then continues, as the WWR researcher for Nepal described: "Christian men mostly migrate to new cities or areas, live under a new identity and are economically deprived in the first phases of persecuted life. In many cases, Christian men and boys are the breadwinner of the family. After being persecuted, the family often suffers through a reduced income as the men and boys are severely beaten and socially ostracized."

The shunning of Christian males (*which is the second most frequent pressure point for Christian males, as described below*) directly impacts the severity of economic harassment suffered. This is particularly difficult in rural areas where the only available livelihood is communal, as can be the case in Bhutan: "However, if male Christians lose their job, are excluded from the traditional way of farming or - in rare cases - are arrested, this affects the whole family as the men are usually the main breadwinners." The very human, communal nature of commerce outside of cities means that the personal identity - and the religious identity - of the worker or business owner is far more important than the produce or its quality as is evident in the WWR analyst's report on Egypt: "Particularly in rural areas, it is hard for Christian young men to find a job. Sometimes, Muslim shop owners openly call upon their Muslim customers not to buy from Christians. Some Muslims may believe that it is impure to eat food made by a

Christian. Unemployment is a great pressure on men over all the country, but especially in upper Egypt.”

This responsibility of being the sole breadwinner for their family is a recurring theme and constitutes such an accessible vulnerable point in a man’s life that it can make his livelihood the focus of repressive efforts of a whole family or community, as is described for the United Arab Emirates: "Most of the time, men and boys are breadwinners and therefore they have to face the brunt of discrimination to help their families."

ii) Shaming and shunning

The moral and social pressure of shame is devastating in and of itself; but, more often than not, shaming is accompanied by shunning, which means exclusion from a man’s most important relational and operational arenas. As noted above, this greatly impacts his role as primary breadwinner which, for many families is a literal survival question. However, the arenas affected also include family, society and markets because “male Christians are more prone to social discrimination since they spend more time in public life.”⁶

For converts, this religiously motivated ostracism often triggers an all-encompassing progression, as in Oman; “Most likely they will be ostracized by their families, resulting in wider social exclusion: i) Their families will not support them any longer; ii) They lose access to daily necessities normally provided by the family; iii) Finding a job will be harder in Oman's network-based society; and iv) No family will allow their daughter to marry a man who does not respect his own family.” Without social and economic communal support, it can be extremely difficult for a man to establish his own Christian household, even if he theoretically has the freedom to do so.

In other regions, where religious identity may be inherited, the impact on an individual man’s personal identity takes a significant toll, especially when linked to lifetime job prospects as is the case in Pakistan: “Christian men and boys are compelled to take lower status jobs and are considered impure. They are often referred to as ‘Chura’, a derogatory word meaning ‘filthy’ and which is used for road sweepers.” In such situations, the socio-economic sting lasts for multiple generations.

iii) Physical violence (including torture) and death

Physical violence was noted for 35% of countries providing a gender-specific persecution profile for men. Half of these paired the mention of violence with the inclusion of death as the ultimate step that actors in the country were willing to take to prevent a man from remaining a Christian in life. Not surprisingly, fear is a significant tool in this dynamic and an additional number of countries noted the psychological violence of ongoing threats of severe harm or death if the man insisted on holding onto his faith, even if these threats were not always carried out.

⁶ Open Doors World Watch List analyst, internal documentation, November 2018.

Sometimes, the combination of shame and socio-economic ostracism is a precursor to physical coercion, as described regarding Saudi Arabia, "Public shaming, isolation, physical abuse, losing all forms of help and access to community life. Promises of complete restoration and even offers of material reward will be made to encourage the convert to return to Islam. Such offers are made up to the point when the family realizes the convert will not change. At this point, the threat of death is very real for most male converts."

Somalia is particularly representative of global trends regarding the severity with which male converts are treated: "Men and boys were verbally abused, physically assaulted, businesses taken over, threatened with death, tortured, burnt alive and others shot to death. And this was when there was only a suspicion of conversion." Kenya also reported: "Boys and men in the wider north-eastern and Lamu areas are at greatest risk since the al-Shabaab militia specifically target them for beheading/killing. This was seen in the past during attacks on Christians in villages where only men were killed." As such, men are constrained in the free exercise of their religion since, even if they are ready to give up their own life for the sake of identifying as a Christian, they will think ahead to the impact on their children if they are killed for their faith, or are even simply discovered to be a Christian.

The express inclusion of torture as a part of characteristic physical violence occurs only with regard to men, except for the case of North Korea where both genders face this extreme violence.

iv) Government: Incarceration and conscription

A significant area of contrast between how men and women experience persecution is how likely they are to be imprisoned for their faith by the state. Globally, a third of countries surveyed cited the government as a persecuting actor for Christian men, via a state-permitted process of arrest, interrogation, legal charges and sentencing or indefinite imprisonment without charge, in contrast to 8% of countries for women. Several analysts connected government imprisonment with other pressure points, specifically violence and economic hardship.

In some areas, imprisonment is accompanied by both physical and psychological violence. According to one researcher for China: "In many cases, [men] held in custody for weeks or months and being treated harshly there, leaves physical and psychological trauma, so that (in some cases) continuing to work is out of question."

Analysts researching Iran specifically connect imprisonment with economic hardship. "When converting to Christianity, they risk losing their jobs, particularly if they have been arrested. This puts extra (financial) pressure on the families."

Government is also an actor of religious persecution of men via militia or military conscription or service against a man's conscience. This pressure point ranked immediately below government imprisonment for men whereas for Christian women it barely registered. While the militia segment of the combined militia/military category is

more regularly associated with radical religious groups or organized crime, the remainder is driven by governments that may also mandate that those legally required to serve must adhere to the national religion. This highly controlled environment is difficult in the extreme to navigate for Christian men in a regime that is hostile to their choice of religion.

b) Spheres and characteristics of male-specific religious persecution

The state is often a primary actor of persecution in men's lives, as revealed by the combination of ratings for the pressure points of "government imprisonment", "false charges", "economic harassment via fines" and, in some cases, military service. However, there are two exceptions.

The first is indicated by the high number of countries that mentioned the crucial role of shaming or shunning for men. In these contexts, control of men's beliefs is particularly devolved to the domestic and social spheres.

The second is the societies where the family or close community is the primary actor in severely restricting human rights for everyone such as in the tightly woven societies of Afghanistan, Somalia and Pakistan. Here Christian men are also subject to the intimate and socially enforced controls usually associated with the religious persecution of women. We note that when men have diminished human rights, their persecution by the community may include sexual harassment and abuse as well.

The above cannot be separated from the physical coercion or punishment that enforces the above. As already noted, the severity of physical dissuasion is harsh but not significantly more frequent in global terms as it was noted for only slightly more countries for men (16) than for women (15). In some countries, the non-sexual violence is understood to be harsher for men because of how the decision-making capabilities of the two are perceived: "In contrast with women, men are not seen as 'misguided', but as wilfully making wrong choices. Thus, their punishment is harsher and they are more likely to suffer physical abuse and torture" (Iran).

What is not ambiguous, and indeed a number of the previous quotes have mentioned, is the much broader ripples of damage caused when individual Christian men are targeted for their faith. This analysis is echoed in Iraq, emphasizing how it is particularly true for men who have chosen Christianity for themselves. "The loss of Christian men not only affects their direct families, but also the local church which consequently finds itself confronted with a lack of potential leadership. Overall, Christian men - particularly former Muslims - are in a very vulnerable position and struggle to sustain their families."

5. Female-specific religious persecution: Sexual violence as a means of power and control

With 49 respondent countries in WWL 2019 for women, the most frequent global pressure points used against them in religious persecution, in order of frequency, were sexual violence, forced marriage and rape. This order is slightly different than in the WWL 2018 analysis but equally reflects the extent to which a woman or teenage girl is most vulnerable with respect to

her perceived sexual purity and family status. The WWL 2019 Gender profiles and underlying data brought into greater evidence the interplay of “shaming and shunning” (which is now ranked 4th for women) with the first three pressure points and naturally explains the rise of “forced divorce” to 5th position.

When comparing the overall men’s and women’s lists of pressure points, there is a preponderance of mentions on the women’s side, which is to say one-third more across all countries than on the men’s side. This speaks to the volume of pressure points that an individual woman may face in her country, and circumstances which, in turn, imply a complexity in the experience of religious persecution. Further, in the top four frequency tiers of mentions, which is to say, four bands of mention occurrence over 49 countries, there are nearly twice as many pressure points for women as for men which show across a minimum of 22% of the countries surveyed.

As seen previously, the persecution of Christian women, when viewed globally, can be characterized as complex, violent and hidden.

a) Pressure points for women

i) Rape and other violence against Christian women

The WWL 2019 analysis of Gender profiles differentiates between seven categories of violence, of which two are rape and other forms of sexual assault. The remaining five are death, domestic, physical (including torture), psychological, and verbal violence. While the physical violence against men in a third of countries surveyed has been reported as severe, the combined collection of all forms of violence reveals over twice the number of mentions for women. In all too many countries, the experience of Christian women is one of violence, with the use of sexual assault and rape being the preferred method of attack across cultures. In 59% of countries surveyed, sexual assault was described as characteristic of religious persecution for Christian women and 47% reported that rape was also common as a means of attack related to a woman’s Christian identity or choice.

Sometimes this violence is sparked by other more straightforward pressure points, such as enforced dress codes: “Female Christians in the country face tremendous challenges. They are forced to dress like Muslims. Girls who are arrested for ‘indecent dressing’ often face groping and humiliation during interrogation” (Sudan). In other situations, where there is more freedom as to dress, women who do not follow the manner of dress of the area’s majority religion can be distinctly identified by a glance at their appearance. In such cases, it is rather simple for a hostile stranger to intentionally sexually harass a Christian woman “in passing” on the street or transport system.

Sexual violence used as a means of aggression against a woman of minority religion goes beyond what may be perceived as a common danger for women in a society. As described for Kenya, there is a specific intentionality linked to the women’s religion. “Christian girls and ladies ... are also forced to be very careful so as not to be waylaid and raped by Muslims. The female teachers in Muslim-dominated areas complained of

rampant sexual harassment from their male Muslim students and other Muslim men in the society. However, they also face the risk of death if found by the al-Shabaab."

Most of the time, rape and sexual violence are linked to the society's notion of honor, and, therefore, are intentionally used to dishonor the Christian woman and her community. As described by an analyst for Libya: "Women and girls are supposed to uphold high norms regarding their sexuality and will bring shame upon the family if they fail to do so. They are therefore prone to (sexual) violence, especially when they make choices not expected from them, such as conversion to Christianity."

Sometimes, however, rape is used as a deliberate form of punishment in reaction to conversion. The Libyan comment continues: "It has been reported that rape is sometimes used as a form of punishment." Sadly, the Libyan commentator was far from alone in the WWL 2019 interviews for recording the connection between rape and punishment in the context of female converts.

ii) Forced marriage and targeted seduction

Forced marriage remains one of the most regularly reported means of putting pressure on Christian women, yet it also remains largely invisible. Fifty-seven (57) percent of the countries featured in the WWL 2019 countries that provided reports on gender-specific persecution of women cited this form of persecution. None reported its use against men. Forced marriage tends to fall into two situational categories.

The first is that of a young Christian woman who is abducted from life in her Christian family and taken to the home of a dominant-religion family. All eight countries that mention abduction of Christian women in the WWL 2019 Gender profiles associate it with forced marriage or rape.

The second is that of a Christian convert whose family is displeased and feels dishonored at her personal religious choice. In this case, the parents will avail themselves of accepted social practices to place her in a family who shares their religion. Thus, the young woman's new husband becomes responsible for reversing her decision to become a Christian. "Although arranged marriages are not uncommon in Jordan, female converts are under additional threat to be married off involuntarily in an effort to retain family honor and bring the daughter back on 'the right path'" (Jordan).

Sometimes the lines between abduction and seduction with intent are blurred. In previous years, the practice in Egypt was highlighted; in the WWL 2019 reporting period, the targeted practice of enticing Christian women into interaction or relationship with young non-Christian men has also been described by the Kenya analyst. Christian women are reported to have been "lured or abducted into al-Shabaab camps inside the Boni forest or in Somalia, and held there as sex slaves, forced to become 'wives' of the militia or just 'breeders' of the next generation of fighters." The use of seduction or "luring" can be even more effective in destroying the young woman's identity since when she realizes that it has been a deceit; she will blame herself and make fewer efforts

to escape, because of the perceived loss of honor and reputation due to the sexual assault committed against her.

As will be discussed more amply below in Section 6b), it is not just local customs but also the state laws that make forced marriage more easily practicable in the case of converts, which is to say, at the Christian woman's family's behest. "Many of them are also forced into marriage with non-Christians. The fact that there are laws which permit under-age marriage in some states (as well the existence of cultural and religious norms that discourage girls from going to school) only contributes to this problem" (Nigeria). The existence of polygamy is also noted as a factor is facilitating the "placing" of young Christians who are deemed wayward, with an older man of the dominant religion to ensure that she not practice or hold closely to her new-found faith.

iii) Shaming and shunning

The equally powerful role of shaming or shunning for Christian women as for men in a religious persecution dynamic has already been highlighted in Section 3a) above. For Christian women, the use of "shaming or shunning", while having economic impact, is primarily aimed at her duty to uphold her family's honor either via her perceived sexual purity or via her continued adherence to her parents' religion.

The first case, of having her family's honor depend upon her perceived sexual purity, is particularly problematic for young Christian women. This is because they are not the sole actors who determine their sexual interactions. The frequency of targeted rape and sexual assault in female-specific religious persecution highlights the extent to which these women are held responsible for something over which they have little agency.

It is this inherent paradox that makes sexual assault WWL 2019's number one global trend for gender-specific religious persecution, coupled with the fact that the shaming creates ripples to the extended family so that they feel obliged to remove her from their midst. An analyst for Afghanistan elaborates, "... any time a woman is 'put away' it is a matter of honor and shame and the family is looked down upon." Prospects for survival of the whole "tainted" family are compromised when shunned in a society where every aspect of life is communal.

The second case is quite the opposite in that it denies a Christian woman agency over her own thoughts and beliefs, which the Declaration of Human Rights says she has freedom over, namely to exercise her freedom of religion. The Christian woman is again placed in an untenable situation relative to her family, which in countries like Saudi Arabia can have severe and direct consequences, "In the strict Islamic Saudi society, women are closely monitored. They need to uphold the family's reputation - any undesired behavior can harm their family's honor, which is considered a mortal sin."

Often, however, the consequences of shaming come over time in a process that eventually leads to financial vulnerability and from there, the spiral of damage continues. The dynamic in Nepal is fairly typical of the progression. "Christian women and girls are subjected to physical violence but initially they are usually emotionally

pressurized by immediate family members (e.g. husband, in-laws, parents). The physical abuse starts gradually until finally they are regarded as social outcasts by family and community. This makes them vulnerable and victims of sexual oppression.”

It is no wonder, therefore, that sexual assault and rape are notoriously underreported. In Bangladesh: “Reports of rapes and sexual harassment, even in government schools, are increasingly common, although the phenomena are underreported due to social stigma.” It is nearly impossible to accurately assess the actual magnitude of the phenomena when one of the key factors in making it such an effective tool is the shame that pushes victims and their families to hide the damage suffered.

iv) Forced divorce and denial of custody

Forced divorce and denial of custody of children are used almost exclusively as a punishment for conversion to Christianity and can affect both men and women. However, according to the WWL 2019 Gender profiles, 35% of the countries mentioned forced divorce as a characteristic pressure point for women, while 13% mentioned it for Christian men; and 31% mentioned denial of custody of children for Christian women, in contrast with 9% mentioned for men.

These two pressure points are largely contingent upon whether national, tribal or religious laws permit the non-Christian spouse to remove the Christian from the home, uncontested. “Women are more disadvantaged in law and society, which has an additional effect on the level of persecution experienced. They will very likely be divorced by their Muslim husbands, leaving them without any financial support; they can thus end up on the street because they do not have an income. The custody of their children may be taken from them, as well as inheritance rights” (Algeria). This example raises the practical consequence for divorced Christian women in many societies: they simply are left with no means to support themselves and no roof over their heads.

Forced divorce is a seriously dissuasive element to conversion, which is also provoked by family honor; often (but not exclusively) the husband’s family honor: “Within the tribal society, women are subject to the authority of their fathers and husbands. Leaving Islam means disregarding them and shaming the honor of the family. This will have severe consequences, especially since most women and girls are (financially) totally dependent on their families. In general, women can be easily divorced and polygamy is still practiced. Married female converts can easily be divorced and end up with no means to survive” (Mauritania).

The repetition in the profiles of financial consequence of divorce for Christian women and girls emphasizes their greater vulnerability relative to the Christian men who also suffer this pressure. In terms of their societies’ structures, there is no allowance for female-headed households and the women themselves often do not have the skills to earn their own living and, even if they did, would not, as divorcees, be hired.

b) Spheres and characteristics of female-specific religious persecution

Whereas men are controlled primarily by state actors, global trends regarding the religious persecution of Christian women in the Gender profiles indicate that they are largely restricted in their free choice or practice of religion through domestic and social actors. These domestic and social actors have scope for coercion within a prejudicial set of laws, so there is a state-approved aspect to the repression without the government having to act as enforcer.

The interplay between domestic actors and the state system is particularly well-illustrated by the situation in Iran as our analyst describes: “The Tahirih Justice Center reports⁷ that women and girls are especially vulnerable in the Iranian society because they are depending on their husbands and guardians. There is little protection against (sexual) abuse and domestic violence. Furthermore, the issue of honor and shame is an important element within Iranian society. Thus, a woman’s conversion and arrest is often more shameful to families than when male members leaves Islam; especially since the arrest and imprisonment of females are culturally considered to be more worrying due to the possibility of sexual harassments by the security services. It has been known for security services to report girls or women attending house-church services to their parents or family, telling them that they were found mixing with men in an inappropriate situation. Shaming (un)married women is an effective way to stain their reputation and harm their social status, especially in conservative areas. Since Iranian women are not free to travel on their own, fleeing a dangerous situation becomes problematic, as well as finding sheltered accommodation. This means that they are vulnerable to being exploited.”

Persecution exploits all the available vulnerabilities that women have, including: lack of access to education, healthcare or infrastructure; forced divorce; travel bans; trafficking; forced abortions or contraception; being denied access to work or the choice of a Christian spouse. The multiplicity of potential pressure points for women creates a complex persecution dynamic, where an event in one area of vulnerability can produce a domino effect on other areas of vulnerability.

6. Contextual factors - Means and reasons behind gender-specific religious persecution

The research reveals more than the factors of gender-specific persecution, it also reveals many of the means and reasons behind discrimination, which takes advantage of pre-existing parameters within socially-accepted gender roles. The basic reason is that it is the easiest means of religious persecution. Especially for women and girls, persecutors simply take advantage of her limitations and vulnerabilities as a woman in her culture, in conjunction with her vulnerability as member of a minority faith. No great strategy needed to be devised to identify and exploit the opportunities available in the overlap of dual vulnerabilities. The ease of persecution has three aspects to it - gender-specific religious persecution blends in, is low risk and highly effective.

⁷ <https://preventforcedmarriage.org/forced-marriage-overseas-iran/>, last accessed February 2019

a) Social contexts - Persecution that blends in

Firstly, intentional gender-specific religious persecution is easiest because it blends in to the ambient abuse in a society.

These social vulnerabilities for women can include, but are not limited to, rampant sexual abuse, confinement to the domestic sphere, reduced educational opportunities, the low status of widows, trafficking, early childhood marriage, and socially acceptable dress codes. For example, in contexts where women lack social protection in general, the use of pressures such as sexual touching in the streets by strangers blends in to the general harassment of women. In certain societies, targeting a Christian woman is especially easier if she is able to choose not to cover her head by a hijab. The cultural disdain for Christians and the perceived association with loose, 'Western' morals perpetuates the false idea that it is more permissible to assault a Christian woman, thereby also serving to focus the molester's choice of victim on the uncovered head. It creates what we hear as the "more so" effect. All women are at risk, but the marginalized Christian women even "more so".

For doubly vulnerable Christian women, even when they are in a safe situation at home, a general atmosphere of restrictions can be used to inhibit their free practice of religion, as can be found in Yemen: "In comparison to men, female seekers and new believers face greater limitations in accessing discipleship training, fellowship with other believers, and opportunities to get baptized—unless they have a close male relative who can facilitate their participation in these activities. This is because families closely monitor the activities of female members of the household outside the home, whereas men can come and go without giving an account of how their time was spent outside the home. Thus, socially accepted conventions and behaviors keep women in a submissive role in society and at home, leaving them less ability to resist persecution than men." The societal conventions and structure allow the persecution to blend-in, camouflaged by that which is common.

Religious persecution mimics - and is often perpetrated via - the worst human rights offenses in a given country. In a more extreme case, we observe that the use of sexual violence which is part of the persecution of Christian women in North Korea is consistent with a recent groundbreaking Human Rights Watch report which states that "unwanted sexual contact and violence is so common that it has come to be accepted as part of ordinary life."⁸

Social contexts that disproportionately impact one gender more than another are used to normalize and to hide persecution, as the situation in Columbia illustrates: "There is no law making Christian men more vulnerable to persecution. However, in the areas controlled by criminal groups or drug cartels, young men are exposed to indoctrination and mandatory participation in these groups. Due to the economic and social context, some young men accept this and join up. However, there are others who refuse - whether on grounds of faith or otherwise - and these are then commonly threatened, persecuted and often abducted along with their families." The all-encompassing control of organized crime or a dictatorial regime

⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/11/01/you-cry-night-dont-know-why/sexual-violence-against-women-north-korea>, last accessed 25 February 2019.

masks the stifling persecution of Christian religion, which is often considered a threat to their carefully constructed power structures.

Additionally, the pressure exerted upon Christian men and women often revolves around an individual's accepted place in the society. In Morocco, "the severity of the backlash after conversion depends on his social position and his political standing within his community." Another researcher explains the importance which social status also plays in the religious persecution dynamic in Syria. "For Christians from a Muslim background, pressure would come most commonly from family and community. Such pressure affects women and girls most, then younger men and lastly older men, reflecting the levels of status and freedom generally within Islamic culture." Social status and freedom to determine one's personal beliefs are in direct relationship, thus dramatically determining the outcry that results from a religiously prejudicial act against a commonly marginalized member of society.

For the vast majority of countries surveyed, it is impossible to dissociate a Christian's experience of persecution from their gender status in their society. The socio-cultural constructs create a multiplicity of pressure points which become gender-specific persecution.

b) Legal contexts - Persecution that is low risk

Gender-specific religious persecution is also easy because it is low risk to the perpetrator of persecution. The importance of the legal structure constructing the circumstances of a Christian's life cannot be overstated. For women, laws regarding child custody, divorce, domestic violence, early childhood marriage, freedom of movement, guardianship, honor killings, inheritance, polygamy and prosecution of rape are all the first line of protection or impunity.

In the Gender profiles, analysts repeatedly mentioned the great challenges for female Christian converts, which the laws and practices of their country create. For example, in the Palestinian Territories: "Family members can almost always act with impunity against female converts." While it is reported from Syria that, "Leaving Islam is a great taboo and seriously violates family honor. This includes assaults and honor-killing risks. Moreover there is limited protection from family violence in practice (if not in law) for women and girls in general." Without legal consequence for family violence, the majority religion is free to flex its might against vulnerable converts.

Analysts on Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya and Pakistan have all voiced the role of each country's social or state understanding and implementation of Sharia (Islamic) Law in creating a general imbalance of human rights vulnerabilities that are prejudicial for women and girls. The most consistent of the vulnerabilities is the relative impunity with which women and girls can be attacked, either because their testimony is thought to carry half the weight of a man's or because the requirements to prosecute sexual crimes are, in practice, unattainable.

For many of the pressure points for women, social pressure and lack of legal protection collude to make the defence of girls or women caught in these dynamics nearly impossible. As a result, many families no longer even attempt to prosecute in countries such as Pakistan where the attempt to obtain justice is turned against the Christian: "Christian girls are often abducted,

raped and converted by force. The authorities do not take any action, on the contrary, usually they side with the Muslim families abducting the girls. That is why parents of such victimized women and girls feel it is pointless to take legal action. Even when a case comes to the courts, the girls are forced to testify that they converted voluntarily...If a Christian family is bold enough to challenge the abduction and marriage, they often face accusations of harassing the 'voluntarily converted' girl and her new family." Every unpunished abduction or assault becomes an advertisement of the impunity for perpetrators and reinforces the effectiveness of the action as a means of persecution for coercing religious choice.

c) Impact in a specific context - Persecution which is effective

While the leveraging of pressure points against specific genders results in a different experience of persecution for men or women, it produces the same rippling impact upon the church community - each of these blows diminishes community resilience. Thus, the reason that gender-specific methods of persecution are used by some is that it is effective.

One background expert explained the ripple impact from the single persecuting action of a religiously motivated arrest: "Some marriages do not survive/struggle because of the pressures brought about by persecution. For example, if the breadwinner is arrested and in the process loses their job, on release, their marriage may suffer/break because of the combination of financial pressure and trauma" (Eritrea). The impact of persecution does not end with the release of the Christian man from prison; it impacts his financial stability and the financial wellbeing of his family, as well as his marital stability.

Similarly, the use of militia conscription is a gender-specific attack with consequence for the Christian community. "Christian men and boys have often been targeted specifically, especially in the north-eastern part of the country where Boko Haram has been active. Many have been attacked, abducted and forced to join the militant group" (Nigeria). This Nigerian testimony highlights with startling clarity the reason behind the targeting of Christian men and boys: "Such attacks have a devastating effect on the Church and Christian families."

7. Implications

Understanding the vulnerability of the individual is vital to protecting and strengthening the whole. While this body of research examined the pressure points that plague both genders in the outworking of their faith in hostile contexts, the purpose of such a study goes beyond gathering understanding of individual or a group's experiences as a gender. The ease with which gender-specific religion persecution is used in any particular demographic has profound implications for the whole of the Christian community.

a) Areas of intense vulnerability - converts, church leaders and the young

While there is a wide variation in overall intensity of religious freedom for the 50 countries on the 2019 WWL, researchers noted that the intense impact of gender-specific religious persecution falls most heavily on female converts and young adults.

i) Particular vulnerability of female converts

As discussed above, the social and legal status of women in certain countries creates an environment that increases the likelihood that compound human rights suppressions and violations will be used against Christian women. In particular, researchers noted that in 66% of the 50 most difficult countries to be a Christian, women are denied the freedom to convert to Christianity. The country profile for Jordan states the particular vulnerability very clearly: “In Jordan, of all categories of Christianity it is above all female converts from Islam who are particularly vulnerable to persecution for their faith.”

Questionnaire respondents repeatedly noted the correlation between familial control and violence, and female conversion. Analysts in Afghanistan noted that “...given the very weak role women play in Afghan society, women who convert to the Christian faith are prone to even more pressure and harassment than men. They can be sold into slavery or prostitution, forced to marry much older men, be deprived of food and water and healthcare, locked into rooms, beaten severely, burned or sexually mishandled.”

Some of the most extreme forms of pressure used against women are channeled in cascading force against female converts by their families, including most frequently: Sexual violence, rape, forced marriage/forced divorce (depending on the marital status of the woman) and incarceration by family (house arrest). An analyst on Yemen stated: “In a culture where the oppression of women is normal, female Christians with a Muslim background are additionally vulnerable. They are exposed to the risk of rape, sexual harassment, forced marriage and imprisonment.” While the predominant religion for this context is Muslim, by no means is this an Islamic-specific phenomena. Researchers also noted the correlation for female converts from Hindu and Buddhist backgrounds.

As mentioned above in Section 5, forced marriage and forced divorce are used almost exclusively in reaction to conversion, while rape and sexual violence are sometimes used in reaction to conversion, but not exclusively so. Also, in many countries, there is a widespread ability for a family to imprison a woman within her home. House arrest can take different forms: Women put under house arrest by their upset families might be chained to the walls of their homes; alternatively, they might walk freely within the four walls their prison, but be ignored as if they were dead. The published WWL 2019 Gender profiles mentioned incarceration by family (house arrest) for 13 countries, and background notes on the Gender profiles frequently qualified the usage of house arrest in the context of female converts.

Furthermore, the situations are complex, as economic realities for women present a dissuasive barrier that requires no physical walls. For instance, Christian women who might also have been forced into de-humanizing forms of slavery stay in terrible situations because the options awaiting them outside their family’s “protection” are worse forms of slavery than those within. Without an education, or legal rights to property or her own children, the only difference on the streets is that she will also be denied access to her children while she suffers.

ii) Particular vulnerability of church leaders

Approximately one quarter of the respondent countries⁹ mentioned the specific vulnerability of church leaders. Background questionnaires from Central African Republic give valuable insight: “The pastors and their families are always the first to be attacked in churches, because they represent the church: They are often more outspoken in condemning injustices and promoting reconciliation, often examples in positive behaviour and an easy target: Visible, but also symbolical (by killing a priest the church feels extra vulnerable, by raping the pastor's daughter the church and pastor's family feels weak, by converting the pastor's son the pastor feels shame).”¹⁰ The sense that pastors or church leaders are emblematic of the church is representative of many regions, and it succinctly explains the particular vulnerability of the position, making them and their families disproportionately targeted for religious persecution.

In addition, analysts for Laos highlighted the impact of government imprisonment and fines when applied to church leaders: “When men or boys are imprisoned, the family usually have to pay a considerable sum of money for them to be released. In the case of church leaders, this severely affects not only the family but churches as well.”

iii) Particular vulnerability of young-adult Christian male and females

When considering the vulnerabilities specific to men and women, one more demographic division continually resurfaced: Generational groupings of gender-specific vulnerability.

Analyst responses over multiple regions revealed that young-adult females are particularly vulnerable to forced marriage and rape, and young-adult males are particularly vulnerable to militia/military conscription as a tool of religious persecution.

Across multiple regions, young women are subject to violent sexual assault or control over their sexual purity. In Central African Republic: “Women and girls are frequently subjected to rape and sexual assault in CAR, particularly when militants attack civilian communities. They are also often forced into marriage under threat of violence.” In Iraq, a young woman who “still lives with her family, a convert risks abuse in the form of house arrest, sexual harassment, rape and even death, if her faith is revealed.” In Columbia: “In areas under criminal control, the guerrilla indoctrination of children affects Christian girls more [than boys], since they not only have to accept the violent ideologies imposed despite their faith, but it is also highly likely that they become victims of rape and sexual harassment.” Despite the diversity of cultural backgrounds, it is the young-adult Christian women bearing the bulk of sexually charged attacks and control.

Across a similar variety of regions, young men experience religious persecution via military/militia conscription. In Kazakhstan, the government-required military service represents an additionally oppressive layer of vulnerability: “Obligatory military service

⁹ 11 out of the 46 Gender profiles for male-specific religious persecution

¹⁰ Open Doors World Watch List analyst, internal documentation, November 2018.

for young men provides an extra potential risk of persecution.” Analysts on Syria note that “a common fear among indigenous Christians is that young men will be forcibly conscripted into the Syrian Army (or to other military factions, including YPG or aligned militias).” Researchers from both Mexico and Columbia note that “...in the areas controlled by criminal groups or drug cartels, young men are exposed to indoctrination and forced recruitment into these groups. In some cases, due to the economic and social context, young men accept this as their inescapable destiny. Those who refuse to join (due to Christian or other reasons) are persecuted and threatened (along with their families) and sometimes abducted and killed.” The regular practice of conscripting the youth for militia or military service provides a normative backdrop for the targeting of young Christian men, despite their conscientious and religious objection.

b) Future of the church

Gender-specific religious persecution against the individual is aimed ultimately at destroying an unwelcome minority community of Christians. While the family of a believer is the first to suffer alongside the individual, their Christian community or church is also a very intentional recipient of the ongoing and future collateral damage.

In Afghanistan, boys coerced into joining the militias also pull their families into the bloody disagreements between factions. According to WWL analysts, “Boys who join a militia commit their family's allegiance to that particular militia, leaving members of the community and families vulnerable to possible persecution for that decision.” The vulnerability of the youth directly increases the immediate vulnerability of the family and community.

Similarly, militias across northern Mali target Christian youth: “Young men are subjected to abduction, forced conversion and conscription in militia in the northern parts of the country. This has a devastating effect on their families and fellow Christians who are traumatized by such persecution.” While the trauma and impact are immediately devastating, the long-term effect on the community is quite sobering. For instance, in Myanmar, the educational system targets the minority Christian youth for the express purpose of the long-term damage to the religious community: “Na Ta La schools convert Christian children which is an effective way of stopping Christianity from spreading to the next generation. Boys are raised to be monks; when they start at the Na Ta La schools, their heads are shaven, they are given monks clothes and they also go round the local community begging for food.” Once young boys and men are through their service in militias or their time in educational brainwashing, the future fabric of a Christian community has massive missing pieces.

Not surprisingly, opportunities for marriage, the very building blocks of the future Christian community, are under attack. “An increasing number of men remain single, because they do not earn enough to pay for a marriage or to provide for a family. Many Christian men want to leave the Palestinian Territories to find a job abroad. Such emigration seriously weakens the Palestinian Christian community, since only the more capable men have the necessary qualifications and financial means for finding a job abroad” (Palestinian Territories). This report from the Palestinian Territories shows the way that the socio-economic pressures on young men establishing their careers impact future marriages within the community.

Although not discussed in this section, the previously discussed focus on abducting, seducing and forcibly marrying young-adult Christian women dramatically, yet simplistically, impacts the young women available to marry within a Christian community. These observations greatly concern researchers with an eye toward understanding pre-emptive attacks on the future families of the persecuted Christian church.

8. Conclusion

The experience of religious persecution is gender-specific, not gender-blind. The list of the most commonly used pressure points is almost completely unique to either men or women, with little or no overlap. The most typical way that men and women experience persecution is directly associated with their socio-culturally-accepted gender identity and roles. In contrast with the diversity of experiences of persecution, the target of persecution is the same - an individual's Christian family and community.

The social and legal inequalities present in a society lead to more means of religious persecution for both men and women. These do not represent a competition of human rights' priorities, rather gender-specific vulnerabilities act in devastating symbiosis with religiously-motivated attack.

Appendix A – Methodology

Data was gathered for the 50 countries appearing in the World Watch List 2019 for the reporting period 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018. Data for Gender profiles was provided for 49 countries for women and 46 countries for men.

Country-specific researchers provided qualitative data and captured spontaneously cited characteristics, tactics and dynamics of religious persecution specific to either men or women. These were analysed through a framework of pressure points, which was refined with key leaders from 15 diverse countries under persecution, in order to allow for quantitative analysis.

These categories provide a means to establish the frequency with which a particular form of pressure is associated with each gender, across the span of countries responding. It also captures per tactic, via the qualitative descriptions, variations across countries in how this pressure is brought to bear in different contexts.

The categories and the resulting statistics and charts are a preliminary means of describing the overall trends in patterns and dynamics. In future years, with increased data and more precise elicitation methods, it will be possible to refine our understanding of gender-specific religious persecution.

Appendix B – Policy recommendations

1. Often religion has a negative connotation when considered in conjunction with women's rights; religion is often blamed as a justification for violating women's rights. The Global Gender-Specific Religious Persecution 2019 Analysis highlights instead the existence of an intersection between violations of freedom of religion or belief and women's rights. Religious persecution is not gender-blind but rather gender-specific. Women and girls from minority faiths are doubly vulnerable -- subject to serious violations of their fundamental rights because of both their gender and religion. The misconception that religion is a primary source for women's rights violations leads to neglecting that women and girls who belong to certain religious minorities are doubly vulnerable because of their gender and religion. Therefore,

The International Community should acknowledge and research the double vulnerability of women and girls belonging to a religious minority, and should assert that women's rights and freedom of religion or belief are not contradictory, but instead mutually reinforcing.

2. The Global Gender-Specific Religious Persecution 2019 Analysis highlights how violations of freedom of religion or belief dramatically amplify the scale of gender-based violence against women and girls from religious minorities. Gender-based violence impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of many fundamental human rights and constitutes discrimination within the meaning of article 1 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). These rights include, but are not limited to: right to life; right not to be subject to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; right to liberty and security of person; right to equal protection under the law (CEDAW committee General Recommendation No. 19, 11th session, 1992). Under these premises,

We urge the United Nations CEDAW Committee to take into account the double vulnerability of women and girls from religious minorities. Furthermore, it should form a panel of special experts to conduct a focused study on the intersection between freedom of religion or belief and women's rights. Said panel should determine (1) how the CEDAW Committee, and the UN in general, is assisting women from religious minorities; and (2) what needs to improve to protect women who are doubly vulnerable due to their adherence to a minority faith.